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# Prevention and early intervention services to address children at risk of poverty

SYNTHESIS REPORT

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# Prevention and early intervention services to address children at risk of poverty

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## SYNTHESIS REPORT

**European Commission**

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## Executive Summary

The Peer Review on Prevention and Early Intervention Services to address children at risk of poverty was hosted by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The seminar focussed on two priority issues in Ireland's national children's strategy, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (2014-2020). These are to lift 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020 and to shift policy towards prevention and early intervention. In pursuing these priorities a key concern of the Irish authorities is to mainstream the learning from a series of innovative local programmes into national policy and to develop an integrated, multidimensional and whole-of-government approach. As part of this a key challenge is how to develop a coherent overall national approach involving all the relevant departments and agencies and to ensure that there is effective coordination and integration of services at local level.

Recent Irish initiatives [e.g. the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) 2006-2013 and the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme (2013—2017)] have been rigorously evaluated. Key learning points from this experience that were highlighted include:

1. supporting parents pays real dividends;
2. birth to three years is critical for early brain development;
3. initiatives to support children's learning must promote a love of learning;
4. supporting key transitions such as moving from an early years' service to primary school can make a significant difference to a child's life outcomes;
5. programmes that support social and emotional learning and promote inclusion;
6. the development of personal skills and aptitudes should be a part of formal and ongoing training for all professionals;
7. consulting with local communities helps to ensure that services and programmes fit better; effective interagency structures are vital.

Among the issues discussed by participants were: why is prevention and early intervention important; how can one win political support; why is a multidimensional and coordinated approach needed; why and how should one develop a systemic whole-of-government approach; what is the best balance between universal and targeted policies; what types of evidence are most useful; why can a children's rights approach help; how can one balance pro-work and parenting policies; what is needed to improve the quality of services; and how do you reach children in rural areas.

The key conclusions and learning points from the Peer Review were:

- prevention and early intervention are a long-term investment with positive benefits for children, society and the economy;
- political will and leadership are important to ensure that adequate resources are made available and that a long-term approach is developed;
- a broad holistic policy mix is essential for effective interventions;
- avoid piecemeal policies and develop a strategic and integrated approach;



- develop a progressive universalist approach with universal services for all children combined with targeting of the most vulnerable children and families;
- a focus on delivery at the local level is indispensable;
- it is important to reach out to those children and families most at risk;
- in order to ensure quality services invest in building capacity across agencies;
- good quality data and rigorous evaluation is essential for evidence-based policy;
- put children's rights at the heart of programme development and delivery;
- working with families is vital for effective prevention and early intervention;
- the EU level can enhance national policies on transnational exchange and learning by fostering a shared political commitment to implementing the Recommendation "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage", by ensuring the availability of good quality comparative data, by putting child poverty and exclusion more strongly at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy, by supporting transnational learning and exchange and by using EU Funds to support national initiatives.





## A. Policy context at European level

### The place of the issue on the European agenda

Over the past decade, child poverty and social exclusion has become an increasingly important issue on the European agenda. The Lisbon Treaty, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) and the Social Investment Package (SIP), especially the Commission Recommendation “Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”<sup>1</sup> have been important steps towards mainstreaming efforts to tackle child poverty and social exclusion and to promote child well-being at the heart of European Union (EU) and national policy making. This has been further reinforced with the initiative by President Juncker to launch a Pillar of Social Rights for the EU. However, in spite of strengthening the anti-poverty framework progress has been disappointing over recent years. Also, the situation in relation to child poverty and social exclusion diverges widely across the EU and some countries have far more developed policies to prevent and reduce it.

### High level of child poverty and social exclusion across EU

A key reason why child poverty and social exclusion is an important part of the policy context at European level is the persistently high numbers of children at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion and the very wide divergence between countries. The European Commission’s *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2014* report highlighted that “in more than 20 Member States, the risk of poverty or social exclusion for children has risen since 2008, along with a worsening situation for their (mostly working-age) parents, with single-parent households facing the highest risks”. The 2015 report further documents the persistently high level of child poverty (see table below).

Table 1 Recent EU figures on child poverty and social exclusion

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
At-risk-of-poverty or exclusion of children (% of people aged 0-17)	27.5	27.3	27.9	27.7	27.7
At-risk-of-poverty (% of children population)	20.8	20.6	20.5	20.2	21.1
Severe material deprivation (% of children population)	9.8	10.1	11.8	11.1	10.4
Share of children living in low work intensity households (% of children population)	9.3	9.2	9.1	9.5	9.6
Risk of poverty of children in households at work (working Intensity > 0.2)	15.8	15.6	15.7	15.5	16.1

Source : European Commission, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2015*

<sup>1</sup> Commission Recommendation, 20 February 2013, Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/c\\_2013\\_778\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/c_2013_778_en.pdf)



The social and economic future of the European Union depends to a great degree on its capacity to fight child poverty and social exclusion and improve child well-being. Yet children (0-17) are more exposed to the “risk of poverty or social exclusion” than the overall population. At EU level, the difference is +3.2 (pp), with 27.7% of children (i.e. 26,295,000) at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared to 24.5% for the whole population. Only in eight Member States (Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Slovenia and Sweden) are children at less risk than the total population.

It is also striking that the situation got worse during the economic crisis. Between 2008 and 2013 child poverty or social exclusion increased by 1.1 percentage points (i.e. by 824,000 children) in the EU-27. It increased in most countries and only decreased in six (Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Poland and Romania).

Furthermore there is a wide divergence across the EU. In 2013 seven countries had child poverty or social exclusion rates of less than 20% (Finland; Denmark; Sweden; Czech Republic; Netherlands; Slovenia and Germany). At the other extreme three countries had rates of over 40% (Hungary; Romania; Bulgaria) and nine countries rates of between 30% and 38% (Portugal; Italy; Malta; United Kingdom; Spain; Ireland; Lithuania; Greece and Latvia).

The high level of poverty and social exclusion becomes particularly serious in the context of the Europe 2020 target of reducing poverty and social exclusion by 20 million from the level in 2008. In practice this would mean reducing the overall level of poverty and social exclusion in the EU-27 from 116.4 million to 96.4 million by 2020, i.e. a decrease by 17.2%. While the Europe 2020 Strategy does not include an EU social inclusion target in relation to the specific situation of children, if the same effort would be made for children as for the population as a whole – i.e. a decrease of 17.2% of the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion over the period 2010-2020 (2008-2018 survey data) – this would mean going from 25.2 million down to 20.9 million. In fact, as has been seen above, the trend in recent years has actually led to an increase in child poverty or social exclusion of 1.1 percentage points to 26.7 million in 2013. Of course, because of the urgent need to invest more in children and also because children are largely overrepresented in the at-risk-of-poverty-and-exclusion (AROE) group, this strictly proportional effort should not be considered sufficient. Thus there is now an even greater political imperative to examine what policies are needed to prevent and reduce child poverty and social exclusion.

## An increasingly strong policy framework

### Lisbon Treaty

The Lisbon Treaty, which came into force on 1 December 2009, is an important part of the political framework, as it provides the legal basis for the EU to play a much more active role in the struggle against poverty and social exclusion generally and child poverty in particular. The Lisbon Treaty made combating social exclusion and discrimination, the promotion of social justice and protection, equality between men and women, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child, core objectives of the Union (Article 3.3. of the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union). Furthermore, a “Horizontal Social Clause” (Article 9 of the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) was also added which requires that “In defining and



implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health.” Thus, while responsibility for preventing and tackling child poverty and social exclusion primarily rests with national and sub-national governments, the EU should now mainstream the well-being of children and their families at the heart of its entire policy making. In addition to the promotion and protection of the rights of the child being one of the objectives of the EU on which the Treaty on European Union (notably Article 3(3)) puts further emphasis, the rights of the child are also enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, where Article 24 of the Charter sets out that: “Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being.”

### **Europe 2020 Strategy**

The Europe 2020 Strategy puts the issue of tackling poverty and social exclusion as one of the EU’s key priorities and recognised that of the 80 million people in the EU who were at risk of poverty prior to the crisis 19 million of them were children. Thus, while reducing child poverty and social exclusion was not made a specific Europe 2020 target, it is an integral part of the overall target of reducing poverty and social exclusion by 20 million by 2020. In the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, while the social dimension has been underdeveloped, child poverty has received some increasing attention. For instance, a key part of the European Semester process which implements the Europe 2020 Strategy is the adoption of Country-specific recommendations (CSRs) by the European Council. In 2014 twenty-six Member States received one or more CSRs relating to children covering: income support, efficiency/effectiveness, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)/ childcare (access, affordability, quality), inclusive education/early school leaving, affordable housing, financial disincentives, reconciliation, youth activation, health, and Roma. This was an increase on 2013 when CSRs covered 14 Member States. However, in 2015, with the reduction of the overall number of CSRs (from 157 to 102) and the introduction of a more focussed approach the number of child focussed CSRs decreased.

