Provision of quality early childcare services
(Czech Republic, 10-11 November 2015)\textsuperscript{1}

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**Context**

There is now a compelling body of evidence that emphasises the critical importance of children's earliest years to their future health, development, learning and wellbeing. The quality of the services that support them and their families is consequently of great significance. Broadly speaking, there are three main approaches to the provision of such services, though they are of course not mutually exclusive.

The first approach is based on the principle that parents are best placed to be the primary caregivers of their own very young children. This approach is underpinned by attachment science and research evidence on early brain development. Actions that support this approach include extended paid parental leave from employment, as well as programmes and interventions aimed at optimising the effectiveness of parents in providing the best early life experience for their children.

The second approach is primarily concerned with supporting parental labour market participation. This approach has prioritised expansion of the volume of provision and supporting its affordability through providers minimising outlay on elements such as staffing and premises or through governments subsidising the cost of provision by giving financial support to providers or to parents.

The third approach has the primary objective of helping children develop well and equitably, through the provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), though it often also supports parental employment. This approach is typified by a highly qualified workforce, skilled in effective methodologies that promote children's social and emotional development and enhancing their capacity to engage with learning both formal and informal.

Across Europe and indeed internationally different aspects of early childhood education and care are emphasised and prioritised. The reasons for this are generally cultural and historic. The description provided of the systems in the Czech Republic, and the policy context in which they operate, indicate that, in various ways, historical and cultural, as well as political, factors have been significant in the evolution of current provision.

In 1989 the communist government collapsed after over forty years of continuous control. During this period there was a strong policy commitment to labour market participation for both men and women and care provision for young children was largely designed to further this objective. This resulted in a high volume of provision, much of which was of inadequate quality and was closed down post

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1990. The expectation that both mothers and fathers would be in employment in their children’s early lives was challenged with a consequent aspiration to return to more traditional gender roles. This has been supported in policy terms by maternity and parental leave entitlement up until the child is three years old, with financial support from the government. The result of this is a very low percentage of children under three in formal childcare (3% as opposed to an EU average of 28%) and fathers representing less than 1% of the population who take parental leave. Furthermore, the maternal employment rate among mothers of pre-school children is low compared to the EU average. Gender inequality in employment is high and the pay gap between men and women is over 5% higher than the EU average.

The key points that emerge from the description paper are that early childhood education and care policy in the Czech Republic encourages mothers to care for their children themselves, that few young children are cared for outside the home, that significant gender inequalities exist in society and that regulation is concerned largely with the health and safety requirements.

Eurochild is pleased to contribute to the peer review. As a child rights based network we will present some important issues for children’s rights and wellbeing in the context of the Czech system. We will also provide recommendations aimed at supporting effective articulation of children’s rights in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC), as well as highlighting some examples of effective practice.

**Issues impacting on children’s rights and wellbeing**

Developments in neuroscience in recent years have underlined the critical importance of the first few years of life in children’s healthy learning and development. Longitudinal data has shown how this early development has lifelong impact in health and wellbeing. If we accept that children have rights to a good quality of life, in childhood and beyond, we must ensure that their early experience provides the foundation for this. If we subscribe to a right to inclusion and equality we must ensure that all children, whatever their ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances and disability, receive the inputs necessary to achieving positive life outcomes. We believe the following issues should be considered by the Czech Republic in the development of a more effective approach.

1. Generous parental leave in both duration and financial support is often consistent with good outcomes for children. This is however predicated on parental care delivering the right ‘inputs’ to enable children to develop well.
2. High inequality in take up of parental leave between mothers and fathers usually reflects both a gender pay gap and a ‘traditional’ view of gender roles.
3. Children in excluded families, groups and communities often need specific additional support to achieve equitable outcomes.
4. ECEC for under threes achieves significant beneficial effects in terms of more equitable outcomes in health, learning and general wellbeing, but only if it is of high quality.
5. Governance, curriculum and workforce are integral components of a high quality system.

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4 The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (2004) Sylva, Mehuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart
5 Working For Inclusion (Children in Scotland, 2010).
Children’s rights and recommendations for improvement

A child rights based approach implies that children have a right to a good quality of life, as articulated in the articles of the UNCRC. The UNCRC is, of necessity, a framework that applies internationally, and its articles need to be defined, with explicit commitments and entitlements, for each national context. It is not clear from the description paper that child rights integrally underpin the Czech system, nor is there a clear articulation of what outcomes for children are aspired to in the way services are organised.

Children’s rights to enjoy the care of their parents is enshrined in the UNCRC. The right to paid maternity leave, and the availability of further parental leave, show strong commitment to this objective. What the Czech system description does not do, however, is indicate what services are in place when parental care needs to be supplemented or supported in order for children to do well. Not all parents are equipped to provide the most effective emotional attachment, health choices, or cognitive development. Some children, such as disabled children, those from a minority ethnic or migrant family, and those living in poverty are likely to need support beyond the universal offer if they are to do well.

