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Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee

Latvia

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Summary

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG), with a view to guaranteeing access to six key services for “children in need”:

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities; at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which low-income children in Latvia do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

In Latvia, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily regulated at national level. However, at sub-national level, municipalities may provide additional support for low-income children to the extent of their resources.

In Latvia, free **ECEC** is available to children aged 1½-6 or 7 attending public ECEC, and discounted ECEC – where the service is partly paid for by the municipality and partly by parents – to children of the same age attending private ECEC. If there is no public ECEC available due to a shortage of places, low-income children are disadvantaged because of the parents’ inability to cover the co-payment for private services.

Low income is not a criterion for children to get free access to **education and school-based activities** except for compulsory basic school materials. There are two main types of financial or in-kind support available for the purchase of basic materials: basic school materials, which are financed by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and co-financed by the state; and a municipal benefit for low-income households with children for the purchase of basic school materials, which varies in amount across municipalities.

The state and local government finance **one hot free meal at school** for all grade 1-4 pupils (aged 7-10) in all education institutions, including private ones. The municipalities may determine the range of other groups of pupils whose school meals are covered by the municipality. As the situation varies from one municipality to another with regard to the provision of free meals to low-income pupils from grade 5 onwards, geographical differences are the main non-financial barrier to this service, possibly leading to financial barriers as well.

Despite the fact that **healthcare services** are free for all children under the age of 18, there are financial and non-financial barriers in accessing them – insufficient financial quotas for state-funded services, regional disparities in service provision, waiting lists for various examinations, and a shortage of human resources in healthcare. There are no healthcare cash benefits at national level. At sub-national level, a municipal social assistance benefit may be granted to low-income households to cover some costs related to healthcare services.

In Latvia, there are no fully state-funded measures to support access to **healthy nutrition** for low-income children apart from school meals. Support for children living in precarious family situations is partly provided by the FEAD and co-financed by the state.

There are two types of support measures in the field of **adequate housing**: firstly, housing benefit, which is means-tested and paid by local government; and, secondly, assistance to cover electricity bills for low-income people, including children, paid from the central budget. Access to decent and affordable housing for low-income groups, and to social housing in particular, is insufficient.

Introduction

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States unanimously adopted the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG).¹

The objective of the ECG is to offset the impact of poverty on children and to prevent and combat their social exclusion. To this end, it is recommended that Member States guarantee for “children in need” (defined as people **under 18** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – AROPE):

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities;² at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

According to the ECG Recommendation, **effective access** means “*a situation in which services are readily available, affordable, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner, and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them*” (Article 3d). **Effective and free access** means “effective access” to the services, as well as free-of-charge provision – either by organising and supplying such services or by providing “*adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access*” (Article 3e).

The Recommendation directs the Member States to prepare action plans, covering the period until 2030, to explain how they will implement the Recommendation.³ These plans are to be submitted to the European Commission.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which children AROPE have effective and free access to four of the six services covered by the ECG and effective access to the other two (see above). Given that the eligibility criterion (or criteria) for accessing those services in individual Member States (at national and/or sub-national level, depending on how the service is organised) is/are not based on the EU definition of the risk of poverty or social exclusion,⁴ the report focuses on access for **low-income children** to each of these services, using the national low-income criterion (or criteria) that apply (e.g. having a household income below a certain threshold or receiving the minimum income). Throughout this report, “low-income children” is to be understood as children living in low-income households.

In Latvia, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily regulated at national level. Therefore, the report seeks to provide a general picture of the (effective/free) access for low-income children in the country.

¹ The full text of the ECG Recommendation is available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC>.

² According to the Recommendation (Article 3f), “school-based activities” means “*learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community*”.

³ Once they have been submitted to the European Commission, the plans are made publicly available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

⁴ According to the EU definition, children are AROPE if they live in a household that is at risk of poverty (below 60% of median income; hereafter AROP) and/or severely materially and socially deprived, and/or (quasi-)jobless. For the detailed definition of this indicator and all other EU social indicators agreed to date, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>. In 2021, EU Member States agreed a target to be reached by 2030: a reduction in the number of people AROPE in the EU by at least 15 million, including at least **5 million children**.

The report is structured by service:

- effective and free access to high-quality ECEC;
- effective and free access to education and school-based activities;
- effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare (e.g. free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment, and access to medicines, treatments and support);
- effective access to healthy nutrition;⁵ and
- effective access to adequate housing.⁶

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to ECEC services.

1.1 Mapping accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Table 1.1: Accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Childcare (usually under age 3)		Pre-school setting (usually age 3 to compulsory school age)	
Accessibility	Affordability	Accessibility	Affordability
ENT-ALL 1.5 years	FREE-ALL 1.5 years	ENT-ALL 1.5 years	FREE-ALL 1.5 years

Note: "ENT-ALL 1.5years" means a legal entitlement for all children from the age of 1½. "FREE-ALL 1.5years" means free for all children from the age of 1½. If the information differs between centre-based and home-based care, the information provided applies to centre-based care.

