



REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

REPORT

ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2021/1004 ESTABLISHING A EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE

(2030)

1. Context

Ensuring support for children and families is among the key national priorities and a number of policies (health, education, social, housing, economic, tax, etc.) contribute for its implementation. In this context, in recent years, efforts have increasingly focused on linking existing policies into a system of comprehensive actions to support children and families and improving intersectoral coordination at all levels. In this context, in recent years, priority efforts have been steered towards inter-coherence of measures and policies for supporting children and families and improving inter-sectoral coordination at all levels.

Bulgaria has a well-developed legal and strategic framework, policies and measures targeted to the needs of children and their families. Guaranteed access to free health care for children, maternity protection policies and paid parental leave, developed preschool and school education and child protection systems are among the most significant achievements. Since 1 April 2022, parents do not pay a fee for the use of kindergartens and nurseries, as well as a fee for meals in compulsory preschool education. Preschool and school education in Bulgaria is free for all students in state and municipal kindergartens and schools, and in private schools there is the possibility of a state subsidy to reduce the fees paid. Knowledge books and textbooks are provided free of charge to children and students up to grade VII including and from the next school year 2024-2025 for students from grade VIII to XII.

In line with legislative measures and initiatives, policies for children and families are in the focus of a number of strategic documents, some of which are also aimed at this target group. A special emphasis on poverty reduction among children as a vulnerable group and on supporting children and families is placed in the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030¹. One of its specific objectives is aimed precisely at limiting the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion. The Strategy contains measures in the field of various sectoral policies – promoting the employment of parents, reconciling professional and family life (including through flexible working arrangements), expanding the network of services for early childhood development, ensuring access to health care, increasing the quality and effectiveness of the network of social services to support children and their families, financial and material support for families with children, etc. For the implementation of the National Strategy, the Action Plan for the period 2023-2024² is under implementation, which contains specific activities in line with its objectives and priorities.

Bulgaria is one of the EU Member States which have set a specific target aimed at children as a specific vulnerable group - to reduce the number of children under 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 196 750 by 2030. The target to reduce poverty and social exclusion among children represents 25% of the overall national target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 787 000 persons by 2030 in implementation of the Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Child Guarantee is a key initiative at European level to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion of children. It sets the vision for policy development in key areas for families and children - early childhood development, education, health, healthy nutrition and housing. With the adoption of the Action Plan for implementation of the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee³ our efforts are focused on establishing a comprehensive framework containing the key measures and interventions to reduce child poverty and promote their social inclusion. The plan includes measures in all areas of impact of the European Child Guarantee. In addition to the state budget,

¹ <https://mlsp.government.bg/uploads/35/sv/nsnbnsv-2030-dop-izm-2.pdf>

² <https://mlsp.government.bg/uploads/35/sv/action-plan-reducing-poverty-2023-2024.pdf>

³ Decision No. 879 of 09.11.2023 of the Council of Ministers.

the implementation of the Plan will also benefit from substantial financial support from the ESF+ through the Human Resources Development Programme (HRDP) and the Education Programme for the period 2021-2027. The total amount of the funds under the two programmes is over EUR 136 million and it is expected to reach over 200,000 children.

Pursuant to the Council Recommendation and with a view to effective coordination at the national level, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy appointed a national coordinator of the Republic of Bulgaria for the European Child Guarantee at the level of Deputy Minister by Order No. RD-01-238 of 21 September 2021. The higher level of representation of the national coordinator meets the requirements set out in the Council Recommendation, namely the availability of adequate resources and a mandate enabling the effective coordination and monitoring. The functions of the national coordinator also involve active communication and dialogue with all stakeholders in the national context, as well as with the European Commission and the national coordinators of other Member States. Since 2021, the functions of the national coordinator have been carried out by deputy ministers and senior staff in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) with significant experience in communication and coordination with stakeholders and the European Commission, as well as in relation to the main policies covered by the Guarantee, the planning and management of the operational programmes under the European Funds. This ensures continuity and coherence of the previous work on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. In the period 01.09.2023 - 17.04.2024, the functions of the national coordinator are performed by the deputy general director of the European Funds, International Programmes and Projects General Directorate in the MLSP⁴, who as of 18.04.2024 has been appointed Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy. The current national coordinator has been actively involved in the overall process since the planning stage of the measures and activities of the National Plan, has considerable experience in communication and coordination with stakeholders in the national context and with the European Commission, as well as in the planning and management of ESF programmes. To support the coordinator in the operational implementation of her/his tasks, a responsible unit has been designated within the specialized administration of the MLSP - Social Inclusion Directorate.

The national coordinator coordinated the activities of the inter-institutional working group for the development of a draft Action Plan for the implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee (2030)⁵. The working group included representatives of all stakeholders - ministries, agencies, representatives of the National Statistical Institute and the National Social Security Institute, social partners, municipalities, NGOs, academics. The draft Action Plan was consulted within the National Council on Social Inclusion (NCSI) to the Council of Ministers, the National Council for Child Protection, and the Children's Council as an advisory body to the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection.

To implement the Council Recommendation, a mechanism for coordination and management of the process has been established at national level, involving all stakeholders. A high level Inter-Institutional Working Group (IIWG) has been established by Prime Minister's Order No. P-20 dated 31.01.2023 to manage and coordinate the implementation process of the Plan. It is composed of all responsible institutions at the level of ministers and heads and chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. By Order No. RD-02-55 of 12.04.2023 of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, a Permanent Expert Working Group (PEWG) was established to support the coordination and monitoring of the implementation process of the Plan. It includes representatives of all institutions and organizations involved, including the

⁴ Determined by Order No. RD-01-265 of 01.09.2023 of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy.

⁵ Created by Order No. RD-02-137 of 10.08.2021 of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy.

civil sector and academia, and is chaired by the National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee. The PEWG have the following tasks:

- to ensure the coordination between the state institutions and other organisations involved in activities of the action plan for the implementation of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee;
- to monitor the implementation of the measures and activities included in the action plan;
- to develop two-year operational plans for the implementation of this action plan;
- to develop two-year reports on the progress and results of the implementation of the Council Recommendation.

For the implementation of the Action Plan, the PEWG developed the first Operational Plan for the period 2023-2024, which contains specific activities with indicators, timelines, amount and sources of funding and responsible institutions in all areas of impact. The Operational Plan was approved by the National Council on Social Inclusion to the Council of Ministers and approved by the IIWG for management and coordination of the process of implementation of the Action Plan. At its meeting the IIWG proposed additional activities to be launched in 2024 and to be included in the draft of the next operational plan for the period 2025-2026 for the implementation of the Action Plan. The proposed activities are fully in line with the Council Recommendation and concern the provision of access for children in need to free healthy school meals, adequate housing, analysis of the effectiveness of social transfers for children and families, etc. Taking into account the key role of municipalities and the implementation of measures at local level to improve children's access to quality services in line with their needs, among the priority activities is the upgrading of the management and coordination mechanism established at national level through the designation of local teams or coordinators in the implementation of the Child Guarantee, as well as the establishment of a mechanism for interaction between the PEWG and the local teams/coordinators in the implementation of all activities at local level. According to the decision of the IIWG, the PEWG has a commitment to discuss and detail the proposed activities.

With regard to the monitoring of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, in parallel with the functions performed by the PEWG in this direction, the implementation of the policy in the field of social inclusion is monitored by the NCSI to the Council of Ministers, as a body for coordination, cooperation and consultation in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the state policy in the field of social inclusion. The Council is composed of representatives of all stakeholders - ministries, agencies, representatives of the National Statistical Institute and the National Social Security Institute, social partners, municipalities, NGOs, including organizations active in the field of children and families, academics. The main functions of the Council include preparing opinions on draft strategic documents in the field of social inclusion; facilitating cooperation and consultation with non-profit legal entities for the development, implementation and monitoring of the state policy on social inclusion; developing, discussing and approving reports, analyses and evaluations of the implementation of the state policy on social inclusion; providing assistance in monitoring the implementation of the state policy on social inclusion. The aim is to monitor the achievement of results of activities on the implementation of priorities in the field of social inclusion, as well as to actively involve stakeholders in the implementation of evaluation and monitoring.

2. Target groups

In Bulgaria live 1 099 696 children aged 0 to 17 years, or 17.1%, according to the National Statistical Institute as of 31.12.2022. Bulgaria is among the countries where the share

of children at risk of poverty is significantly higher than the average for the European Union (EU)-27 - 25.9% or about 314 thousand compared to 19.3% for the EU-27 in 2022⁶. Their share is also higher compared to the total population at risk of poverty - 22.9%. Compared to 2021, there is a slight increase of 1.7 percentage points (p.p.) in the share of children at risk of poverty.

The factors causing poverty among children are many and of different nature - low educational status and unemployment of parents, low income, household composition, etc. In 2022, eight out of ten children (78.4%) whose parents have primary or no education are living in poverty. Approximately 18 times fewer, or 4.3%, are children whose parents have a higher education living at risk of poverty. In 2022, the share of children living with severe material and social deprivation is 19.2% (deprivation 7 out of 13 indicators), a decrease of 0.8 p.p. compared to 2021. Children's risk of poverty and material deprivation is also determined and influenced by their ethnicity. According to the NSI, in 2022 the relative share of children with material deprivation (deprived of at least one of the 13 indicators) is as follows: 23.0% of the Bulgarian ethnic group, 33.0% of the Turkish ethnic group, 76.2% of the Roma ethnic group and 33.2% of other ethnic group. In terms of the combined indicator - risk of poverty or social exclusion, which has registered steady improvements in recent years, there is a slight increase in the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022 – 33.9% compared to 33.0% in 2021.

Estimates of poverty by household type show that the highest relative share of the poor is among one-person households with a person aged 65 or older (61.3 % in 2022), households with three or more children (48.5 % in 2022), and single parents with children (34.9 % in 2022).

A regional view of poverty shows significant differences, with areas with better economic indicators (employment and income) generally characterized by lower levels of income inequality or relative poverty, including among children. According to the NSI, the risk of poverty or social exclusion among children in 2022 is lowest in the North Central (28.1%) and North East (29.0%) regions, followed by the South West (30.7%). Significantly higher levels of poverty were recorded in the North-West region (43.5%), which is characterized by a serious lag behind other regions of the country in almost all monitored areas of socio-economic development, and the South-Central region (40.4%).

From an analytical point of view, the data on the indicator „number of children under 16 in the household” are of interest, showing a continuing trend of increase in the relative share of households without children under 16. According to the NSI⁷, as of 07.09.2021 over 80% of households in Vidin, Vratsa, Gabrovo, Stara Zagora, Sofia, Montana, Pleven, Razgrad, Veliko Tarnovo, Dobrich, Shumen, Silistra and Smolyan districts are without children under 16. The lowest share of these households is in the districts of Pernik (75.6%), Burgas (77.1%), Varna and Kardzhali (77.3% each), Sliven (77.9%) and Blagoevgrad (78.8%).