### **Social Investment Package and Commission Recommendation**

In order to further strengthen the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the contribution of social policies to achieving the EU’s social goals the Commission, in 2013, adopted the Social Investment Package (SIP). An integral part of this package is the Commission Recommendation on “Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”. This Recommendation grew out of a decade of work at EU-level on child poverty and social exclusion and many inputs from NGOs, researchers and policy makers including the proposals set out by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) in an advisory report to the Commission.

The Commission Recommendation on investing in children advocates an integrated three pillar approach to preventing child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being: access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services and children’s right to participate. It stresses the importance of early intervention and preventative approaches noting that “Early intervention and prevention are essential for developing more effective and efficient policies, as public expenditure addressing the consequences of child



poverty and social exclusion tends to be greater than that needed for intervening at an early age”. It calls on Member States to:

- support parents’ access to the labour market and make sure that work ‘pays’ for them;
- improve access to affordable early childhood education and care services;
- provide adequate income support such as child and family benefits, which should be redistributive across income groups but avoid inactivity traps and stigmatisation;
- step up access to quality services that are essential to children’s outcomes – improve access to early childhood education and care including for children under 3, eliminate school segregation, enhance access to health, housing, social services;
- support children’s participation in extra-curricular activities and in services and decisions affecting children such as social services, education, alternative care.

The importance on the Recommendation has recently been reinforced with the adoption by the European Parliament of a written declaration on investing in children, which, with 428 signatures, is the most signed declaration since 2011. The declaration calls upon the European Commission to introduce specific indicators on children at risk of poverty; it also urges EU Member States to use EU funding to implement the Commission Recommendation “Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage” and to draw up a roadmap and adopt child well-being indicators, in line with the Recommendation.

### EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child

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In addition to the Commission Recommendation, which contains a strong statement on the importance of children’s rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Commission adopted an EU Agenda for the rights of the child in February 2011 which set out both general child rights principles and concrete actions in specific policy areas (e.g. child-friendly justice, child protection). The Agenda reaffirmed the strong commitment of all EU institutions and of all EU Member States to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of the child in all relevant EU policies. The EU Agenda recalled that the standards and principles of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child must continue to guide EU policies and actions that have an impact on the rights of the child. Under general principles, the EU Agenda underlined that the EU’s commitment to the rights of the child requires a coherent approach across all relevant EU actions...using the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UNCRC as a common basis for all EU action relevant to children. Furthermore, the “child rights perspective” must be taken into account in all EU measures affecting children. In the conclusion of the EU Agenda, the Commission called on the EU institutions and on the Member States to renew their commitment to step up efforts in protecting and promoting the rights of children.

### Early Childhood Education and Care

In 2011 the European Commission published a Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This acknowledges the crucial importance of going beyond the earlier conceptualisation of children’s services purely as child care for working parents and embraces the importance of integrating care and education, and addressing children’s needs holistically. A focus on child well-being emphasises the importance of high quality ECEC to foster the development of the child, regardless of the work status of the parent(s).



## Pillar of Social Rights

President Jean-Claude Juncker, in his speech to the European Parliament upon his election as Commission President, said that “I want Europe to be dedicated to being triple-A on social issues, as much as it is to being triple A in the financial and economic sense.” Also in July 2015 the Five Presidents (European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, together with the President of the Euro Summit, Donald Tusk, the President of the Eurogroup, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, and the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz) produced a report which stresses that one of the main lessons learned from the crisis is that a “triple-A EMU” must combine competitive economies that are able to innovate and succeed in an increasingly globalised world, with a high level of social cohesion. They stress that better labour market and social performance, as well as social cohesion should be at the core of the new process of “upward convergence”. This has now led to the European Commission putting forward a first, preliminary outline of what should become the European Pillar of Social Rights. As mentioned by President Juncker in his State of the Union address on 9 September 2015, “I believe we do well to start with this initiative within the euro area, while allowing other Member States to join in if they wish to do so”.

Throughout 2016, the Commission will engage in a debate with EU authorities, social partners, civil society and citizens on the content and role of the Pillar to move towards a deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union. The outcome of this debate should feed into a final text of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This provides a significant opportunity for those concerned with child poverty and social exclusion in general and in particular with promoting of early intervention and prevention to argue for this issue being put at the heart of the Pillar. The Commission Communication *Launching a consultation on a European Pillar of Social Rights* the Commission includes an annex entitled *First preliminary outline of a European Pillar of Social Rights*<sup>2</sup>. This gives a clear recognition of the importance of early intervention and prevention in addressing child poverty. The Annex states that “Childcare services improve the cognitive and social development of children, especially those living in disadvantaged households, and enhance educational and labour market prospects later on in life. Formal childcare is also a key tool for work-life balance, encouraging parental employment, especially for women. However, limited availability, access, affordability and quality remain major obstacles and hamper children’s development. The access of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to these services also remains challenging.” It thus proposes that:

- a. Access to quality and affordable childcare services, provided by adequately qualified professionals, shall be ensured for all children.
- b. Measures shall be taken at an early stage and preventive approaches should be adopted to address child poverty, including specific measures to encourage attendance of children with disadvantages backgrounds.”

<sup>2</sup> The Commission Communication and Annex is available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1457706909489&uri=COM:2016:127:FIN>



## B. Host country policy

### Ireland's child poverty and social exclusion context

Historically Ireland has had quite high levels of child poverty and social exclusion and combating child poverty and social exclusion has been a significant priority within Ireland's overall efforts to combat poverty. This has been reflected in successive National Action Plans on poverty and social exclusion since the mid 1990s. During the period of severe economic crisis and fiscal re-adjustment the rate of children living in consistent poverty (income poverty combined with deprivation of basic items) increased from 8.7% in 2009 to 11.7% in 2013, affecting 138,000 children.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding additional challenges, there remained existing underlying factors among parents contributing to child poverty such as joblessness, low education level, being a younger and especially a lone parent<sup>4</sup>. There is a clear connection between poverty and broader social exclusion: children's performance in schools is strongly linked to mother's education, while participation in physical exercise, organised sport and cultural activities is related to social class and parental income<sup>5</sup> as is progression to third level education<sup>6</sup>. It is also important to note the parents' involvement in their children's education is associated with their educational background<sup>7</sup> and that school absenteeism is linked to issues of parental engagement as well as unemployment<sup>8</sup>. A recent study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (Watson et al, 2015) has concluded that "Over the period 2004 to 2012, income poverty and material deprivation among children were significantly higher than among the rest of the Irish population. They were also higher than in most EU15 countries. Following the unprecedented economic recession beginning in 2008, overall levels of material deprivation and economic stress increased sharply."

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The need to do more to tackle child poverty is accepted and reflected in public policy priorities. Tackling child poverty is one of the key priorities in the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. A target has been set to lift over 70,000 children (aged 0-17 years) out of consistent poverty by 2020, a reduction of at least two-thirds on the 2011 level. This target will include reducing the higher consistent poverty risk for households with children as compared to non-child households (8.8 vs 4.2%), and for children as compared to adults (aged 18 years and over) (9.3 vs. 6%).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Protection (2015) Social Inclusion Monitor 2013 See [http://socialinclusion.ie/documents/2015-03\\_SIM2013\\_rpt\\_Final.pdf](http://socialinclusion.ie/documents/2015-03_SIM2013_rpt_Final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The latter group is at particularly high risk of poverty: in 2013 17% of lone parent households were in consistent poverty. Social Inclusion Monitor 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Growing Up in Ireland, the Live of 13 year olds, Child Cohort, Wave 2; See [www.growingup.ie](http://www.growingup.ie)

<sup>6</sup> It was shown that farmers, self-employed and higher professionals are much more likely to have their children in third level education than non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers. Higher Education Authority (2014), *Towards the Development of a New National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* – Consultation Paper. Dublin See [http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/consultation\\_paper\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/consultation_paper_web_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Central Statistics Office, Quarterly Household National Survey, Special Module, Parental Involvement in Children's Education, Quarter 2, 2012 <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2012/QNHSparentalinvolvementchildreducationq22012.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Darmody, M., Thorton, M. and Mc Coy, S. (2013) Reasons for Persistent Absenteeism among Irish Primary School Pupils ESRI Research Bulletin: Dublin. See [www.esri.ie/bulletin](http://www.esri.ie/bulletin)



## Ireland's policy framework

In recent years Ireland has been making considerable efforts to strengthen and better coordinate its policy framework for supporting the well-being of children and to develop a whole-of-government approach. Key institutional developments include the appointment of a dedicated Minister and the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 and the establishment of Tusla, a dedicated Child and Family Agency.<sup>9</sup> An enhanced local infrastructure is being developed with the establishment of Children and Young People's Services Committees<sup>10</sup> which operate at county-level. These county level structures are intended to support improved interagency working at a local level and link with the local authority structures and planning arrangements. They are a platform for a range of agencies to come together to plan and co-ordinate services and activities for children and young people.<sup>11</sup>

These institutional developments are leading to a more strategic and integrated approach to supporting children and the identification of clear cross-sectoral priorities. These are set out in the overarching policy framework which has been developed, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*. Two of the key cross-sectoral priorities identified which are closely interrelated are the reduction of child poverty and prevention and early intervention.