In Latvia, there is no differentiation between childcare and pre-school education, and all ECEC institutions are called "pre-school education establishments". The general education law stipulates access to pre-school education at the national level. The law states that local government is responsible for the provision of equal access to ECEC for all children from the age of 1½. From the age of 5, all children (without exception) must be enrolled in a public pre-school education institution, as pre-school education is compulsory in Latvia for children aged 5-6 (see Table 1.1).

If a local authority does not provide a public ECEC place for a child, and the child then attends a private ECEC provider, the local authority partially covers the costs of the private institution (the co-payment equals the average costs⁷ in public institutions of the respective municipality). Some municipalities also provide co-financing for babysitting services according to their

⁵ According to the Recommendation (Article 3g), "healthy meal" or "healthy nutrition" means "a balanced meal consumption, which provides children with nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development and for physical activity that complies with their physiological needs".

⁶ According to the Recommendation (Article 3h), "adequate housing" means "a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, and is available and accessible at an affordable cost".

⁷ In 2022, the amount of the co-payment varied from €170 to €325 per month for children aged 1½-4 and from €109 to €295 per month for children aged 5-7, depending on the municipality (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, 2022).

budgetary possibilities and needs.⁸ Children from low-income families do not have a priority in enrolment in public ECEC.

Thus, in Latvia free ECEC is available for all children aged 1½ till they enter primary education at the age of 6 or 7, for those who attend public ECEC. ECEC is subsidised for all children of the same age cohort who attend private ECEC.

1.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable

1.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Not applicable: access is free for all children.

According to Eurostat data, in 2021 there were 24,000 children under 6⁹ in Latvia who met the criteria of being AROPE, or 19.1% of all children of that age; this was lower than the EU-27 average (22.9%) (Eurostat, EU-SILC¹⁰ [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023). The share of low-income children was not specified, because they do not receive specific cost reductions for ECEC.

1.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to ECEC for low-income children

1.2.1 Financial barriers

The Education Law defines the competences of local government in the field of pre-school education, including its financing. The Law sets out a municipality's obligation to partially cover the costs of a private pre-school education institution if a child who has reached the age of 1½ and living within the municipality's administrative territory is not provided with a place in municipal ECEC. The costs must be reimbursed in an amount equal to the average cost per pupil required for ECEC run by the respective municipality. As costs in private ECEC are higher, this implies that parents have to make a co-payment when their children attend private ECEC. If there is no public ECEC available due to a shortage of places, low-income children are therefore in a disadvantageous situation, because of their parents' greater difficulty in covering the co-payment for private services. There are no studies addressing this issue in more detail. Based on the data on average ECEC costs in different municipalities and on ECEC waiting lists, it can be concluded that financial barriers are more common in urban areas, where the demand for ECEC is generally higher, as are the average ECEC costs.

1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

The availability of places varies across municipalities, with the longest waiting lists in the Riga suburbs. In October 2022, 7.3% of those who needed the service were on the waiting list.¹¹

⁸ In 2022, 15 municipalities provided this support, ranging from €79 to €272 per month (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, 2022).

⁹ However, in most cases, ECEC in Latvia continues until children reach the age of 7.

¹⁰ European Union statistics on income and living conditions.

¹¹ Calculation based on the statistical data from Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and national education information system.

The total waiting list comprised 6,868 children in October 2022, which was 12% less than a year before (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, 2022).

Children from low-income households do not have priority on the waiting list.

1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

The fees for pre-school meals differ between municipalities. In most municipalities, children's meals in ECEC are paid for by parents, but in some municipalities part of the cost is covered by the municipality and the other part by parents. In 2017, 13 (11%) municipalities provided free meals to all children; 55 (46%) provided free meals to children from in-need¹² and low-income families (see Section 2.1.1 for low-income criteria); 37 (31%) provided meals fully free of charge for children from in-need families, and at a reduced cost for children from low-income families; and 13 (11%) provided meals at a reduced cost for children from in-need and low-income families (PKC, DLK, 2017). The reform of local government in 2021 reduced the number of local authorities from 119 to 43. However, based on past municipal practices, the authors of this report would claim that the proportions of in-need and low-income children accessing free pre-school meals have not changed for the worse.

No more recent studies were found, and nor does the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Government monitor or collect such information.

2. Education and school-based activities

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to education and school-based activities.

Section 2.1 maps the main school costs in public primary and secondary education, distinguishing between the following:¹³

- compulsory basic school materials (schoolbag, pens, glue, scissors, etc.);
- compulsory school materials (textbooks, school supplies, notebooks, etc.);
- compulsory specific clothing (uniform, sports clothing);
- IT equipment requested by the school;
- sports equipment or musical instruments requested by the school;
- compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum;
- other compulsory fees or costs; and
- transport costs to or from school.

Section 2.2 briefly describes the cash benefits specifically intended to help meet educational costs.

Finally, Section 2.3 seeks to identify the main barriers that prevent low-income children from having effective and free access to “school-based activities” as defined in the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (see “Introduction” section). Given that the distinction between these activities and some of the activities covered above – especially the “compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum” – may not

¹² The term “household in need” is taken from the official translation of the law and respective regulations (also “in-need family” and “in-need person”).

¹³ Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.

always be clear-cut, the focus of Section 2.3 is specifically on school-based activities which are not part of the curriculum.

