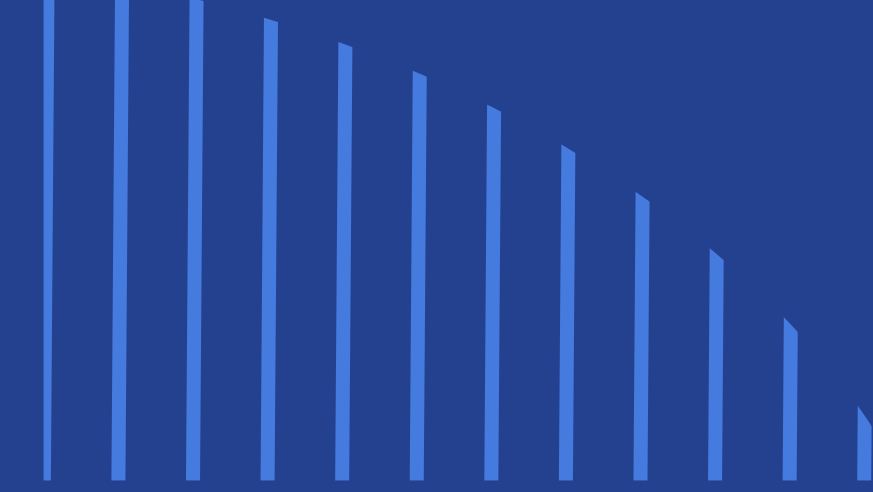




Aftercare Policy for Children in Alternative Care

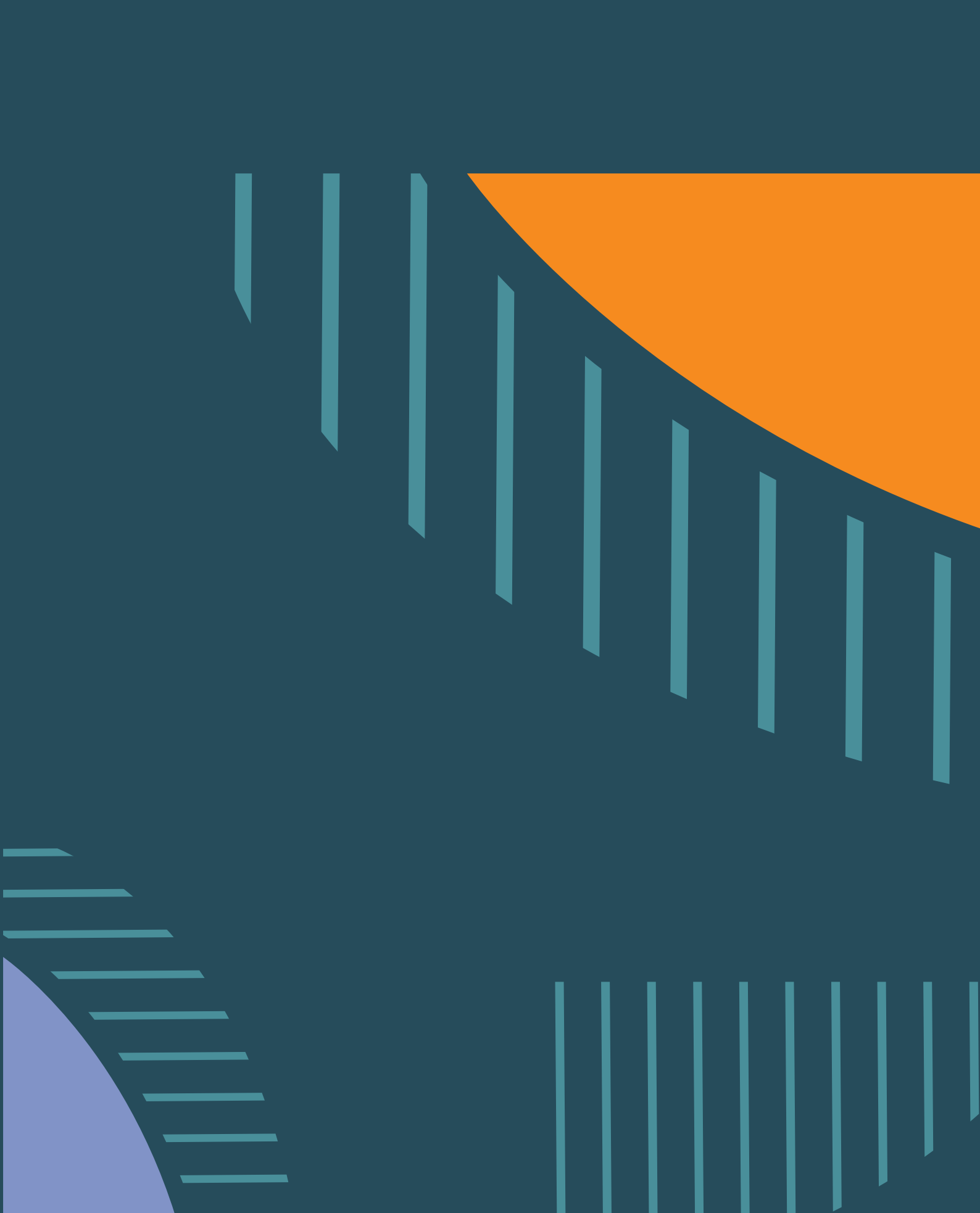
Public Consultation Document
September 2026



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR SOCIAL POLICY
AND THE FAMILY







Aftercare Policy for Children in Alternative Care

Public Consultation Document
September 2026



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR SOCIAL POLICY
AND THE FAMILY

Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	A Specific Focus on Care Leavers: Identifying Challenges	3
1.2	Objectives of Policy	4
1.3	Methodology	5
2	Context	9
2.1	The International Dimension	11
2.2	National Context	12
2.2.1	Legal Framework Governing Aftercare in Malta	12
2.2.2	Role of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services	13
2.2.3	Placements	15
2.2.4	Analysis of Alternative Care and Aftercare Services Data	17
2.2.5	Role of the Social Care Standards Authority	22
2.2.6	After-Care Services	22
2.2.7	Key Insights and Identified Challenges	23
3	An Aftercare Guarantee	25
3.1	Planning and Preparing Aftercare	29
3.2	Education and Employment	37
3.3	Continued Health Support	40
3.4	Adequate Aftercare Financial Support	42
3.5	Supported Accommodation and Independent Living	45
3.6	Supporting Family Ties	48
3.7	Enabling Policy Framework	51
4	Implementation and Monitoring	61
5	Concluding Remarks	63
	Annex 1 – Questionnaire distributed to Alternative Care Homes	65
	Annex 2 – Glossary	69
	Annex 3 – Short Report of the Findings of Focus Groups on Aftercare and Support for Care Leavers	75

List of Tables

Table 1: Planning and Preparing Aftercare Recommendations	34
Table 2: Education and Employment Recommendations	38
Table 3: Continued Health Support Recommendations	41
Table 4: Aftercare Allowance Recommendations	43
Table 5: Supported Accommodation and Independent Living Recommendations	46
Table 6: Supporting Family Ties Recommendations	49
Table 7: Enabling Policy Framework Recommendations	51

List of Figures

Figure 1: Number of Children and Young People in Alternative Care, by Type of Care, February 2025	17
Figure 2: Number of Children and Young People in Foster Care, by Age Group, February 2025	18
Figure 3: Number of Children and Young People in Residential and Community Care Homes, by Age Group, February 2025	18
Figure 4: Young People Aged 18 Years or Over in Alternative Care by Type of Care, 2023-2024	19
Figure 5: Number of Children and Young People Receiving Aftercare Services, by Age Group, 2021-2024	20
Figure 6: Number of Young People Living in Aftercare Residences (aged 19 - 23 years), 2023-2025	21
Figure 7: Number of Children in Alternative Care Reaching Adulthood (18 years of age) in the next 6 years, 2025-2030	21
Figure 8: The New Aftercare System – Aftercare Guarantee	28

List of Abbreviations

DIER	Department of Industrial and Employment Relations
DSS	Department of Social Security
EMN	European Migration Network
ESF	European Social Fund
FAH	Foundation for Affordable Housing
FSWS	Foundation for Social Welfare Services
HA	Housing Authority
LAC	Looked After Children Services
MAL	Ministry for Accommodation and Lands
MCH	Mount Carmel Hospital
MES	Ministry for Education and Sport
MFF	Ministry for Finance
MFHEA	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority
MIPE	Ministry for Infrastructure, Planning and Employment
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
MSF	Ministry for Social Policy and the Family
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Ministry for Health
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSPs	Public Social Partnerships
SCSA	Social Care Standards Authority
SID	Strategy and Implementation Division
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Minister's Foreword

Hon. Michael Falzon

Minister for Social Policy and the Family



Every child has the right to grow up in a safe, stable, and nurturing environment that enables them to reach their full potential. Government remains firmly committed to safeguarding children's rights and placing their wellbeing at the heart of its priorities.

The transition from alternative care to independent adulthood represents one of the most critical stages in a young person's life. Our responsibility as a State extends beyond providing protection and care during childhood; it also includes ensuring that no young person is left unsupported when formal care comes to an end.

Despite sustained efforts over the years, we recognise that continued and targeted action is essential to effectively support young people as they transition from care to independent living.

The Aftercare Policy for Children in Alternative Care marks Malta's first national framework of its kind. It builds on our commitment to place the wellbeing, dignity, and potential of every child and young adult at the centre of social policy.

One of the most innovative elements of this policy is the introduction of the Aftercare Guarantee. This Guarantee consists of a comprehensive set of policy measures designed to provide consistent and accessible support to care leavers across key areas, including education and employment, health and wellbeing, housing, financial assistance, and relationships. These supports are complemented by mentorship, offering young people integrated personal and professional guidance as they navigate adulthood.

This policy framework affirms that aftercare is not a privilege, but a right. Young people who have experienced alternative care deserve the same opportunities as their peers – to pursue education, training, meaningful employment, and healthy relationships within a safe and enabling environment. By strengthening aftercare services through the Aftercare Guarantee, we are taking a decisive step towards equality, empowerment, and long-term social inclusion.

The policy has been shaped through extensive consultation, drawing on the expertise of professionals working in the field and, most importantly, the voices of young people themselves. Their lived experiences and insights have guided our approach and must continue to inform the services and support they deserve.

The Aftercare Policy stands as a clear demonstration of Government's commitment to ensuring that young people leaving care are not left to navigate adulthood alone. Their success is our collective responsibility. I invite all stakeholders – government entities, voluntary organisations, communities, and society at large – to join us in ensuring that every young person leaving care is equipped with the tools, opportunities, and confidence to build a fulfilling and independent future.

Permanent Secretary's Foreword

Mark Musù

Permanent Secretary at Ministry
for Social Policy and the Family



In a rapidly evolving society, our social policies must continuously adapt to ensure that no young person is left behind. Young people transitioning from alternative care into independent adulthood face unique and complex challenges. It is our responsibility, through effective and responsive policymaking, to provide them with the tools, opportunities, and support they need to thrive and contribute positively to society.

At the core of the Aftercare Policy is the Aftercare Guarantee, which reflects Government's determination to place young people leaving care at the centre of our social vision. The Guarantee ensures that care leavers have the resources they need to succeed by recognising their rights and responding to their individual needs. The policy

positions the Aftercare Guarantee as a key mechanism to foster resilience, independence, and social inclusion, offering a comprehensive framework that builds on young people's strengths, capabilities, and ambitions.

Through targeted support and structured mentorship, the policy aims to help young people achieve stable housing, succeed in education and employment, maintain their health and wellbeing, and fully integrate into society. Mentorship plays a vital role in guiding young people as they navigate the challenges of adulthood and make informed decisions about their futures.

Aligned with national strategies and international obligations, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the policy establishes clear priorities and measures to ensure that the best interests of young people remain central to implementation. It also recognises the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. The effective delivery of aftercare services depends on the commitment of multiple stakeholders working together to provide coordinated and holistic support across all areas of young care leavers' lives.

The development of this policy has been informed by extensive consultation with professionals, government entities, civil society organisations, and, most importantly, children and young people themselves. Their lived experiences have shaped the priorities set out in this framework, ensuring that it responds to real needs and aspirations.

This public consultation now offers an opportunity for all stakeholders and citizens to contribute to shaping the future of aftercare services. I am confident that, through our collective efforts, we can create an enabling environment where young people leaving care are not only supported but truly empowered to achieve their full potential.

Executive Summary

The Aftercare Policy sets out Government's commitment to ensuring that all young people leaving alternative care in Malta are supported throughout their transition to independent adulthood. It recognises that the period following care is a pivotal stage in a young person's life – one that requires stability, guidance, and meaningful opportunities. Through this policy, Government seeks to strengthen the systems, services, and resources that empower care leavers to thrive and participate fully in society.

Developed through comprehensive desk-based research, stakeholder engagement, and direct consultation with young people who have experienced care, the policy responds to the real-life challenges faced by care leavers. These include limited access to stable housing, financial insecurity, barriers to education and employment, and the need for consistent psychosocial and emotional support. By identifying these issues, the policy establishes a coordinated, rights-based framework that ensures young people leaving care are not left behind.

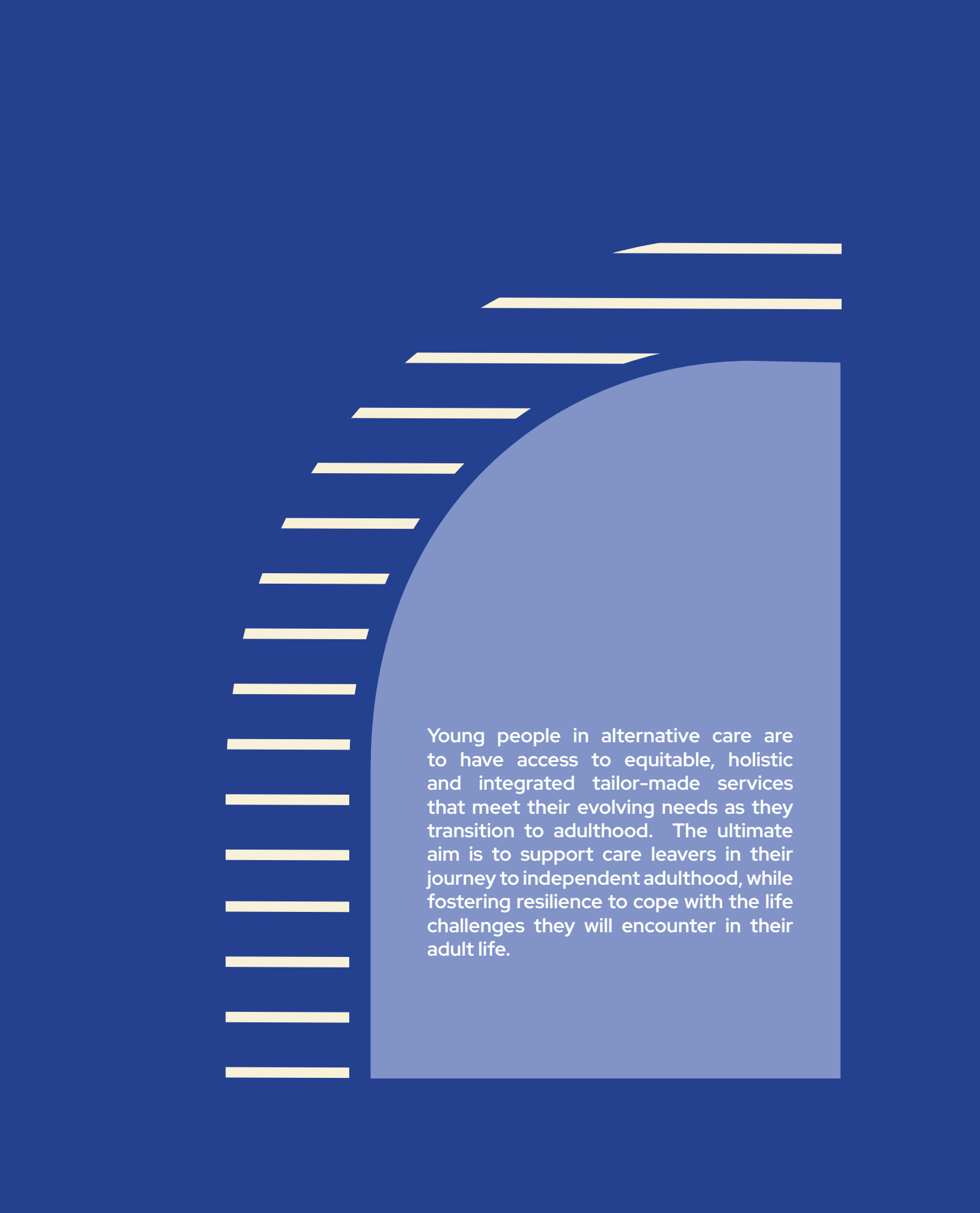
Central to this policy is a strong commitment to youth participation. The policy promotes the active involvement of care leavers in both design and implementation processes, ensuring that their voices and lived experiences directly shape the services intended to support them. Guided by the principles of equality, empowerment, and inclusion, the framework adopts a young-person-centred approach, affirming that every care leaver deserves the same opportunities as their peers to lead a secure, healthy, and fulfilling life.

At the heart of the Aftercare Policy lies the Aftercare Guarantee – a nationwide initiative providing a baseline of essential support for all care leavers. This includes enhanced access to education and employment, healthcare, housing, financial assistance, and support in maintaining family and community relationships. These measures are complemented by both formal and informal guidance aimed at promoting wellbeing, resilience, and personal development. By establishing consistent and comprehensive support, the Aftercare Guarantee equips young people leaving care with the tools and confidence needed to navigate early adulthood successfully and achieve long-term social inclusion.

Implementation of the policy will be led by the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, in collaboration with the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, and supported by strong inter-ministerial and inter-agency cooperation, alongside robust monitoring mechanisms. With the backing of national and European Union funding, this framework represents a long-term investment in Malta's young people and their futures.

The public consultation document on the Aftercare Policy stands as a tangible expression of the State's dedication to ensuring that no young person faces early adulthood alone. By fostering resilience, independence, and dignity, it aims to build a society in which every young person leaving care is empowered to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to their community.

Our Vision



Young people in alternative care are to have access to equitable, holistic and integrated tailor-made services that meet their evolving needs as they transition to adulthood. The ultimate aim is to support care leavers in their journey to independent adulthood, while fostering resilience to cope with the life challenges they will encounter in their adult life.

01

Introduction

Every child has the right to grow up in a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment that enables them to reach their full potential. Over the years, Government has consistently prioritised the promotion and protection of children's rights, ensuring that their overall wellbeing remains central to its agenda. Policies and initiatives have been guided by the core belief that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, deserve protection, care, and equal opportunities to thrive.



When a child's biological family is unable to provide adequate care, even with the available support, the child has the right to access out-of-home care systems designed to meet their specific needs. Such systems must focus on supporting children, youth, their families, and alternative caregivers, with the goal of achieving reunification whenever possible and unless if reunification is assessed to be detrimental to the child's wellbeing. When this is not possible, the State takes on the responsibility of ensuring appropriate alternative care to safeguard the child's wellbeing (ages 0–17)¹. The Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act² first enacted in 2020 reflects the State's commitment to ensure that all children in Malta, in particular children in alternative care, are safeguarded from all forms of maltreatment.

¹ Through the issuing of a care order under the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act

² Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, Chapter 602 of the Laws of Malta, enacted 26th July, available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/20240726/eng>.

1.1 | A Specific Focus on Care Leavers: Identifying Challenges

The transition out of care to independent living can be a daunting one, as it often involves significant life changes and the taking on of new responsibilities that may feel overwhelming³, and it is often characterised by a compressed and accelerated transition into adulthood. Care leavers may often face various challenges of adult life at a relatively young age, such as securing stable housing, managing finances, and finding employment⁴. This absence of adequate support can expose them to negative outcomes, such as homelessness⁵, substance use disorders, unemployment, or involvement in criminal activities⁶. Many care leavers also find it difficult to integrate into the community due to unmet needs upon leaving care, this leading to a longing for ongoing protection and assistance⁷. The high level of distress experienced after leaving care, further complicates their adjustment to independent living, as they may feel unprepared to cope with the abrupt shift in responsibilities and the absence of structured guidance. This underscores the importance of addressing these needs comprehensively in order to ensure a smoother and more successful transition.

Scope

In line with Malta's Social Vision 2035, Government is committed to leaving no one behind and also to empowering all young adults leaving alternative care to lead a better quality of life.

