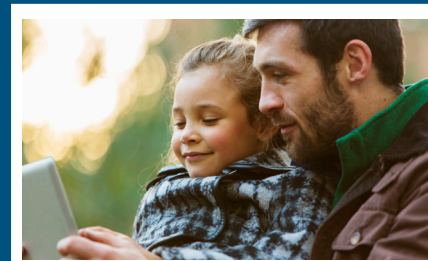


Investing in Children's Services, Improving Outcomes

Executive summary



Background

Childhood is a unique period of human development, subject to many public policy interventions, and therefore is a critical period for preparing future generations to be social, productive, healthy and happy. There is a large body of evidence showing that the early years are crucial to people's development and impact on adults' social, economic and labour outcomes. In 2013, the European Commission published the Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage', which presents Member States with policy guidance on multidimensional children's policies around three pillars: access to resources, access to quality services and child participation.

The Recommendation outlines access to quality services as essential in the framework of multidimensional policies for children and recognises five types of services:

- Reducing inequality at a young age by investing in early childhood education and care;
- Improving education system's impact on equal opportunities;
- Improving the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children;
- Providing children with a safe, adequate housing and living environment;
- Enhancing family support and the quality of alternative care settings.

The Recommendation provides good policy guidance, but it is essential that policy principles are translated into practice. This is why between 2013 and 2015, ESN has been working with a number of agencies to map the implementation of children's services in 14 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and The United Kingdom). This helped us to identify strengths and gaps to suggest proposals for improvement in line with the European Recommendation, which we gladly present in the report "Investing in children's services: improving outcomes."

The report consists of a short introduction to the methodology and the European context followed by a summary of trends in children's services across Europe. Next, the report describes the situation in 14 countries, including key policies, financing and governance arrangements. This is followed by a cross-country comparison of key issues in children's services in Europe. Finally, based on the input gathered through the questionnaires, the report makes recommendations regarding two to four key issues in children's services per country.

Ways of working and aims

We used a two-fold methodology. First, we designed a questionnaire where the overarching principles contained in the Recommendation were formulated as questions. Then we selected the countries on the basis of several criteria, including geographical considerations, welfare systems, varying degrees of development of children's services or different levels of decentralisation. The aim was to gather intelligence to draft 14 country profiles addressing how the principles might be implemented in practice. Second, we organised three peer reviews, one per year, bringing together a delegation per country consisting of children services' directors, national, regional and local government's representatives with responsibilities in children's services and service providers from each country.

The analysis of the national policy and legal frameworks in the 14 countries was structured around five key principles.

Principle 1: Early Childhood Education and Care	The legal and policy framework, funding and financial incentives, provision's variability, and inter-services and parental cooperation
Principle 2: Education systems and equal opportunities	The inclusiveness of the education system, with a focus on children with disabilities, migrant and ethnic minorities and children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds
Principle 3: Responsiveness of health system	Specific provisions for children with disabilities, children with mental health problems, unaccompanied children, pregnant teenagers and children from families with a history of substance abuse.
Principle 4: Access to housing	Measures guaranteeing the access of families with children to housing and which forms of support for families with children at risk of eviction
Principle 5: Risk assessment protocols	<p>Protocols to assess the risks to a child and which forms of support are implemented when risk has been detected.</p> <p>Provisions guaranteeing that children are not placed in institutions and that children without parental care have access to services.</p> <p>Specific mechanisms to listen to and record the voice of the child within the child protection system.</p>

We held three peer reviews in Ireland, Spain and Hungary between 2013 and 2015. At these meetings, participants from four or five countries reviewed the European Commission Recommendation's policy proposals and their legal and policy frameworks in their countries. Some countries feature a decentralised approach to the organisation of children's services. This means that relevant themes for children's services refer to decentralised policies, which may diverge within the countries themselves, and therefore to illustrate this we focused on specific regions in those countries.

Participants identified gaps and two to four key issues per country, which helped us to develop recommendations about how services may need to be developed in response to the Recommendation. We also hope that the strengths and gaps highlighted in the report will serve as inspiration for the European Commission and representatives of the Member States in the Social Protection Committee (SPC) to monitor the implementation of the Recommendation.

