

## Whole of Syria Child Protection Area of Responsibility

### Programme Closure Guidance

This document provides guidance on how to prepare and implement an exit strategy in the event that child protection programming has to be reduced, transferred to another organisation, or closed. Both situations where the exit strategy is planned and when it happens unexpectedly are included. The document is structured by the following sections:

1. Why is it important to have exit strategies?
2. When is an exit strategy needed?
3. What is a 'principled' exit?
4. What makes a good exit strategy? (Top 10 tips)
5. What are the key considerations when implementing an exit strategy? (Checklist)
6. What additional considerations apply to case management programming? (Checklist)
7. What messages should be given to donors? (Speaking points)

#### 1. Why is it important to have an exit strategy?

For many children in Syria, child protection programming is both a life-saving and life-sustaining service. This includes children affected by or at imminent risk of significant harm, including death and permanent injury. Children and families rely on local, national, and international authorities and organisations to provide child protection programmes that prevent and respond to all forms of abuse, exploitation, neglect, and violence against children.

For many children, being able to access child protection spaces constitutes their only place of safety. The relationship that children have with a child protection worker might be the only relationship they have with a trusted, caring, adult. As a result, all child protection actors have an obligation to prepare and plan for different possible exit strategies for different scenarios. Withdrawing child protection programming too quickly or in an unplanned, unethical manner poses a risk to life.

There are children in Syria who rely on child protection services to survive, such as:

- Young (<12) unaccompanied children;
- Children who have serious injuries from physical abuse;
- Children at risk of honour killings;
- Children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups;
- Children with significant mental health problems, such as suicidal ideation; and
- Many others.

Sometimes, there have to be changes to programming, including reducing, transferring or handing over to another organisation, or stopping services. A change in programming might be caused by an escalation in violence, changes in access, or change in political situation that prevents an organisation from continuing to programme as before. For instance, a change in access might force an organisation to relocate and close a programme, manage a reduced programme remotely, or transfer the activities to another organisation. Changes in the availability of funding also have the potential to force an organisation to alter services. However, it is vital that any move to exit from child protection programming is necessary, planned, and conducted in a principled manner.

## 2. When is an exit strategy needed?

All child protection programmes must have an exit strategy. Exit strategies should be prepared in advance and include plans for different scenarios. Sometimes, there is advanced notice that an organisation might need to reduce, transfer, or close programming. However, sometimes an exit can happen unexpectedly and very quickly.

Planned	Unexpected
Overall, the role of child protection NGOs is to support, rather than replace, formal and informal child protection systems. With that in mind, NGOs should work towards a planned handover of responsibilities as the child protection system recovers and develops.	The situation in Syria means that child protection services can be subject to unexpected shocks, such as a sudden loss of funding or loss of access due to a change in conflict lines and control of an area or, loss of access due to restrictions related to COVID-19.

Whether planned or unexpected, there are three main types of exit from child protection programming:

- (1). Reducing activities;
- (2). Transferring activities to another organisation; and
- (3). Closing activities completely.

Child protection actors in Syria are **strongly advised** to have an exit strategy in place that considers these three types of exit in scenarios that are planned and unexpected. Some of the options work in parallel. For instance, activities might be reduced before being transferred or closed completely. At other times the full range of activities might be transferred or closed. Exit strategies should include plans for relocating programming, if such a scenario is likely to occur. For instance, if an escalation in conflict is expected in the coming months and the escalation is likely to displace the community being served, it is advisable to plan how to relocate activities and staff to another location.

Closing a programme completely should be a **last resort**, unless the needs of children and families have been met and the programme is no longer needed.

### (1). Reducing activities

Reducing (scaling-down) activities means that, although the programme does not stop completely, the scale and scope of activities are reduced. Ideally, this is done steadily as a crisis stabilises and transitions into recovery phase. It might also be necessary to reduce programming if human and financial resources become limited. For instance, if an organisation loses funding that was expected and is unable to fill the gap in financial resources, the programme might have to be reduced to only essential services, such as case management. It might also be necessary to reduce programming if the security situation changes, as is the case in the following scenario.

