

Estonian Child Guarantee Report 2024

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

On 24 March 2021, the European Commission (hereinafter the Commission) published the first comprehensive European Union (EU) Strategy on the Rights of the Child¹ and presented a proposal for a Council recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee² to promote equal opportunities for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The recommendation on the EU Child Guarantee was adopted on 14 June 2021.

According to the recommendations, Member States had an obligation to develop targeted measures for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and to establish an action plan up to the year 2030. The Estonian Action Plan was approved by the Minister of Social Protection in March 2022. The objectives of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan are in line with Estonia's national objectives and the activities of the government's action programme, as well as other national development plans and strategic documents.

This report has been prepared under the coordination of the Ministry of Social Affairs in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and provides information on the implementation of both the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan and the recommendations on the European Child Guarantee. Partner organisations have also contributed to the preparation of this report. A list of these organisations and their views are presented below in this chapter.

¹Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU strategy on the rights of the child. COM(2021) 142 final. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0142&from=en>

²To support these measures, EU funds are available through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), as well as the European Regional Development Fund, InvestEU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. For more information, see: COM(2021) 137 final. Proposal for a Council Recommendation Establishing a European Child Guarantee. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0137&from=EN>

National target for combating child poverty and social exclusion

As part of the EU Social Pillar Action Plan, Estonia has set a target of reducing relative poverty and exclusion of children (here and hereafter aged 0–17) by 13,000 children by 2030. This means that the relative poverty and social exclusion rate among Estonian children will decrease to 15% by 2030 (the survey year).

The target level for child poverty and social exclusion set out in the EU Social Pillar is in line with the objective laid down in the Ministry of Social Affairs' Welfare Development Plan 2023–2030: "Estonia is a good place to raise a family and children, and children in Estonia are happy growing up in a caring, inclusive, safe and nurturing environment." One of the indicators of the objective is also the rate of social exclusion and poverty of children.

According to Eurostat EU-SILC data for 2023 (income year 2022), 18.3% of children lived in poverty and social exclusion in Estonia. Compared to the data for 2022 (income year 2021), this is 1.7 percentage points more than in the previous year, when the percentage of children living in poverty and social exclusion was 16.6%. At the same time, in 2023, the proportion of children living in poverty and social exclusion is 1.4 percentage points lower than in 2019, when the percentage of children living in poverty and social exclusion was 19.7%. Thus, Estonia is moving in the desired direction at reducing child poverty and social exclusion.

Ongoing and planned changes to combat child poverty, reduce social exclusion and support children in need

In a number of areas, important reforms are underway or planned to support children in need and contribute to reducing social exclusion and combating poverty. In this chapter, we will highlight some of the most important activities.

Activities have been started to integrate social and healthcare services. **The aim of these activities is to create an integrated social and healthcare system** that provides comprehensive and prevention-focused assistance to Estonian residents, thereby reducing the burden of care and extending healthy life years. The activities were launched in 2023 and an initial analysis and proposals for the management and financing model of an integrated social and healthcare system will be completed in 2024 as an important step in this area of action.

In order to facilitate identifying and helping children in need, we are updating the Estonian child protection system, among other things with the aim to focus more on

prevention, improve cooperation between sectors and revamp child protection case management, as well as to improve the organisation of child protection work in local governments and national authorities, and the quality and monitoring system of child protection.³ [The first legislative amendments](#), which will contribute to the improvement of cross-sectoral cooperation and the identification of children in need, have been sent to the partners for approval and will be presented to the Government of the Republic of Estonia in April 2024. The second package of amendments will be prepared in 2024 and will be presented to the Government a year later. In addition to legal and practical changes, IT systems used in child protection work will be modernised. The implementation of activities and the development of IT systems will be financed from the European Social Fund (ESF).

In 2021, the Government of the Republic of Estonia endorsed **proposals for the renewal of the support system for children with special needs**. In cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Research, [a reform of the support system for children with special needs](#) was launched, with the overall aim of providing faster, more effective and comprehensive assistance to children. The first objective of the reform is to simplify and speed up access to assistance by reducing the duplication of activities and information fragmentation in terms of assistance provided by the social, educational and healthcare sectors. The reform will link the receipt of services to the presence of an assessed need for assistance, not the severity of the disability, and as a whole, additional attention will be paid to the early identification of children's needs in both infancy and early childhood, so that children would be promptly attended to by the family physician and thus it would be possible to detect development delays in time. Various legislative changes and IT developments are planned for the implementation of the activities in the future, and several activities are to be financed from the ESF. The first amendments under the reform are expected to be implemented in the next few years, with longer-term activities planned for the period until 2027.

At the end of 2023, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Social Protection, the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Education and Research signed an agreement on the prevention of intimate partner violence for the years 2024–2027. The action plan of the agreement sets out activities to support **children affected by domestic violence**. In 2024, e-learning materials will be created for professionals working with children on the impact of domestic violence, including indirect and psychological abuse, on the child. This supports the timely detection of children's needs and their access to assistance.

³ [A legislative intent for a draft Act amending the Child Protection Act and other Acts to increase the welfare of children](#) was prepared in 2023.

In order to provide more systematic assistance to those children who have witnessed domestic violence, an analysis is to be carried out in 2024/2025 focusing on practices used in civil proceedings for assessing domestic child abuse (including the identification of psychological abuse and parental alienation) and its impact. The analysis should reveal which assessment tools could be used by social and law enforcement professionals to assess the impact of domestic violence on the child and to provide the child with the necessary assistance.

The **Barnahus service will also be enhanced** and, in addition to the development of services targeting sexually abused children, a greater focus will be placed on **abusive children**. For example, new assessment tools will be introduced in 2024, as well as a handbook for assessing the needs of children and young people exhibiting harmful sexual behaviour, for planning interventions, and for providing assistance. Activities to provide counselling for sexually abusive children will be expanded. The competencies and training needs of professionals who provide psychological assistance and other interventions in cases of child sexual abuse will also be analysed this year in order to ensure that both abused children and children exhibiting abusive behaviours have access to appropriate help.

In order to **promote family-based alternative care**, [a legislative intent for a draft Act amending the Social Welfare Act and other Acts](#) was prepared in the spring of 2023, on the basis of which a number of legislative amendments are planned. Starting from 2024, support services for family-based alternative care will receive nearly €1.2 million (€1.5 million from 2025 onwards) of funding from the state budget (previously developed and financed under the ESF). Support services are intended for foster, guardian and adoptive families and aim to support the psychosocial coping of families. Regulations on support services have been prepared and sent to partners for approval. The amendments will be submitted to the Government of the Republic in April 2024 and will enter into force from 2026. In the coming years, the goal is also to regulate the provision of crisis and professional special care families, which have so far operated on a project-by-project basis, in order to create a stable system both for the provision of temporary family-based care (instead of the institutional shelter service) and for the provision of family-based care to children with higher needs for care and assistance.

In the period of 2023–2029, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications will allocate EUR 12 million of ESF funds to the development of an Estonia-wide support system for young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) or are at risk of being NEET.⁴ The development work in the current period is based on the national co-creation process, on the basis of which **a cooperation model for**

⁴ For more information, see: [Meede: Kõrge tööhõive taseme saavutamine ja hoidmine \(Measure for achieving and maintaining a high level of employment\) | The State Shared Service Centre of Estonia \(rtk.ee\)](#)

providing services and support to youth in a NEET situation or at risk of NEET was prepared for local authorities. The framework created will allow for a harmonised understanding of how to reach and support children and young people.⁵ In accordance with the Labour Market Measures Act, which entered into force on 01.01.2024, and the Employment Programme (2024–2029), activities are implemented which contribute to creating environments that support children’s work experience (eg [support for employers for the employment of minors](#)) and enable young people to learn more about their strengths (eg [career services](#)).

Major ongoing changes in the education sector are related to early childhood education, the transition to Estonian-language education and extending the school-leaving age for compulsory education. With regard to early childhood education, principles for the provision of childcare and early childhood education will be harmonised. Childcare service providers, which previously belonged to the social sector, will now be included in the education sector. For children up to 3 years old, the services of childcare and day nurseries will be merged. The aim of the transition to Estonian-language education is to give all Estonian children, regardless of their native language, the opportunity to acquire a high-quality education in the Estonian language. The transition of all Estonian schools and kindergartens to Estonian as the language of instruction will be beneficial to children and young people, as Estonian-language education helps them to integrate into the Estonian cultural and value space, so that they do not lose their identity, but expand their options. A common Estonian-language educational setting will give all children and young people better opportunities for further learning and finding a desirable job and activity in the future. Education in the Estonian language supports the development of Estonian national identity, increases the cohesion of society and reduces both educational and socio-economic segregation. In addition, a reform on compulsory school attendance is planned to be carried out, with an aim to support the continuation of every student’s education beyond the basic school level and to reduce dropout from vocational or upper secondary schools, so that all Estonian young people attend school until they reach the age of majority, thus keeping opportunities open for future studies to acquire a profession or degree. Upon the entry into force of the amendment, compulsory school attendance starts at the age of seven and lasts until the age of 18. If the requirements for completing vocational education or secondary education are met before the age of 18, the obligation to attend school is also deemed fulfilled. Compulsory school attendance will apply to young people going to the ninth grade in 2024. Achieving results requires cooperation of the education, youth work and social sectors at the local level and the contribution of various ministries in the establishment of a system of career education and counselling for students. The amendments have been sent to the partners for approval and the intention is to present them to the Parliament of Estonia (Riigikogu) by April this year.

⁵ The created framework can be viewed here (in Estonian): <https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/media/2472/download>

Considerable focus is also placed on the area of mental health, where a large-scale study on the mental health of children was launched in 2023, serving as a basis for regular monitoring of children's mental health in the future. The results of the study will be available by the end of 2024. A cross-sectoral ministerial working group has also been established to address the factors affecting children's mental health in general and to develop proposals for changes in both the physical and social environment in all areas of life and at any level during 2024.

Institutional context for implementation of the Child Guarantee

In accordance with the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan, the policy framework for the Child Guarantee in Estonia consists of a child protection council.⁶ In August 2022, legislative amendments⁷ entered into force, establishing a single prevention council by merging the existing Child Protection Council, the Offence Prevention Council and the Government Committee on Drug Prevention⁸. The purpose of the Prevention Council is to establish a common basis for the development of cross-sectoral prevention and an action plan to guide and set strategic objectives for cooperation between different sectors. The Prevention Council includes among other parties the Chancellor of Justice, as well as representatives of the association of local governments, children's and youth organisations, relevant state agencies and citizens' associations. Politicians participating in the Protection Council include the Minister of Social Protection, the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education and Research, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Culture and the Minister of the Interior.

An overview of the initiatives related to the Child Guarantee was presented at the Prevention Council on 6.12.2023. At the same time, it was decided to launch a sub-working group on child welfare under the Prevention Council, under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Affairs. One of the tasks of this sub-working group will be to support and monitor the implementation of the Child Guarantee Action Plan.

The Child Guarantee Coordinator in Estonia is Hanna Vseviiov, Deputy Secretary General for Social Affairs of the Ministry of Social Affairs, whose responsibilities in the Ministry of Social Affairs include welfare policy, benefits and pension policy, child protection policy, family policy, economic livelihood, food aid and victim support. The Deputy Secretary General for Social Affairs acts under the authority of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Social Affairs, forming a horizontal team with the Deputy

⁶For more information, see the Child Protection Act:

<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/112122018049?leiaKehtiv#para13>

⁷ Acts amending the Child Protection Act, the Law Enforcement Act and Act on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and Precursors thereof.