Key issues

The accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care

A key issue is the accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care, as any positive effect depends greatly on their coverage, their intensity (with evidence showing that children benefit more significantly if their participation is higher than 30 hours per week), staff-child ratios and workforce qualifications. Many countries are adapting the fees of early childhood education and childcare services to parents' income, though this measure may only include statutory services. For example, in the Walloon Region in Belgium, fees are regulated for public providers but not for private providers, which represent 22% of home-based care and 33% of care provided in centres. In Bulgaria, municipal crèches and children's kitchens are financed through the local authority's budget, and parents and guardians contribute with a fee determined by the local authority. However, there are no financial provisions regarding private nurseries and kindergartens

Combining the adaptation of fees with targeted measures for specific groups (children in care, children with disabilities), it is expected to reduce the disadvantages experienced in children's access to early education and childcare by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Ireland, all children from the age of three are entitled to free preschool for three hours per day in the year prior to starting primary school. In Sweden, every child is entitled to 525 hours of preschool per year from the age of three. The Scottish government recognises a minimum of 600 hours per annum for children aged three and four as well as for 27% of children aged two. In England, children aged three and four are entitled to 570 hours per annum of free early education or childcare. This entitlement is also available for children aged two who meet specific criteria, e.g. their parents are in receipt of certain welfare benefits, or the child is looked after by a local authority, has special educational needs or is a child with disabilities.

The key importance of quality, coverage and intensity has emerged when comparing countries with different combinations. In countries with higher quality, coverage and intensity of ECEC (as in the Nordic countries), children's competences in school are significantly higher than in those countries with medium or low quality, coverage and intensity (e.g. Spain). Gains are also significantly higher for disadvantaged children in countries with low coverage but high quality as it is the case in Hungary.

School attainment and socio-economic factors

Having benefited from early childcare, children may experience a cancelling out effect as they progress through education unless early childhood investment is followed up by investment in schools. The correlation between school attainment and socio-economic factors has been identified as an issue across a number of countries. Measures are being adopted to address the difficulties of schools in disadvantaged areas or where there is a high concentration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The allocation of funds for schools is in some countries partially dependent on the students' socio-economic background. This may include the parents' level of education, whether the family receives benefits and the child's mother tongue as it is the case across the regions in Belgium and in the Netherlands. In Andalusia (Spain), there is a programme to identify 'areas with social transformation needs'. In France, there are 'education priority areas', where public schools receive additional funding, have fewer children per class and more teachers (who also receive a salary's top-up).

Inclusive education

Another trend that has been observed is the efforts carried out in most of the analysed countries to make education systems more inclusive for children with disabilities and/or special needs. Though it is true that most countries have legislated in favour of inclusive education and encourage ordinary schools to include children with disabilities or special needs, the picture is varied when it comes to the countries' share of the use of inclusive and special schools.

For instance, in the Netherlands, between 2000 and 2012, the number of children with special educational needs, who were excluded from mainstream education, increased by 16.4%. In Italy, the main criticism of the network of specialised teachers is that the number is not related to the number of children with special support needs and therefore, demand may not be adequately met. In Germany, during the 2012/13 school year, 4.8% of all full-time students attended special schools (this is known as the exclusion rate), while the percentage of students with special needs attending regular schools was just 1.9%.

In most countries, legislation does not refer to 'desegregation policies' despite the fact that increased segregation has been acknowledged as a key issue in a number of country profiles. For instance, in the Netherlands there has been an increase in ethnic segregation in school. In Sweden, it has been reported that freedom to choose school has impacted negatively on inclusion in education for children from families without, or with low, qualifications and immigrant families. In some cases, there has been an increase in ethnic segregation in schools. Finally, there are countries where geographical segregation exists, due to the existence of cities and neighbourhoods with predominantly Roma population.

In fact, the inclusion of Roma children has become a key goal in many countries' policy agenda, especially those with a large Roma population. Countries such as Hungary, Romania, Italy or Spain have developed specific programmes to promote the inclusion of Roma children in the school system with different degree of success. In this respect, there is a need for public authorities to work with parents from all vulnerable backgrounds and especially Roma to make sure that children participate actively in school, and with teachers to identify and act early in cases of risk of school drop-out. The strengthening of vocational training has been identified as a tool used by many countries to prevent early school leaving. Efforts to make this kind of alternative educational path more appealing to students at risk of dropping out of school were acknowledged in several countries.

Decentralisation

Decentralisation is also a key theme in the provision of children's services throughout Europe. Many countries have moved towards systems in which the provision of services is done by regional or local public social services, or private providers. Furthermore, some countries have also started decentralising the regulation and monitoring of these services, and municipalities are taking up the responsibilities (including financing) previously held by the state in the children and youth care and family support areas. As seen in a number of countries, this process is not exempt of difficulties which are leading to increasing regional disparities in service provision. However, it has also helped to add clarity in regards to roles and responsibilities. For instance, in the field of child protection legislation in most countries that were analysed in the study sets out the specific responsibility of local authorities to assess the needs of children and young people and to look after them if necessary to prevent any risk or harm.

The development of alternative family care

A general move towards deinstitutionalisation has also been observed. Whenever possible, children requiring care from the state and their families receive social service support aimed at ensuring that the child remains with their family as long as this is in the child's best interest. For instance, in the French community in Belgium, the Decree on youth support clearly states that priority is given to preventing children from being placed in care, and a specific instrument was created – 'the local district councils for youth support', which are responsible for promoting and monitoring the implementation of preventive measures. Their role is similar to the role of the 'local child and youth protection committees' in Portugal or the 'local child protection committees' in the UK.