This policy document addresses the needs, realities and challenges of all young persons who are transitioning out of alternative care, often referred to hereunder as "care leavers". The ultimate aim is to ensure, that these young individuals experience a smooth and successful transition into adulthood, equipping them with the skills and support needed to thrive, as they move beyond the protection of the State.

Eligibility for the policy measures set out in this document is strictly limited to young individuals who were under an active care order immediately before turning 18 years old.

3 Jabal H. 2022: The adaptation to adulthood of Maltese youth post-out-of-home residential care.

4 Cameron, C., Hollingworth, K., Schoon, I., van Santen, E., Schröer, W., Ristikari, T., ... & Pekkarinen, E. (2018). Care leavers in early adulthood: How do they fare in Britain, Finland and Germany?. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 87, 163-172.

5 Lifelong Links: Supporting Care Leavers to Build Relationships. (2023). King's College London. Retrieved from https://assets-global.website-files.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/64be6a0a84efae71d558a0a_CHI.KCL-LifelongLinks2023.pdf

6 Strahl, B., et al. (2021). Leaving Care: The International Landscape. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 37(1), 1-20. doi:10.1080/21662679.2021.1878573. Retrieved from Better Care Network [kps://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/div-class-title-a-multinational-comparison-of-care-leaving-policy-and-legislation-div.pdf](https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/div-class-title-a-multinational-comparison-of-care-leaving-policy-and-legislation-div.pdf)

7 Abela A., Abdilla N., Abela C., Camilleri J., Mercieca D., & Mercieca G. 2012. Study 3: Exploring the long-term outcomes of children in residential out-of-home care (pages 65-102) in *Children in Out-Of-Home Care in Malta: Key Findings from A Series of Three Studies* commissioned by The Office of the Commissioner for Children. Accessed at: [Children-in-Out-Of-Home-Care-in-Malta.pdf \(gov.mt\)](#).

1.2 | Objectives of Policy

This *Aftercare Policy* aims to support care leavers, by providing appropriate support through a range of integrated support services and programmes. This policy in fact, goes beyond the legal obligations of the State to support children with care orders, until they reach the age of 18 years⁸. It advocates for continuous support and guidance. This extended support in turn aims to enhance their prospects holistically, including for secure employment and a stable future.

In order to support young people in developing the resilience needed to cope with adulthood, it is imperative to provide:

- | | | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|--|
| 01 | Necessary mentoring and support to help develop the necessary life and social skills; | 02 | Assistance for further education and training, and/or access to stable employment opportunities; |
| 03 | Services that offer ongoing health, social and psychological support; | 04 | Assistance in seeking or establishing suitable accommodation to facilitate social integration. |
| 05 | Targeted assistance to families to help them address their challenges, facilitating the successful return of their children to a safe home environment. Should the family environment be detrimental to the children's wellbeing, appropriate focus will be given to building new healthy support networks. | | |

To achieve these desired objectives, consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders, including civil society and service providers, is essential. Most importantly the views of the young individuals themselves must be consistently taken into consideration, ascertained and given due importance.

⁸ Following the recent amendments to the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) (Amendment) Act, 2020 (Act No. XXXVII of 2020), specifically Part IV bis concerning After Care 68B, individuals who have lived in the same alternative care residence for over two years may opt to continue residing there until they reach the age of 21. This provision applies as long as they do not pose a potential danger to other minors and are bound by a Social Contract.

1.3 | Methodology

This Aftercare Policy for Children in Alternative Care is Malta's first formal framework aimed at ensuring continuity of care and support for young people beyond the alternative care system.

Desk Based Research and Dedicated Questionnaires

This Policy is grounded in extensive desk research and robust data collection led by the Ministry for Social Policy and the Family (MSF)⁹. Using detailed questionnaires distributed to all alternative care homes (Annex 1), the MSF also gathered valuable insights into existing aftercare systems and thus identified the challenges faced by care leavers.

The questionnaire responses provided a comprehensive overview of the demographic composition of all children in care, including age and gender distribution. This data is crucial for tailoring aftercare services to the specific developmental and psychosocial needs of different age groups and genders.

Insights into the reasons for care the issuance of orders, revealed a wide spectrum of underlying issues, including domestic violence, various forms of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), neglect, abandonment, and parental challenges such as addiction, chronic illness, mental illness, or disability. These factors were closely linked to the current emotional and behavioural state of the children, highlighting the need for trauma-informed and individualized support strategies.

The responses also shed light on transition planning practices. Most care homes initiate preparation for leaving care at a specific age, often around mid-adolescence, and employ internal support services such as counselling, life skills training, and mentorship programmes. However, the approaches vary significantly, and many care homes expressed the need for standardised guidelines and improved coordination with external services.

The questionnaire responses highlighted several challenges faced by care homes when children reach the age of leaving care. These include emotional instability, lack of preparedness for independent living, and limited access to housing, education, and employment opportunities. Gender-specific vulnerabilities were also noted, necessitating targeted and tailor-made interventions.

External support services commonly accessed by care leavers include social workers, psychologists, and psychotherapists amongst others. However, the availability and continuity of these services post-care remain inconsistent, underscoring the need for a more integrated aftercare system.

⁹ Prior to June 2026, MSF was referred to as MSPC (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights).

To address these challenges, care homes recommended that the Government further refines existing services, by enhancing inter-agency collaboration, increasing funding for aftercare programmes, and developing new services tailored to the evolving needs of care leavers. Suggestions included the establishment of transitional housing, vocational training centres, and dedicated aftercare coordinators.

In conclusion, the insights gathered from the questionnaire have in turn been instrumental in shaping this Aftercare Policy. They underscore the importance of a structured, responsive, and inclusive approach to supporting children and young adults transitioning out of alternative care. The MSF remains committed to incorporating these findings into a robust policy framework, that promotes the well-being and successful integration of care leavers into society.

Bi-Lateral Meetings with Relevant Authorities

To deepen this understanding, bilateral meetings with national authorities, (in particular, the Social Care and Standards Authority and the Foundation for Social Welfare Services) were held, focusing on addressing key challenges and on shaping a high-quality aftercare framework that evolves with the needs of care leavers, while adhering to critical standards.

A Pre-consultation Event with the Main stakeholders

In March 2025, a pre-consultation event with key stakeholders was organised, serving as an important platform for gathering insights and for fostering dialogue on the core priorities of the policy.

The meeting served for stakeholders to discuss initial drafts and proposals in the Aftercare Policy. Participants also shared perspectives on the timing and structure of support services, the roles of professionals and carers, and also the importance of youth involvement in shaping their own transition plans. There was here, broad agreement on the need to build further upon existing services rather than introduce entirely new systems, with emphasis placed on ensuring continuity, flexibility, and responsiveness to individual needs.

Key themes included the importance of trauma-informed care, the challenges faced by care leavers—particularly in areas like housing and mental health—and the need for adaptable financial support mechanisms. The discussion also highlighted the value of inclusive consultation and the need to tailor services to diverse groups, including young parents and individuals from outside Europe. These insights informed the next steps in refining this policy.

Dedicated Focus Group with Young Adults

A focus group then followed in July 2025 with four adult care leavers, whose lived experiences provided invaluable input into the policy's direction and design.

The focus group brought together young adults aged 18 years and over who had transitioned out of alternative care, with the aim of gathering direct reflective insights on their experiences and identifying areas for improvement in aftercare services. Participants shared their personal journeys, highlighting both the support that helped them and the challenges they faced during and after leaving care. The session encouraged open dialogue and used creative tools to help participants express their thoughts on the key stages of their care experience, including entry into care, the transition period, and their outlook on the future.

Throughout the discussion, participants emphasised the importance of emotional and practical support, particularly in areas such as housing, financial stability, and life skills. They expressed a strong desire for more flexible and extended aftercare services, that respond to individual readiness rather than fixed age limits. Suggestions for improvement included more consistent support systems, better housing options, and financial mechanisms that ease the burden of independence.

Dedicated Focus Group with Children

In mid-August 2025, a focus group was held with four adolescents aged 14–17 years residing in residential care, to explore their lived experiences, perspectives on leaving care, and recommendations for future support. A creative engagement approach enabled both structured reflection and open discussion.

Levels of engagement varied: where younger participants tended to disengage, viewing leaving care as distant, while older participants engaged actively, reflecting on aspirations for education, employment, and the practical challenges of transport and financial management.

Findings highlighted trust as a recurring theme—both a significant difficulty and an essential support factor. Family relationships, despite strain, remained central to participants' hopes, particularly regarding reunification. Sources of support were identified in relatives, staff within the home, and trusted relationships.

Key recommendations included: targeted financial support (including starter packs and savings assistance), stable housing, access to education and job opportunities, structured life skills training, and mentoring. The group emphasised the need for clear, practical measures to better equip young people for a successful transition to independence.

A detailed report of the two Focus Groups is being attached as Annex 3.

Collaborative Platforms

The Ministry for Social Policy and the Family (MSF) also actively participated in collaborative platforms bringing together various governmental and non-governmental alternative care and aftercare homes. This ensured, that a diverse range of perspectives and expertise were incorporated into policy development. This collaborative approach promoted the exchange of best practices and innovative ideas, with the aim of enhancing the quality of aftercare support.

02

Context



The current landscape for children in alternative care, presents various challenges that must be addressed, to ensure their rights and well-being¹⁰. These challenges include instability in placements and placement breakdowns, limited access to tailored support services, and difficulties in maintaining connections with their birth families or communities¹¹. While each child's background and experience of family stability are unique, all children in care share essential needs and rights to a nurturing environment that supports their emotional development, education, and overall- well-being¹².

¹⁰ OECD (2022), *Assisting Care Leavers: Time for Action*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1939a9ec-en>.

¹¹ UNICEF. *Children in Alternative Care*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-in-alternative-care>

¹² Childhood Experiences of Alternative Care and Callousness/Unemotionality: A Systematic Scoping Review and Conceptual Model. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. 2023. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/>

2.1 | The International Dimension

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* affirms that children deprived of their family environment, whether temporarily or permanently, are entitled to special protection and assistance from the State¹³. Complementing this, the *United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*¹⁴ provide essential recommendations for aftercare services, with emphasis being made on counselling, mentoring, life-skills training, and assistance with education, employment and housing. These guidelines underscore the fact, that aftercare is essential for fostering a successful transition to independence, particularly for children who have experienced adversity while in care. Ensuring that care leavers continue to access these critical services is vital to upholding their rights for and enabling them to lead fulfilling, self-reliant lives.

To enhance outcomes, the implementation of aftercare programs should integrate a holistic approach, addressing emotional, social, and practical needs¹⁵. Collaboration with community stakeholders, ongoing monitoring, and feedback from care leavers themselves, are pivotal to designing support systems that adapt to their evolving challenges and aspirations¹⁶. This ensures that their transition into adulthood is not only smooth, but is also empowering, enabling them to contribute positively to society¹⁷. The Council of Europe Recommendation Rec (2005)5¹⁸ highlights the rights of children in residential care, emphasising the necessity of providing care that prioritises their dignity, development, and well-being. It also reinforces the international commitment to safeguarding youth in vulnerable situations, by establishing standards that promote a child-centred approach to care.

The recommendation also outlines key principles, including ensuring that institutional care is used only as a measure of last resort and that children receive care in a family-like environment wherever possible. It also advocates for the participation of children in decisions affecting their lives, access to education and healthcare, advocating also for regular monitoring of residential settings to protect children against neglect or abuse.

Furthermore, it underscores the importance of preparing children for their transition out of residential care. This involves creating robust aftercare programmes that focus on emotional, educational, and practical support to help young people develop independence and to integrate into society successfully. By aligning with international frameworks, such as the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children¹⁹, Rec (2005)5 serves as a foundation for national policies aimed at safeguarding the rights and futures of children in alternative care.

13 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 20. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

14 United Nations. Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. UN General Assembly, 2009. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/5416.pdf>

15 OECD (2022), *Assisting Care Leavers: Time for Action*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1939a9ec-en>.

16 Häggman-Laitila, A., Salokkela, P., & Karki, S. (2020). Integrative review of the evaluation of additional support programs for care leavers making the transition to adulthood. *Journal of pediatric nursing*, 54, 63–77.

17 Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 20. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

18 Council of Europe. (2005). Recommendation Rec(2005)5 on the rights of children living in residential institutions. Available at: <https://archive.crin.org/en/library/legal-database/council-europe-recommendation-rec20055-rights-children-living-residential.html>

19 United Nations. Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. UN General Assembly, 2009. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/5416.pdf>

2.2 | National Context

2.2.1 – Legal Framework Governing Aftercare in Malta

In Malta, Government provides alternative accommodation for children in need, through residential, community homes, and foster care families. The 2020 Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act is a key legislative framework which reflects the State's commitment to ensure, that all children, particularly those in alternative care, are safeguarded from any form of abuse, neglect, or exploitation²⁰. This legislation also ensures that the rights of every child are upheld, receiving the care and protection necessary to grow into resilient, productive, and successful adults.

The amendment to the 2020 Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act in 2023 reflects a significant change in Malta's support system for young adults transitioning out of alternative care. This amendment allows individuals to continue living in their current alternative care residence until the age of 21²¹, provided that they have been in the same placement for at least two years before reaching adulthood. This approach aims to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, acknowledging the fact, that many young people may not be ready to handle adult responsibilities upon turning 18 years of age²².

While this legislative framework offers essential protection and support, the challenges associated with the transition from care to independent living remain significant. The sudden withdrawal of the previous support at a critical stage of their development, can leave these young adults vulnerable to homelessness, unemployment, and emotional distress, making their path to independent adulthood significantly more difficult and challenging compared to their peers²³.

20 Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, Chapter 602 of the Laws of Malta, enacted 26th July, available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/20240726/eng>.

21 Act No. XI of 2023, An Act to amend the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, Cap. 602. Accessible at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/act/2023/11/eng>

22 Atkinson, C., & Hyde, R. (2019). Care leavers' views about transition: a literature review. *Journal of Children's Services*, 14(1), 42-58.

23 Starr, M., Cordier, R., Pakpahan, E., Robinson, M., Speyer, R., & Chung, D. (2024). Understanding how young people transitioning from out-of-home care acquire and develop independent living skills and knowledge: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *PloS one*, 19(6), e0304965. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304965>

2.2.2 – Role of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services

Children in alternative care are followed by the Looked After Children Services (LAC) within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) to ensure that they receive the necessary care and attention from foster care, residential home care or community home care placements. They are also supported by other services within FSWS, such as the Youth in Focus, the Adolescent Day and the Embark for Life Programmes, and the Opportunity Knocks Project²⁴. In reality, minors living in alternative care often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are known to be at a greater risk for health problems than the average minor. In 2021, a new healthcare service for children in alternative care was set up aiming to provide a holistic medical plan, ensuring all are properly vaccinated, have proper dental care and that the children's emotional wellbeing is being adhered to.

During their time in care, children are assessed in the early years of their experience and assessments are undertaken on a regular basis, with a view to establish the feasibility of reuniting children with their own family. When reunification is not possible²⁵, alternative placements are sought to provide the child with a safe nurturing, and stable environment.

A personalised care plan is therefore drawn up, tailored to support the child or youth, according to their particular needs. The care plan is then discussed and confirmed by a Review Board. Every child and youth have the right to be heard and consulted in the creation of their care plan, ensuring that their voice remains central in shaping their own future²⁶. In addition to the child's input, contributions from all relevant stakeholders – including social workers, caregivers, family members and other professionals²⁷ – are incorporated in the formulation of this plan. The LAC professionals ensure that the minors have stability in their placements by conducting regular visits, and by maintaining frequent contact with the biological parents and other professionals involved in the minors' case. These care plans outline the social and legal framework that ensures the safety and well-being of children and youth in alternative care.

24 Foundation for Social Welfare Services 2023 Annual Report. Accessible at: <https://fsws.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Annual-Report-2023-1.pdf>

25 Before seeking alternative care systems, the Directorate for Child Protection starts exploring placements with members of the extended family should parents, or any other person vested with parental authority, would be unable to look after their children.

26 Glynn, N., & Mayock, P. (2018). "I've changed so much within a year": care leavers' perspectives on the aftercare planning process. *Child Care in Practice*, 25(1), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2018.1521378>

27 OECD (2022), *Assisting Care Leavers: Time for Action*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1939a9ec-en>.

What is a Care Plan?

Care Plans are composed of specific goals set, to be achieved within realistic timeframes. These goals provide clear guidance to all stakeholders and service users, outlining the tasks to be undertaken and assigning responsibilities for their implementation.

Key elements of effective care planning include; developmental milestones, health-related needs, academic objectives, safety measures, family/support network contact, and the development of intra- and interpersonal skills, among other factors. Importantly so, care planning is a dynamic and evolving process that must adapt to the changing needs and circumstances of the child or youth.

A fundamental aspect of care planning is ensuring, that the process is developed collaboratively with the child or youth. The care plans must reflect their wishes, feelings, and views, empowering them to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives²⁸.

To maintain confidentiality, certain aspects of the care plan may not always be shared with support staff working within residential homes. However, home management should always be fully aware of all aspects of the care plan in order to ensure proper oversight and decision-making. While support staff may not have full access to the child's or youth's history and detailed care plan, they should however be provided with a basic plan that outlines essential guidance to be followed in daily care and support.

These plans are in turn, reviewed periodically to ensure they continue to reflect the best interests of the child or youth as they grow and develop. Care plans also consider pathways such as reunification with birth families, achieving permanency, preparing for adoption, and providing aftercare support.

28 Glynn, N., & Mayock, P. (2018). "I've changed so much within a year": care leavers' perspectives on the aftercare planning process. *Child Care in Practice*, 25(1), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2018.1521378>

2.2.3 – Placements

The environment in which a child is raised during their time in alternative care plays a crucial role in shaping their experience and development²⁹. There are three main categories of placements: foster care, residential home care and community home care. Each of these placements offers varying levels of support and care. Many of these, are licensed by the Social Care Standards Authority (SCSA) in order to ensure quality standards are met. The Alternative Care Directorate at FSWS strives to ensure that children under the age of three years are not placed in residential care as far as possible. For such children LAC seeks to find alternative family arrangements, primarily fostering³⁰. Furthermore, the cases of children under the age of five years who are placed in residential care, are reviewed monthly, this with the aim of moving children out of residential care before they are older.

The duration of a child's placement can be short-term, or long-term. Short-term placements serve as a temporary solution until a permanent plan is made, whilst long-term placements offer stability until the child reaches adulthood, or is reunited with their biological family. While changes in placements are generally limited to minimise disruption, they may be necessary if a child's needs evolve, these being done keeping the child's best interests at the centre of every decision³¹.

Foster Care Services

Foster care is rooted in the principles of providing love, stability, and support to young children in need, offering them a nurturing environment, where they can feel secure and thrive. When it is determined that foster care is in the child's best interest, the matching process with foster carers begins. The Matching Board within the Directorate for Alternative Care oversees this process, working to identify the most suitable placement, by consulting with the professionals involved in the child's care to understand their needs³². Once a match is agreed upon and the foster carers choose to proceed, a transition plan is developed to ensure the child adjusts smoothly. This plan is tailored to address both the emotional and the practical aspects of the child's integration into their new home, helping them feel supported and valued.

29 Almas AN, Papp LJ, Woodbury MR, Nelson CA, Zeanah CH, Fox NA. The Impact of Caregiving Disruptions of Previously Institutionalized Children on Multiple Outcomes in Late Childhood. *Child Dev.* 2020 Jan;91(1):96-109. doi: 10.1111/cdev.13169. Epub 2018 Oct 8. PMID: 30295918; PMCID: PMC7197095.

30 Foundation for Social Welfare Services Strategic Objectives 2021-2031. Available at: <https://fsws.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/PDF-Strategy-Final-Documents.pdf>

31 Alternative Care Policy 2024, Directorate Alternative Care, Foundation for Social Welfare Services.

32 Ibid.

Residential Home Care

Residential home care refers to structured, group-based care provided on a 24-hour basis by trained professionals within dedicated residential homes. Unlike the large-scale orphanages³³ that historically formed part of alternative care systems, and which no longer exist in Malta, contemporary residential homes are smaller in scale and purposefully designed to offer a more personalised and supportive environment. These homes operate with interprofessional staff teams and clearly defined care frameworks, ensuring consistency, safety, and therapeutic support. Residential homes provide stability, which is particularly important for children who have experienced trauma, disruption, or significant adversity.