2.1 Mapping the main school costs in public primary and secondary education

Table 2.1a: School costs of primary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
MOST ITEMS	ALL	NO	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	NO

Note: "ALL" means that this category is free for all children. "MOST ITEMS" means that most but not all items in the category are free for low-income children, "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.

Compulsory textbooks and school supplies, IT equipment, sports and musical equipment, as well as compulsory extramural activities and other fees and costs, are provided free of charge to all children irrespective of their income status (see Table 2.1a).

Compulsory basic school materials for children living in households that are deemed to be in need or on a low income, as well as households in crisis situations,¹⁴ are provided to children aged 5-16 by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and co-financed by the state. Municipalities also provide school aid for families who are recognised as being in need or on a low income, as well as families in crisis: such families are eligible for the benefits for the purchase of school materials (the amount of the benefit varies among municipalities). Most but not all items of basic materials can therefore be considered as being free for low-income children, but no evidence is available to make a list of the items that are free for low-income children.

Costs of clothing are not covered.

Pupils can receive different transport concessions depending on the education level,¹⁵ their place of residence (in or outside the city), the type of the route (urban or regional route), the type of household (large or not) and disability status. The groups of passengers, including pupils, who are entitled to concessionary travel are determined at national level (Cabinet regulations No 414). The following groups of pupils in primary education are entitled to the following public fare concessions:

- pupils residing outside the city area are reimbursed 100% of travel expenses on urban and regional routes from the place of residence to the school and back within the administrative territory of the municipality;
- pupils residing outside the territory of the municipality whose municipality does not have a general primary education institution are entitled to 50% reimbursement of travel

¹⁴ For example, households that suffered from a fire, natural disaster or other catastrophic event beyond their control may get the status of a "household in crisis" and become eligible for social assistance. To receive municipal support in a crisis situation, people must submit an application and documents justifying the crisis situation.

¹⁵ General education in Latvia in total lasts 12 years, consisting of a compulsory nine years of basic (primary) education and three years of secondary education. The basic education stage comprises general basic education (grades 1-9) and vocational basic education. The secondary education stage comprises general secondary education, vocational secondary education and vocational education.

expenses on urban and regional routes between their place of residence and a school located in another municipality;

- orphans and children without parental care who are in foster care, guardianship, childcare institutions or studying in general primary and vocational primary education institutions until the age of 24 have the right to use public transport free of charge on a regional route;
- children under 18 with disabilities have the right to use public transport free of charge on urban and regional routes; and
- members of large households (with three children and more), irrespective of their income status, have concessionary fares on regional bus and train routes: 50% of the full price of the ticket; 40% of the full price of a monthly ticket; 90% of the full price of a ticket for pupils and students under 24; and 100% of the full price on state holidays.

Table 2.1b: School costs of secondary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
MOST ITEMS	ALL	NO	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	NO

Note: "ALL" means that this category is free for all children. "MOST ITEMS" means that most but not all items in the category are free for low-income children, "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.

The situation described above concerning primary education also applies to secondary education, except for transport costs (see Table 2.1b):

- pupils of general secondary education level (grades 10-12) residing outside the urban area are reimbursed 50% of travel expenses on urban and regional routes from the place of residence to a school and back within the administrative territory of the municipality;
- members of large households and children under 18 with disabilities at general secondary education level have the same concessions as pupils at general primary education level;
- orphans and children without parental care who are in foster care, guardianship, childcare institutions or studying in general secondary and vocational secondary education institutions until the age of 24 have the right to use public transport free of charge on a regional route.

Organising public transport services in urban areas is an autonomous function of local government. Municipalities therefore have the right to set and provide additional fare concessions for pupils at any level of general education. For instance, public transport is free for pupils of educational institutions registered in the city of Riga, regardless of their place of residence, general education level and grade (Riga city council binding regulations No 89). The lack of aggregated information on urban transport concessions limits the ability to assess its free availability for low-income children across the country.

2.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a "low-income child"

Latvia distinguishes between "in-need" and "low-income" status. The Law on social services and social assistance stipulates the criteria for the status of an in-need or low-income person/household. A household (including a single-person household) is in need if:

- the average monthly income of its members over the previous three months did not exceed €272 for the first person and €190 for all other people in the household (including children, regardless of age);
- and if (cumulatively): (a) it does not have savings or property; (b) it has not entered into a maintenance contract;¹⁶ (c) it does not receive the services of a long-term social care and social rehabilitation institution or are not imprisoned¹⁷; and (d) the working-age members of the household are either working or registered with the state employment agency as unemployed.

The social service office of the municipality assesses whether or not the household/person meets all the conditions for being considered in need (Cabinet Regulations No 809). Essentially, in-need households/individuals, including children, are categorised as low-income people. There is no national-level definition of a low-income person in law. The status of a low-income person is granted by the local municipality, in accordance with the procedure specified in its binding regulations. Each municipality is entitled to set its own income threshold for a low-income household, but it may not be higher than €436 per month for the first (or only) person and €305 per month for other people in the household, and not lower than the income threshold of the in-need household mentioned above. Also, households that have suffered from a natural disaster or other catastrophic event beyond their control may get the status of a “household in crisis” and become eligible for social assistance.