In 2022, there were 274 deaths of children under one year of age and the infant mortality rate was 4.8‰⁸. In regional aspect, in 2022, in a total of ten districts, the infant mortality rate is lower than the national average, with the lowest rates in the districts of Kardzhali (0.9‰), Pernik (1.3‰) and Sofia (1.5‰). The highest infant mortality rates were recorded in the districts of Yambol (11.6‰), Dobrich (10.2‰) and Vratsa (9.7‰).

The data highlight as particularly vulnerable groups of children those who live in low-income families, in families with three and more children, children raised by single parents, children with disabilities, children of Roma origin, etc. A similar categorizing of the most vulnerable groups of children is made in the report „Un/equal Childhood - A Comprehensive

⁶ According to Eurostat and the National Statistical Institute (NSI) data.

⁷ NSI, Infostat, Population census and housing fund, Ordinary households, Households by statistical regions, districts and by number of children under 16 years as of 07.09.2021.

⁸ Number of deaths of children under 1 year of age per 1 000 live births.

Analysis of the Current Situation and Dimensions of Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria, as well as Policies, Programmes, Services, Budgets and Mechanisms to Address Them”, developed within the framework of the pilot project „European Child Guarantee”.

In view of the factors underlying poverty and the different risks faced by children from vulnerable groups, the following target groups are identified in the Action Plan for the implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee (2030):

- ✓ Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation;
- ✓ Children with disabilities and children with mental health issues;
- ✓ Refugee and migrant children, with a focus on unaccompanied or ethnic minority children;
- ✓ Children in alternative care outside the family, especially those placed in social services for residential care, including children and young people leaving alternative care;
- ✓ Children from low-income families;
- ✓ Children in precarious family situations (children-victims of violence, children raised by single parents, teenage mothers and their children, children of labour migrant parents, etc.).

3. Roll-out of services

Since the establishment of the European Child Guarantee, a number of measures have been implemented to support children and families in Bulgaria, some of which have been launched directly in response to the initiative, while others have been implemented even before the adoption of the National Plan and their implementation will continue in the future. The second group covers measures related to the provision of integrated services, early childhood development services, financial support for families with children, the implementation of the process of deinstitutionalisation of childcare, etc. For example, the expansion of the network of early childhood development services continued during the period under review, recognising their key role in preventing and reducing intergenerational poverty. Another significant measure to support families with children, not explicitly set out in the Action Plan, relates to the amendments to the Family Allowances Act (FAA) adopted at the end of 2022, extending support to families whose children are enrolled in the second, third and fourth grades and providing one-off benefits for all children, regardless of the type of school in which they are enrolled.

On the other hand, significant resources from the European Social Fund + (ESF+) have been allocated specifically for the implementation of measures under the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria through the complementarity of the two flagship programmes - the HRDP and the Education Programme for the period 2021-2027. In the period 2021-2023, a total of about 14,000 children are supported by various services under the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRD OP) 2014-2020 (in the period 2021-2022) and the HRDP 2021-2027 (in 2023).

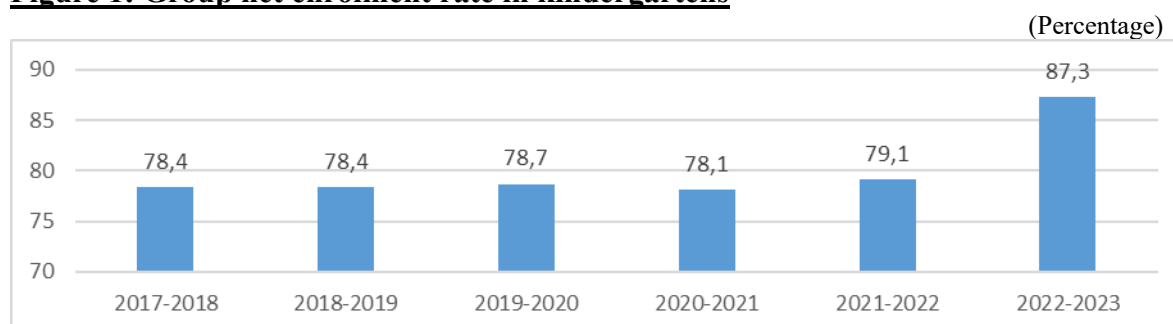
3.1. Early Childhood Education and Care

In Bulgaria, in recent years, a targeted and consistent policy has been implemented to improve the coverage of preschool education, as well as to improve its quality. The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning (2021-2030) identifies early childhood development as one of the priority areas in which to focus policies with a 2030 horizon.

One of the objectives in the framework is expanding the coverage of children from 0 to 7 years in early childhood education and care and effective socialization through the introduction and development of integrated early childhood education and care (ECEC) services that offer a more effective and balanced approach between care and education, and accessible services for all families who need them. Within this goal, measures for inclusive education are also envisaged - providing a supportive, safe, multicultural environment to support the child during the transition from the family environment to kindergarten, a focus on inclusive education for children 0-3 years, active partnership and dialogue with parents, and gradual removal of kindergarten fees by the end of the period.

In the framework of the „Active Inclusion in the Pre-school Education System” project under the Operational Programme „Science and Education for Smart Growth” (OP SESG) 2014-2020 in the period from February 2020 to April 2022 the fees of children living at risk of poverty were paid. Project experience has shown that the measure has been effective in terms of kindergarten enrolment by increasing the number of children enrolled at age three. The project supported 52 566 children for whom fees were paid. As a result of project implementation and to ensure access to ECEC, parents have been exempted from paying fees for their children to attend nursery and kindergarten since April 2022. Payment of fees was a barrier to enrolment in preschool education, especially for children from disadvantaged families.

Figure 1: Group net enrolment rate in kindergartens



Source NSI

*2021/2022 - Break in time series due to a change of data source. 2022/2023 - Break in time series due to the availability of a new population estimate based on the 2021 Census data.

Table 1: Net enrolment rate in the education system

	(Percentage)					
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Group net coefficients¹ by level of education according to ISCED 2011						
Preschool education (ISCED-0)	78.4	78.4	78.7	78.1	79.1	87.3
Net enrolment rate² by age group						
3-6 years old	79.8	79.9	80.1	79.4	80.4	88.8

Source NSI

1. The group coefficient is calculated as the ratio of the number of children aged 3 to 6 enrolled in preschool education to the number of population of the same age.

2. The coefficient is calculated as the ratio of the number of pupils in the age group 3 to 6 inclusive, regardless of the level of education in which they are enrolled, to the number of population of the same age.

3. Break in time series due to a change of the data source.

4. Break in time series due to the availability of a new population estimate based on 2021 Census data.

In 2020, an amendment was made to the Preschool and School Education Act, introducing compulsory preschool education for children aged 4, with the change to come into

force after the relevant municipality has provided the conditions, but no later than 2023-2024 for the whole country.

In addition to the exemption from fees, there is also the possibility to compensate parents of children who are not enrolled in kindergarten or nursery due to lack of available places⁹.

During the period 2021-2023, the implementation of activities related to comprehensive health promotion for children in nurseries, kindergartens and schools continues. On the basis of studies, assessments and analyses of the current situation of nurseries in 2021-2022, recommendations have been made for their development in line with the quality criteria set out in the EU Quality Framework set out in the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, which also include proposals for updating the legislative framework. In 2022, amendments and supplements were made to Ordinance No. 26 of 2008 on the organization and operation of nurseries and children's kitchens. One of the main arguments for the changes is the shortage of nurses for the needs of nurseries and the increased employment of retired medical professionals. The amendment creates the possibility of employing other medical professionals in nurseries and nursery groups: persons with the professional qualification of „medical assistant” and „paramedic”. Texts related to ensuring the quality of nurseries' activities to ensure the growth and development of children in good health have also been amended and supplemented.

In connection with the search for a solution to improve the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria, at the initiative of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), the European Commission provided technical support under the Structural Reform Support Programme aimed at developing a set of tools for managing and monitoring the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria. A report on the state of ECEC in Bulgaria was developed to examine the state of the ECEC system structure in Bulgaria by reviewing the legislative and strategic framework and its implementation in the five areas identified by the EU Quality Framework for ECEC (access; staff; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; governance and funding)¹⁰. One of the findings of the report shows that the structural and organizational characteristics in the management of ECEC in the health and education systems lead to a great disconnection and differences in their meaning and content and do not provide the necessary continuity between the different types of institutions. A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care has been developed under the Programme, work on which was completed in September 2022. The document was created in line with the EU Quality Framework set out in the Council of Europe Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, adopted on 22 May 2019. It is tailored specifically to the Bulgarian context and is accompanied by a set of indicators and benchmarks that could be used to monitor and evaluate the quality of ECEC services and to support institutions' self-assessment of ECEC.

In view of the importance and complexity of measures to support children and their families in the early childhood period, a permanent Inter-institutional Working Group for planning and coordination of policies for early childhood development has been established, which includes representatives of a number of responsible institutions and stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the

⁹ Ordinance on the terms and conditions for the provision and payment of funds from the state budget to compensate for the costs of raising and educating children who are not enrolled in municipal nurseries or nursery groups in municipal or state kindergartens due to lack of places and the Ordinance on the terms and conditions for the provision and payment of funds from the state budget to compensate for the costs of raising and educating children who are not enrolled in state or municipal kindergartens or schools due to a lack of available places.

¹⁰ Analytical Report on the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care in Bulgaria, <https://web.mon.bg/bg/101109>

Ministry of Health and other institutions, various organizations and professionals with expertise on the subject.

In fulfilling its tasks, the working group developed the 2024 Annual Plan to promote early childhood development by ensuring access to social, health, educational and integrated services in order to reduce negative trends in child poverty and improve the quality of life of young children. The plan is the first national document focused entirely on promoting early childhood development. Its measures are organized into five impact areas: (1) Health and Nutrition; (2) Early Learning, Early Childhood Education and Care; (3) Child Protection, Security and Safety; (4) Social Protection and Parenting Support; and (5) Early Intervention. The 2024 Annual Plan for Promoting Early Childhood Development contains specific measures and activities for implementation, indicators, financial sources and amount, responsible institutions and partners for each of the impact areas. These include measures to improve antenatal care and ensure access to health care and services for pregnant and childbearing women; introducing patronage care programmes at national level; providing support to improve early learning and early childhood care; ensuring sufficient numbers of qualified professionals to work in early childhood education and care services; supporting biological families to prevent child abandonment; providing effective social protection for families with children. The Plan was adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 260 of 04.04.2024.

In 2023, the „General and additional support for personal development in preschool education” procedure was announced under the Education Programme 2021-2027, which will contribute to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The activities under the procedure include additional support for personal development of children with special educational needs (SEN), children at risk, with chronic diseases and gifted children; general support for personal development for access and sustainable inclusion of children in pre-school education through the prevention of learning difficulties and programmes for psychomotor, cognitive and language development of children in kindergartens; psychological support and additional training in Bulgarian language for children in kindergartens who do not speak Bulgarian; individual and group work for identified language and/or emotional-behavioural difficulties; implementation of effective programmes for health education and physical culture, etc.; intensive work with parents and work to improve the qualifications of pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff. It is planned that 37 000 children will receive support under the „Strong Start” project under the procedure, the contract for which was signed on 15 February 2024, with over BGN 29 million planned for the European Child Guarantee.