⁸ [For more information on the Prevention Council, see https://www.just.ee/ennetusnoukogu](https://www.just.ee/ennetusnoukogu)

Secretary General for Healthcare and the Deputy Secretary General for Innovation, who are responsible for innovative development in the healthcare and social sector.

Evaluation of activities under the Child Guarantee

Since the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan is linked to national and sectoral development plans, more specific evaluations are mainly carried out in the course of activities in different sectors.

An important study completed in 2023 was the survey on household structure and organisation of families with children, which was commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The survey was conducted by the Estonian Centre for Applied Research CentAR. The survey⁹ was conducted among the population of recipients of child allowance from the Social Insurance Board in November 2022. Responses were collected from more than 12,000 families with children. According to the Estonian Social Survey (ESU),¹⁰ the survey not only provides data about households with children, but also gives an overview of the types of households with children over time. The study mapped the household structure of Estonian children, and the data obtained allow us to compare different household types and the way of life of families, including economic livelihood, satisfaction with family life, etc. Among other things, the study provides an in-depth look at single-parent households, categorising them based on the reasons for single parenting. For example, if a child's parents have separated, the survey reveals the extent to which the other parent living away from the household is involved in the child's life, including how often the child meets and communicates with the other parent and whether the child has a say in this, and how the child's expenses are covered.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is also conducting a comprehensive analysis of family allowances and parental benefit, which will be completed in October 2024. The purpose of the analysis is to review the current system of family benefits and to collect proposals for improving it in order to best support family planning, reconciliation of work and family life and economic livelihood. The previous comprehensive analysis on family allowances, related services and parental leave was published in 2015.

Stakeholder involvement

As the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan consists of sectoral development plans and related action plans, stakeholders are to a significant extent involved within the framework of ongoing processes in the individual sectors. The formation of broad-

⁹ A summary in English is available here: https://raportid.centar.ee/2023_lastega_pered/executive-summary.html

¹⁰ A summary in English is available here: https://raportid.centar.ee/2023_lastega_pered_esu_raport.html#5_Summary

based working groups, thus involving all the main stakeholders and partners, is a common practice in Estonia when planning and implementing changes.

For example, a cross-sectoral working group has worked together to plan and implement the reform of the support system for children with special needs, and it also contributed to the service design process of the support system for children with special needs. In addition, a legislative intent for a reform of rehabilitation services was prepared in 2023 in cooperation with a cross-sectoral working group. This involved consultations with a number of professional organisations, as well as advocacy organisations. A broad-based working group has been set up to prepare for the reform on compulsory school attendance, which includes representatives from ministries, as well as relevant NGOs. Stakeholders have also been extensively involved in the framework of legislative processes related to child protection.

A cooperation model for providing services and support to youth in a NEET situation, intended for local authorities, was prepared in national coordination with other parties and is currently the basis for supporting local authorities. This involved a service design process in order to create a model for providing support to children and young people, which will highlight how different parties can cooperate to efficiently support youth in a NEET situation at the level of local governments and how the process can be made as smooth as possible from the point of view of the target group. Input for the creation of the model was received from six workshops that took place during the co-creation process and where the needs of the target group, requirements related to the sector and possible solutions were mapped using service design tools. The workshops were attended by representatives of local governments, national authorities and their agencies, as well as representatives of support programmes and activities for young people in a NEET situation.

As part of the preparation of this report, feedback was gathered from stakeholders on the implementation of the Action Plan. Feedback on the implementation of the Action Plan was given by representatives of local governments, the Children's and Youth Rights Department of the Chancellor of Justice, Estonian Chamber of Disabled People, NGO Oma Pere, Estonian National Youth Council, Tallinn Welfare and Health Care Department, Estonian School Student Councils' Union, Estonian Association of Child and Youth Welfare Institutions, Estonian Dance Education Association, European Speech and Language Therapy Association, Social Insurance Board and Estonian Refugee Council.

Positive feedback from partners regarding the implementation of the Estonian Child Guarantee and the fight against poverty and social exclusion included the following:

- the country has long-term goals and lines of action to support the target groups, and an increased focus is placed on addressing problems arising from the increase in inequality;

- noticeable progress has been made in certain areas, for example, in supporting parents of children with special needs, as well as prevention activities (including parenting, youth work, hobby education, etc.);
- decisions are based on research, and assistance is targeted at the target groups most in need of support, eg single parents, to whom a number of activities have been targeted;
- cross-sectoral cooperation is increasingly valued and there are targeted actions to increase its effectiveness;
- the role of public information and social campaigns has increased, helping to raise awareness and encouraging behavioural change;
- there has been an improvement in understanding the expectations of young people and targeting actions accordingly.

At the same time, the representatives of partner organisations find that there are still a number of thematic areas that need more attention, in order to support vulnerable target groups and move towards the objectives of the Child Guarantee:

- as regards the Child Guarantee actions, it is important to focus more specifically on children and families in the target group; for example, measures should not only be aimed at preventing the risk of poverty and exclusion, but should also be targeted at children and families in the target group, and progress should be monitored within this target group in the context of the implementation of the Child Guarantee;
- children get noticed and helped too late, which exacerbates socio-economic difficulties and significantly affects the coping ability and mental health of children. Here, an important role is played by specialists who work directly with children and who, in addition to noticing, must be able to better support these children;
- it is important to increase social awareness, as well as community assistance and support for children and families in the target group;
- more attention should be paid to support specialists and their succession, including their workload and continuing professional development, and it is important to create a common national understanding of and support for the domain of support specialists;
- children with learning difficulties should be provided with simplified learning materials and appropriate schooling, which also better accommodates the needs of those children in mainstream education whose intellectual capacity is slightly lower. More attention should also be given to alternative means of communication (eg sign language, image-based communication, etc), and the associated responsibilities need to be more clearly defined;
- it is important to further increase actual involvement, especially among the target group of young people themselves and, more specifically, to identify those young people who are affected by these issues on a daily basis;

- attention should also be paid to increasing accessibility, which can be a major obstacle to reducing exclusion.

The partner organisations remarked that when working with vulnerable children and families, the roles of the organisations themselves need to be further defined; for example, organisations working with children on a daily basis play an important role in the sectors of education and hobby education, as well as in thematic representative associations. Organisations see their role as sharers of information, educators and awareness-raisers. Local authorities can target assistance based on the needs of the region by analysing regional needs, but it is also important to contribute more extensively to preventive actions. Youth organisations take on an important role in passing on information from young people to other young people and increasing the visibility of children and young people as stakeholders through advocacy activities.

Progress in the implementation of the Action Plan

During the period under review, significant actions were implemented in various domains of the Child Guarantee. For example, important steps were taken to improve the mental health situation of children, including addressing the issue at the ministerial level more broadly across all areas affecting children's mental health.

In order to increase the welfare of children and to improve the child protection system, a [legislative intent for a draft Act](#) was prepared, which described further changes necessary for preventing the need for assistance, for the timely identification and effective support of children in need, as well as for improving the child protection system and ensuring the quality of child protection work.

Significant progress has also been made in supporting children with special needs. One of the most important achievements in this area was the establishment of automatic data exchange between the state and local authorities on persons with disabilities, which enables local authorities to proactively reach families who may need additional support due to a child's disability. The principles for the use of funds allocated to local authorities were also amended to ensure greater flexibility to help children with a high need for care and assistance, and to prevent an aggravation of their need for assistance.

Regarding support for children in need of alternative care, the financial contribution of the state increased significantly, so that the important activities aimed at ensuring the quality of alternative care and facilitating family-based alternative care, which were started with funding from the European Social Fund, could be continued with funding from the state budget after the end of the project activities.

Significant progress has also been made in supporting children and families where the child is raised by one parent: on 1 January 2024, the maintenance allowance paid to children whose parents do not comply with the obligation to pay maintenance was doubled. In 2023, the single-parent child allowance was increased to €80 instead of the earlier €18.19. In addition, a legislative intent was prepared with an aim to transfer the survivor's pension under the scope of the Family Benefits Act. This would in the future allow families who have lost a primary income earner to receive a uniform indexed allowance based on the child's maintenance costs and help prevent the risk of poverty. In addition to increasing financial support, practical solutions were developed in 2023 to reduce the number of children who have no father entered into their birth certificate. A national family mediation system was also launched to support separating parents with regard to arrangements related to the rights of access and custody.

The coping capacity of families with children has also been supported by changes in family allowances. For example, in 2023, the child allowance for the first and second child was increased from €60 to €80. Allowances paid to large families have also increased during the reporting period. Starting from 2024, a large family (starting from the third child) will be paid €450 to €650 per month, depending on the number of children. Temporarily, family allowances for large families were even higher in 2023, but were made more proportional in 2024.

2. TARGET GROUPS

Based on the Commission's recommendations, Estonia has identified in its Action Plan the target groups at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Table 1 below provides an overview of the size of the target groups and the change compared to the initial size of the target group, as indicated in the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan.

Table 1 Child Guarantee target group sizes

Target groups	Initial size of the target group of children (under 18, unless otherwise indicated) as indicated in the Action Plan	The most recent available data on the size of the target group of children (under 18, unless otherwise indicated)
Children with special needs or disabilities	The number of children in need whose case was dealt with by a local government's child protection services: 9,857 children in 2020. Source: STAR, Social Insurance Board / Ministry of Social Affairs.	The number of children in need whose case was dealt with by a local government's child protection services: 14,213 children, which is 5.7% of the number of children in 2022. Source:

		STAR, Social Insurance Board / Ministry of Social Affairs.
	10,169 children with disabilities (3.8% of children aged 0–17) <i>Source: Data of the Social Insurance Board as of the end of 2023</i>	10,817 children with disabilities (4.1% of children aged 0–17) <i>Source: Data of the Social Insurance Board as of the end of 2022</i>
Children growing up in a single-parent household	37,900 children (14.7% of children) <i>Source: Eurostat, table ilc_lvps20, as of 2020</i>	36,400 children (14.1% of children) <i>Source: Eurostat, table ilc_lvps20, as of 2022</i>
Children with mental health problems	The percentage of 11–15-year-olds who experienced a depressive episode during the year was 32.8%. <i>Source: Estonian survey of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), academic year 2017/2018</i>	The percentage of 11–15-year-olds who experienced a depressive episode during the year was 38.5%. <i>Source: Estonian survey of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), academic year 2021/2022</i>
Children in alternative care	A total of 2,099 children (0–17 years old) in alternative care, including 745 children in substitute homes / family homes, 138 children in foster families and 1,216 children in guardian families <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, as of the end of 2020</i>	A total of 2,135 children (0–17 years old), including 716 children in substitute homes / family homes, 146 children in foster families and 1,273 children in guardian families <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, as of the end of 2022</i>
Children from a violent family and	In 2020, 4,140 cases and 5,700 new victims reached victim	In 2022, 3,719 new cases and 4,636 new victims reached

children experiencing violence	support, including 1,038 minors (0.4% of 0–17-year-olds) <u>Source:</u> Ministry of Justice / Social Insurance Board. Population data: Statistics Estonia (annual average number of 0–17-year-olds)	victim support, including 695 minors (0.26% of 0–17-year-olds) <u>Source:</u> Ministry of Justice / Social Insurance Board. Population data: Statistics Estonia (annual average number of 0–17-year-olds)
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3. SERVICES

3.1. Early childhood education and care

In the academic year 2022/23, nearly 69,000 children attended early childhood education, there were 586 early childhood and care (preschool) institutions and 3,875 groups, ie the trend of previous years has continued, with the number of preschool institutions decreasing, while the number of children and groups is increasing. Compared to the academic year 2018/19, 3,000 more children attended early childhood education and care institutions in the academic year 2022/23 (+5%). The number of children was significantly increased by Ukrainian war refugees: as of 10 November 2022, 1,921 Ukrainian children attended Estonian preschool institutions, ie approximately 3% of all kindergarten children. County-wise, the number of children attending early childhood education has increased in five years in all counties except Ida-Viru County.

