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Skills4Life

Supporting the socio-economic integration of youth leaving child protection systems by developing their skills and capacities through more inclusive leaving care policies in the Danube region

D.1.1.6 Country Reports of youth inclusion policies

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Executive Summary

This country report analyses youth inclusion policies in Austria with a focus on **young people leaving the child protection system (care leavers)**, prepared within the *Skills4Life* project. It draws on desk research, national and EU-level sources, previous project experience, and primary data from three Skills4Life surveys targeting care leavers (n=22), employers and HR professionals (n=15), and trainers and professionals (n=47).

Austria's child and youth welfare system (Kinder- und Jugendhilfe) operates through a **decentralised, multi-level governance structure**. Statutory support generally ends at 18, with extensions limited to exceptional cases up to 21. This contrasts sharply with societal norms: 70% of Austrian 21-year-olds still live with their parents, and the average age for leaving the parental household is 25.6 years. Care leavers—who often require more time due to adverse childhood experiences—are expected to achieve full independence precisely when their peers continue to receive substantial family support.

The report identifies significant **structural disadvantages**: 73% of care leaver respondents report financial insecurity, 55% have struggled with mental health since leaving care, and 40% felt unprepared for adult life at 18. Administrative systems in health insurance, social assistance, study grants, and housing implicitly assume ongoing parental support, creating barriers that disproportionately affect care leavers. The situation is further compounded for migrant care leavers, particularly following legislative changes from January 2026 restricting minimum income access in Vienna and Tyrol.

At the same time, **promising practices** exist. The *Welcome to Life* project (2016–2019) demonstrated that sustained, relationship-based transition support measurably improves outcomes. The advocacy of the *Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+* and *DÖJ* has advanced the policy debate, and regional pilot measures such as counselling vouchers show what targeted interventions can achieve. Professionals recognise care leavers' resilience and adaptability, and 93% of surveyed employers expressed openness to hiring care leavers—though 60% had never heard the term.

The report puts forward **ten recommendations**. The most fundamental is a **legal entitlement to aftercare support until age 24**, anchored in provincial legislation and coordinated through a revised federal–provincial agreement. Further priorities include: relationship continuity and proactive outreach; integration of mental health support into transition programmes; professional development (only 6% received care leaver-specific training in the past year); removal of structural barriers in social protection systems; employer awareness-raising; cross-sectoral coordination; digital support tools; care leaver participation; and targeted measures for migrant care leavers.

Austria has the institutional foundations to significantly improve outcomes for care leavers. The central challenge is to move from **project-based innovations to systemic, rights-based, nationally harmonised transition policies**. The Skills4Life project can contribute through evidence-based training, employer engagement, and transnational learning. Investing in

successful transitions is both an ethical imperative and a sound economic strategy that safeguards substantial public investments made during childhood.

1. Introduction

This section is used to describe the national child protection system and youth transition policies. It should explain the purpose of the country report (youth inclusion efforts, needs, progress) and place it in the context of the Skills4Life project. 1 page

Austria's child protection and youth support system is characterised by a strong legal and institutional framework aimed at safeguarding children's wellbeing, promoting education, and supporting social inclusion. Child and youth welfare (Kinder- und Jugendhilfe, KJH) is primarily regulated at the **provincial level**, resulting in a decentralised system where responsibilities for care, protection, and support services are shared between federal, regional, and local authorities. The system provides a range of measures including residential care, foster care, mobile family support, and preventive services designed to ensure children's safety and development.¹

However, the transition from adolescence to adulthood represents a **critical structural challenge**, particularly for young people leaving the child protection system (care leavers). While most young people in Austria remain supported by their families well into their mid-20s, care leavers are generally expected to become fully independent at the age of **18**, when statutory child and youth welfare support ends. Extensions of support are possible only in exceptional cases and usually limited to the age of 21.² This stands in contrast to broader societal trends, where prolonged education, delayed labour market entry, and rising housing costs have significantly extended young people's dependency on family support.³

Austria's youth transition policies are primarily framed through the **National Youth Strategy**, which addresses participation, education, employment, health, and social inclusion for young people aged 14–24 (with some measures extending to age 30).⁴ While the strategy recognises disadvantaged youth as a priority group, it does not explicitly address care leavers as a distinct target population. As a result, the specific needs of young people transitioning out of care—such as housing stability, financial security, access to health insurance, and continuity of social support—are often addressed in a fragmented and inconsistent manner.⁵

Against this backdrop, civil society organisations, child and youth welfare providers, and advocacy platforms in Austria have increasingly highlighted the **structural disadvantages faced by care leavers**. Research and practice-based evidence show that care leavers are at higher risk of

¹ Federal Chancellery of Austria. *Youth Policy in Austria – National Youth Strategy*. Vienna. Available at: <https://www.bundestkanzleramt.gv.at/en/agenda/youth/youth-policy-in-austria.html>

² European Commission / EACEA. *Youth Wiki – Austria: Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Young People*. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/austria/43-strategy-for-the-social-inclusion-of-young-people>

³ Statistics Austria. *Living Arrangements of Young Adults*. Vienna.

⁴ Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ). *Position Paper: Hilfen für junge Erwachsene in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (Jugendhilfe 18+)*. Vienna. Internal policy document.

⁵ Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+. *Recommendations for the Redesign of Aftercare Support for Care Leavers in Austria*. Vienna.

poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity, social isolation, and mental health challenges.⁶ These risks are exacerbated by administrative and legal systems that implicitly assume ongoing parental support, an assumption that does not hold true for young people leaving care.⁷

The purpose of this country report is to provide a **comprehensive overview of youth inclusion efforts in Austria**, with a particular focus on policies, practices, and systemic conditions affecting care leavers. The report analyses the national child protection system, youth transition policies, institutional arrangements, and legal frameworks relevant to youth inclusion. It identifies key challenges and progress made in recent years and highlights gaps where further policy development and coordination are needed.

