

# Estonian Child Guarantee Action Plan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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

To achieve the goal of the European Child Guarantee, it is the responsibility of each Member State to develop targeted measures for the children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and create the Child Guarantee national action plan up to the year 2030. The wider aim of the Child Guarantee action plan is to ensure that children at risk of poverty and social exclusion have access to key services: free access to early childhood education and childcare, education and school-based activities, and at least one healthy meal each school day, free access to quality health care, access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The Commission has left flexibility for the countries to define the target groups of children in need, but has proposed to take into account: children growing up homeless or experience severe housing deprivation, children with disabilities, children with a migrant background, children with a minority racial or ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Roma), children in alternative (especially institutional) care and children growing up in precarious family situations.

In the Estonian context the objectives of the Child Guarantee are in line with the Estonian national objectives and the activities of the government's action program. The action plan for the Child Guarantee is based on: national long-term strategy "Estonia 2035", European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the current Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023 and the new Welfare Development Plan 2023-2030, Children and Families Program 2022-2025, Youth Field Development Plan 2021-2035, Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 and Education and Youth Program 2022-2025, Population Health Development Plan 2020-2030, National Action Plan for Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee for the period 2022-2027, Green Paper on Mental Health and Culture Development Plan 2021-2030.

The national action plan for the Child Guarantee provides an overview of the coordination, implementation, notification and monitoring of the European Child Guarantee in Estonia proceeding from the identified target groups of children in need. In addition, the action plan describes the situation of children through various indicators of their risk of poverty or social exclusion, known barriers to accessing key services for children in need, and existing and planned measures to support access to key services.

The action plan for the Child Guarantee has been prepared in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Estonian Union for Child Welfare and the action plan has been confirmed by the Minister of Social Protection.

### **We thank everyone who contributed to the preparation of the Child Guarantee Action Plan:**

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Roundtable and Estonian Women's Shelters Union, Tallinn Children's Hospital and MTÜ Lastekaitse Liit.

Nõo, Saue, Toila, Jõelähtme, Elva, Kiili, Harku, Rõuge, Rae, Kastre, Mulgi, Mustvee, Lääne-Harju, Saarde, Põhja-Pärnumaa, Viljandi rural municipalities and Paide, Kohtla-Järve, Narva, Pärnu, Loksa and Tartu city government and Tallinn Social Welfare and Health Care Department.

## **2. CHILD GUARANTEE COORDINATOR**

The Commission has recommended the appointment of a Child Guarantee Coordinator in each Member State with broad-based powers, competences and necessary resources to coordinate the implementation of the action plan, including monitoring. In addition, the Child Guarantee Coordinator is responsible for liaising with the Commission on the implementation of the Child Guarantee. The official coordinator of the Estonian Child Guarantee is Hanna Vseviiov, Deputy Secretary-General for Social Affairs of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In order to coordinate, implement and monitor the national action plan for the Child Guarantee, a cross-sectoral working group will be set up under the direction of the Child Guarantee Coordinator, with members responsible for implementing the activities described in the action plan. In addition to the representatives of the ministries, other partners and experts from interest groups, local government and representatives of children and young people will be involved in the activities of the working group based on the needs of the field.

The purpose of the working group meetings is to create a common information field and to provide an overview of the implementation of the Child Guarantee action plan, including planned or already ongoing measures, and to establish a system for monitoring the action plan. In addition, the working group will assess the need to update the Child Guarantee action plan (statistics, set indicators and benchmarks, target groups and related activities). For example, it is important that the indicators in the national sectoral development plans are in line with the indicators in the Child Guarantee action plan, in order to avoid confusion and overuse of existing similar indicators. It is also necessary to take into account what is happening in society and to assess the topicality of the target groups of Child Guarantee and their needs for the implementation of supporting measures. In 2022 the war in Ukraine has brought children and young people to Estonia as war refugees, which is why there is a possibility that the target groups set out in the action plan, including the measures to be implemented, will change in the coming years.

The working group meets at least once a year and the meetings are coordinated by the Estonian Child Guarantee Coordinator in cooperation with the Department of Children and Families of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

The progress on actions of the Child Guarantee should be reported about to the Commission every two years and to the Council of the European Union every five years. The Commission, together with the National Child Guarantee Coordinators and Social Protection Committee, will monitor the implementation of the recommendations.

