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EVALUATION OF **FAMILY HOMES**  
AS A HOUSING AND CARE SOLUTION  
FOR **UNACCOMPANIED MINOR**  
**REFUGEES**



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## A NEW HOME FOR CHILDREN ON THE RUN

*Youth who have fled to Norway alone have had experiences we can hardly imagine. They need stability, predictability and a new family that can provide support and care. This is the idea behind the family home model in «Our New Children».*

For SOS Children's Villages, taking care of children is one of the most natural things we can do. We were launched almost 70 years ago, in the post-war Europe, aiming at taking care of children who had lost their parents in war. Our goal was that all children should grow up in a safe home.

Many people know us best through the traditional children's village model. But the work of SOS Children's Villages looks different today than for a decade or two ago. Today, we are increasingly working with local and national authorities, and with local organizations that often know more about the local community and challenges of families than we do.

This includes Norway too. The project «Our New Children» is a good example of this. The refugee flow in autumn 2015 gave a new mission to us as fellow human beings and to us as an organization. A record number of children fled alone to Norway. It was obvious to us that there was a need to think out of the box, and we also knew that SOS Children's Villages' long experience would be a good contribution to this work.

Just over two years later we stand here with a two-digit number of family homes for single minor refugees. The model has been developed in cooperation with Asker municipality, but several family homes are now being established in other municipalities in Norway. It shows us that such a well-proven concept as letting children grow up in a family never becomes outdated. And it also shows that Norwegian municipalities are not afraid of developing innovative models or looking for untested measures when new challenges arise.

The world is constantly changing. But one thing stands firm: all children shall grow up in a safe home. It is our vision, and we are pleased to see that this vision now keeps being implemented getting more and more new partners.

*Sissel Aarak  
Head of Program Department in SOS  
Children's Villages Norway*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2016, SOS Children's Villages contacted NTNU Social Research with a request to assess the establishment of family homes as the housing and care solution for single minor refugees. It was easy for NTNU Social Research to consider the SOS Children's Villages' request. We really wanted to do this! Single minor refugees have been a key research field in our professional environment for many years, and we have seen the need for a big range of housing and care initiatives. The family home model represents a supplement to existing models in the work with single minors. This makes it particularly interesting to evaluate. The model is based on SOS children's more than 65 years of experience with children's villages and family homes in Norway and abroad. At the same time, the model also has clear roots in housing and care solutions we know from refugee work in Norway in the 1980s and 1990s. The family home model can therefore be seen as both an innovation and a further development of models that we know from before.

The work with family homes is organized as a project called *Our New Children*. Big arrivals of single minor refugees in the autumn of 2015 became the background for the project. That year there were 5297 single minors, which was more than twice as many as any

previous year. Initially, this was a capacity challenge during the reception phase. Next, these municipalities faced an increased need for housing and care actions for those who were to be settled. Shared home has long been the most widely used solution for single minor refugees (Garvik, Paulsen and Berg 2016), but when the group became larger and more complex in terms of background, gender and age, the need to develop a more complex offer increased as well. The numbers from 2015 also showed the arrival of a higher number of younger refugees and a higher number of siblings. In this situation, SOS Children's Villages wanted to develop a model based on experience in caring for children both in Norway and in other European countries.

*Our New Children* was initially established as a collaborative project between SOS Children's Villages, Asker Municipality and the Housing bank<sup>1</sup>. Asker municipality has adapted the SOS Children's Villages model to a Norwegian municipal reality. At the same time, it has always been a prerequisite that the model should be used in other municipalities and be adapted locally. Asker was chosen as a partner because this municipality is among those with the longest experience of settling single minor refugees. The child welfare service in the municipality was ready to try new housing and

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<sup>1</sup> Descriptions of the project *Our New Children* are taken from the SOS Children's Village's booklet about family homes as a housing and care solution for single minor refugees.

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care solutions for this group. The Project Manager of *Our New Children* in Asker says the following about the family home model:

*We have had many initiatives in Asker. In the past, the main focus was on shared homes. They have their advantages and disadvantages. Shared home is a home for some and a workplace for others. Although these two phenomena can live side by side, it is sometimes perceived as a contradiction. The goal of the new model is to create a home together*

(Hassan Ali, project manager in Asker municipality)

The family home model, as Hassan Ali says, is about creating a home. Single minors are a complex group with different needs, but they share the common need for close caregivers in Norway. Handling of these care needs depends on many different conditions, both when it comes to the needs of an individual child and to what the municipality is able to offer. The solution is often that «one takes what one has», and in the majority of the municipalities there is a tendency to be offered settlement in a shared home. It may be appropriate for many, but there has been a need to develop measures more similar to a home, especially for youngest children. The same applies to siblings who come together. For them it will be unnatural to separate when being settled in a municipality. At the same time it may be difficult to find practical solutions for siblings to live together as a family. In this case the family home model can be one of the answers to these needs.

But before we go into the evaluation of family homes, we can reflect for a moment and see what housing and care solutions are applied in different municipalities that settle single minor refugees. What does already exist, and what family homes shall supplement or challenge?

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## HOUSING AND CARE SOLUTIONS IN MUNICIPALITIES

Municipalities decide for themselves how to organize and solve the tasks related to receiving and settling single minors. This contributes to large variations between municipalities in terms of both available measures and the quality of settlement and follow-up work. The quality of municipal housing and care services for single minors depends on the available range of services, the municipality school, health-care and leisure opportunities, and the responsible municipal agency's provisions. The transfer of responsibility from the UDI to the child welfare service for unaccompanied minors under the age of 15 in the asylum seekers phase may also have influenced the municipality's approach to this issue. In different units, staff has a tendency to base their work on different perspectives, and different systems may have different focus. For example, the *child welfare services* tend to emphasize considerations related to children's needs for care, safety and protection. These can be referred to as *child welfare perspectives*. In refugee services, refugee-related factors such as fleeing history, trauma background and psychosocial situation will be central to their work on refugee settlement. These can be referred to as *refugee perspectives*.