The focus of activities in this policy area is also on the provision of patronage care for pregnant women and families with young children. In this regard, additional health care provided in the home by nurses, midwives or physicians' assistants for new-borns up to 14 days after discharge from the maternity ward is regulated in addition to the package of health care activities guaranteed by the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). The period of time during which health care is provided at home to new-born children up to 6 months after discharge from the hospital has also been extended¹¹. There were 81 health care visits at home for new-borns in 2022 and 167 in 2023. Also, in 2023 in relation to developing patronage care for children, measures were taken to develop a model of patronage care for children based on an analysis of available activities, services and programmes.

During the period under review, UNICEF and Trust for Social Alternatives Foundation pilot projects were implemented to create and adapt services for pregnant women, children up to 3 years of age and their families, in partnership with the Ministry of Health (MoH), the

¹¹ Amending Ordinance No. 9 of 2019 on determining the package of health activities guaranteed by the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund.

National Centre for Public Health and Analysis (NCPHA) and with the participation of other units of the health system. The Trust for Social Alternatives Foundation is piloting a service for pregnant women, infants and children up to 2 years of age from vulnerable groups and their families through home visits under the Together - Healthy Baby, Healthy Future Programme, with two centres opened at health facilities in the cities of Sofia and Plovdiv. In 2022, an opinion on the sustainability of the programme was prepared and a mechanism for introducing the patronage care for pregnant women and young children from vulnerable groups in the Maternal and Child Health Consultative Centres established under the National Programme for Improving Maternal and Child Health was developed. According to UNICEF data, 10 458 home visits were made to 2 712 families of children up to 3 years of age and to 596 pregnant women. A study on the effectiveness of the service identifies the main positive outcome as improving coverage with preventive activities of uninsured pregnant women from vulnerable groups and increasing the quality of parental care in terms of breastfeeding, feeding, childcare and child development.

In parallel to improving the coverage and quality of pre-school education and developing patronage care, efforts are focused on expanding the network of early childhood development services. As of 31.12.2023, there are 386 community-based social services for children that can also implement activities to support early childhood development and early intervention of disabilities.

Regarding early childhood intervention, already within the pilot project European Child Guarantee, implemented in partnership with UNICEF Bulgaria, family-oriented models for early childhood intervention have been implemented in three regions in the country. In 2023, 7 social services with a maximum number of 345 users have been established with funding from the state budget, thus ensuring the sustainability of these services developed under early disability intervention projects.

3.2. Education and school-based activities

Inclusive education is one of the key priorities enshrined in the Preschool and School Education Act. Its implementation involves a number of responsible institutions, representatives of the parents, NGOs and other stakeholders. The measures implemented are aimed at ensuring higher quality and better access to education for children and pupils, with a focus on children and pupils with SEN. For this purpose, the project „Support for Inclusive Education” under the OP SESG with a specific beneficiary - the Ministry of Education and Science, has created a Functional Assessment Map of the individual needs of children and students with SEN and chronic diseases based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. On 24 November 2023, an agreement was signed between the Minister of Education and Science, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Labour and Social Policy to introduce a cross-sectoral approach to the implementation of the Functional Assessment Map in 28 districts of the country, which will be carried out by trained specialists from the Regional Centres for Supporting the Inclusive Education Process, Regional Health Inspectorates and Social Assistance Directorates. On the basis of this agreement, the regional structures of the three ministries will interact in the functional assessment of the individual needs of children and students with SEN and chronic diseases.

In addition, the project „Support for Inclusive Education” has developed a tool for the identification of gifts and for the identification of opportunities for their stimulation through additional support for personal development of children and gifted students, as well as guidelines for the implementation of the tool. A tool for identifying markers of risk for children and pupils and for identifying opportunities for providing additional support for the personal development of children and pupils at risk and guidelines for its implementation have also been

developed. In response to the need of pedagogical specialists to be supported in their work with children and pupils with SEN, a teaching guide has been developed to adapt the content by educational strands for the education of children with SEN in preschool education, including specific developments for children and pupils with chronic diseases.

Also, under a national programme of the Ministry of Education and Science, methodological guidelines for adapting the curriculum content in academic subjects have been developed for students with SEN who are educated under individual learning programmes, as well as for 2 078 children and students who are educated in centres for special educational support.

In the context of digitalization and access to free digital content, a platform for educational and therapeutic resources for children and students with SEN „Support me” (podkrepime.mon.bg) has been launched in February 2022 – in partnership between the Ministry of Education and Science, the Regional Centre for Support of Inclusive Education (RCSIE) - Sofia-city and UNICEF - Bulgaria. It contains more than 400 author's products in the form of video and text files, and the development of new resources is ongoing. The platform aims at a more effective collaboration between the family and the pedagogical professionals supporting the child or student, enabling all of them to be connected and to track together the progress of the child or student on his/her development programme, which is part of the platform. To date, more than 60 such programmes have been developed and the number is expected to grow. The platform is currently used by 1 033 professionals and 162 parents.

In 2024, an additional BGN 8 million from the state budget has been allocated to finance activities to provide support for the personal development of children and students with SEN.

The number of children and pupils with SEN receiving resource support is increasing. According to the data of the Centre for Information Assurance of Education (CIAE), as of 15.09.2023 resource support is provided to a total of 24 541 children and pupils with SEN from kindergartens and schools, distributed as follows:

- children in kindergartens and preschool groups in schools – 6 052 (of them children in kindergartens – 5 739 and children in preschool groups in schools – 313);
- Students in schools – 18 489 (from 1st to 12th grade);
- Out of the total number of children and students with SEN receiving resource support, 8 701 children and students receive resource support from 1 031 RCSIE specialists.

According to the data of CIAE as of 15.09.2023. 1 535 resource teachers, 1 380 psychologists, 957 speech therapists, 70 hearing and speech rehabilitators, 134 teachers of visually impaired children, 11 teachers of hearing-impaired children, 851 pedagogical advisors, 19 teachers of children with mental disorders, 466 educators, 103 pedagogues, etc.

In 2022, the procedure „General and additional support for personal development in school education” was announced under the Education Programme 2021-2027. On 27 January 2023, a contract was signed for the implementation of the „Success for you” project of the Ministry of Education and Science with a duration of 60 months. The amount of the planned project funds for the European Child Guarantee is BGN 85 634 907. The project activities include additional activities/training in school subjects within the framework of general support for personal development, activities for additional support for personal development of pupils with SEN, at risk, with chronic diseases and gifted children, extra-curricular activities, inter-school activities, etc. 96 000 pupils are expected to receive support. By the end of 2023, after identifying the needs of students from vulnerable groups, the project has covered 1 431 schools in general and additional support activities for students from vulnerable groups and 188 schools for gifted students. The schools involved so far in the project activities have declared/planned to cover the following number of pupils for the school year 2023/2024: 11 746 pupils with SEN, chronic diseases and at risk and 64 271 pupils from vulnerable groups.

In 2023, a call for proposals under the topic „Promoting intercultural education through culture, science and sport” was developed. The main activities include implementation of intercultural education in a school environment through interest-based activities; implementation of the learning process through outreach activities in a real environment in museums, art galleries, cultural institutions; building a community of active parents, including through the work of educational mediators and conducting information campaigns aimed at non-discrimination. The aim of the procedure is to reach over 24 000 children and pupils from vulnerable groups, over 12 000 children and pupils whose mother tongue is Bulgarian, over 41 000 children, pupils and parents from marginalized groups.

Children with disabilities, asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants and disadvantaged children have access to cultural and artistic activities through the network of community centres /cultural centres/ and public libraries. There is a wide range of cultural and educational activities for children through courses, clubs and various forms of activities, which are free of charge for these vulnerable children.

The implementation of various national programmes, including „Policing in Schools”, „Children's Police Station”, etc., is ongoing.

3.3. Healthy meal each school day

Children enrolled in full-day nursery and kindergarten are provided with free breakfast, lunch and two compulsory snacks - between breakfast and lunch and between lunch and dinner. Parents do not have to pay fees for these meals from April 2022.

In order to consolidate the positive changes achieved in the national dietary pattern and to reduce the risk of nutritional deficiencies and chronic diseases related to nutrition in later life, activities are carried out annually to promote sustainable healthy diets for children in organized children's groups. The 28 Regional Health Inspectorates (RHIs) monitor and evaluate nutrition in organized groups of children and schoolchildren on an annual basis in order to comply with legal requirements. A positive trend compared to the previous year is a decrease in the bread and flour consumption at the expense of an increase in the consumption of rice, pasta and other cereals (wheat, maize, oatmeal). During the period, there was also a continuing trend towards increased consumption of milk, vegetables and eggs.

In 2023, a National Strategy for the implementation of a scheme for the supply of fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy products in kindergartens, schools and special education support centres in the Republic of Bulgaria was adopted with an implementation period of 2023/2024 - 2028/2029 school years. 422 000 children are covered by the scheme for the school year 2022/2023, with funding of BGN 47 972 000 from the state budget and BGN 7 648 158 from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund.

In the education system, the Ordinance on the Financing of Institutions in the System of Preschool and School Education regulates the way in which the pedagogical council to each school, taking into account the opinion of the public council established at the educational institution, decides on the type of breakfast - basic breakfast or support breakfast (support meal) to be provided in the kindergarten, school or special education support centre. Only one of the two types of breakfast may be provided within the kindergarten, school or special educational support centre. The main breakfast shall provide 20% of the energy content of the day's meal for the age group concerned and shall be provided in the morning by 9.00 a.m., and the support breakfast (support meal) shall provide 10-15% of the energy content of the day's meal for the age group concerned.