Many residential homes in Malta demonstrate exemplary practice, supporting children to engage in education, leisure, and community life while receiving care and supervision. Residential homes are mainly managed by various non-governmental entities and, in addition to providing alternative care, play a critical role in delivering aftercare services. Dedicated aftercare units within residential services support young people as they transition from care into independent adulthood, focusing on life skills development, education, employment, and emotional wellbeing. The commitment, compassion, and professionalism of carers and staff in residential homes are fundamental. Their work is instrumental in safeguarding the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of children and young people in alternative care, ensuring they are supported, empowered, and given every opportunity to thrive.

Community Home Care

Community homes occupy a distinct position within Malta's alternative care system and are not categorised strictly as either residential care or family-based care (i.e. foster care). Rather, they combine key elements of both models. Community homes consist of small homes situated in various localities across Malta, usually hosting up to a maximum of seven children, providing a setting that closely mirrors family life. These homes provide high levels of individualised attention, supported by trained staff working on a shift basis. As in residential care homes, the one-to-one attention from carers in community homes is particularly valuable for fostering strong and supportive relationships. FSWS mainly operates community homes, specialising in both alternative care and aftercare. Their contribution is central to providing flexible, responsive care solutions that bridge the gap between foster care and more formal residential provision.

These homes are designed to provide a stable, nurturing environment, offering both family-like relational care and professional oversight to meet emotional, behavioural, or developmental needs. Emphasis is placed on continuity, emotional security, daily routines, education, and participation in community activities, allowing children to experience belonging and normalcy. Community homes also play an important role in maintaining family connections, accommodating siblings together when possible, and supporting sustained contact with birth families. The dedication, expertise, and empathy of staff in community homes are essential. Their work helps ensure that each child is supported, nurtured, and able to flourish.

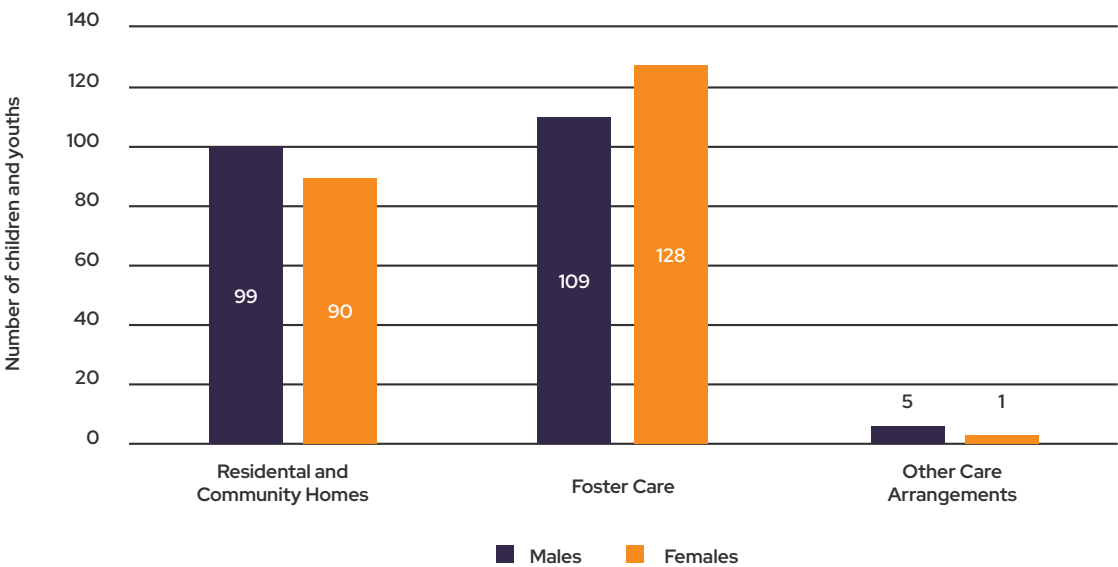
33 Large facilities that cared for a greater number of children of various ages.

2.2.4 – Analysis of Alternative Care and Aftercare Services Data

This section presents an analysis of recent data on children and young people in alternative care and aftercare settings. The data spans multiple aspects of care – from overall numbers in alternative care to detailed age distributions of children in foster, residential and community care, and extends also to aftercare services and future projections as these young people transition into adulthood. Each graph (Figures 1–7)³⁴, offers a different perspective, and together they build a comprehensive picture of the current state and anticipated trends in alternative care, for aftercare planning.

The data in the first three figures below (Figures 1–3) present a comprehensive picture of children and young people in various alternative care settings. However, the focal point for the development of this aftercare policy lies in understanding the needs of those transitioning out of care. Hence, data from Figures 4 through 7 directly informed the development of this policy and the subsequent measures related to aftercare.

Figure 1: Number of Children and Young People in Alternative Care, by Type of Care, February 2025



Note: Other Care Arrangements includes Caritas – Ta’ L-Ibwar, Correctional – Forensic Ward MCH, Correctional -YOURS, YMCA Dar Nikki Cassar, and the Young People’s Unit.

34 Source: Foundation for Social Welfare Services, February 2025, Personal Communications.

Figure 2: Number of Children and Young People in Foster Care, by Age Group, February 2025

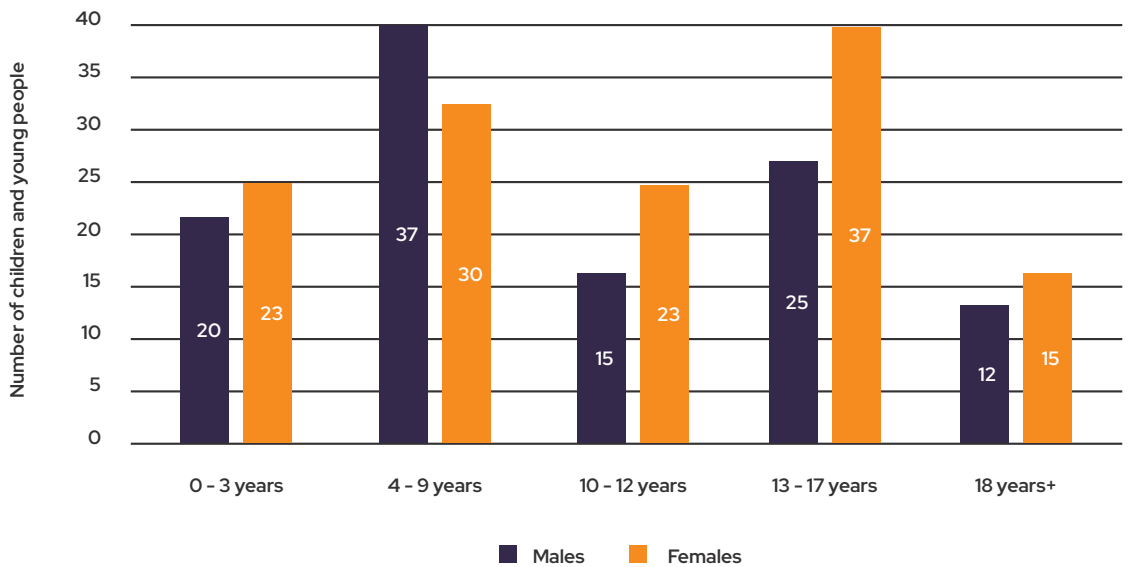


Figure 3: Number of Children and Young People in Residential and Community Care Homes, by Age Group, February 2025

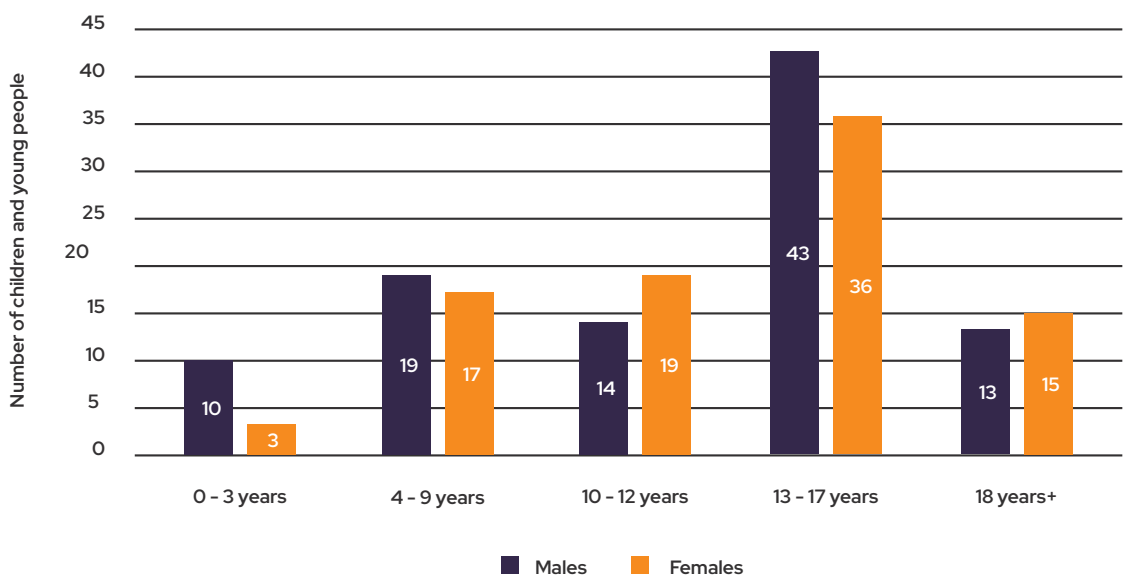
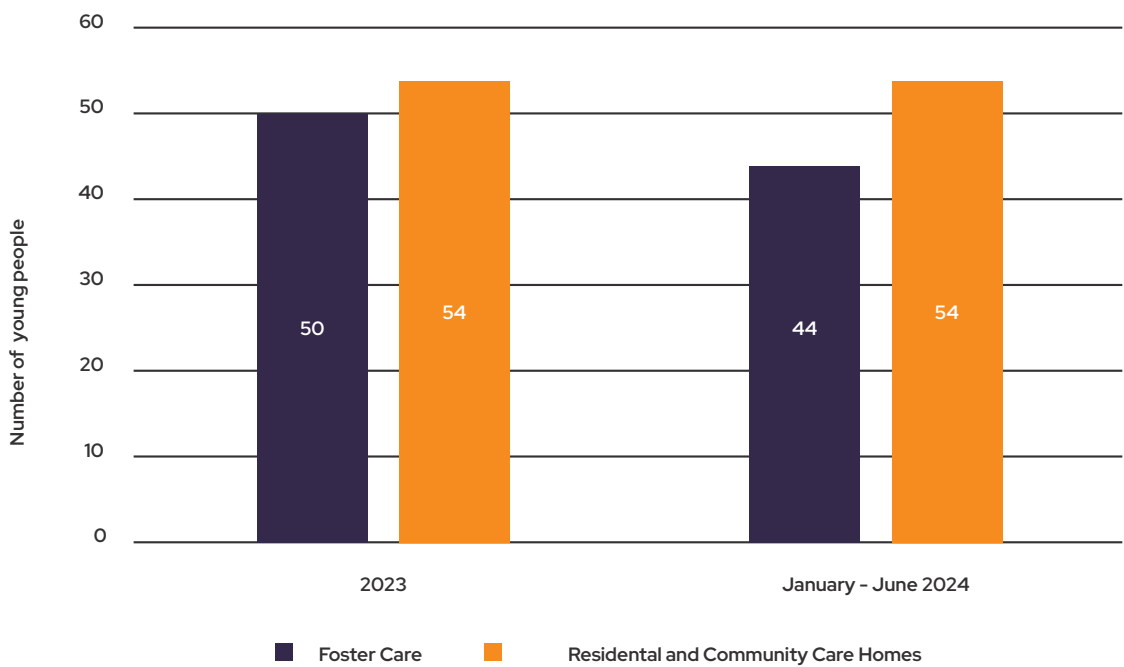


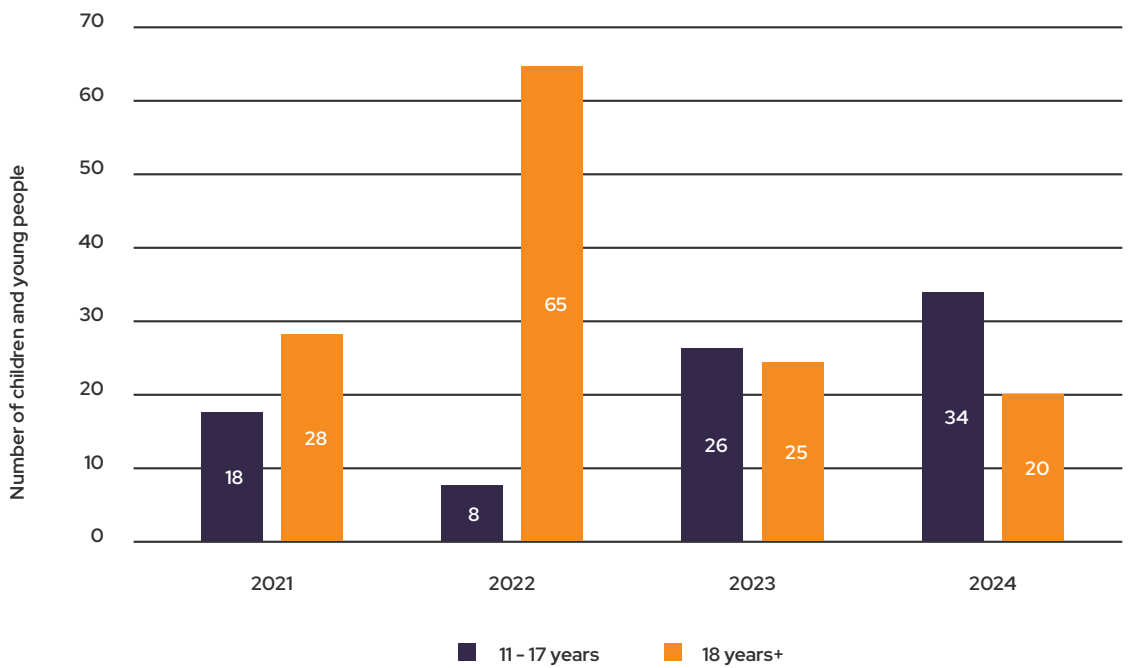
Figure 4 below illustrates the number of young people, aged 18 years and over, who still lived in alternative care settings in 2023 and 2024. The graph indicates the number of young people who still lived with their foster care families and a slightly higher number of young people who still lived in residential and community care homes. When this data is compared to the data presented in Figures 5 and 6 below, it shows that young people of care leaving age (18 years of over) are mostly living in residential and community care homes whilst receiving aftercare services and that specialised aftercare residences are still being developed and/or have a low intake number for more focused support.

Figure 4: Young People Aged 18 Years or Over in Alternative Care by Type of Care, 2023-2024



The time series in Figure 5 data shows trends in the number of children and young people receiving aftercare services between 2021 and 2024. Gender disaggregated data was available for the year 2024, wherein 11 males and 23 females aged 11–17 received aftercare services, while 12 males and 8 females aged 18 and over received aftercare services. Children receiving aftercare services are in alternative care and are being supported to develop their skills and support networks for their transition to adulthood. Likewise, young people receiving aftercare services refers to young people who are still living in foster care, residential and community home care, aftercare residence, or independently in the community. An upward trend in aftercare engagement indicates a growing recognition of its importance. This momentum should be further bolstered by expanding service availability, enhancing quality, and ensuring that policy and programmes are responsive to changing needs.

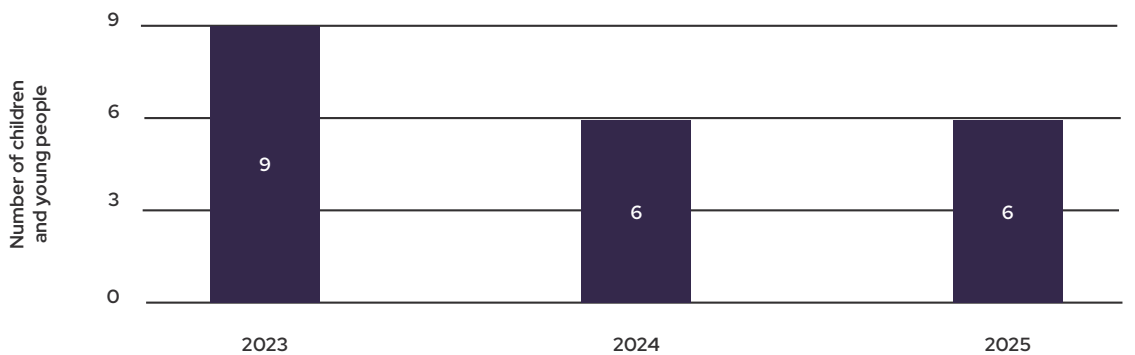
Figure 5: Number of Children and Young People Receiving Aftercare Services, by Age Group, 2021-2024



Data in Figure 6 on the number of young people aged 19–23 years living in aftercare residences in 2023, 2024 and 2025, sheds light on housing stability and focused aftercare support during a critical phase of transition. Yet, as indicated above in Figure 4, more young people of care leaving age kept living in residential and community care homes whilst receiving aftercare services.

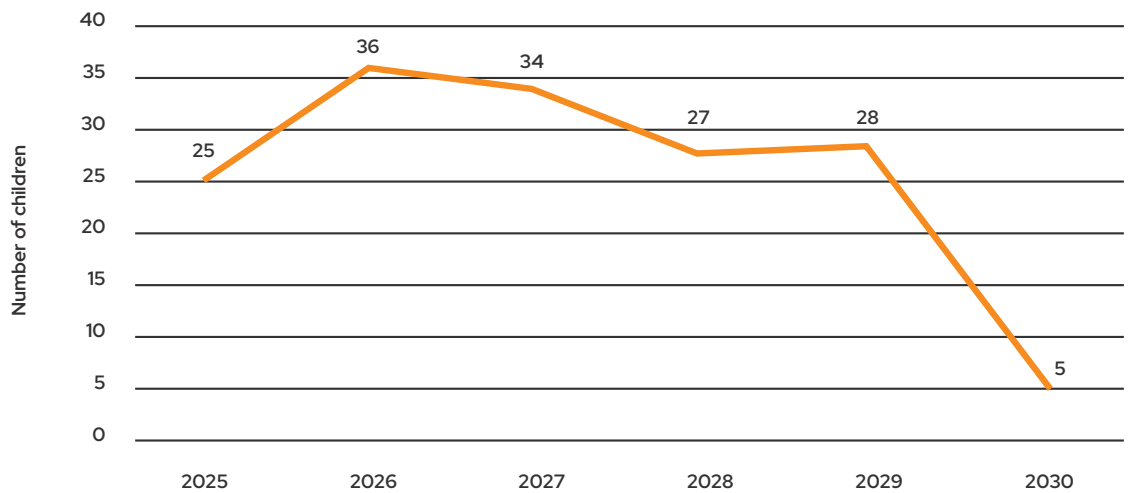
Additionally, there were 9 children and young adults aged 17–22 years on the waiting list for aftercare residential services. The existence of a waiting list suggests that current aftercare residential services may be insufficient to meet the needs of transitioning youth. This highlights the need for expanding aftercare residential capacity, improving transition planning, and ensuring timely placements for those nearing adulthood.

Figure 6: Number of Young People Living in Aftercare Residences (aged 19 – 23 years), 2023-2025³⁵



Projections for the number of children reaching adulthood in the next six years, presented in Figure 7, provide a forward-looking view of the upcoming demand for aftercare services. Such data on the number of young people being eligible for aftercare support is required for proactive planning that facilitates a smoother transition into independent adulthood for all alternative care leavers.

Figure 7: Number of Children in Alternative Care Reaching Adulthood (18 years of age) in the next 6 years, 2025-2030



³⁵ 2025 refers to latest available data at February 2025.

2.2.5 – Role of the Social Care Standards Authority

The Social Care Standards Authority (SCSA) plays a key role in regulating and overseeing care homes, this to ensure that children in alternative care receive high-quality support in a safe and nurturing environment. The authority is responsible for the statutory licensing and monitoring of the previously mentioned care homes, ensuring they adhere to established regulatory standards and that they comply with the legal requirements outlined in Chapter 602³⁶ and Chapter 582³⁷ of the Laws of Malta. The SCSA sets regulatory standards, investigates complaints, and takes necessary action to safeguard the well-being of children in care.

To ensure compliance the SCSA conducts regular inspections of residential and community care facilities, and other care settings in order to monitor adherence to quality standards, identify areas for improvement, and ensure compliance with legal frameworks. Based on its findings the SCSA may issue reports and recommendations working collaboratively with service providers to enhance care practices and to promote the best interests and developmental needs of children.