2.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

In 2021, 11,910 children of all ages in Latvia were deemed to be in need (Ministry of Welfare, 2022). According to Eurostat data, in 2021, there were 51,000 children aged 6-17 in Latvia who met the criteria of being AROPE. They made up 18.9% of all children aged 6-11 and 22.2% of those aged 12-17; these proportions are lower than the EU-27 averages (23.8% and 25.8% respectively) (Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023).

According to the Eurostat data, in 2021 the annual AROP threshold in Latvia for a family of two adults and two children under 14 was €11,891 (Eurostat, EU-SILC [[ILC_LI01], downloaded on 17 January 2023), which amounted to €998 per month. At the same time, however, according to the national methodology, such a family might be deemed to be in need if its incomes did not exceed €842 per month (and the threshold for a low-income household might vary from €842 to €1,351 per month depending on the municipality). There is no information available on the non-take-up rates, or on groups of children over-represented in the AROPE population but lacking free access to education.

2.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs

There are no cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs at national level.

One of the two additional social assistance benefits (the other is the crisis benefit) provided for by the Law on social services and social assistance, and paid from the municipal budget, is

¹⁶ This is a contract in which a person who owns a house exchanges it for the (lifelong) guarantee of maintenance (care, food, paying for medical services, utility bills, entertainment, etc.) from a third person (not a member of the same household).

¹⁷ If a household member is subject to one of the criteria in (c), they cannot be granted the status of an in need or low-income person. In fact, this means that the person does not live in the household.

the benefit for certain expenses. It is intended to provide material support to low-income people (see Section 2.1.1 for low-income criteria) to ensure social functioning and independent living, and, inter alia, it may be granted to cover education-related costs. The purpose, amount, granting and payment procedure of this benefit are determined by the municipality.

According to Eurostat data, in 2021 there were 24,000 children under 6¹⁸ in Latvia who met the criteria of being AROPE, or 19.1% of all children of that age; this was lower than the EU-27 average (22.9%) (Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023). See Section 2.1.2 for a comparison of the value of the national low-income criterion/a with the value of the national AROP threshold. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Welfare, in 2021 a total of 5,270 children received social assistance benefits aimed at helping with education costs. Approximately two thirds of the benefits were paid in cash, and one third in kind; the average amount of the benefit was €56 per person per year (Ministry of Welfare, 2022). It is not, however, possible to see from those statistics how many children received cash payments, as adults as well as children received them, and the amounts varied across municipalities. There is no information available on the non-take-up rates, or on groups of children over-represented in the AROPE population but lacking free access to education. There are no studies analysing the adequacy of this benefit to cover education-related costs.

Another support measure, which could be classified as a cash benefit, is the reimbursement of transport costs for pupils residing outside the urban area (see also Section 2.1). During the school year, 100% of travel expenses on urban and regional routes from the place of residence to the school and back within the administrative territory of the municipality are reimbursed for pupils of general primary education, and 50% for pupils in general secondary education. A full-fare ticket should first be purchased, and then its cost is reimbursed from the municipal budget, in accordance with the procedures determined by the municipality. This support measure is not targeted at low-income children. There is no information available on the number of beneficiaries, non-take-up rates, or the adequacy of this support to cover the transport-related costs.

2.3 Main barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children

2.3.1 Financial barriers

There is no study-based evidence of financial barriers to free access to school activities not included in the curriculum. However, based on the observations and social experience of the authors of this report, there are some school-based activities that are financed by parents (e.g. entertainment trips organised by schools, and attendance at cultural events). Parents of low-income children may find it difficult to cover such costs. The Ombudsman's Office's position on this issue is that it would be good practice to ensure that all pupils participate in school trips not included in the curriculum, and to try to find a way to cover the cost from class or school funds for pupils whose parents cannot afford it (Laganovskis, 2019).

Since autumn 2018, the Latvian state-funded cultural education programme "Latvian school bag" has addressed the limitations of access to cultural events for pupils, including low-income children. The programme provides pupils with the opportunity to get to know Latvian art and culture (music, theatre, dance, visual arts, cinema, architecture etc.), linking them to teaching

¹⁸ However, in most cases, ECEC in Latvia continues until children reach the age of 7.

and educational work, thus reducing social inequality and strengthening the sense of citizenship and national belonging.¹⁹

2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

There is no evidence of non-financial barriers (e.g. lack of activities organised by school, or geographical disparities) faced by low-income children in their actual access to school-based activities.

3. Free meals at school

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to at least one free healthy meal each school day.

3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

The law stipulates that the state and local government must finance one hot lunch meal for all grade 1-4 pupils (aged 7-10) in all education institutions, including private ones (Education Law). Presently (February 2023), the amount of the state budget per pupil in state education institutions is €2.15 per day, and €1.075 per day in municipal and private education institutions (Cabinet Regulations No 614). In the case of municipal and private schools, the municipality is responsible for covering the difference between the amount subsidised by the state for school meals (€1.075) and the total amount of subsidy per pupil per day set by law for state schools (€2.15). This means that the municipality provides a subsidy of €1.075 per day per pupil in municipal and private education institutions.

A municipality may also decide to subsidise meals for pupils in other grades, within the limits of its budget. The Education Law provides that local authorities determine the range of those pupils whose school meals are covered by the municipality. These arrangements may vary – they might mean providing food packages or other support for the purchase of food to large households, to households in need, or to all pupils.