**Example scenario:** An international NGO (INGO) is providing group psychosocial support (PSS) activities to children in a community centre. The security situation deteriorates and it is no longer safe for children to attend the group activities. The community is forced to relocate. The INGO is no longer able to operate. A reduced form of programming is re-established in the new location and implemented by community-based organisation. The INGO provides financial support and technical support remotely to the community-based staff and volunteers.

#### What action was taken?

- Salaries and stipends for staff and volunteers were advanced in line with the Duty of Care Framework.
- Staff and volunteer wellbeing measures were reviewed and strengthened, including access to an

Arabic-speaking counsellor via phone/online.

- Community-based staff and volunteers communicated with children, caregivers, and community leaders about the decision to scale down PSS activities and the timeline for total closure.
- The donor was informed of the plans.
- Programme data was transferred to a cloud and physical/hard copy files were destroyed.
- A new programme site in the community of relocation was identified.
- Programming was completely closed in the old location and reactivated in the new location.

## (2). Transferring activities

Transferring (handing-over) activities means that one child protection organisation transfers activities to another child protection organisation so that the activities can continue. An example of an unexpected transfer of activities is if local authorities or an armed group rejects an organisation, which is then no longer allowed to operate in the area. The organisation might be able to transfer activities to an organisation that is able to continue operating in the area. An organisation might also transfer activities as part of a partnership strategy, such as by reducing activities (see above) as the partner organisation increases its capacity to take on more activities. The following scenario is an example of a planned transfer of activities.

**Example scenario:** An INGO and a national NGO (NNGO) have been working in tandem to deliver a child protection programme that involves case management, PSS, and community-based awareness-raising. The INGO leads on technical advice such as trainings, tools, and guidance, and the NNGO is the project manager responsible for implementation. The agreement from the start of the partnership was that the NNGO would take on all responsibilities through a gradual, phased process.

### What action was taken?

- Partnership assessment was conducted at the start and throughout the process
- NNGO policies (e.g. child safeguarding) and procedures (e.g. feedback and complaints) in place.
- NNGO systems (e.g. finance and monitoring and evaluation) were strengthened.
- Child Protection Specialist and Child Protection Trainer were recruited in the NNGO.
- NNGO staff were provided with opportunities for shadowing and mentoring of INGO specialists.
- Community-based volunteers and community leaders were informed of change in contacts and staffing (e.g. new trainers).

## (3). Closing activities

Closure is a last resort when the only option is to stop all activities. For instance, a change in the security situation might force an organization (and the community) to leave an area. It is not always possible to reduce or transfer activities to another organization. In this scenario, particular attention should be paid to staff safety and wellbeing and data protection, which are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**Example scenario:** An organisation is working near a frontline. The lines of control changed rapidly and the security situation deteriorated (e.g. the organisation's offices were looted etc.)

### What action was taken?

- All activities had to stop immediately
- The agency Duty of Care protocol was activated.
- Physical/hard copy files were burnt and electronic files were saved to cloud and deleted.
- Remaining supplies and assets (e.g. CFS kits) were looked after by community volunteers.
- National staff were asked to stay at home/in a safe place and international staff were relocated.

### 3. What is a ‘principled’ exit?

The reason for preparing exit strategies is to ensure the exit occurs in a way that is safe, ethical, and compliant with the following key principles and the guidance that can be found in subsequent sections.

