

Eurochild analysis of the European Commission proposal for establishing a European Child Guarantee

POLICY BRIEFING



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

31 MARCH 2021

About Eurochild



Eurochild advocates for children’s rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

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This first response is prepared by the Eurochild Secretariat building on knowledge and experience gathered from its almost 200 members working across 35 European countries. In the coming months, together with members, we will analyse the Commission’s proposals in more detail and develop further our recommendations for implementation.

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014-2020. For further information please consult <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>.



The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

On 24th March, the European Commission presented its proposal for a [Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee](#). It aims to **prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion** by supporting Member States efforts to guarantee **access to quality key services for children in need**. It calls on Member States to guarantee children in need **free access** to: early childhood education and care; education (including school-based activities); a healthy meal each school day and healthcare; and to ensure **effective access** to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The proposal is a significant key **milestone** in the fight against child poverty and comes at a particularly crucial time. Even before the pandemic, almost **18 million** children were experiencing poverty and social exclusion. The **COVID-19 pandemic** is exacerbating existing inequalities. **A priority focus on children is thus essential if we are to build back more equal and inclusive societies after the pandemic**. It is a moral duty, but it is also an economic imperative. If we do not invest in equal opportunities for all children, the cost to society in the future will be enormous.

The Commission's proposal **takes account of many of the demands brought forward by Eurochild and its members**. For example, it emphasises that such a Child Guarantee will only be effective if it triggers national investments and a 'supportive enabling policy framework'. The design of national action plans for its implementation will therefore be crucial to its success.

From Eurochild's perspective, despite its many positive elements, the proposal has some weaknesses. For example, investment in early childhood is limited to early childhood education and care, whereas we would like to see a more holistic approach to [supporting children under 6 and their families](#). Children in alternative care are mentioned as a target group, but the proposal does not give sufficient attention to child protection reforms which are still needed in many parts of Europe. Finally, although children themselves are identified as being among the stakeholders to be involved in developing the national action plans, no guidance is given on how to ensure meaningful processes of child participation.

What we welcome

"With a view to sound governance, monitoring and reporting, Member States are encouraged to: within six months from the adoption of this Recommendation, submit to the Commission an action plan, covering the period until 2030, to implement this Recommendation, taking into account national, regional and local circumstances." p25

It is important that these plans: outline the **measures** to implement the Recommendation and the allocation of resources and timelines; identify which groups of children will be prioritised; establish quantitative and qualitative targets; and propose a **national framework for data collection** for the monitoring and evaluation. Civil society can help to identify children in need and the barriers they and their families face in accessing the services covered

by the Recommendation. Design, delivery and evaluation of the action plans must take a participatory approach, capitalising on the expertise and experience of all stakeholders committed to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. The role of the **national Child Guarantee Coordinator** will be key. It will be important to **monitor** how these persons are selected, what powers they are given, what kind of resources they can count on, and how the role fits more broadly into delivering government policy reforms.

The “intention of the Commission to: monitor the progress in implementing this Recommendation, and the impact on children in need, in the context of the European Semester.” “Work jointly with the Social Protection Committee to: establish a common monitoring framework and develop agreed common quantitative and qualitative outcome indicators to assess the implementation of this Recommendation.” p26

In our view we need a **yearly reporting system**, ensuring that the European Semester cycle monitors progress in implementation of the Recommendation. We support efforts to enhance the **availability, scope and relevance of comparable data at the European Union level**, including on children in need and their access to services and adequacy and coverage of benefits targeted at children. We would like to see the agreement of new **disaggregated indicators** covering the priority areas such as deinstitutionalisation and early childhood development. Despite there being large disparities between the systems of data collection on children living in alternative care in the EU, we believe it is possible to use officially published data to give a comparable overview of the situation of children in alternative care across the EU. This is evident from the [Datacare Project](#), launched by Eurochild with support from UNICEF in March 2020.