An analysis carried out by the authors of this report in 11 out of 43 municipalities shows that the situation varies across municipalities. In some of them, school lunches are provided free of charge to pupils from poor and low-income households, but there are also municipalities where this is not the case and parents have to provide a co-payment.

3.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable at national level: access is not free for low-income children from grade 5. Low-income children can be determined as a specific target group for free school meals at municipal level from grade 5 onwards. See Section 2.1.1 on the low-income criteria.

3.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Not applicable to children in grades 1-4: access is free for all children. As there were 77,367 pupils in grades 1-4 in the 2020/2021 school year (Ministry of Education, 2021), this was also the number of children who had free access to at least one healthy meal each school day. According to Eurostat data, in 2021 there were 18,000 children aged 6-11 in Latvia who met

¹⁹ Official website of the programme, available at <https://www.lnkc.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-skolas-soma>.

the criteria for being AROPE, or 15.7% of all children of that age; this was lower than the EU-27 average (18.7%) (Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_LI02], downloaded on 20 December 2022).

There are no data available on low-income children in the country who receive free meals or reduced-price meals. Considering that each municipality has the right to determine the additional groups of pupils to whom free school meals are provided, it would be necessary to survey all 43 municipalities.

3.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children

3.2.1 Financial barriers

There are no financial barriers for grade 1-4 pupils. However, from grade 5 onwards, financial barriers may vary at municipal level. The provision of free school meals for older children varies across municipalities. Some municipalities provide free school lunches to all pupils in grades 1-12, others do so to pupils in grades 1-9, and still others do so up to grade 6. As noted above, there are no data available on the number of municipalities where free school meals are available to low-income children, nor studies that have analysed whether the out-of-pocket cost of such a meal is a financial barrier for them. However, in the municipalities surveyed by the authors of the report, if the municipality does not cover the cost of school meals, families are encouraged to approach social services for further assistance. The benefit for certain expenses is one of the options for financial support in such cases.

3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

The main non-financial barrier is the geographical disparity resulting from the varying policies of local municipalities in providing free school meals to low-income pupils.

4. Healthcare

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to healthcare, focusing on vaccinations, care from a general practitioner (GP) or infant nurses, specialist care, dental care (not orthodontics) and prescribed medicines.

4.1 Mapping the provision of free healthcare services and products

Table 4.1: Healthcare costs (free for all/low-income children)

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	NO

Note: "ALL" means that all services/products in the category are free for all children. "POOR" means that they are free for low-income children. "NO" means that most/all services/products are not free for low-income children.

Children under the age of 18 are exempted from any fees for state-funded healthcare services, except prescribed medicines (see Table 4.1).

In general, prescribed medicines are not available free of charge for children, except in the case of specific diagnoses. There is a procedure for granting reimbursement of medicines at 50%, 75% or 100%, determined by law and by reference to a list of reimbursable medicines

for treatment of specific diagnoses. This means that, after a diagnosis has been confirmed, state-paid medicines can be obtained under certain conditions. These conditions are not income related, but solely diagnosis related. There is also a separate list of reimbursable medicines for children under 2, and such medicines are reimbursed at 50%. There are no specific measures aimed at reducing the out-of-pocket costs for low-income children.

4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

4.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Not applicable: access is free for all children, except access to medicines, where there are no groups of children who have free access.

4.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs

There are no healthcare cash benefits at national level.

At sub-national level, there exists the benefit for certain expenses, which is intended to provide material support to low-income people to ensure social functioning and independent living. Inter alia, this benefit may be granted to cover some expenses related to healthcare services. The amount of the benefit, and the procedure for granting and paying it, are determined by the municipality. Although it is not targeted at low-income children, but at the general population, a specific support to low-income children can be defined in some municipalities. For instance, there are municipalities that provide a spectacles benefit for children from poor and low-income households. Several municipalities provide financial support for dental services, dentures, health services and examinations for people, including children, from poor and low-income households (Ministry of Welfare, 2021) (see Section 2.1.1 on the low-income criteria). In general, the purpose, amount, granting and payment procedure of this benefit is determined by the municipality and varies a lot across the country. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Welfare, in 2021 a total of 1,374 children received municipal social assistance benefits aimed at helping with costs related to healthcare services. 98% of the benefits were paid in cash, and 2% in kind; the average amount of the benefit was €94 per person per year (Ministry of Welfare, 2022). It is not, however, possible to see from those statistics how many children received cash payments, as adults as well as children received them, and the amounts varied across municipalities.

There are no studies analysing whether this benefit adequately covers the healthcare out-of-pocket costs for low-income children in cases where it is relevant (i.e. if private healthcare services are used due to limited accessibility of state-funded healthcare services).

4.3 Non-financial barriers to effective and free access to healthcare

Despite the fact that healthcare services are free for children under 18, financial quotas for state-funded services are insufficient to ensure effective access to those services in terms of timeliness and the availability of specialists. In cases where access to state-funded healthcare services is limited, parents opt for private healthcare services. These, in turn, are not available to low-income households with children due to their high cost. It can therefore be seen as a financial barrier.