## **3. IDENTIFYING CHILDREN IN NEED AND BARRIERS OF ACCESS TO NECESSARY SERVICES**

This chapter describes the situation of Estonian children based on various indicators of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Chapter 3.1), considering, inter alia, the target groups of

the Child Guarantee provided by the Commission. In addition, the existing measures to support children in need in ensuring the key services are described and the known barriers are identified (Chapter 3.2).

In order to identify children in need and their barriers, Estonian local governments, children's and families' advocacy organizations and children and young people were involved to find out their views on Child Guarantee target groups, barriers to accessing key services and possible measures to resolve the situation (Chapter 3.3).

### **3.1. Estonian data on children in need**

According to the Commission's proposal the children at risk of poverty or social exclusion are considered to be children in need in the Child Guarantee. In view of the multifaceted challenges faced by low-income people who have difficulties to access goods and services or the labour market, a composite indicator being "at risk of poverty or social exclusion" has been agreed at EU level, calculated on the basis of three indicators:

1. the number of people who have equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) that is less than the poverty line;
2. severe material deprivation, i.e. the lack of basic goods needed to ensure an adequate standard of living in a given society;
3. very low work intensity.

A child at risk of poverty or social exclusion is a child whose household lives at risk of poverty, i.e. below at-risk-of-poverty line, in severe material deprivation or in a household where working-age members have minimal participation in the labour market. Social exclusion can be exacerbated by a low household income, which prevents the family from affording basic living conditions or fixed items such as rent or utilities, eating nutritious food, resting away from home, buying a car, washing machine or telephone.

As at 1 January 2021, according to Statistics Estonia, 1,330,068 people lived in Estonia, of whom 258,227 were children under the age of 18, representing 19.4% of the total population. According to Eurostat 17.4% of children aged 0-17 lived at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Estonia in 2020, which is approximately 46,000 children. While in most EU countries the risk of child poverty or social exclusion is higher than in the general population, in Estonia the indicator for the entire population is higher (23.3%). Estonia has proportionally less children living at risk of poverty or social exclusion than in many other EU countries and on average in the EU. In 2020 the total of 23.7% of children in EU countries lived at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This indicator was lower than in Estonia only in Poland, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Czech Republic and Slovenia.

The situation of Estonian children is analyzed below by sub-indicators of poverty and social exclusion:

1. At-risk-of-poverty-rate - according to Eurostat 15.2% of Estonian children lived at risk of poverty in 2020 and this is a lower indicator than the EU average (19.5% on average in the EU in 2020). Compared to 2015 when 20% of Estonian children lived at risk of poverty, the at-risk-of-poverty-rate has decreased.
2. Severe material and social deprivation rate - in 2020 2.0% of Estonian children lived in severe material and social deprivation, which is three times less than the EU average (8.1%). In 2015 the rate of severe material and social deprivation of Estonian children was rather low (2.9%).

3. Rate of children living in a household with a very low work intensity - according to Eurostat 3.1% of Estonian children lived in very low work intensity households, which is more than twice less than the EU average (7.2%). Compared to 2015 when 5.1% of Estonian children lived in very low work intensity households, the indicator has improved and in 2020 the situation was better than in Estonia only in Slovenia.

### **3.1.1. Children living in economically difficult family circumstances**

The economic coping of families is affected by three main factors: household income, structure and size. Thus, the risk of family poverty depends largely on whether there are one or two parents in the family, whether both parents work, which salary and other income they receive, and how many members of the family, including children, have to share the income.

In Estonia, in addition to the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the absolute poverty line is used to assess the economic coping of people with even lower incomes, including children and families with children. The absolute poverty line, i.e. subsistence minimum, in Estonia is calculated on the basis of expenditure, and the absolute poverty line expresses the share of households whose monthly income per household member at consumption weights of 1:0,7:0.5 is below the absolute poverty line (i.e. below the level of expenditure that is the absolute poverty line), i.e. below the subsistence minimum.

The calculation of the absolute poverty line takes into account three components of expenditure: food, housing and individual non-food expenditure. The cost of food is calculated on the basis of the minimum food basket. According to Statistics Estonia the estimated subsistence minimum for a one-member household was 220.48 euros per month (including the cost of the minimum food basket was 104.86 euros) in 2020, in 2021 it was 233.57 euros (food basket 106.75 euros).