Children's breakfasts in kindergartens should meet the requirements of Ordinance No 6 of 2011 on healthy nutrition of children aged 3 to 7 years in kindergartens. Accordingly, the requirements of Regulation No 37 of 2009 on the healthy diet of schoolchildren should be

observed in the breakfast of schoolchildren. In addition, the specific safety and quality requirements for food offered in kindergartens and school canteens are laid down in Ordinance No 9 of 2011 issued by the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

3.4. Healthcare

In response to the identified challenges to the health system related to ensuring quality health care for pregnant women, mothers and children, efforts are aimed at improving key indicators of the health of young people, pregnant women, mothers and children by improving access to health services, including beyond the scope of health insurance, health promotion and ensuring conditions for the development and sustainability of integrated health and social services. In this regard, a National Programme for Improvement of Maternal and Child Health for the period 2021-2030 (NPIMCH 2021-2030) was adopted in 2021. A National Coordinating Council (NCC) on Maternal and Child Health has been established to coordinate the activities of the programme and regional coordinators have been appointed in all districts of the country. In order to ensure the sustainability of the activities of the introduced mass neonatal hearing screening as well as the existing Maternal and Child Health Consultative Centres established in hospital care facilities, three-year contracts have been signed with 101 hospital care facilities under the National Maternal and Child Health Improvement Programme. In the period 2021-2023, the sustainability of the screening programmes and the activities of the Health Consultation Centres under the NPIMCH 2021-2030 has also been ensured. In 2021, the following consultations were carried out: 5 280 consultations by medical specialists, 3 194 by psychologists and 3 370 by social workers; in 2022: 5 832 consultations by medical specialists, 5 852 by psychologists and 5 257 by social workers; and for 2023: 5 435 medical consultations, 6 256 consultations by psychologist and 5 854 consultations by social worker. Home visits were also provided during the period under review: 137 in 2021, 163 in 2022 and 213 in 2023. The coverage of neonatal hearing screening is also increasing. In 2021, 47 200 children were screened, in 2022 – 49 651, in 2023 – 47 230. Examinations under the biochemical screening for pregnant women also increase from 15 559 in 2021 to 16 007 in 2022. In 2023, 14 747 tests were conducted. Assessing the need for early intervention for risks and problems in child health and development covered 5 801 children in 2021, 6 676 in 2022 and 6 658 in 2023. In order to provide comprehensive interdisciplinary medical care and continuous health care for children with certain chronic diseases (diabetes, congenital heart malformations, congenital facial malformations, congenital haematological diseases, congenital neurological diseases and premature infants), 1 158 individual medical and social plans were developed in 2021, and 1 655 and 1 600 in 2022 and 2023.

During the period 2021-2023, various information and training activities have been carried out to raise the awareness of the population on reproductive health and family planning, pregnancy, childbirth and child care, to increase the knowledge and skills for healthy lifestyles of adolescents and young people and prevention of health risk behaviour, as well as to support parents in developing skills to care for premature babies and children with disabilities and special needs. Meetings, lectures, trainings, health education campaigns, publications on healthy lifestyle issues and other events have been organized and conducted by the RHI and the NCPHA. Different target groups have been reached - pregnant women, mothers, children, schoolchildren and young people, as well as their parents.

In order to improve the quality and scope of medical care in the field of maternal and child health, to expand the volume and scope of the package of health activities guaranteed by the NHIF budget, changes in the legislative framework were carried out during the period under review. In 2021, amendments and supplements to Ordinance No. 9 of 2019 on the determination of the package of health activities guaranteed by the NHIF budget were adopted.

The amendments created an opportunity for patients with oncological diseases of various localizations, including those covered by paediatric surgery, to have access to the innovative method of robot-assisted surgical treatment within the framework of the package of healthcare activities under the NHIF. In 2022, changes were made to Ordinance No. 8 of 2016 on preventive examinations and dispensation and Ordinance No. 9 of 2019 on the determination of the package of health activities guaranteed by the NHIF budget. The changes supplement the package of preventive activities with additional types of examinations, which is aimed at improving the quality of the services provided for the prevention of diseases within the framework of the compulsory health insurance.

In order to ensure better access to obstetric care for uninsured pregnant women and to reduce infant mortality in the country by introducing an effective system for prevention, screening, prophylaxis and early diagnosis of predictable and preventable conditions and pathologies during pregnancy, amendments were adopted to Ordinance No. 26 of 14 June 2007 on the provision of obstetric care to uninsured women and on the performance of examinations outside the scope of compulsory health insurance for children and pregnant women. The amendments increased the number of preventive examinations for uninsured pregnant women from one to four and expanded the package of medical and diagnostic examinations during pregnancy. As a result of the amendments to the Regulation, the number of preventive examinations carried out on uninsured pregnant women has increased. In 2021, 2 922 preventive examinations were carried out, in 2022 their number is 2 921 and in 2023 – 3 925. In 2023, the number of examinations carried out on uninsured pregnant women also increased from 9 083 in 2021 and 8 460 in 2022 to 14 284 in 2023. The number of births by uninsured women decreased. Obstetric care was provided for the births of 7,140 uninsured women in 2021, 6 824 in 2022 and 6 517 in 2023, this downward trend is likely due to the decrease in the birth rate in general.

During the period 2021-2023, the scope of preventive examinations for children was expanded. In 2021, 3 067 971 preventive examinations were carried out on 988 322 children, in 2022 – 3 337 588 examinations were carried out on 1 003 370 children and in 2023 – 3 242 960 examinations were carried out on 997 281 children. During the period 2021-2023, the number of preventive examinations carried out on insured pregnant women decreases. In 2021, 325 578 preventive examinations were carried out on 62 453 pregnant women, in 2022 – 304 949 preventive examinations on 59 509 pregnant women, and in 2023 – 292 167 examinations on 57 498 pregnant women, with a decreasing trend probably also due to the decrease in the birth rate in general. In this regard, it is important to note the ratio between the number of pregnant women and the number of preventive examinations carried out over the years, which has remained relatively stable between 5.08 and 5.21 examinations.

In connection with the development of health and integrated health and social services for the prevention of complications in children with chronic diseases, in 2021 7 new Centers for Complex Services for Children with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases (CCSCDCD) were established in the cities of Blagoevgrad, Buzovgrad, Dobrich, Debelets, Sofia, Sliven and Haskovo, as well as the capacity of the CCSCDCD-Burgas was expanded. In all the 10 functioning CCSCDCD outpatient diagnostic, physical therapy, medical and psychosocial rehabilitation of children with disabilities and chronic diseases is provided. Parents are also supported in the care of a child with a disability through the provision of hourly services, which include individual and/or group activities with children. The number of all children who have been covered by the CCSCDCD and for whom outpatient and inpatient diagnosis, treatment, physical therapy, and psychosocial rehabilitation has been carried out, increases annually from 1 622 children to 2 279 in 2022 and to 2 672 children in 2023 for whom an individual medico-social plan has been developed and is being implemented. Of these, the most significant increase is for children in the outpatient block who have received hourly care to provide

physical therapy, medical and psychosocial rehabilitation, from 1 389 in 2021 to 1 972 in 2022 and to 2 380 children in 2023. The number of children passing through the outpatient block in 2023 increased by 20.6% compared to 2022 and by 42% compared to 2021. A significant increase (70%) in 2022 is observed when considering the indicator that reflects the number of children who received specialized medical care in a home environment or in social services for residential care. In 2023, this percentage increases, but at a small rate – by 6%. Children receiving care in an inpatient unit in 2022 increases from 186 to 199 but in 2023 decreases to 175, a 13.7% decrease. This decrease is due to the increase in care in the outpatient block, where some children are transitioning to rehabilitation without having to be admitted to the inpatient block.

As part of the deinstitutionalization measures, 20 Centers for specialized health and social care for children with disabilities in need of permanent medical care and 6 Centers for specialized health and social care for children with high-risk behaviour and in need of special health care are under construction. Of these, 6 Centres for specialized health and social care for children with disabilities with a need for permanent medical care and 1 Centre for specialized health and social care for children with high-risk behaviour and a need for special health care are completed and partially equipped in 2023.

The National Health Strategy 2030 adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2023 lays down measures to improve maternal and child health indicators, which will be aimed at ensuring universal access and increasing the coverage of children, pregnant women and mothers of children up to one year of age with quality health care and services for prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation.

The construction of a National Paediatric Hospital to provide comprehensive medical services for children is another priority task of great public importance to provide adequate, timely and highly qualified care to children. A National Strategy for Child and Adolescent Health and Paediatric Care was adopted in 2023, which aims to achieve integrity of the measures implemented so far and the interventions envisaged, ensuring continuity and outlining a long-term perspective for the development of paediatric care in the country. Strong emphasis is placed on early childhood development, including monitoring children's physical health and building and strengthening emotional bonds between children and parents, developing comprehensive paediatric care, building medical-social units for preventive and promote activities and patronage care for children in all periods of their development, etc. Some of the activities are planned to be implemented with the support of the European Structural Funds, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the Connecting Europe Facility and other international financial sources.

During the reporting period, vaccine deliveries to support the national immunization calendar were carried out according to schedule and contracts within the approved budget. In 2022, an increase in the core immunizations compared to the previous year is reported. A number of activities have been implemented to promote vaccination, increase the knowledge of health professionals, health mediators and parents, and increase immunization coverage.

Table 2: Immunization coverage achieved with core immunizations (%)

Compulsory immunizations	2021	2022	2023
Against TUBERCULOSIS			
immunized new-borns	96.7	96.5	96.5
% of covered			
Against DIPHTHERIA, TETANUS AND PERTUSSIS			
received a third dose	89.5	91.4	92.4
% of covered			

Against POLIOMYELITIS			
received a third dose	89.5	91.4	92.4
% of covered			
Against HAEMOPHILUS INFLUENZAE TYPE B			
received a third dose	89.5	91.5	92.5
% of covered			
Against Hepatitis B			
immunized new-borns who have received a third dose	89.4	91.5	92.3
% of covered			
Against MEASLES, MUMPS AND RUBELLA			
immunized at 13 months	88.7	91.2	91.6
% of covered			
Against PNEUMOCOCCAL INFECTIONS			
received a second dose	86.1	91.2	91.7
% of covered			

Source: NCPHA¹²

For children with chronic and rare diseases on home treatment, under the Health Insurance Act and in connection with the provision of medicinal products, dietary foods for special medical purposes, medical devices, medicinal products and medical devices for maintenance therapy are paid. In the case of the need for hospital treatment, medicinal products for hospitalized children are included in the cost of medical care provided under clinical pathways/procedures, and for children with oncohematological diseases medicinal products are paid for separately from the cost of medical services.

Table 3: Number of children aged up to 18 years who received medicines, medical devices and dietary foods for home treatment

Year	Children under 18 years of age who have received medicines, medical devices and dietary foods for home treatment	
	Number	Reimbursement amount (BGN)
2021	23 998	67 813 050,00
2022	23 976	87 829 484,00
until 10.2023	21 797	92 341 604,00

**Note: Costs presented in the table include those who received medicines, medical devices and dietary foods for home treatment of rare diseases.*

In relation to ensuring children's mental health the National Strategy for Mental Health of the Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 adopted in 2021 and its Action Plan set out activities and funding for establishing new services throughout the country to expand access and improve services for children and adolescents. There are also activities related to increasing the capacity of the system to improve the functioning of child and adolescent psychiatry in Bulgaria. As part of the implementation of the National Strategy, an Assessment of the needs of the population (general and inpatient psychiatric population) for mental health services and their provision at territorial level has been prepared and an analysis of the number of adults and children in need of specialized services has been carried out in order to determine the number and territorial distribution by municipality as well as the number of specialists to be involved.

¹² https://ncpha.government.bg/uploads/statistics/current/2021/imunizacii_21.pdf
https://ncpha.government.bg/uploads/statistics/current/2022/immunizations_2022.pdf

The development of child and adolescent psychiatry has been given a leading role in the implementation of the National Strategy.