Group care can be a positive and enriching experience for children if it is of high quality. It can also be of great value as a source of advice and support for parents and has the potential to include and achieve more equal outcomes for children who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. Conversely, poor quality ECEC can affect children’s development adversely, particularly for those children who already experience some form of disadvantage. The description paper does not provide much detail as to the quality of provision, or how this is assured and regulated.

The constructive involvement of fathers with the upbringing of their children has been shown to have a positive impact. Research also indicates, however, that father involvement is in many countries strongly socially patterned, with the poorest and most vulnerable children also being the least likely to benefit from this positive experience. Whether intentional or not, it is clear from the figures that father take-up of parental leave in the Czech Republic is very low. This suggests that gender expectations are fairly traditional and that fathers are likely to be the higher earners.

There are several critical elements of a high quality ECEC service. The physical environment (in terms of safety, opportunities for learning and accessibility); the governance (level of integration at unit and higher organisational levels); and, most importantly, the workforce (nature and level of qualification, pedagogical approach and underpinning values) are all critical to ensuring a positive experience for children that promotes their optimal wellbeing. While a qualification framework is in place, the content of this and its correlation with children’s wellbeing is not explicit. There is also little information about the physical environments in which ECEC is delivered, or what is seen as good practice in this respect. The information supplied about governance suggests that there is a range of different types of establishment which are thought to meet a range of different requirements rather than an integrated approach that combines children’s learning and development with opportunities for parents to enter the labour market. Divided responsibilities at national and sub-national level are likely to reinforce this separation of function.

The effectiveness or otherwise of a child rights based approach can only be measured by its impact on the wellbeing of children. None of the data supplied in

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6 Fathers’ Involvement in Early Years Settings: Findings from Research (Tim Kahn, Department for Education and Skills, England, 2005).
7 UNESCO (2010), Learning and Caring Together (Kaga, Bennett & Moss).
the description relates to children. There is no indication as to whether the services are improving child wellbeing or indeed adversely affecting it even in terms of the general population. Furthermore there is no reference to how the needs of vulnerable and minority groups are addressed and how effectively they are included. Collection of good quality nuanced data on children’s wellbeing and social integration, with specific data being gathered and analysed in respect of groups such as Roma children, disabled children, migrant and refugee children, religious and ethnic minorities, and children from deprived socio-economic circumstances, is essential both to understanding whether services are doing an effective job and to ensuring that they are inclusive and not discriminatory.

Of course parental participation in the labour market can be critically important to children’s wellbeing. Employment is the most reliable route out of poverty for many families, but many families in Europe remain poor despite being in employment. In Scotland, at present, more than half of all poor children are in households where at least one adult is working. Government policies in relation to financial subsidy of ECEC must be underpinned by a commitment to make sure that provision is of sufficiently high quality to promote wellbeing and inclusion and reduce inequality. It must also avoid indirect subsidy of low paid and insecure employment. Only in those circumstances will it make a meaningful contribution to reducing child and family poverty and the risks to good outcomes for children that are too often correlated with financial and material disadvantage.

We therefore submit the following recommendations:

1. The Czech Republic, like almost every country in the world, has endorsed the UNCRC. There should be a clear statement of what this means for young children and their families in terms of entitlements to ECEC and parent support.

2. The particular needs and circumstances of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups should be given special attention and explicit commitment made to their inclusion. This should articulate the practical measures required to articulate the commitment and set meaningful and accountable targets.

3. A system of quality assurance that has, at its centre, the rights and wellbeing of children should be put in place.

4. Some exploration should take place of the reasons for gender inequality in pay and in parental leave patterns. Employers should be encouraged to support and promote fathers’ involvement with the care of their children as well as that of others. ECEC establishments should be father friendly and family policies at national and sub-national level should reflect equality in parenting. Images of families in official material should ensure that fathers are equally and positively portrayed.

5. Integrated systems of governance and holistic approaches to delivery achieve the best outcomes for children. They are also highly correlated with general prosperity and social and economic equality. Consideration should be given to reviewing structures to achieve better integration, for example by bringing responsibility for all ECEC services under a single government department.

6. Without good data collection and analysis it is not possible to assess service effectiveness. As well as employment, income and participation data, good information on how service provision is impacting on children’s wellbeing and promoting their rights is needed.

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7. Overall population data does not give any indication as to how well and equally minority and vulnerable groups are included. Indeed an overall increase in, for example, cognitive development in the young population can mean that the most disadvantaged become even further distanced from the average. For this reason it is vital that their progress is specifically monitored and that services are provided that are accessible and inclusive and aim to avoid a gap developing between these groups and the rest of the population.

8. Charging and subsidy policy and its relationship to taxation revenue and remuneration from employment is complex. Nonetheless a clear framework should be developed that ensures the most effective use of public funds.

**Some examples of good practice**

**1. Inclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged children: LicketyLeap – a brief intervention**

*LicketyLeap* is a drama-led early intervention. National and local government funding in addition to fundraised income ensures that there is no charge to families for the children’s participation. It is provided exclusively to children in pre-school education settings in deprived and disadvantaged communities throughout Scotland.