### REFUGEE PROFESSIONAL AND CHILD WELFARE PERSPECTIVES

Settlement of single minors actualizes both refugee and child welfare perspectives. On the one hand, it can be argued that single minors are by definition the responsibility of the child welfare service, where the group's needs dictate the use of professional competence on children and children's welfare. At the same time, it can be argued that the refugee background of single minors indicates the need for refugee competence. This link between the refugee perspective and the role of child welfare service is a hotly debated topic both in research and in practice (Lauritsen and Berg, 2002; Eide and Broch, 2010; Svendsen, Thorshaug and Berg, 2010; Lidén et al., 2013; Paulsen, Thorshaug and Berg, 2014; Berg and Tronstad, 2015, Garvik, Paulsen and Berg, 2016). Many municipalities work across sectoral boundaries to ensure that single minors are given the care they need based on their situation. Nevertheless, there is a need for closer cooperation between both municipal and state agencies to ensure that the refugee and the child welfare perspectives are taken into account. The support system thus plays a central role in the youth's everyday life. The Norwegian debate has for many years focused a lot on the child welfare service's responsibility for single minor asylum seekers, but to a lesser degree on settled single minors and their rights to care and

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follow-up by the child welfare service (Aadnanes and Pastoor, 2013) and how child welfare service provides its services to this group (Paulsen et al., 2014). Like other single children, single minor refugees need care services that compensate as much as possible for the care they cannot get from their own parents. The term «care» has two main meanings. One is to provide, to take care of someone, and is synonymous with attention, nurturance, tendance and oversight. The other meaning has a more pronounced emotional dimension and is about nurturing someone, and it is synonymous with interest and consideration (NOU 2011: 10). It is common to call it «formal» and «informal» care. This is about both of them when it comes to single minors.

Housing and care services are therefore vital. They shall form the framework for stability and continuity and provide single minors with the opportunity to develop self-reliance within secure boundaries. Housing offers that can be available are foster homes, kinship placements, studio apartments with or without arranged follow-up, homeowner housing, shared housing, child welfare institution or private housing. The measures include both collective and individual solutions. Selection of offers shall be based on assessments of the need for relief measures and follow-up, and shall be considered against age, independence and previous experiences. These measures have very different cost frames depending on expenses for housing, salary, financial assistance and other relief measures, such as homework assistance, leisure activities, support person, guardian and respite homes. While kinship

placement without approval as a foster home is the cheapest housing remedy, shared homes approved as foster homes, shared homes with duty rotas and municipal child welfare institutions are the most expensive measures (Econ, 2007).

Housing and care services for single minors have considerably changed over the past few decades (Berg, 2012) from focusing on kinship placements in the 1980s and 1990s to greater use of shares homes and homes with follow-up. Available statistics show that the number of homes with follow-up has significantly increased between 2007 and 2011, and that it is widely used for single minors between the ages of 13 and 20. The number of offered own dwellings/dorm rooms has reduced and is primarily offered to single minors aged 18 or older (Haugen and Dyrhaug, 2014). This development shows an increased use of shared homes with staff.

Earlier research shows that the choice of housing and care measure can have major consequences for the development of single minors after being settled. A number of studies shows the importance of close follow-up by professionals and continuous access to adults, while giving young people space for independence (Lauritsen et al., 2002; Svendsen et al., 2010; Bruce, 2012). However, the way that housing with follow-up is organized varies a lot. There are few guidelines that regulate the work and the contents of a shared home, and this leads to major variations between municipalities in the offer that single minors

receive when being settled (Thorshaug et al., 2013). Which placement option is selected and consequently what follow-up single minors receive is of major importance for their development, including schooling and education (Brendler-Lindqvist, 2004; Wade et al., 2005). At the same time, it is emphasized that there is a need to know more about how housing and care measures are experienced by unaccompanied minors (Wade et al., 2005; Bruce, 2012).

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Individual traumatic experiences of single minors have been described by many. The report on living conditions for asylum-seeking children (Berg and Tronstad, 2015) documented a high level of emotional stress in this group. The figures are far above any that can otherwise be found among children. These conditions must be taken into consideration when facilitating housing and care services for this group as well as other measures relevant to the overall care situation. This concerns health care, schooling, friends and social networks, etc. An important key word here is comprehensive follow-up.

This brings us to the second level of challenges which is the *municipality level*. Municipalities that settle single minors are responsible for establishing a comprehensive service offer for this group. The contents of these services need to be tailored to the individual's needs

and comply with laws and regulations. Unaccompanied minors have the right to attend school in accordance with the Education Act, but there is little beyond this that is directly stated in the law. In other words, municipalities have freedom to act, and they use it, as the research in the field shows. There are different housing solutions and a variety of school, care and health care services. Some variations can be explained by unaccompanied minor's individual-specific differences (e.g. age). Other differences may be due to different understandings of what the task is or different professional perspectives. In terms of organizing and legal anchoring, most municipalities take the child welfare act as the starting point for the services provided to single minors. Some of them base their initiatives on the Social Services Act. Some municipalities perceive such freedom to act as positive, while others call for clearer guidelines.

Now we are at the third level which is the *societal challenges*. These are also described both in research and in public investigations and are related to everything from politics and law to organization and economics. Specifically, this is about general work conditions and how they affect the individual municipality's freedom to act, including how changes in economics and legislation affect the work. An example of such changes is the highly controversial amendment that causes many single minors to lose their right to permanent residence after the age of 18. This obviously has major consequences for each single minor, but it also affects the municipalities' opportunities of long-term plan-

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ning for the group. Another example is changes in the financial support schemes for the settlement of single minors from a refund-based system to so-called «unit price financing». In other words, we see that challenges at the individual and municipal level are affected by social conditions.

Single minor refugees are defined as a risk group because these are children fleeing from war, trauma and difficult living conditions. They lack parental care, guidance and protection and are at the same time in a country with foreign languages, culture and traditions. Many single minors have had traumatic experiences such as losses, privations, sorrow, persecution, distress and abuse. Furthermore, their inadequate social relationships and the lack of a familiar system during the crucial development period are of essential importance. Single minor refugees also lack network and family relationships and thus represent a group of children with special support and care needs (Garvik, Paulsen and Berg 2016, Valenta and Berg, 2010, Berg and Tronstad 2015, Paulsen, Michelsen and Brochmann 2015).

### FAMILY HOME MODEL FOR SINGLE MINOR REFUGEES

Creating of family homes is a supplement to housing and care solutions which are already used for the target group. The project «Our New Children» will make it easier for municipalities to receive single minors and take good care

of them. The purpose of the project is to develop settlement and integration solutions for this group of refugees. The central element of the project is the development of family homes with a focus on belonging.