During the period under review, not only the number of health mediators was expanded, but also the number of municipalities with appointed mediators (from 148 municipalities in 2021, to 151 municipalities in 2022 and to 153 in 2023). In order to validate the model of health mediators, the work of 21 health mediators has been started in medical institutions in the pilot municipalities of Burgas, Kazanlak, Samokov, Novi Pazar, Dupnitsa, Dimitrovgrad and in the municipality of Blagoevgrad. 60 health mediators graduated from the first alumni with the training module „Work of health mediators in hospital”. A digital reporting module for health mediators has been developed to facilitate their work.

3.5. Healthy nutrition

In order to ensure healthy nutrition of adolescents, in parallel with the introduced legislative requirements, actions are undertaken related to the analysis and assessment of the nutritional status and dietary intake at individual and group level, as well as to raise awareness on the issues of healthy nutrition of children and schoolchildren (training seminars, individual trainings, trainings of the management and staff of children and educational institutions, health education materials on the implementation of the current legislation and the recipe books for the different age groups). Within the National Programme for the Prevention of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NPPCNCD), an analysis and assessment of the nutritional status of the population aged 1 to 19 years, as well as an analysis and assessment of risk factors related to the nutrition of children aged 1-6 years and 7-9 years have been carried out. Major risk factors related to pregnancy, lactation periods, feeding and socioeconomic status were examined. Behavioral factors associated with dietary patterns were analysed in the population aged 10-19 years¹³.

The analysis of the data from the National Population Health Risk Factor Survey 2020 in Bulgaria, conducted under the NPPCNCD, points to the following main problems and trends by age groups: in children aged 1 to 5 years, the main nutritional status problems are associated with a high relative share of children at possible risk of overweight (14.9%) and overweight children (12%). A worrying trend is the threefold increase in the prevalence of overweight (9.9%) compared to the values measured in 2014. There is a favourable downward trend in the relative share of obese children (2.1%) compared to 2014. Serious nutritional status problems in children aged 5 to 19 years are the high relative share of overweight (32%) and obesity (12.8%). Girls aged 5 to 9 years (18.6%) and boys aged 10-13 years (16.1%) had the highest relative share of obesity. There was an unfavourable trend of a slight increase (by 2.5%) in the relative share of obese children.

With the financial support of the World Health Organization, new software was developed to assess dietary intake at the individual and group level by developing a new web-based IT system and transferring information (databases, nomenclatures, etc. from an existing product) to assess dietary intake in epidemiological surveys conducted by the MoH, NCPHA and regional health inspectorates, and to perform health surveillance by assessing dietary intake and its compliance with the legal requirements on health and nutrition. The use of the new web-based programme is intended to improve the work of RHI professionals and to enable adequate assessment of the nutrition offered in organized children's groups.

In order to provide healthy meals to children from 10 months to 3 years, vouchers are provided against which children from vulnerable groups receive midday meals from the children's kitchens. The focus is on children who are subject to social assistance - children from

¹³ <https://ncpha.government.bg/uploads/pages/3166/2-2022-SUPPLEMENT+.pdf>

low-income households, children with disabilities, children deprived of parental care, children living in poor housing conditions, at risk of abandonment, etc., for whom meals are not otherwise provided. The amount of funding envisaged is BGN 7 153 272 until 2025 and it is expected that at least 5 000 children will be supported during the same period. The measure is implemented by the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA) and partners are municipalities across the country. To date, partnership agreements have been concluded with a total of 28 municipalities. The conclusion of agreements with municipalities and the activity of attracting new partners to extend the scope of the programme are ongoing. As of January 2024, 378 children have been supported and the number is set to increase gradually.

In addition, support activities are implemented through the purchase of packages of essential basic products for new-born children from poor and at-risk families identified by the social assistance authorities. The amount of funding envisaged is BGN 1 818 000 until 2025 and it is expected that 5 000 children will be supported during the same period. This type of support will be provided at least twice until the child is six months old. In addition to the support, a follow-up monitoring of the supported families will be carried out in order to achieve better targeting and effectiveness of the support.

3.6. Adequate housing

The focus of this area of impact is the provision of social housing for the accommodation of persons and families with children from vulnerable groups. For the period June 2021 to 31.12.2023 no social housing projects have been funded under the Operational Programme „Regions in Growth” (OPRG) 2014-2020. 13 projects with a total value of BGN 25.5 million have been completed. 569 dwellings were rehabilitated in urban areas, with 1 197 members of marginalized groups having improved housing conditions.

The review of the implementation of activities highlights the provision of access to housing as an area of impact where further efforts and actions are needed. In this context and taking into account the serious challenges, the measures eligible for funding through the new integrated territorial approach in the field of housing in urban municipalities are: the provision of modern and affordable housing, including for vulnerable and other disadvantaged groups, support for the implementation of innovative approaches to financing housing policy in municipalities, promoting architectural design and housing construction applying principles of environmental sustainability, with particular attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

An essential policy area in the field of housing is the provision of appropriate accommodation for children seeking and receiving international protection. In recent years, a number of changes have been implemented in national legislation in the field of migration, asylum and refugees, which have guaranteed the right of unaccompanied, foreign and refugee children to protection, to measures under the terms and conditions of the Child Protection Act (CPA) and to referral to supporting social services for children in the community.

The existing capacity and resources of the Child Protection Departments (CPD) and social services for children at risk in the country are used for the placement of unaccompanied foreign children, including refugee children in 2022 and 2023, as follows:

- In 2021 – 52 cases of unaccompanied foreign children, including refugee children, against whom protection measures have been taken under the terms and conditions of the CPA, of whom 48 boys and 4 girls. Social services used: 41 children have used social services for residential care (Family-type accommodation center for children without disabilities (FTACCWD), Transitional Housing, Crisis Centre), 11 children have been referred by the Social Assistance Directorate (SAD) to the Complex for

Social Services for Children and Families (CSSCF) for the use of the services „Emergency and Respite Care / Emergency Reception”.

- In 2022 – 182 cases of unaccompanied foreign children, including refugee children, against whom protection measures have been taken under the terms and conditions of the CPA, including 162 boys and 20 girls. In 2022, 150 children used social services for residential care (FTACCWD, Transitional Housing, Crisis Centre) and 32 children were placed with relatives or close friends.
- In 2023, the Child Protection Departments in the country worked on 120 cases of unaccompanied foreign children, including refugee children, against whom protection measures were taken under the terms and conditions of the CPA, including 101 boys and 19 girls. The existing capacity and resources of the available social services for children at risk in the country are used to accommodate unaccompanied foreign children, including refugee children. In 2023, 88 children used social services for residential care (FTACCWD, Crisis Centre, Centre for Integrated Services) and 32 children were placed with relatives or close friends.

The measures and activities implemented in the context of the childcare reform and the process of deinstitutionalisation have an essential place in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. Bulgaria's progress in the implementation of one of the largest reforms in the social area, such as the deinstitutionalisation of childcare, is internationally recognised and Bulgaria is a good practice example in its implementation. The most significant result of the reform is the prevalence of family care.

At the moment, the last 4 homes for medical and social care for children (HMSC), which are managed by the Ministry of Health, are functioning and are also to be closed. To this end, two inter-institutional working groups have been established in the Ministry of Health in 2023 to develop plans for the closure of two of the four currently functioning children's homes for medical and social care (HMSC-Kardzhali and HMSC-Stara Zagora). A Council for Supporting the Process of Taking out of Children Placed in Homes for Medical-Social Care for Children in the Cities of Varna, Kardzhali, Pleven and Stara Zagora and Preventing the Placement of Children in these Homes was established in September 2023 as an expert consultative unit to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. Among the main tasks of the Council are to identify difficulties related to the finalizing the process of deinstitutionalization of children from HMSC and to propose measures to overcome them, to develop methodological guidelines to support the prevention of placement of children in HMSC until their final closure and guidelines for work and interaction with local communities where children leaving the HMSC will use residential care services. The work of the Council also focuses on the development of foster care for children with disabilities and respite care for children from HMSC after their relocation to a family. The Council discussed issues related to the termination of new placements of children in HMSC, as a result of which the Executive Director of the Social Assistance Agency, by order of 30.11.2023, discontinued the placement of children in CSCH - Kardzhali.

In 2023, the implementation of the activities under the „Continuing Support for the Deinstitutionalization of Children and Youth” project under OPHRD 2014-2020 was completed, which aimed to continue supporting the process of deinstitutionalization and to ensure the preparation for the establishment and provision of new services in a family and in the community. Through the implementation of the project support and preparation of children/youth for independent life in the community was provided, including vocational orientation, guidance for acquiring skills for building work habits, choice of profession. As a result of the project activities 1 919 children and young people placed in institutions have been covered by deinstitutionalization interventions. A total of 513 children and young people were

supported to move out into the community through the support of appointed mediators for independent living and professional integration of the target group.

No projects for the deinstitutionalization of childcare have been funded under the Operational Programme „Regions in Growth” (OPRG) 2014-2020 for this period. 3 projects with a total value of BGN 1.4 million have been completed. 10 social infrastructure facilities have been supported in the process of deinstitutionalization with a capacity of the supported infrastructure for childcare or education of 500 persons.

In addition, amendments to the Regulations for the Implementation of the Social Assistance Act¹⁴ were made in 2023, which regulated a new monthly targeted support to cover the initial needs of young people aged 18 to 21 who have used a social or integrated health and social service for residential care up to that age and are leaving it for the first time. The amount of this benefit is the poverty line for the respective year.

3.7. Other measures to overcome social exclusion and reduce child poverty

In addition to the above-mentioned key areas for supporting children and families, and considering the multi-sectoral nature of child poverty, a number of other measures made also a significant contribution to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in the national context. These measures are aimed at improving access to social services for children and their families, improving the capacity of the child protection system, providing material and financial support for families with children from vulnerable groups, creating conditions for sports and promoting healthy lifestyles. Although most of these measures have not been introduced in response to the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee and their implementation precedes the adoption of the National Action Plan, they have an added value in ensuring access for children from vulnerable groups to various services.

Social services are among the main tools for supporting children and families. Their contribution to the process of deinstitutionalization of childcare is also essential. As of 31.12.2023 there are 734 social services for children and families, state delegated activities. Their total capacity is 18 989 places. The number of social services for residential care is 308, with a total capacity of 3 667 users. The number of social services for children and families in the community is 426, with a total capacity of 15 322 places. In the period 2021-2023, a total of 88 social services for children have been established as a state delegated activity (76 consultative services and 12 residential care services).

Table 4: Community-based social services for children (as of 31.12.2023)

According to the Social Assistance Agency

No.	Type of social service	Number	Capacity	Occupied places
1.	Day care centres for children and/or young people with disabilities; children and young people with severe multiple disabilities	91	2 540	2 547
2.	Day care centres for children with disabilities; children with severe multiple disabilities; Day care centre for children with disabilities (with Early Intervention of Disabilities programme)	10	258	191
3.	Day care centres for children and young people with disabilities - weekly care	6	143	142

¹⁴ Promulgated, SG No. 44 of 2023.

