

# Participant Report

## EU Leonardo Mobility

Scott Ferguson

interview by Gabriel Eichsteller, 17/03/2012

GE: First of all, just tell me what you've experienced and what has made the biggest impressions. Perhaps we'll do it placement by placement, so your first placement at Jens Jessens Vej, how was that?

SF: First of all we were meeting Klaus, the homes manager. He's doing the work from his heart, he's a very passionate guy and made a big impression on me. The staff just go about it and it seems to flow. They all seem to sing from the same hymn sheet, they're all doing the same job consistently and work in the same way with the kids. The kids in the home are up to age 18 in the residential home and then can move down into the home next to it until they're 25 to give them continuity, which I thought was really good. We met the girls who live there. And some of the problems that the girls there actually spoke to us about, their personal issues, they were very open towards us. I think they have turned themselves around. They said that the pedagogues are always there and offering them guidance when they needed it. They were all very well-adjusted mature young women, confident and had overcome a lot of difficulties.

The unit there was so similar to those in England yet so different. All the placements were.

GE: What would you say was similar?

SF: I don't know really, I can't really say.

GE: The feeling when you walked through the door?

SF: Yeah, the magnolia paint. But otherwise I don't know, I've been thinking about it. The staff just all seem to know what they're doing and just go about their job. They've got a lot more confidence about themselves, the pedagogues.

GE: So they would just do what they thought was the right thing rather than having to ask someone.

SF: Yeah, the levels of independence of the pedagogues. Back home we're tied up in so many restrictions, but the pedagogues are trusted enough. They're employed in their job caring for the young people, so then they're given trust to make judgment calls and are allowed to do their work. Their manager actually said that to us. He said 'I don't want them ringing me. I'm on call', he said, 'I'm there if they need me. I know all my staff, I trust all my staff, and if they get it wrong we can always reflect about it.' They do have greater flexibility and independence, which I like. I think if you're in that kind of work, looking after kids and supporting young people, I'd say being in that kind of job in the first place you should be given trust and that confidence to work for the benefit of the young person you're supporting. I don't think you should be questioned for something unless it's a daft idea. They all have great flexibility and great relationships with kids in every placement we've been.

GE: So do you get a sense that they spend more time building relationships with the kids? Or do they have the kids longer and can therefore build a better relationship?

SF: I don't think they have them longer so that they can build a better relationship - that probably goes into it - but they have them longer because they realise that when you turn 18, you don't get a switch turned on turning you into an adult, you know how to change a light bulb, you know how to pay your bills. That doesn't happen, particularly if you've been in the care system. Depending on who looked after you you might not even know that a postcard needs a stamp, you know, these simple things. So I don't think it's the case that they've built the relationship for that length of time although that will go hand in hand with teaching the kids when they go out to settle down in regular life. They do all that. But the freedom they have as workers, it's surprising. It's doing my head in a little bit seeing it. They're allowed to make all those judgment calls. They don't spend all their day in the office doing paper work. I mean we have shed loads of that, I know some of that is necessary. We even have time at our place when we close and then you can go in doing an 8-hour shift and do all your paperwork. I mean that's an accountant's job - pedagogues are support workers. And in that unit they don't have much paperwork.

GE: Yeah, and pedagogues don't have to write down the same bit of information on three different forms.

SF: Yeah, they showed us the paperwork - obviously in Danish, but they translated pieces. They've got time to focus on the learning and doing things, going out with kids on a daily basis. Whereas in our place you spend like 4 hours with paperwork and 4 hours with kids, and you got the impression that we're not there for the kids, we're there to tick boxes and have all these restrictions. But I'm in the job because I like working with children and I want to make a difference for kids. It was a good experience to see it, and the commune, the council, they all seem to understand each other and say 'yeah, you do need some money for this'. And they do get it eventually, whereas we tend not to get it. It's like 'oh, we can't afford it', end of story, but you can't put a price on a kid's life.

GE: So you also met the guy from the commune, Klaus' boss? How did he talk about residential care and what's going on there?

SF: Oh yeah, he said that he was lucky that in his community the home at Jens Jessens Vej were quite a good lot to work with. And I think simply because the area has got a lot of wealthy people in it, even though the wealthy people don't seem that happy about having these sort of places in their backyard - it's the same in England. He said that there are 4 residential homes in this area and that there are also some children with special needs. But he said that these children tend to be in foster families, with one of the parents being a pedagogue. He seemed to be very happy. They want results, because they're paying money, but it's gonna take time. And I don't think the guy is rushing things. I got that impression of him. But he said that the commune has been in conservative hands ever since it's existed, although the social democrats are in power nationally. And we asked him if his commune would ever become social democratic and would that be a good thing or a bad thing, and he said that it would be better than it currently is. But we didn't have a more political conversation than this.

Anyway, it's very similar to back home, but the main difference is that you're allowed to make them judgment calls and use your common sense.