The main non-financial barriers to access to free healthcare services for children do not significantly differ from those for adults – regional disparities in service provision, waiting lists for specialists and various examinations, and a shortage of human resources in healthcare (Rajevska, Kļave, Rajevska, 2022). There is no evidence that the reimbursement mechanism for prescribed medicines creates barriers to access, although this possibility cannot be excluded.

The public health guidelines for 2021-2027 state that, in recent years, vaccine opponents have become increasingly active, significantly affecting vaccination coverage against various infectious diseases. Although vaccination coverage rates in infancy are high and generally meet or even exceed the 95% level recommended by the World Health Organization, vaccination coverage rates for school-age children and adults in Latvia are unsatisfactory (Ministry of Health, 2022). In these age groups, the most pressing problems relate to vaccination against diphtheria, human papillomavirus and seasonal influenza, and there have also been declines in the revaccination of school-age children against measles, rubella and epidemic parotitis (Ministry of Health, 2022). Statistics on immunisation rates compiled by the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control support these conclusions (SPKC, 2022).

Although dental services for children under the age of 18 are provided and paid for from the state budget (Cabinet Regulation No 555), the number of medical institutions having a contract with the national health service for the state-funded services does not match the demand. According to the public health guidelines for 2021-2027, the situation as regards access to dental services in the regions, especially for children, is critical. Although the number of providers of state-funded dental services where the waiting list exceeds 30 days has fallen, in some municipalities the waiting list for dental services is very long, of as much as 150 days (Ministry of Health, 2022). A Latvian public media report²⁰ pointed out that in the Vidzeme region, for example, waiting lists for state-funded dental services ranged from five to 275 days (Stara, Brasliņš, 2022). The average waiting time for children (up to age 17) for publicly funded dental and dental hygiene services in 2019 was 40 and 23 days respectively (Ministry of Health, 2022). To address the problem of access to dental services, the Ministry of Health plans to implement a new approach, including introducing a new payment system and requiring each region to have a certain number of dentists providing state-funded dental services for children (Ministry of Health, 2022).

From July 2022, following a civic initiative launched by parents in January 2022 (Stara, Brasliņš, 2022), children up to the age of 17 can receive state-funded dental care on Saturdays in sudden and urgent cases. State-funded dental care is only provided if the child has: acute, persistent toothache; swelling of the cheek and/or gums; or trauma to a tooth. Only nine clinics across the country provide the service, three of which are in the capital Riga and six in the regions²¹ (NVD, 2023). This leads to a conclusion that state-funded dental services for children are not equally available in all regions within a reasonable time.

According to the public health guidelines for 2021-2027, the use of publicly funded dental hygiene services for children should also be encouraged, for example by linking access to publicly funded paediatric dentists to compulsory regular dental hygiene visits. Regular hygiene is essential to reduce and prevent acute pain, which is often linked to a lack of oral hygiene. As stated in the above-mentioned policy planning document, publicly funded dental hygienists are available for children, but many parents do not take advantage of this opportunity (Ministry of Health, 2022).

²⁰ Available: <http://bit.ly/3YOUqC2>.

²¹ Two clinics are located in Liepāja, and the other four – one in each region – in Ogre, Valmiera, Limbazi and Daugavpils.

5. Healthy nutrition

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to healthy nutrition.

5.1 Main barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition

5.1.1 Financial barriers

In general, minimum income levels, including the income threshold for a low-income and in-need people, are still low, and the adequacy of corresponding social benefits – for instance the guaranteed minimum income (GMI) benefit – is also low. In the context of this report, it should be also stressed that minimum income levels have not increased in line with increases in consumer prices and inflation. In January 2023, consumer prices increased by 21.5% compared with January 2022. Annual average inflation was 18.5% (Ministry of Economics, 2023). Consumer prices for food in January 2023 were 45.5% higher than in January 2019 (CSB, 2023). Meanwhile, the low-income threshold and the GMI have remained unchanged since 2021, and the existing legislation does not provide for their uprating in line with prices. It is therefore highly likely that financial barriers to low-income children's access to healthy nutrition do exist.

5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

There is no evidence for non-financial barriers faced by low-income children in their access to healthy nutrition.

In Latvia, there are publicly available healthy nutrition recommendations for children and young people in three age groups: 0-2 (Ministry of Health, 2021a), 2-10 (Ministry of Health, 2021b), and 11-18 (Ministry of Health, 2021c). The recommendations contain: explanations of the daily energy and fluid requirements; examples of healthy breakfasts, lunches and dinners; optimal portion sizes; the need for dietary variety, and sugar and salt restriction; and many other answers to healthy eating questions. These recommendations are informative and educational. There is no evidence of limited access to certain foods in certain areas of the country.

5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

Support to children living in precarious family situations is partly provided by the FEAD. In Latvia, FEAD support is used to help the most deprived by providing food packages and additional child food packages for households with small children aged from 7 to 24 months, as well as hygiene and school supplies. Support from the FEAD can be received by: people deemed to be in need (in 2023, the income threshold of a household in need is €272 per month for the first or only person in the household and €190 per month for each subsequent person); a low-income person (the income threshold for this is variable and reviewed annually, see Section 2.1.1); and people who present a valid statement issued by the social service of local government that they have found themselves in a crisis or emergency situation (Cabinet Regulations No 727). From 1 January 2023, FEAD support is also available to low-income households whose income does not exceed €376 per month for the first or only person in the household, and €264 per month for each subsequent person (in 2022, the low-income threshold applied to this support measure was €327 per month for the first or only person in

the household, and €229 per month for each subsequent person). There are no other conditions to be met on top of the low-income criterion.