4.	Day care centres for children with disabilities and their families	16	480	360
5.	Day care centres for children with severe multiple disabilities and their families	1	30	25
6.	Day centres for children and adults with disabilities; Day centres for children and/or adults with disabilities; Day centres for children and/or adults with severe multiple disabilities	13	395	272
7.	Centres for social rehabilitation and integration for children	57	2 003	2 382
8.	Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration for Children with Disabilities (with Early Intervention of Disabilities Programme); Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration for Children (with Early Intervention of Disabilities Programme)	5	265	157
9.	Centre for social rehabilitation and integration for children from 0 to 7 years with intellectual difficulties	1	30	14
10.	Centres for social rehabilitation and integration for children and young people	1	25	25
11.	Centres for social rehabilitation and integration; Centres for social rehabilitation for children and adults	14	470	437
12.	Community Support Centres	162	7 446	7 741
13.	Community Support Centre/Community Centre for Children and Families; Community Centre for Children and Families	9	538	350

In the area of social services, the implementation of the reform in the sector is a priority, and it is expected to contribute to a significant and positive change for people, as well as to the professionalization of the sector in order to provide accessible and quality social services. With a view to creating a comprehensive network of social services across the country in the long term, a proposal for a National Map of Social Services has been developed, and it is under public consultation and to be submitted to the Council of Ministers for adoption once the coordination procedures have been completed. The planning of social services at national level through the National Map aims to ensure equal access to social services throughout the country. It includes all social and integrated health and social services at municipal and regional level for which full or partial funding is provided by the state budget, as well as the maximum number of users of these services.

During the period under review, actions were taken to improve the quality and effectiveness of the overall child protection system through legislative changes and initiatives, as well as to strengthen inter-institutional cooperation and effective interaction. Priority measures include the development of foster care and its extension. In 2023, the implementation of the „Adopt Me 2015” operation, funded under the 2014-2020 OPHRD, aimed at improving and expanding the scope of foster care and consolidating its provision at local level as an alternative form of raising children at risk in a family, was completed. In the framework of the project 7 784 children were covered by the foster care service, with the total number of foster parents with whom children have been or are placed being 2 950. As of 01.01.2024, the project „Increasing the capacity of the employees of the Agency for Social Assistance in relation to the modernization of social protection systems”- Component 1 was launched, which is aimed at improving and expanding the scope of foster care and consolidating its provision at the local level for raising children at risk in a family environment, placing special emphasis on the development of „specialized foster care” for children with disabilities, in the context of the imminent closure of the last 4 HMSC in the country.

Children and their families have access to various forms of financial support through specific legislation in this area. The provision of financial support is an important part of policies for children and families in Bulgaria and contributes to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee objectives. Family benefits for children provided under the Family Allowances Act (FAA) aim to support families in raising children in a family, while promoting their preschool and school education, access to health care, etc. Under the CPA and the Rules for its implementation, financial benefits are provided to support children at risk and their parents or caregivers, including prevention and reintegration benefit, benefit for raising a child from a family of relatives or close friends and foster families, remuneration for professional foster families and a supplement for children with disabilities. Benefits under the FAA and the CPA are financed solely from the state budget under the budget programme „Support for Children and Families”. For 2023, the amount spent under the programme is BGN 589 698 596.

Table 5: Number of recipients of benefits provided under the Family Allowances Act

No.	Type of benefit	2021	2022	2023
1.	One-off pregnancy	9 644	9 114	8 616
2.	One-off benefit upon childbirth	60 352	59 581	56 221
3.	One-off benefit upon adoption of a child	322	325	316
4.	One-off benefit for raising twins	1 869	2 015	1 862
5.	One-off benefit for raising a child by a mother (adoptive mother) who is a full-time university student	311 1st and 250 2nd payment	195 1st and 183 2nd payment	156 1st and 117 2nd payment
6.	Monthly benefits for raising children under the age of one (average monthly)*	12 226	12 181	11 516
7.	Monthly benefits for raising a child until graduation from high school, but not after the age of 20 (monthly average)**	321 678 families with 509 008 children	312 791 families with 456 491 children	285 453 families with 449 978 children
8.	One-off benefit for pupils enrolled in first, second, third and fourth grade	51 653 children for the school year 2021/2022.	50 557 children for the school year 2022/2023.	53 481 children enrolled in first grade; 51 379 children enrolled in second grade; 51 897 children enrolled in third grade; 49 121 children enrolled in fourth grade for the 2023/2024 school year.
9.	One-off benefit for students enrolled in eighth grade	49 543 children for the school year 2021/2022.	48 937 children for the school	47 763 children for the school

			year 2022/2023.	year 2023/2024.
10.	Monthly benefits for children with permanent disabilities (average monthly)	27 403	26 669	26 402
11.	One-off allowance for free railway and bus transport in Bulgaria to mothers of multiple children	5 789	5 601	5 062
12.	Monthly benefit for a child who is ineligible for a survivor pension from a deceased parent (average monthly)	1 801	2 027	2 201

According to the ASA

(*) *In-kind support in the form of vouchers was received by 1 393 mothers in 2021, 1 465 mothers in 2022 and 1 401 mothers in 2023;*

(**) *The benefit was received in the form of vouchers from 2 015 families with 2 246 children in 2021, from 2 025 families with 2 245 children in 2022 and from 1 952 families with 2 162 children in 2023.*

In addition to the FAA, financial support is also provided under the Social Assistance Act, which is a general law regulating social assistance to which persons in need, including families with children, are entitled. According to the information provided by the ASA, in 2023 an average of 20,554 individuals and families, including families with children, were provided with monthly benefits. For the period January - December 2022, 19 620 cases are covered on average per month. An average monthly increase of 934 (about 5%) was reported. In 2021, 22 936 individuals and families, including families with children, were provided with monthly benefits on average.

Supporting parents with children, including creating opportunities to better reconcile parents' work and private lives, is also part of an overall policy to support children and families and promote child well-being. Under the Employment Promotion Act, measures are implemented to support unemployed persons from disadvantaged groups, including unemployed single parents (adoptive parents) and/or mothers (adoptive mothers) with children up to the age of 5, by providing financial incentives to employers who employ them.

Table 6: Number of persons employed under incentive measure under Article 53a of the Employment Promotion Act

Incentive measure under Article 53a of the Employment Promotion Act for single parents (adoptive parents) and/or mothers (adoptive mothers) with children up to 5 years of age	06.2021 - 12.2021 /number of persons/	2022 /number of persons/	2023 /number of persons/¹⁵
Jobs created	98	261	0
Persons in employment, of whom:	116	251	6
- Single parents (adoptive parents) with children up to 5 years of age	22	49	0
- Mothers (adoptive mothers) with children up to 5 years of age	94	202	6

According to the Employment Agency

¹⁵ Due to the late adoption of the National Employment Action Plan in 2023 (Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 621 of 14.09.2023), through which the programs and incentive measures for employment are financed, the latter are implemented to a limited extent.

Within the framework of the „Parents in Employment” project implemented by the Employment Agency (EA) under OP HRD 2014-2020, which aims to ensure better work-life balance of parents with children from 0 to 12 years of age, 28 parents were involved in job mediation for the period June 2021 - 29 December 2023 (the date of the project's completion). From 01.01.2023, EA started the implementation of the „Parents in Employment” project under the HRDP 2021-2027. A total of 213 parents have been involved in employment mediation from March, when the reception of application for participation in the project has started up to December 2023. Through the project activities, parents can be supported to enter employment according to their needs, through vocational guidance and motivation for active labour market behavior, as well as referral to a specific employer and/or pre-employment training requested by the employer. All parents approved for inclusion in the project who are not employed or self-employed need to be involved in job mediation for up to 4 months. In case both parents are unemployed, they must be involved in job mediation activities and referred to employers in order to ensure employment, during which time the child/children will be cared for by a carer under the project.

Alongside measures to promote healthy nutrition, which is one of the European Child Guarantee and the National Action Plan areas of impact, efforts are being made to create conditions for sport and encourage healthy physical activity through participation in organized sporting activities by children from vulnerable groups. In this regard, programmes such as „Sport for Children at Risk” are implemented annually to provide free sports activities for children at risk, „Sport for Children in Leisure Time” to improve their health, physical and sporting development, and school games for pupils with hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical disabilities and central nervous system disabilities. Data from the implementation of the Sport for Children at Risk programme in recent years show that in 2021, 174 children are covered, with at least 50% of the children in each group identified as children at risk; in 2022, approximately 200 children are covered, of whom 169 are identified as children at risk; in 2023, approximately 210 children are covered, of whom 145 are identified as children at risk. In 2021, over 27 000 sports activities involving approximately 4 300 children have been carried out under the „Sport for Children in Leisure Time” programme; in 2022, 22 416 sports activities involving approximately 3 621 children have been carried out and in 2023, the total number of the participants is 6 025, giving children the opportunity to participate in a minimum of 72 sports activities two or three times a week for a period of 6 months and to practice a sport of their choice free of charge.

The focus of the actions taken is also on creating conditions for children to exercise their right to express their views and opinions on issues that concern them. During the period under review, the Children's Council, as a consultative body to the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP), continued to actively participate in various activities and events, expressing its views and opinions on documents and issues related to children's rights. For the period June 2021-January 2024, 11 regular meetings of the Children's Council were held, during which the following topics were discussed: child and youth participation through the global youth platform the digital platform U-Report; the harms of using ray gas and „designer drugs”; cyber security and risks for children”, climate change and how it affects children's rights, etc. As mentioned in section one, the Children's Council discussed the draft Action Plan implementing the Council Recommendation and made specific proposals on the implementation of the activities and measures. Among the documents discussed by the children were the Ordinance on Specialized Protection of Children in Public Places, the National Programme for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children, the National Strategy for Child and Adolescent Health and Paediatric Care. In 2022, the Children's Council was consulted on the topic of „Children and War” and the proposals made were presented at the „Let's Talk Children and War” Conference.

SACP together with the MLSP held the initiative „The Voice of Children and their Families“. The initiative included a series of discussions held with different target groups of children (children of Roma origin, children who have committed antisocial acts and are placed in correctional boarding schools, children with special needs, preschool children, gifted children, children aged 15-17, etc.).

According to information provided by the SACP on the activities of the National Helpline for Children (NHC) 116 111, a total of 71 798 calls were received in the period 14 June 2021 - 29 January 2024. The number of counselling sessions held to provide support through the NHC was 21 148, 12 052 of which were with children. Test calls from children were 23 925 and persons seeking information were 870. The data shows that 5 629 counselling sessions were held with girls, 5 139 with boys during the period. Calls from mothers were 1 038 and 314 were reports, calls from fathers were 1 701 and 305 were reports. The total number of reports for the period was 2 890, with 171 from girls, 118 from boys, 11 from a group of children and 1 from a child with no gender identified. Children and adults indicated that violence most often takes place in the biological family – in 1 772 of the reports, with 891 of the reports naming mothers as perpetrators, and fathers – in 532 of the reports.

