



**A FAIR START  
FOR *every* CHILD  
IN EUROPE**

## **Proposal for a European Child Guarantee: what does it mean for early childhood development?**

### ***What is the proposed Child Guarantee?***

On 24<sup>th</sup> March, the European Commission published its proposal for a [Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee](#). The Child Guarantee proposal aims to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion by urging and supporting Member States to guarantee access to quality essential services for children in need. The proposal represents a very important milestone in the fight against child poverty. It calls on Member States to guarantee, for all children in need: free access to early childhood education and care; to education (including school-based activities); to a healthy meal each school day; to healthcare; and to ensure effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The proposal 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 from vulnerable groups, including in their very early years, is therefore essential for building more equitable and inclusive societies after the pandemic.

With political will, the proposed Child Guarantee has the potential to increase children's access to essential services, provide much-needed support for families and improve the lives of young children and 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. This will also require national efforts to address intersectional inequalities, exclusion and discrimination of children and families, and ensure that services are accessible to, and meet the needs of, those who face the greatest barriers in accessing essential services.

We welcome the proposal that Member States should identify children in need, and specifically consider homeless children or those experiencing severe housing deprivation, children with a disability, children with a migrant background, children with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma), children in alternative (especially institutional) care and children in precarious family situations. The inclusion of migrant children, 'irrespective of migrant status' is particularly welcome, as undocumented children and families are often among the most vulnerable.

If the proposal is adopted, each Member State will submit a national action plan to the European Commission, covering the period until 2030, taking into account national, regional and local circumstances.

### **The *First Years First Priority* campaign is calling for:**

- ❖ EU Member States to adopt an ambitious and comprehensive Council Recommendation for a Child Guarantee that includes access to quality essential services for children from their earliest years, and their families
- ❖ EU Member States to develop integrated, holistic and inclusive national Child Guarantee action plans, with increased resources (from national budgets and EU funding) that include increased support and investment in early childhood development, especially for the age group from birth to 3 years of age. This must include targeted measures with a focus on vulnerable children, such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children at risk of entering, or in, alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty.
- ❖ EU Member States to 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 paid to children from vulnerable groups who have fewer opportunities to participate in policy and decision making.

### ***Investing in children's first years must be a priority – key points***

1. From the **early childhood development** perspective, the proposed Child Guarantee presents some weakness.

Investment in early childhood is limited to early childhood education and care, whereas a **comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to children's development in early childhood is crucial and very much needed**. This is a key focus of the [First Years First Priority](#) campaign, which advocates for prioritization of early childhood development in public policies, with a particular focus on families and children who are at greater risk of discrimination and exclusion. Ensuring effective access to healthy nutrition, healthcare and prevention of good quality, education in an inclusive and stimulating environment, and adequate housing for all children in need, the five areas mentioned in the Child Guarantee, must also include public policies and services that support families and caregivers with very young children (i.e., under 3 years of age), especially those who are most disadvantaged and face discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society.

2. The reference to healthcare must include **universal access to quality healthcare, including prevention, and healthcare and support services in pregnancy, childbirth and infancy**.

While the proposal in the Child Guarantee to ensure effective and free access to quality healthcare is welcome, this must also include access to quality maternal, newborn and child healthcare, and prevention, as key prerequisites for children's survival and healthy development. Ensuring universal access to quality healthcare in pregnancy, childbirth and infancy should be a priority for Member States' national action plans to implement the Child Guarantee.

3. A common framework to monitor progress on the implementation of the Child Guarantee needs to be informed by **comparable disaggregated data profiling the youngest age group of children** and areas of vulnerability.

The Commission's proposal for a **common framework to monitor progress** on the implementation of the Child Guarantee and '*develop agreed common quantitative and qualitative outcome indicators*' should support efforts to enhance the availability, scope and relevance of comparable data at EU level on children in need and their access to services, and for the age group from birth to 3 years of age. This should also include disaggregated indicators on ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and in key areas such as health and children in alternative care.

4. The National Child Guarantee Coordinator must guarantee that the **youngest children are well represented in the national plans**, beyond ECEC.

The Commission's proposal recommends that EU Member States nominate a **national Child Guarantee Coordinator** (equipped with adequate resources and mandate) to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the Child Guarantee. This figure will play a key coordination role at the national level, and it is important that National Coordinators also support and promote the right of *all* children and families to have support and equal access to quality essential services from their earliest years.

### ***What happens next?***

EU Member States are negotiating on the content of the Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation, with the aim of approving a final version of the document by the end of the Portuguese EU Presidency at the end of June 2021.

If adopted, the success of the Child Guarantee will depend on its ability to trigger and support a strategic response at national level. The meaningful and inclusive participation of families, caregivers, relevant civil society actors and children themselves, especially those belonging to vulnerable and socially excluded groups, will be key to the initiative's success.

In the proposal, Member States are urged to dedicate and coordinate adequate financial resources to implement the Child Guarantee, '*making optimal use of national and EU funds, in particular the European Social Fund Plus, the European Regional Development Fund, REACT-EU, Invest-EU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Technical Support Instrument*'.

The proposal to use of a variety of EU funds as well as national budgets to implement the Guarantee is very welcome. The European Social Fund is a particularly important instrument, as it requires Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average (23,4% - [ARPE](#) 2017 – 2019) to allocate 5% of ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty, and for all Member States to allocate an appropriate amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty.

We hope that EU Member States will adopt the Child Guarantee, in the form of a comprehensive and ambitious Council Recommendation, and that this will trigger well-coordinated national reforms and public investment in early childhood development at the national, regional and local levels. The success of this proposal depends on governments' willingness to make the fight against child poverty a national priority, and to ensure that children's needs in their youngest age are a cornerstone of their efforts.

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