This analysis is conducted within the framework of the **Skills4Life project**, which aims to support the socio-economic integration of youth leaving child protection systems in the Danube region by strengthening skills, capacities, and inclusive leaving care policies. The Austrian country report contributes to this objective by mapping the national context, providing evidence for policy learning, and laying the foundation for transnational exchange and capacity building.

⁶ Diakonie Österreich. *Recht auf Hilfe für junge Erwachsene bis 24.* Vienna. Available at: <https://www.diakonie.at/unsere-themen/hilfe-fuer-kinder-jugendliche-und-familien/recht-auf-hilfe-fuer-jugendliche-bis-24>

⁷ Wiener, M. (SOS-Kinderdorf). *Strukturelle Benachteiligungen von Care Leavern gegenüber Gleichaltrigen.* Vienna.

2. Methodology

This section is used to describe the methods applied (surveys, interviews, desk research), the sample composition, tools used, and limitations. 1–2 pages

Desk research should cover current situations in respective countries and the results of the surveys (D.1.1.3)

This country report for Austria is based on a mixed-methods approach combining desk research and analysis of survey data collected within the framework of the Skills4Life project. The methodological approach was designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the **national context of youth inclusion policies**, with a particular focus on young people leaving child protection systems (care leavers), while also enabling comparability across partner countries in the Danube region.

Desk research constituted the primary method for analysing the **institutional, legal, and policy framework** relevant to youth inclusion and leaving care in Austria. A systematic review of national and regional sources was conducted, including:

- National strategies and policy documents related to youth, social inclusion, education, employment, and child protection
- Federal and provincial legal frameworks governing child and youth welfare (Kinder- und Jugendhilfe), youth policy, and social protection
- Position papers, advocacy documents, and policy recommendations issued by civil society organisations and professional networks working with care leavers
- Research studies, evaluation reports, and statistical data from national authorities, research institutions, and EU-level sources

Particular attention was given to identifying **policy gaps, structural barriers, and areas of progress** in relation to youth transitions from care to independent adulthood. The desk research also aimed to capture recent developments and pilot initiatives at regional and municipal level that address the needs of care leavers, even where these are not yet embedded in national legislation.

In addition, the desk research integrated findings from previous national and EU-funded projects focusing on care leavers and youth transitions, including practice-based evidence on housing, education, employment, health, and social participation outcomes. This approach allowed the report to situate Austria's youth inclusion policies within broader European and international frameworks, such as the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** and relevant EU youth and social inclusion policies.

Survey Data (D.1.1.3)

The desk research was complemented by the analysis of **survey data collected within the Skills4Life project** under Deliverable D.1.1.3 (“Assessment of the actual needs and challenges of the target group”). The surveys targeted key stakeholder groups involved in youth inclusion and care leaving processes, including professionals, trainers, service providers, and organisations working with young people transitioning out of care.

For the Austrian context, the survey data provided **practice-oriented insights** into:

- Perceived challenges faced by care leavers during the transition to adulthood
- Gaps in existing support systems and services
- Needs related to skills development, employability, psychosocial support, and independent living
- The role of training, mentoring, and coordinated support mechanisms in promoting successful transitions

While the detailed quantitative results are presented in the aggregated survey annexes, the findings were used in this report to contextualise and validate desk research findings, ensuring that policy analysis reflects both structural conditions and lived realities observed by practitioners.

Analytical Framework

The analysis followed a structured framework aligned with the Skills4Life objectives, focusing on:

- Youth inclusion policies and practices relevant to care leavers
- Transition mechanisms from child protection to adulthood
- Coordination between institutions, sectors, and governance levels
- Strengths, innovations, and systemic barriers within the Austrian context

This framework ensured coherence across chapters and facilitated comparison with other partner countries participating in the project.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, Austria’s **federal structure** and the decentralised nature of child and youth welfare mean that policies and practices vary across provinces. While

this report aims to reflect national trends and common challenges, it cannot capture all regional specificities in equal depth.

Second, the survey data primarily reflect the perspectives of professionals and organisations involved in youth inclusion and care leaving. While these perspectives are highly valuable, they do not replace direct qualitative input from care leavers themselves, which would further enrich the analysis.

Finally, some initiatives supporting care leavers operate as local pilot projects or informal practices and are not always systematically documented in publicly available sources. As a result, certain innovative practices may be underrepresented in desk research findings.

Despite these limitations, the combined use of desk research and survey analysis provides a **robust and evidence-informed basis** for understanding youth inclusion policies in Austria and for identifying key areas for policy development and transnational learning within the Skills4Life project.

3. National Context

3.1. Institutional Framework

Austria's institutional framework for youth inclusion and child protection is characterised by a **multi-level governance structure**, in which responsibilities are shared between federal, provincial, and local authorities, alongside a strong involvement of non-governmental organisations.⁸ This decentralised structure allows for flexibility and regional adaptation but also results in **variation in service provision and coordination**, particularly in the transition phase from youth welfare to adulthood.⁹

At the **federal level**, overall youth policy coordination lies with the **Federal Chancellery (Bundeskanzleramt)**, which is responsible for the National Youth Strategy and cross-sectoral coordination of youth-related policies.¹⁰ While the strategy addresses broad dimensions of youth inclusion—such as education, employment, participation, and wellbeing—implementation relies heavily on cooperation with line ministries and provincial authorities. Additional federal actors

⁸ European Commission / EACEA. *Youth Wiki – Austria: Youth policy governance and actors*.

⁹ European Commission. *EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 – Country implementation context*.