Family home is a new way to settle children fleeing alone to Norway. The model is based on SOS family homes that exist in many countries in Europe and the rest of the world. A municipality provides a suitable house, and two to five children and foster parents live together as a family. Foster parents have access to professional support, administrative assistance and respite care. There is much focus on care quality and stability. If foster parents for any reason have to quit, it's them and not children who have to move. Thus, children keep their home, friends and school.

The central goal of family homes is to create a stable home for especially the youngest single minors and for young people who need special follow-up and stability. In addition to that, it has been an important task to create an opportunity for siblings to live together. The important purpose of evaluation is to focus on to what extent and in which manner family homes manage to meet the objective of good and family-based care with focus on stability and continuity.

Research in the field underlines the importance of ensuring that the measures aimed at single minor refugees provide them with adequate adult contact and contribute to integration (Oppedal, Seglem and Jensen 2009, Svendsen, Thorshaug and Berg 2010, Berg and Tronstad 2015, Garvik, Paulsen and Berg 2016). The project emphasizes specific

activities to ensure that such children have contact with other youth, mentoring schemes for young people, relatives and activities to provide them with work practice and education. That way, «Our Children» can be a driving force for engaging communities to support children when they move to a municipality. We know from other projects that involving children into activities is a very important part of the integration process (Flaugen, Elvegård and Berg 2015). The major focus of the evaluation has therefore been on studying the importance of belonging and on investigating the role of family homes in social integration.

### EVALUATION FOCUS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The project «Our children» wants to develop a model that has transfer value to other municipalities and is used in existing municipal expense reimbursement/financial support schemes. The project collaborates closely with the Norwegian State Housing Bank and has arranged information and dialogue meetings with several municipalities. In order to facilitate implementation in other municipalities, we would like to highlight examples of good practice in the evaluation. The point of this perspective is developing practices and procedures that work well for single minors and foster parents instead of focusing on barriers and challenges. Processes, procedures and everyday events that illustrate what works well and thus have transfer value to other municipalities that want to perform similar

settlement work can be described in a better way through identifying good practice.

The evaluation is based on information and gathering of experience from a variety of sources. Our main informants have been single minors themselves and those who are closest to them in their daily work, such as foster parents, community workers, child welfare services and other support staff in the appropriate municipalities. Most of the interviews have been conducted in Asker municipality since it has been the first municipality where the project started and since it has several family homes. In addition, we have interviewed those in charge of family homes in Skien and Nesodden, and we have had many conversations with SOS Children's Villages' employees both individually and in the form of meetings and group discussions. Originally we planned to conduct workshops with the participation of all involved parties. However, we put these plans away after having spoken to those closest to the work at the local level. They wanted more peace both in and around the family homes. We see very clearly that too much attention from researchers may break something that Hassan Ali calls *creating a home together*. We have both respect and understanding of this and have therefore decided to spend more time on experience gathering from those who have close contact with single minor refugees. We think that by doing this we have gained a good understanding which largely confirms what single minors have communicated.

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As mentioned above, children and foster parents have been our most important sources in this evaluation. Through in-depth interviews we have had the opportunity to ask questions we consider relevant for highlighting the project's issues. At the same time, informants could share their own experiences, opinions, thoughts and reflections. This type of interviews requires good preparation, but at the same time allows interviewers to come up with topics they are interested in. This concerns both children and adults, but is especially important when talking to single minors whom all this is about.

Seeing things from the «child's perspective» prompts other reflections than seeing them from the «adult's perspective». When it comes to the practical implementation of interviews with children and adolescents, it is important to take the individual's age, situation, desires and needs into account. Some children would feel secure if foster parents are present when we talk to them. In other families we may talk individually with different family members. All interviews with children are based on the child's, foster parents' and guardian's consent.

Similarly to how children and adults can see the world from different perspectives, different evaluations can be made depending on whether they are done from the *inside* or from the *outside*. The inside will in this case be a family home, while the outside is represented by such systems around family homes as municipality's child welfare services, SOS Children's Villages or

central government. This is the reason why we have talked to people who have different roles and who bring different experiences into the work. It has also likely determined who has conducted interviews and conversations. One of us has long experience of municipal work with refugees (both research and practice) with single minors as a special focus area. The other one has long experience as a child and family researcher with a special eye for relationships between parents and children. We have seen much of the same in the conversations that have been conducted, but we have approached this topic from different angles and from slightly different points of view. We have complemented each other – something that we believe and hope comes forth in our evaluations.

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## DATA MATERIAL

As mentioned above, the evaluation is primarily based on the experiences of Asker municipality. The first family home was established here in spring 2016 with four new family homes in the following months. In addition, we interviewed key people in Skien and Nesodden municipalities with one family home established in each of them. The total data material consists of interviews with foster parents and children of three family homes. In addition to that, we interviewed 16 employees and other support staff in three municipalities. The employees have different roles, such as community workers, family counselors, nurses, respite carers, coordinators and guardians. Most of them are linked to child welfare services and have special responsibility for the guidance and follow-up of a family home. We have also interviewed key people in SOS Children's Villages who have been the core of the family home model development, and we have participated in meetings and network gatherings to discuss experiences with the new model.

In the initial phase of the evaluation work it was planned to establish family homes in several municipalities, including Trondheim. We wanted to include Trondheim in the evaluation since we were well informed about the work done in this municipality and could therefore study the establishment of family homes in light of other housing and care solutions for the target group. Trondheim municipality has signed a letter of intent with SOS Children's Villages for the establishment of family homes, but since settlement figures have been considerably declining across the whole country for the last two years, these plans have been put on

hold, and the same has been done by other municipalities. The climate for establishing family homes is positive in a number of municipalities, but there is closing down instead of building-up on the agenda because of low settlement figures. However, several municipalities say that the family housing model is interesting, because it creates proximity and is easy to adapt to both small and large municipalities, and because it is considered economically advantageous with the new grant system.