The overall picture of child poverty indicators has improved over time. According to Statistics Estonia almost one in ten Estonian children (9%) lived in absolute poverty in 2014, then in 2020 about 7,000 children or 2.7% of Estonian children. This means that the family income of these children is not enough to cover the minimum cost of food and living. In 2020 15.5% of children aged 0–17 lived at risk of poverty (i.e. an estimated 40,000 children). A family living at risk of poverty can earn well, but inequality arises when everyone around earns more. It is estimated that the share of children and young people experiencing deprivation in 2021 decreased compared to 2020 (6.4% in 2020 and 3% in 2021), being lower than the deprivation rate of the entire population (4.9% in 2021).

The most important factor influencing the child poverty rate is the work intensity of working-age members of the household with dependent children. In 2020 3.1% of children aged 0-17 (approximately 8,000 children) lived in households with very minimal participation in working life, and in 2020 7.2% of children aged 0-17 lived with unemployed family members. 61.9% of the households, where dependent children grew up and which members participated in working life with a very low intensity, lived at risk of poverty and 16.9% in absolute poverty in 2020. Thus, the increase in the work intensity of working-age household members reduces the risk of the family falling into poverty - the absolute poverty rate for households with dependent children and households with very high work intensity was only 1.1% in 2020 and the at-risk-of-poverty rate was 7.6%.

Poverty indicators also vary depending on the area in which the family lives. While the at-risk-of-poverty rate of Estonian children was 15.2% in 2019, it was considerably higher in North-Eastern Estonia (22.0%) and Southern Estonia (20.2%), for example.

The number of single-parent families has grown year by year. While in 2015 there were 17,100 (11%) single-parent families out of 154,000 households with children in Estonia, in 2021 there were 20,400 (13%) single-parent families out of 155,900 households with children. In 2020 the share of single parents living at risk of poverty (27.3% in 2019 -> 37.5% in 2020) and absolute poverty (5.3% in 2019 -> 6.4% in 2020) increased in Estonia. The economic coping of households with one adult and one child/children deteriorated the most in 2020 compared to 2019 regarding the different types of households - the number of single parents living at risk of poverty increased by one tenth. Their income has fallen to the level of the years 2017/2018 and poverty rates have not changed compared to 2015. Every tenth (9.7%) single-parent family lived in deprivation in 2021.

The support for maintenance may not be sufficient for a parent raising a child alone. There are more than 10,000 children in Estonia whose maintenance obligations are not voluntarily fulfilled by a parent and the number of disputes concerning the rights of custody and access and the problems in enforcing court decisions on communication procedure between a child and a parent have increased over time.

In addition to household composition the differences in poverty rates are related to the child's disability and mother tongue. While the at-risk-of-poverty rate of all Estonian-speaking children has decreased compared to 2015, the situation of Russian-speaking children has not changed much: while in 2015 23.7% of Russian-speaking children lived at risk of poverty, then in 2019 22.8%. The poverty of Russian-speaking children is linked to the labour market situation of their parents.

It can be assumed that in 2020 and 2021 at-risk-of-poverty rate of Russian-speaking children increased further, as the labour market situation of non-Estonian parents deteriorated compared to Estonians. According to the Estonian Labour Force Survey the situation of non-Estonians aged 20-49 with children under 18 deteriorated more in the labour market due to the corona crisis than that of Estonians aged 20-49 with 18-year-olds and this also in 2021. The data for the first three quarters of 2021 indicate that the employment rate of non-Estonian parents decreased compared to 2020 (79.3% -> 77.6%) and the unemployment rate increased (6.9% -> 8.3%). At the same time the employment of Estonian parents increased and unemployment decreased. In the comparison of Estonian/non-Estonian parents, both the employment gap (from 5.1 pp to 7.1 pp) and the unemployment gap (from 2.0 pp to 4.7 pp) increased in 2021.

The at-risk-of-poverty rate of children with disabilities has decreased compared to 2015 (2015 25.1% -> 2020 18.7%), but it is still 3.2 percentage points higher compared to all Estonian children.