¹⁰ Federal Chancellery of Austria. *Youth Policy in Austria – National Youth Strategy*.
<https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/en/agenda/youth/youth-policy-in-austria.html>

relevant to youth inclusion include ministries responsible for social affairs, labour, education, health, and family policy, each contributing through sector-specific programmes and regulations.¹¹

The **child and youth welfare system (Kinder- und Jugendhilfe, KJH)** is primarily organised and implemented at the **provincial level**. Each federal state (Bundesland) is responsible for planning, funding, and delivering child and youth welfare services through regional youth welfare authorities and contracted service providers.¹² These services include residential care, foster care, supported housing, counselling, and preventive family support. While provincial authorities play a central role during childhood and adolescence, their responsibilities and mandates typically end when young people reach adulthood, contributing to gaps in institutional continuity for care leavers.¹³

At the **local and municipal level**, youth offices, social services, and youth work organisations provide frontline support, including counselling, outreach youth work, and employment-related guidance. Municipalities may also play a role in housing allocation, social assistance, and access to local services. However, access to these services for care leavers is often dependent on local eligibility rules and funding mechanisms, which can vary significantly across regions.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are key actors within Austria's youth inclusion landscape. Organisations such as SOS-Kinderdorf, Pro Juventute, and members of the Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ) provide direct services to children, young people, and care leavers, including housing support, psychosocial counselling, mentoring, and advocacy. NGOs often fill gaps left by statutory systems, particularly in the transition phase after leaving care. They also play a crucial role in policy advocacy, research, and awareness-raising, highlighting systemic disadvantages faced by care leavers.

Several **coordination mechanisms and partnerships** exist across sectors, although these are often project-based rather than structurally embedded. Platforms such as the **"Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+"**, a national network of organisations working with care leavers, facilitate exchange between service providers, researchers, and policymakers.¹⁴ At the project level, EU-funded initiatives (such as Welcome to Life and Skills4Life) have fostered cross-sectoral cooperation between youth welfare providers, training institutions, and public authorities.

Despite these coordination efforts, institutional cooperation between child and youth welfare services and adult social systems (e.g. employment services, housing authorities, health insurance

¹¹ Federal Chancellery of Austria. *Youth policy – Cross-sectoral cooperation*.

¹² European Commission / EACEA. *Youth Wiki – Austria: Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Young People*. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/austria/43-strategy-for-the-social-inclusion-of-young-people>

¹³ Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ). *Position Paper: Hilfen für junge Erwachsene in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (Jugendhilfe 18+)*. Vienna. Internal policy document.

¹⁴ Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+. *Recommendations for the Redesign of Aftercare Support for Care Leavers in Austria*. Vienna.

systems) remains limited.¹⁵ This lack of systemic coordination disproportionately affects care leavers, who often transition into adulthood without the informal family support that mitigates such fragmentation for their peers. Strengthening **institutional interfaces and long-term partnerships** is therefore widely recognised as a key area for improvement in Austria's youth inclusion framework.

3.2. Legal and Policy Framework

This section is used to outline national youth and child protection laws, policies, and strategies relevant to care leavers, noting links to international or European frameworks. 1-3 pages

Austria's legal and policy framework for youth inclusion and child protection is built upon a combination of **constitutional principles, federal strategies, provincial legislation, and international commitments**. While this framework provides broad protections for children and young people, it does not currently offer a **comprehensive, legally guaranteed aftercare framework** for young people leaving the child protection system.¹⁶

Child and youth welfare is regulated primarily through **provincial child and youth welfare laws**, which define the responsibilities of public authorities for protecting children, supporting families, and providing care measures. These laws govern residential care, foster care, and other protective interventions up to the age of majority. In general, statutory support ends when a young person turns **18 years old**, reflecting the legal definition of adulthood under Austrian civil law. Extensions of support beyond this age are possible only in exceptional cases and typically limited to age 21, depending on provincial regulations and individual assessments.

At the national level, Austria does not have a single, binding **Youth Act**. Instead, youth-related policies are coordinated through the **National Youth Strategy**, which aims to improve the living conditions, participation, and opportunities of young people. The strategy emphasises cross-sectoral cooperation and includes disadvantaged youth among its target groups. However, care leavers are not explicitly addressed as a distinct group with specific transition-related needs, resulting in limited policy visibility for this population.¹⁷

Several **sectoral policies and legal provisions** indirectly affect care leavers, including regulations on education and training, labour market integration, social assistance, housing, and health

¹⁵ Löffler, H. (2019). *Welcome to Life – Final Project Report*. Project No. 2720. Vienna. Funded health promotion project targeting care leavers (2016–2019).

¹⁶ European Commission / EACEA. *Youth Wiki – Austria: Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Young People*. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/austria/43-strategy-for-the-social-inclusion-of-young-people>

¹⁷ Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ). *Position Paper: Hilfen für junge Erwachsene in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (Jugendhilfe 18+)*. Vienna. Internal policy document.

insurance. Many of these systems are designed around the assumption of continued parental support into early adulthood. As a result, care leavers often encounter legal and administrative barriers, for example in accessing financial aid, health insurance coverage, or housing, once youth welfare support ends.¹⁸

Austria's legal framework is also shaped by **international and European obligations**. The country has ratified the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, which emphasises the right of young people to protection, development, and participation, including during transitions to adulthood. At the European level, Austria aligns with broader EU youth and social inclusion objectives, such as those outlined in the **EU Youth Strategy** and the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, which stress equal opportunities, access to social protection, and inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Despite these commitments, the lack of a nationally standardised entitlement to aftercare support for care leavers remains a significant gap. Advocacy organisations, including DÖJ and the Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+, have repeatedly called for legal reforms to establish a **right to support for young adults leaving care at least until the age of 24**, in line with societal realities and international evidence on youth transitions.¹⁹ Some federal states have introduced partial measures or pilot instruments, such as counselling vouchers or extended advisory services, but these remain unevenly distributed and are not anchored in national legislation.