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## FAMILY HOME MODEL EXPERIENCE OF MUNICIPALITIES

The three municipalities that have so far established family homes for single minor refugees have organized the work quite similarly. The work is supported by child welfare services, and each family home consists of foster mother and/or foster father with 2-5 children who together constitute a family. Most family homes have siblings. Some «family members» in various family homes have been replaced, but their composition at the time of evaluation was as follows:

Family home 1: Five siblings, the eldest sister is the foster mother

Family home 2: Four siblings, the eldest brother is the foster father

Family home 3: Three foster children, single foster father (not related)

Family home 4: Three foster children, single foster father (not related)

Family home 5: Three foster children, single foster father (not related)

Family home 6: Four siblings, foster father with own family (not related)

Family home 7: Three siblings, foster mother with own family (not related)

Children are 7-28 years old. We find a big age gap in family homes where the children are siblings and where the eldest sibling has the role of foster father or mother. At the time of evaluation, there were no couples sharing the parental function. However, the municipalities emphasized that they would like the families to have both foster mother and father. When this is being written, the first family home has got a foster parent couple. In sibling-based family homes, foster mother or father have the same language background as children. In other family homes, different languages are spoken. Even though youths speak Norwegian quite well, they are dependent on using interpreters in some types of conversations. This may be either an attendance interpreter or a telephone interpreter.

In two of the family homes, elder siblings are foster parents. Originally, siblings had this role in one of the family homes only, but there were changes made in one of the homes so that an elder sister had taken over the role of foster mother. Elder siblings where they are

found have often seen it natural (and almost obvious) that they should have a parental role. Many of them have acted as mother or father both before and during the escape, and they found it difficult to give up the «parenthood» when they came to Norway. One example is four siblings who had to manage on their own for several years. The eldest one who became over 18 thought it was very strange that he could not continue as father.

*He was asking many questions and thought in the beginning that this was both strange and difficult. After a while he gradually let it go and found that it was a relief too.* (Child welfare services employee)

Other family homes have the same experience. After a while, many of the eldest siblings experience a relief when they share responsibility with another adult. However, this requires both patience and flexibility from both parties. The one who has acted as father or mother for a younger sibling must be able to let go, but the development of such a process depends largely on how foster parents and elder siblings manage to build good recognition-based relationships. Magne Raundalen and Willy-Tore Mørch who have prepared own guide for foster parents of single minor refugees emphasize the importance of building relationships. Willy-Tore Mørch says the following:

*In a family home, foster parents and youth built positive relationships which are a prerequisite for successful solutions to everyday challenges. Continuity and close relationships of a family home will trigger resources that provide hope for a future in Norway.*

Building good relationships is something that occurs over time. It requires efforts from both parties, and in many cases an external assistance is also needed. This is something that a family counselor can contribute both by virtue of own professional background and also by being an outside person who can see the interaction between family members in a new way. Again, it is important to emphasize the importance of timing. At the same time it is essential to be open to different solutions. There is a family home that works well with an elder sibling acting as foster mother or father, and there is a family home where roles change as children get older. These solutions must be tailored to the needs.

## RECRUITMENT OF FOSTER PARENTS

Stories about how each family home has been started and eventually developed are different. Employees emphasize that they are trying to tailor the offer to the youth's needs. The following story can illustrate how one of the municipalities considered what establishment solutions would be good for a specific family home. The municipality received a request from the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity

(IMDi) to settle a sibling group. The children were between 14 and 23 years old. They wanted to live together, and this was something the municipality wanted to facilitate. Representatives of the municipality's child welfare services visited the reception center where the children lived and interviewed them. The conclusion they came to was to make an offer for all those children which was a family home. One of the employees says: They wanted to live together, and we took the challenge! The eldest girl took a lot of responsibility and had for a long time been like a mother to her younger siblings. She had particularly close relations with the youngest girl. However, the municipality's judgement was that she should not be a mother and that she also had to take care of her own situation. Therefore, they decided that they would hire a foster mother or a foster father. The decision was to hire a foster father since the mother's role was already largely covered by the eldest girl in the family:

*We considered it appropriate to hire a man of the same nationality, the one who could serve as a male figure and a role model. We announced the position but ended up using the network to find a suitable person. So we decided to use elder sister as a respite carer. It worked very well.* (Family counselor)

Several municipalities say that the network has been the prime recruitment source of foster parents. There is always someone in the community who knows someone who may be of interest or who knows some-

one who knows someone else. Ethnic environments have a good overview of not only relevant persons in their own municipality. Since the family home model implies that it is the municipality that makes the house available, foster parents may come from other municipalities, including, in principle, foster parents from other regions of the country. This increases the recruitment base. However, the experience shows that regular job listings or foster announcements do not reach this group. Many people think that this is not for them, while others stop because they think they do not meet the requirements to become foster parents.

The regular foster care home is based on moving the child into the foster family's house. If you are going to be foster parents of several siblings, please note that there are very few people who meet the requirements on, for example, the number of bedrooms in the house. This is a challenge that municipalities rather than foster parents must solve with the help of the family home model. This will allow more people to take on the work. Nevertheless, finding good solutions is a challenge. Those who undertake the task have to move out of their own homes for a period of time, and for those who have their own families it is often a «puzzle» to make this happen. Despite this, the issue has been resolved in most of the municipalities in cooperation between various municipal bodies and refugee networks, as well as the housing issue. Although it was difficult in some municipalities to make everything ready before children arrived, this was eventually sorted out.

## FAMILY HOME VERSUS SHARED HOME

Many people we have talked to have been comparing a shared home and a family home. This may not be so strange since a shared home has been the most used housing and care solution for single minors across the municipalities. All three municipalities that have now established family homes have own experience with shared homes. Their evaluations are therefore based on their own experience which makes the comparisons plausible. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the term “shared home” is not defined clearly. They may vary in terms of size, location, setup, number of adults and professional alignment. Some shared homes are the size of a family home. Others may have up to 20 young people living under the same roof. However, the common elements for most shared homes are that they are based on full-time services and that the staff works shifts. Therefore, they certainly have an institutional nature regardless of the number of children living together.

The picture drawn out in municipalities is that the family home model has given this work «a new impetus». Many have been missing housing and care solutions that allow siblings to live together, although some of them are children and others are adults in terms of their age. A shared home for single minors is by definition not a place where older siblings can live. A shared home where younger and older children live together is not common either. In many cases the solution was to separate sibling groups. In some cases there may

be professional reasons for this solution, but in most of them splitting a sibling group will be experienced as both unnatural and difficult. Siblings are often tied together through common struggle to survive war, persecution and flight. In such situations, sibling relationships are especially important. They represent continuity and security. It does not mean that elder siblings necessarily have to continue the parenting role, but they should be allowed to be present unless conditions indicate that other solutions are better. The child’s best interests rather than organizational limitations must be the governing principle here. This is emphasized by the staff, foster parents and children. The family home model is unique. It provides the opportunity to safeguard and maintain sibling relationships and family ties while at the same time being less vulnerable than previous kinship placements where families were largely left to themselves.

