

The European Child Guarantee: an opportunity to invest in early childhood development July 2021

On 24 June 2021, EU Member States unanimously adopted a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee. The text is available in [all EU languages](#). The Child Guarantee aims to prevent and combat poverty and social exclusion by guaranteeing access to some key services. Member States are asked to guarantee, for children in need:

- ❖ Effective and free access to high-quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, and healthcare
- ❖ Effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing

This document considers the Child Guarantee initiative from the perspective of early childhood development and stresses the importance of ensuring that its implementation responds to the needs of very young children, especially those from vulnerable groups and their families and caregivers.

The importance of investing in early childhood cannot be overstated. There is irrefutable evidence showing how children's experiences in the first years of life shape lifelong outcomes by improving adult health and wellbeing, educational attainment and earnings. When the most vulnerable children participate in quality early years services, gaps in equity can be overcome. Investing early in nurturing care for all children is essential for their healthy development but also for the wellbeing of society and for countries' economic prosperity. Public investment in early childhood is one of the most visionary and effective policy measures that governments can take offering a spectacular return on investment.

The Child Guarantee comes at a crucial time. Even before the pandemic, almost [18 million](#) children were experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and COVID-19 is exacerbating existing hardship and inequality. A priority focus on children in vulnerable situations, including in their very early years, is therefore essential to realize children's rights and uphold states' commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is essential that across countries the Child Guarantee pays special attention to the age group from birth to 3 years of age. This is in line with the recently adopted [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), which recognizes that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years.

While the Council Recommendation is not legally binding on EU Member States, it represents an unprecedented EU-wide commitment to address child poverty and social exclusion. With political will, it has the potential to increase children's access to essential services, provide much-needed support for families and improve the lives of young children from socially excluded groups. It can catalyse country investments and reforms so that all children have adequate housing, healthy nutrition, access to healthcare of good quality and quality early learning and childcare, **from the start**.

A welcome focus on children in need

The Council Recommendation asks governments to focus on 'children in need', defined as those under the age of 18 years who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. These are children living in households at risk of poverty, those experiencing severe material and social deprivation and, importantly, includes children with a migrant background irrespective of their migration status. Member States are asked to address the specific disadvantages experienced by:

- Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation
- Children with disabilities
- Children with mental health issues
- Children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma
- Children in alternative, especially institutional, care
- Children in precarious family situations

Given the differences and specificities of each national context, governments are asked to tailor their approach to implementing the Child Guarantee, and to identify children in need and the barriers they face by taking into account national, regional, and local circumstances and involving relevant stakeholders.

Identifying children and families in need must include a clear focus on very young children from vulnerable groups – especially those under the age of three – who are often invisible in policy-making. Our analysis across nine countries has highlighted the scarcity of data on early childhood, especially for children living in poverty and social exclusion, including children with disabilities, children in alternative care, Roma and Traveller children, and children from a refugee or migrant background, including undocumented children.

Implementing the Child Guarantee requires national efforts to address health and social inequalities and systemic racism and discrimination in public services faced by many young children and their families. Efforts are needed to ensure that services are accessible to them and meet their needs, including through better representation of marginalised groups across professions, more and better complaint mechanisms and more opportunities for beneficiaries to influence the design and delivery of services.

An enabling policy framework

The Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee recognises the multifaceted nature of child poverty and social exclusion. It recommends that Member States have the best interest of the child as a primary consideration, that they take a coordinated, person-centred and multidimensional approach, and ensure an integrated and enabling national policy framework which comprehensively addresses the social exclusion of children.

It urges Member States to:

- Ensure consistency with social, education, health, nutrition and housing policies
- Increase investment in education, health and social protection systems to address the needs of children and their families, especially those exposed to social exclusion

- Set up support measures for parents or guardians and income support to families and households in need
- Address the geographical dimension of social exclusion
- Strengthen cooperation with national, regional and local actors and children themselves
- Dedicate adequate national resources and EU funds
- Take into account a gender perspective

An enabling policy framework to address child poverty and social exclusion must include particular attention to children's early years, and to the ecosystem of policies and support measures to ensure that all children can have the best start in life. This includes social protection, employment and housing policy, universal access to maternal and child healthcare services, and parenting and family support.