Early childhood education is organised by local authorities and the monthly fee may differ across different regions of Estonia. The average monthly fee in 2022 according to the balance sheets of local governments was €41.1. In addition, the parent pays for the child's meals in the kindergarten, but the local government may also cover a part of or the whole cost. Also, the local government may establish various discounts (for example, for the second or third child of the same family). If the family cannot afford to pay the monthly fee and the cost of meals at the kindergarten due to a difficult economic situation, then help can be obtained from the social department of the local government.

One of the reasons for the decrease in the number of preschool institutions is the rearrangement of the educational network by local authorities, taking into account population forecasts and the changes that have already taken place in the number and location of children. Kindergartens have been merged with schools, and several smaller kindergartens have been merged to form a single larger establishment, while

retaining all the places for children that were available when the institutions operated separately.

Care groups have been formed at 25 preschool institutions or kindergarten-schools, the largest number being in Tartu County (13 preschool institutions). In total, 560 children are in care groups, 170 of them in Tartu municipality and 198 in the city of Tartu.

Most children with special educational needs are in mainstream groups. Around a third of all preschool institutions (189 institutions) have special needs groups and integration groups where children with special needs are together with other children.

Childcare services were provided to 5,879 children in 2022, including 5,274 preschoolers and 605 children aged 7–18. For children with a high need for care, local governments supported access to childcare services for 820 children. The childcare service for children with a high need of care is a service organised by the local government, the provision of which is supported by the state on an annual basis. For parents, the service is available free of charge or with minimal own contribution, which does not prevent access to the service. All families in need must receive childcare services close to their home if the family has a child with a high need for care and assistance. The service is designed to reduce the caregiving burden on parents and to support labour market participation or professional development.

Early childhood education attendance rates vary from county to county, especially for children under 3 years of age. This can be attributed to regional income inequality, as the Early Childhood Education and Care Survey 2021 revealed that the lower the household income, the more widespread the use of kindergarten. For children aged 3–5 years, the attendance rate in rapidly growing local governments may also be due to the inability to secure kindergarten places for all who request it (Lang *et al.* 2021). There are over 90% of 6-year-olds in preschool in all counties, with an average of 92.5%, and at least 95% in more than half of the counties. In autumn 2022, 1,311 children started school in Estonia who did not attend kindergarten the previous year. This is significantly higher than in previous years, when the number of children who did not attend kindergarten ranged from 700 to 850 children. Although according to the PISA study, the link between kindergarten attendance and later learning outcomes in Estonia is weak (Valk and Selliov 2018), attendance of early childhood education has proven to have a positive impact on children's development, especially for children with poorer-quality home environments. The sooner a child starts to attend kindergarten, the sooner it is possible to identify special educational needs, including talent, and to provide the necessary support to ensure each child's individual development and readiness for school.

A child who has reached the age of seven before October 1 of the current year must attend school. If the child has not achieved the necessary school readiness by the time the child reaches compulsory school age, school attendance may be postponed for

one academic year on the recommendation of an external counselling team. For the academic year 2022/23, a recommendation on the postponement of school attendance was issued for 519 children. The recommendation to postpone school may be issued due to a variety of special educational needs, including, for example, speech impairments, health reasons, persistent learning difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, emotional and behavioural disorders, etc. At the request of the parent and on the recommendation of an external counselling team or the kindergarten, a child may also start school before the compulsory school age. As of 10 November 2022, 2,277 6-year-old children and 13 5-year-old children were enrolled full time in general education schools, and approximately 15% of first-grade students are under the age of 7. 56% of children who have started school under the age of 7 are girls and 44% are boys. Compared to previous years, the percentage of children under 7 years of age in general education schools has slightly increased, with their percentage varying greatly depending on whether the child is studying in Estonian or Russian – approximately one in seven first-grade students studying in the Estonian language, and about one in five students studying in the Russian language, are younger than 7 years old.¹¹

As the biggest change in the development of the field of early childhood education, a draft Early Childhood Education Act has been prepared, the purpose of which is to establish a more uniform framework for kindergartens and childcare service providers. The proposed harmonisation of the support system will also contribute to greater coherence between early childhood education and basic education. The amendment also harmonises the requirements for childcare service providers and nurseries and stipulates that local governments must provide all children aged 1.5–3 years with the opportunity to attend childcare and all children aged 3–7 years the opportunity to attend kindergarten. These changes are to enter into force on 1 January 2025.

Through this amendment, childcare service for children under three years of age, which has so far fallen under the purview of different ministries, with different requirements applicable to it, will henceforth be transferred to the remit of the Ministry of Education and Research, and quality requirements will be harmonised. Quality childcare will become more accessible to families through the involvement of the private sector and its quality will be consistent. The provision of support services to children in need of support will henceforth be more clearly regulated.

¹¹ The overview of this subsection is based on the analytical annex to the 2022 performance report of the Ministry of Education and Research on the performance area “Smart and active people”, which is available (in Estonian) at <https://hm.ee/haridus-ja-teadusministeeriumi-2022-aasta-tulemusaruanded>

3.2. Education and school-based activities

Regarding education and school-based activities, a report is provided on the three areas of action of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan, and an overview is given about the main activities underway and planned in these areas of action.

3.2.1. Learning opportunities and organisation of education

Activities under this measure are aimed at developing the network of educational institutions and providing the required infrastructure, so that education would be accessible to different target groups and the learning environment would support a modern approach to learning. The measure also ensures flexible learning opportunities at different levels of education, access to quality education and supported learning, in order to reduce the drop-out rate and interruption of studies and maximise the potential of each individual.

To this end, the following activities take place in 2023–2026.

- The school network (including state gymnasiums, basic schools, schools for students with special educational needs) will be restructured, and investments will be made to restructure the network of basic schools in regions that need impetus for development. Result: by 2026, there will be 26 state gymnasiums in operation, including at least one state gymnasium in each county (approximately 11,000 places for students depending on agreements and the situation on the construction market). The basic schools involved in the restructuring are functional, modern and efficient.
- The infrastructure of vocational schools and the implementation of pilot projects of educational centres will be modernised. The investments will support closer cooperation between educational institutions, including vocational schools, general education schools, non-formal education providers, as well as higher education institutions (eg regional colleges of universities) and youth work institutions, ensuring a common infrastructure and a “one-stop shop” approach to provide schooling tailored to the needs of the region.
- In order to implement the principles of inclusive education, support will be provided to educational institutions from 2024 onwards in order to increase the participation of people with any special needs in mainstream education and youth work through the improvement of the learning environment. The total budget of the measure until 2027 is €12.1 million.
- In order to ensure access to general education, educational support is provided to the operators of municipal and private schools, necessary study places in state schools are provided and the implementation of IBO curricula and the development of the European School are supported. The implementation of internationally recognised curricula supports activities related to

internationalisation and international cooperation in different areas. Free school meals are provided in cooperation between the state and local authorities.

- In order to ensure access to vocational training, vocational training volumes are planned, study places are provided and measures are provided to support students' coping. Free study places ensure access to vocational education. The training volume is optimal and in line with the recommendations of OSKA reports. The financing model supports the achievement of vocational education objectives, including the incorporation of the principles of inclusive education in the organisation of teaching in schools¹². Vocational schools take into account the principle of equal treatment and the needs of different target groups, including students with a home language other than Estonian, new immigrants and returnees, and students with special educational needs. Discontinuation of vocational training, including for economic reasons, is reduced.

3.2.2. Youth sector

The activities help to increase access to and the quality of youth work (incl hobby education) and will continue to support the diversification and accessibility of youth hobby education and activities. The aim of the activity is to make high-quality youth work (incl youth hobby education) available all over Estonia and create opportunities for all young people (aged 7–26) for diverse development, success experiences, enrichment of experience and independence.

To this end, the following activities take place in 2022–2025.

The state contributes to the participation of young people in non-formal education through additional support for hobby education and hobby activities. Starting from 2022, the amount of the support is €10.3 million. Year after year, the number of young people participating in hobby education and hobby activities in municipalities has increased, despite the crises of recent years (about 80% of young people aged 7–19 take part in hobby education and hobby activities).

In order to support participation in youth work, the state allocates additional budgetary resources to local governments and – through project grants – to youth work establishments. In 2022, state support was allocated for the activities of youth brigades, youth project camps and permanent camps (based on filled places, a total of 34,655 young people took part (ie one young person may have participated in several different activities). In national calls for proposals, more attention was paid in 2022 to the involvement of children and young people from among Ukrainian war refugees, in order to support their adaptation and integration into the Estonian society and cultural space, Estonian language learning and the continuation of their personal development (842 young people of Ukrainian origin participated in the permanent and

¹² The incorporation of the principles of inclusive education and equal treatment in the daily work of schools is one of the components of the financing model for vocational education.

project camps, and 108 in the youth brigade activities). The call for proposals “Noorte heaks” (For Youth) aims to enhance cooperation in the youth field in order to respond to the needs and challenges of young people.

In addition, the state supports **youth self-initiative projects**, where young people develop and implement ideas they have created themselves. Self-initiative supports the development of an active attitude to life among young people, as well as their entrepreneurship and awareness of the functioning of the labour market.

In 2023, the terms and conditions were finalised for granting support for the action “Services for youth at risk and the involvement of children and young people in civil society”. The aim of the grant is to prevent and reduce the social exclusion of young people at risk, including mental health and labour market problems, to support the retention of young people in the education system and the development of active attitudes to life. To this end, more opportunities will be created across Estonia for young people at risk (10–18 years old) to participate in activities based on sports and exercise that develop general skills and help prevent social exclusion. The activities carried out by the NGO SPIN.

A support measure for integration and language learning camps was developed, which supported the organisation of 141 camps with nearly 11,000 young people participating, nearly half of whom were of Ukrainian origin. In order to better integrate Ukrainian war refugee youth into Estonian society, additional support was allocated to local governments for organising language learning and integration activities in non-formal learning environments (including youth centres, hobby schools, hobby organisations and institutions).

The state supports **enhancing participation opportunities for young people, as well as increasing their motivation to participate**. Support was given to the Estonian National Youth Council, which started a participation programme focusing on regional coordinators. The aim of this area of action is to support local governments in the establishment of youth councils and to contribute to the development of youth councils. In order to ensure the quality and development of the activities of youth councils, a mentoring programme aimed at new youth councils was also launched. Youth civic participation shows a continued diversification of forms of participation. New youth councils and active groups are formed at the local level, as well as youth advisory councils at the national level, which enable young people to have their say in matters of their society. In 2022, there were 92 forms of participation.

One way to bring youth work opportunities to all young people is **mobile youth work**, which, however, so far has no clear national strategic development direction or objective. The value of mobile youth work became more evident in society during the pandemic, when many young people could no longer be in their usual environments – school, hobby school, youth centre – and were left in isolation. In 2022, the concept of mobile youth work started to be developed, which will be completed in 2024. This will

contribute to a more coherent definition of mobile youth work at the national level and will help local authorities to implement it better.