Several employees we have talked to draw lines back in time when considering family homes as a housing form for single minors. As mentioned above, many people compare the system with shared homes and declare that family homes are more focused on care, create closer proximity and are more flexible than shared homes. The quotes below can illustrate this:

*Family homes do not have the institutional nature that shared homes have with their shift work system and employees who come and go.* (Employee)

*It’s so good to have only one person to deal with.* (Youth)

*Working as foster parents is much more based on an ethical mission as opposed to working shifts and going to work. It is coming home where much of the focus is on giving youth the «home feeling».* (Employee)

*The general experience with shared homes is that they move in and live there and then start pushing the boundaries of how long they can be outside, what adults they want to deal with, etc. As a result, youth in a shared home may eventually «bristle their feathers» or «rattle the sabres» a bit, but we have not seen that element in family homes yet. This often happens after 4-5 months, but we have not seen this in family homes.* (Employee)

*The reason why it is like this and why you do not get such reactions in family homes is I think relational, i.e. that you have one person you permanently live together with and whom you need to deal with. I was waiting for something to happen, but it turned out to be surprisingly good.* (Employee)

The staff tells that there have of course been problematic situations in family homes as well, but as they say: *We have not seen the outbreaks that we often see in shared homes, nothing of this has happened in family homes!*

Several employees emphasize that there is a big difference between 7-8 people working shifts compared to one person having all responsibility:

*No overlapping is required because now everything is in the head of one person. At the same time, there is a lot to follow up about school, guardians, activities, and it gets easier since one person has full control. When one person is in charge, you don’t have to hear «but she said this, and he said that» as you often hear in a shared home. We have never had this in family homes.*

It seems that youths feel much more seen and understood in family homes:

*It takes a long time to get acquainted and a long time to understand them, but when you spend 24/7 together you get to know each other in a completely different way than when you work shifts in a shared home. I also think that it opens up differently to the youngest children. They feel they are seen in a family home. Therefore, the family home model is especially good for the youngest unaccompanied minors.*

Many youths emphasize that proximity to foster parents impacts dealing with everyday situations:

*Bad days may happen. For example, when someone has not slept well, a bad day may occur without anything being forced through. For example, in a shared*

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*home, you have to make dinner every Tuesday. In a family home, it is up to a foster parent to assess the situation. If a youngster has not made dinner one day, a foster parent knows that he has not slept well and has a lot to deal with now. There is a greater flexibility in a family home so that youth's current state and «what they are in for» can be taken into account. This cannot be done to the same extent in a shared home.*

*Children and parents, as well as the staff depict a picture of family homes that corresponds well to what SOS Children's Villages convey in their presentation of the model:*

*The family home model is a home and care solution for children who have fled to Norway alone and who will be settled in a municipality. The model will provide family-based care with secure, stable caregivers, and a great emphasis will be placed on quality and long-term care.*

It is emphasized that the model is particularly suitable for the youngest children, but it also suits for older youth who need closer follow-up. In addition, as we have already emphasized, the model is well suited for siblings who have fled together. Family homes are similar to other care models, but they also have some features that make this model unique. We have already noted that the model shares similarities with what is commonly referred to as kinship placements. The difference is that the approval process for becoming a foster parent is more formalized and that the child

welfare service and the support system follow up more closely. Normally there is also another type of remuneration (which is significantly lower) in case of a kinship placement. The requirements for foster parents in a family home are also more formalized while at the same time they are trained in advance and guided along the way. They are paid as a state foster home, so the model itself is clearly based on a foster home model. There are also similarities between a reinforced foster home and a family home. The difference is that a family home is the child's home, not the home of foster parents. If foster parents quit their job, children keep their home, school and network. This contributes to a completely different stability while growing up.

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## ROLE OF THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

As we wrote in the introduction, the family home model is both an innovation and a further development of models that have worked well in other contexts. One of the employees with long experience from working with unaccompanied minors put it this way:

*There were both economic and professional reasons why we wanted to look at new alternative housing and care solutions. Previously we had only shared homes and host families. We wanted to establish family homes as the third option. It is similar to solutions we had before, but there was no facilitation or support around. It had to cut off at some point (...) It is interesting to see parallels with what was done long ago. Family homes are similar to what was established in the 1980s and 1990s, but there was just no external support at that time.*

Many of whom we have talked to emphasize the importance of taking sufficient time when establishing new family homes and of providing that support staff around families (family counselor and community worker) can often be present during the first couple of months. This is the period when important relationships and trust are established. They need to be prepared that this is not a 9 to 16 job. Here, it's necessary to be ready to spend time and to be flexible.

When it comes to the contact between foster parents and staff (child welfare services' case officers, family

counselors and community workers), it is governed by foster parents. They have a clear role distribution, but foster parents are to a great extent the ones who ask for help and who have the opportunity to say when it suits to get in. They are also those who decide which topics should be raised. There are foster parents who have an overview of everyday life and who have a close relationship with youths. The support system around children has a supervising and facilitating role, but the contact should happen in family home's premises taking the daily rhythm and the everyday life of the family home into account. Case officers, family counselors, guardians and other employees have different roles. Case officers are usually the closest of all employees, while others get involved when needed. Foster parents are the closest to every youth.

Everyone we have talked to emphasizes that the role of foster parents can be challenging. They shall get to know young people who have had difficult lives and who are from communities which are very different from the Norwegian society. Those who have the same linguistic and ethnic background as the youth have an obvious advantage, but if a child and a foster parent have not been connected previously, trust has to be built up while at the same time you as a parent have to set boundaries and make decisions that are not always popular. You will also have to endure (at least in the beginning) that there will be things which youngsters will keep hidden. But as one foster father said, it's completely OK...