A particularly vulnerable subgroup of care leavers in Austria are **young people who arrived as refugees without parental care**, commonly referred to as **unaccompanied minors**. In 2024, Austria recorded approximately **930 asylum applications by unaccompanied minors**, representing a sharp decrease compared to 2023 according to Eurostat-based EUAA analysis.²⁰

In Austria, the situation of unaccompanied refugee children sits at the intersection of the **asylum system** and the **child and youth welfare system (Kinder- und Jugendhilfe, KJH)**. Upon arrival and asylum registration, unaccompanied children are entitled to a legal representative for the asylum procedure, who supports them in interviews and procedures with authorities and courts.²¹ In practice, unaccompanied minors initially pass through federal reception structures (notably linked to the initial reception context around Traiskirchen), while longer-term care and support responsibilities fall within the child and youth welfare competences that are organised at provincial level.

¹⁸ Wiener, M. (SOS-Kinderdorf). *Strukturelle Benachteiligungen von Care Leavern gegenüber Gleichaltrigen*. Vienna.

¹⁹ Diakonie Österreich. *Recht auf Hilfe für junge Erwachsene bis 24*. Vienna. Available at: <https://www.diakonie.at/unsere-themen/hilfe-fuer-kinder-jugendliche-und-familien/recht-auf-hilfe-fuer-jugendliche-bis-24>

²⁰ European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA). Data Analysis of Unaccompanied Minors in 2024, Fact Sheet No 36 (August 2025). (Eurostat-based; includes Austria: 930 applications, -81% vs 2023).

²¹ Asylum Information Database (AIDA). Austria: *Legal representation of unaccompanied children* (page updated 2025).

Regarding material support and accommodation, unaccompanied minors in Austria are generally covered by **basic care/provision (Grundversorgung)**, which is designed to secure essential needs (accommodation, food, medical care, basic material support) and is implemented through a federal–provincial framework.

Integration in practice usually develops through a combination of:

- **secure legal and procedural support** in the asylum system (legal representation, child-sensitive procedures)²²
- **youth welfare placement and case support** (where available/activated promptly), including supervised living arrangements and social-pedagogical support²³
- **education access**, including school enrolment and German language learning, and later **transition support into vocational pathways** (apprenticeships/training) depending on residence status, regional availability, and individual circumstances.²⁴

A critical risk point emerges when these young people **reach adulthood (18+)** and must transition from youth welfare and child-focused supports into adult social systems (income support, housing, labour market integration). This transition is particularly sensitive for those with **subsidiary protection status**, a status that is common in protection outcomes for certain nationalities across Europe.

From **1 January 2026**, major subnational legal/policy changes significantly reduce access to mainstream minimum-income benefits for persons with subsidiary protection in at least some provinces—most notably **Vienna and Tyrol**. In Vienna, official and widely reported information confirms that people with subsidiary protection lose eligibility for Vienna’s **Mindestsicherung from 1 January 2026** (with impacts communicated via counselling and media reporting), shifting support towards the **lower-level Grundversorgung** framework.²⁵

Social organisations warn that these measures may **push affected young adults into severe material hardship**, including heightened risks of housing loss and instability—factors that can increase vulnerability to exploitation and survival strategies in informal or illegal economies. Such concerns are raised explicitly by service providers and NGOs working with refugees and

²² UNHCR Austria. *If you are under the age of 18* (information on special rules and legal representation for unaccompanied/separated children).

²³ UNICEF Austria / UNHCR / IOM. *Infofolder: Obsorge für unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge* (recommendations and description of guardianship/child welfare responsibilities).

²⁴ Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW). *Grundversorgung* (practical description of basic care support in Vienna).

²⁵ ORF Wien. *Kürzungen bei Mindestsicherung beschlossen* (Nov 2025; notes no entitlement for subsidiary protection holders from 2026).

homelessness, who describe the exclusion as creating existential distress and significant risks for those affected.²⁶

In summary, Austria's legal and policy framework provides a solid foundation for child protection and general youth inclusion but falls short in addressing the specific and long-term needs of care leavers. The absence of harmonised aftercare legislation, combined with fragmented sectoral policies, creates structural disadvantages for young people leaving care and underscores the need for more inclusive, rights-based transition policies.

These gaps are particularly evident for **migrant care leavers and young people with subsidiary protection status**, whose vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by **recent legislative changes entering into force in January 2026**, which significantly restrict access to minimum income support and shift affected young adults to basic provision schemes.²⁷ This development risks deepening poverty, housing insecurity, and social exclusion at a critical transition point to adulthood, and highlights the urgency of coordinated, inclusive policy responses—an issue directly addressed by the objectives of the **Skills4Life project**.

4. Analysis of Youth Inclusion Policies

This chapter analyses Austria's youth inclusion policies with a focus on care leavers, drawing on desk research, practice-based evidence, and the **Skills4Life survey data** collected from three stakeholder groups: care leavers (n=22), employers and HR professionals (n=15), and trainers and professionals working with care leavers (n=47). The analysis identifies both good practices and systemic challenges that shape the transition from care to independent adulthood in Austria.

4.1. Good Practices and Innovations

Despite the structural gaps described in the legal and policy framework, Austria has seen a number of **promising initiatives and innovative practices** aimed at improving outcomes for care leavers. These have been driven primarily by civil society organisations, professional

²⁶ Diakonie Österreich. *Entzug der Mindestsicherung für subsidiär Schutzberechtigte* (notes exclusion in Vienna and Tyrol from 1 Jan 2026; warns of existential hardship).