The Child Guarantee is an opportunity for Member States to develop an integrated and multi-sector approach to early childhood, that addresses the needs of very young children and their families with a comprehensive system of services, including parenting and family support, especially in light of the impacts of the Covid pandemic.

Early childhood education and care, inclusive education and school-based activities

The Council Recommendation recognises that equal access to quality and inclusive early childhood education and care and education is central to tackling social exclusion.

To guarantee effective and free access to these key services, Member States are asked to:

- Identify and address financial and non-financial barriers, including 'out of pocket costs'
- Provide learning support to children with learning difficulties
- Provide appropriate responses to the needs of children with specific educational needs and children with disabilities
- Support inclusive education and avoid segregated classes in early childhood education and care and educational establishments
- Provide at least one healthy meal each school day
- Ensure provision of educational materials
- Provide adequate technological equipment necessary for distance learning and improve digital skills
- Provide transport to early childhood education and care establishments and schools
- Ensure equal and inclusive access to school-based activities
- Develop a framework for cooperation of all stakeholders to support inclusive education and to provide after school care and opportunities to participate in sport, leisure and cultural activities

Our [analysis of data](#) on early childhood shows the need to guarantee universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services particularly for children under three and for those who are most in need. This requires increased public investment in ECEC services and strengthening the capacity and professional development of ECEC staff to respond to children's needs in their earliest years. It also requires tailored capacity and support to ensure access to those most in need.

Healthcare

The Council Recommendation recognizes that children living in poverty and facing discrimination and social exclusion can face particular barriers to accessing some healthcare services, including disease prevention and health promotion programmes.

Member States are asked to:

- Facilitate early detection and treatment of diseases and developmental problems (including mental health), ensure access to periodic health screenings and ensure timely curative and rehabilitative follow up and support and access to medicines, treatment and support as well as vaccination programmes
- Provide targeted services for children with disabilities
- Implement accessible health promotion and disease prevention programmes targeting children in need, their families and professionals working with them

Increased access to healthcare for children in need must also include access to quality maternal, newborn and child healthcare, and early intervention services, as key pre-requisites for children's survival and healthy development. This must include specific attention to women and children facing discrimination and exclusion.

Ensuring universal access to quality healthcare in pregnancy, childbirth and infancy should be a priority for Member States in their implementation of the Child Guarantee.

Nutrition

The Council Recommendation asks Member States to ensure that all children in need have at least one healthy meal each school day and to:

- Support access to healthy meals also outside of school-days
- Ensure that nutrition standards in early childhood education and care, and in school settings, address specific dietary needs
- Limit advertisement and restrict the availability of unhealthy foods

However, the Child Guarantee does not reference the importance of healthy nutrition for very young children, especially from birth to three. Healthy nutrition in children's early years is essential for their development and wellbeing.

Implementation of the Child Guarantee should also include measures to ensure that all households have the means to provide healthy nutrition for very young children, with social support and targeted services for those most in need. This should include measures to promote and support breastfeeding, as one of the most effective public health interventions for both mothers and infants.

Housing and institutional care

The Recommendation recognises the importance of adequate housing for tackling the social exclusion of children and their risk of homelessness. Homelessness and poor housing conditions have a range of impacts on children's health, both physical and mental, and on their development and wellbeing. Housing quality, stability and security have direct and indirect

effects on children's lives, and on the ability of their parents and caregivers to provide nurturing care in infancy and early childhood. Overcrowded, poor quality and insecure housing are also risk factors for parental mental health, child protection interventions and family separation.

Member States are asked to:

- Ensure that homeless children and their families receive adequate accommodation, prompt transfer from temporary accommodation to permanent housing and provision of relevant social and advisory services
- Assess and revise national, regional and local housing policies to ensure that the interests of families with children in need are duly taking into account
- Provide children in need and their family priority and timely access to social housing or housing assistance

Worryingly, the Council Recommendation includes the option to place children in institutions, despite the fact that this is never in a child's best interests. This represents a step backwards in the transition from institutional to community and family-based care.