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*Even if four people live together under one roof, they are four strangers (if they are not siblings). They should tell things of their own free will. Some are offered to go to a Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Day Clinic, but do not want to. It is important to emphasize that the offer remains in force and also that it is important for them to have someone to talk to.*

## A GUIDE FOR FOSTER PARENTS

In the Guide that SOS Children's Villages have prepared for foster parents of unaccompanied minor refugees, there are many good recommendations to both new and more experienced foster parents which tell exactly how to handle difficult situations. The Guide contains five chapters that address both major and minor topics related to everything from practical questions to topics which affect emotional and integration-related issues. Examples of what is referred to as the major topics are friendship, language training and schooling, physical and mental health and the integration process. The minor topics are written and unwritten rules in the Norwegian society such as codes of conduct, authority structures, forms of communication and conflict resolution. The heading *"The mild Norwegian authority is also an authority, not a proposal"* can be an example of topics under discussion. Here the relationships between authoritarian and democratic forms of conduct are discussed. And the topic *Interpre-*

*ting Norwegian youth's behavior in different contexts* also contains useful input and advice to both foster parents and others who counsel and raise unaccompanied minor refugees.

The topics in the Guide are specific and recognizable. Magne Raundalen and Willy Tore Mørch who have prepared the Guide have also used their psychological background to convey methods for what they call «cleaning in the basement and in the attic». Cleaning in the basement is about heavy thoughts, painful memories, sorrows and traumas of the past. Cleaning in the attic is about annoying, bad and negative thoughts, about stress and helplessness in the present, and about concerns and worries for the future.

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## NEED FOR RESPITE

It may be challenging to be thrown into the role as foster parents, and although close follow-up is provided by both the child welfare and health care services, foster parents will still need breaks. Foster parents of unaccompanied minors have the same right to respite as other foster parents, but it has been difficult to make good arrangements in some family homes. This makes the scheme even more vulnerable. Several employees say that the pressure on foster parents may be too big, and that they may carry out their mission for too long. They believe that foster parents are exposed to too much stress, both emotionally and practically. Many have not been prepared for the fact that a large house with probably four or five bedrooms, an outdoor area and maybe a garden requires a lot of housework and care. This comes on top of all the emotional work to be done with the youth. As an employee said, *foster parents have to stand for that, even if it is the municipality that has chosen this large house*. Even though youth in a family home has to participate and share tasks, it will nevertheless be a lot that falls on the foster parent's shoulders. It goes without saying that the burden can be great.

Everybody we have talked to emphasize the importance of having a support system around every family home. Each family home has its own family counselor. Besides, there are community workers and a respite care service that help foster parents to get some days off every month. The frequency is tailored to meet the

needs of each family home, but it is usually 2-3 days a month plus vacation. As children grow up and some are also formally out of the child welfare system, there are solutions developed to suit the new situation. The child welfare service may make decisions until the youth is 23 years old. The last few years (after the age of 18) are then defined as aftercare. In family homes where children have become older, this support provided by family counselors and workers has been reasonably reduced. In many places it has happened a little gradually because foster parents feel more secure in this role and no longer need so much external assistance. This shows some of the model's strengths. It is flexible and can be tailored for the needs of both children and adults.

Family home as a housing and care solution means in many ways taking the best from several models. It combines private and public, individual and collective, formal and informal, planned and flexible components. The model is *eclectic*, which implies *mixing elements from different areas to create own or new solutions*. Family homes have drawn inspiration and elements from previously used housing and care solutions. In that sense, the project Our New Children represents both something new and something old at the same time. Yet, it is a project, which means that much needs to be created along the way and that there should be space for trying and failing. One foster father put it this way:

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*Mistakes certainly happen when it's a new project and things we have not thought of are going to occur, but it will also be a good experience. Therefore, we have made a slogan, namely that we're building the boat while rowing.* [From the SOS Children's Villages' booklet "Our New Children"]

A family counselor describes it as a process characterized by learning-by-doing: Working as a family counselor for this type of foster home is relatively new and you do not have much to rely on.

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## THE WAY FORWARD

The overall experience with the family home model is positive. In this model, it has been possible to find a balance between the professional and the family-oriented levels, and it has been possible to preserve the best of many different types of housing and care solutions for unaccompanied minor refugees. Family homes are organized like normal homes where parents and children live together and arrange their everyday life as other families do. However, stories of both children and parents differ from most other families. Even though today we have greater awareness of different family forms and family stories, there are many circumstances that make family homes extra vulnerable. This vulnerability is linked to an individual child, to a group and to a *family home* itself as a structure. In view of these, it is impressive to see how well family homes work and how unambiguous the feedback has been in most areas. But good measures may also be challenging, and there are some recurring issues when it comes to family homes. The first one is *support and follow-up* by the systems around family homes.

### FOLLOW-UP, GUIDANCE & RESPITE CARE

We have already mentioned the importance of having a good support system around family homes. Here, it is important to emphasize that family homes had slightly different experiences. Many experienced the start-up phase as challenging and wanted more follow-up

during that period. Eventually, most of them felt that the follow-up was good, but that needs changed when family groups were created. When it comes to *respite care*, which is also a form of support, there was a general belief that respite care is important and that this is both a right and something that can prevent foster parents from burning out. However, there is a small paradox here. The respite care topic was brought up by municipal supporters in the first place and not by foster parents. Of course, this can be interpreted as the fact that foster parents do not need respite or are satisfied with respite care they receive, but it may also be that they are not used to expect this kind of external support and help and therefore do not request them. Hence, there is reason to take it seriously if the staff is concerned that the load is getting too heavy.

Practical steps of organizing respite care should nevertheless be discussed and determined in consultation with foster parents. One of the family homes had a good experience with an elder sibling acting as a respite carer. In other foster homes, a person who was already familiar to the youth was moving into a family home when foster parents had time off. This solution was also described as good. What is important, however, is the principle that single unaccompanied minors shall not be anywhere else when foster parents get respite. They shall live in peace in their own home. The amount of support a family home needs should

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be continuously assessed. It is hard to be sure if the support is sufficient before a situation that requires extraordinary effort occurs. It is therefore important to be prepared so that foster parents do not feel that they are left alone with the responsibility in case of difficult situations. Several foster parents thought that there could be too much interference in daily life and that a *constant flow of people* would cause turmoil and stress and turn a family home into an institution and not a normal home. In other words, it should be a balancing act.