Key Principle	Meaning	Relevance
<b>Best interests of the child</b>	The best interests of the child are a primary consideration for all decisions and actions taken. When exiting a programme, there is an obligation to consistently evaluate the positive and negative consequences of the exit.	Exit strategies must prioritise the best interests of the children being served and seek to continue to strengthen protective factors and minimise risks to children who are on the programme. The least harmful course of action should be taken.
<b>Continuity of care</b>	Continuity of care refers to the importance of children and families having a continuous caring relationship and support from an identified child protection worker to receive consistent, quality services over time.	Exit strategies disrupt the consistency of care provided to children and their families and so all steps must be taken to minimise disruption. In relation to case management, if there is no choice but to end a child’s relationship with their current caseworker, a gradual handover to a new caseworker should be carefully managed.
<b>Do no harm</b>	Activities designed to support the child and their family should not expose them to further harm. Particular caution should be taken to ensure that no harm comes to children or families as a result of collecting, storing or sharing their information.	Children who rely on the programme for their safety and wellbeing (e.g. children in interim care) must receive special consideration. Likewise, exit strategies that transfer programming to an organisation that cannot meet minimum standards may constitute a breach of the do no harm principle.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	Confidentiality is the obligation that Personal Data is not disclosed or made available to unauthorised persons unless consent for third party sharing has been given and unless sharing the information is necessary.	Exit strategies have to include plans of how to transfer or destroy Personal Data, whether that data is in electronic or hard copy format. Special focus must be given to sensitive data, such as the content of case management files.
<b>Engagement</b>	Information relevant to children, families, and communities should be communicated in a timely, open, and transparent manner.	Children and families, especially those receiving regular or long-term support, should be informed in advance and at different stages of the exit strategy. Where possible, they should have a say in decision-making about the exit strategy.
<b>Safeguarding</b>	Child safeguarding is the specific responsibility of organisations to make sure that their staff, programmes, and operations do not harm children or expose them to abuse and exploitation.	Exit strategies must seek to maximise wellbeing, minimise disruption, and avoid harm to children. Particularly when transferring programming to another organisation, there is an obligation to keep a written record (e.g. an email exchange) of having checked that the receiving organisation has child safeguarding policies, procedures, and effective practices in place.

## 4. What makes a good exit strategy?

All child protection programmes should have an exit strategy. An exit strategy might be a standalone document or it might form part of another document, such as an organisation's response strategy or programme strategy. Here are **10 tips** for a good exit strategy.

### 4.1. Collaborative drafting

Exit strategies should be developed **collaboratively** by a group of staff within the organisation, particularly staff who: manage teams; are responsible for field offices; and/or are responsible for the design of the programme. Exit strategies are stronger if different perspectives and suggestions have been considered. Holding a short workshop is a good way to develop an exit strategy and ensure that different colleagues are informed and consulted.

### 4.2. Scenario planning

Exit strategies should include **scenario planning** for different situations. A good exit strategy includes unexpected and planned scenarios. A planned exit usually involves reducing activities when no longer needed or building the capacity of a local or community-based organisation and transferring activities to them when ready. Unexpected exit scenarios to include are things like a change in control of the area, loss of access etc. The operational situation in Syria changes often. Therefore, it is normal to include several scenarios in an exit strategy and to review and revise the exit strategy as situations evolve.

### 4.3. Analysis of likelihood and impact

Scenario planning should also include an analysis of the **likelihood** of the scenario occurring and the **impact** it would have. For example, if an election is due in six months, a change in relationship with local authorities might be likely and, if the organisation doesn't have a good reputation and relationship with the party likely to win the election, the impact of the scenario happening could be significant. Considering the likelihood and impact of different scenarios makes it possible to prioritise programme activities and resources in the event of the exit strategy needing to be used. It also encourages flexibility from donors if the event occurs.

### 4.4. Child-focused priorities

Exit strategy decisions must be made with the **'do no harm'** principle in mind because closing a child protection programme has the potential to cause harm to children who rely on those services for their safety and wellbeing. The exit strategy should be designed to avoid or minimise disruption and harm to children, such as prioritising life-saving and essential services (e.g. case management of high risk cases) for continuation and reducing other activities (e.g. group psychosocial support sessions).

### 4.5. Staff wellbeing measures

In addition to children's wellbeing, programme closures can have a significant impact on the **wellbeing and mental health** of staff and volunteers. Exit strategies should aim to minimise stress and distress for staff, who may experience feelings such as guilt, sadness, and frustration. To the extent possible in the situation, extra steps should be taken to maintain and promote staff wellbeing. For example, providing staff with regular, clear messaging so that they understand how the programme is changing and why are important. Staff should also be given their own messages to provide to children, families, and communities. Other wellbeing measures should be considered, such as access to counselling if possible or the opportunity to share concerns with managers.