²⁷ Diakonie Österreich. *Entzug der Mindestsicherung für subsidiär Schutzberechtigte ab 1.1.2026; Kürzungen bei Mindestsicherung beschlossen*; ORF Wien. *Teil-Novelle des Tiroler Mindestsicherungsgesetzes* (2025).

networks, and EU-funded projects, and increasingly informed by the voices of care leavers themselves.

Practice-based projects and health promotion. The *Welcome to Life* project (2016–2019), funded under the Austrian health promotion framework and implemented across four federal provinces, represents one of the most comprehensive care leaver support initiatives in Austria to date.²⁸ The project reached approximately 400 care leavers and provided individual counselling, group workshops, and targeted information on topics such as financial management, housing, health, and social networking. Evaluation results demonstrated that the duration of support was positively correlated with improvements in care leavers' financial situation, employment, use of follow-up services, and leisure activities.²⁹ The project also identified the importance of relationship continuity between care staff and care leavers as a precondition for effective transition support. *Welcome to Life* received the "Sozialmarie" innovation prize, raising public awareness of care leaver issues.

Advocacy and policy development through professional networks. The *Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+*, a coalition of twelve national organisations, and the *Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ)* have been instrumental in advocating for legal reform.^{30,31} Their joint position paper calls for a legal entitlement to transition support for care leavers up to the age of 24, including flexible forms of assistance (ambulatory, semi-residential, residential), relationship continuity with former carers, and proactive outreach by youth welfare services. This advocacy work has contributed to incremental policy changes in several federal provinces.

Regional pilot measures and innovations. Several provinces have introduced targeted instruments for care leavers, even in the absence of national legislation. Vorarlberg, Salzburg, and Carinthia have implemented *counselling vouchers (Beratungsgutscheine)* that allow care leavers to access advisory and support services after leaving care.³² Vienna has facilitated access to public housing for care leavers, a model that has since been discussed in Vorarlberg and Tyrol.³³ The *careleaver.tirol* website, developed in the context of the *Welcome to Life* project, previously offered information and networking resources for care leavers in Tyrol. Although the website is no longer

²⁸Löffler, H. (2019). *Welcome to Life – Final Project Report*. Project No. 2720. Vienna. Funded health promotion project targeting care leavers (2016–2019).

²⁹Löffler, H. (2019). *Welcome to Life – Final Project Report*, p. 3: "Die höchsten Unterstützungswünsche von CL zeigten sich in Bezug auf Finanzen, Wohnung, Arbeit/Ausbildung und Ämterkontakte."

³⁰Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ). *Position Paper: Hilfen für junge Erwachsene in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (Jugendhilfe 18+)*. Vienna. Internal policy document.

³¹Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+. *Recommendations for the Redesign of Aftercare Support for Care Leavers in Austria*. Vienna.

³²Diakonie Österreich. *Recht auf Hilfe für junge Erwachsene bis 24*. Vienna. Available at: <https://www.diakonie.at/unsere-themen/hilfe-fuer-kinder-jugendliche-und-familien/recht-auf-hilfe-fuer-jugendliche-bis-24>

active, the concept of a regional or national digital information platform for care leavers remains a relevant model for future development.

Care leaver participation and self-advocacy. An important development in recent years has been the growing involvement of care leavers in advocacy and policy dialogue. The *Care Leaving Dialog* initiative enabled care leavers to articulate their demands directly to policymakers, and the Skills4Life survey confirms a strong willingness among care leavers to engage: all 22 respondents expressed interest in participating in training, and 14 out of 20 indicated they would like to receive further information about the project.³⁴ Moreover, 17 out of 21 respondents identified “having someone to talk to regularly (mentor or buddy)” as the most important form of emotional support, reflecting a clear demand for sustained relational support.³⁵

Employer openness and willingness to cooperate. The employer and HR professionals survey reveals encouraging attitudes toward hiring care leavers. Out of 15 respondents, 14 indicated they would be open to hiring a care leaver (5 “absolutely”, 9 “possibly, if well-prepared”).³⁶ Ten respondents believe that care leavers could thrive in their workplace if given the right support. Employers identified *motivation to learn and grow* (13 responses) and *being proactive and showing initiative* (10 responses) as the most valued qualities in young people from care backgrounds.³⁷ Furthermore, 11 employers expressed willingness to offer internships and 7 would consider entry-level positions for care leavers.³⁸ Four employers expressed definite interest in cooperating with a care leaver support project, with an additional eight considering it.

Recognition of care leaver strengths by professionals. The trainers and professionals survey (n=47) highlights that practitioners recognise significant strengths in care leavers, including *adaptability* (27 responses), *motivation to improve their situation* (25), and *resilience and perseverance* (24).³⁹ This strengths-based perspective, combined with the identification of one-on-one mentoring as the most effective support format (27 out of 47),⁴⁰ provides a solid foundation for designing targeted training and support programmes within the Skills4Life framework.

³⁴Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 15: Interest in training; Question 22: Interest in further information.

³⁵Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 18: Emotional support – mentor/buddy preference (17 out of 21).

³⁶Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 8: Openness to hiring care leavers.

³⁷Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 13: Valued qualities in young people from care backgrounds.

³⁸Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 14: Opportunities offered to care leavers.

³⁹Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 8: Key strengths of care leavers.

⁴⁰Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 10: Support formats care leavers respond to best.

4.2. Challenges and Barriers

Despite the positive developments described above, care leavers in Austria continue to face **significant structural, institutional, and individual barriers** during the transition to adulthood. The Skills4Life survey data, combined with desk research and practice-based evidence, reveals a consistent picture of systemic disadvantage.