GE: Yes, but I think it's not just common sense. Common sense can be quite different depending on who you ask - what's common sense for you is not necessarily the same for someone else.

SF: Oh yeah, because I work one way and other folk are working another way, and they're probably also using their common sense. What you're saying about common sense, yeah, common sense can be different for different people and in different culture. And there's a lot of cultural elements too. I mean at Jens Jessens Vej they had lots of kids from different ethnic backgrounds. I think in England it would have been a bit more paperwork because of their ethnic backgrounds whereas here that wasn't the case.

GE: You were also attending a team meeting where they resolved a conflict between staff. How was that? What did you observe?

SF: It was done in Danish - 3 hours in Danish. They spoke in Danish and Klaus kept summarising in English every now and then. He asked us afterwards to come to his office and tell him what we'd picked up. And there was a bit of tension in the team as one or two of the pedagogues, their body language told much about how upset they were and who might need a bit of support. And we told Klaus that, and he was very surprised how much we'd picked up even though we'd not been able to understand it. And the tension, we were right about that. One of the pedagogues had been a bit miffed about a situation where they'd involved Klaus and had to remove a lad. He said I would've been able to handle that without calling Klaus. And it wasn't a matter that he would be big-headed about that, but when he spoke to us he said 'I really didn't want him [the boy] to get moved on because in three week's time he would've been moved to another place anyway'. He was concerned about the effect it would have on him with two moves in such a close time, which was nice to see that they were worried about the boy rather than saying, well I can't bloody sort that out, which is the attitude you sometimes get back home, people thinking it's like moving a bit of paper. So it was nice to see that he was actually concerned about what would happen to the young lad. We did manage to pick quite a lot up, even though we couldn't understand 90 per cent of it. And it was also nice to see how organised they are in their team meetings. It would've been nice to sit in a couple more, but compared to us where they are total chaos these were so respectful with each other, they actually listen to each other. It was like a load of mates sitting around a table, if you know what I mean, that's the impression I got. These team meetings are worth having. They have a lot of them, I think, more team meetings than we have. When it's a lot about paperwork I'm not quite sure, that could be a bad thing, but these weren't.

GE: Did you get a chance to speak to Klaus about how he is structuring or organising these team meetings?

SF: They have an agenda, like we do, and he gives people a chance to speak. We got a sense that he's got a staff team he really trusts - you got the tensions, of course, but you can discuss the most important things on the agenda. And then you can discuss the stuff for key workers and the issues. They're pretty similar in structure to our team meetings. You know, we don't want to argue about who had what for tea for the last six times. Klaus said that this used to be on top of the agenda when he started

managing there, and he said I'm not having that on top. You're all there to do the job so sort that out between yourselves, it's not up for debate in a team meeting. Aye, I absolutely enjoyed myself, feels a little bit like I'm on holiday to be honest.

GE: So did you get to interact much with the young people there?

SF: Yeah, yeah, we did alright actually. I mean the language - apart from those who did speak English - held up the others a little in coming to speak to us. Even some of the staff, they said 'oh no I'm ashamed of my English' and thought we'd enjoy some of their Danish. Thank you. There was one young lad who was very open with us about how he'd ended up at Jens Jessens Vej. But for many it feels kind of strange talking to two men they've never met, so we talked about football a lot. That's usually a nice ice breaker, a good way to get in and get a good conversation. They're a lot more open, I think that must be part of their culture. I don't think kids back home at our unit would be that open about their background, their family life and all this, but they were very open and all very genuine. To one kid I said that we're not here spying for Klaus or the kommune. I wanted to make a point that we weren't doing that but that we were doing a similar kind of job back home in England and Scotland, so anything they'd say would not be told to others but that we wanted to openly talk to them. And they were all very happy. Usually, when you speak to kids in England they're all like 'it's sh\*t here, it's sh\*t, it's sh\*t', but they were all positive about it, which is nice to see. I guess that's what I must be meaning when I say it's different here.

GE: So they must be doing something right if they're so happy and positive about living there?

SF: I think, well, do we give them more responsibility? I think from a small age they're given more trust and more responsibility, and some of that is very different back home. Their home environment is different here too, nice and clean. It seems to be a common theme in England: if you're in a home environment you get a lot of anger and kids smashing things. We put photos of them and paintings by them on the wall to give our kids a sense of it's their home, the same mentality as it's here. They didn't have that but they respected the environment a lot more. And there's less shouting in the homes here, which is positive. They're giving them a lot of opportunities, and then if they mess up they sit down together and reflect with them, like 'you know you can't just leave cups and plates on the table what with other people living here. What would you do if someone came into your bedroom and left cups and plates and things'. And they've done that in a really positive way, which I think that's a big difference to the majority of people back home. They've done it in an ideal way in a sense.

GE: And how was your second placement?