The cross-sectoral priority on the reduction of child poverty, which is being led by the Department of Social Protection, aims to build on the life-cycle approach of the National Actions Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016. Key activities identified include monitoring the child poverty target (i.e. of lifting over 70,000 children (aged 0-17 years) out of consistent poverty by 2020), assessing the social impact of the budget on children<sup>12</sup>, contributing to childcare investment plan and monitoring the cash benefit and activation reforms in respect of one parent families. The Department is responsible for providing income payments to families with children that have a proven poverty reduction effect.<sup>13</sup> The Department of Social Protection, in conjunction with its partner Departments and with stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector, is currently working to develop a cross-government multidimensional approach to tackling child poverty.

<sup>9</sup> More details on the Ireland's policy framework are set out in the Host country's background paper prepared by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Harnessing a national approach to mainstreaming the learning in prevention and early intervention to improve outcomes for children, particularly those at risk of poverty and social exclusion*. Available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024&langId=en&newsId=2328&furtherNews=yes>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cypsc.ie/>

<sup>11</sup> Their members comprise of the Tusla – The Child and Family Agency, Health Service Executive, an Garda Síochána (Irish Police Force), Education and Training Boards, Irish Primary Principals' Network, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Local Development Companies, City and County Childcare Committees, Probation Services. The Committee regularly engage with the local youth parliament (Comhairle na nÓg).

<sup>12</sup> Since 2014 a social impact assessment of welfare and income tax measures in the budget is carried out. Department of Social Protection (2015) Social impact assessment of the welfare and income tax measures in Budget 2016 – Research Briefing. See [www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/Pages/pr041115.aspx](http://www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/Pages/pr041115.aspx).

<sup>13</sup> 22 Watson, D. and Maitre, B. (2013) Social transfer and Poverty Alleviation in Ireland: an Analysis of the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2004-2011, Social Inclusion Report No. 4 See [www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Social-Transfer-and-Poverty-Alleviation-.aspx](http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Social-Transfer-and-Poverty-Alleviation-.aspx)



The cross-sectoral priority on prevention and early intervention, which is being led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, is informed by progressive universalism: where universal services are the main providers of prevention and early intervention services and therefore need to be inclusive and accessible but also need to provide targeted, effective intervention to further support children at risk. Adopting a focus on prevention and early intervention is a specific strategy to ensure that best use of the learning from the inputs and investments in this area over the past decade is realised and implemented via a systems-wide approach that underpins a re-balancing of resources toward prevention and early intervention. To this end the Department is currently focussing on mainstreaming and utilising learning derived from evaluations, monitoring and assessment processes, referring to and including those from service provision, programmes and practices.

The Department is currently developing a Quality and Capacity Building Initiative intended to support this systemic approach. The plan is to develop a coherent and coordinated series of activities to mainstream the learning in prevention and early intervention work with children and young people across a range of policy areas, sectors and practice fields. This ambitious programme is aimed at policy makers, commissioners, sectoral and representative bodies, service delivery organisations and practitioners. The key aims of the programme are as follows:

- Enhancing the evidence base by bringing together research and learning from existing and new initiatives;
- Enhancing the information base by supporting the development and alignment of existing data initiatives and related knowledge management systems;
- Enhancing the knowledge and skills base by developing coaching and training programme;
- Enhancing and sustaining the quality base by the development and implementation of a quality framework for children's services.

The initiative is intended to address deficits and delays in implementation processes, knowledge transfer and coordination, and to stimulate and support sectoral readiness along the continuum spanning policy to provision, with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for children.

### **Prevention and early intervention approaches in Ireland**

For more than a decade there has been a considerable investment in evidence-based and evidence-informed prevention and early intervention services and programmes, co-funded by the Irish Government and The Atlantic Philanthropies<sup>14</sup>, in a number of areas such as early childhood, learning, child health and development, child behaviour, parenting and promoting inclusion.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Atlantic Philanthropies was founded in 1982 by Irish-American businessman Charles "Chuck" Feeney. They have contributed to programmes to help the disadvantaged in Ireland, and in numerous other countries throughout the world, often co-funding with governments. <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/>

<sup>15</sup> More details on previous and current initiatives can be found in Appendix 1 of the Host Country paper for the peer review which is available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024&langId=en&newsId=2328&furtherNews=yes>





The latest and perhaps most extensive initiative, the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme (2013-2017) is a prevention and early intervention initiative consisting of committed funding of 30 million EUR for an area-based approach to implement evidence-based programmes through consortia of agencies and organisations in thirteen geographical areas. The ABC initiative is expected to improve outcomes among children and their parents and contribute to addressing inter-generational poverty where it is most entrenched. However, the ultimate goal is to mainstream learning from the ABC programme, its precursor programmes and other current and related initiatives to respective policy and practice domains, with a view to responding to child poverty and thus improve children's lives in a strategic manner.

Key findings from the evaluation of the ABC Programme's predecessor, the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) 2006-2013 and other prevention and early intervention services across the island of Ireland were brought together by the Centre for Effective Services (CES) in their 2014 report *Prevention and early intervention in children and young people's services* (Rochford, Doherty and Owens, 2014). This report identifies eight key lessons:

1. supporting parents pays real dividends in terms of better outcomes for children;
2. because of the importance of early brain development, a strong focus should be placed on supporting children's development from birth to three years;
3. initiatives to support children's learning must promote a love of learning and be clear how they will integrate into the school setting;
4. supporting key transitions such as moving from an early years' service to primary school – can make a significant difference to a child's life outcomes;
5. programmes that support social and emotional learning and promote inclusion should be supported by wider school structures and policies;
6. the development of personal skills and aptitudes should be a part of formal and ongoing training for all professionals working with children;
7. consulting with local communities helps to ensure that prevention and early intervention services and programmes fit with the needs of children, young people and their families;
8. effective inter-agency structures are vital to ensuring better services for children, young people and families.



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This learning and the emerging lessons from the ABC programme are now informing Ireland's efforts to develop a more systemic and mainstreamed approach to early intervention and prevention. In doing so the key challenges are fourfold:

- to rebalance resources towards prevention and early intervention;
- to assess interventions and services efficiently to collect learning so as to combine universal with targeted services to greatest effect and most efficiently;
- to use learning to embed changes in service provision and professional practice that goes beyond individual programmes to systemic change;
- to connect policy, provision and practice vertically and horizontally on an ongoing and sustained basis.



## C. Policies and experiences in peer countries and stakeholder contributions

Participants from other Member States and from stakeholders contributed considerable experience and insights to developing effective prevention and early intervention programmes. Some of their examples of national policies and programmes are summarised below.<sup>16</sup>

### Belgium

The Belgium overall framework for tackling child poverty has two key elements: the national child poverty reduction plan and the federal measure for the support of local consultation platforms for the prevention and detection of child poverty. The national child poverty reduction plan situates the fight against child poverty and social exclusion right at the core of the Europe 2020 strategy. A second national action plan is currently being elaborated. A multidimensional approach is being adopted which reflects the three pillars of the Recommendation on investing in children. There is a strong emphasis on coordination and communication with all key players. With the federal measure for the support of local innovative consultation platforms for the prevention and detection of childhood poverty, the Federal Government calls on Public Social Welfare Centres and associations to create partnerships between local actors (for example schools, day-care centres, poverty organisations etc.) or the strengthening of existing partnerships in order to ensure that child poverty is detected in a preventive and proactive manner and to look for joint remedies.