In 2021, a project was launched to **integrate non-formal learning into formal education**. It was initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research and is implemented in cooperation with the European Commission and the international consulting company ICF. The project “Supporting young people to succeed – building capacities

to better integrate non-formal and formal learning” ran until August 2023. The aim of the project was to create a framework for describing the knowledge, skills and experiences acquired during non-formal learning, and for assessing and recognition of the quality of those skills and competencies when the student is completing the curricula of lower and upper secondary schools or vocational schools. The longer-term objective is to contribute to a more flexible and student-centred education system.

A common national model was developed in 2010 **for assessing the quality of youth work**. The aim of the quality assessment is to enable local authorities to map the strengths of their youth work, the bottlenecks that need to be addressed and, on the basis of the results, to plan further development based on the needs of young people. By 2022, the percentage of local governments that had passed the assessment of the quality of youth work had increased to 24%.

In order to create high-quality and diverse opportunities to unlock and develop the interests and talents of young people, the **concept and action plan for 2022–2027 for talent spotting and development** was completed in 2021. The concept and action plan were preceded by an analysis completed in 2019 that addresses issues related to talent from the point of view of the student, school and teacher, as well as the state. The concept of talent development and spotting formulated the principles for solving the problems presented in the analysis, and the action plan describes the areas of action to support talent in the development of a systemic approach.

A multilingual youth information website www.teeviit.ee/youth-info was created for the youth information portal Teeviit in order to increase the visibility of youth work and hobby education and to make national youth information more accessible for young people with other native languages. In addition, the information and games website TEEVIIT juunior has been created for the younger age group (7–12 years), which distributes supportive and skill-enhancing information materials in an engaging and inclusive way.

The Infohunt portal gives young people information about the various activities and events organised for them in their home community. An important advantage of the portal is the reduction of information overload for all parties concerned and the presenting of information on activities in the region in one place, categorised both by age and by topic.

In 2022, work was begun to update two laws regulating the youth sector – the Youth Work Act and the Hobby Schools Act – in order to ensure the accessibility and quality of youth work and hobby education, introduce qualification requirements for employees and establish minimum quality requirements. The legislative intents will be prepared in 2024.

3.2.3. Succession planning and development of teachers, learning approach and environments

The measure involves activities for the application of the principles of modern learning at all levels and types of education, so that the learning process and content would support the development of a self-managing learner and the teaching would empower the learner as well as the teacher and the vocational teacher. The measure supports, among other things, the development of a common cultural and value space, ensures high-quality Estonian and Estonian language learning and encourages the learning of foreign languages, ensures flexible employment opportunities for qualified teachers and support specialists, support for beginners and professional development opportunities throughout their career.

There has been **an increase in study places** in the specialties of teacher training and support specialists since 2019. Starting teachers have been paid a beginning teacher allowance. The aim of the allowance is to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession and the career of support specialists, and to support qualified teachers and support specialists in starting work at school for 5 years at least half-time (0.5 FTE). The amount of the allowance in 2023 is €15,979 (€20,773 in Ida-Viru County). A scholarship of €400 is paid to aspiring teachers and support specialists. Scholarships are received by 80% of students studying in curricula preparing teachers of natural sciences and languages, 20% of students in curricula preparing kindergarten teachers, and 20% of students doing a bachelor's programme in special education. In the remaining curricula that allow for the qualification of a support specialist or teacher, 60% of students receive a scholarship. A support programme for beginning teachers has been launched at the universities of Tartu and Tallinn to provide support to teachers starting work at school. By the academic year 2023/24, the programmes have been extended to those teachers working at schools who have not completed a teacher training curriculum at a university.

The Education and Youth Board offers development programmes to improve leadership skills and develop organisational culture for both beginning and experienced managers, as well as a programme for the succession of school leaders, a development programme for directors of studies, etc. In total, more than 100 managers have participated in the development programmes. Activities related to the popularisation of the teaching profession have been carried out: Since 2018, the Education and Youth Board has been running an inspiration programme "Jah! Õpetajaks!" ("Yes" to becoming a teacher!), which aims to encourage people who want

to make a career change and take up or return to the teaching profession. An elective course at upper secondary schools to introduce the teaching profession as a career option (finalised at the end of 2023; schools can use the elective course from the beginning of 2024). Teachers in Ida-Viru County who teach in Estonian are paid 1.5 times the minimum wage of teachers. Various digital solutions are supported, such as the Videoõps and Digiõps programmes, Tagasi Kooli online classes, etc. In 2024, the Teacher Academy programme will be launched in cooperation between the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, with the aim of ensuring succession to academic staff of universities and teachers of schools and preschool institutions, as well as increasing their R&D capacity in four focus areas – science didactics, mathematics didactics, teaching Estonian to students and children with other home languages, teaching in Estonian and inclusive education. Collaborative communities of master teachers and university academics in four focus areas will be established in order to build a basis for succession, and innovative microdegree programmes will be implemented in teacher education. The target result will be an increase in the numbers and qualifications of academic staff in the focus areas, which will allow for an increased attractiveness regarding studying to be a teacher, as well as an increase in the number of qualified teachers. In cooperation with the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, the capacity of school leaders and school administrators will be increased through training and development programmes.

In 2024, work was started to develop a professional standard for assistant teachers and to update the current [professional standards for teachers](#).

3.2.4. Development activities related to curricula and organisation of schools

Regarding the development and support of national curricula of general education, one stage of updating the curricula was completed on 23.02.2023, when the Government of the Republic approved the changes. This indicates that besides improvements in the field of social sciences, learning outcomes related to critical thinking and problem-solving skills have been described in all subject fields. In addition, the importance of a positive mental and social environment has been significantly highlighted in all subject field plans.

To support the implementation of the national curriculum, an online environment has been created: <https://projektid.edu.ee/site/okmv>. The updated physical education (PE) curriculum includes five topics throughout all levels of school, one of which is “Mental and physical balance”. The student will acquire basic knowledge and skills of maintaining mental and physical balance and will understand ways to improve their mental and physical health.

In order to ensure equal opportunities in early childhood and basic education, the principles of inclusive education have continued to be applied, which includes ensuring access to advisory services. The provision and development of educational counselling services through the Rajaleidja network will continue. The total budget of the measure until 2029 is €29.4 million.

In order to prevent mental and physical health problems in children and young people, activities are supported both within and outside educational and youth work institutions. A more holistic new physical education curriculum and solutions supporting mental health will be implemented.

The development of the e-Koolikott portal has continued to make the website more user-friendly. The website has been updated with an index of educational literature.

3.3 Healthy food on every school day

Local authorities are responsible for ensuring the economic maintenance and financing of municipal educational institutions in their administrative area and the catering of students during the school day. The state budget provides for a subsidy to cover the costs of school lunches for full-time students receiving basic or upper secondary level education at municipal or private schools. The school lunch subsidy per student has been approved by the Government of the Republic. The current school lunch subsidy is €1 per school day, totalling €175 per year.

The terms and conditions and procedure for using the school lunch subsidy are established by the rural municipality or city council. The current Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act does not oblige local governments and other school administrators to provide students with a free school lunch. In state-maintained general education schools and in many municipal schools, school lunch is free for the student. In addition to support from the state budget, the school administrator also contributes. In several municipalities and in all private general education schools, parents also cover a part of the cost of school lunches. All local governments ensure free school lunches for children of families in difficulty.

The state budget also provides for a subsidy to cover the costs of school lunches for students who have enrolled in initial vocational education and training curricula, but have not completed upper secondary education. This subsidy is based on the same criteria as in the case of general education schools. The terms and conditions and procedure for using the school lunch subsidy are established by the school administrator.

Support from the state budget has increased over the years from the initial 78 cents to 1 euro. The subsidy was initially intended only for basic school students and was later extended to upper secondary school students as well.

The cost of school lunch per student per day in 2023 is €1.25 (excluding VAT) in state-maintained general education schools and €1 in vocational schools. The average cost of school meals (per day) for local governments in 2022 was €1.64 according to the balance sheet (includes morning porridge, as well as catering for the long-day group, school boarding house).

Table 2 School lunch subsidy from the state budget

	2022 (million €)	2023 (million €)	2024 (million €)
State-maintained general education schools	2.08	2.59	3.4
State-maintained vocational schools	2.41	2.49	2.8
Private general education schools	1.79	1.90	2.0
Municipal general education schools	24.2	24.80	24.4
TOTAL	30.44	31.78	32.6

To support the provision of organic food in preschool institutions and general education schools, funds are planned in the budget of the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture. Funds allocated for this support amounted to €673,500 in 2022 and €1,200,000 in 2023. Administrators of municipal and private kindergartens and municipal, state-maintained and private schools may apply for this subsidy. The amount of the subsidy per one child of a preschool institution is €4.90, and per one student of a general education school €2.20 in one calendar month.

When organising catering, there is an obligation to comply with the health protection requirements established by the Public Health Act. [The requirements for school meals and catering have been established by a regulation of the Minister of Social Affairs.](#) The production, labelling and control of organic food are governed by a [Regulation of the Commission of the European Communities](#), and the [Organic Farming Act](#).

According to the Global School Feeding Survey 2021¹³ report, Estonia is one of the countries in Europe and the whole world that contribute the most to school meals: both from the state budget as targeted subsidies and as a contribution from local

¹³ [School meal programmes around the world: Results from the 2021 Global Survey of School Meal Programs © | Health and Education Resource Centre \(unesco.org\)](#)

governments to support school lunches. This is supplemented by the organic food measure, fruit and vegetables measure and school milk measure.

3.4. Health

All children up to 19 years of age whose principal place of residence according to the population register is Estonia, are covered by health insurance, and their healthcare services, including dentists' services, are paid for by the Estonian Health Insurance Fund. From the moment of birth, the child is registered on the same family physician's practice list as the mother, in order to ensure the availability of help. Children have the right to receive regular medical examinations and services, which include both physical examination and monitoring of development in accordance with the principle set out in Section 5 of the Public Health Act: as a means of preventing disease, preventive medical examinations of children are carried out in order to ensure, *inter alia*, the healthy development of children and early detection of health disorders. This involves the cooperation of paediatricians, family physicians, family nurses and as specialist doctors. The child's development, growth, weight, hearing, vision and speech are monitored. This also involves helping children to form healthy eating and exercise habits and advising on any other matters of health. Vaccinations are carried out for the prevention of infectious diseases. Regular check-ups help children to form healthy eating and exercise habits, and the family is advised on matters of health.

As the basis for monitoring the health of children, the guide for monitoring a healthy child has been in use in Estonia for many years, which was last updated in 2019 and partially (in terms of eye checks) also in 2021. A checklist for monitoring the health of the child¹⁴ has been prepared to supplement it, which includes various activities for monitoring the health (including mental health) of a healthy child, vaccinations, recommendations for visiting the dentist. Age groups have also been defined, as well as specific responsibilities of the family nurse/family physician/midwife and the school nurse.

3.4.1. Supporting children with mental health problems

The Government of the Republic, which took office in 2023, provided in its work plan for the development of proposals to improve the mental health of children. The Ministry of Social Affairs decided to carry out this task on a cross-sectoral basis, addressing the factors affecting children's mental health more broadly. To this end, a working group consisting of the representatives of all ministries was convened, so that issues related to the mental health of children and young people could be monitored and addressed in all policies of the country. During 2024, the working group is to develop

¹⁴ https://www.ravijuhend.ee/uploads/userifiles/Lapse_tervise/Kontrollkaart_A4.pdf

proposals for changes in both the physical and social environment in any area of life and at any level.