Abrupt end of statutory support and lack of legal entitlement. The most fundamental challenge remains that youth welfare support typically ends at 18, with extensions possible only in exceptional cases and usually limited to age 21.⁴¹ This stands in sharp contrast to societal norms: 70% of 21-year-olds in Austria still live with their parents, and the average age for leaving the parental household is 25.6 years.^{42,43} Care leavers, who often require more time for their transition due to adverse childhood experiences, are expected to manage independently at an age when their peers continue to receive substantial family support. The Skills4Life care leaver survey reflects this gap: only 3 out of 20 respondents felt “very prepared” for adult life when leaving care at 18, while 8 felt “not prepared at all.”⁴⁴

Financial insecurity and material hardship. Financial vulnerability is among the most pressing concerns. Of the 22 care leaver respondents, 9 reported “struggling a lot” financially, and a further 7 described their situation as “difficult, but manageable.”⁴⁵ When asked what they wished someone had told them before leaving care, the most frequent answer (10 out of 22) was “how to manage money and pay bills.”⁴⁶ These findings are corroborated by the structural analysis, which identifies multiple administrative barriers: care leavers may face reclamation of family allowance (Familienbeihilfe) payments, difficulties accessing needs-based minimum income (Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung) due to parental maintenance obligations, and loss of health insurance coverage.⁴⁷ These barriers are compounded by the fact that many social protection systems in Austria implicitly assume continued parental support.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing. Mental health emerges as a critical concern across all three survey groups. Among care leavers, 12 out of 22 reported struggling with mental health since leaving care (7 “often” and 5 “sometimes”).⁴⁸ The trainers and professionals survey ranked *mental*

⁴¹European Commission / EACEA. Youth Wiki – Austria: Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Young People. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/austria/43-strategy-for-the-social-inclusion-of-young-people>

⁴²Statistics Austria. Living Arrangements of Young Adults. Vienna.

⁴³Eurostat / Statistics Austria. Average age of young people leaving the parental household: Austria 25.6 years (2018).

⁴⁴Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 7: Readiness for adult life at 18.

⁴⁵Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 6: Financial security.

⁴⁶Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 21: What they wished someone had told them before leaving care.

⁴⁷Wiener, M. (SOS-Kinderdorf). Strukturelle Benachteiligungen von Care Leavern gegenüber Gleichaltrigen. Vienna.

⁴⁸Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 17: Mental health struggles since leaving care.

health and emotional wellbeing as the single most frequently cited challenge faced by care leavers (30 out of 47 responses), followed by *finding employment* (22) and *finding safe and affordable housing* (18).⁴⁹ Correspondingly, mental health support was identified as the most urgent support area by professionals (31 out of 47).⁵⁰ Among care leavers themselves, 15 out of 21 identified “learning how to manage stress and emotions” and 14 selected “free counselling/therapy” as priority support needs.⁵¹ These findings underscore the need for trauma-informed and psychosocial support components in any transition programme.

Skills gaps and workforce readiness. The survey data reveals a significant gap between the skills care leavers feel confident about and those they identify as needing support with. While many feel confident in practical areas such as cooking and meal planning (12 out of 20) or writing CVs (11), they report much lower confidence in managing money (only 4 confident) and managing emotions and stress (only 1 confident).⁵² Professionals corroborate this, identifying *motivation and goal-setting* (20 out of 47), *problem solving* (17), and *time management* (16) as the skills most frequently missing in care leavers entering the workforce.⁵³ Employers, for their part, expressed concerns about low self-confidence or motivation (6 out of 15) and emotional or social challenges (4) as potential barriers to employment.⁵⁴

Table 1. Selected key findings from the Skills4Life surveys – Austria

Indicator	Care Leavers	Professionals	Employers
Financial insecurity	73% struggling or getting by	–	–
Mental health struggles since leaving care	55% often or sometimes	Top challenge (64%)	–
Felt unprepared at 18	40% not prepared	–	–
Preferred support format	Mentor/buddy (81%)	One-on-one mentoring (57%)	–
Support system rating	–	43% poor	–
Openness to hiring care leavers	–	–	93% open
Awareness of term “care leaver”	–	–	60% never heard it

⁴⁹Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 6: Biggest challenges care leavers face.

⁵⁰Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 7: Most urgent support areas.

⁵¹Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 18: Emotional support needs.

⁵²Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Questions 12–13: Skills confidence and skills gaps.

⁵³Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 9: Skills often missing in care leavers.

⁵⁴Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 9: Concerns about hiring care leavers.

Low employer awareness and labour market barriers. While the employer survey reveals significant goodwill toward hiring care leavers, awareness of this target group remains low. Nine out of 15 employer respondents had never heard the term “care leaver” before, and only one had knowingly hired a care leaver.⁵⁵ This lack of awareness limits opportunities for care leavers in the labour market and suggests that targeted awareness-raising and employer engagement strategies are needed. Employers identified that having a *clear contact person or project coordinator* (12 out of 15) and *access to a talent pool of motivated young people* (6) would most encourage their involvement in a support project.⁵⁶

Fragmentation of the follow-up support system. The complexity of Austria’s follow-up support system for adults poses a particular challenge for care leavers navigating it without parental guidance. Housing subsidies are linked to minimum income, which in turn depends on parental income data; applications for study grants require parental financial information that care leavers may not have access to; and health insurance coverage gaps arise for those who leave residential care without being eligible for co-insurance through a family member.⁵⁷ These interconnected administrative requirements create what practitioners describe as a “bureaucratic maze” that disproportionately affects care leavers. The professionals survey confirms this: 16 out of 47 respondents cited “navigating bureaucracy” as a major challenge for care leavers,⁵⁸ and 32 out of 47 identified “consistent aftercare or follow-up services” as the most important missing element in the support system.⁵⁹

Regional disparities and lack of national standards. Austria’s federal structure means that the availability and quality of support for care leavers varies considerably across provinces. Counselling vouchers and extended advisory services exist in some regions but not in others, and care leavers who move to a different province may lose access to regionally funded services.⁶⁰ The absence of a nationally harmonised aftercare entitlement, combined with the decentralisation of youth welfare competences to the provincial level, results in an uneven landscape where support depends more on geography than on need.