In Flanders there are coordination challenges as there is a division between care for children (until the age of three) and education (from three up). As a result there has been only a limited integration of services. However, in 2013, Flanders reformed the preventive family support by the creation of local Houses of the Child. These Houses of the Child are local networks of services working for and with parents-to-be and parents with children. These networks cover education, youth care services, child day care, youth services, social welfare services, and local health services. They are inspired by recent developments in the area of integrated services for families in countries like Sweden. At this moment, there are networks working in approximately 170 local communities and cities in Flanders, that is, in 55% of the local communities and cities in the Flanders region. The creation of the local Houses of the Child, together with the installation of local networks to fight poverty (a platform bringing together a wide range of local actors, from anti-poverty associations to child day-care centres, schools, sports clubs, Public Social Welfare Centres) has brought a local dynamic with a strong accent on ECEC as a means to create maximum opportunities for all children. The Houses of the Child combine universal and targeted services. They offer a universal service to all families but also specific attention is paid to low-income families by for instance offering meeting places for young parents and their children where advice is given by professionals or by organising educational and family support at home for those families

<sup>16</sup> The Country Comments papers prepared by participants give more details on the policies and programmes pursued by participating countries and stakeholders. They are available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024&langId=en&newsId=2328&furtherNews=yes>.



In the Wallonia Brussels Federation a public service, ONE, has three main missions: to support families, to control and finance day care centres and provide preventative healthcare. ONE provides universal services for families, pregnant women and babies, whilst ensuring no discrimination to be committed. ONE also has a system of specific actions targeted at specific needs and specific populations. It implements multidisciplinary action, namely medical, social, psychological and pedagogical care. It also appreciates the importance of support from the local community. It combines local action with scientific research. It runs a number of cross-disciplinary missions, such as parenting support, actions focused on fighting against child poverty and reducing child abuse. One of its targeted actions is an internal plan entitled “Poverty, Perinatal and Childhood: A Mobilisation of ONE” including 31 separate actions with objectives, budgeting and planning.

## Bulgaria

Like Ireland Bulgaria has set a child poverty sub-target - this is to reduce the number of children aged 0-18 living in poverty by 78,000. A focus on promoting child well-being is put in many strategic and programme documents at national level – National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Development Programme: Bulgaria 2020, National Strategy for the Child 2008–2018, National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020 and the Action Plan for its implementation. As a result of child care reform and the implemented process of deinstitutionalisation of child care over the last years, there has been a steady rise in the number of the community-based social services for children as alternative to institutional care. Early childhood development (ECD) is a relatively new concept in policy making. The development and provision of integrated cross-sectoral services is one of the key priorities of the current government’s agenda. In this context, a strong focus is put on the development of innovative integrated services for ECD to support the implemented measures to prevent child abandonment and to provide opportunities for children to grow up in a family environment.

Since 2010 the Social Inclusion Project (SIP) has aimed to prevent social exclusion and reduce child poverty by investing in early childhood development. The focus of the services for children up to age three is mostly placed on formation and development of parenting skills and supporting parents in raising their children. The main emphasis of the approach towards children between three years of age and pre-school age is their inclusion into larger peer groups to promote socialisation and development of skills to guarantee equal start at school. SIP services include: integration of children into kindergartens and preparatory groups/classes; additional preparation for equal start at school by attending summer schools; children’s health consultation and disease prevention activities; crèches fee reduction; early intervention for children with disabilities; individual pedagogical support for children with disabilities to join first class; formation and development of parenting skills through group and individual work with expectant and current parents; family counselling and support including group and individual sessions for family planning and individual work to solve specific problems in raising children; Family centres for children from 0 to three years and from three to seven years, provided in case of insufficient capacity of existing kindergartens and nurseries.

The Early Intervention Programme (EIP) (Karin Dom Foundation) aims to introduce a new model of services, provided in the natural environment of the child, and based on partnership and family-centred approach. This model of early intervention works to support



and strengthen parent capacity as well as child outcomes, and provides parents who have decided to abandon their child with alternatives to institutionalised forms of support. Services include: home visits, parent-toddler play groups, family support networks and breastfeeding support. The Programme provides services to families of children aged 0 to 4, who are either with a disability, delay in one or more of the developmental areas or are at risk of developmental delay (e.g. social factors, low birth weight, etc.).

## Cyprus

Cyprus had no national policy on children before 2011 when the economy was very strong. However, after the crisis, things changed. A national agency for family policy was set up in 2015, coordinated by the Ministry of Labour, involving ministries, NGOs, the church and trade unions. A Strategy for Social Policy 2014-2020 has been developed which emphasises the promotion of child well-being. The Strategy adopts a multidisciplinary approach on child well-being focussing on income support and empowering families, on child care, on the education system, on health care, housing and on sports and healthy lifestyle. The Strategy clearly recognises the challenges faced by Cyprus which at the same time constitute priorities for action, namely the provision of quality and affordable early childhood education and care services for children under the age of 5, the high unemployment and the decrease of family incomes.

Most policies and programmes affecting children are family-centred and aimed at improving the general family functioning (family support). Further to active labour market policies and income support, the classic model of social casework services is followed with regard to marginalised families at risk of having their children taken into care. Social Services Officers play a key role in counselling parents, networking families with basic services (e.g. access to benefits, health services, school) and community services (day-care, social support). Concerning alternative care, the Social Welfare Services place children in need of care and removed from their families mainly into foster care. The best interest of the child is at the centre of policies and programmes.

Social welfare services are supplied through child and family centres to improve family support. Social welfare services play a key role in counselling parents, networking of families, access to benefits, health services etc. Social care programmes can be supplied by private individuals or NGOs, e.g. day-care centres for preschool children from 4 months to 4 years, childminders and day-care centres for school-aged children including children with disabilities. Operators receive money from the government for expenses. Over 2 million EUR was spent in 2015.

In addition to improving access to ECEC and also safeguarding the child's well-being and school attendance, the Ministry of Education of Culture has promoted the implementation of educational measures and policies that would alleviate poverty and facilitate the smooth integration of all vulnerable pupils, especially children regardless of background. Key actions include: expansion of pre-primary education; all-day schools in primary and pre-primary education; multicultural education; health promotion actions; actions for school and social inclusion (Educational Priority Zones); summer schools; educational and summer camps; feeding pupils in financial need. The most important challenge is the change in cultural attitudes – in the past people were not ready to admit that they were living in poverty, but this is no longer the case.

## Czech Republic

Although the Czech Republic has a low child poverty rate many challenges persist. There is no single strategy for combatting child poverty and social exclusion and policies are quite fragmented with no single ministry in charge so coordination is not easy. However, in recent years several strategies have been created focussing both specifically on complex related issues and generally on the rights of children. These include: the Social Inclusion Strategy (2014-2020), the National Strategy to Protect Children's Rights "The right to a childhood", and the Strategy of Education Policy of the Czech Republic until 2020. Essentially support for children and families with children at risk of poverty and social exclusion can be divided into financial support which is provided by means of cash benefits directly or indirectly through tax relief, and non-financial support which is provided through the social services and services for families and includes support for (social) housing. Other important indirect instruments consist of support for employment (specifically women/mothers) and education (with an emphasis on early and inclusive education). The most important social services concerned with preventing child poverty and social exclusion include so-called social activation services which are provided to families with children for whom there is a threat to normal development as a result of the long-term impact of the family's difficult social situation. A further important social service in this respect consists of low-threshold facilities for children and young people that provide outpatient services for children and young people at risk of social exclusion and which focus particularly on leisure activities, counselling and providing motivation for education.

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There is recognition that early childhood education and care services (ECEC) play a crucial role in the fight against social exclusion but there is a shortage of ECEC services for children. The availability of quality facilities for very young children is essential in terms of their further development and improving their life chances, especially with regard to children from socially disadvantaged families. Czech ECEC services combine three basic complementary functions: childcare which allows for the employment of parents; upbringing and education; and the social integration of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and disabled children. In order to solve the issue of lack of high quality care and educational facilities for children up to 2 years of age so-called children's groups are being introduced which will include specialised educational and socialisation coverage where necessary. Many such facilities will thus provide an environment of prevention and early intervention. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has recently introduced a pilot scheme regarding so-called micro-crèches, i.e. care facilities for small groups of young children (up to 4 children). Apart from their main function, they will provide support for the employment of mothers of small children and as such potentially prevent the threat of poverty with respect to families with children and contribute towards improving the social integration of children from marginalised social groups.

Municipalities are key players in the field of prevention and intervention. They are responsible for the coordination of the activities of operators in the field of social services, housing etc., and are responsible for local territorial planning and overseeing the distribution of grants to non-profit organisations.



## Estonia

The main objective of the Estonian *Strategy of Children and Families 2012-2020* is to improve the well-being and quality of living of children and families. The focus of the strategy is on knowledge-based and uniform child and family policy, positive parenting, children's rights and child protection system, family benefits and services and reconciliation of work and private life.