4. Indicators, targets and monitoring

The National Framework for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria includes indicators for all areas of impact of the National Action Plan and sets intermediate and target values to be achieved for each of them. A review of their values in recent years highlights a positive development compared to the base 2021, related to the expansion of the coverage of children aged 0-7 in early childhood education and care and the reduction of the share of early school leavers. The number of children in residential care is also decreasing, while the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information and counselling, therapy and rehabilitation, education and other community-based services is increasing.

During the period 2021-2023, the 2025 intermediate indicator, reporting on the implementation of specific target 9 „Reduce child mortality“ has been achieved. The child mortality rate decreases from 5.6‰ in 2021 to 4.8‰ in 2022. In spite of the annual positive trend of decreasing child mortality, it is still higher than the EU average (3.2‰). It should be borne in mind that this indicator is an indicator for the quality of medical care, but it is also influenced by the standard of living and health culture of the population.

For the period 2021-2023, an increase in the coverage of children with compulsory immunizations according to the National Immunization Calendar from 91% to 93% is reported. Thus, the 2025 intermediate indicator of specific target 10 „Increase coverage of children with compulsory immunizations“, which is 93%, has been achieved.

For the period 2021-2023, there is a decrease in the number of births from girls under 19 years, from 4 408 to 4 241, as well as a 37% increase in the expansion of the coverage of children with disabilities who received complex health services at Centres for Complex Services for Children with Disabilities and Chronic Disease. In terms of the indicator for reducing the percentage of underweight born children, there is an increase in its value from 9.7% in 2020 to 9.9% in 2022.

In 2023, there is an increase in the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (by 0.9 p.p. compared to 2019), as well as in the share of the poor among households with three or more children and the share of the poor among single parents with children. The negative trend of one in 10 children in the country being born to a mother teenage also continues, which raises the urgent need for systematic health and health-education services for young people (see Table 6).

The Action Plan's analysis of the target groups, their profile and the barriers they face in accessing key services identifies the lack of official statistics or the fragmentation of available data for different groups of children. Therefore, the Action Plan highlights the need for a reliable database on the number and profile of different groups of disadvantaged children, taking into account the various factors and risks they face. In this regard, the Operational Plan for the period 2023-2024 includes activities related to the expansion and upgrading of the national framework for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in order to cover key indicators under the different sectoral policies for children and families and to better monitor the situation of children and families. As mentioned in section one, further activities in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee are currently being discussed and these activities have been identified as priorities and necessary to ensure that children from vulnerable groups have real access to key services. One of these activities relates to the definition of extreme poverty and the mapping of children in extreme poverty, which is key both to inform and better plan policies and measures to support children.

Table 7: National framework for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria and for data collection (latest updated data)

Targets	Indicators	Source of information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current value (latest data available)	Intermediate value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Reducing the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	Share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	33.0% (2021)	33.9% ¹⁶ (2023)	26.0%	21.0%
	Share of children at risk of poverty	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	24.2% (2021)	26.9% (2023)	22.0%	18.0%
	Share of children experiencing severe material and social deprivation (7 out of 13 indicators)	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	20.0% (2021)	19.0% (2023)	17.0%	15.5%
Reducing the share of the poor among households with three or more children	Share of the poor among households with three or more children	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	49.3% (2021)	55.2% (2023)	45.3%	37.5%
Reducing the share of the poor among single parents with children	Share of the poor among single parents with children	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	35.7% (2021)	42.8% (2023)	31.0%	25.0%
Expanding the coverage of children aged 0-7	Share of the children aged 0-2 enrolled in ECEC ¹⁷	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	20.6% (2021)	22.3% (2022)	22.0%	25.0%

¹⁶ The data are not final. According to the Dissemination Calendar, the publication date for the Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey data (SILC2023) is 26 April 2024.

¹⁷ The age range 0 to 2 years includes all children up to the age of 3 years.

Targets	Indicators	Source of information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current value (latest data available)	Intermediate value by 2025	Target value by 2030
years in early childhood education and care	Net enrolment ratio of children in the education system from 3 years to entering first grade ¹⁸	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	80.4% (2021/2022)	88.8% ¹⁹ (2022/2023)	84.3%	86.3%
Reducing the share of early school leavers	Share of early leavers from education and training	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	12.2% (2021)	10.3% (2022)	10.2%	7%
Reducing the share of the students with scores below the critical values (average for the three PISA areas – reading, mathematics and science)	% of 15-year-olds with poor average results in the three areas: reading, mathematics and science	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	Every three years/EU-27	46.0% (2018): - 47.1% for reading; - 44.4% for mathematics; - 46.5% for natural sciences.	51.5% (2022): - 52.9% for reading; - 53.6% for mathematics; - 48.0% for natural sciences.	36.0%	25.0%
Reducing the number of children in residential care	Number of children placed in residential care services	ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	3 022 (2021)	2 752 (2023)	2 600	2 000

¹⁸ The calculation of the coefficients includes children aged 6 years who are enrolled in the first grade.

¹⁹ The target value has been reached. The result is due to the use of revised population data based on 2021 Census results in the calculation of the 2022/2023 ratio. There is a break in the time series.

Targets	Indicators	Source of information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current value (latest data available)	Intermediate value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Increasing the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information and counselling, therapy and rehabilitation, training and other community-based services	Number of users of social services for children and families (consultative, for prevention and early intervention, day care), financed by the state budget	ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	11 795 (2021)	15 265 (2023)	14 000	20 000
Reducing child mortality	Infant mortality by new-borns	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	5.6 per 1000 (2021)	4.8 per 1000 (2022)	4.8 per 1000	3.1 per 1000
Expanding the coverage of children with mandatory immunisations	Immunisation coverage with essential immunisations	NCPHA/WHO	Annually/EU-27	90% (2021)	93% (2023)	at least 93%	at least 95%
Reducing the number of births from girls under 19 years	Number of births given by girls under the age of 19 years	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	4 408 (2021)	4 241 (2022)	2 100	1 100
Expanding the coverage of children with disabilities using	Number of children with disabilities using social, health and integrated	MH, ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	7 587 (2021)	7 965 (2023)	9 000	10 000

Targets	Indicators	Source of information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current value (latest data available)	Intermediate value by 2025	Target value by 2030
health, social and integrated health and social services	health and social services						
Reducing the percentage of overweight and obese children	% of children underweight born children	NCPHA	Annually/Bulgaria	9.7% (2020)	9.9% (2022)	9.7%	9.2%
	% of overweight children from 1 to 4 years (overweight + obesity)	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	12% (2020)	-	12%	11.4%
	% of overweight children aged 5 to 19 (overweight + obesity)	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	32% (2020)	-	32%	30.4%
	% of obese children from 1 to 4 years	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	2.1% (2020)	-	2.1%	2.0%
	% of obese children aged 5 to 19	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	12.8% (2020)	-	12.8%	12.2%
Reducing household overcrowding	Housing cost overburden rate among children at risk of poverty	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	29.5% (2021)	36.4% (2023)	27.5%	25.5%
	Overcrowding rate among children at risk of poverty	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	75.9% (2021)	70.3% (2023)	70.0%	65.0%

* The framework presents actual data on the individual indicators in order to track their dynamics and compare them with their base values.

** With regard to the indicators formulated for the ST „Reducing the percentage of overweight and obese children“, no more up-to-date values are available than the base values set for 2020. Information on these indicators is collected every five years.*

5. Financing

The implementation of the measures in the National Action Plan is mainly financed from the state budget and the European Structural and Investment Funds through the Education Programme 2021-2027, the HRDP 2021-2027, the Regional Development Programme (RDP) 2021-2027, the Food and Basic Material Support Programme 2021-2027, and other sources.

The following resources are planned under the European funds, specifically for the purpose of the implementation of the Guarantee in Bulgaria:

- Education Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 198 829 711;
- Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 81 281 936;
- Regional Development Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 897 517 471, 79: total budget for measures related to education, health, social infrastructure and for improving the housing conditions of marginalized groups, including Roma, some of which are relevant to the objectives of the Child Guarantee in Bulgaria;
- Food and Basic Material Support Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 13 140 000 (indicative).

The state budget finances all types of activities related to free health care, preschool and school education, early childhood care, provision of social services to children and their families, various types of social and family assistance, tax relief, pensions and benefits, etc. For example, each year the state budget allocates substantial resources for financial support of children and their families. The funds provided under the programme „Support for Children and Families“ are as follows: for 2021 – BGN 553 411 592; for 2022 – BGN 583 170 546; for 2023 – BGN 589 698 596. For 2024, the programme is planned to allocate BGN 687 170 000. There is also an annual increase in the funding of social services, which are state-delegated activities. For 2021, the funds provided by the state budget for financing social services delegated by the state (for children and adults in total) amount to BGN 421 927.2 thousand, and they are increased by BGN 138 020 000 or 45.0% compared to those for 2020. For 2022, the funds for social services delegated by the state are also significantly increased and amount to BGN 533 666.2 thousand (by BGN 111 500 000 compared to 2021). In the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria Act for 2023, the funds for all social services, which are state-delegated activities, amount to BGN 644 784.7 thousand. For 2024, funds for financing social services, state-delegated activities, are provided in the amount of BGN 902 666.2 thousand.

The state budget allocations for the preschool and school education system for 2021 are BGN 4 445.9 million, for 2022 – BGN 4 941.2 million, for 2023 – BGN 5 881.9 million. The following main activities have been financed within the allocated funds for school and preschool education:

1. Education and training of children and pupils. The total amount of the estimated funds, which are used to provide the costs of salaries and the educational process in kindergartens and schools, is as follows: for 2021 – BGN 3 060.5 million, for 2022 – BGN 3 341.4 million, for 2023 – BGN 4 128.7 million.

2. Promoting equal access and support for personal development of children and pupils. The total amount of funds allocated for 2021 is BGN 689.7 million, for 2022 – BGN 882.0 million, for 2023 – BGN 1 081.2 million. These funds also include measures for inclusive education of children and pupils with SEN, which amount to BGN 90.3 million for 2021, BGN 114.5 million for 2022 and BGN 146.9 million for 2023; as well as funds for schools and kindergartens with a concentration of children from vulnerable groups – BGN 34.7 million for 2021, BGN 34.7 million for 2022 and BGN 39.4 million for 2023. These funds are aimed at providing additional staff and/or additional activities, as well as supporting access to education and preventing the risk for children and pupils from vulnerable groups dropping out of preschool and school education. Resources for equal access also include funds for student

scholarships, student dormitories, knowledge books, textbooks and school kits for free use by students in grades I to VII and children in preparatory groups, nutrition support for children in preparatory groups and pupils in grades I to IV. The main areas are transport for children of compulsory preschool age and for pupils in settlements without a kindergarten or school, activities for the development of the interests, skills, competences and performance in science, technology, arts and sport of children and pupils, and career guidance provided by personal development support centres.