## FINANCES

Another issue that many think is challenging is finances. It is all about reimbursement foster parents get, what they receive to cover living expenses and what clothes, appliances and pocket money each child gets. Several municipal employees have been concerned that foster parents *are underpaid for the job they are doing and that municipalities always stay at the lowest level*. Some employees have mentioned that «starting a new home» requires a lot of efforts, and that these efforts as well as all financial expenses at the initial stage could have been compensated for in a better way. Municipalities follow regular rates of foster parents' salary/remuneration and reimbursement, but several have pointed out that single minors are in an extraordinary situation when they come from reception and care centers.

As some say, they are missing everything. Almost the same can be said about many foster parents. They shall turn a house into home. This means that a lot of small things need to be bought and arranged to make a proper family home. In this case there could be more generosity and the opportunity to cover expenses beyond the usual rates. Two employees have put it this way:

*I totally agree that this assignment should be based on some values and that it should not only be about money, but at the same time you have to see how much responsibility it actually is. Someone, for example, needs extra follow-up of sleep or school, and they lose things that need to be bought again, etc. I think Asker municipality has put quite a lot on the shoulders of one person.*

*I think the municipality could bang the drum a bit better! There is a lot that boils down to the capability of foster parents to cope with the task, which entails, among other things, a specific salary compensation. If you compare it with salaries of other employees, it is not anything to get rich on. There is something about value-based ethics compared to what is expressed in cold cash. We probably think a bit differently in this case.*

As mentioned above, the salary issue was raised by employees and not by foster parents. However, the attitude to expenses for clothes, activities and appliances was pretty unambiguous. Here, there is a need

for more flexible thinking and an understanding that single minors may have some other needs because they are newcomers in Norway. But again, it is a balancing act. What are reasonable expectations and legitimate needs and what are unreasonable requirements? One employee has said the following:

*Youths have very little system understanding and often get a kind of claim mentality. Now having come to the municipality, they have the attitude like, 'we want new pants, new shoes, new bike, why don't we get this and that, etc.' Here, foster parents stand alone, and coping with this task for a long time requires good relationships.*

Some youths have problems to understand that foster parents do not have a big financial capability and can't buy everything new (furniture, appliances, clothes, etc.). Or as one said: *They must learn that they cannot eat up all bananas on the fruit platter and that they have to share.*

Interviews with employees show that there are slightly different opinions on whether the reimbursement is high enough to cover foster parents' actual expenses. Some employees say, for instance, that *they think foster parents face many difficulties and that they also have financial challenges*. Some of the foster parents' extra expenses are directly or indirectly related to the fact that the youths have little experience of living in Norway. For example, they have little knowledge about food and food prices, and they have little experience

with winter climate, electricity and heating, in addition to sometimes being able to (like most other people) make «stupid purchases» or set «incorrect priorities». The last examples are obviously not good reasons for increasing the reimbursement, but they highlight an everyday problem faced by foster parents. This issue should be raised more often. It is not certain that the reimbursement increasing is the correct answer, but the issue should be taken seriously. Perhaps a better solution than a general increase of the amount would be greater flexibility and more individual assessments. It will solve some problems, but may also create some new ones. Youths compare themselves with others, which is why discrimination is easily considered unfair anyway. *One of the employees has described this as an eternal discussion.*

*Youth in the «growth phase» has many expenses. We would save foster parents a lot of trouble if, for example, clothes and appliances could be covered by child welfare services. It's a huge struggle during the first months, because these youths have nothing when they come*

In some families, it becomes such a big problem that you have to spend a lot of time talking to find out realities. There may be conflicts between foster children and foster parents because youths think they get too little compared to other youngsters they compare themselves to. It is also being mentioned that foster parents use «their own money» to be able to cover all expenses for the youths.

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These are discussions known from ordinary foster homes too. The challenge in family homes is nevertheless a bit different because these children are missing most things when they arrive to a municipality. Although it may also apply to other foster children, the constant problem is that they often lack proper winter clothes, walking gear, gym clothes, skis, bicycles and other equipment that we take more or less for granted in Norway. Without the necessary equipment, it is difficult to participate in activities along with other youths. A computer and a mobile phone are now considered by most people as «necessary equipment». They cost money too, and there are neither aunts, nor uncles or grandparents who can step in and pay. In other words, it's necessary to think thoroughly what reasonable needs are and to consider how to meet them appropriately. This will allow foster parents to avoid many potential conflicts and can contribute to greater equal treatment of children and young people under public.

## SCHOOL, LEISURE AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

School and leisure were the main topics in several conversations we had in and about family homes. Single minors have the same rights to schooling as «everyone else», but what does it mean in practice to have the same rights when the starting point is so different? Youths who have grown up under civil war and persecution usually have big gaps in their school CV. Some almost never went to school. Others attended school, but their schooling was interrupted, and they are academically behind others of the same age. Regardless of whether they went to school in their home country or not, they enter a new education system, and they need to learn subjects, languages, culture and social skills at the same time. This in itself is very demanding. In addition, many of them carry a heavy baggage of war and flight experiences. Many have lost close family members. All of them have lost familiar surroundings.

In other words, challenges are queuing up. The report «*Unaccompanied Minors: On the Way to Adulthood*» (Svendsen and Berg, 2017) addresses many of these challenges. It emphasizes the need for close cooperation between schools and housing and care services for unaccompanied minors. It's about everything from motivational work to specific homework assistance and language training offers. We have an impression that there is great awareness of this in family homes. Homework assistance is facilitated either in a family home or at school, and the attention to the importance

of schooling is great. There are some concerns about academic facilitation at schools, but it is also admitted that it's difficult to know whether the best is to be in a class with peers or to attend a class which is appropriate for your academic level. In most large municipalities, elementary schools have their own reception classes where students go until their Norwegian language skills are good enough to attend a regular class.

Unaccompanied minors aged 16-18 are usually offered a primary education course arranged by adult education centers, unless they are already qualified to enter high school. Those who have already reached the age of 18 when settled will normally be entitled to an Introduction program in accordance with the Introduction Act. In other words, there may be unaccompanied minors in one and the same shared house whose educational program belongs to four different education systems, i.e. ordinary elementary school, elementary school education through adult education program, high school and introduction program. It may be difficult for foster parents to get oriented in all the different school systems, and providing advice and guidance on any further education course may be challenging. In Norway, education is very important for gaining entry into employment, but this is not that obvious in many countries of origin of unaccompanied minor refugees. It is therefore important that the education system and family homes here cooperate and consider being confidants and advisors regarding the future of young people as a common task.