In Estonia there are a number of interesting evidence-based prevention programmes. The Ministry of Social Affairs is piloting in cooperation with the National Institute for Health Development an evidence-based parenting programme *The Incredible Years Preschool Basic Parent Programme and Advance programme* among Estonian and Russian speaking parents during the period 2014 -2017. The parenting programme is implemented and piloted within the framework of the project *Support System Development for CAYR* and its main objective is to help parents develop efficient coping strategies to prevent and successfully deal with behaviour and development problems in children. In the long term, the programme should contribute to mitigate aggressive and antisocial behaviour, substance abuse, and dropping out of school among children and young people. In another initiative, *Circle of security*, two educated trainers offer programmes and offer, in collaboration with local governments and midwives, support to families by enhancing attachment security between parents and children. A further initiative is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme. The *PAX Good behaviour Game pilot project* by the National Institute of Health Development is being implemented in basic school first classes to prevent behavioural problems.

Estonia emphasises the importance of universal preventive services for children, but also the difficulty to measure the effectiveness of primary prevention. For example, the country plans to restore the system *Home visit for every new-born*, to obtain information about the home situation during the first home visit and to plan interventions if children are at risk. The positive side of universal home visits is to introduce families to the health care system, assess family resources and empower parents. The effectiveness of targeted home visits is confirmed by many good quality research studies (e.g. Nurse Family partnership programme). Although targeted interventions for disadvantaged children exist, they sometimes come too late. By the time a child gets hurt, is diagnosed with a disability or drops out at school, interventions are usually more expensive. It is important to get a holistic picture of family needs and all round services.

## Germany

Germany, in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy, supports the employment of parents through universal and specific financial family benefits and services. It grants a basic security benefit which is a legally enshrined form of assistance to allow people to live a dignified life and to empower them to become non-dependent as soon as possible. For children the social assistance incorporates a school and social participation package. In addition, there are several financial family benefits, for example: the child allowance for all families, the child supplement for families with little income, the housing allowance for households with little income and the subsistence allowance for single parents.

Prevention and early intervention services operate at the intersection of basically two separated sectors: health care and youth welfare. They have undergone a process of

intensive development in terms of political scope as well as implementation of provision in recent years. The *National Initiative on Prevention and Early Intervention* (2012-2017) aims to promote sustainable implementation of early intervention services at the local level (municipal level) and to ensure high quality standards of services. Implementation of the initiative is currently and continuously being evaluated. It has pursued a rather universal approach, promoting services for all families in stressful situations. However, current and future work in this field is characterised by a more targeted approach: provision for three specific groups is promoted: fathers, families suffering from mental illnesses and families with migrant background.

Prevention and early intervention services focus on parents before and after giving birth and in the years of early childhood. The idea is to support parents' educational competencies by preventive programmes in order to reduce risks for children and strengthen families. Service provision is very heterogeneous and comprises universal as well as targeted programmes. Thus, programmes can address all families in terms of health care provision within broader social welfare state patterns (universal/primary prevention), but they also can address families suffering from all sorts of distress, including poverty and social exclusion (selective/secondary prevention). In recent years growing attention has been given to professional cooperation within the field. Interdisciplinary professional networks are regarded as vital and are being promoted – both structurally and financially – on different levels, especially on the local level. The most important and most common prevention and early intervention services are (usually responsibility lies with the youth welfare services at municipal level): welcome letters by municipalities; welcoming home visits; family midwives; parenting courses; parent-child-groups/baby and toddlers groups; prevention projects addressing pupils; professionals accompanying families on a voluntary basis; counselling services for parents; and educational support by multiprofessional teams.

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In addition to genuine prevention services, the sector of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has become more and more important with regards to prevention in early childhood. The idea of integrating children into ECEC services in order to counteract unfavourable family settings has a long tradition in Germany. Access for children has been made universal. At the same time, ECEC service provision has been heavily promoted during the last decade. Thus, the number of young children (0-3 years) participating in ECEC has considerably increased (2008:17.6%, 2015:32.9%). In addition to this approach of universality, targeted programmes are being implemented within ECEC services, covering language development, health issues, science-oriented education, parenting programmes etc. Summing up, ECEC settings can be understood as a service with preventive character, accessible for all children and offering support for parents in risk situations.

The *National Centre on Early Prevention* (NCEP) supports the development of prevention and early intervention services. It is a knowledge platform to better prevent neglect and violence in early childhood to foster an evidence-based approach of intervention and support cooperation among all actors involved.





## Greece

Greece has a very high level of child poverty and child poverty rates have literally shot up during the crisis. Almost half of children in Greece now reside in households with the living standards of the “2008 poor”. The decline in living standards of children comes at a time when the quality of education, health and social care services provided by the state is deteriorating as well, putting extreme pressure on the family as the only provider.

Like Ireland and Bulgaria Greece has set a child poverty target. This is to reduce by 100,000 the number of children (0-17 years) at risk of poverty. Initiatives have been developed for enhancing the effectiveness of social expenditure transfers as well as strengthening the social safety net for the most vulnerable groups. Emphasis is given to policies: supporting the participation in the labour market, providing a guaranteed minimum level of living standard, providing access to public healthcare and education. Family support, especially for the most vulnerable families is a fundamental political priority.

As a result of the serious rise in child poverty and lack of adequate resources emphasis is given to targeted and effective policies to tackle the issue. Various cash benefits have been converted into two means-tested benefits, focused on the most vulnerable and in line with the restrictions imposed by the fiscal consolidation programme. Apart from the above, financial support continues to be provided to low-income families like those with children living in mountainous and/or disadvantaged areas, those with children up to sixteen years and single-parent families. Part of Greece’s 2013 primary surplus was allocated to the payment of a “social dividend” to the more vulnerable groups in society. In addition, several programmes have been launched, mainly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and concern the provision of free meals, food, fruits and milk to pupils in school units, mainly in “Educational Priority Zones” (EPZ). The Ministry of Rural Development and Food has launched the implementation of two programmes “Plan for the promotion of fruit consumption in schools” and “EU school milk programme” financed by the EU.

In the area of early intervention emphasis is given in the provision of access to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care services for children. The data show an improvement in the relevant coverage rates of childcare facilities but these are still well below the EU average.

An interesting initiative in education is the development of Educational Priority Zones (EPZ). School units of primary and secondary education that are part of the EPZ operate in regions with special characteristics (low educational attendance, high percentage of early school leaving, low percentage of access to higher education and low socio-economic conditions) aiming at promoting an inclusive education system. “Reception Classes” and “Supportive Tutoring Classes” for students coming from Sensitive Social Groups are also operated.

Efforts are being made to improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children. Access to the public health-care system is free to all children covered by their parents’ work-related public social insurance schemes. In addition, refugees and migrant children without residence permission enjoy full medical and health coverage. Children of uninsured and very low-income families (fulfilling certain eligibility criteria) have also free access to health services on a special “social welfare booklet”.

To preserve social cohesion and address the vast social inequalities, the Government is taking measures to protect the most vulnerable segments of the population. Law no.4320, adopted in March 2015 on addressing the “humanitarian crisis”, ensures the provision of basic goods and services to persons and families living under extreme poverty conditions through the provision of free electricity, rent allowance and food stamps. Priority was given to homeless and families with children. Around 300,000 persons. have already benefited from this law.

## Lithuania

Lithuania has a high level of child poverty or social exclusion (35.4% compared to an EU-average of 27.6% in 2013). However, there is a positive dynamic in the development of prevention and early intervention services. The National Reform Programme reflects the Programme of Children Welfare for 2013-2018 and its implementation measures. which are receiving more financial support for the period 2013-2018 and aim to make services for children and families more accessible and decrease poverty and social exclusion. Special attention is paid to early prevention and intervention: outpatient services for children and families have been developed to decrease the number of children growing up in social risk families or institutions.

One of the Programme’s methods is to set up child day centres (CDCC) in municipalities. An increasing number of CDCC projects are being financed every year and the number of children using their services has been growing. Municipal administrations allocated additional funds to CDCC for the provision of half of all day social care services to children and families which were financed by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour in 2014. It should be noted that the majority of CDCCs established in municipalities are operating in cities, district centres and larger towns to which children from more remote areas have limited access.

In order to reduce the number of children in child care homes and children younger than three years old who are sent to child care institutions, funding is provided to programmes offering various services for both the child and his/her mother (father) going through a crisis in order allow the child to grow up in its own family and help the family overcome crisis and live independently. Participants of the programmes received essential items, food, safe temporary housing and other kinds of support (information, mediation, consultation, representation, administration of personal documents, psychological, legal, medical consultations, help with developing household skills, professional orientation, job-seeking and temporary supervision of children). In 2013, 36 projects to improve social and positive parenting skills and support families to overcome their crises and become self-dependent, p were financed.