2.2.6 – After-Care Services

Young people transitioning from care require smooth, flexible, and well-planned transitions tailored to their individual needs³⁸. The **Aftercare Service**, initiated in mid-2021 and offered by the **Directorate for Alternative Care** within FSWS, provides a comprehensive range of interventions to support young people currently in care and those who have previously benefited from alternative care. The process begins at age 15 years, involving the young person, their key worker, and other relevant stakeholders. This collaborative assessment leads to an agreed-upon contract that outlines the roles of all professionals and establishes a clear path forward³⁹.

Stability is crucial during this transition. Indeed, young adults, who have been assessed by professionals as benefiting from aftercare placements, have the option to remain in their same placements after turning 18 years of age or have access to secure alternative accommodations. The Aftercare Service offers semi-independent living opportunities for young people aged 18 to 21 years, allowing them to gradually develop life and responsibility skills in a supportive environment. To qualify, young people need to be enrolled in education or employed full-time. Moreover, the Directorate strives to keep siblings together, especially in cases where one of the siblings reaches the age of maturity. The service also ensures continued professional support, including access to education, training, employment, healthcare, social services, and legal aid. Moreover, the Social Care Standards Authority (SCSA) is in the process of developing comprehensive Regulatory Standards to further support these aftercare services.

36 Minors Protection (Alternative Care) Act, Chapter 602 of the Laws of Malta. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/eng>.

37 Social Care Standards Authority Act, Chapter 582 of the Laws of Malta. Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/582/eng/pdf>

38 O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: a review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>

39 Foundation for Social Welfare Services 2023 Annual Report. Accessible at: <https://fsws.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Annual-Report-2023-1.pdf>

2.2.7 – Key Insights and Identified Challenges

This section outlines key challenges in the aftercare process for young people transitioning from alternative care in Malta. These challenges were identified from data collected through the questionnaire distributed to alternative care homes⁴⁰ and insights gathered from the collaborative meeting platforms. It highlights areas where improvements are needed to better support care leavers and the professionals working with them.

Non-Standardised Care Leaving Policies

Locally, aftercare for young people transitioning from alternative care is managed through policies individually developed by each alternative care home, guided by the Care Plan provided by the Directorate for Alternative Care within the FSWS. These aftercare policies, while not formally standardised, are based on either evidence-based practices or insights gained from long-term experience in caring for young people. Despite some variation, alternative care homes generally uphold core principles, including the importance of a planned, tailored transition, providing ongoing support and guidance during the transition period, and promoting family reintegration where feasible.

Enhanced Support for Care Leavers

The analysis carried out by the Ministry for Social Policy and the Family, in collaboration with key stakeholders, highlights that while ongoing efforts have laid a strong foundation for aftercare, there is a need to address the main challenges holistically and at a national level. Data gathered from the alternative care homes highlights shared areas of enhanced need for care leavers, particularly regarding housing solutions, financial support, counselling services, and pathways to employment and further education.

Managing Sensitive Information in Care

As previously outlined, every child in alternative care has a personalised care plan with specific, time-bound goals, which is kept and updated by FSWS social workers. To complement this care plan, many residencies develop their own resident-specific care plans tailored to the child's day-to-day needs and reviewed regularly. While this dual approach ensures comprehensive care, challenges arise in streamlining communication during handovers, sometimes leaving care/support workers without essential knowledge about the child, as such information is typically held confidentially by the FSWS social worker. Although confidentiality is crucial, sharing key details such as triggers, dietary requirements and basic background information could significantly enhance the safety and well-being of both children and home staff.

⁴⁰ Refer to questionnaire in Annex

Challenges for Alternative Care Workers

The work carried out by care and support workers in alternative care is invaluable, providing children with much-needed stability and guidance. However, the quality of care can be further strengthened to better meet the complex needs of these children. While the current qualification requirement offers a solid starting point, it may not fully prepare care workers to handle the sensitive and challenging situations they often encounter. The sector also faces significant challenges, including understaffing, heavy workloads, and a lack of effective training due to time constraints and limited incentives. Moreover, the current conditions may not fully capture the demanding nature of the role, which involves long hours and significant emotional and physical challenges. Addressing these aspects could help improve job satisfaction and support care workers in providing the best possible care for the children.

Managing Extreme Behaviours

Home managers play a critical role in creating safe and nurturing environments for children in alternative care. However, they face significant challenges when children exhibit extreme and unpredictable behaviours that cannot be safely managed by home staff. These situations can pose serious risks to care workers, other residents, and the child themselves. While the need for trauma-informed training has been highlighted as a key area for improvement, such training alone may not be sufficient to address emergency situations effectively. This underscores the urgent need for additional resources and specialised support to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone involved.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

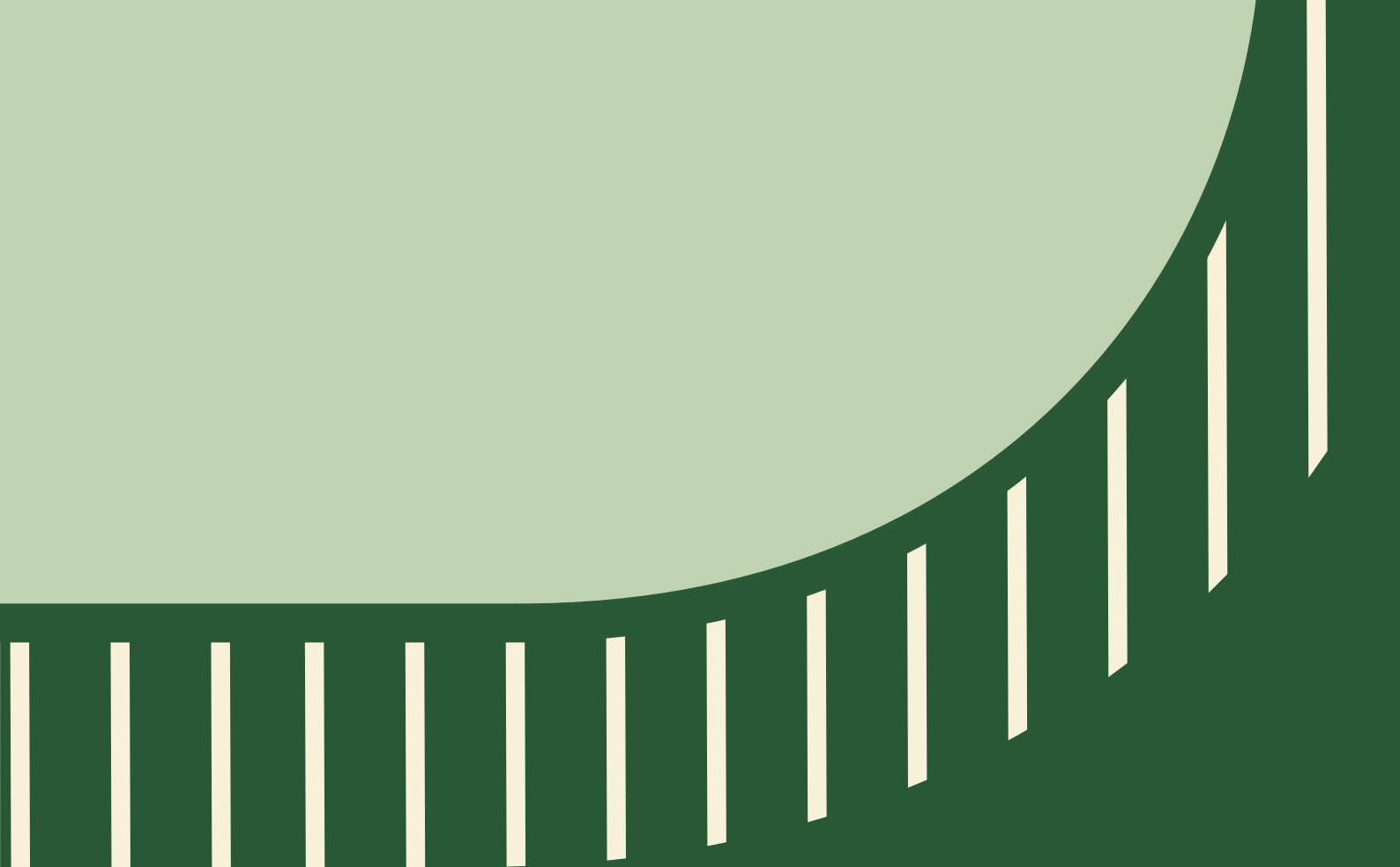
Finally, the challenges faced by children in alternative care often extend across multiple sectors. Addressing these crosscutting issues requires improved integrated collaboration among stakeholders, ideally through high-level platforms coordinated by the relevant authority. Such platforms could facilitate the identification and resolution of systemic issues efficiently and effectively.

03

An

Aftercare

Guarantee



This section introduces key principles and strategic recommendations essential for establishing the first ever Aftercare Guarantee at a national level. The Aftercare Guarantee is built on the principle that all young people in care have the right to be supported at all levels towards their transition to adulthood⁴¹.

Eligibility for all the Aftercare Guarantee measures is strictly limited to young individuals who were under an active care order immediately before turning 18 years old.

Through this instrument, Government will be setting up an improved comprehensive support system for young individuals transitioning from care to adulthood, giving them the best chances to be confident, positive and successful.

⁴¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). Assisting care leavers: Time for action. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3e597bea-en>.

The **Aftercare Guarantee**⁴² is a package that establishes a baseline of essential support services to ensure continuity, stability, and accessibility for individuals transitioning from structured care to independent living.

The Aftercare Guarantee focuses on:

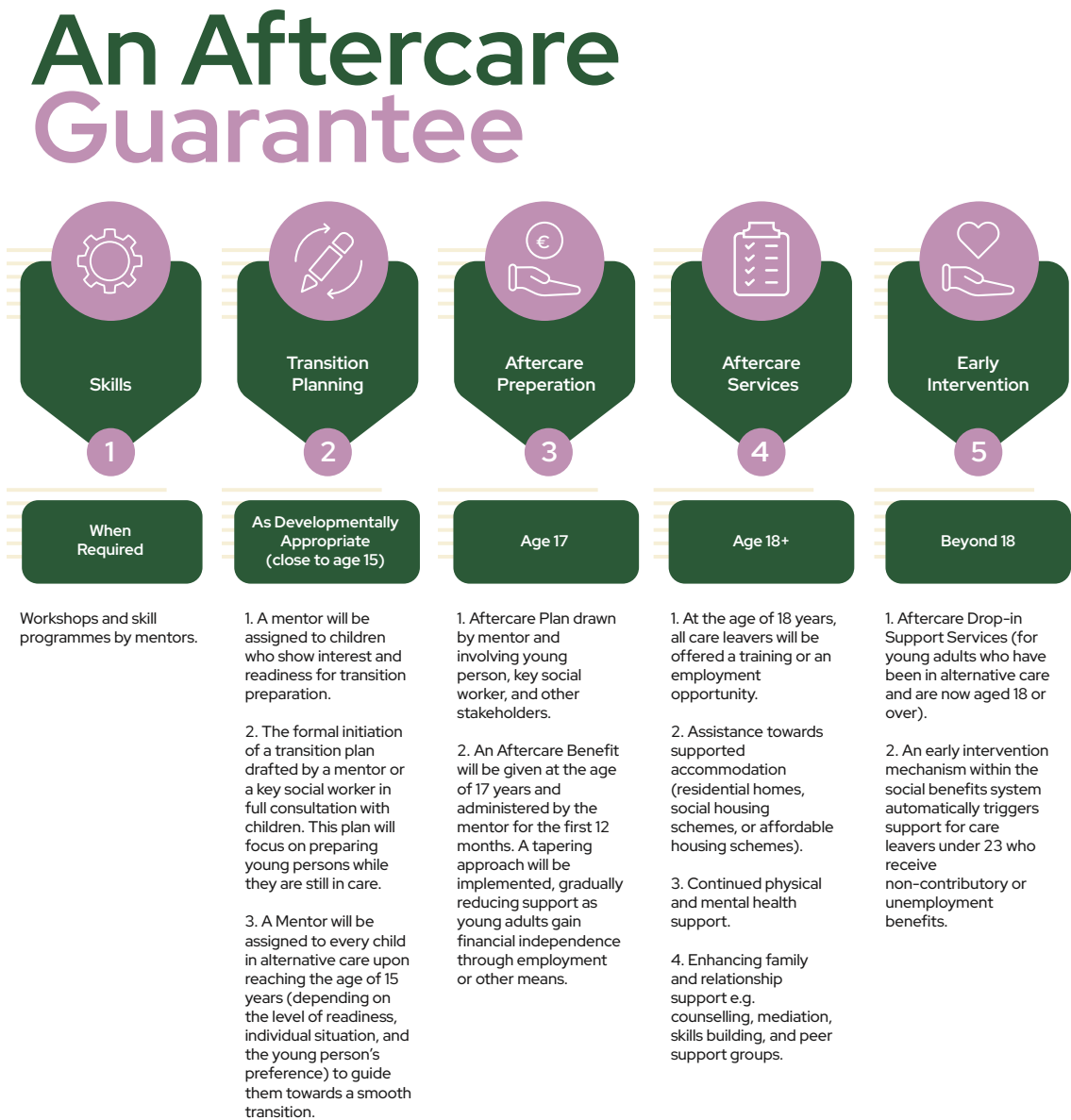
- Planning and Preparing Aftercare
- A Guarantee of Education or Employment
- Continued Health Support
- Financial Support through an Aftercare Allowance
- Supported Accommodation and Independent Living
- Support for Family Ties
- An Enabling Framework

⁴² Aftercare services that give support to prepare young people leaving care arrangements for adulthood, will remain of a voluntary nature. Young people leaving alternative care will have the right to decide whether to engage in aftercare services or otherwise, and they will also have the option to re-engage with the services at any point up to the age of 21 years (This may be extended if a young adult is in full time education or accredited training to the age of 23 years). Compliance with the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act will ensure that services are aligned with safeguarding the best interests of minors and young adults.

A forward-thinking and holistic strategy for transitioning young people into independence is paramount. The following initiatives form the Aftercare Guarantee and aim to provide a comprehensive safety net which promotes a supportive environment and provides the necessary spring-board momentum for a sustained societal integration, empowerment, and long-term resilience.

A snapshot of the proposed New Aftercare System – Aftercare Guarantee is presented in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: The New Aftercare System – Aftercare Guarantee



3.1 | Planning and Preparing Aftercare

Workshops and Programmes

Early planning is crucial to allow the young person time to master skills and attitudes necessary to successfully transition to adulthood⁴³.

This policy recognises that the level of support required will vary from one child to another; therefore, *a priori*, professionals working with the children and key persons have an important role in identifying individual needs.

A key person refers to a trusted adult who plays a consistent, supportive role in the young person's life. This may be a family member, foster carer, residential care worker, or another significant figure with whom the child has built a stable and meaningful relationship. For some children, this key person will naturally provide valuable guidance and emotional support throughout the transition process. However, other children may not have such a figure in their lives and may require the involvement of a qualified professional, such as a trained mentor, to provide tailored support. Identifying whether the young person has a key person—or whether additional professional input is needed—will form part of the assessment carried out by those working closely with them. This will take into account their developmental stage, emotional well-being, and overall preparedness.

When appropriate and deemed necessary (by the key social worker), the young person will be assigned a mentor and gradually introduced to dedicated workshops and life skills programmes tailored to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life.

This careful approach will help ensure that transition planning is introduced at the right time, reducing the risk of unnecessary anxiety or re-traumatisation. In most cases, the teaching of life skills already forms part of the daily work of residential and community home care staff. Where this is not yet fully embedded, efforts will focus on enhancing existing practices rather than introducing entirely new ones.

These workshops and programmes, for those who require them, will be carefully planned by the Mentor to complement and build on the valuable work already being carried out by key persons, social workers, residential and community home staff, and others involved in the child's care. The services provided will also be subject to regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure their effectiveness and relevance.

43 O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: A review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>.

Transition Plan

Formal transition planning is one of the keyways that young people are prepared for leaving out-of-home care. International research on transitions from out-of-home care has indicated that early, comprehensive and collaborative transition planning is associated with better post-care outcomes⁴⁴. Preparing children for employment and self-care involves teaching them how to manage their health, seek employment, and maintain housing amongst other aspects. These skills are essential for a successful transition to independent living⁴⁵.

Within this context, taking into account the level of readiness of the individual (in particular through the developmental and psychological factors) transition planning should ideally start when the child turns 15 years old or immediately upon entry into alternative care (whichever comes first) through the formal commencement of an individualised transition plan⁴⁶. This plan will focus on preparing a young person, **while they are still in care**.

The process of creating a formal transition plan will involve identifying the young person's goals, aspirations, needs, and wants. The plan should outline their preparation for the transition and specify the types of support and assistance they will receive⁴⁷.

The formal transition plan will be developed in collaboration with the young person and should be regularly updated and undertaken as a shared responsibility by their care team.

A Skilled Mentor for All

Young people leaving care struggle with independence, particularly when they don't have anyone to rely on⁴⁸.

Through this Policy, Government will introduce and streamline the new role of a **Mentor**, who will be assigned to every child in alternative care upon reaching the age of 15 years (**depending on the level of readiness, individual situation, and the young person's preference**) to guide them towards a smooth transition.

44 Muir, S. and Hand, K. (2018). Beyond 18: The Longitudinal Study on Leaving Care Wave 1 Research Report: Transition planning and preparation. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/beyond-18-wave-1-research-report>.

45 Starr, M., Cordier, R., Pakpahan, E., Robinson, M., Speyer, R., & Chung, D. (2024). Understanding how young people transitioning from out-of-home care acquire and develop independent living skills and knowledge: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *PloS one*, 19(6), e0304965. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304965>.

46 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). Assisting care leavers: Time for action. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3e597bea-en>.

47 Tusla. (2023). Strategic Plan on Aftercare Services for Young Adults 2023-2026. Tusla Child and Family Agency. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Strategic_Plan_on_Aftercare_Services_for_Young_Adults-2023-26.pdf.

48 Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76, 74-83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035>.

Definition of A Skilled Mentor

A mentor is a qualified and trained professional with the expertise and capacity to provide structured, relationship-based support to young people transitioning from alternative care to independent living. This role extends beyond informal support and requires specific competencies in trauma-informed care and systemic understanding of the challenges faced by care leavers.

Role and Responsibilities

The mentor will be a professional who is able to engage meaningfully with the trauma histories and systemic difficulties experienced by young people leaving care. This includes the ability to:

- Safely explore and unpack the complex emotions that may surface during this transitional period;
- Prevent and respond appropriately to crisis situations, offering stability and reassurance;
- Understand the trajectory of trauma and how it may manifest in behaviours and emotional responses;
- Work within professional boundaries, providing consistent, respectful, and reliable support.

While the mentor's approach is tailored to the specific needs of young people in aftercare, it is grounded in evidence-based knowledge and practice. This ensures that they are equipped to interpret behaviours within the context of each young person's lived experience, offering support that looks beyond surface-level reactions.

Distinction from Other Professionals

While the mentor works collaboratively with key workers, social workers, youth workers and other members of the care team, their role is distinct in that it prioritises relational consistency and individualised emotional support within a clear professional framework. The mentor complements formal case planning by offering continuity, trust, and context-sensitive guidance, thereby bridging the gap between formal professional intervention and the lived daily realities of young people leaving care.

Recognising the deep emotional and psychological connections young people form with their caregivers, psycho-social professionals and familiar environments, the Mentor will work collaboratively to preserve these bonds while fostering the young person's growth and resilience. To strengthen this process, the mentor will establish strong links with community local teams to empower the person to actively participate in neighbourhood community initiatives and social life. These efforts will connect young people to the assets and resources available within their own communities and neighbourhoods, ensuring they are supported by a broader network⁴⁹.

The transition from care to independent living is better enabled when young people are supported to plan and discuss the opportunity for reunification with their family⁵⁰. Including the young person's family in interventions aimed at supporting their transition to independent living can help them manage challenging emotions while offering emotional and social support⁵¹. However, family involvement may not always be in the young person's best interest, and any contact should be carefully evaluated by professionals on a case-by-case basis.

Additional care is essential for unaccompanied young people, whose transitions may be further complicated by the absence of a family network and other uncertainties⁵².

Training

Mentors will be required to possess the necessary skills in building trust, fostering motivation, and effectively guiding young people through challenges⁵³. To ensure they are well-prepared for this role, a new training course⁵⁴ will be developed for individuals aspiring to become aftercare mentors. Successful completion of this course will be mandatory, with all mentors receiving an "Aftercare Mentorship Certificate" as recognition of their qualifications.