In order to better understand and improve the mental health situation of children, a large-scale study was also launched in 2023, which will be completed by the end of 2024 and will form the basis for future regular monitoring of children's mental health.

The social and healthcare sector has also worked efficiently with the Ministry of Education and Research to make the learning environment more supportive of the development and well-being of children. In cooperation, training courses on the mental health of children have been developed and disseminated, *inter alia* to better support children with traumatic experiences at school. The National Institute for Health Development, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Research, has been developing a programme for enhancing the socio-emotional skills of teachers starting from 2022. With the support of the Ministry of Education and Research, the Education and Youth Board is adapting the YAM (Youth Aware of Mental Health) programme, which is an evidence-based programme for mental health promotion and suicide prevention, for use in Estonian schools. Preparatory activities for the implementation of the programme are carried out in cooperation with the healthcare sector. Current preparatory activities for the use of the programme include the preparation of training courses, etc.

Access to mental healthcare and physiotherapy services in the healthcare system has been improved. On 1 October 2023, amendments to the Health Services Organisation Act entered into force, which established requirements for the independent provision of psychological treatment, physiotherapy and speech therapy. Through this amendment, the same rights and obligations apply to these professionals as to other healthcare professionals. As a result, these professionals received the right to transfer treatment records to the health information system, which facilitates the exchange of information between specialists and ensures better quality and consistency of treatment. Also, from 1 October 2023, such a change allowed the Estonian Health Insurance Fund to conclude direct contracts with service providers for, *inter alia*, the financing of psychological treatment. This enables people who have a referral from a family physician to go to their preferred practitioner who has a contract with the Estonian Health Insurance Fund, and the Fund pays for the treatment.

Efforts have also been made to make mental healthcare services available to children outside the healthcare system – support specialists at schools, Rajaleidja centres across Estonia, an advisory centre (Õppenõustamiskeskus) in Tallinn and Perepesa centres in several municipalities provide psychological help and support. The Social Insurance Board is operating a child helpline, 116 111, enabling children to anonymously talk about their concerns, either by phone or an online chat. For many years, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Estonian Health Insurance Fund have also financed the youth counselling services of the Peaasjad NGO, including Peahea

mental health counselling. For the third consecutive year, the Ministry of Social Affairs, through a call for proposals, also supports the mental health services of local county governments and the hiring of psychologists in health centres. On top of that, there are initiatives from both the private and non-profit sectors.

3.4.2. Support for children with special needs and disabilities

In 2023, a reform of rehabilitation services was prepared and a legislative intent for a draft Act amending the Social Welfare Act and other Acts was drawn up. The action is part of the reform of support services for children with special needs and is intended to help achieve its objectives. A simple and comprehensive assistance system, the early detection of need and wide accessibility of effective assistance make it easier for families to focus on supporting the child in need of assistance and help prevent an increased burden of care, thereby reducing long-term dependence on social services and benefits.

Below is a list of activities carried out in the framework of the reform of the support system for children with special needs, which are intended to support children with special needs and disabilities in terms of healthcare.

- In 2023, [an analysis of the identification of need on the basis of a diagnosis of an irreversible condition and the proactive provision of support services](#) was completed. This is the basis for the establishment of automatic data exchange between the healthcare, social and educational sectors. With the support of IT developments, a system is being created where the parent no longer has to seek help from various authorities, but national and local authorities proactively contact the family to provide support and services. The principle of a one-time request for data is followed and a desktop is created where all parties have access to the data necessary for their work.
- In 2023, the Government of the Republic decided to increase the accessibility of treatment for rare diseases by allocating €5 million annually from the state budget for the following four years. The Government of the Republic will support children with rare diseases for the next four years with a total of €20 million. For the treatment of children with rare diseases and the continuation of treatment started in childhood, support reaches those in need through charity funds.
- In 2022, an amendment was prepared that will allow local authorities to obtain data on children concerning whom an application has been submitted for the determination of the severity of the disability. In 2023, automatic data exchange was established to give child protection specialists of local governments the right to proactively assist families in need, thereby preventing an aggravation of the need for assistance.
- In 2022, an amendment was prepared that allows local governments to use the support allocated from the state budget (funds from the support fund) to help

all children with a high need for care and assistance, instead of catering only to the target group of children with severe and profound disabilities, as was the case earlier. In addition, the amendment allows local authorities to use support instead of the existing social services (childcare, support person, social transport) to provide support that prevents the need for assistance from aggravating and helps to reduce the burden of care for the family. The amendment entered into force in January 2023.

- In 2021, on the proposal of the genetics centre of the University of Tartu, 6 more diagnoses were added to the list of rare diseases. This will help families access the social benefits provided by the state and prevent an aggravation of the need for assistance and the development of complications that would significantly impair the quality of life of children.

Ensuring accessibility for children with disabilities so that they can participate in all aspects of social life is supported by a legislative framework, but in practice there are still challenges that can probably be attributed to a lack of awareness and limited resources. A positive trend is that the promotion of accessibility is actively on the agenda of various institutions and is being integrated into more and more areas.

Estonia has transposed Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services. In this context, on 30 May 2022, the Parliament of Estonia (Riigikogu) adopted the Products and Services Accessibility Act, the requirements of which will apply to products and services placed on the market starting from 28 June 2025. This concerns, for example, e-readers, payment terminals, ticket machines, general-purpose computer hardware systems and their operating systems, which in turn has a positive effect on children's accessibility to the information space, as well as learning and daily independent activities.

In 2018, the European Union Directive (EU) 2016/2102 was transposed into the Public Information Act, requiring public websites and mobile applications to comply with the European digital accessibility standard EN 301 549. On 22 December 2023, the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority published a report on the digital accessibility of the Estonian public sector in 2023. The percentage of non-compliance highlighted therein is the percentage of shortcomings in the compliance of websites with the requirements of the standard, taking into account all mandatory requirements for subpages/non-web documents tested in a domain. This percentage was identified during in-depth monitoring. For the checked pages, the percentages of non-compliance with requirements varied approximately from 13% to 19%, with the average being ca 16%. For websites that had been included in the sample in 2022 and were included again in 2023, the percentage of non-compliance had decreased by 1–8% during the year. Regular monitoring and reporting will contribute to improved accessibility. Accessible websites allow children to find a variety of necessary and

interesting information, learn, socialise, learn about activities aimed at them and also about ways to get assistance.

Regulation No. 28 of 29 May 2018 of the Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology of Estonia on the requirements for buildings arising from the special needs of people with disabilities (Puudega inimeste erivajadustest tulenevad nõuded ehitisele) establishes requirements for buildings where a service is provided to the public, for roads for public use within settlements, and for buildings that must be accessible to people with disabilities. These requirements apply, *inter alia*, to social housing, educational institutions, healthcare and cultural institutions and public street space, so compliance with them has a significant impact on the access of children to participate in social life. Supervision is carried out by the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority, on whose website there are guidelines and checklists available to everyone. The agency is constantly engaged in awareness-raising. The Ministry of Climate is working on amending this regulation in 2024. The accessibility situation of buildings providing public services is uneven, there are well-accessible institutions, but for some establishments, people with special needs do not have access at all. Therefore, in practice, a child might not be able to attend a school close to home, which in turn limits the choice of residence for families of children with special needs and their ability to be active in their own community. At the same time, if the child enrolls in an inaccessible school, it means a constant need for assistance, which in turn affects the coping capacity and sense of dignity of the family. The updating and widespread implementation of this Regulation and awareness-raising are therefore very important.

In terms of accessibility, Estonia currently relies heavily on the final report for 2021 of the Accessibility Task Force established by the Government Office, which contains numerous recommendations to improve accessibility for all population groups in various sectors in Estonia. This report drew upon, *inter alia*, a study on accessibility for children, commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs and carried out by the Centre for Applied Anthropology in Estonia in 2020. Although it did not specifically concern accessibility for children with disabilities, this is still a step forward in drawing attention to the issue of accessibility for children, which is now also getting attention at universities. Estonia continues to actively implement the recommendations of the Accessibility Task Force. As the Task Force addressed the issue of accessibility for both disabled people and children, which in turn also affects people with a care burden, the implementation of all these recommendations should have a positive impact on children. In 2026, the national plan "Estonia 2050" is planned to be approved, which also emphasises accessibility, inclusive design and the importance of taking into account the entire life cycle in spatial design. The Estonian planning system is hierarchical, so that these principles are transferred to all lower-level planning, if they are not already taken into account there.

3.5 Healthy eating

3.5.1. Healthy food in educational institutions

When promoting a balanced diet in educational institutions, a positive result is achieved by a comprehensive approach, which includes the following components:

- updating of curricula to include nutrition and horticulture education,
- raising the awareness of educators and parents,
- promoting the availability of balanced and healthy food choices.

Children's food choices are often influenced by easy access to the food offered. In this context, the following measures can be highlighted:

- food served in school buffets and/or vending machines – the National Institute for Health Development prepared in 2019 a guide to food served in the buffets and vending machines at schools, which can be used to provide children with healthier choices at points of sale. In 2024/2025, the guide is planned to be updated and more widely disseminated;
- catering in educational institutions – catering in preschool institutions and schools is regulated in Estonia by Regulation No. 8 of 15 January 2008 of the Minister of Social Affairs, which lays down requirements for the food served and the energy and nutrient content of the food. The Regulation is being updated in particular on the basis of updated nutrition and exercise recommendations. The Regulation will enter into force along with the Public Healthcare Act in the summer of 2025;
- special programmes to provide free fruit and vegetables in educational institutions – these programmes have had a positive effect on attitudes towards and the increased consumption of fruit and vegetables. Schools can receive support within the framework of the school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme in accordance with a Regulation of the Minister of Regional Affairs. The school scheme includes the following support for educational institutions: support for serving fruit, vegetables and berries, support for serving milk and dairy products (unflavoured Greek yoghurt without additives, curd and cottage cheese and fermented milk products) and support for related educational measures;
- serving organic food – since 2022, the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture supports serving organic food to children at preschool institutions and full-time students of general education schools in grades 1 to 12.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school catering was in many municipalities also provided to children during periods of distance learning. It was organised mostly in the form of food packages based on a parent's prior request.

3.5.2. Non-school food aid

An additional measure for people in difficulty is food aid, which is provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The aid is divided into food aid purchased by the state and donated food aid. From October 2023, food aid purchased by the state is distributed in the form of food cards in cooperation with the retail chain Rimi.

The list of food aid recipients is drawn up on the basis of applications and recipients of subsistence benefit and local government allowances. To apply for this aid, people must contact the social worker of the local government in their place of residence. The food card is not applied for separately, but supplements the above allowances if the social worker deems it necessary.

In addition to the food aid purchased, donated food aid is also distributed to people in need on a rolling basis throughout the year. The target group includes a natural person or household (parent/guardian and children living in the same dwelling) in an economically difficult situation, whose need for assistance has been identified by a local government social worker. Donated food aid can be obtained according to need 1–4 times per month. Recipients are entitled to donated food aid on the month of the assessment of need, and for three months following it. In the event of a prolonged need for assistance, the social worker reviews the situation. In addition, a soup kitchen service is provided to those in need. The soup kitchen is open to anyone who has difficulties in providing sufficient means of subsistence and, consequently, in securing a meal.

Some local authorities also provide meals for children in need, including hot meals during school holidays.

