

**Response to the European Commission's European Care Strategy  
and the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the  
Revision of the Barcelona Targets on Early Childhood  
Education and Care**

*September 2022*

**The *First Years, First Priority* campaign welcomes the European Commission's European Care Strategy, its proposals for a Council Recommendation on Long Term Care and for a Council Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care (ECEC), published on 7 September 2022.**

We welcome the approach to care and caregiving across the life-course, from infancy, throughout people's lives and into older age. We also welcome the focus on ensuring that formal and informal care workers are given the necessary recognition, support, opportunities for professional development and good working conditions to ensure quality of care for all those who need it. As women take up the vast majority of caring responsibilities, this approach to caregiving is also necessary to achieve greater gender equality. This also means that fathers and men should be enabled and encouraged to play a more substantial role in caring responsibilities.

In our response to the European Commission's consultation on the Care Strategy and the revision of the Barcelona targets on ECEC, we highlighted the need for a vision of care and caregiving that addresses the needs of children – from very early childhood - especially those facing poverty and social exclusion. Children – especially in their earliest years – rely on care and caregivers. Investing early in nurturing care for all children is essential for their healthy growth, development and wellbeing.

**We urge Member States to:**

- ⇒ **Adopt the Commission's Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the revised Barcelona targets on ECEC and develop ambitious national strategies for its implementation**
- ⇒ **Fully implement the European Child Guarantee and ensure access to quality ECEC for all children in need, up to school entry age, in line with the revised Barcelona targets**
- ⇒ **Ensure the meaningful engagement of European and national civil society organisations, parents, families, caregivers and children, in the implementation of the EU Care Strategy and the revised targets on ECEC**

- ⇒ **Ensure additional investment and support in family and community-based care (in line with the Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care) to enable children to grow up in quality family-based care, including their biological families, extended families or foster care, and avoid family separation and institutionalisation**

### ***Inclusive, quality nurturing care for all children***

Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a key component of the nurturing care needed for all children to thrive and develop to their full potential. Despite progress in many countries, universal access to ECEC - especially for the youngest children - is primarily hindered by a lack of availability and affordability of quality ECEC services. This greatly limits the participation of children at risk of social exclusion who benefit from ECEC the most.

We particularly welcome:

- The proposed **increase in the target of children under 3 participating in ECEC** (from 33% to 50%). This is something we have been calling for, given the critical importance of the first 1,000 days of a child's life for their healthy development and wellbeing
- The proposal that Member States should adopt targeted measures to increase **access to quality ECEC for the most disadvantaged children**, especially children in poverty and social exclusion, including children with disabilities and special needs, and migrant children, to close the participation gap in ECEC between children facing poverty or social exclusion and the overall population, as well as measures to **address rural/urban and local/regional disparities** in access to ECEC
- The proposal for Member States to introduce a **legal entitlement** to ECEC that bridges the end of the parental leave period with the start of ECEC, as one way of ensuring provision for *all* children
- The proposal for greater **national investment in quality ECEC** that is available and accessible for *all* children. Increased public investment in ECEC services for children under three is especially needed. In this regard, Member States have opportunities to **leverage EU funding** to complement domestic resources, including access to the ESF+ for implementing the Child Guarantee
- The focus on **quality, inclusive, non-segregated ECEC**. We know that segregation, exclusion and low-quality services significantly hinder participation in ECEC, with lower enrolment rates for children from ethnic minorities, refugee/migrant children, children in poverty and with special needs

- The focus on ensuring that ECEC services for all children are of **high quality**, with national quality frameworks, adequate staff-child ratios and group sizes and **support for the professionalisation of all ECEC staff**, with good working conditions, higher levels of initial education, continuous professional development and life-long training opportunities
- Proposals for measures to **ensure accessibility**, including through flexibility for working parents and single parents, administrative support for disadvantaged families, **accessibility of buildings, infrastructure and learning materials** for parents and children with disabilities or special needs, and **support to address linguistic and cultural barriers** they may face and to enable their participation in mainstream, inclusive and non-segregated facilities
- The proposal to ensure that **parents**, regardless of their capabilities, cultural or socio-economic background, are respected rights-holders, well-informed about their legal entitlements, opportunities for financial or parental support they can access, and about ECEC options and flexibility
- The need to ensure **access to ECEC regardless of parents' employment status**, limiting out of pocket expenses and introducing a sliding scale of fees proportionate to family income or maximum fee for ECEC
- The proposal to improve **data collection on ECEC participation**, broken down by age for children at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion. We already voiced the fact that there is an overall lack of disaggregated data on children's earliest years and on different types of vulnerability, and their access to services, so addressing this gap is important for effective planning and policy-making

However, we are **disappointed** that the proposals include no reference to children in **alternative care** and **no commitment to invest more in de-institutionalisation of children and to transition to family and community-based care**. Despite the EU's commitment to de-institutionalisation, the DataCare project by Eurochild and UNICEF has estimated that there were almost 800,000 children in alternative care and 303,000 children in residential care in 2021, in the EU.

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