Every certified mentor will have a manageable caseload to allow effective individualised mentoring through quality service provision⁵⁵.

49 Dehertogh, B., Berkvens, L., Van Tongel, W., & Moentjens, G. (2018). *Policy framework for a strengths-based approach for youth care leavers: Core guidelines for organisations and aftercare workers*. Antwerp: AP University College.

50 Holt, S., & Kirwan, G. (2012). The "key" to successful transitions for young people leaving residential child care: The role of the keyworker. *Child Care in Practice*, 18(4), 371–392.

51 Feather, J., Allen, D., Crompton, R., Jones, Z., Christiansen, A., & Butler, G. (2023). Transitional support interventions for care leavers: A scoping review. *Children & Society*, 38(5), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12825>.

52 **European Migration Network (EMN)**. (2022). *Transition of unaccompanied minors to adulthood in Europe*. European Commission. Retrieved from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/EMN_INFORM_Transition-minors-adulthood_final.pdf.

Council of Europe. (2019). *Supporting young refugees in transition to adulthood: Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)4*. Council of Europe Publishing. Retrieved from <https://edoc.coe.int/en/refugees/8233-supporting-young-refugees-in-transition-to-adulthood-recommendation-cmrec20194.html>.

53 Dehertogh, B., Berkvens, L., Van Tongel, W., & Moentjens, G. (2018). *Policy framework for a strengths-based approach for youth care leavers: Core guidelines for organisations and aftercare workers*. Antwerp: AP University College.

54 For those already having an MQF level 6 (or at least 5 years experience) in the Social Sector.

55 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). *Assisting care leavers: Time for action*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3e597bea-en>.

A Standardised Aftercare Plan

The preparation for aftercare will intensify whereby all children in alternative care at the age of 16 years and/or over will undergo a **formal aftercare assessment of their needs** by the key social worker⁵⁶ and in collaboration with the assigned mentor.

This assessment will lead to the development of a detailed **After Care Plan** that addresses the specific needs of the child and to indicate which assistance they are entitled to when they leave the residential or community home, to integrate well into society⁵⁷.

The Aftercare Plan is drafted and coordinated by the Key Social Worker, in collaboration with the young person and the main stakeholders as necessary, including the assigned Aftercare Mentor and other key professionals. The Mentor is primarily responsible for supporting and implementing the plan once it is formalised. The aftercare plan should be formalised and ready for implementation at least **12 months before the child reaches 18 years of age**.

This collaborative process ensures a smooth transition to independence by prioritising stability, continuity, and holistic support. Detailed and holistic needs assessments, which are regularly reviewed with the young person's input, will be essential for effective support⁵⁸.

At all stages in care, young people will have a right to be provided with all relevant information to enhance their participation in relation to their future plans. The continuous meaningful participation is fundamental for the preparation, planning and achievement of positive outcomes for care leavers.

All supports offered, whether financial, housing-related, or social, must aim to promote independence. A tapered approach will be adopted to gradually reduce support as young people grow in capability and confidence, to avoid fostering long-term dependency.

56 As per definition in CAP 602: "Key Social Worker" means the social worker appointed by the Director (Child Protection) to investigate a report, or the social worker appointed by the Director Alternative Care (Children and Youths), to follow the development and well-being of a minor in alternative care and to co-ordinate and follow up the progress of a care plan in relation to that minor.

57 Tusla. (2023). Strategic Plan on Aftercare Services for Young Adults 2023-2026. Tusla Child and Family Agency. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Strategic_Plan_on_Aftercare_Services_for_Young_Adults-2023-26.pdf.

58 Ibid.

Table 1: Planning and Preparing Aftercare Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
1.1 In circumstances where a child requires particular assistance and support in gaining general and basic life-skills, a dedicated mentor is to be assigned. The assigned mentors will also be responsible to assist the children, when necessary, through the participation in workshops and life-skills programmes focused on essential areas like self-care, relationship management and household management, amongst others, depending on age and readiness of the child. Guidance from the mentor will also include support in pursuing hobbies, leisure activities, and social engagement as well as fostering peer networks and community connections to reduce loneliness and isolation.” When required, such support should also be provided once the young person reached adulthood and moves into semi-independent or independent living.	FSWS / All Licensed Homes	2028

-
- | | | | |
|-----|--|------------------------------|------|
| 1.2 | Initiate a formal Transition Plan for children aged 15 years of age and who are deemed to be ready (taking due consideration developmental and psychological factors). This plan will focus on preparing a young person while still in care, equipping them with the skills and support ⁵⁹ needed while they are still in care, paving stronger pathways towards their preparation for aftercare. | FSWS / All
Licensed Homes | 2027 |
|-----|--|------------------------------|------|

For such Transition Plans there should be a standard template (also catering for the necessary flexibility of the different situations) to be created by FSWS.

The plan should be accessible to home managers and include aspects in relation to health and triggering behaviour amongst others. Access to sensitive information should be controlled on a need-to-know basis to address confidentiality concerns.

-
- | | | | |
|-----|---|------|------|
| 1.3 | Consider assigning an aftercare mentor to children, that show interest to have a mentor, and who show readiness for transition preparation, when they turn 15 years of age. The role of the aftercare mentor will involve providing continuous support, life coaching and being the main point of reference for the young individual until they reach the age of 21 years. Mentoring service may be extended up until the age of 23 years to further help those who require longer interventions. | FSWS | 2029 |
|-----|---|------|------|
-

⁵⁹ Such as emotional and psychological preparation for transition.

1.4	At the age of 16 years, through the Key Social Worker, together with the aftercare Mentor and other key professionals, develop individual, tailor-made, and standardised aftercare plans for each young person. Children should be empowered to express their perspectives, opinions and future life goals to create a sense of ownership and accountability. This approach will align with the Care Plan and Placement Plan.	FSWS / All Licensed Homes	2027
-----	---	---------------------------	------

1.5	Maintain a manageable caseload for aftercare mentors to ensure that a mutual trusting relationship can be built with the young individuals transitioning out of the care home. This will involve regular face to face meetings, and remote support when required.	FSWS	2027
-----	---	------	------

3.2 | Education and Employment

At the age of 18 years, all care leavers will be offered a training or an employment opportunity.

Introducing comprehensive support for education and employment for young people leaving alternative care is vital to fostering their independence and long-term well-being⁶⁰. By addressing educational and employment barriers, such as limited financial resources, skill gaps, and lack of professional networks, these young individuals can better navigate their transition into adulthood⁶¹. Providing targeted forms of assistance will not only help them attain higher education or secure meaningful employment but also empowers them to build confidence, develop essential skills, and achieve self-sufficiency⁶².

This policy develops a dual-focus support system (focusing on education and employment opportunities) to lay the groundwork for a smoother transition, promoting active participation in society and enhancing the overall quality of life⁶³.

60 O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiriakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: A review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>.

61 Muir, S. and Hand, K. (2018). *Beyond 18: The Longitudinal Study on Leaving Care Wave 1 Research Report: Transition planning and preparation*. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/beyond-18-wave-1-research-report>.

62 Schiff, M., Pat-Horenczyk, R., Benbenishty, R., & Kaplan, Z. (2020). The contribution of mentoring to the life skills of youth leaving care in Israel. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(1), 48–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12690>.

63 Dehertogh, B., Berkvens, L., Van Tongel, W., & Moentjens, G. (2018). *Policy framework for a strengths-based approach for youth care leavers: Core guidelines for organisations and aftercare workers*. Antwerp: AP University College.

Table 2: Education and Employment Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
2.1 Collaborate with educational institutions and training providers to offer tailored educational and vocational training opportunities. These programmes should be designed to support young people leaving alternative care. Tailored educational and vocational opportunities will depend on a case-by-case basis, to extend inclusion not diminish it.	MSF and MES	2028
2.2 Establish partnerships with industries to create pathways for sustainable employment opportunities. These initiatives should specifically support young people that where in alternative care and/or are in aftercare.	MSF / Jobsplus	2028
2.3 Incentivise employers to hire and retain (for at least 2 years) young care leavers by providing tax credits or grants. High consideration should be given to protect stigma at the workplace in designing such schemes. Introduce tax credit schemes for alternative care leavers in employment. This approach protects young adults that do not want to disclose their background and reduces stigma in the workplace.	MSF and MFF	2028

2.4	Provide additional support through flexible work arrangements such as remote working, or part time work, so that care leavers can find a balance especially when pursuing further education.	MSF and DIER	2028
2.5	Ensure that all care leavers benefit from the supplementary financial assistance given to post-secondary and tertiary students eligible for a stipend. This measure aims to ease financial pressure and encourage more young people to pursue higher education.	MES	2028
2.6	Consider the creation of an Interprofessional Aftercare Support Network that connects social workers with professionals in education and training support services such as Carer Advisors to track records, analyse trends, and provide ongoing guidance.	MSF and MES	2029
2.7	Consider providing care leavers that are parents with free childcare services (irrespective of their employment or education status).	MSF and MES	2029

3.3 | Continued Health Support

A critical aspect of young care leaver's life is their health and wellbeing. Ensuring physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing is foundational for a productive and independent future built on accountability, responsibility and resilience⁶⁴. Aftercare services should thus prioritise access to comprehensive healthcare resources, including regular health check-ups, dental care, and age-appropriate medical guidance⁶⁵.

Care leavers are further at significant risk of experiencing poor mental health⁶⁶. Therefore, it is crucial to facilitate the provision of mental health support, with timely access to counselling, psychological services, and support groups that address common challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma that may have resulted from past experiences in care⁶⁷.

It is essential that young people have a clear understanding of their health needs and the resources available to them, empowering them to make informed choices about their wellbeing⁶⁸. Health education will be incorporated into the above-mentioned aftercare workshops and programmes. The mentor will also have a crucial role to cover areas such as sexual health, nutrition, physical activity, and substance misuse prevention⁶⁹.

To maintain continuity, collaboration with the primary public health system and local healthcare providers will be key to ensure that young people can seamlessly transition to community-based healthcare systems as they move toward greater independence⁷⁰. This integrated approach to health not only safeguards their immediate wellbeing but also instils lifelong habits and knowledge that contribute to their overall quality of life⁷¹.

64 Memarzia, J., St Clair, M. C., Owens, M. J., Goodyer, I. M., & Dunn, V. (2015). Adolescents leaving mental health or social care services: Predictors of mental health and psychosocial outcomes one year later. *BMC Health Services Research*, 15(1), 185.

65 Starr, M., Cordier, R., Pakpahan, E., Robinson, M., Speyer, R., & Chung, D. (2024). Understanding how young people transitioning from out-of-home care acquire and develop independent living skills and knowledge: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *PloS one*, 19(6), e0304965. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304965>.

66 Memarzia, J., St Clair, M. C., Owens, M. J., Goodyer, I. M., & Dunn, V. (2015). Adolescents leaving mental health or social care services: Predictors of mental health and psychosocial outcomes one year later. *BMC Health Services Research*, 15(1), 185.

O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiriakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: A review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>.

67 Schiff, M., Pat-Horenczyk, R., Benbenishty, R., & Kaplan, Z. (2020). The contribution of mentoring to the life skills of youth leaving care in Israel. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(1), 48–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12690>.

68 Muir, S. and Hand, K. (2018). Beyond 18: The Longitudinal Study on Leaving Care Wave 1 Research Report: Transition planning and preparation. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/beyond-18-wave-1-research-report>.

69 Dehertogh, B., Berkvens, L., Van Tongel, W., & Moentjens, G. (2018). *Policy framework for a strengths-based approach for youth care leavers: Core guidelines for organisations and aftercare workers*. Antwerp: AP University College.

70 Feather, J., Allen, D., Crompton, R., Jones, Z., Christiansen, A., & Butler, G. (2023). Transitional support interventions for care leavers: A scoping review. *Children & Society*, 38(5), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12825>.

71 Gypen, L., Vanderfaellie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035>.

Table 3: Continued Health Support Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
3.1 Create a voucher-based system to provide free, accessible and timely counselling and psychological therapy to young people leaving care, in cases where specific psychological support is necessary. Access to these services remains voluntary and guided by the care leaver's own wishes. Where possible, care leavers should be offered the option to continue working with the same therapist, psychologist, or counsellor they were engaged with while in alternative care, to ensure continuity and support a smoother emotional transition.	MSF and ODPM	2029
3.2 Equip mentors with the necessary tools and training to act as liaisons for young care leavers in accessing public healthcare services. Mentors should guide young individuals in navigating primary health centres (polyclinics) and mental health resources such as the 1579 support line, by assisting with scheduling appointments, understanding service options, and ensuring awareness of available support. Additionally, mentors should accompany care leavers to medical appointments when needed, provided that the care leaver has given clear consent and expressed the intention for such presence. This support offers both emotional and logistical support to foster independence and build confidence in navigating healthcare systems effectively.	FSWS	2028

3.4 | Adequate Aftercare Financial Support

This Policy introduces a new Aftercare Financial Support system for young people transitioning out of alternative care to support their journey towards independence and stability⁷². This financial support will provide essential financial assistance to cover immediate living costs, support education or job training, and ease the economic pressures they face as they navigate adulthood without the usual family safety net⁷³. By ensuring a degree of economic security, the aftercare financial support will aim to help mitigate the risk of homelessness, unemployment, and financial hardship⁷⁴. Such targeted support can empower these young individuals to build resilience, pursue their ambitions, and become active, contributing members of society⁷⁵.

The financial support will be provided to individuals starting at the age of 17 years and will be administered by their assigned mentor for the first 12 months to teach essential budgeting skills⁷⁶. After this initial period, the financial support will be gradually tapered over a defined timeline to encourage financial independence⁷⁷.

72 The Aftercare Allowance will be available to those individuals that have resided in alternative care for at least 2 years.

73 Muir, S. and Hand, K. (2018). Beyond 18: The Longitudinal Study on Leaving Care Wave 1 Research Report: Transition planning and preparation. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/beyond-18-wave-1-research-report>. O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiriakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: A review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>.

74 Feather, J., Allen, D., Crompton, R., Jones, Z., Christiansen, A., & Butler, G. (2023). Transitional support interventions for care leavers: A scoping review. *Children & Society*, 38(5), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12825>.

Starr, M., Cordier, R., Pakpahan, E., Robinson, M., Speyer, R., & Chung, D. (2024). Understanding how young people transitioning from out-of-home care acquire and develop independent living skills and knowledge: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *PloS one*, 19(6), e0304965. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304965>.

75 Schiff, M., Pat-Horenczyk, R., Benbenishty, R., & Kaplan, Z. (2020). The contribution of mentoring to the life skills of youth leaving care in Israel. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(1), 48–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12690>.

Gypen, L., Vanderfaillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Hoken, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035>.

76 Dehertogh, B., Berkvens, L., Van Tongel, W., & Moentjens, G. (2018). *Policy framework for a strengths-based approach for youth care leavers: Core guidelines for organisations and aftercare workers*. Antwerp: AP University College.

77 Holt, S., & Kirwan, G. (2012). The “key” to successful transitions for young people leaving residential child care: The role of the keyworker. *Child Care in Practice*, 18(4), 371–392.

Table 4: Aftercare Allowance Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
4.1 Introduce and Aftercare Benefit to support young adults with day-to-day living costs. The Aftercare Benefit will be tailored according to the needs of the individuals (based on a needs assessment) and will be available to all care leavers⁷⁸. Young persons who choose to progress in education or accredited training will have a higher allowance. The financial support package will be given at the age of 17 years and administered by the mentor for the first 12 months. Aftercare leavers that are parents should have an increased benefit. The benefit will be provided until the care leaver reaches the age of 21 years.	MSF (SID & DSS)	2028
4.1.1 Collaborate with national banks and financial regulators to enable care-experienced youth to open bank accounts through simplified procedures and access youth-friendly banking schemes. This includes accepting alternative identification and proof of address, and offering specialised accounts with no fees, and lower minimum balances.	MSF	2028

⁷⁸ Like all measures in this document, eligibility for the benefit is strictly limited to young individuals who were under a care order immediately before turning 18 years old.

4.1.2	Implement a tapering approach to the provided financial support, gradually reducing support as young adults gain financial independence through employment or other means. This ensures they are incentivised to seek work while still receiving essential assistance during their transition and reduce dependency on the provided financial support.	MSF (SID & DSS)	2028
4.1.3	Conduct regular review of the provided Aftercare Benefit to ensure that it addresses the unique circumstances of young people transitioning out of care.	MSF / FSWS	2028
4.2	Establish an automatic triggering mechanism within the social benefits system to ensure timely intervention for care leavers under 23 years who become recipients of non-contributory or unemployment benefits. When a care leaver accesses these benefits, the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) will be immediately alerted to offer targeted support. This proactive approach will help prevent long-term dependency on welfare, promote sustainable employment pathways, and ensure that care leavers receive the necessary support to transition successfully into independent adulthood.	MSF / FSWS	2028

3.5 | Supported Accommodation and Independent Living

Young people transitioning out of care require a structured pathway to achieve stable, independent living. A structured approach is crucial to ensure that each young adult has access to safe, secure, and affordable housing tailored to their level of independence and specific needs⁷⁹.

Through the Aftercare Guarantee, care leavers will benefit from dedicated accommodation options that will be diverse and flexible, ranging from fully supported living arrangements to independent housing with access to periodic guidance.

Supported accommodation and independent living is to be integrated with existing social services, including financial, mental health, and educational support, to create a safety net that addresses the holistic needs of young people as they transition⁸⁰. Furthermore, service providers should ensure regular assessments to track each young person's readiness for independence and make adjustments to the level of support as needed⁸¹. This principle underscores the importance of enabling young people to experience a smooth and supported transition to adulthood, reducing the risk of homelessness or instability and enhancing their prospects for a successful, independent life⁸².

79 O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiriakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: A review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>.

Starr, M., Cordier, R., Pakpahan, E., Robinson, M., Speyer, R., & Chung, D. (2024). Understanding how young people transitioning from out-of-home care acquire and develop independent living skills and knowledge: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *PloS one*, 19(6), e0304965. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304965>.

80 Feather, J., Allen, D., Crompton, R., Jones, Z., Christiansen, A., & Butler, G. (2023). Transitional support interventions for care leavers: A scoping review. *Children & Society*, 38(5), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12825>.

Schiff, M., Pat-Horenczyk, R., Benbenishty, R., & Kaplan, Z. (2020). The contribution of mentoring to the life skills of youth leaving care in Israel. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(1), 48–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12690>.

81 Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Hoen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035>.

82 O'Donnell, R., Hatzikiriakidis, K., Mendes, P., Savaglio, M., Green, R., Kerridge, G., ... Skouteris, H. (2020). The impact of transition interventions for young people leaving care: A review of the Australian evidence. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 1076–1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2020.1842216>.

Table 5: Supported Accommodation and Independent Living Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
5.1 Collaborate with NGOs and Government entities, such as the Housing Authority, to establish and implement pilot and phased transitional housing programmes tailored for care leavers, based on identified needs and available funding.	MSF/MAL/HA	2028
5.1.1 Assess the feasibility of providing student lodging—either through university residences or subsidised private housing—to ease financial and logistical pressures. This measure aims to encourage more youth to pursue tertiary education and help reduce the education attainment gap.	MSF/MES/MAL/HA	2028
5.2 Initiate discussions with the Planning Authority to explore the feasibility of amending the “Use Classes” as defined under the Development Planning (Use Classes) Order, to enable the construction of innovative and affordable housing structures with shared amenities to cater for the short-term needs of alternative care leavers. Such amendment would also require where appropriate revisions to the housing design policies and guidance as defined in the “Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards (2015)”, together with the responsible Minister’s endorsement, following consultation with relevant stakeholders.	MAL/MIPE	2028

5.3	Revise and enhance the housing subsidy scheme to provide youth leaving alternative care with a higher level of financial support than is currently available. The revised subsidy should be tiered, offering varying levels of support based on the care leaver's engagement in education, training, or employment. This structure will provide a baseline level of housing support for all eligible care leavers, while incentivising continued participation in studies or work through higher subsidy rates, thus promoting both stability and long-term self-sufficiency.	MAL	2028
-----	---	-----	------

5.4	Provide starter packs with essential household items to support young people transitioning to semi-independent or independent living, addressing immediate practical needs and reducing initial financial and emotional pressures.	MSF	2028
-----	--	-----	------

3.6 | Supporting Family Ties

The Aftercare Guarantee will establish a new system of family services specifically designed to support alternative care leavers who are assessed to require such assistance.