The Child Guarantee should trigger reforms necessary to ensure that all mothers and children have access to adequate and secure housing, especially those living in vulnerable and precarious situations. Housing policy must take into account the specific needs of women and children, in pregnancy, infancy and childhood.

The Child Guarantee should trigger increased investment in services which help parents, families and caregivers to access the material and emotional support and advice needed in this critical period of children's lives. This must include support for families facing adversity, that prevents family separation and that helps parents and guardians in their role as primary caregivers for young children.

The Child Guarantee should include efforts to end the institutionalisation of young children and support the development of alternative care options that provide a safe, secure and loving environment for young children, where possible with their biological family.

What needs to happen now?

National action plans

By March 2022, Member States are expected to submit their Child Guarantee national plans to the European Commission, taking into account national, regional and local circumstances. These will cover the period until 2030 and set out how Member States will implement the Child Guarantee.

Action plans should include:

- Targeted groups of children in need to be reached
- Integrated measures to be implemented
- Quantitative and qualitative targets to be achieved in terms of children in need, taking into account regional and local disparities

- Other measures planned or taken to address child poverty and social exclusion at the national level (including at regional/local level), including on the enabling policy framework outlined in the Child Guarantee
- A national framework for data collection, monitoring and evaluation of the Child Guarantee
- Member States will report every two years to the Commission on the progress in implementing the Child Guarantee, in line with their national action plans

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EU governments should develop integrated, cross-sector and comprehensive action plans that include increased coordination, support and investment for early childhood development - especially for children from vulnerable groups under the age of three.

Child Guarantee national plans must include specific measures to ensure access to essential services for all young children in need, especially those experiencing discrimination and social exclusion, such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children and those at risk of entering, or in, alternative care.

Participation

Importantly, the Council Recommendation asks governments to ensure that children, families, civil society organisations and institutions working on social inclusion, non-discrimination and children's rights are able to participate in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Child Guarantee national action plans.

EU government should ensure that families, caregivers, civil society organisations and children themselves have equal opportunities to participate meaningfully in the development of national Child Guarantee action plans and their implementation.

Specific attention must be given to enabling the participation of children facing poverty and social exclusion, and their families, as they have fewer opportunities to have their views heard and to engage in policy-making. To enable this, Member States should ensure transparency and access to timely information on the action plans and clear processes for the participation of civil society stakeholders at the national, local, and regional levels.

National Coordinators

The Recommendation asks Member States to nominate a national Child Guarantee Coordinator, in charge of coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Child Guarantee. Member States are expected to nominate their national coordinator by October 2021.

The National Coordinator will play a key role in ensuring successful implementation of the Child Guarantee and must ensure that the needs of young children from vulnerable groups – under the age of three - are well represented in national plans.

The National Coordinator's mandate should include outreach to, and consultation with, children, families and civil society organisations, and a specific focus on early childhood development.

Monitoring

The European Commission will monitor progress on the Child Guarantee implementation via the Social Scoreboard, in the context of the European Semester, and propose, when necessary, country-specific recommendations to Member States. It is expected to set up a common monitoring framework to assess the implementation and enhance the data availability at the EU level on children in need and their access to services.

The Commission will review the progress made and report to the Council in 2026.

A common monitoring framework needs to be informed by comparable disaggregated data on the youngest children and their families, and should support efforts to enhance the availability of disaggregated data on children under three and their families, and their access to services.

Funding

The Council Recommendation urges Member States to finance the Child Guarantee with EU and domestic funding.

All Member States are expected to earmark an appropriate amount of funding from the ESF+, to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. For those countries with a rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion above the EU average, that amount must be at least 5% of their national ESF+ allocation.

In addition, other EU funds such as the European Regional Development Fund, Asylum Migration and Integration Fund, InvestEU, the Reform Support Programme and the Recovery and Resilience Facility should support national implementation of the Child Guarantee.

The Child Guarantee should catalyse more public investment in early years, model the coordination of funding across different sectors impacting early childhood development, and mobilise national as well as EU financing to support children in need, and their families, from the earliest years.

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