⁵⁵Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 6: Awareness of term “care leaver.”

⁵⁶Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 17: Factors encouraging involvement.

⁵⁹Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 16: What is missing in the support system.

Particular vulnerability of migrant care leavers. As outlined in the legal framework analysis, the situation of unaccompanied minors and young people with subsidiary protection status represents an additional layer of vulnerability. Legislative changes entering into force on 1 January 2026 in Vienna and Tyrol, which remove eligibility for minimum income (Mindestsicherung) for persons with subsidiary protection, risk pushing affected care leavers into severe material hardship at a critical transition point.⁶¹ Social organisations have warned that these measures may increase housing insecurity, social exclusion, and vulnerability to exploitation.

Professional capacity and training needs. The professionals survey reveals important capacity gaps. Only 3 out of 47 respondents had received specific training related to care leavers in the past year, while 26 expressed a desire for such training.⁶² The most requested training topics were *motivational techniques* (29 responses), *mental health first aid* (27), *conflict management* (25), and *trauma-informed care* (22).⁶³ The biggest challenges professionals reported in their work with care leavers were *time and resource limitations* (23), *addressing mental health issues* (21), and *lack of consistent support services* (19).⁶⁴ These findings highlight the need for systematic investment in professional development and institutional capacity – a core objective of the Skills4Life project.

5. Recommendations

Based on the analysis of Austria's institutional, legal, and policy framework, combined with the evidence gathered through the Skills4Life surveys and desk research, the following recommendations are proposed. They address national policy gaps while also identifying opportunities for transnational collaboration within the Skills4Life project.

1. Establish a legal entitlement to aftercare support until the age of 24. The most important structural reform is the introduction of a legally guaranteed right to transition support for care leavers, anchored in provincial child and youth welfare legislation and ideally coordinated through a revised federal-provincial agreement (Bund-Länder-Vereinbarung). Support should be available at least until the age of 24, in line with the age limit for family allowance (Familienbeihilfe) and the recommendations of the Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+ and DÖJ.^{65,66} This entitlement should be non-stigmatising, proactive, and allow for interruption and resumption.

⁶¹Diakonie Österreich. Entzug der Mindestsicherung für subsidiär Schutzberechtigte ab 1.1.2026; ORF Wien. Kürzungen bei Mindestsicherung beschlossen (Nov 2025).

⁶²Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 12: Training received related to care leavers.

⁶³Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 13: Training types and resources needed.

⁶⁴Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 14: Biggest challenges in working with care leavers.

⁶⁵Dachverband Österreichischer Kinder- und Jugendhilfeeinrichtungen (DÖJ). Position Paper: Hilfen für junge Erwachsene in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (Jugendhilfe 18+). Vienna. Internal policy document.

⁶⁶Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+. Recommendations for the Redesign of Aftercare Support for Care Leavers in Austria. Vienna.

2. Ensure relationship continuity and proactive outreach. Evidence from both the *Welcome to Life* project and the Skills4Life surveys demonstrates that care leavers benefit most from sustained relationships with trusted adults.⁶⁷ Transition support should, wherever possible, be provided by professionals who already have an established relationship with the young person. Services should adopt a proactive and outreach-oriented approach, rather than relying on care leavers to initiate contact. The strong preference for one-on-one mentoring identified in the surveys (57% of professionals and 81% of care leavers) underscores this priority.^{68,69}

3. Integrate mental health and psychosocial support into transition programmes. Given that mental health was identified as the top challenge by professionals and a major concern among care leavers,^{70,71} transition programmes should include dedicated psychosocial support components. This includes access to free counselling and therapy, peer support groups, and life skills training focused on emotional regulation and stress management. Training programmes for professionals should incorporate trauma-informed care and mental health first aid, the two most requested training topics in the professionals survey.⁷²

4. Invest in professional development and build institutional capacity. The significant training gap identified among professionals working with care leavers – with only 6% having received specific training in the past year, while 55% expressed interest in such training – calls for systematic investment in capacity building.⁷³ The Skills4Life project can directly address this need by developing and delivering training modules on motivational techniques, conflict management, trauma-informed care, and career coaching, tailored to the Austrian context and informed by the training needs identified in the surveys.

5. Remove structural barriers in social protection and administrative systems. Several specific administrative reforms would significantly improve care leavers' situations, including: enabling co-insurance in health insurance for care leavers beyond residential care without the requirement of shared household; exempting care leavers from parental income assessments for needs-based minimum income and study grants; preventing reclamation of family allowance accumulated during care periods; and establishing a right to return to care in case of crisis.⁷⁴ These

⁶⁷Löffler, H. (2019). *Welcome to Life – Final Project Report*. Project No. 2720. Vienna. Funded health promotion project targeting care leavers (2016–2019).

⁶⁸Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 10: Support formats care leavers respond to best.

⁶⁹Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 18: Emotional support – mentor/buddy preference (17 out of 21).

⁷⁰Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 6: Biggest challenges care leavers face.

⁷¹Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 17: Mental health struggles since leaving care.

⁷²Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 13: Training types and resources needed.

⁷³Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 12: Training received related to care leavers.

⁷⁴Wiener, M. (SOS-Kinderdorf). *Strukturelle Benachteiligungen von Care Leavern gegenüber Gleichaltrigen*. Vienna.

measures address the structural disadvantages that arise from the assumption of parental support embedded in Austria's social protection systems.