Family dynamics can vary greatly. Support must be adaptable, taking into account the unique needs and circumstances of each family. Such services may include family therapy and counselling, mediation, and guidance on effective communication, all aimed at creating a nurturing environment that promotes positive relationships. By equipping families with resources to support the young person's growth, this Aftercare Guarantee helps foster a stronger, more resilient support system that benefits both the individual and their family members as they transition into a new phase of life.

Providing structured support to families as young people transition out of care is critical. Reuniting or maintaining family connections can be a significant factor in a young person's successful adjustment to independent living, offering them a stable emotional and social network. For those young people who have safe and healthy relationships with family members, tailored support to family can strengthen these bonds and provide a dependable source of guidance and encouragement as they navigate adulthood.

In instances where the young person's family members are the peers sharing the same living amenities, it is essential to provide tailored support that facilitates positive family setting dynamics to ensure a harmonious and supportive environment. This may involve offering services to help resolve any potential conflicts, as well as ensuring that all members understand their roles and responsibilities in maintaining a nurturing living space. By recognising the young person as a family member within a shared living environment, this policy fosters mutual support, accountability, and empowerment. A collaborative approach helps the young person thrive while nurturing close healthy relationships.

Table 6: Supporting Family Ties Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
6.1 Conduct regular assessments of the family dynamics and relationships of the young care leaver, to identify whether such ties are viable and beneficial to the young individual. Where positive family ties are identified, further enhance targeted family support services, including family counselling, mediation, and skills-building workshops in areas such as communication, conflict resolution, and parenting. These services will help families strengthen their relationships and provide a stable foundation as young people transition to independent living. Recognising that family support may not always be possible, focus on alternative measures to build strong, dependable networks of support through community teams and peer-based initiatives. Thus, the focus should be on family but also on any support system that the youth deem important for inclusion in their future.	FSWS	Ongoing

6.2	Introduce a Youth Family Support Programme that connects young adults (18–23 years) with individuals or families who provide stability, guidance, and a supportive family environment through a personalised matching process. Voluntary carers, will be given training to commit to regular, meaningful engagement, helping young adults build essential life skills and navigate independence. Through this semi-independent support framework, the programme promotes positive role modelling and increased emotional and practical support for young adults transitioning to independence, leading to improved long-term outcomes for youth Accountability checks ensure that the young individuals are not exposed to anymore vulnerabilities.	FSWS	2029
-----	--	------	------

6.3	Monitor and evaluate family support services to assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving family relationships. This evaluation should focus on the young person’s wellbeing, the strength of family connections, and the ability of family members to support the young person’s transition to independent living.	FSWS / MSF	2028
-----	---	------------	------

6.4	Facilitate peer support groups for families and other care leavers to connect with others in similar situations, offering opportunities to share experiences, challenges, and solutions. This peer network can provide families and other care leavers with additional emotional and practical support as they navigate the complexities of transitioning young people out of care.	FSWS	2028
-----	--	------	------

3.7 | Enabling Policy Framework

An enabling policy framework is a pre-requisite to guide the development and delivery of aftercare services for young people transitioning from alternative care to independent living⁸³.

The following recommendations concerning standards, processes and services have a crucial role to play in building a strong enabling framework and a solid foundation for the delivery of the components of the Aftercare Guarantee.

Table 7: Enabling Policy Framework Recommendations

Measure	Responsible Entity	Implementation Date
7.1 Standards		
7.1.1 In collaboration with the Social Care Standards Authority, develop and implement Standards for Aftercare, as a requisite for necessary licenses for residences providing aftercare accommodation for individuals who wish to opt in such services and are transitioning out of the care system	SCSA	2027

83 Muir, S. and Hand, K. (2018). Beyond 18: The Longitudinal Study on Leaving Care Wave 1 Research Report: Transition planning and preparation. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/beyond-18-wave-1-research-report>.

7.1.2	Revise and elevate current standards for Alternative Care, ensuring they lay a robust foundation for successful aftercare transitions. This involves integrating preparatory elements that progressively build young people's skills, resilience, and readiness for independence. These standards should encourage stronger coordination between alternative care and aftercare providers to facilitate a smoother, more supportive transition for each individual leaving care.	SCSA	2027
-------	--	------	------

7.1.3	Gradually elevate the qualification standards required for support and care workers in alternative care and aftercare homes, ensuring alignment with internationally recognised frameworks and best practices.	MSF, FSWS, SCSA, MFHEA	2029
-------	--	------------------------	------

7.2 Infrastructure and Resources

7.2.1	With reference to the "assessment of needs" referred to in the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (CAP 602), develop standard operating procedures to ensure consistency of transition plans, aftercare plans and effectiveness of services. The standard operating procedures will play a crucial role in identifying the appropriate support and services required for each individual's transition/aftercare plan, outlining the key domains to be considered during the evaluation whilst also allowing autonomy for professionals to develop guidelines for the benefit of the young individuals.	FSWS / SCSA	2027
-------	---	-------------	------

7.2.2	Establish a dedicated Aftercare Mentorship Unit within MSF (FSWS) to ensure that every young person in care benefits from skilled mentorship. In collaboration with a dedicated institute to mentors and aftercare support professionals, this Unit will also provide specialised training and resources for mentors who guide young adults transitioning out of care.	MSF, FSWS	2028
-------	---	-----------	------

7.2.3	Set up specialised units specifically for care leaving individuals with severe mental health challenges or extreme challenging behaviours who cannot safely reside within other settings. Where possible, provide a therapeutic environment tailored to their unique needs by trained mental health professionals, supported by a robust safety protocol to prevent harm to the child or others. Community involvement will be central to encourage understanding and support, creating opportunities for positive social interactions.	MSF/ODPM	2029
-------	---	----------	------

7.2.4	As part of Public Social Partnerships' (PSPs) agreements, encourage NGOs continue improving salaries of support/care workers to better reflect the workload, working conditions, and emotional strain of the role. This would also serve to attract and retain personnel to the sector, benefitting service quality. Public Social Partnerships (PSPs) should continue to be target-oriented, with clear deliverables and measurable outcomes that are regularly monitored to ensure accountability and effectiveness.	MSF	Ongoing
-------	--	-----	---------

7.2.4.1	Establish a fund for interested aftercare service providers to offer dedicated aftercare services that cover and address gaps in the availability of beds, food, amenities, and therapeutic support for aftercare leavers.	MSF	2028
---------	--	-----	------

7.2.5	Establish clear career progression opportunities within the sector to incentivise professional growth and long-term commitment.	MSF, FSWS	2027
-------	---	-----------	------

7.3 A Streamlined Process

7.3.1	Initiate discussions with the necessary stakeholders to improve and expedite the aftercare referral system procedure. It is crucial to avoid delays leaving empty availabilities.	MSF	2027
-------	---	-----	------

7.3.1.1	Establish a real-time database to enhance transparency and efficiency in managing residential and community home care placements. This system should provide live updates on availability, demand, and occupancy while integrating key demographic, health, and other relevant data. By ensuring real-time access to accurate and comprehensive information, the database will support informed decision-making, improve resource allocation, and promote accountability within the care system.	MSF	2027
---------	--	-----	------

7.3.2	Implement a simplified and user-friendly application process for accessing available services. This could include the development of an aftercare online portal where individuals can easily find information, submit applications, and track the status of their requests. Additionally, providing dedicated personnel to assist applicants in completing forms and understanding eligibility criteria would help remove barriers, be of assistance to both the young adult and the mentor, and facilitate timely access to necessary services.	FSWS	2028
-------	--	------	------

7.3.3	Establish a high-level collaborative platform involving key stakeholders, coordinated by the Social Care Standards Authority (SCSA), that meets regularly to address cross-cutting issues in alternative care and aftercare. The platform is to possibly include permanent secretaries from the Ministries of Health, Education, Social Policy and the Family, Justice, and Housing.	MSF, SCSA	2027
-------	--	-----------	------

7.3.4	Amend the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (Cap 602) to formalise the Aftercare Guarantee within the Aftercare section, thereby enhancing and strengthening aftercare services.	MSF	2029
-------	--	-----	------

7.3.4.1	Amend existing legislation to ensure that all minors under the age of 18 years who are placed under a care order, and that spend at least 1 year in alternative care, are granted the right to remain in care until the age of 21 years.	MSF	2027
---------	--	-----	------

Current legislation requires at least 2 years.

7.4 Training Programmes for Professionals

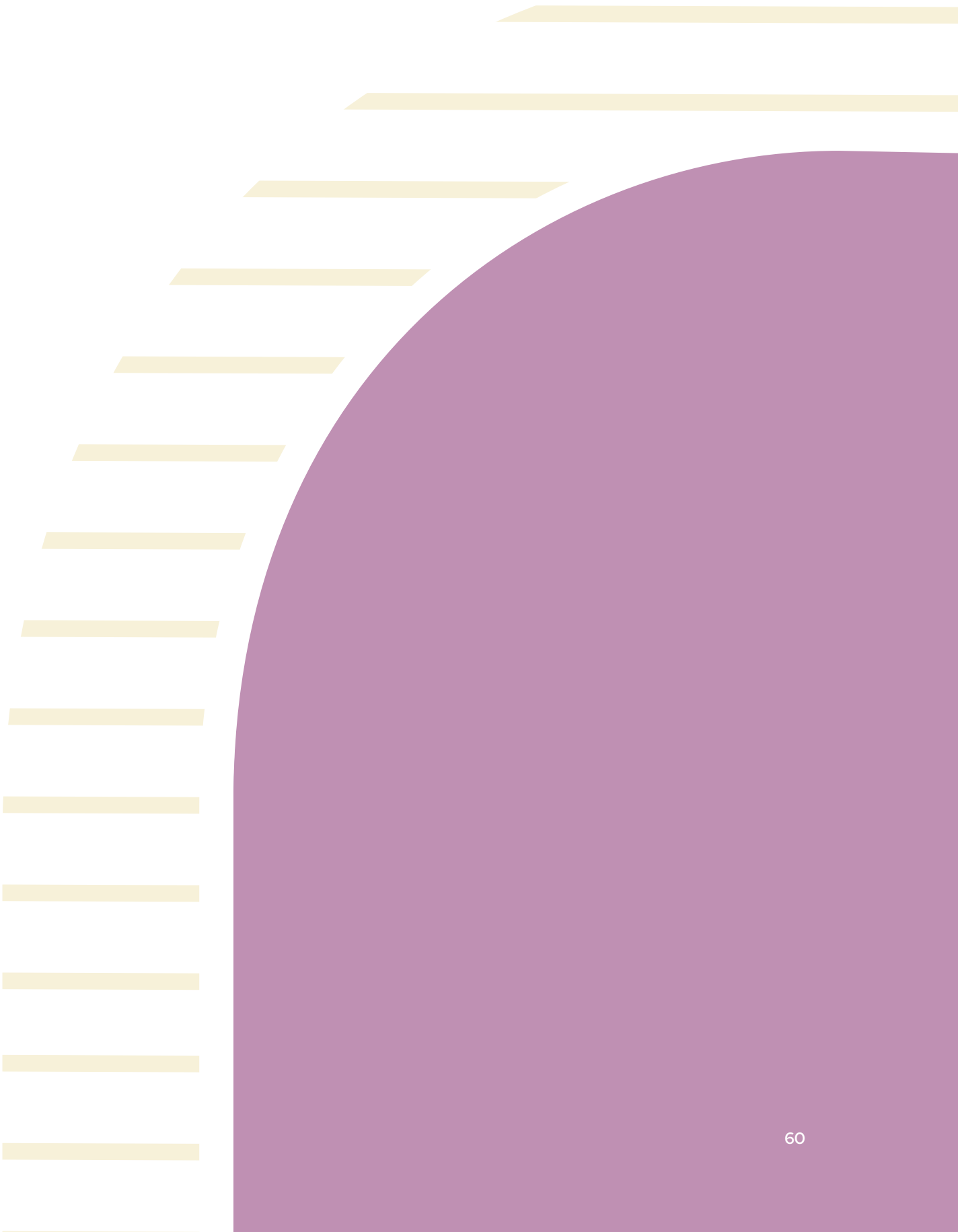
7.4.1	Establish specialised training courses for social care professionals, focusing on the realities of alternative care and aftercare. This will ensure a skilled workforce capable of addressing the diverse needs of individuals in various social care settings related to aftercare. Consider incentivising take-up through financial means.	MSF, MES	2028
7.4.1.1	Within the specialised training courses, develop programmes/modules targeted at aftercare mentors involved in alternative care and aftercare to cover trauma-informed care, mental health awareness, and conflict resolution. Such training would incorporate strategies to manage emergencies effectively, in line with improved alternative care and aftercare systems.	MSF, MES	2027
7.4.2	Provide appropriate capacity building to key social workers assigned to the child in alternative care, with a specific focus on aftercare planning.	MSF	2027
7.4.3	Introduce sponsored courses at level 5 and 6 for support/care worker specialisations, potentially leading to professional warrants or certifications, to support the gradual enhancement of qualification standards among support and care workers in alternative care and aftercare homes.	MSF	2028

7.5 Awareness and Outreach

7.5.1	Set up an "Aftercare Drop-in Service" for all young people/young adults who in the past have been in the alternative care system and are thus eligible for an aftercare service. Available on a flexible, walk-in basis, the Aftercare Drop-in Service would connect individuals with skilled mentors, offering immediate assistance with housing, employment, mental health, financial planning, and other critical needs. By establishing this service, aftercare support becomes more accessible and responsive to those who did not opt for structured aftercare. This service would serve as a home-base and allow care leavers to request aftercare support if their circumstances change, like for example losing a job, experiencing a mental health crisis, or facing housing instability.	MSF	2030
7.5.2	Actively raise awareness and promote the availability of aftercare services, aiming to reduce the stigma around seeking help, encouraging young individuals to use the support available.	MSF, FSWS	2028

7.5.3	Promote greater exposure to and awareness of the care work profession by implementing targeted outreach and engagement initiatives. This includes creating opportunities for potential care workers to gain hands-on experience through internships, volunteer programmes, and shadowing professionals in alternative care settings.	MSF, FSWS	2027
7.5.4	Develop public awareness campaigns and collaborate with career advisors to highlight the value and impact of care work, emphasising the critical role care workers play in supporting vulnerable populations.	MSF, FSWS	2027
7.5.5	Partner with educational institutions to incorporate care-related subjects into curricula and career guidance programmes to inspire more individuals to consider this rewarding profession.	MSF, MES	2027
7.6 Research, Monitoring and Evaluation			
7.6.1	Conduct a national study to explore the main challenges faced by care leavers. The study should focus on accommodation outcomes and any barriers they face in securing and maintaining stable housing.	MSF	2028

7.6.2	Use the findings from the national study on accommodation outcomes for care leavers, to inform housing policy reforms.	MAL/HA/FAH	2028
7.6.3	On a yearly basis, assess the number of children who are approaching care leaving, to identify any gaps in the required number of supported accommodations, family support services and mentorship services. Inform the Ministry for Social Policy and the Family with the official results for necessary action.	FSWS	2027
7.6.4	Conduct a research study to evaluate the effects and outcomes of the Aftercare Guarantee, with particular focus on mentorship which binds all services offered to young care leavers.	MSF	2030
7.6.5	Within the research study, develop an Aftercare Data Dashboard with performance indicators to regularly assess the effectiveness of aftercare services, such as employment rates, housing stability, educational achievements, and mental health outcomes.	MSF	2030
7.6.6	Implement feedback loops from care leavers to improve services continuously.	FSWS	2028



04

Implementation and Monitoring

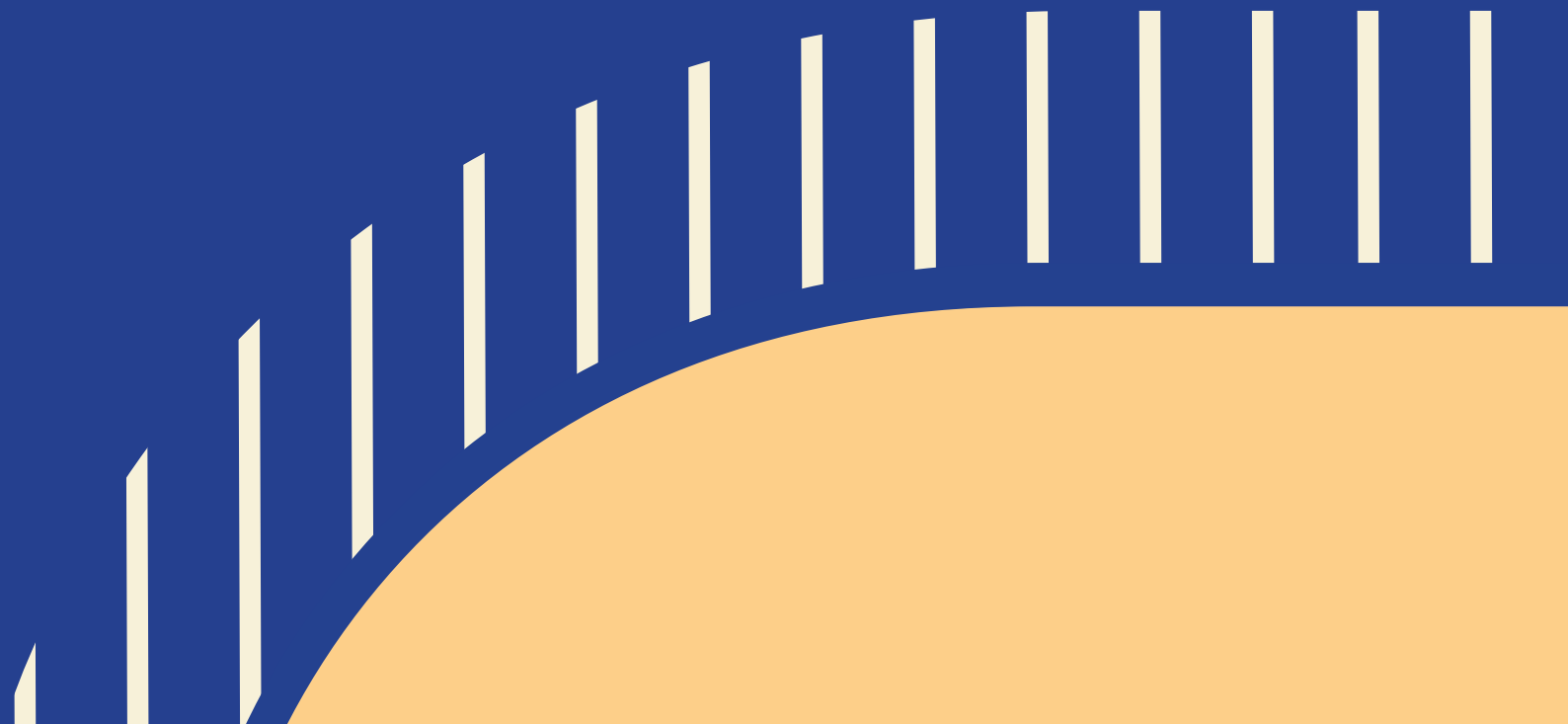
The successful implementation of the Aftercare Policy requires a coordinated and structured approach involving key stakeholders. The Ministry for Social Policy and the Family (MSF) will assume overall responsibility for the implementation of the policy, ensuring that national priorities are addressed and that the necessary resources are allocated through the national budget and European Social Fund (ESF) mechanisms.

The Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) will take a leading and coordinating role in the operationalisation of the policy. FSWS will establish an Implementation Committee composed of representatives from relevant authorities, including MSF. This committee will be tasked with overseeing the rollout of the policy, ensuring alignment with strategic objectives, and addressing any emerging challenges.

To guide the implementation process, FSWS will develop Annual Work Plans in collaboration with the Implementation Committee. These plans will outline specific actions, timelines, and responsibilities, thereby ensuring a structured and measurable approach to policy execution. MSF will support the implementation of national initiatives identified in these work plans by making the necessary funds available through the national budget and ESF funding streams.

Monitoring and evaluation will be integral to the policy's success. Every two years, FSWS will draft an Implementation Report that assesses progress, identifies gaps, and proposes adjustments to enhance the effectiveness of the policy. These reports will be shared with MSF and other stakeholders to ensure transparency and continuous improvement.

This implementation and monitoring framework underscores the Government's commitment to delivering a responsive and sustainable aftercare system that meets the evolving needs of care leavers in Malta.



05

Concluding Remarks

The Aftercare Policy for Children in Alternative Care represents a landmark national commitment to ensuring that no young person leaves care unsupported. It affirms that aftercare is not a privilege, but a right – a vital continuation of the State’s duty to protect, empower, and accompany young people as they transition into independent adulthood.