Nevertheless, Lithuania is still facing significant challenges in developing prevention and early intervention services. For instance, CDCCs cannot support all children from social risk families (only 10% of children are covered), the quality of the service provision is not sufficiently assessed and there are insufficient psychological services for children from vulnerable families. Overall, Lithuania lacks an integrated and multidimensional strategy and evidence-based policy-making and monitoring is weak. Although there is progress regarding deinstitutionalisation, community-based services and the promotion of integrated



education should be improved. While huge investments in children and families have been made during the economic crisis, there is still a need for more coordinated and integrated approaches at both national and local level.

## The Netherlands

From a comparative perspective, children in the Netherlands face a much lower risk than in the EU generally, but in absolute terms poverty among children in the Netherlands has been growing. Since the crisis, many families have seen their income decrease as a result of job-loss or debts and this has led to a rise in poverty and social exclusion. The government has therefore stepped up its policies to combat poverty and indebtedness on the basis of an integrated approach and set several priorities, i.e. no child should be left on the sidelines, prevention and early detection of poverty and debt is crucial, policies should be implemented at local level and tailor-made, public-private partnerships should be strengthened and sharing knowledge and best practices stimulated.

The Netherlands applies an integrated approach which starts with investing in a stable environment: an adequate income for parents, access to essential and qualitative care and early investment in education. The Netherlands has institutionalised a comprehensive set of services aimed at the well-being of children. This system operates both at a central and decentralised level: the 15 provincial authorities/large urban areas and 408 local authorities have responsibilities regarding youth policy and related services. They carry out their tasks with a great degree of autonomy.

Since 2010 there has been an increased investment in the quality of childcare services including early childhood education (ECEC). The Opportunities for Development through Quality and Education Act (2010) (“Wet OKE”) aims to support children between two and five years old at risk of a language deficiency or being educationally disadvantaged through preschool and early childhood education. This policy works towards diminishing the differences between free pre-schools and fee-based childcare through the Toddler Project (“Peuterproject”) by creating one financial structure for the governmental subsidy working parents receive, and by equalising and improving the pedagogical quality of pre-school and childcare.

In 2015, large parts of the social protection system were decentralised and devolved to municipalities which were considered to be more capable of understanding and analysing someone’s situation because of a more direct contact. Responsibilities that currently fall under the jurisdiction of municipalities include youth-care, community shelter, labour participation, poverty, social inclusion and debt relief. Child services for which municipalities are responsible include: special assistance, if relevant in kind (e.g. a bicycle for schoolgoing children); municipalities are obliged to offer targeted ECEC programmes to all children aged between 2 and 5 at risk of a language deficiency or being educationally disadvantaged at a preschool or day-care institution. Moreover, municipalities are obliged to make agreements with the relevant institutions/organisations to identify and reach the target group and regulate in-flow in preschool education programmes.

Before the above mentioned decentralisations, all municipalities had a Centre for Youth and Family to give child-rearing advice and, if necessary, introduce parents and children to other areas of the youth care system. In the new system of decentralisations, municipalities are

in charge of youth care and hence may either provide these services themselves or organise their new responsibilities differently. Some municipalities decided to continue working with the Centres for Youth and Family.

## Save the Children

Save the Children emphasises that growing up in poverty and social exclusion can dramatically change children's chances to enjoy their rights. Across Europe, Save the Children is witnessing how poverty deprives children of educational opportunities, access to healthcare, healthy diets, adequate housing and living environments, family support and protection, along with access to leisure, culture and sports activities. It stresses that child poverty needs to be addressed from a child rights perspective and with a cross-sectoral and integrated approach. This will ensure the right to be heard, non-discriminatory access to education, health care services and leisure activities. The European response to improving the living conditions of poor children must be multidimensional, rights-based and integrated, aiming at ensuring that children and their families have access to adequate resources and quality services.

Save the Children stresses that child poverty is not only about lack of material resources but also involves deprivation of educational opportunities. In particular it emphasises that the early years from birth to compulsory education represent a crucial period for the development of the child, as the capabilities and the skills which will accompany individuals throughout life start to form. For this reason, access to formal child care and education are essential rights of the child, and need to be taken into consideration when defining and measuring child poverty and social exclusion. Another key element of social exclusion is early school leaving which is strongly correlated with child poverty, learning difficulties, discrimination, bullying and low self-confidence, rejection by peers, lack of academic support and parental supervision, hampered mobility with regards to school accessibility, and living in remote or socially and economically disadvantaged urban areas. Offering a greater variety of education and training opportunities, both formal and informal such as after school programmes could support the reduction of early school-leaving. In the light of this Save the Children decided to tackle the education poverty of children and adolescents living in disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring them education opportunities that are essential to growth.

Save the Children highlights two integrated strategic types of intervention: a community based territorial intervention and an individual-customised intervention. The community based territorial interventions involve the implementation of hub centres with high education density in the areas deprived of services and opportunities that are open to children and adolescents. Hub centres offer playing-recreational and training activities, for example, learning support, promotion of reading, safer internet, physical, artistic activities, labs for theatre, photography, writing, music and education about proper nutrition and healthy lifestyles. Moreover, parents can receive legal, psychological, paediatric and parenthood assistance support. Save the Children also stresses that it is pivotal to create mums centres, meeting places, in urban contexts that are lacking in public services, where parents are given support in the process of improving care for their children and in the management of their economic resources.



The individual-customised interventions involve an individualised plan of support, and an education endowment dedicated to provide goods and services to individual children and adolescents living in certified conditions of poverty. For example, education endowments can be for the purchase of books and school supplies, musical instruments, help with public transport costs, participation in summer camps and support for school trips etc.

## SOS Children's Villages International

SOS Children's Villages International emphasises that prevention and early intervention services to address child poverty and social exclusion are an integral part of the broader child protection and social welfare system. Poverty and social exclusion continue to be among the main reasons for separating children from their families in Europe. In many cases, family separation can be avoided by ensuring that families have access to resources and welfare services, such as income support, adequate housing, day care and early childhood education and care (ECEC), and to targeted services, such as parental support and helping families to develop parental skills in a non-stigmatising way.

SOS provides services and support to ensure that effective prevention for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is built around three basic levels. The first level is primary prevention, which is achieved through the provision of basic services, grounded in a wide range of UNCRC provisions, such as health care (art 24), education (art 28), birth registration (art 7), social security (art 26) and non-discrimination (art 2, art 30). The next level is secondary prevention, which is targeted at families who are identified or have declared themselves as being vulnerable, and for whom, for whatever reason, primary prevention measures have proved insufficient. The children concerned here include those who are at risk of being relinquished and those whose removal from the family on grounds of protection may be considered. Secondary prevention measures include individualised counselling and support to parents and children, parenting support and education, access to day care and financial assistance. Measures can target specific vulnerable groups, such as single and teenage parents and parents and children with disabilities and special needs. The third level is tertiary prevention which comprises actions taken in cases where neither primary nor secondary prevention have been sufficient, making the entry into alternative care unavoidable. Efforts at this level focus on returning a child in alternative care to the care of his or her parents wherever possible, at an appropriate moment and under appropriate conditions.

To ensure that prevention and early intervention services are provided in a non-stigmatising and empowering way, SOS supports the principle of progressive universalism. A predominantly universal approach should be adopted as this is the most effective and efficient way to prevent problems arising and to ensure equal opportunities for all children. Within this broader approach, targeted support should be provided to children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, enabling them to overcome barriers and access mainstream services and opportunities. It also stresses that the development of effective prevention and early intervention requires a holistic and a child rights based approach.

SOS Children's Villages operates Family Strengthening Programmes (FSPs) which aim to prevent the separation of children from their family of origin and to reintegrate children back into their family of origin. The main principle of the FSPs is to provide services based on a holistic approach towards child development and the individual needs of each child

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and their families. In doing so, each FSP supports children and families to access essential services (targeted universalism) and helps families in building their capacity to protect and care for their children. The range of services that is provided differs from location to location and is determined to the needs of the local community. Examples of these services include: ensuring that children have access to essential services, e.g. education, health care, nutrition, legal support and housing; supporting parents in creating a nurturing family life. This includes teaching skills to improve parenting, care, child health and household budget planning; supporting parents to have a stable income through vocational training, literacy programmes and support to find a job or set up a business; provision of day-care services for children; and provision of therapy and psychological support.



## D. Main issues discussed during the meeting

A wide range of issues were discussed by participants during the meeting. Ten, in particular stood out and these are discussed in more detail below.