No more than ten children are included in each group, so that each child’s potential to engage and participate is optimised. Establishments worked with are asked to identify the children according to a range of criteria of need, including disability and not having English as first language. The children are mostly three and four years old with some five year olds, though the approach has been successfully used with children in the first two years of school.

The method used is participatory drama led by ‘actor-pedagogues’. They have the dual function of delivering the dramatic elements of the story and encouraging and supporting the children in participating in, and learning from, the drama. It has a carefully planned, secure structure in which children participate and contribute to enrich and develop the story using any of the dimensions and multiple intelligences they choose, individually and collectively. They form a strong attachment to the two characters. The whole session is filmed.

Between one and four weeks later, the actor-pedagogues return to the nursery for a follow up session. Parents/carers attend the second half of the follow up session to hear about the project and see some live performance by the children. They are shown excerpts of their children’s film and the actor pedagogues lead a discussion with them about LicketyLeap as a family resource and its relevance and value in relation to their child’s (brain) development and wellbeing.

Parents/carers frequently see their children in a new and more positive light. They see adults modelling child-centred play and are encouraged to play with their children in an imaginative world where the child is the expert, which can fortify their attachment, confidence, self-esteem and capacity to flourish. Crucially, whole nursery delivery strengthens peer relationships between children, families and teachers and enriches a sense of community.

Six months later, nursery staff are asked to re-assess each participating child across a range of outcomes relating to health, wellbeing and development. External evaluations completed by teachers on a sample of 329 children over a 4-6 week period, indicated 60-70% of children demonstrated improved confidence, social skills, problem solving ability, emotional literacy and resilience following

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LicketyLeap. Many nurseries reported a fundamental change in nursery culture, which became more inclusive and emotionally literate as children continued their LicketyLeap play.

2. Father involvement in early life: Family Foundations/Team Parenting

Family Foundations/Team Parenting is a programme based approach to developing shared and equitable parenting, particularly aimed at families at risk of social and economic exclusion. It was developed in the United States by Professor Mark Feinberg and requires the consistent involvement of mothers and fathers, though it has been used in several other countries.

It begins in the pre-natal period and carries on after the birth of the child. It combines practical parenting education, dealing with issues in the couple relationship, and peer support. Adaptations of the programme have been developed for teenage parents, adoptive parents and parents of disabled children among other groups.

Greater sharing and equality in parenting has been found to have strongly beneficial impact on children’s wellbeing. Evaluation of the impact of the programme carried out by randomised control trial has found sustained positive benefit to children and greater equity in parenting.

Long-term research showed families that used the Family Foundations program experienced more positive outcomes than families in the control group who did not. Over a seven-year period, compared to randomly assigned control families, Family Foundations families showed better parenting teamwork, parenting sensitivity and warmth, child self-regulation, child social competence and child academic competence, as well as reduced pre-term birth, parental stress, maternal depression, conflict between parents and harsh parenting. Assessment of programme benefits took place several times between child age 6 months and 5 years. Positive results were found at each time point, and there was no decrease in the strength of the Family Foundations benefits over time.11

3. Data collection and analysis: the Early Development Instrument

There are a number of effective approaches to data collection and analysis in early childhood. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is an example of a relatively low cost method of yielding detailed information on the child population, particularly where good administrative or individualised data on children is not available.

The Early Development Instrument12, developed in Canada, is now used in a number of countries13. It collects population data on whole cohorts of children, for example, all children in a local authority area in the first year of school. It consists of a questionnaire of 104 questions and measures five core areas of early child development that are known to be good predictors of adult health, education and social outcomes; physical health and wellbeing, language and cognitive development, social competence, emotional maturity, communication skills and general knowledge.

The information is not collected directly from the child’s carer and the child themselves. Teachers instead provide the information on behalf of all of the children in their class. Data is anonymised, thus they cannot be correlated with

11 www.famfound.net/pages/evidence#sthash.dpfTtdY1.dpu
12 http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/edi
13 A cross-sectional pilot study of the Scottish early development instrument: a tool for addressing inequalityhttp://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3890505/
administrative information, nor can individuals be tracked. The EDI provides a method of collecting whole population data where opportunities for routine contact across the whole population do not exist, where there may be limitations or sensitivities in gathering data where individuals are potentially identifiable, or where the cost of collecting information directly from parents may be prohibitive.

The EDI has been used in several countries. It informs and supports good service planning and effective guidance for quality assurance bodies. Its positive value has been demonstrated by a number of research studies.¹⁴

Conclusion

The Czech Republic is a society that has relatively little poverty and inequality in European terms. However the provision of services for young children appear to place parental employment at its heart rather than children’s rights underpinning healthy learning and child development. There appear also to be substantial gender inequities in employment and in parenting. The inclusion of minority and vulnerable groups do not seem to feature strongly in the services described.

Nonetheless, there is a demonstrable commitment to supporting families financially and otherwise and a good range of provision. The foundations are in place for a system that could benefit children and families better as well as promoting inclusion, equality and wellbeing in the population as a whole.