The living conditions of children are also linked to the income of parents: the financial situation does not enable to solve housing problems, such as paying for roof repairs or alleviating space shortages. The rate of children living in lack of space in 2019 (21.4%) has not changed significantly compared to 2015 (22.8%). The rate of children living in households with the burden of housing costs was 3.7% in 2019, which is significantly lower than in 2015 (8.5%).

According to Eurostat data the share of Estonian children under the age of 18 with severe housing deprivation rates was 2.9% and compared to 2015 the share of children deprived of housing has decreased (4.7% in 2015). In 2019 the indicator was lower (3.3% in Estonia) than the EU average (6.0%).

According to Statistics Estonia the households with one adult and one child/children rate their dwelling as good or very good to a lesser extent (67.6%) than all households with children. The data on all Estonian households (with and without children) indicate that there are also regional differences in the assessment of dwellings in Estonia: the share of households rating good or

very good is significantly higher than in other regions in Northern Estonia (82.6%), but in other regions the share is less than 80%. It is the lowest in Southern Estonia, where the share of households that rate their housing as good or very good is only 70.3%.

### **3.1.2. Children growing up in precarious family circumstances due to social and other factors**

According to the Medical Birth Registry of the National Institute for Health Development (hereinafter TAI), the total of 13,043 live births were registered, of which 57 (0.42% of all live births) were registered with a teenage mother. In 2019 0.49%, in 2018 0.44% and in 2017 0.56% of live births with a teenage mother were registered.

Every year more and more children in need have reached child protection officials. In 2020 local government social workers registered approximately 7,000 child-related appeals. In 2020, there were 569 appeals related to children at risk and abused.

Every year thousands of Estonian children experience violence or abuse, often in their family environment. 479 sexual offenses with minor victims were registered (incl. 222 contact crimes) in 2020, in 2021 663 sexual crimes against children were registered in Estonia (incl. 303 contact crimes, almost 90% of which were committed by a child's family member, relative or other acquaintance). Nearly 3,800 crimes of domestic violence were also registered in 2021, in 27% cases of which the child was an eyewitness or an immediate victim. Domestic violence harms a child even if he or she is not involved. In 2021 Ida-Virumaa (55) and Valgamaa (41) had the highest number of registered domestic violence crimes per 10,000 inhabitants.

Emotional, physical or sexual abuse, as well as the neglect of a child at an early age, inhibits the child's development and harms his or her mental and physical health. The effects of any abuse are long-lasting and can be serious, if the child does not receive the necessary help in time. According to the Green Paper on Mental Health, abuse (both mental and physical) and domestic violence are major traumatic experiences of childhood that can become biologically entrenched during sensitive periods of development and lead to lifelong physical and mental health problems, including deviant and criminal adult behaviour.

The impact of domestic violence on children in 2015 was estimated at 6.3 million euros, half of which was the cost of emotional damage caused by mental trauma. It is not possible to assess the impact of the damage caused to children on the educational path and through it on the career and the resulting economic damage in the future.

42% of Estonian adults consider corporal punishment of children to be a necessary and understandable means of education in certain situations (9% strongly agree and 33% rather agree). At the same time the attitudes of adults differ significantly depending on whether the person has experienced corporal punishment as a child, witnessed violence between adults or has not experienced either of the above. Almost half (49%) of the adults who have experienced corporal punishment as children themselves tolerate corporal punishment of children in certain situations, while 29% of the adults who have not experienced corporal punishment do so.

The cases of child abuse that have reached a criminal investigation indicate that parents usually use violence against their children either due to ignorance (being unaware of the prohibition of reacting with violence or being accustomed to behaving and resolving conflicts with violence), incompetence (not being able to react in any other way to the child's disobedience) or weakness (being in trouble oneself due to divorce, raising a child with special needs, unsatisfactory relationship or tensions related to domestic difficulties).

Since 2018 the Social Welfare Act imposes an obligation to give preference to family-based alternative care and in recent years the state has actively contributed to the recruitment of foster families, but in 2020 there were still 800 children and young people (745 aged 0-17 years, 18 of whom less than 3 years old) in substitute homes and family houses. 65% of children in alternative care were in family-based alternative care: 145 persons (138 aged 0-17) in foster families and 1332 under guardianship (1216 aged 0-17 years).