SF: That was really fun. Again, that's quite alien. Well, we don't have that kind in England because our school times are a lot different. We have youth clubs until like 7o'clock at night, but that's just for kids who want to go to that kind of place. That is the same kind of thing here, you're not meant to go unless you're on their books, of course. And again, it's a nice clean environment, staff owning what they were doing. They have a staff meeting at the start of each shift where they all sit down, and that gives you a relaxed attitude straight away. Everyone we saw, they all come in with smiles on their faces. They never seem miserable. That might have to do with me, I don't

know, you might see one or two otherwise, but they all start their day with a positive attitude, which is nice to see.

I liked at that one that they're also rough-housing with kids as well, a bit of interaction, let kids jump on them and play with kids. They come there straight from school, these 6 to 10 year olds - they've got kids up to 16 at the youth club. And the kids there were all happy, playing football, computer, Xbox - again, great children, relaxed atmosphere. There were loads of kids with an ethnic background there, and most of the staff were from ethnic groups: there was a Turkish lad, a Moroccan lad, a Danish lad, Syrian guy. All the difference between us and the pedagogues, when we were talking to them, is that they speak a different language, but everything is so similar. It's weird, loads and loads of things when you speak about them, in Moroccan or Turkish or Danish, it's all the same. A couple of lads were from that area, and I think it's a pretty rough area. They got one of the guys who used to work at the kinderclub when they had a problem with some youth. So they asked him to come and work there, because he knows a lot of the kids who were causing a bit of trouble, knew their families and their brothers, and they took him, so that's obviously really useful. I think we could use this guy over here and it will calm the situation, and they've had a lot less hassle since. Very much like a youth club in England really. The pedagogues were left to their own devices, it was just that trust thing. I think sometimes I'd have to stand there for half an hour trying to explain why I want to take little Dave climbing a tree, do you know what I mean? And then I'd have to do a risk assessment, whereas they're just trusted to do it, just as simple as that. They seemed very open, the pedagogues. And they do talk a lot about reflecting, whereas I don't particularly use that word although I think about stuff a lot.

GE: And were there many differences between the youth club and the after-school club you went to last?

SF: No, they were just younger kids. What did really surprise me is that they have various jobs, which they allocate, which can be translated like: 'well, who wants to do the kitchen?' I was gobsmacked that they were asking. You see, back home, the best job they'd all want to do and then there'd be a big argument around the table and 'oh no I'm not doing kitchen, I did that last week'. But they weren't. And they collect things from school and stuff, which was astounding to me. They collected them and when they got to a road the kids in the front were responsible for everybody to cross the road and decide when it was safe to cross. We would discourage that back home, so that in itself was astounding. And then they come in and sign into the book and then they can play.

We went to the craft section in the after-school club, and the kids there have a kitchen knife, a 6 inch knife held by a girl of 6. It's a big knife, and there were a couple of kids sitting at the table and chatting and talking, and they weren't particularly concentrating on cutting. For us in England that would just not happen. They used tools like saws and hacksaws and hot glue guns, I actually took a picture of the toolbox. I guess you get used to it.

The kids there, they were like really well behaved, not cheeky at all. They have little boxes for them to stand on, so that they can help do the washing up or chopping vegetables. It was really ace to see. They're also explaining things really well to the children so that they understand, like: the table is just for sitting on and eating on, not for standing on. They just word everything so differently, so positively.

GE: Yeah, really explaining it.

- SF: Yeah, and then they just get off, no problem. They get back from school and help wash up and clean up. In terms of independence it's just a natural progression from kindergarten, where they put on their own snow suits and use the toilet on their own. The school is obviously different, and that helps. In schools you learn lots of academic stuff, and that's important. But at after school clubs you learn all these social skills, and that does really benefit children. I've seen it with my own eyes, and it does work. It's not bullsh\*t, you can see the benefits of the Danish system.
- GE: So the after-school club gives them a chance to learn all the social interaction and creative and emotional skills, which school doesn't necessarily?
- SF: Oh yeah, they are proper life skills and you're talking about children, five-, six-year olds. I have a fourteen year old, and he's like 'oh, I'll make myself beans on toast', whereas they can probably cook a bloody five-course meal, you know. When you sit and think about it and you've actually seen it and you've seen the results and you've seen what the kids are capable of, why aren't other countries doing that? That is ace, and that's your progression, that's someone leading them and teaching them, not like in school and boring, but quality teaching. I actually said to most of the staff that they're very lucky to be doing these jobs, you know. It must be ace working in there, it's all about the development of the kids. I'm getting a bit deep now, and I'm not usually like that. I think you need to experience it for yourself in order to really make sense of it. And most people back home, they just wouldn't want to adopt this way of working.
- GE: What I think what you can do is tell them what you've seen in Denmark and that the kids here, they use knives without chopping off their hands. But I think you now also know why they're doing it, and that it's not just a daft idea, but you know why it's important.
- SF: Yeah. It's also made me a lot more aware that from a kids point of view, most adults they speak to, they bulk in all the time, you know. It's just made me think that when I'm back home I'll work more outside the box in that respect. There'll be quite a bit of things I'll be able to use back home, I think.