For young people, school is not only a place to learn, but also an important integration arena. This is where they meet peers, where after-school activities are planned, and where you are recruited into different types of networks. Language is often an obstacle for unaccompanied minors. Although many learn the language quickly, there is a lot of linguistic jargon that it takes time to acquire. Sometimes it is a dialect that is hard to understand. In other cases it is first and foremost that young people have other reference points and therefore are unable to keep up with conversations. Such programs as the TOGETHER project arranged by SOS Children's Villages are established to create contact and joint activity based on reciprocity between unaccompanied minors and other young people in municipalities. This is an initiative that has been used by many youths in family homes. Some have become familiar with other youths through the Red Cross Buddy project, while others join common recreational arenas such as sports teams, schools of arts, brass bands, etc.

It is common in family homes that each youngster can participate in one recreational activity. These recreational activities often have a price tag, which implies the necessity to set up limits. Some youths perceive it as unfair. «All others» can participate more... However, this does not seem to be a big problem. These issues are addressed by individual family homes, and days are usually filled with school, homework and communication with others in a family home. The challenge may be that unaccompanied minor refugees have too



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little informal contact with Norwegian youngsters. This is something that goes on in many municipalities regardless of home and care solution. Therefore such projects as TOGETHER and the Buddy project are extra important for this group. Social networks are something everyone needs. Facilitating social activities that can allow for lasting relationships becomes extra important for young people who have lost so much. Unaccompanied minor refugees are basically resourceful young people but all of them face challenges related to coming to a new country with unknown systems and everything that occurs as a result of reestablishment. It has been emphasized in conversations with employees that an immigrant background of foster parents is an important success factor.

*They were newcomers here too and know many of the challenges many youths face. It creates a completely different relationship and I think it's an important reason of why many of them are doing so well.* (Employee)

Several employees emphasized that language problems are a serious obstacle, especially in the beginning:

*They lack nuances and can often only convey that they are for example angry or happy. When you have foster parents who speak the same language as youths, you avoid many misunderstandings, and this forms the basis for completely different relationships. It is also very helpful that many foster*

*parents have been «in the same shoes», and it is therefore easier for them to understand «where the shoes pinch».* (Employee)

In one of the family homes they are concerned that for too many single minors it is difficult to put away the survival mechanisms which they have been completely dependent on while fleeing, such as fighting for food and supplies. For example, they need to trust that there will be food on the table. Some «take what they can» because that's what they are used to, and some hoard food in their room, etc. Most of the Norwegian children do not know what it means to be hungry or to fight for clothes and blankets.

Norwegian child welfare children still have some familiar settings. They are familiar with the school system, they speak the language and they know the society. Unaccompanied minor refugees don't have that. This means that family homes shall perform many tasks. At the same time, this is part of their strength. The proximity of different family members means gaining trust between youths and between youths and foster parents. Of course, trust problems and conflicts may also occur in family homes as in all families, but conditions to manage conflicts and to re-establish trust are in place. Besides, support around family homes is an important safety valve. Foster parents are not alone, but they share the responsibility with professionals in the municipal support system.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The family home model appears to be an important supplement to the housing and care solutions that are already used by municipalities which settle unaccompanied minor refugees. The model helps to create stable care services for a group that has a special need for a safe and stable place to live. This applies primarily to the youngest children, but also to others who have a special need for close follow-up. For siblings, this model should be the preferred one. It allows siblings live together, while helping to relieve elder siblings of care responsibilities many of them had before coming to Norway. The model is flexible and can therefore be used in both small and large municipalities. The prerequisite is that there is a professional support system that can guide and assist foster parents who provide the day-to-day care. Support of family homes by an interdisciplinary team appears to be an important success factor. Without this support, the family home model will become vulnerable with the risk that foster parents will struggle because the responsibility becomes too big.

We see a need to expand the team around family homes. As of today, it appears that child welfare, health and social skills are offered in particular. We see a clear need for the school and education system to be more closely linked to family homes. Homework assistance is offered in all municipalities, but we also see the need for guidance beyond the school program. In continuation of that, we also recommend municipa-

lities that establish family homes to work actively on developing leisure arenas and gathering places where single minors can meet other youths on the basis of interaction. Several volunteer organizations have developed such friendship projects (SOS Children's Villages, Red Cross, Save the Children, etc.). In addition, there are various projects under the umbrella «inclusive leisure» in many municipalities. Experiences from a number of research projects show that many single minor refugees miss friends and arenas where they can have activities with other youths. Social networks do not always develop by themselves, especially if you are struggling with the language and don't know the social codes. This makes it extra important that municipalities also have an active attitude to youths' leisure time.

We see a potential for improvement when it comes to financial framework conditions for family homes. The general attitude is that the expense limit is too low. The need to buy both things for home and appliances for a single minor refugee when starting a new family home is especially high. It does not concern furniture and fixtures (which are in place), but relates to things that can help make the home more homely. When it comes to clothes and appliances for the youths, it has to be taken into consideration that they are missing most things when they arrive to a municipality. It may include sportswear, walking gear, bicycles, skis, PCs, etc. In most families it is considered as «something everyone has», but for single minors it is not a guarantee. The same applies to opportunities to participate

in activities that cost money. Of course, economic factors should be assessed in this case, but participation in different types of recreation should be to a greater degree considered as integration measures and support of single minors in fitting in with the youth community and in becoming an active part of the local society.

The project *Our New Children* has shown that the family home model is viable and should be part of the range of services in all municipalities that settle single minor refugees. It is important that the model is tailored to meet the needs of those who will live and work in family homes. It should be flexible, but within the basic structure that ensures adequate assistance by a wide-ranging team of professionals in the municipality and by the rest of the support system. From the financial point of view, we recommend that at the initial stage the particular situation of single minors is taken into consideration to a greater extent in terms of expenses. It may imply increasing of reimbursement or can be done by the municipal child welfare service covering the expenses to a greater extent at the initial stage. Today, the family home model is an economically beneficial model. It should create bigger opportunities for municipalities to cover expenses that can contribute to the youth's long-term integration into the neighborhood, local community and the Norwegian society.

Through their project, SOS Children's Villages have provided an important contribution to the development of housing and care solutions for unaccompanied minor refugees. It should be made possible to further develop the project and to follow developments in the municipalities that have already implemented this solution. There will also be a need for research follow-up in form of more systematic experience evaluations over time.

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