3.6 Adequate housing and other areas of activity from the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan

Pursuant to the Social Welfare Act (adopted by the Riigikogu on 9 December 2015), the local government must ensure the use of a dwelling for a person who, due to their socio-economic situation, is not able to provide housing that meets their and their family's justified needs. People who – due to a disability – have difficulties in moving around in a dwelling, independent coping or communicating are assisted by local authorities in adapting the dwelling or in obtaining a more suitable dwelling. When securing the use of a dwelling, the principle is that the disabled person should be able to live in a home environment for as long as possible. The dwelling provided to a person for use must comply with the requirements for a dwelling set out in subsection 4 of § 11 of the Building Code, as well as the justified needs of the person and their family and the size of the family. All in all, this means that local authorities must help to make housing accessible if necessary and, while doing so, must not restrict a person's freedom to choose their place of residence.

The following measures of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan are aimed at preventing the need for assistance from arising and at supporting the target groups in need. Some of the measures help to mitigate risks associated with finding suitable housing.

3.6.1. A social protection system that supports the economic coping of families and the reconciliation of work and family life

Allowances increase the sense of security of parents and help families cope better, but child poverty is mainly influenced by parents' labour market status and household composition. A higher risk of poverty occurs in families with fewer income earners compared to dependants, such as single-parent families and families with many children.

Absolute poverty indicates the percentage of people in the society who are unable to support themselves. The absolute poverty rate among children under the age of 18 rose from 1.3% in 2021 to 4% in 2022 and among the working-age population from 1.9% in 2021 to 4.1% in 2022. Regarding households with children, absolute poverty increased the most in single-parent households: from 4.2% in 2021 to 12.7% in 2022, but also in households of couples with three or more dependent children: from 1.9% in 2020 to 4.3% in 2022. The increase in the percentage of families in absolute poverty was due to the increase in the cost of living.

The purpose of parental benefit is to support the reconciliation of work and family life by providing parents with a substitute income while raising a child under the age of three. The parental benefit of the mother and the parental benefit of the father are the individual rights of the parents. Shared parental benefit is a right shared between parents, allowing them to decide for themselves which parent will receive the benefit and to divide it flexibly. The latest parental benefit reform made the sharing of parental benefit even more flexible and raised the monthly gross income rate for working while receiving parental benefit.

The greater flexibility of the system has increased the percentage of fathers among recipients of parental benefit. As of the end of September 2023, 2,817 fathers received parental benefit, constituting 17.4% of all recipients of parental benefit. As of 31 January 2017, 1,509 fathers received parental benefit, which is 8% of all recipients of parental benefit. The number and percentage of fathers among recipients of parental benefit has doubled.

The legislative amendment of 1 March 2018 has more than doubled the percentage of parents who work while receiving a benefit. Before the amendment, about one-tenth of benefit recipients earned income from work in a calendar month. Since March 2018, the percentage of recipients of income from work has increased, amounting to 24% of all recipients of parental benefit in September 2023.

The employment rate of men does not seem to be significantly affected by the age of the child, but in the case of women, this factor is important. When comparing 2018 and 2022, the employment rate for women with children aged 0–2 has increased to 44% and 66%, respectively. The employment gap between men and women thus decreased to 44% and 28% when comparing these years.

Among the different family types, one of the most vulnerable target groups is single-parent families. In order to prevent and reduce the risk of poverty in single-parent families, an intervention study has been launched concerning the entry of the father on a child's birth certificate. In the framework of this study, measures are developed to help reduce the number of children who have no father (second parent) entered onto their birth certificate. As a result, children whose other parent is alive and known are ensured economic and emotional support and a sense of security.

Allowances for single-parent families have been increased. From 1 January 2023, the single-parent child allowance increased from €19.18 to €80, and from 1 January 2024, the maintenance allowance increased from €100 to €200.

As the next step, the survivor's pension for families with children is planned to be brought under the scope of the Family Benefits Act. The amount of the current survivor's pension depends on the old-age pension of the deceased parent, varies to a very large extent (from €8 to €2,000) and does not provide sufficient economic support to all children who have lost a primary income earner, but after the planned amendment in 2026, all children who have lost a primary income earner will begin to receive a uniform indexed allowance, which covers at least half of the child's maintenance costs.

The launch of the national family mediation system on 1 September 2022 plays an important role in supporting parenting. To date, 225 parenting agreements have been made with the help of a family mediator. The number of families who have used the service (more than 700 families) is significantly higher than originally estimated. This shows the need for the service in order to save families from lengthy litigation, where children are often the biggest victims.

There are currently 34 contracted family mediators in Estonia who provide services in all regions of the country. In 2024, an impact analysis of the family mediation service will be started in order to identify the steps needed to further develop and improve the service based on the results of the first two years of operation.

3.6.2. Provision and development of parenting education and parenting support services

The National Institute for Health Development (TAI) is engaged in development activities in the field of educating families and parents. Parents are offered training in the framework of an evidence-based parenting programme "Imelised aastad"

(Incredible Years), which includes a basic programme for parents of children aged 2 to 8 years (Parent Basic Preschool) and a follow-up programme for parents of children aged 4 to 12 years (Advanced Parent). The programme aims to develop the parenting skills of parents to prevent and reduce child abuse and mental health problems. TAI supports local authorities in covering the costs of providing training. By early 2023, 74 out of 79 local governments have implemented the parenting programme and in most cases, the programme is implemented at least once a year. The programme is carried out by 124 group leaders who have received training on the parenting programme. Raising awareness on parenting education and parenting methods based on positive parenting is an ongoing process, which is necessary in order to increase parents' awareness of their role, as well as their skills at using positive parenting methods.

Strategic partners of the Ministry of Social Affairs (2022–2024) carry out activities aimed at raising children, valuing families with children and programmes supporting parenting and family relations. These activities will help to increase the number of parenting education providers and pilot a group work model for more balanced parenting, in order to support traumatised parents and prevent the harmful effects of parental childhood trauma from being passed on to future generations.

The European Union Structural Funds (2021–2027) further help to finance the development and support of parenting skills and the prevention of risk behaviour in children. The focus is on supporting families who are expecting or have had a child, as well as raising parents' awareness of their role in supporting children's development in the early years of life. An important activity is the development of prevention activities to support parenting education for parents of children of all ages (0–13 years) and increasing access to such prevention activities throughout Estonia. Among other things, a greater focus is placed on raising the awareness of fathers and increasing their participation in parenting education programmes.

The European Union Structural Funds for the period of 2023–2027 will help to finance the creation and development of family services in local governments. The aim is to establish and develop prevention and family work centres, thereby increasing the number of and access to services provided by local authorities to families. The target group is families with children aged 0–7 years. Development of the activities is guided by a concept created by the child welfare foundation Sihtasutus Lapse Heaolu Arengukeskus (LaHe). LaHe has developed and piloted in 2022 a prevention and family work centre concept called "Perepesa" (Family Nest). The aim of Perepesa is to provide a systemic solution to support local authorities in improving the quality of and access to services for children and families and increasing the effectiveness of prevention work with families. By 2027, 18 Perepesa centres will be established in Estonia.

With the support of Norway, LaHe implemented the project "Midwife's Home Visits in the First Years of Life" between September 2021 and August 2023. In the course of the project, a model for action was developed for assessing and mitigating risks

affecting the well-being of families who are expecting or have had a child, through a midwife's home visits after childbirth. Between May 2022 and March 2023, midwives made home visits to 330 families as part of a pilot project of the Home Visits Model. Just over a third of the families also needed a repeated home visit. The midwife helps families adapt to the life changes accompanying the birth of a child and can see early on if the family needs additional support. The pilot project was successful and the Ministry of Social Affairs intends to continue promoting the midwife home visits service.

3.6.3. Ensuring effective and targeted assistance for children in need through cross-sectoral cooperation

For supporting children in need, an amendment was prepared in 2022 that will allow local authorities to obtain data on children concerning whom an application has been submitted for the determination of the severity of the disability. In 2023, automatic data exchange was established to give child protection specialists of local governments the right to proactively assist families in need, thereby preventing an aggravation of the need for assistance.

In the same year, another amendment was prepared that allows local governments to use the support allocated from the state budget (funds from the support fund) to help all children with a high need for care and assistance, instead of catering only to the target group of children with severe and profound disabilities, as was the case earlier. In addition, this allows local authorities to use support instead of the existing social services (childcare, support person, social transport) to provide support that prevents the need for assistance from aggravating and helps to reduce the burden of care for the family. The amendment entered into force in January 2023.

In 2023, a [legislative intent](#) for a draft Child Protection Act was prepared, which aimed at prevention, cross-sectoral cooperation and assistance, as well as the development of the child protection system and improvement of its quality. In order to achieve the objectives, it is necessary to implement regulatory changes, as well as to support the development of practices. Legislative amendments will be implemented in two stages. The first amendment package will be presented to the Government of the Republic in April this year. This amendment highlights the role of professionals working with children in identifying children in need, introduces regulations increasing the obligation to inform, and clarifies the principles of data exchange and data protection involved. The following amendments will be prepared in 2024 and will be submitted to the Government of the Republic in 2025. In addition to the practical changes, a child- and family-centred case management model will be piloted starting from the end of 2024. If the testing is successful, the goal is also to support the implementation of a uniform model nationwide. As a first step, a comparative analysis of case management models will be completed in the summer of 2024, based on which further model selection will be made. In order to improve the effectiveness and quality of child protection work, the IT environment used in child protection work will be updated, with the main activities

planned starting from 2025. The updating process of basic education and national continuing education for child protection specialists will begin in mid-2024.

3.6.4. Alternative care and family-based alternative care

In 2022, the percentage of family-based alternative care was 67%. Although this remained one percentage point lower than expected in the Action Plan, a number of actions were implemented to improve the quality of services and promote family-based care.

In 2023, a legislative intent for a draft Act amending the Social Welfare Act and other Acts was prepared with a view to promoting family-based alternative care. The main proposals concerned the regulation of the system of support services for foster families, the establishment of regulations on professional foster families, greater support for guardian families and ensuring the adoptees' right to identity. Regulatory changes will be made in several stages in cooperation between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. The first amendment concerns the creation of a system of support services for foster families, which will be presented to the Government of the Republic in April 2024. The change was enabled by the allocation of €1.5 million from the state budget, which made it possible to fund the provision of services from the state budget starting from 2024, instead of the previous project-based financing.

From 2023, the provision of national training on substitute care was transferred from the remit of the National Institute for Health Development to the purview of the Social Insurance Board, and the state budget funds for providing training were significantly increased. This allowed the training and refresher training of staff, which was previously financed with the help of the European Social Fund, to be fully funded from the state budget. The training provided included both the required preparatory training and various advanced training courses, and a considerable focus was placed on the development of the staff's trauma competency.

With support from the European Social Fund, the development and provision of the services of crisis foster care families and professional special needs foster care families continued. The challenge is to find suitable families capable of offering such a service. The regulatory solution for the service is planned to be prepared in 2024.

Particular importance has been given to awareness-raising activities, in order to normalise family-based alternative care and to attract new foster families. A great deal of information materials have been prepared, most of which are available on a [website](#) dedicated to the topic of foster families. Among other things, the TV series "Koduteel" has been broadcast on national television channels both in Estonian and in Russian for two consecutive years, introducing the possibilities of both institution-based and family-based care.

In 2024, the funding scheme for the alternative care service changed, and the state now supports local governments through the revenue base and an equalisation fund instead of the previous scheme that was based on a support fund. The amendment gives local authorities greater flexibility in the use of funds allocated by the state, for example, to contribute to the prevention of family separation.