#### 4.6. Coordination

The Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CPAoR) coordination mechanism is available to provide advice and **coordinated support** both about how to develop exit strategies and if an exit strategy is triggered. If developing or reviewing an exit strategy, the CPAoR coordination mechanism is a good place to discuss options as a group. If one organisation does have to exit, it may be possible for another organisation to take on some or all of the activities. The CPAoR coordination mechanism can verify which organisations have the capacity to take on activities. Paying attention to service mappings and referral pathways also provides a good overview of which organisations might have the capacity and areas of operation to be called upon if activities need to be transferred. Likewise, if access is lost or reduced from one operational hub it may be possible for actors from another hub to fill the gaps in services. Harmonisation of programming approaches is important where two hubs are delivering child protection services in the same location.

#### 4.7. Key messages

If an exit strategy is triggered, it is important to have **lists of key messages** for different audiences, such as children, community volunteers, and staff. Staff should be given clear and accurate information about the exit, including the rationale, timeframe, and instructions for activities. Staff should also be given key messages to give to children (in age appropriate language) and adult community members. It is important that everyone in the team is on the same page and sharing the same information. Community volunteers and community leaders are well placed to communicate about an exit, especially if the exit is unexpected and if access is an issue.

#### 4.8. Plan to protect or dispose of assets

Exit strategies should include a **plan to protect or dispose of assets** through storage, transfer to another organisation, or destruction, depending on the situation. Community leaders and volunteers may be able to look after field-based assets (e.g. Child Friendly Space structure and materials) if the programme is closed temporarily. The plan should include a procedure for removing visibility (e.g. logo stickers). For accountability reasons, assets should be carefully recorded and, where possible, certificates of transfer (e.g. to another organisation) or destruction should be documented. Additional measures related to assets and data protection can be found in the case management checklist below.

#### 4.9. Accurate project data and documentation

Project data that clearly shows the nature and scale of child protection activities and what is being done to prevent and respond to those issues is a **strong tool** for advocacy efforts to avoid a programme closure. Accurate information about the programme also helps when developing and implementing an exit strategy. For instance, a record of programme equipment and assets helps to reduce the risk of items getting lost or stolen. If transferring activities to another organisation, it is important to be able to provide a clear record of the programme. A distinction should be made between non-sensitive data (e.g. a list of equipment) and sensitive or Personal Data (e.g. a beneficiary database). Handling of Personal Data, including transfer to another organisation, must be done in accordance with data protection and information sharing protocols and with the consent of beneficiaries (e.g. informed consent to third party data sharing to provide services should be included in case management forms).

#### 4.10. Learning opportunities

Afterwards, if possible, a **lessons learned exercise** about the exit should be conducted to benefit similar situations in the future. Providing opportunities for children, community members, and staff to provide feedback is an important element of any lessons learned process and a good opportunity for self-expression as well as generating information for advocacy with authorities, donors, and other influencers about the importance of consistent child protection services.

## 5. What are the key considerations for an exit strategy?

The following checklist gives examples of key considerations when planning implementing an exit strategy. This checklist is not exhaustive and should be adapted and expanded to meet the needs of the organization, programme, and exit situation.