“Member States should identify children in need and within this group take into account, wherever appropriate in designing their national integrated measures, specific disadvantages experienced by: (a) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (b) children with a disability; (c) children with a migrant background;(d) children with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); (e) children being in alternative (especially institutional) care; (f) children in precarious family situations.” p22

It is important that the proposal refers to these **targeted categories of children in need**, ensuring that no child is left behind. It is significant that when referring to migrant children, the proposal emphasises that this is ‘irrespective of migrant status’ as undocumented children and families are often the most vulnerable. We emphasise the need for a rights-based approach that supports families in adversity and prevents family separation. Effective outreach and information are also key in order to reach children in need and their families, and enable them to benefit from the services promoted by this Recommendation.

“Member States are invited to build an integrated and enabling policy framework and: (h) dedicate adequate resources for implementing this Recommendation and make 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. ” p.23

The long-term success of the Child Guarantee initiative will depend on its ability to trigger and support a strategic response at national level. Child poverty and social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring a combination of preventive and remedial measures. National efforts must make the best out of existing Union instruments, such as the [2013 Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children](#), the [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#) and the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#). We welcome that the proposal mentions the need to use a variety of EU funds as well as national budgets to implement the Guarantee. The European Social Fund is a particularly important instrument. In February we welcomed the [agreement](#) of co-legislators requiring 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.

What we should be aspiring to

Meaningful and inclusive child participation: The proposal rightly mentions the importance of involving children throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the national action plans. It also refers extensively to the 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children with its specific pillar on children’s right to participate and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child with its first pillar on children’s participation in political and democratic life. Nonetheless, the document lacks a convincing narrative of how the Child Guarantee will be delivered in partnership with the people it aims to support – including children. The Child Guarantee must **promote children’s meaningful and rights based participation in decision-making** that affects their lives. It will be important to elaborate further on what measures and structures will be established to ensure children’s meaningful on-going participation.

A more comprehensive approach: The Child Guarantee will mainly focus on the correlation between social exclusion and the lack of access to key services. If we want national frameworks to holistically tackle child poverty, as indicated by the [2013 Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children](#) approach, Member States will have to dedicate appropriate attention also to its other two pillars: access to resources and child participation.

Recognising the critical importance of early childhood development: The document fails to fully acknowledge how early childhood development influences children’s well-being. The attention to early childhood education and care is welcome, but a **broader, more comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to children’s development in early childhood is 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 adequate housing for all children in need must also include public policies and services that support families and caregivers with very young children, especially those who are most disadvantaged and face discrimination and exclusion.

Access to support services for pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care: While the proposed Child Guarantee seeks to ensure effective and free access to quality healthcare, it fails to include **access to quality maternal, new-born and child healthcare**, which is a key prerequisite for children's survival and healthy development. Ensuring universal access to quality healthcare in pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care must be a priority for Member States in their adoption and implementation of the Child Guarantee.

Adequate support to housing: As we know, one of the reasons why children are taken out of their families is poor housing conditions or family homelessness. The Child Guarantee must ensure adequate and affordable housing for all families and children at risk. We do not think that placement of children in institutional care should be presented as a possible last resort (Recital 24 of the proposal) and we do not consider shelters to provide adequate housing for children.

Nutritious meals outside of the school system: It is unacceptable that there are families in Europe that struggle every day to provide adequate and healthy meals. Ensuring children's access to nutritious meals while at school is an essential step, but it does not solve the wider problem. Considering that schools are not open every day, that in some Member States schools do not have the necessary infrastructures to offer such services and that there are children who do not attend school, the Child Guarantee should **support children's access to healthy meals outside of the school system as well**.

Next Steps

The **European Member States** are now expected to start the **negotiations on the content of the proposal** with the aim of approving a final version of the document as soon as possible, ideally **before the end of the Portuguese Presidency** of the Council (January-June 2021).

As civil society we must ensure the Child Guarantee is converted into concrete investments at the national level and **trigger much needed structural reforms at the national, regional and local level**. The success of this proposal depends on governments' willingness to make the fight against child poverty a national priority. By working together with experts, municipalities, civil society and most importantly those with lived experience – not least children themselves – governments can make a meaningful and sustainable impact on children's lives.