6. Raise employer awareness and develop supported employment pathways. The employer survey reveals strong willingness to hire care leavers, but very low awareness of this group.⁷⁵ Targeted employer engagement strategies should be developed, including awareness campaigns, employer toolkits, and the establishment of clear contact persons within care leaver support projects. Given that employers valued internships (73%) and entry-level positions (47%) most,⁷⁶ supported employment pathways combining workplace experience with ongoing mentoring and guidance should be prioritised. Onboarding guidelines, external mentor or job coach support, and contact persons from youth services were the support measures most requested by employers.⁷⁷

7. Strengthen coordination across sectors and governance levels. Improved coordination between child and youth welfare services, employment services, housing authorities, health insurance systems, and education institutions is essential.⁷⁸ This could include establishing formalised transition protocols, inter-agency case conferences, and designated care leaver coordinators within relevant public services. At the national level, embedding care leaver transition support in the National Youth Strategy would increase policy visibility and cross-sectoral coordination.

8. Develop digital support tools and information platforms. The professionals survey indicates moderate but growing interest in digital tools: 6 out of 47 endorsed them strongly, and 30 considered them potentially useful depending on design.⁷⁹ Resources for trainers and professionals (23 responses), chat or mentoring functions (19), and information on rights, housing, and support options (16) were the most requested features. Among care leavers, 11 out of 22 preferred a combination of online and in-person training.⁸⁰ These findings suggest that a blended approach, combining digital information and planning tools with face-to-face relational support, would be most effective.

9. Promote care leaver participation and peer networks. Care leavers' readiness to participate in advocacy and mutual support should be systematically encouraged.⁸¹ Peer networks, regional and national care leaver forums, and online platforms for exchange and information can

⁷⁵Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 6: Awareness of term "care leaver."

⁷⁶Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 14: Opportunities offered to care leavers.

⁷⁷Skills4Life Employers and HR Professionals Survey (Austria, n=15). Question 15: Support needs when hiring care leavers.

⁷⁸Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 16: What is missing in the support system.

⁷⁹Skills4Life Trainers and Professionals Survey (Austria, n=47). Question 17–18: Digital tools for care leaver support.

⁸⁰Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 16: Preferred training format.

⁸¹Skills4Life Care Leaver Survey (Austria, n=22). Question 15: Interest in training; Question 22: Interest in further information.

strengthen individual empowerment and collective voice. Building on the success of initiatives like the Care Leaving Dialog, a national care leaver platform should be established.

10. Address the specific vulnerabilities of migrant care leavers. Given the legislative changes affecting young people with subsidiary protection status from January 2026,⁸² targeted measures are needed to prevent severe material hardship and social exclusion for this group. Transition programmes should be designed to be inclusive of migrant care leavers, with culturally sensitive support, language assistance, and attention to the particular legal and administrative challenges they face. Transnational learning within the Skills4Life Danube region partnership can offer valuable comparative insights in this area.

6. Conclusion

Austria possesses a well-developed institutional framework for child protection and youth welfare, supported by a strong civil society landscape and a range of professional services. However, this report has demonstrated that the transition from care to independent adulthood remains a **critical structural weakness** in the system. The abrupt end of statutory support at the age of 18, combined with a decentralised and fragmented follow-up system, creates conditions in which care leavers are significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers who continue to benefit from family support well into their mid-twenties.

The Skills4Life survey data collected in Austria corroborates and deepens these findings. Care leavers report high levels of financial insecurity, mental health challenges, and a sense of unpreparedness for the demands of independent living. Professionals working with this group confirm these observations and identify consistent aftercare, mental health support, and trauma-informed approaches as the most urgent gaps in the current system. At the same time, the surveys

⁸²Diakonie Österreich. Entzug der Mindestsicherung für subsidiär Schutzberechtigte ab 1.1.2026; ORF Wien. Kürzungen bei Mindestsicherung beschlossen (Nov 2025).

reveal important assets: care leavers are recognised for their resilience, adaptability, and motivation, and employers express a remarkable willingness to offer workplace opportunities—if supported with appropriate information and structures.

Austria's good practices—including the *Welcome to Life* project, the advocacy work of the Plattform Jugendhilfe 18+, regional counselling voucher schemes, and the growing participation of care leavers in policy dialogue—demonstrate that meaningful change is both possible and achievable. However, these initiatives remain largely project-based and regionally uneven. The central challenge is to move from pilot innovations to **systemic, rights-based, and nationally harmonised transition policies** that guarantee every care leaver access to the support they need during the extended phase of youth.

The Skills4Life project is well-positioned to contribute to this goal. By developing an evidence-based training programme for care leavers and the professionals who support them, strengthening employer engagement, and facilitating transnational exchange across the Danube region, Skills4Life can help bridge the gap between identified needs and available support. The Austrian country report provides a robust foundation for this work and highlights the areas where targeted intervention can achieve the greatest impact: sustained mentoring relationships, mental health support, labour market integration, professional capacity building, and policy advocacy for aftercare reform.

Ultimately, investing in the successful transition of care leavers is not only a matter of social justice and human rights—it is also a sound economic strategy. The comparatively modest costs of effective transition support stand in contrast to the high societal costs of failed transitions, which manifest in unemployment, homelessness, involvement in the criminal justice system, and long-term dependency on social assistance. Ensuring that care leavers have the opportunity to thrive as independent adults is both an ethical imperative and a wise investment in Austria's social and economic future.

Annex I – Aggregated Surveys Results (D1.1.4 – Assessment of the actual needs and challenges of the target group)

(Insert the completed tables, following the [template](#) provided).

Annex II – Title of Annex

Use annexes to provide supporting information, such as statistics, questionnaires, agendas, list of participants, etc. if applicable.