In 2023 and 2024, competency models were developed for both institution-based service providers and foster families to support higher service quality.¹⁵ A competency model was also prepared for managers of the institution-based service. The models are indicative and to facilitate their implementation, the Social Insurance Board has organised training and seminar days.

3.6.5. Creating a smooth journey for abused children from perceiving the need for help up to help

In 2022 the Child Protection Act was amended to regulate the operation and tasks of the Barnahus service (children's houses) in Estonia. Also, the local municipalities' child protection services were obliged to engage the children's house in all cases of (suspected) child sexual abuse. Children's houses are a state service to assist victims of sexual abuse and children with harmful sexual behaviour. The Barnahus model has been implemented in Estonia since 2017 and this has improved the co-operation of various professionals working with child victims as well as the prevention work and raising awareness of child sexual abuse. Also in 2022, the fourth children's house was opened in Estonia, which ended the first round of expansion throughout the country.

A draft Act was prepared in the spring of 2024, emphasising the obligation of key professionals working with children (including teachers, healthcare professionals, coaches, hobby education professionals, etc) to inform child protection services of children who are in need of assistance. When notifying, it is also necessary to provide known data on the child's need for assistance. The draft Act also regulates more broadly the processing of personal data in child protection work. The changes are scheduled to come into effect in 2025, and by that time, supporting tools (forms, guides, e-training) will also be created to help professionals identify and notify of a child's need for assistance. These measures will facilitate notifying of a child in need of assistance, including an abused child, and will contribute to a faster exchange of information between various sectors. They also help to raise awareness of child abuse among professionals working with children and promote spotting such children.

In 2024, the Social Insurance Board will begin developing e-learning materials for child protection specialists and professionals working with children, which will provide them with the knowledge and skills to understand and notice the impact of domestic

¹⁵The models and videos introducing them (in Estonian) are available at <https://www.sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/asendushoolduse-ja-jareelhoolduse-korraldamine>

violence, including indirect and psychological abuse, on a child, to support the timely detection of children's need for assistance and their access to help.

In cases of domestic violence, women with children can get help from women's support centres. There is one support centre in each Estonian county, and in Tallinn, there are two additional shelters specifically for mothers and children. In addition to safe accommodation, the support centres offer essential psychosocial support, counselling, psychological counselling or psychotherapy, and legal advice. If a mother with children arrives at such a centre, it is required to contact a child protection specialist to assess the children's need for assistance and give support.

3.6.6. Supporting young people at risk

The national Action Plan for Strengthening the Youth Guarantee 2022–2027, which is coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and the Ministry of Education and Research, includes activities aimed at reducing the overall risk of social exclusion of young people and at preventing them from dropping out of the labour market and/or the education system, and at ensuring their rapid and smooth return to the education system or the labour market in the event of a NEET situation. The Action Plan focuses on two areas of action: firstly, activities to assist young people in a NEET situation, which – through a personal approach – help to support young people and bring them back into society, and secondly, activities designed universally for all young people in order to prevent them from becoming NEET. Particular attention is paid to young people at risk of social exclusion, who are more likely to drop out of school or experience exclusion in the labour market.

As foreseen in the Child Guarantee Action Plan, the Ministry of Education and Research approved in 2023 the terms and conditions for providing support through the programme “Youth work measures to support the entry of young people into the labour market and the provision of support measures for youth with a NEET status” (“Noorsootöö meetmed noorte tööturule sisenemise toetamiseks ja NEET- staatuses noortele tugimeetmete pakkumiseks”). Preparatory activities were also carried out to launch a course of action concerning young people in a NEET situation.

The action will support the implementation of mobile youth work in regions where the number/percentage of NEET youth or unemployed youth is higher, and will ensure support for young people in the target group by using youth work opportunities in these regions, including by supporting young people's participation in voluntary activities. In the case of young people with basic education or lower levels of education, the focus of support activities is to promote the continuation of education.

Development programmes will be developed and implemented in order to support the training and competencies of professionals who do mobile youth work or work with young people with a NEET status or at risk of a NEET status. The programmes are

based on the job specificities, working environment and development needs of the specialists working with young people in the target group.

The necessary support and development activities are planned to support the successful implementation, development and sustainability of the action. This includes support for youth work organisers, youth centres and youth work organisations in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the effectiveness of activities. The implementation of the activities is monitored and analysed, and the necessary development activities are planned. The necessary materials, such as handbooks, support and guidance materials are prepared and made available, analyses are drawn up and training and information activities are organised.

Since 2016, the Youth Guarantee support system has been in operation, which allows Estonian local governments to receive information twice a year on needy children and young people aged 16–18(26) who are not studying or working and may need additional support. Based on the information received, the local government can proactively provide support. The Youth Guarantee support system has been part of the Estonian Youth Guarantee Estonia Action Plan since 2022. At the moment, the 13th monitoring has been started.

Specific case management under the Youth Guarantee Action Plan is ensured through a number of areas of action, where youth-centred support is provided depending on the domain. Based on the proactive case management approach, the child/young person's need for assistance is assessed first and, where appropriate, they are then supported in accordance with networking principles. In order to ensure that basic needs are covered, cooperation will take place with the social departments of local governments.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications will allocate €12 million for the development of the Estonia-wide Youth Guarantee support system and case management in the period of 2023–2029. The development work in the current period is based on the national co-creation process, on the basis of which a cooperation model for providing services and support to youth in a NEET situation or at risk of NEET was prepared for local authorities. The framework created will allow for a harmonised understanding of how to reach and support children and young people.

4. INDICATORS

The Indicators Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee of the European Commission developed and agreed in November 2023 on a preliminary indicator framework¹⁶ for the evaluation of activities under the Child Guarantee. In order to monitor the fulfilment of the objectives of actions outlined in the Estonian Child

¹⁶ The document can be downloaded here. [Monitoring and benchmarking frameworks - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

Guarantee Action Plan, preliminary indicators were set when preparing the Action Plan, along with the baseline and target levels. To date, the set metrics have been updated and harmonised.

The metrics of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan are consistent with the metrics of the national sectoral development plans (in Estonia in 2022, the Welfare Development Plan 2023–2030 was updated, which also involved adjusting the metrics for assessing the situation) and are in line with the indicators monitored under the EU Child Guarantee Action Plan. The implementation of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan and its impact will also be assessed in the form of substantive and descriptive reporting (Chapter 3), including, in addition to the set Action Plan metrics, also other relevant additional data on the target group and their situation.

The following are the metrics and corresponding indicators of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan, including baseline levels, the latest known data and the target level set for 2025.

Table 3 Estonian Action Plan metrics by area of action

Area/target group/metric	Initial level according to Action Plan	2022 level	2023 level	Target level 2025
1. Provision and development of parenting education and parenting support services. Target group: measure across target groups				
Parents who feel they need advice and help but do not know where or to whom to turn or do not dare to address anyone <i>Source: Study of Children's Rights and Parenting, Ministry of Social Affairs. Praxis</i>	53% (2018)	The next study is planned to be conducted in 2024.	The next study is planned to be conducted in 2024.	decreases
Acceptance of corporal punishment of children by parents <i>Source: Study of Children's Rights and Parenting, Ministry of Social Affairs. Praxis</i>	42% (2018)	The next study is planned to be conducted in 2024.	The next study is planned to be conducted in 2024.	decreases
2. A social protection system that supports the economic coping of families and the reconciliation of work and family life¹⁷. Target group: across target groups				

¹⁷The metrics differ from the corresponding metrics of the Estonian Action Plan presented in 2022, as at the time of submitting the Action Plan, the metrics were being developed and they have been

Area/target group/metric	Initial level according to Action Plan	2022 level	2023 level	Target level 2025
Absolute poverty rate of children Source: Statistics Estonia, Estonian Social Survey	2.7% (2020)	4% (2022)	No data yet.	≤2.7%
Employment gap between men and women aged 25–49 with children aged 0–2 Source: Statistics Estonia, Estonian Labour Force Survey	44.3 pp (2020)	28.4 pp (2022)	No data yet.	decreases
3. Ensuring effective and targeted assistance for children in need through cross-sectoral cooperation. Target group: measure across target groups				
Number of referrals involving children in danger and abused children <i>Source: Data register of social services and benefits</i>	569 (2020)	718 (2022)	498 (preliminary data for 2023)	decreases
Percentage of children separated from the family among children aged 0–17 <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, Statistics Estonia</i>	0.11% (2020)	0.12% (2022)	No data yet.	decreases
4. Learning opportunities and organisation of education. Target group: measure across target groups				
Percentage of children aged 3 to school age who have attended a preschool establishment <i>Source: EHIS</i>	91.6% (2020)	91.6% (2022)	indicator level has not yet been calculated for 2023; will be updated by the end of February	95%

adjusted to the final metrics of the Welfare Development Plan of the Ministry of Social Affairs, which were approved by the Government of the Republic on 23 February 2023.

Area/target group/metric	Initial level according to Action Plan	2022 level	2023 level	Target level 2025
Drop-out rate in stage III of full-time study (%): total/boys/girls <i>Source: EHIS</i>	0.2/ 0.3/ 0.1 (2020)	0.3/ 0.4/ 0.2 (2022)	indicator level has not yet been calculated for 2023; will be updated by the end of February	Keep the level
Drop-out rate in vocational educational institutions (at the level of vocational secondary education in the first year of study) (%) <i>Source: EHIS</i>	9.4 (2020)	10.7 (2022)	indicator level has not yet been calculated for 2023; will be updated by the end of February	<11
5. Youth sector. Target group: measure across target groups				
Percentage (%) of local governments where youth work services are at least at the "advanced" level <i>Source: minuomavalitsus.ee</i>	59 ¹⁸ (2019)	39.2 ¹⁹ (2022)	the data have not been updated yet; the level of the indicator for 2023 will be known in the summer of 2024	
6. Succession planning and development of teachers, learning approach and environments. Target group: measure across target groups				

¹⁸ In terms of baseline, more precise data are now known, compared to initially submitted data, ie 59 instead of 50.

¹⁹ The evaluation criteria for youth work services in local governments and their corresponding levels have changed. It cannot be said that there has been a substantial decline in the quality of services.