### Why do prevention and early intervention matter

There was a strong consensus that prevention and early intervention can have a lifelong impact and is one of the most effective ways to combat child poverty and social exclusion. The debate emphasised that the first three years influence the entire life trajectory: 80% of the brain has developed by age three. Antenatal conditions such as maternal health, nutrition and stress also have a long-term impact. But prevention and early intervention can be effective at any age as some issues only become apparent later in life. However, it was also pointed out that there is often a lack of clarity about what prevention and early intervention involves. Thus, in order to foster a better understanding of prevention and early intervention there is a need to build up a shared understanding of what it involves and how to measure it. A suggestion that developing a prevention and early intervention index to measure countries' performance and make cross-country comparisons more feasible was positively received by participants.

### How to win political support for prevention and early intervention

Several participants highlighted the difficulty of persuading policy makers to invest in developing comprehensive prevention and early intervention services. Politicians tend to respond to crises rather than adopting the long-term strategies needed to make a difference throughout a person's lifetime. Difficulties in securing long-term funding from both private and public sources is an obstacle to the planning of effective prevention and early intervention programmes. This highlights the need to strengthen political arguments for more investment and to present them more forcefully. It is agreed that there is a need to complement moral and rights based arguments and evidence of the positive impacts of early intervention with strong economic arguments.

It was stressed that there are indeed strong economic arguments for prevention and early intervention policies that can be marshalled. If countries do not invest in prevention and early intervention, they will have to pay more later for alternative means of care. These are more expensive and have worse social outcomes. Research shows that children who leave care have less chance of finding a job and a higher risk of prison or suicide. So it is crucially important to invest early. Early intervention must be seen in the broad picture of child protection and social welfare.<sup>17</sup>

### Why does a multidimensional and coordinated approach matter

There was a strong consensus among participants that the well-being and development of children has many different elements and involves many different policy domains. Thus

<sup>17</sup> During the discussion reference was made to a helpful 2014 report prepared by Brian Harvey for the Prevention and Early Intervention Network which sets out the evidence and arguments for investing in this area. This report, *The Case for Prevention and Early Intervention*, is available at <http://www.pein.ie/blog/new-pein-policy-paper-the-case-for-prevention-early-intervention/>.



effective interventions need a multidimensional and holistic approach to meeting the needs of children. This requires effective coordination across policy areas. Services need to be planned and delivered in a joined up and mutually reinforcing way. This can be challenging in systems (such as Ireland) where policy development and delivery has traditionally often happened in silos. There is a danger that people are not interested in a coordinated approach if they do not get outcomes (results) for their own department. To counter this there is a need to foster a sense of shared ownership and goals across departments and agencies and a common understanding of what is needed for effective interventions. For this to work strong coordinating mechanisms are needed at both national and regional/local levels.

## Why it is necessary to develop a systemic whole-of-government approach

A key issue raised was how to balance the development of local initiatives with developing a more mainstream and strategic whole-of-government approach. It was generally accepted that successful local prevention and early learning projects are very important in identifying new ways of working and pioneering ways of reaching those children and families most in need of support. However, it was also pointed out that local initiatives, if they are not set within a system wide approach, often tend to be short-term and lack forward thinking. They may work in their own area but they do not ensure that all children in need are reached. Thus it was argued that developing an overall strategy is tactically important for building momentum and building support and commitment across the range of government services for children. However, in doing so it is really important that the positive learning from local level initiatives is mainstreamed into mainline service provision and that an overall national strategy on early intervention and prevention retains a strong focus on effective initiatives at local level. It is only at the local level that the coordination and integration of services and supports and outreach to the most vulnerable children can be fully realised.

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## What should be the balance between universal and targeted policies

The issue of how to ensure good quality services for all children while also ensuring that those children most at risk are reached was raised. It can be a challenge, particularly at times of economic austerity, to convince policy makers that services should be available to everyone rather than just focussed on those most in need. Following discussion on the relative merits of universal versus targeted measures, it was agreed that both are necessary, with a majority in favour of progressive universalism. It was argued that universal services can attract more public support and that this helps to ensure the quality of services provided. If you develop services just aimed at people who are poor they tend to be poor services and can lead to stigmatisation. It was pointed out that initiatives in other policy areas, such as tackling high blood pressure and improving nutrition, have shown that universal policies which move the *whole* population in the right direction are the most successful because those who have most to gain do better. This also helps to make interventions acceptable and improve quality of services.

However, it is really important that mainline services identify and reach out to the those children and families who may be less likely to avail of services or who may need additional





support. Child protection services can play a key role in identifying those children who are at risk. An area based approach which concentrates on disadvantaged communities can also be another way of reaching those at risk. Also targeting services to groups such as children from migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, including Traveller children, can be important.

## What type of evidence is important for effective policy making

Participants agreed that using the best available evidence to develop accessible, affordable and good quality services is key to lifting children and families out of poverty. However, an important issue is how to decide what constitutes good quality evidence. There is a need for research reports to be rigorously assessed for their quality and it is important to peer review research.

There was general agreement that evaluation of programmes needs to be rigorous and programmes that are clearly not working should be stopped, although even these can offer useful learning. Following the economic crisis and resulting budgetary constraints, more emphasis is being put on effectiveness and value for money. This has enhanced the attention being given to monitoring and evaluation of programmes. The challenge is to find which programmes are most cost-effective.

Several participants stressed the importance of involving all stakeholders in the development and assessment of research and evaluation studies.

## How can a child rights approach help to reconcile a focus on children with support for parents and families

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Some participants stressed the difference between focussing on child poverty and on family poverty. They emphasised that children have specific needs that should be met in their own right and regardless of family circumstances and that they have a right to grow up in a safe environment. Meeting children's needs means ensuring access to quality services in a broad range of areas such as health, social services, early childcare and education and housing as well as providing protection for children at risk. Also important for children's development and well-being is having access to music, culture and sports activities.

Several participants emphasised that a focus on children's rights, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, can help to ensure that practitioners and policy makers put the needs of children first. However, it was recognised that adopting a child rights perspective doesn't happen automatically and needs to be fostered. It entails training professionals and policy makers in a child rights perspective. Training and mentoring for care professionals is vital, since good programmes may not work if they are not properly implemented. It is important to avoid stigmatising disadvantaged children, so measures such as free breakfasts in schools should be implemented sensitively. It was stressed that a child rights approach also involves listening to and involving children themselves and taking account of their wishes. The seminar heard about the considerable efforts that are being made in Ireland to listen to children's voices.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020. Available at: <http://www.dcyu.gov.ie/docs/national-strategy-on-children-and-young-people>



However, it was also stressed that in a child rights approach the role of parents and families is also important. All children have the right to grow up in a secure family environment. Thus it is important to work with families on issues like income support and work-life balance and to work with parents to strengthen their parental skills and to encourage their engagement in schools and other activities. Parents generally want to do the best for their children but some do not know how to do it and helping them to do so is important.

## How to balance work and parenting

Participants noted that many countries stress that increasing levels of parental employment is seen as the best way of lifting families out of poverty. However, this can lead to a tension between strongly pushing parents to find employment and supporting parents to engage more with their children. It was generally agreed that both are important. Reconciling them involves ensuring first that work is of good quality, is flexible and that good work-life balance policies are in place and, secondly, investing in good quality early childhood care and education programmes which are affordable and accessible. It is important to recognise that for some parents, particularly lone parents, accessing the labour market can be difficult and not immediately achievable. Besides, there are often good reasons for parents to stay home when their children are young. It is also important to recognise the crucial role that is played not just by parents but extended families in caring for children.

## How to improve the quality of services

Several participants noted that childcare services are often underfunded and understaffed and that staff lack training and qualifications. This can lead to poor quality services for children. To counter this the types of initiatives suggested by participants included investing in in-service training, raising the levels of qualifications of staff employed in Early Childhood Education and Care and other early intervention and prevention services, organising mentoring programmes, developing training in applying a children's rights perspective and documenting and disseminating examples of good practice. It also means ensuring that reasonable salaries are paid to staff working in this area.

## How do you reach children in isolated and rural communities

Several participants pointed out that developing effective services needs to take account of the differences between urban areas and more isolated rural areas with smaller and more dispersed numbers of children. For instance it was pointed out that almost 40% of the Irish population lives in rural areas and this raises different challenges to ensure quality services compared to urban areas. Innovative suggestions put forward by participants included the use of mobile health centres and play facilities, home-based child-minders and use of social media.



## E. Conclusions and lessons learned

### Key conclusions and lessons for policy makers

The outcome of the various presentations and discussions led to the identification of some thirteen key conclusions and lessons for policy makers which are detailed below.