There has been an annual increase in funding for maternal and child health services. According to the NHIF, the Child Health Programme has allocated BGN 47 350 711 in 2021, BGN 70 450 040 in 2022 and BGN 80 851 070 in 2023. BGN 4 939 211 has been allocated in 2021, BGN 6 441 163 in 2022 and BGN 6 697 392 in 2023 under the Maternal Health Programme. For medicines, medical devices and dietetic food for home treatment of children up to 18 years of age, including children with rare diseases, BGN 67 813 050 have been allocated for 2021, BGN 87 829 484 for 2022 and BGN 92 341 604 until October 2023. For complex services for children with disabilities and chronic diseases, the MoH budget has allocated BGN 10 676 637 for 2021, BGN 14 102 062 for 2022 and BGN 16 427 652 for 2023. For compulsory and targeted immunisations and re-immunisations, biological products for post-exposure prophylaxis and medical devices the MoH budget allocated BGN 30 921 103 for 2021, BGN 27 794 578 for 2022 and BGN 33 609 917 for 2023. For the implementation of maternal and child health activities financed through the National Maternal and Child Health Programme 2021-2030, BGN 3 725 246 for 2021, BGN 4 214 514 for 2022 and BGN 4 366 391 for 2023 were provided. For 2024, BGN 79 310 654 have been provided from the NHIF budget for the Child Health and Maternal Health programmes, and BGN 16 896 000 have been provided from the MoH budget for complex services for children with disabilities and chronic diseases and BGN 6 690 000 for maternal and child health activities financed under the National Maternal and Child Health Programme 2021-2030. In 2024, funds amounting to BGN 48 000 000 have been provided for the purchase of vaccines for compulsory and targeted immunizations and re-immunizations, biological products for post-exposure prophylaxis and medical devices for their administration.

For the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, BGN 81 281 936 have been provided under the Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027, which are programmed under the „Future for Children“ operation. „Future for Children“ is the first measure in implementation of the national action plan. The envisaged activities include health prevention and health promotion, including prevention of early marriage and childbirth, family planning, preparation for the education system according to identified needs, patronage care for children aged 0 to 3 years, early childhood development and health and social services for children and young people, including with disabilities, labour market counselling and mediation, and training and supervision of employees. Considering its cross-cutting nature, the implementation of the operation is key to achieving the overall objectives of the plan. At least 22 000 children are expected to improve their living conditions.

The Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027 mainly finances measures to provide support for improving early childhood care, development of health and integrated health and social services to prevent complications in children with disabilities, developmental difficulties and chronic diseases, measures to prevent early marriage and childbirth and individual support for underage mothers/pregnant women and their children, support for young people leaving alternative care, etc. At the same time, other programme investments, such as measures to improve capacity of the social system, measures to support health specialists, measures for employment, qualification and training of parents, measures to support reconciliation of work and family life, etc., also contribute to achieving the objectives of the

Guarantee. Currently, the ESF also finances measures for the deinstitutionalization of childcare.

The Education Programme 2021-2027 will mainly finance measures to support personal development in preschool and school education, prevent bullying and violence and reduce aggression in schools, create conditions for access to education by overcoming demographic, social and cultural barriers, measures at municipal level for school desegregation, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination, measures to promote intercultural education through culture, science and sport, etc.

The total budget of the procedure „General and additional support for personal development in pre-school education“ under the Education Programme with the specific beneficiary of the Ministry of Education is BGN 105 400 000, of which BGN 24 111 999 from ESF+ or BGN 29 226 222 (ESF+ and national co-financing) for activities contributing to the implementation of the Child Guarantee, according to the grant agreement signed on 15 February 2024.

The total budget of the „General and additional support for personal development in school education“ procedure under the Education Programme with the specific beneficiary MES is BGN 151 123 000 for the implementation of the „Success for you“ project. The planned project funds for the purposes of the European Child Guarantee amount to BGN 85 634 907, of which BGN 70 million from ESF+ and BGN 15 million national co-financing. The total amount of the verified funds at the end of 2023 is BGN 689 712.

The total budget of the „Promoting intercultural education through culture, science and sport“ procedure under the Education Programme is BGN 31 123 577 (ESF+ and national co-financing).

The Regional Development Programme 2021-2027 will mainly finance measures related to education, health, social infrastructure and to improve the housing conditions of marginalized groups, including Roma. For the period June 2021 - 31.12.2023, no educational infrastructure projects have been funded under the „Regions in Growth“ Operational Programme 2014-2020. 18 projects with total value of BGN 114.6 million have been completed. 81 educational institutions have been modernized with a capacity of the supported infrastructure for childcare or education of 38 904 persons and representatives of marginalized groups using the modernized educational infrastructure – 3 632 persons.

The Food and Basic Material Support Programme 2021-2027 will mainly finance measures to ensure access to healthy nutrition for all children in need and to provide material and financial support to families with children from vulnerable groups. The planned funding for the provision of a voucher/card for a children's kitchen to families with children from 10 months to 3 years of age from vulnerable groups under the Programme amounts to BGN 7 153 272 by 2025. The amount of funding foreseen for the provision of support through the purchase of packages with necessary basic products for new-born children from poor and at-risk families identified by the social assistance authorities amounts to BGN 1 818 000 by 2025.

6. Lessons learned and further development

The European Child Guarantee is already being implemented before the formal adoption of the National Action Plan and the first two-year operational plan for the period 2023-2024. During this almost three-year period, the world and Bulgaria have changed, which inevitably has an impact on national policies for children and families.

The main lessons learned can be structured into several areas:

- There is a need to promote the European Child Guarantee as an instrument to support children in need in different policy areas, as it is still not sufficiently recognized by society as a national but as an external European initiative. A similar need has been

identified within the High-Level IIWG, and the responsible institutions have committed to assist and take concrete steps to promote and explain the objectives of the initiative. For this purpose, not only specialized events could be organized, but also actions in the field of concrete work of the institutions – for example, health mediators in Roma communities could be involved to raise awareness, or actions to promote the European Guarantee at local level could be included in the already planned trainings of all child protection bodies in the 28 districts of the country. In order to improve the interaction between institutions, it is planned to hold meetings between their representatives in the planning process of project proposals before their launch.

- The idea that income support and material/social assistance are the main ways to overcome poverty is a common belief. In response to the complex and multifaceted nature of child poverty, measures and activities to address it are also set out in a number of sectoral strategies, programmes and documents, addressing labour market issues and the promotion of employment, reconciliation of work and family life, education, early childhood development, health, housing, the organization of children's daily life, recreation and leisure, etc. Many of these activities are ongoing and regulated by the relevant institutions. Raising awareness and implementing target activities that address different aspects of poverty would help break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.
- There is still a lack of official statistics on child poverty and social exclusion. To this end, and given the multi-sectoral nature of policy for children and families, coordination and exchange of information between different government institutions and local authorities is necessary.
- The established practice of coordinating the actions of the stakeholders through the establishment of a formal governance body - the High Level Inter-Institutional Working Group for the Management and Coordination of the Plan's implementation Process, chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy – and the establishment of a Permanent Expert Working Group, chaired by the National Coordinator of the European Child Guarantee to support the coordination and monitoring of the Plan's implementation process, could be considered positive. The coordination structure takes into account the multi-sectoral nature of child poverty reduction policy and the need to fully involve all responsible ministries and institutions and more closely recognize their commitments. It also relies on the role of local authorities, social partners, representatives of the civil sector, academia, etc.
- Despite the positive results reported so far from the implementation of the European Child Guarantee and the measures taken to support children and families across a range of sectoral policies, there are challenges that underpin the planning of future measures and the prioritization of policies:
 - implementing integrated measures to support children and families and strengthening inter-institutional cooperation - clearly defining the roles of stakeholders;
 - strengthening the role of local authorities in the planning and implementation process and developing local coordination mechanisms similar to those in place at national level;
 - increasing the capacity of both the system and the professionals working directly with children and families;
 - implementing targeted measures to ensure access to key services for the most deprived children;
 - increasing the focus on prevention, reintegration and family support services;
 - successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee requires broad public support, which requires raising public awareness and involving local communities in supporting the process.

The experience gained and recommendations made in implementing the Guarantee in the national context led to conclusions on further developing certain elements of the Plan, which will be taken into account in developing the next biennial operational plans. In this respect, attention was also drawn to the achievements of other EU Member States. Good practices in the Portuguese Republic were examined in relation to the European Child Guarantee. The transfer and implementation of these in the national context is being considered. As indicated, within the framework of the IIWG to manage and coordinate the implementation process of the Action Plan, additional activities have been proposed that aim to improve access of children in need to key services: provision of free healthy meals in schools for students from the most vulnerable groups, with a focus on so-called hot lunch, provision of adequate housing, with a focus on social housing measures, definition of extreme poverty and mapping of children in extreme poverty, etc.

The lessons learned so far and the problems and areas for improvement identified will be taken into account when planning the measures and activities for the follow-up implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria.

7. Conclusions

The European Child Guarantee is a key initiative to reduce child poverty and promote their social inclusion and its implementation is closely linked to the ambitious targets Bulgaria has set in implementing its European commitments in the field of policies for children and families.

As mentioned above, in addition to the long-term Action Plan for the implementation of the initiative, an Operational Plan for the period 2023-2024 has been developed, which includes more than 120 actions whose collective actions aim to contribute to the achievement of the national targets set in the area of child poverty and social exclusion. The state budget is the main source of funding for the implementation of the measures, i.e. most measures are implemented as part of the state policies. Also, ESF+ finances exactly 5% of the funds earmarked for Bulgaria, or € 136 million, through the Education and Human Resources Development programmes, which have already programmed and operationalized their actions in line with the Guarantee strands.

Significant emphasis both in the long-term plan and in the operational plan is placed on providing support for improving care for children at an early age through the provision of patronage care for pregnant women and families with young children, improving the qualifications of specialists working with children and families, developing complex services aimed at early intervention for children and families, improving the interaction between the health, education, social system, etc. Among the leading activities are also the provision of access to the education system and inclusive environment for children and students from vulnerable groups, support for personal development in school education, improvement of children's mental health, development of health and integrated health and social services. In the area of health, measures are being implemented to expand the scope and activities of health mediators, who play a key role in providing local support to people from vulnerable groups. In the area of healthy nutrition, work is underway to develop a comprehensive strategic framework for implementing a cross-sectoral policy on healthy nutrition and the so-called „children's kitchen”. With regard to housing, although less ambitious, activities have been planned to improve the housing conditions of vulnerable groups and to develop a national housing strategy. Taking into account the implementation of the new integrated territorial approach for the period 2021-2027, it should be noted that the financing of projects under the Regional Development Programme 2021-2027 will be carried out through the Integrated Territorial Investments instrument, i.e. on the basis of social needs mapping combined with a

bottom-up approach - identification of social needs at local level in the strategic documents of municipalities and regions. In this respect, greater activity by municipalities in submitting concepts for integrated territorial investments including housing activities is essential.

As stated, the promotion of the European Child Guarantee and its full implementation on the ground, as well as the participation of children and all stakeholders in the implementation processes, are key prerequisites for the successful implementation of the initiative. This understanding underpins the national mechanism in place to manage and coordinate the process. Another equally important but challenging task is the selection and dissemination of information on good practices in the practical implementation of the Guarantee.