If remaining with the biological family is not in the child's best interest, the legislation in most countries states that the preferred option is alternative family care, whenever possible with the extended family (kinship care) or with (professional) foster families. Many countries have also explicitly committed not to place children under three in residential care. There has been progress across countries in foster care provision. In Hungary, according to official statistics in 2007, 54% of children in care were accommodated with foster families, whilst this figure increased to 64% in 2013. In Bulgaria, there were 7,800 children in institutional care in 2015 whilst by the end of 2015, thanks to the implementation of their de-institutionalisation strategy, 1,500 children were accommodated with foster families.

Despite pledges and progress in legislation, there is room for improving foster care provision. For example, in France, according to 2013 estimates, 53% of children, who are placed outside their family, are in foster care but 38% are still in residential care. In Italy, 28,449 children had been removed from parental care in 2013 with almost a split in two halves between those in residential care and those in foster care. Portuguese legislation favours keeping the child within the family but still, when implementing placement as a last resort, there is a worrying trend of placing children in long-term residential facilities, while kinship care and professional foster care still under-developed. Countries with higher numbers of children in foster care have improved the 'professionalisation' of foster care; for instance, with financial compensation, training and support to improve foster parents' capabilities. Foster parents may also be entitled to benefits in areas such as education, housing or transport.

Expanding the role of children in the child protection system

Efforts have been made to expand the role that children have within the child protection system. In many countries, children are entitled to be represented in legal procedures affecting them by an independent representative. Children above a certain age, which differs from country to country, must be informed, be heard and be consulted to obtain their consent for any support measure for them. Some countries have also set up specific bodies for recording the views and wishes of children in care. In Bulgaria, there has been an increase in specially equipped rooms for children's hearings. In Italy, an inter-professional working group has been set up to put in place specific and appropriate training for lawyers and judges working on children and family matters to ensure uniformity of listening methods and procedures. Scotland has a unique system for overseeing decisions on care and child protection: 'the children's hearings system' - a more child-friendly approach to bringing children into the legal system for the reason of offending or for their care and protection.

A number of developments have also taken place to foster the participation of children in care in decisions affecting them. For example, in Germany, there are provisions encouraging residential facilities to promote the participation of children and young people in consultations, decisions within the facility and complaint procedures.

In Catalonia (Spain), the Department for Social Welfare & Family published a study on the situation of young people leaving care, with testimonials of young people themselves. In France, each child in the child protection system has a personal plan according to their needs, and children actually participate in the definition of their plans' goals and measures. In England, there are duties on local authorities for children's voices to be heard in legal proceedings. Local authorities set up councils for children in care, and independent advocacy is commissioned, usually from the non-government sector.

Looking ahead

The latest frameworks, strategies and delivery mechanisms that we have identified in this report focus increasingly on outcomes. This represents an opportunity in the children's sector to build an outcomes-led approach to commissioning services, which should promote innovative thinking about how people are deployed and located to deliver services for children and young people.

On the basis of our study, a number of suggestions could be incorporated to encourage service delivery for lasting outcomes.

To start with, it is key to focus on long-term 'outcomes' not 'outputs'. It is common for the rhetoric around services to be focused on outcomes while in practice there is still more of a focus on outputs. This is in large part encouraged by national measurement frameworks, which tend to focus on *what we do* (output) rather than *what difference it makes* (outcome).

It is essential to distinguish between outcomes and output indicators, because measuring 'success' only on the basis of outputs can be misleading. In this respect, it is key to monitor the longer-term outcomes, even when children are not in contact with the services. The impact of the service should look not only at the child but also at other relevant stakeholders, such as their siblings, parents or carers and the wider community.

It is important to track the distance travelled by measuring at least pre- and post-intervention and preferably also at regular intervals during the process. Measuring outcomes should factor in well-being, which emerges from the interaction between children's circumstances, their own resources and their interactions with those around them. As well as the structural factors affecting the circumstances of children's lives (e.g. poverty, inequality), the psychological and social aspects of children's well-being are also vital for improving outcomes.

Outcomes should include a range of social, environmental and economic objectives. When service directors and those responsible for commissioning services think about value for money, it is important that they take account of outcomes across the wider social, environmental and economic spheres. The moves towards joint children's service delivery (including joint budgets) support this process. In this respect, giving those managing and delivering services flexibility over budget management and funding allocation over a longer period of time would certainly be an encouragement.

Finally, the system of measurement should reflect what matters for children and young people. This is why it is key to measure with service users; for example, along the lines of inspection teams including young people. These teams include young people with direct experience of care and child protection services who receive training to contribute their knowledge and experience to help evaluate the quality and impact of child protection services.

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together people who plan, finance, research, manage, regulate and deliver local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.

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