Checklist	✓
<b>Staff</b>	
Measures have been taken, in compliance with the Duty of Care Framework for humanitarian organisations in Syria, to protect the safety and wellbeing of staff.	
All staff have been contacted either by phone or face-to-face (individually or in a group meeting) to update them on the situation, reasons for the change to the programme, and steps for the exit.	
Staff have been provided with additional wellbeing measures (e.g. flexible hours, counselling sessions, pastoral meeting with line manager, etc) to cope with the stress and distress of the exit.	
If applicable, emergency evacuation key messages instructions have been shared with all staff (this could be bulletpoints in an email).	
If applicable, staff have been provided with recommendations and training certificates etc. to help with finding a new job.	
<b>Coordination</b>	
The change to the programme has been communicated to the lead/co-lead of the CP AoR coordination mechanism and to any other relevant organisations (e.g. to receiving organisations if transferring).	
<b>Community engagement</b>	
Community leaders, community-based child protection mechanisms, and any other volunteers have been informed (and if possible consulted) of the change to the programme and provided with information about alternative services to be able to provide direction to other available services.	
<b>Programme beneficiaries</b>	
Children who are direct beneficiaries of the programme have been informed (and if possible consulted) about the change to the programme in age-appropriate, child friendly language and provided with information about alternative services.	
Parents, caregivers, and other family members who are involved in the programme have also been informed (and if possible consulted) about the change to the programme and provided with information about alternative services.	
All children and other community members who have provided Personal Data to the programme have been informed about how his/her Personal Data will be handled and assent/informed consent has been secured <sup>1</sup> for any transfer of data to a new service provider.	
If possible, existing feedback and complaints mechanisms (including safeguarding and PSEA <sup>2</sup> ) will remain in place and functioning during the change to the programme and for a period afterwards.	

<sup>1</sup> Assent or informed consent for third party data sharing for the purpose of service provision may be proactively obtained when registering a child or other beneficiary for services (e.g. in a case management registration form).

<b>Communicating with other stakeholders</b>	
Donors are informed of the change to the programme and the exit strategy used.	
The organization has also met with other relevant stakeholders (e.g. local authorities if applicable, other sectors operating in the same geographic area) and explained the change to the programme and the exit strategy used.	
<b>Data protection</b>	
Electronic and hard copy Personal Data and sensitive data has been moved or destroyed as per procedures agreed in data protection protocols and information sharing protocols.	

## 6. What additional considerations apply to case management programming?

If an organization directly implements case management or supports a partner to implement case management services, there are additional considerations to bear in mind before reducing, transferring, or closing case management programming. The same considerations apply if implementing similar case-based services that involve particularly vulnerable beneficiaries and sensitive data, such as individualised mental health support.

Case management involves support to particularly vulnerable children and it involves particularly sensitive data, which means additional measures should be considered during any kind of exit.

For many children who have experienced violence, his or her caseworker might be the only or one of very few trusted, reliable adults in the child’s life. A sudden reduction or withdrawal of individual support can have devastating consequences. In addition, case management involves particularly sensitive data that, if not properly protected, could be used to harm children and others. Close attention should be paid to sensitive cases such as children associated with armed forces and armed groups and survivors of sexual violence.

The following checklist gives examples of additional considerations that should be included in a case management exit strategy. As with the previous checklist, this checklist is not exhaustive and should be adapted and expanded to meet the needs of the organization, programme, and exit situation.

Checklist	✓
<b>Prioritisation of cases</b>	
Supervisors (or if not available managers) have worked with each caseworker to review and organise their current caseload and to order of priority (from highest risk case to lowest risk case) so that the caseworker can begin work informing and adapting the care plan for the highest risk case through to the lowest.	
High risk cases are prioritised for continued services where possible, or the least harmful approach, such as transfer, rather than closure.	
A decision has been made about when to stop taking on new cases and caseworkers have been provided with clear messages to give to children, families, and communities.	

<sup>2</sup> Child safeguarding is the responsibility of organisations to make sure that their staff, programmes, and operations do not harm children or expose them to any kind of abuse and exploitation. PSEA is specifically about preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.