The package of measures of the Aftercare Guarantee will provide consistent and accessible support to respond to the real challenges of all care leavers, while recognising their strengths, aspirations, potential, and voices in guiding its design and implementation.

Over the next five years, the Aftercare Policy will be implemented through coordinated stakeholder engagement and robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure measurable and lasting impact. The Policy thus calls upon all stakeholders – government entities, voluntary organisations, and the wider community – to work together in sustaining a culture of inclusion, equality, and empowerment. Every young person, regardless of background, will have the opportunity to thrive – laying the foundation for a more just, compassionate, and resilient society.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

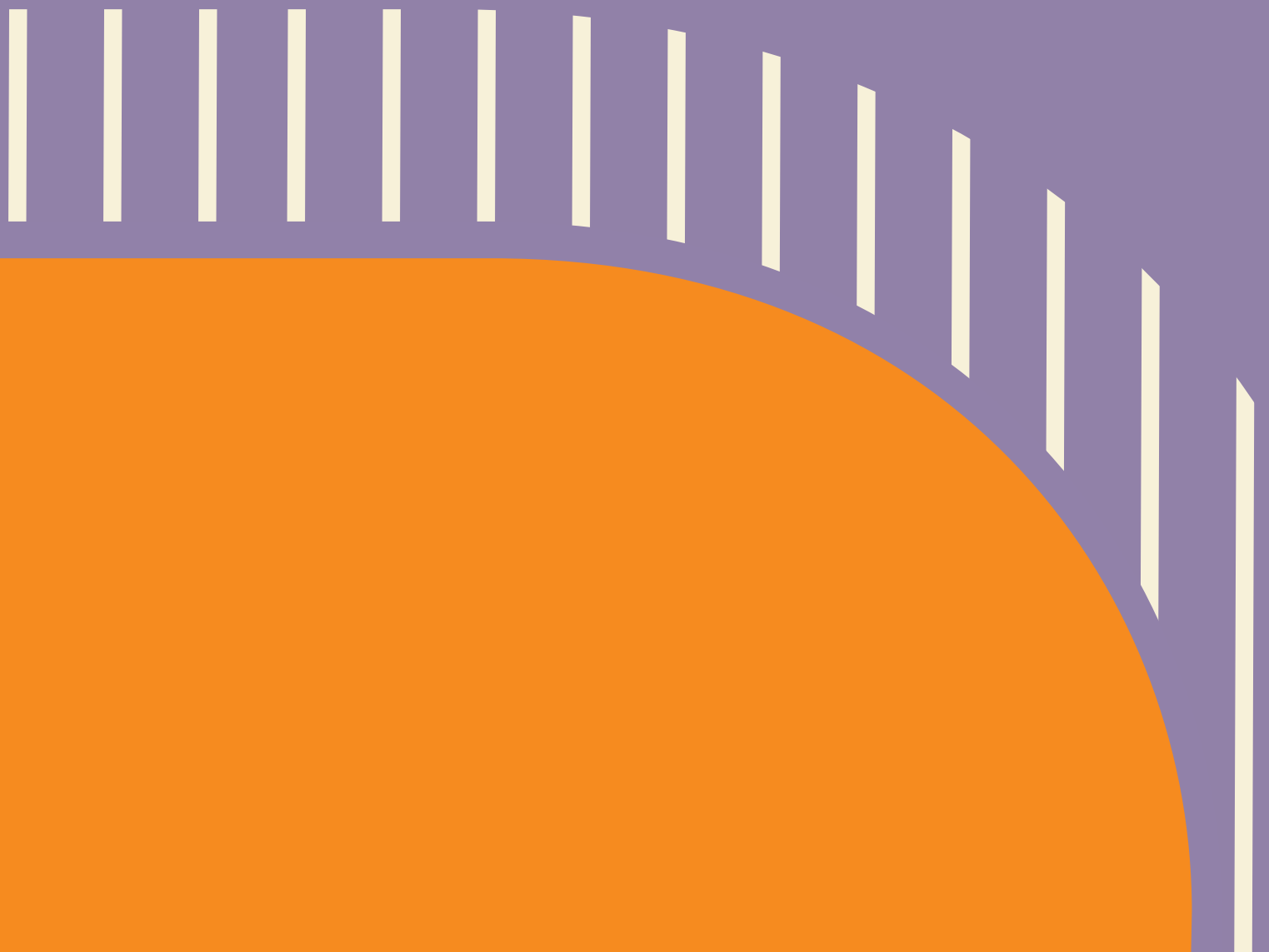
13

14

Annex 01



Questionnaire **distributed to** **Alternative** Care Homes



The Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights (MSPC) is in the process of developing Malta's first Aftercare Policy for children in alternative care. This policy will be designed to facilitate a smooth transition to adulthood for these children by offering comprehensive support.

Effective collaboration with all relevant stakeholders is crucial for the policy’s success. To ensure that the policy fully addresses the needs of the children, we kindly request that Alternative Care Homes complete the following questionnaire. The information collected will provide valuable insights into the specific needs of the children, which will be instrumental in shaping and refining the Aftercare Policy. Your input is essential to ensure the policy’s effectiveness, and to support the well-being and successful transition of these young individuals.

- 1. How many children are currently under the care of your Home/Residence? Please disaggregate by age and sex.
- 2. Kindly indicate the reason for care order and a brief description of the current emotional/behavioural state of the child by filling in the table below:

Reason for Care Order	Number of Children	Current Emotional/Behavioural State of the Child
Domestic violence		
Addictions		
Chronic illness, mental illness, or disability of parents		
Physical abuse		
Emotional abuse		
Sexual abuse		
Neglect		
Abandonment		
Other (kindly indicate)		

- 3. Young persons who are approaching the stage of leaving the care system should benefit from smooth transitions which are backed up by tailored care plans reflecting their needs.
 - a. How do you approach this stage of when a child is approaching to leave the care system?
 - b. What are your existing internal support services for children approaching the stage of leaving the care system?

- c. At what age do you start preparing a child for the stage of leaving the care system?
 - d. How can the system be improved?
4. Is there a specific care-leaving policy within your home? If yes, can you provide some information (or provide a copy)? How was this developed? Does this care-leaving policy also include care-leaving guidelines for specific family situations, such as siblings?
 5. How many young people aged 18 years or over are still living under your care?
 - a. At what age, usually, are children expected to leave your care/residence?
 - b. Are there any criteria for keeping young adults aged 18 years or over in your home/residence, or are all individuals maintained subsequent to a request or expression of interest/need?
 6. Exploring the needs and challenges of children as they approach the age of leaving the care system is essential for addressing the realities and issues faced by care homes.
 - a. What are the needs, realities and vulnerabilities of children who are approaching the stage of leaving the care system? (Differentiate challenges faced by age and gender).
 - b. What are the issues your home is facing when children reach care leaving age?
 7. What are the external support/follow-up services that are used by individuals who have left alternative care? What professionals are mostly consulted for care leaving children (ex: social workers, psychologists, psychotherapists, etc)?
 8. In broad terms, there are three main categories of persons who are receiving aftercare services:
 - children who are approaching the stage of leaving the alternative care system;
 - individuals (aged 18 years or over) who have left alternative care, and
 - individuals (aged 18 years or over) who are still living in alternative care residences.

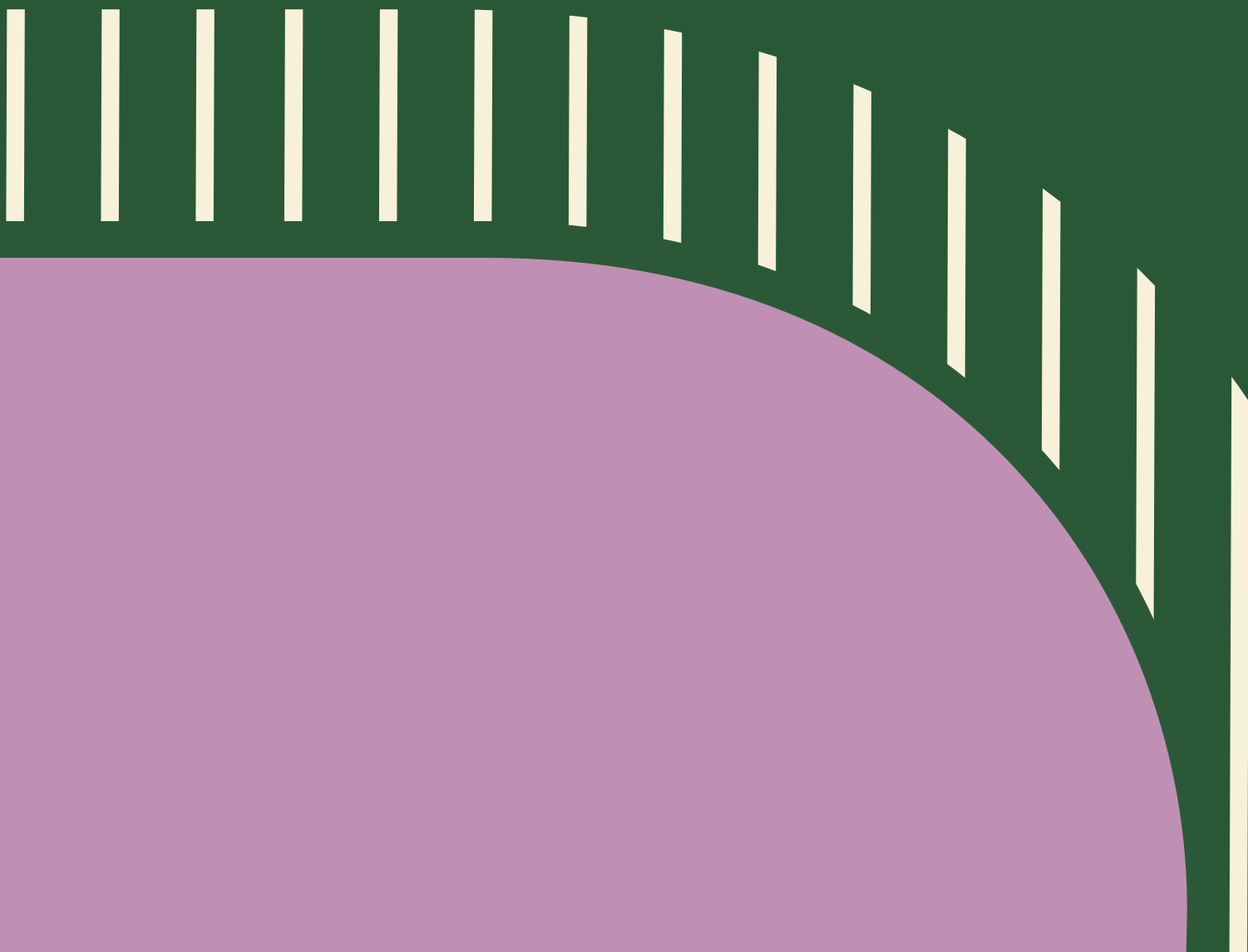
How can Government finetune the existing services to meet the challenges experienced by these individuals? How can Government support to improve Aftercare services?

9. Are there any new services required for alternative care leavers to have adequate aftercare support (once they reach 18 years or once they are expected to leave the alternative care residence)?

Annex 02



Glossary



Aftercare: A system that provides support to young people from the age of 18 years onwards who in their childhood lived in alternative care. The aftercare system smoothenes the transition to adulthood for alternative care leavers, giving them further support to integrate into society by honing the necessary skills as well as enabling them to positive independency⁸⁴.

Aftercare residences: Accommodation facilities specifically designed to support young people transitioning from state care into independent living. These residences provide a stable and structured environment where individuals can receive guidance, life skills training, and other essential support services to help them integrate successfully into society. They include supervised housing, semi-independent living arrangements, or fully independent units, depending on the needs of the residents.

Aftercare services: Services that aim to support young individuals transitioning from care to independent living by addressing various aspects of their lives, including accommodation, financial management, education and life-skills training, employment, mentoring, and other personal matters⁸⁵.

Alternative Care: “The placement of a minor under the care of a person or entity, not being a parent of the minor, as ordered by the Court or as a result of an administrative decision”. (Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, CAP 602 of the Laws of Malta⁸⁶)

Care Leavers: Individuals who have to transition out of alternative care placements, such as foster care, residential care or community home care, upon reaching adulthood.

Care Plan: A personalised document having tailored plan to support the child or youth according to their needs. Care Plans are composed of specific goals set to be achieved within realistic timeframes. These goals provide clear guidance to all stakeholders and service users, outlining the tasks to be undertaken and assigning responsibilities for their implementation.

Child / Children: The terms child and children refer to all those under eighteen years of age, as per Maltese Legislation and Article 1, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

84 Aftercare-issue-brief.pdf What is Aftercare?

85 United Nations. Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. UN General Assembly, 2009. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/5416.pdf/>

86 <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/eng>

Community Home / Community Home Care: A form of alternative care and aftercare provided in small, home-like settings within ordinary communities, usually accommodating up to seven children or young adults. Community homes combine family-like relational care with professional support and are currently mainly managed by FSWS.

Family: In the case of a child, a family is defined as a person, or group of persons, who are linked to the child either by blood, kinship and/or responsibility of care and upbringing. As the child grows into an adult, the concept of family expands to include a close network of people, whether bound by blood, marriage, partnership, adoption, or deep emotional connections, who offer support, companionship, and a sense of belonging throughout life's stages.

Foster Care: "The placement of a minor under the care of a person, not being a parent of the minor, and which is chosen, qualified, approved and supervised to provide care for a period and in accordance with a care plan" (Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, CAP 602 of the Laws of Malta⁸⁷). Additionally, "a service for a determinate period whereby a child is placed in the continuous care of a foster carer, and through which the child is brought up in a family environment according to his best interests." (Foster Care Act, CAP 491 of the Laws of Malta⁸⁸)

Foster carer: "One or more persons approved by the Fostering Board to foster a child." (Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, CAP 602 of the Laws of Malta⁸⁹; Foster Care Act, CAP 491 of the Laws of Malta⁹⁰)

Independent living: A lifestyle in which an individual, particularly a young adult or care leaver, is able to live in the community with minimal reliance on external care or support. It involves managing one's daily activities such as housing, finances, education, employment, and social relationships. Independent living is thus an ability acquired through the development of personal autonomy and self-determination⁹¹.

Intra- and interpersonal skills: The abilities that individuals use to interact with themselves (intrapersonal) and with others (interpersonal).

Key social worker: "The social worker appointed by the Director (Child Protection) to investigate a report, or the social worker appointed by the Director Alternative Care (Children and Youths), to follow the development and well-being of a minor in alternative care and to co-ordinate and follow up the progress of a care plan in relation to that minor". (Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act, CAP 602 of the Laws of Malta⁹²)

87 <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/eng>

88 LEGIZLAZZJONI MALTA

89 <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/eng>

90 Ibid.

91 Independent Living - ENIL

92 <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/eng>

Mentor: A person assigned to every child in alternative care upon reaching the age of 14 years to guide them towards a smooth transition. The mentor forms a relationship in support and guidance of the child and later young adult, to assist them in developing essential life skills, build self-confidence, and in navigating the challenges of transitioning to independent living⁹³.

Other Care Arrangements: Alternative care placements that include Caritas – Ta' L-Ibwar, Correctional – Forensic Ward MCH, Correctional –YOURS, YMCA Dar Nikki Cassar, and the Young People's Unit.

Placement Plan: A Placement Plan, also referred to as a "Resident's Plan", is a structured document that outlines the tailored support and care arrangements for a child in alternative care. It details the child's individual needs in areas such as health, education, social development, and behaviour while also defining the responsibilities of the caregiver. Additionally, the plan specifies how parenting tasks will be shared between the child's carer and the responsible authority, ensuring a coordinated approach to the child's well-being and development⁹⁴.

Primary caregivers: The persons or entity which are recognised by the State as being responsible for the care and upbringing of the child⁹⁵.

Stable housing: Secure, long-term accommodation that offers residents safety, consistency, and the opportunity for social and economic advancement.

Stakeholders: Those that are directly involved within the given subject or have either a direct or indirect concern.

Supported accommodation: Housing arrangements that provide individuals with a stable living environment while offering varying levels of support to help them live independently⁹⁶.

Residential Care / Residential Care Home: A form of alternative care where children live in structured residential facilities, receiving 24-hour support from trained multidisciplinary staff. These homes accommodate larger groups of children in more spacious settings than community homes, with a larger

93 Youth Mentoring Relationships in Context: Mentor Perceptions of Youth, Environment, and the Mentor Role - PMC Spotlight on Youth Mentoring - The Annie E. Casey Foundation

94 Placement plan - Family Rights Group 3.2.2 Placement Plans3.2.2 Placement Plans

95 <https://cdn-others.timesofmalta.com/67cacf015f1719f5fee468a35d3306e4fbd85f1c.pdf>

96 What is supported accommodation?

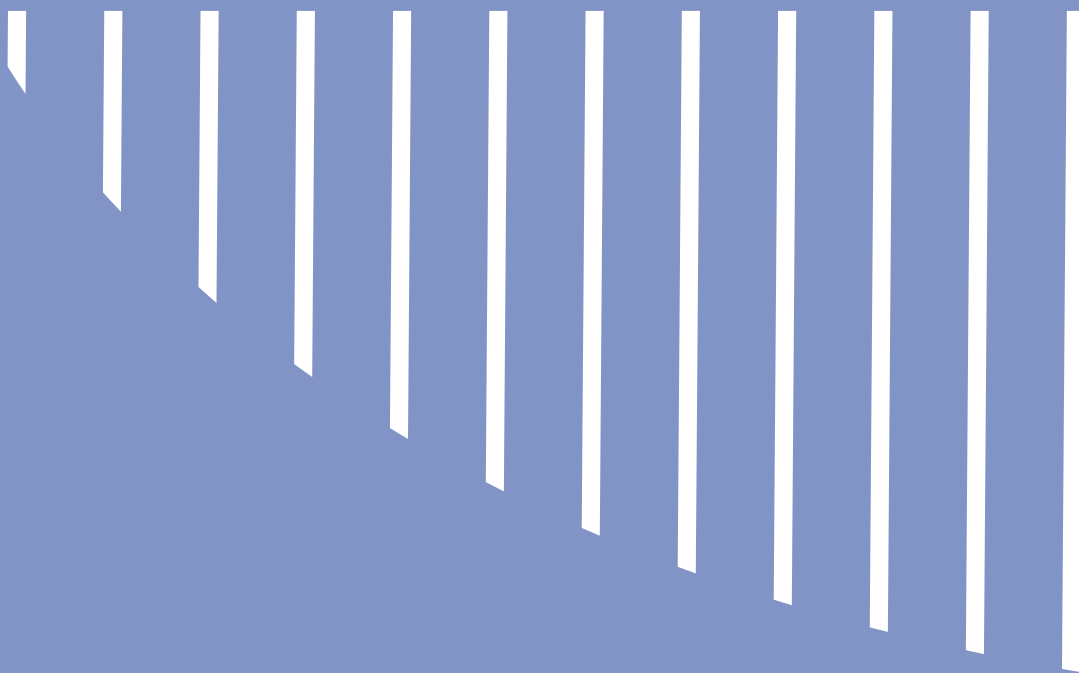
staff team to support the bigger groups. Primarily managed by non-governmental organisations, residential homes also provide aftercare support to help young people transition smoothly into independent adulthood.

Residential institutions / Residential settings: Facilities offering both accommodation and care services to individuals requiring assistance, whether due to health conditions, age, or other factors necessitating supportive living environments. Such institutions include orphanages, hospitals, nursing homes and similar facilities where residential institutions have a social use and care is provided alongside accommodation⁹⁷.