Area/target group/metric	Initial level according to Action Plan	2022 level	2023 level	Target level 2025
Percentage of students who have not been repeatedly bullied in the last two weeks (%)				
4th grade	67.8	63.5	60.9	increases
8th grade	74.2	76.7	69.8	increases
11th grade	89.1	90	88.1	increases
Students of vocational schools	– (data for 2020)	87.8 (2022)	86 (2023)	–
Percentage of early childhood education teachers who agree that kindergarten and various non-kindergarten specialists, including doctors, support and child protection specialists and the police, etc, cooperate well in supporting children with special needs <i>Source: Satisfaction survey</i>	59.2	–	the next measurement will take place in April-May 2024; we will receive data in the summer	increases
Percentage of teachers in general education schools who find that the school and various out-of-school specialists, including police officers, counsellors, doctors, psychologists, youth workers, etc, cooperate well in supporting children with special educational needs <i>Source: Satisfaction survey</i>	65.3	–	the next measurement will take place in February-March 2024; we will receive data by the end of April	increases
Participation of Estonian children and young people in culture <i>Source: Survey of the Ministry of Culture</i>	baseline will be retrieved from the survey of 2023			increases by 2030
7. Support for children with special needs and disabilities. Target group: children with special needs and disabilities				

Area/target group/metric	Initial level according to Action Plan	2022 level	2023 level	Target level 2025
Percentage of parents or primary carers of disabled children who say they have not been able to use social service(s) at all or enough, but would need these for their disabled child or would need more ²⁰ <i>Source: Survey of coping and needs of families with children with disabilities.</i>	30% (2017)	No new study has been conducted	No new study has been conducted	decreases
Percentage of parents who are on the labour market 6 months after starting to receive childcare and/or support service for disabled children <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs</i>	74.65% (2018)	74%	remains at the same level or increases	remains at the same level or increases
8. Alternative care and family-based alternative care. Target group: children in alternative care				
Percentage of children placed in non-institutional alternative care out of all children placed in alternative care ²¹ <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs</i>	65% (2020)	67% (2022)	No data yet.	70%
9. Creating a smooth pathway for abused children from identification to getting help. Target group: children from violent families and children experiencing violence				
Number of referrals involving children in danger and abused children	569 (2020)	718 (2022)	498 (preliminary data for 2023)	decreases

²⁰ The metric shows the percentage of parents (primary carers) of children with disabilities who estimate that they have needed certain social services for their disabled child in the past year, but have not received them at all or to an adequate extent. The indicator thus shows the unmet need for social services for children with disabilities and their families.

²¹ The metric shows how large a proportion of children in alternative care are in family-based or non-institutional alternative care (in a foster family or guardian family), and family-based alternative care is considered to be more supportive of a child's well-being and development than institution-based institutional care (substitute homes).

Area/target group/metric	Initial level according to Action Plan	2022 level	2023 level	Target level 2025
<i>Source: Data register of social services and benefits</i>				
Percentage of children separated from the family among children aged 0–17 <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, Statistics Estonia</i>	0.11% (2020)	0.12% (2022)	No data yet.	decreases

5. FINANCING

This section lists state expenses in 2022–2024 to cover the main measures related to the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan, which contribute to the implementation of the Action Plan. Where appropriate, a footnote has been added to the activity, specifying which services are included in the calculations (services under activity-based state budget programmes). Table 4 below shows only the activities financed from the state budget (including with external funds received), and local governments also contribute to various activities from their own budgets. For 2022, data from the report on state budget implementation are shown; for 2023, either the actual expenditure or the final budget is indicated depending on the area of action; for 2024, estimated expenditure is reported for all activities. Depending on the activities, this may be an expenditure for the whole area of action, since it is not possible to distinguish the cost related to the target groups of the Child Guarantee from the total cost. The table shows expenses covered from the state budget of Estonia (EE), as well as the general expenses covered by the European Union (EU) support measure for those activities where the sector is developed with EU support.

Table 4 Expenditure related to the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan 2022–2024 (million €)

Service	2022		2023		2024	
	EE	EU	EE	EU	EE	EU
1. Provision and development of parenting education and parenting support services ²²	1.22	0	1.32	0.46	1.22	2.03
2. A social protection system that supports the economic coping of families and the reconciliation of work and family life (million €) ²³	765.62	0	964.46	0	926.66	0
3. Supporting children with mental health problems ²⁴	1.5	0	2.6	0	1.96	
4. Ensuring effective and targeted assistance for children in need through cross-sectoral cooperation ²⁵	1.42	0.10	2.72	0.36	2.45	1.01
5. Learning opportunities and organisation of education	265.88	69.20	282.99	99.71	310.75	0.25
6. Youth sector	4.61	1.05	5.00	4.61	4.91	3.82
7. Supporting young people at risk ²⁶	0.08	0.12	0.11	0.16	0.20	0.31

²² The expenditure includes state budget expenses to cover activities related to the development and provision of parenting education carried out by the National Institute for Health Development. The EU measure helps to support the development of additional parenting programmes and the establishment and maintenance of community-based prevention and family work centres called the “Perepesa” centres.

²³ The expenses include maintenance allowance, parental benefit, parental pension and medical insurance, family allowances and child leave pay. The final budget shown for the year 2023.

²⁴ The expenditure includes expenses of the Ministry of Social Affairs to cover the development of the mental health domain through a strategic partnership, subsidies directly allocated to local governments to improve access to mental health services at the local level, as well as expenses of the Estonian Health Insurance Fund on development projects in the field of youth counselling. The expenses do not include the provision of services financed by the social, educational and healthcare sectors.

²⁵ The expenses include the development and implementation of child protection and family policies and victim support policies, coordination of prevention, development and information activities in the field of child protection, and expenses of the strategic partnership.

²⁶ The expenses include the development of the Youth Guarantee support system, testing and support to local governments.

Service	2022		2023		2024	
	EE	EU	EE	EU	EE	EU
8. Succession planning and development of teachers, learning approach and environments	33.28	10.87	66.06	24.29	86.79	18.37
9. Support for children with special needs and disabilities ²⁷	31.12	7.15	37.01	2.43	42.1	0.31
10. Alternative care and family-based alternative care ²⁸	20.30	1.33	22.87	1.54	3.11	1.09
11. Creating a smooth pathway for abused children from identification to getting help ²⁹	1.89	0.22	3.93	0.75	4.32	1.45

6. LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

According to the Estonian Social Survey of 2023 conducted by Statistics Estonia, 16.0% of Estonian children lived in relative poverty and 4.0% of Estonian children in absolute poverty in 2022 (by year of income). Absolute poverty³⁰ indicates the percentage of people in the society who are unable to support themselves. Compared to 2021, the proportion of children living in relative poverty increased by 2.4 percentage points, and the proportion of children living in absolute poverty increased by 2.7 percentage points. The increase in relative poverty can to a great extent be attributed to the payments of the second pension pillar in 2021, which raised the average income

²⁷ The expenses cover the development and provision of support services for children with disabilities and the promotion of work-life balance, rehabilitation and services of providing assistive devices for children with special needs, social benefits for disabled children and the payment of additional leave days for parents of disabled children.

²⁸ The expenses are related to the development of the alternative care service and the state contribution to financing its provision (including through the support fund for local governments until 2023). The final budget shown for the year 2023. As of 2024, the financing scheme changed, and funds are no longer allocated as a subsidy to local governments, but through income tax collection and the equalisation fund.

²⁹ The expenses include state expenses on abuse prevention, state-sponsored training of professionals, and assistance for (suspected) victims of child sexual abuse through Children's Houses (Barnahus). The final budget shown for the year 2023.

³⁰ More information on the methodology of determining the absolute poverty rate is available on the website of Statistics Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/en/avasta-statistikat/valdkonnad/heaolu/sotsiaalne-torjutus-ja-vaesus/absolute-poverty>

and reduced the relative poverty rate among households with children. The increase in the number of children living in absolute poverty can be attributed to the major price increase in 2022, which raised the minimum subsistence level that underlies the methodology of determining the absolute poverty rate more than ever: 30%, ie from €234 to €303. This means that the incomes of families with children, including various allowances, did not increase at the same rate in 2022. In 2023, a number of allowances for families with children were increased (see above), contributing to stopping or decreasing the further growth of child poverty. A number of important activities have also been implemented in terms of services through which we create opportunities for people to cope better and prevent risks.

However, the Child Guarantee Action Plan also poses some challenges. In addition to sectoral bottlenecks, it is important to ensure greater cross-sectoral integration of activities in the future and to target actions even more to the most vulnerable target groups. To this end, we see the need to further strengthen national cooperation and involve not only the national level, but also the local level and partner organisations in the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

Another challenge concerns data on child welfare, which are fragmented in different sectors in Estonia, and initiatives already being developed do not have a complete and comprehensive up-to-date set of child welfare indicators. With the funding of the EEA and Norway Grants bilateral cooperation fund, the Ministry of Social Affairs, in cooperation with the Office of the Chancellor of Justice, has launched a project on the development of cross-sectoral child welfare indicators in Estonia and opportunities based on practices in Iceland. The aim of this project is to analyse Iceland's experience in the development of a child welfare scoreboard and evaluate the applicability of a similar approach in Estonia, including to draw from Iceland's experience specific sector-based proposals on how to create a child welfare toolkit in Estonia, which would cover different areas and be as comprehensive as possible taking into account various aspects of a child's well-being.

With regard to indicators, we would like to further add or specify indicators in the Action Plan, so that they more accurately reflect the implementation of the actions set out in the Action Plan and the impact on the target groups. One such indicator that we need to clarify is the number of children who have experienced violence and abuse. At present, there is no nationwide uniform methodology for this target group, although it is one of the important target groups of children in need. Currently, data are collected across different sectors and provide information on sector-specific activities or services. We see a solution to the problem through the development of a scoreboard system where violence/abuse against children becomes one of the issues measured.

In addition, it is necessary to update the Action Plan with regard to indicators of children's mental health, where currently dozens of different indicators are monitored but there is no common indicator. The indicators suitable for monitoring the situation

will be revealed in an analysis on the mental health of children, which will be completed in 2024. The relevance and adequacy of risk indicators pertaining to youth at risk also need to be analysed, as a number of sectors and related programmes contribute to the activities. In particular, it is necessary to agree on metrics appropriate for activities under the Child Guarantee.

7. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan is proceeding as planned and there have been no significant delays in the activities. The objectives of the Action Plan are in line with Estonia's national objectives and the activities of the government's action programme, and are based on other long-term strategy documents and development plans of the country. Although there was some increase in poverty indicators during the period under review, Estonia is moving towards the goal of reducing the number of children in poverty and exclusion, taking into account both implemented and planned activities.

Significant importance is given to the development of the family benefits system in Estonia, where the first step is to carry out a comprehensive analysis of family allowances and parental benefits in 2024 in order to collect additional proposals that would best support family planning, economic coping and reconciliation of work and family life. As for the development of family policy measures, measures designed to support single parents can be highlighted, which support the participation of both parents in the upbringing of the child, peaceful arrangements through the family mediation system and the development of an altogether fairer support scheme for children growing up in a single-parent family. Significant attention will also be given to the development of the parenting field, so as to provide parents with appropriate support both before childbirth and in the parenting process.

A number of major reforms in the social, educational and healthcare sectors have also been launched and implemented. In the social sphere, major developments are planned to support children with special needs and improve the child protection system. In addition, efforts will be continued to facilitate assistance to children who have suffered abuse and domestic violence, and to promote family-based care in the framework of alternative care. Considerable attention will be paid to the prevention of mental health problems and the enhancement of assistance, including with an aim to address the problem across sectors. The integration of the social and healthcare sectors is also important, which must organise the principles of providing assistance from both systems and the points of convergence. An important positive example of the changes already implemented is the amendment that entered into force from 2023 and allows the automatic exchange of data between the national and local authorities concerning children for whom an application has been submitted for the determination

of the severity of the disability. Automatic data exchange allows local authorities to be aware of children in need in their administrative territory and to proactively provide support to them, so that families themselves do not have to apply for assistance from local authorities.

There are also important reforms planned in the field of education, where a greater focus will be placed on restructuring the field of early childhood education, the transition to Estonian-language education and extending the school-leaving age for compulsory education. The package of measures aimed at young people and youth at risk is also diverse, involving preventive actions to avoid risk, as well as measures to support those young people who are already at risk. An example of success is the field of school meals: Estonia is one of the countries in Europe and the whole world that contribute the most to school meals, both from the state budget as targeted subsidies and as a contribution from local governments to ensure school lunches. In addition, a number of measures are planned to ensure healthy food, including providing fruit, vegetables, organic food and school milk.