Cases are only closed if the case closure (found in the Standard Operating Procedure) are met and if the caseworker has received approval from their supervisor for case closure. All efforts should be made to keep open any cases that need continued support, including transferring the case to another organisation if needed.	
<b>Data protection</b>	
Data Protection Impact Assessment is complete and mitigating actions have been taken.	
A Data Protection Protocol (DPP) and or Information Sharing Protocol (ISP) is in place, up-to-date, and being followed by all staff.	
Personal Data is stored in a safe location with limited access (e.g. authorized access only to offices, lockable filing cabinets), including online (e.g. password protected files, backing-up files online and deleting original data etc.)	
Staff are trained how to store and manage Personal Data safely (e.g. training on using online servers and file transfer websites etc.)	
Staff are also trained on how to protect sensitive data during emergency evacuation either by relocating it (e.g. moving laptops, flash-drives, and papers) or as a last resort destroying it (e.g. shredding, burning, smashing equipment).	
<b>Transferring cases</b>	
If transferring cases to another organisation, there is confidence that the receiving organisation has sufficient capacity (i.e. skilled staff, SOPs, resources etc.) to take on these case management activities and this has been verified with the CP AOR coordination mechanism lead or co-leads.	
The child and, if appropriate/relevant his or her parent/caregiver have consented to Personal Data being transferred to another case management service provider.	
A handover meeting between the 'exiting' and receiving caseworker (and ideally supervisors) has been held in which knowledge and documentation is exchanged and observations and suggestions are shared.	
A joint home visit (if feasible) or phone call with the child and (if appropriate) caregiver or family has been conducted by both the 'exiting' and receiving caseworker.	
As a minimum, the child and (if appropriate) his or her parents/caregivers have the name and contact details of the new caseworker and an idea of when they will next be contacted and/or visited.	
There is a clear plan in place to document the transfer or storage of files (e.g. use of case transfer form, certificate of receipt for files etc.)	
<b>Community engagement</b>	
Community leaders, community-based child protection mechanisms, and any other volunteers have been informed and provided with messaging for communities, and are able to provide direction to other available services.	
<b>Programme beneficiaries</b>	
Starting from the most high risk, each child on the case management programme and (if appropriate) his or her parents/caregivers are informed about the change to the programme on a one-to-one basis (on the phone or, ideally, in person) of the change and options for the case are discussed and agreed, including safety planning if needed.	
If closing the programme completely and it is really not possible to transfer cases to a new service provider, if possible, high risk cases are followed-up remotely (over the phone.)	

## 7. What key messages should be given to donors?

There are children in Syria who rely on child protection services to survive, such as:

- Young (<12) unaccompanied children;
- Children who have serious injuries from physical abuse;
- Children at risk of honour killings;
- Children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups;
- Children with significant mental health problems, such as suicidal ideation; and many others.

### 7.1. What is at stake?

For many children in Syria, child protection programming is both a life-saving and life-sustaining service.

- This includes children affected by or at imminent risk of significant harm, including death and permanent injury;
- For many children, being able to access child protection spaces constitutes their only place of safety;
- For many children, the relationship and support they have with a child protection worker may be the only relationship they have with a trusted, caring, adult.

As a result, it is vital that any reduction, transfer, or closure of child protection programming is necessary, planned, and conducted in a principled manner. Withdrawing child protection programming too quickly or in an unplanned, unethical manner poses a risk to life.

### 7.2. Partnerships

While grateful for support for child protection, predictable, flexible, multi-year funding is needed:

- To enable child protection actors to be accountable to communities by providing children and families with the consistent, reliable services that they deserve; and
- To enable INGOs to realise their localisation commitments under the Grand Bargain<sup>3</sup> through structured capacity building support to enable local actors to gradually take on more activities and to enable external actors to reduce and withdraw.

### 7.3. Reviewing proposals

The proposal development and review process is a great opportunity to support child protection actors to put exit strategies in place. For instance, by requiring that proposals include:

- Dedicated technical staff to properly design, implement, review and transition programming;
- Duty of care for staff is adequately budgeted;
- Partnership strategies that promote sustainable, local solutions;
- Multiple exit strategies for different planned and unexpected situations; and
- Flexibility for the grant receiving organization to reduce, transfer, or close as needed.

### 7.4. Potential unexpected closures

If child protection actors are forced or requested to suspend or close their programming, donors can play a key role in advocating with the involved parties, including:

- Promoting the message that child protection services are life-saving and life-sustaining;
- Highlighting successes of the programme and the progress that has been made;
- Reminding parties of their obligations and remembering that services should be guided by needs and not politics; and
- Reminding parties of the potential negative consequences for children.

---

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the Grand Bargain, please see <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>