Due to the sharp increase in consumer prices, each person in a low-income household has the right to receive a supplementary food package for a period of three months between 1 November 2022 and 30 April 2023 (Cabinet Regulations No 659). The food package includes 18 products that meet the requirements of organic farming or the Latvian national food quality scheme or equivalent. Currently, 25 partner organisations (non-governmental organisations, religious organisations, municipalities and municipal social services) distribute the FEAD packages in 446 locations across Latvia and providing ready-to-eat meals in 29 soup kitchens (FEAD, n.d.).

There are no other publicly funded measures²² that directly support access to healthy meals for low-income children.

6. Adequate housing

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to adequate housing.

6.1 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Housing allowances

This section examines two types of support: firstly, housing benefit and, secondly, “protected user support”, which provides in-kind assistance to cover electricity costs for low-income people, including children.

Assistance to people in addressing housing issues has been established as an autonomous function of local government. **Housing benefit** is one of the mandatory social assistance benefits paid by local government. In July 2021, a uniform calculation methodology for housing benefit was introduced throughout Latvia. According to the current approach, housing benefit is universal in the sense that the income level of a household (or a person) is no longer the eligibility criterion. Everybody can be entitled to housing benefit for rent, administration and other utility costs if, after these costs, there is less than €327 per month for the first or only person in the household, or €228 per month for each person in the household. The following are taken into account when assessing eligibility: a household's expenditure on housing; its savings (total savings not exceeding €272); and its possessions (owning no more than one car, or no more than two motorised vehicles if there are children in the household; and no more than five hectares of land and a small number of outbuildings).

However, housing benefit can be considered as the core support measure for low-income households with children to cover their housing costs. Currently, the amount of housing benefit is calculated using the following formula:

- the monthly GMI for the household (i.e. €109 per month for the first person in the household and €76 per month for each subsequent person, until 1 July 2023);
- *plus* the household's actual monthly expenditure on housing, which includes expenses for rent, energy services (heating and hot water, electricity, water, natural gas), and

²² Such measures include publicly funded food banks and social grocery stores.

telecommunications services (including the internet) (the total amount of eligible monthly expenditure for each category is capped);

- less the total monthly income of all household members (including the amount of the GMI if household members are GMI recipients) (Klave, 2022).

It is noteworthy that state social benefits targeted at families with children (family state benefit, and the supplement to family state benefit, including for caring for children with disabilities) are not included in the household income assessment. Although the regulation does not explicitly set the level of household income as an eligibility criterion for housing benefit, the formula used for calculating the benefit takes household income into account. After housing costs, the household income of the person concerned must not fall below the GMI level (Klave, 2022). In the context of the energy crisis, from 1 October 2022 the formula for calculating the housing benefit was revised by applying a higher GMI amount (applying a coefficient of 3) for all households eligible for housing benefit (€327 per month for the first person and €228 per month for subsequent people in the household). This change has widened the range of potential beneficiaries of housing benefit. As an example: a single working parent (salary €1,200) with two children, whose spending on rent, internet, and telephone (according to the minimum norms) was €520, would receive housing benefit of €103 ($€327 + [2 \times €228] + €520 - €1,200$).

Housing benefit is granted for three calendar months if there is at least one person of working age in the household, which is the case for families with children. The benefit is paid at least once every three months, except for housing benefit for the purchase of solid fuels, which may be paid one or more times during the calendar year. The benefit can be paid both in cash and by transfer to the house administrator²³ or service-providers (gas, electricity, etc.). The benefit can also be provided in kind (i.e. by supplying solid fuels). In 2021, in total of 59,854 people received housing benefit. Out of all housing benefit recipients, 18% were children (Ministry of Welfare, 2022).

There are no recent studies analysing whether the current housing benefit adequately covers the housing costs for low-income households with children. However, the substantial increase of the GMI coefficient (from 1.5 to 3) in October 2022 has significantly contributed to the adequacy of housing benefit and to the growing numbers of benefit recipients at the end of 2022 and during first months of 2023.

According to Eurostat data, in Latvia in 2021 the housing cost overburden rate for children under 18 in the income group below 60% of the median income equivalent was 17.8% (25.9% in the EU-27); in the income group above that it was 1% (2.4% in the EU-27). The overall housing cost overburden rate for those under 18 reached 3.8%, which was lower than EU-27 average in 2021 (7%).

The overall indicator of severe housing deprivation in Latvia for those under 18 in 2020 was 15.5% (EU-27, 6.7%); in the income group below 60% of median equivalent it was 29.9% (EU-27, 15.6%); and in the income group above that it was 12.8% (EU-27, 4.6%).

Since 1 January 2015 the Electricity Market Law has introduced the concept of a “**protected user**”, which is: an in-need or low-income household/person (see Section 2.1.1 on the low-income criteria); a large household (three or more children); a household/person that takes care of a child with a disability; or a person with a group I disability who uses electricity for their own needs (for final consumption). A household with three or more children, of whom one or more is aged 18-24, is also eligible.