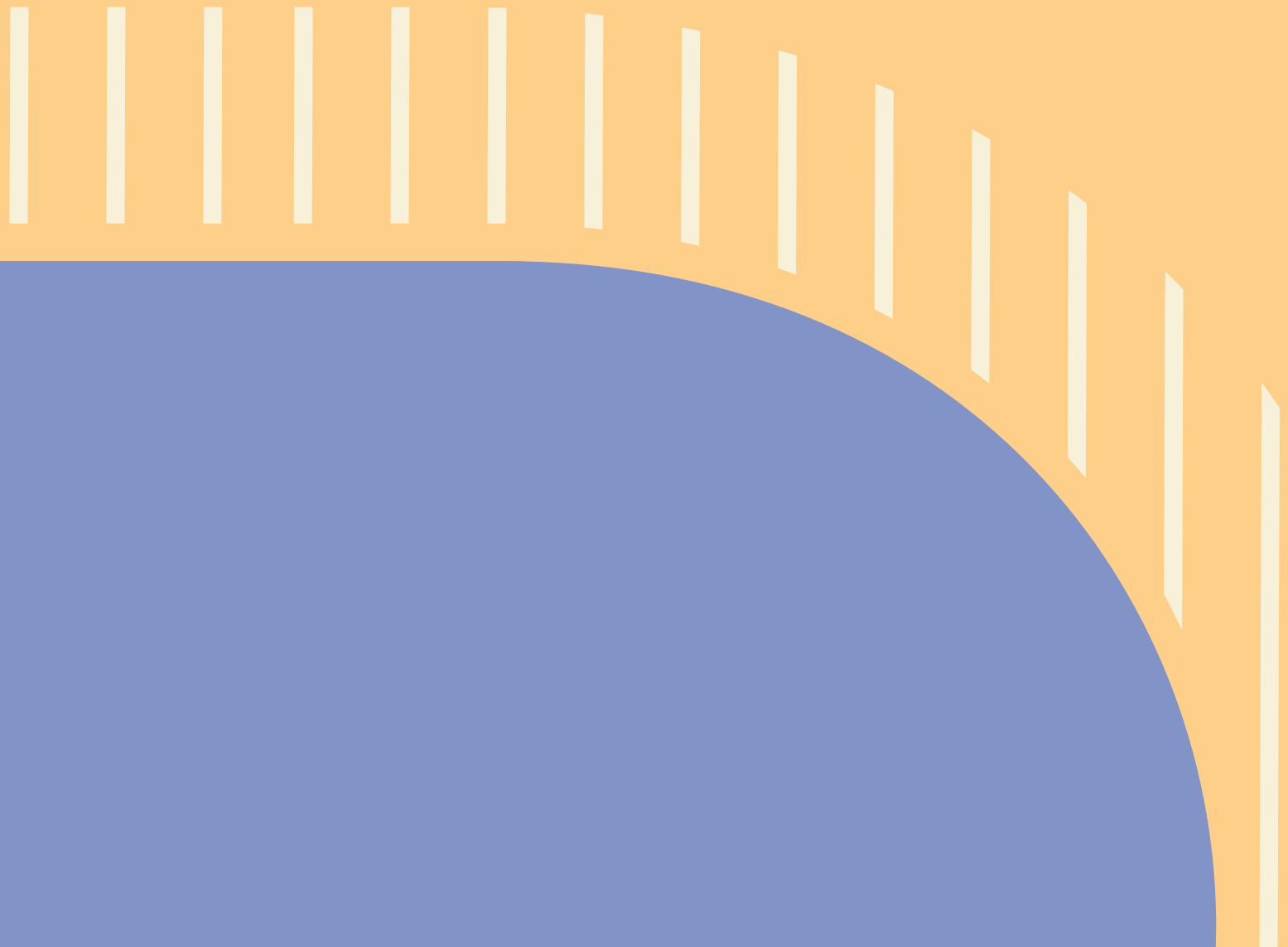
Young people / Young persons / Youth / Youths: Within this document, where age is not stated, the terms young people and young persons and youth or youths refer to all persons aged 18 years to 30 years.

97 <https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/552.15/eng/pdf>

Annex 03



Short Report of the **Findings of Focus Groups** on Aftercare and Support for Care Leavers



Summary of Key Themes

Introduction

This report presents the main findings from two focus groups conducted with care-experienced young people and adults. The sessions explored their perspectives on aftercare, existing support systems, and recommendations for improvement, with the aim of informing the 2025–2030 National Aftercare Policy.

The research design intentionally brought together two cohorts: minors aged 14–17 years still in alternative care and young adults aged 18–22 years transitioning out through various aftercare arrangements⁹⁸. A total of eight participants engaged in these two focus groups, with each group consisting of four male participants, recruited through purposive sampling in collaboration with care providers from two different organisations.

Despite efforts to ensure diversity and a broader representation by gender, age, and residence in care settings managed by other organisations, the perspectives of older care leavers (23–30 years), females, and residents of other alternative or after care houses were not represented, leaving limitations in the findings and perspectives gathered. This was due to the absence of individuals from these groups who expressed interest in participating.

The age range at which the participants had entered care ranged from 0–14 years, hence the participants had experienced living in care home/s for a number of years. Most participants spent more than 7 years in care. This prolonged duration meant that residential care became a central part of their upbringing, shaping their daily routines, social interactions, and emotional development. However, most participants expressed that a child's rightful place is with their family, whether with parents or next of kin, and therefore did not view care homes as providing the same sense of stability and continuity that family life could offer. Some participants had lived with their next of kin before entering residential homes, while others moved in and out of care at different points in their childhood. At the same time, there were participants who entered care at a young age and remained there continuously for many years, making the care home their primary living environment throughout most of their childhood and adolescence. Long-term stays in care brought challenges, such as adjusting to staff turnover, limited contact with family members, and the need to navigate relationships with peers who themselves were experiencing difficult circumstances. These experiences strongly influenced the participants' sense of identity, belonging, and preparation for independent living.

Participants varied in their engagement with carers, mentors, social workers, and youth workers, ensuring a mix of experiences both positive and negative. This diversity enriched the discussions and helped surface a wide range of feedback. Contributions were shared verbally and through creative exercises, enabling deeper self-expression, particularly for those who found words limiting.

⁹⁸ Some participants were still receiving support at a residential home, while the others were being supported through independent or shared semi-independent Aftercare Houses which they rent at a low and subsidized rate. Three participants were currently engaged in tertiary education while holding summer jobs, whilst another participant had stable full-time employment.

Levels of engagement during the focus groups varied among the mixed group of Maltese and foreign children. Two younger participants were less responsive, and at times appeared detached or disruptive, treating leaving care as a distant concern despite already being in care for years. In contrast, the older participants were more reflective and engaged, discussing ambitions for education and hobbies, as well as practical issues such as transport and finances. Everyday challenges—like travelling for education and training weigh more heavily on them as they must manage without family support.

Two participants were pursuing tertiary education while working full-time during summer and part-time during winter, two participants had stable full-time employment, and another was employed on a full-time basis but seeking better opportunities and requiring career guidance and support to remain motivated to engage in tertiary education. The rest were still in secondary school, with one participant of these aspiring to “study and work at the same time” and noting that “if I get paid for studying, I will remain”.

Tools and Approach

The focus groups combined structured reflection with creative and visual methods to encourage openness and meaningful dialogue. Facilitators used the **Blob Tree** (William & Long, 2013) as a symbolic tool for expressing emotions and experiences felt in the past and present. This helped participants articulate complex feelings, challenges faced and support required in a non-verbal, accessible way.

The participants’ past experiences of going into care included uncertainty, confusion, and feeling “thrown” into the unknown.

During the blob tree exercise on their present experiences, the young people positioned themselves in different places on the tree, ranging from feeling happy and secure to feeling tired, fearful, or withdrawn.

Within the older age focus groups, life after alternative care or in transition – Most identified with blobs that were clinging or climbing, reflecting the effort to access support. The same participant who had a more realistic start in care continued to feel more unaffected in the present.

When asked to represent their future, some placed themselves high on the branches, accomplished and content, while others showed themselves as part of a group or in a more precarious position.

Together, these choices conveyed a broad spectrum of feelings about both their current situation and their outlook for the future.

In addition, participants engaged in reflective activities such as drawing or writing messages to their younger selves. These exercises allowed them to revisit their care journeys, uncover both painful challenges and moments of growth, and reflect on their vision of an ideal care experience. The session created a space for the participants to share their current experiences of care, their expectations and uncertainties about the future, and their ideas for what support could help them in the transition to independence.

A **donut chart** was also introduced to map key life domains—housing, education, employment, relationships, and mental health. This visual framework prompted participants to take notes, prioritise areas of importance, and suggest additional domains that mattered to them.

The sessions concluded with a forward-looking exercise where participants voiced their recommendations for policymakers. These closing reflections underscored their ability not only to identify gaps in support but also to envision practical solutions for the future.



Emerging Themes

- **Trust, Communication, and Management**

Carers were praised for their consistent, everyday presence and emotional support – “they gave me support and helped me to handle stress, to do the transition, to keep up with my priorities”. In contrast, management structures were perceived as distant, bureaucratic, and less responsive to individual needs.

Two participants lamented that they are to be given pocket money for the chores that they are expected to carry out at the home, especially considering that homes are given funds by the Government. They felt that this would also help them “to experience hands-on learning of budgeting and being responsible for my own things, such as buying a pair of shoes”.

Participants’ reflections revealed not only the strengths of direct care but also the gaps in organisational oversight, which may shape their trust in care and their overall experience. The majority of participants were told they would only be in care for a short time, which was not the case. The mismatch between what they were told and their actual experience led to understandable feelings of anger and frustration: “We need clear guidance and an example that one should not lie. Trust is lost. The social worker places the blame on the carer. The anger remains.” This experience contributed to reduced trust in management among participants and highlighted the importance of implementing stronger best practices to ensure decisions are made in the best interests of children. One participant, who was given a more honest explanation, reported feeling more grounded.

Trust – in whom they trust as well as themselves being trusted – emerged as central to their experience of care and their confidence in the future. Trust stood out simultaneously as a difficulty and a core hope for the future. For many, trust was built through supportive relationships: “My friends help me,” one young person shared, while another noted, “Care workers and social workers help me to have a good relationship with every single boy in here.”

- **Quality and Stability of Carers**

Strong concerns were raised about the reliance on part-time carers, who were viewed as less dedicated and inconsistent: “Carer on a part-time basis should be terminated... part-time carers are there prezente kadavere... there is no dedication... no consistency.” In contrast, “it is full-timers and house leaders that make the difference”.

There is a big demand for carers in alternative care and aftercare, not only in quantity but also in quality. They noted that part-time carers often change after a few months, lack commitment and are less informed, sometimes making decisions that conflict with those of full-timers or house leaders. Participants advocated for dedicated, full-time carers who receive comprehensive training prior to starting.

A participant said, “There are those that try to help you, and those that tell you something to get rid of you”. Another participant said, “Carers need to be more serious, committed and consistent”.

Low wages were identified as a driver of unprofessional conduct among carers— “99.9% it is the low wage of a carer”. “At interview stage, there needs to be more attention on the person’s internal qualities”, another person outlined.

In summary, participants recommended more full-time, well-trained carers, supported by adequate wages and professional standards to ensure better outcomes.

- **Transitions to Independence and Support Pathways**

In both focus groups, participants stated that financial support, stable housing, family connection, life skills training, job opportunities, and education would help them feel more prepared for independence. Participants called for extended, tailored aftercare that continues past the age of 18 years. There was widespread agreement that assistance should be tailored to individual readiness and responsibility rather than governed by a strict age threshold. Referring to the provision of such aftercare support, a participant emphasised that “These things should have happened sooner, because people have long been suffering.”

Leaving care was experienced as abrupt by most of the young adults. They described the experience as emotionally difficult and happening quite fast. Although they knew it would happen one day, the moment of transition arrived suddenly. One respondent said, “I didn’t really transition gradually. I just moved.” Another noted that they were simply given a farewell with no ongoing connection or plan.

Other participants said that at the age of around 17 years, they were given the options to remain in the house or move to shared semi-independent aftercare living. Despite moving between various and sometimes distant areas of aftercare living arrangements, participants still felt a sense of belonging within their community. However, participants identified several major gaps in the transition process, namely:

1. Housing

- There is a serious lack of appropriate housing options once young people leave care. As one participant put it when referring to an aftercare shared house, “The problem is that there aren’t many houses like this.”
- Affordable housing remains a challenge even for those with stable employment.
- Participants experienced the sudden loss of everyday supports when moving into semi-independent living. Unlike their peers at school or work, there was no one to prepare their meals or provide the comforts of home: “It hurts that I cannot turn to my parents. It bothers me that I have to find a place to live for myself, but I do not have the means.”

2. Finances

- Young people faced financial pressures living alone, including covering housing, transport, insurance, and daily necessities, especially when compared to peers who could stay with family and share or avoid such costs.
- Some participants highlighted the need for tailored loan schemes or low-interest repayment options: “I can manage to buy a house if there was the possibility to acquire a loan... with less financial interest to pay.”
- Financial support was seen as essential for independence, including assistance with car lessons or transport.

3. Life Skills

- Shared living arrangements, both in alternative care and aftercare settings, offered opportunities, learn practical skills while living with peers and navigating these relationships, but additional support was needed for ongoing life skills development.
- Before age 16, care environments provided structure, guidance, and collective management of daily challenges. Leaving care felt like a leap from security into the unknown, particularly to manage all the responsibilities, such as cooking, budgeting, and organising leisure time after years in structured routines.

4. Emotional Support

- Inconsistent follow-up and limited mentoring were highlighted as major issues. While several found genuine connection and support with a mentor—describing a sense of “clicking” or being understood—they were candid that this relationship was not a substitute for everyday companionship. The mentor, though valued, was not available around the clock, and the absence of someone to turn to at any hour left a palpable gap.
- Participants who moved to independent living reported feelings of loneliness after leaving care.
- Informal support – not necessarily through a qualified professional such as a therapist – was considered essential beyond age 18 and tailored to readiness rather than a strict age cut-off.
- Trust, both in relatives and staff in the home, was identified as a key source of support.

5. Transition Preparation and Hopes

- Younger participants often had limited understanding of what leaving care would involve.
- Hopes included pursuing further education, family reunification, and building trust in relationships.
- Some participants aspired to learn to drive, highlighting the need for financial or practical assistance.
- Concerns focused on instability, financial burdens, and unclear support during the transition.

In view of these needs, participants recommended improvements to aftercare that are gradual, structured, and realistic:

- Expand aftercare housing options in both quality and quantity.
- Provide starter packs with essential household items to reduce financial and emotional burden.
- Introduce financial assistance schemes, including low-interest or gradual loan repayments.
- Support transport needs for moving, work, or training.
- Integrate ongoing life skills training and mental health support.
- Ensure structured transitions characterised by predictability and clarity, which can be achieved through adaptable transition plans.
- Emphasise mentoring and structured preparation to help young people manage independence confidently.

- **Family, Mentors and Teamwork:** Across the groups, family emerged as a recurring theme. Some expressed hope for reunification, even when family ties had been strained. A participant shared: “I feel supported by my therapist, house leader and head of care, but I prefer to live with my family.”

In some cases, what was keeping them away from living with their family, was described as being the family’s financial situation. Two participants said that they would rather go to live with their families and help them out financially even if burdensome, or that the government assists them financially as a family, rather than go to an aftercare house. For this reason, these participants went on to giving significant importance to work: “If you have a job, you have everything”.

Younger participants lamented about the strict community care house rules when compared to the more flexible environment within a family setting. This was a recurring factor influencing their preference to live with their families rather than in alternative care. In contrast, older young people who had already left alternative care reflected that, while such rules had felt restrictive at the time, they were intended to provide safety, structure, and consistency – aspects that, in hindsight, they recognised as being in the child’s best interests, especially by participants who went on to live independently before turning 20 years of age.

While shared housing helped some prepare for independence—learning to cook, clean, and budget—others emphasised the emotional gap: losing the sense of security and having no one to fall back on. The comparison to peers with families was a recurring theme. Although they had a key worker or mentor, most still longed for a parent figure to support them.

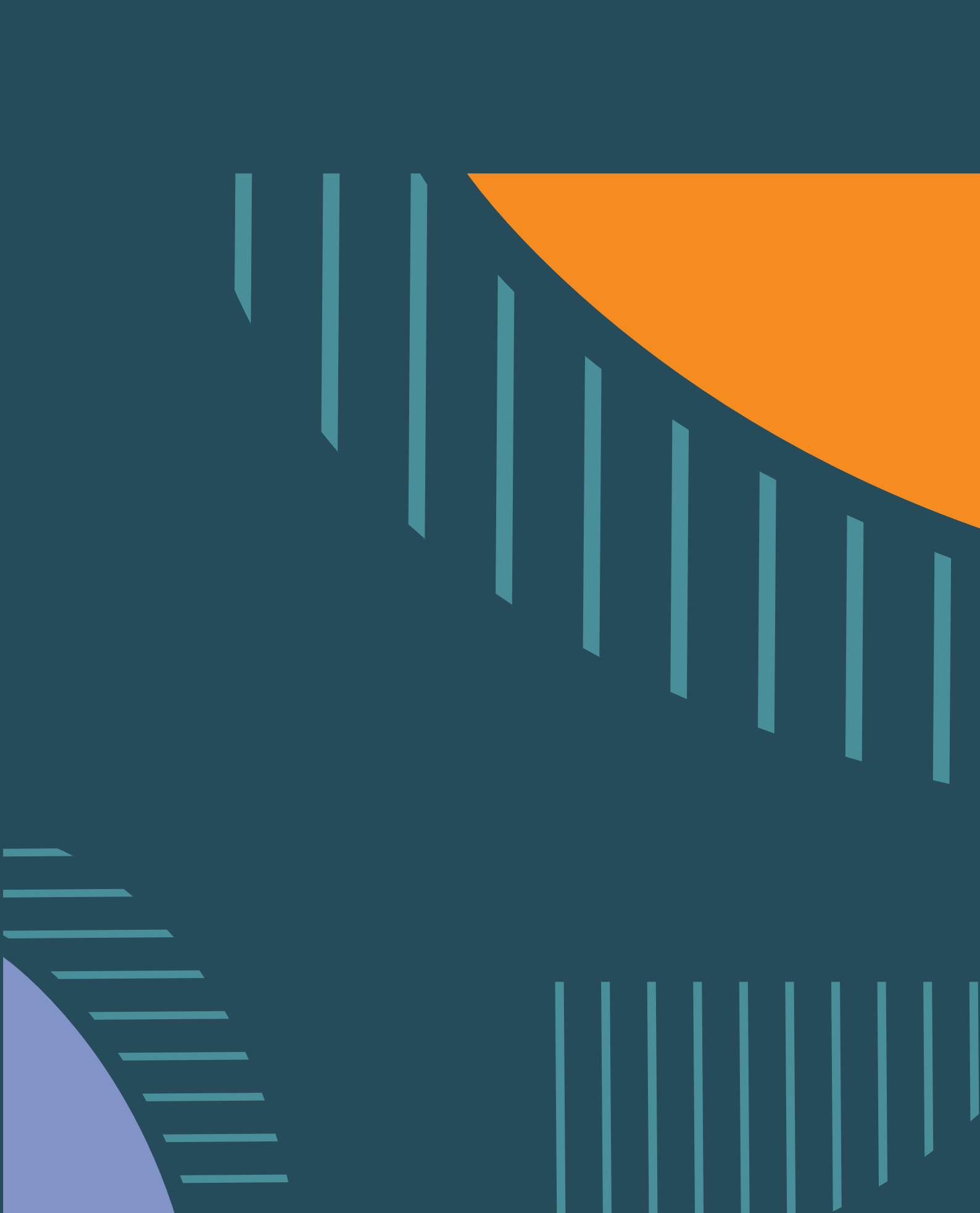
A mentor is assigned to care leavers upon exit from care, sometimes a former carer or therapist. Meetings with mentors occur “every three months or when you need to”. While most participants had changed mentors over time, they ultimately found satisfaction in their current relationships. Mentors and carers who acted as family support were highly valued, especially those who offered practical help such as transporting belongings. Collaboration between youth workers and social workers was described as effective and complementary, with participants noting that they “work well together” and advocating that such teamwork should become standard practice.

Some participants who moved into independent—not shared—housing at the age of 18 years reflected on specific challenges. Even when assigned a mentor or key worker, the adjustment was difficult. They recounted how weekends often felt particularly long and isolating; having their own space meant being alone for extended periods, magnifying feelings of loneliness. While several found genuine connection and support with a mentor—describing a sense of “clicking” or being understood—they were candid that this relationship was not a substitute for everyday companionship. The mentor, though valued, was not available around the clock, and the absence of someone to turn to at any hour left a palpable gap. This sense of being “on their own” highlighted for them both the importance of reliable adult guidance and the realities of solitude that accompany early independence. On the other hand, weekends were regarded as being the best among most participants of the minors’ group, since they go to their families.

Conclusion

Despite differences in age and stage of transition, both minors and young adults expressed strikingly similar needs: longer-term, personalised aftercare; more professional and consistent carers; smoother pathways out of care; and stronger collaboration among support professionals. These findings provide a clear direction for strengthening aftercare policies and practices, ensuring that care leavers are not left unsupported at a critical juncture in their lives.







1. Introduction

2. Background

3. Methodology

4. Results

5. Discussion

6. Conclusion

7. References

8. Appendix

9. Glossary

10. Index