#### **Prevention and early intervention are a long-term investment**

Developing prevention and early intervention services for children is a real long-term investment. This is because the pre-birth and 0-3 years are key to a child's development and ensuring the best outcomes for children at this stage is vital to their long-term development. Already considerable evidence exists of the returns for children, society and the economy but still more evidence is needed and more precise definitions will be helpful if the arguments for investing in prevention and early intervention are to be fully realised.

#### **Political leadership is vital**

Political will and leadership is important to ensure that adequate resources are made available and that a long-term approach is developed. Such political support needs to be built and constantly reinforced. This will be helped by building public awareness and support for prevention and early intervention policies. It will also be important to foster collective ownership and responsibility across policy areas for advocating for early intervention and prevention measures.

#### **An holistic approach is essential**

A broad holistic policy mix, as is evident in the three pillar approach of the European Commission's *Recommendation on Investing in Children*, is essential for effective interventions. Such a mix should cover quality services, child protection and family support, early childhood education and care (ECEC), health and social services, education, housing, leisure, culture, sport, music, etc. as well as support for parental employment and adequate child and family benefits.

#### **An integrated systemic approach is necessary**

It is important to avoid piecemeal and fragmented policies and programmes and to develop a system-wide approach that is multidimensional, strategic and integrated. In doing this it is important to integrate and mainstream learning from projects on the ground. Local area based projects will have the greatest impact when they are situated within an overall system-wide approach.

#### **There is a need to combine universal and targeted approaches**

An approach based on progressive universalism in which universal services are available for all children but in which extra efforts are made to reach out to and target the most vulnerable children and families is desirable. This avoids the risk of developing poor quality

services which stigmatise. It should also increase public support for services and for improving their quality.

### **A focus on the local level is indispensable**

It is important that an overall strategy puts a strong emphasis on the local level. The local level is important for five main reasons: first, it is at local level that one can best identify those most at risk; secondly, it is at this level that one can best identify local needs and priorities and develop integrated local plans tailored to these needs; thirdly, it is only at the local level that one can ensure effective, coordinated and tailored delivery of services; fourthly, it is at this level that one can best enhance the participation of all sectors (statutory bodies, NGOs, local government etc.); fifthly, it is through local involvement that one can increase the accountability of local services' delivery.

### **Targetting those most at risk is essential**

It is important to reach out to those children and families most at risk. This requires both the development of area-based and personalised approaches and the identification of children and families at high risk (e.g., asylum-seekers, Travellers/Roma, remote rural communities, children in care).

### **Invest in ensuring quality services is critical**

In order to ensure quality, it is necessary to invest in building capacity across agencies. Key ways of doing this include: developing training and mentoring for professionals; encouraging networking and collaboration; undertake regular and rigorous monitoring; and establishing quality standards in line with international standards.

### **Quality data and research is essential**

Good quality data and rigorous evaluation of policies and programmes is essential to develop evidence-based policy. In this regard it is important to focus on outcomes and effectiveness and recognise that some outcomes are long-term. To ensure good policy choices cost-benefit analysis is important and more is needed. Stakeholders should be involved in research and evaluation. Cross country comparisons of prevention and early intervention policies and outcomes and studies of expenditure profiles across countries could be helpful in developing more effective interventions. To this end consideration should be given to developing an EU wide index for early intervention and prevention.

### **Participation of children is important**

Fostering the participation of children, parents and communities is essential. First, it leads to personal empowerment and development of those involved. Secondly, the insights gained lead to better policy-making. Thirdly, it promotes better quality and more accountable service delivery.



## **Children's rights should be central to policy development and delivery**

It is important to put children's rights at the heart of policy and programme development and delivery. This will lead to prioritising the best interests of the child. It will encourage policy makers to guarantee the provision of all necessary child-essential services. It will ensure that participation of children is respected as a right. However, to ensure that a children's rights approach is successful it will be important to develop guidelines and training for policy makers and practitioners on applying children's rights.

### **Working with families vital:**

Working with and strengthening families is vital for effective prevention and early intervention. Children have a right to live in safe and supportive family environments. However, it is also important to recognise that working with families is complementary to and not a substitute for ensuring children's rights and services.

### **The EU level can enhance national policies:**

While under subsidiarity it is a national responsibility to develop effective prevention and early intervention policies the EU level can provide valuable support to national efforts. There are five ways in particular that the EU level can be helpful. First, the EU level can foster a shared political awareness and commitment to addressing child poverty and social exclusion and to implementing the Recommendation on Investing in Children. Secondly, the EU level can ensure the availability of good quality comparative data and use this for making cross country comparisons and for benchmarking the performance of Member States. Thirdly, the EU level, in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the target on reducing poverty and social exclusion, can monitor and make recommendations to Member States for strengthening their prevention and early intervention policies. Fourthly, as this Peer Review has shown, the EU level can facilitate the identification and exchange of learning and best practice. Fifthly, EU Funds can be used to support the development of policies and programmes that will tackle child poverty and social exclusion and promote early childhood development.

However, if the EU level is to fully contribute to enhancing national policies in relation to poverty and social exclusion in general and children in particular then there is a need to significantly rebalance the relationship between economic and social policies at EU level. More importance needs to be given to social policies and achieving social obligations need to become more mandatory. In this regard it was also suggested that economic and monetary policies could be proofed for their impact on children's well being.

## **Contribution of the Peer Review to EU priorities**

The Peer Review strongly reinforced the importance of strengthening the implementation of the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy if the objectives set are to be achieved. The Europe 2020 Strategy identified fighting poverty and social exclusion as one of its five key priorities for 2020, setting the specific target of reducing the number of people in Europe at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 20 million. Before the crisis, 19 million of the 80 million people at risk of poverty in the EU were children. Thus, although reducing child poverty was not a specific Europe 2020 target, it forms an integral part of meeting the objectives. This has been recognised by Ireland. As part of its commitment to

achieving the Europe 2020 poverty and social exclusion target Ireland has committed to lift over 70,000 children (aged 0-17 years) out of consistent poverty by 2020. It is clear from the peer review that one of the key ways in which it can be successfully in addressing this challenge is through developing effective prevention and early intervention policies. This emphasis in Ireland on addressing child poverty as part of the overall EU efforts to fight poverty is an important reminder to other Member States to include a focus on children in their efforts to meet the EU's poverty and social exclusion target.

The importance of the focus on early intervention and prevention goes beyond just contributing to meeting the EU's poverty and social exclusion target. It is also vital to achieving EU educational, employment, economic and environmental targets. From an education perspective prevention and early intervention services have a significant impact on cutting the number of early-school leavers and increasing the proportion of young people completing tertiary education. Thus, as one of the Europe 2020 strategy's seven flagship initiatives aims to enhance the performance of education systems and improve educational outcomes investing in prevention and early intervention can make a significant contribution. From an employment perspective children who are the victims of poverty in their early years are less likely to acquire the skills and qualifications they need to enter the jobs market and develop their human capital and social potential later in life. Thus again it is clear that investing in prevention and early intervention has long-term benefits not only for the children into adulthood but also has very positive benefits in terms of employment and economic growth. Such policies also help to ensure long-term sustainability.

In the framework of its Social Investment Package, adopted in 2013, the European Commission issued a Recommendation on *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. The Peer Review confirmed that prevention and early intervention are among the most effective ways to break this cycle by promoting the interests of the child from an early age - or taking prompt action as and when appropriate - and thus avoiding more difficult and costly remedial measures later in life. It thus reinforced the value of the Recommendation and the need for its active implementation.

The proposal arising from the meeting for the European Commission to develop a Prevention and Early Intervention Index, promoting a shared understanding of what prevention and early intervention involves, can be a very positive contribution to enhancing the monitoring and reporting of Member States' performance in this area and allow for cross country comparisons.

Finally it is worth noting that the findings of this Peer Review are particularly timely. The European Commission's current consultation on developing a European Pillar of Social Rights specifically refers to child poverty. It suggests that as part of the Pillar "Measures shall be taken at an early stage and preventive approaches should be adopted to address child poverty, including specific measures to encourage attendance of children with disadvantages backgrounds." Thus the findings of the Peer Review can feed in directly to this consultation.



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# Prevention and early intervention services to address children at risk of poverty

Host country: **Ireland**

Peer countries: **Belgium - Bulgaria - Cyprus - Czech Republic - Estonia - Germany - Greece - Lithuania - Netherlands**

Stakeholders: **Save the children, SOS Children's Villages International**

Ireland is in the process of developing a more coordinated and integrated approach to children's services, aimed at tackling the complex problems of disadvantaged families in a more joined-up and holistic way. This Peer Review (Ireland, February 2016) looked at Irish good practice and harnessed learning from other EU Member States.