²³ An adult natural person with the capacity to act; or a legal person who, on the basis of an administration contract, performs the administrative activities assigned by the owner of the residential house (Law on Administration of Residential Houses).

The support measure provides for a reduced electricity bill for one electricity contract (one household). The payment reduction applies to electricity, system services and mandatory purchase components, but may not cover value added tax. The receipt or application of the service to protected users is automatic; the protected user does not have to apply to the electricity trading service-provider (trader) and does not have to provide documentation confirming the status of the protected user.

The level of support for the different sub-groups, and the principles for determining it, have changed several times since the introduction of this measure. From 1 September 2021 a fixed amount was introduced as a discount on monthly electricity costs, which means that all categories of protected users automatically receive a monthly in-kind compensation for the electricity consumed. Currently, the support is applied at the following rate per calendar month (for the period from 1 November 2021 to 30 April 2023):

- for an in-need household or low-income household/person – €15;
- for a household/person with a disabled child – €15 (from 1 February 2022 for each disabled child);
- for a person with a disability level group I or their guardian – €15; and
- for a large household – €20 (Cabinet Regulations No 345).

It was estimated that in 2022 there were approximately 160,000 protected users in Latvia, but only around 90,000 (40%) of them received support for electricity billing. According to media reports,²⁴ non-take-up was due to the incompatibility of service-providers' data systems with the system of the institution that collects data from various national and local registers on people/households eligible for protected user status (Latvian public media, 9 February 2022). There are no more recent data on the total number of the protected users and the non-take-up rate. There are no recent studies analysing whether the current support for protected users, including low-income children, adequately covers the electricity costs for low-income households with children.

6.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Social housing

6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

Some low-income households with children make use of social housing. However, this group has no priority in access to social housing, unlike other low-income groups such as single pensioners and people with disabilities – a low-income household with a child with disabilities would therefore have priority.

Social rental housing (a flat or a house) along with housing benefit is another form of support for low-income people. In general, social housing consists of municipality-owned buildings with a special social status. There are three main target groups that have the right to rent social housing: (a) in-need and low-income people (see Section 2.1.1 on the low-income criteria), provided that they are already renting municipal housing and have expressed a wish to live in a social flat; (b) orphans; and (c) people with disabilities. A particular local authority may set more favourable eligibility criteria at its discretion. As of January 2022, a social apartment rent agreement can be concluded for a maximum of two years (previously – six months) and can be renewed if the household still complies with the eligibility conditions. Every six months, it is verified that the circumstances have not changed. The maintenance of social housing is

²⁴ Available: <https://bit.ly/3lQz1dL>

financed from the municipal and/or state budget and the rent payments received from social apartment tenants. The social housing policy is rather weak and is designed as a short-term or a crisis solution, but not as a stable and long-lasting support measure for low-income people. To a large extent, this situation is determined by the insufficient municipal housing stock, and publicly available statistics on the topic are quite scarce (Rajevska, Kļave, Rajevska, 2022).

Due to the character of the privatisation process in the 1990s, Latvia is a country of home-owners, with few tenants: 7 out of 10 Latvian households own their home outright (OECD, 2020). Housing quality is an issue for many: a quarter of Latvian low-income households live in housing without basic facilities. After denationalisation and privatisation, only 10% of the housing stock is owned by municipalities (causing an imbalance between demand and supply). For example, the capital city of Riga owns 12,000 municipal flats, out of which only 1,800 or 15% are social flats (Vahtina, 2023). As a result, municipalities cannot meet the demand for social housing. This causes a shortage of accommodation for low-income and socially disadvantaged people, who are unable to pay their current housing bills and end up without a place to live. Municipalities do not have sufficient financial resources; and the money allocated for social assistance is used inefficiently, by paying benefits and allowances.

Issues related to the availability of social housing are addressed within the framework of the cohesion policy for 2021-2027 (Ministry of Finance, 2021), where support of €60 million is indicatively planned for the development of social housing: for 200 people in 2024 as intermediate value and for 1,865 people in 2029 as planned value. This is the first officially declared state support for social housing policy in Latvia.

6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

Access for low-income children to social housing is the same as for the population in general. The social housing policy functions as a short-term or crisis solution, not as a stable and long-lasting support measure for low-income people. The lower a household's income, the less its housing meets the standard for decent housing.

Existing housing support leaves out a large proportion of Latvian households whose incomes are too high to qualify for housing benefit and too low to afford renting newly built municipal flats or taking out a mortgage loan. Approximately 44% of households do not receive adequate support from either the state or the private sector, constituting the "missing middle" (OECD, 2020).

6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

The main non-financial barrier that hinders access by low-income children to social housing is the shortage of social housing. Latvia has one of the smallest social housing stocks in OECD countries – 2% of the total housing stock (OECD, 2020).

6.3 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Other measures

In Latvia, there is a rather limited range of state support instruments, in view of the exceedingly small size of the public and municipal housing stock. The development of the “support programme for families with children in purchasing or building housing” is among the policy tools that cannot be considered to directly target low-income households with children and tackle housing exclusion and homelessness.

It follows that, apart from housing benefits and social housing, there are currently no other measures to support access to affordable and decent housing for low-income households with children.

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