According to Statistics Estonia there were 322,700 people of Russian nationality (24% of the total population) and 85,333 people of other nationalities (6% of the total population) living in Estonia as at 1 January 2021. Most people of other nationalities living in Estonia are Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Finns, who together make up the vast majority, i.e. 91% of non-Estonians. There are no data on people of different races in Estonia, but the population data of the 2011 census by nationality give an indication that people of various origins live in Estonia, but it is still a marginal part of the population.

For example, in 2011 there were 482 Roma living in Estonia (0.04% of the total population). Thus, it is not reasonable to differentiate children on the basis of race in Estonia, but it is reasonable to speak primarily of the native Russian-speaking population, which differs from the native Estonian-speaking population in terms of its socio-demographic indicators. The war situation in Ukraine has also brought children and young people to Estonia as war refugees. Depending on the number of refugees in Estonia and how many of them will remain in the community, Estonia will need to take greater account of the migration background of children when designing measures.

The WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 emphasizes that poverty, unemployment, poor working conditions, poor housing or a low level of education have a negative impact on mental health and significantly increase the likelihood of mental disorders. According to 2018 data, 51% of 12-year-olds rated their mental well-being low and 15% felt unhappy. The child's subjective assessment of his or her low level of mental well-being is also confirmed by the greatest concern for the child's mental health identified in the analysis of the situation of the child's rights.

As in other countries, the mental health of the population, especially children and young people, has deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic with increased aggressive behaviour, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, self-harm, sleep disorders, addictive disorders (both drugs and alcohol) and suicidal behaviour. The number of children and young people in need is also increasing. The WHO survey indicates that the number of suicide attempts per year committed by minors has almost doubled since 2015. Estonia is among the first in the world to commit suicide among minors, including 14 young people under the age of 19 who committed suicide in 2020. Among those involved in suicide attempts, the proportion of people with mental and behavioural disorders is high - 60% in the group aged 0-17. This figure is 17% among the people involved in self-harm with unclear intent

According to the statistics of the Social Insurance Board the number of applications for the child's social rehabilitation service had increased by 180% compared to the first half of 2020, whereas the most frequently needed service is psychological assistance. The availability of support services remains a problem, for example, in 2019 only 24 child and adolescent psychiatrists worked in Estonia, including there is no reception for child and adolescent psychiatrists in Ida-Virumaa and Hiiumaa, only 43% of the Estonian schools have a school psychologist and there is a shortage of mental health nurses.



## **3.2. Access of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion to key services**

### **3.2.1. Access to early childhood education and childcare**

All Estonian children have a legal right to receive high-quality early childhood education and local governments have an obligation to ensure that all children between the ages of 1.5 up to 7 in their service area, whose parents so wish, have the opportunity to attend kindergarten.

In 2019 there were total of 557 kindergartens managed by local governments in Estonia, which accounted for 67% of all kindergartens and childcare providers. This was followed by private childcare with 192 institutions. There were much fewer private kindergartens and childcare institutions of local governments (54 and 25, respectively).

Due to the Estonian parental benefit scheme, which has enabled parents to be at home with 100% replacement income paid on the basis of previous income until the child reaches the age of one and a half, only a very small part (2.7%) of children aged 0-1.4 went to kindergarten in Estonia in 2019. Ida-Virumaa stands out in this age group, where 10% of children of this age already attended kindergarten. Due to the child's health condition the kindergarten or childcare were mostly not used by the parents whose child had a special need or disability. As regards the children who do not have special needs or disabilities, only 1% of children who did not attend kindergarten or care did not use kindergarten or care due to the child's health reasons. This result refers to a significantly higher average childcare burden for the parents of children with special needs and disabilities, which is not well covered by childcare opportunities in childcare institutions.

The survey of the coping and needs of families with disabled children indicated that 77-83% of the disabled children aged 0-6 attended kindergarten or nursery in the academic year 2016/2017. The survey revealed that non-attendance at kindergartens is mostly related to the lack of a suitable kindergarten place or the necessary support person.

Local government may fix the parent's fee in the kindergarten which should not exceed 20 per cent of the minimum wage established by the Government of the Republic. The parent also covers the child's food expenses in the kindergarten according to the procedure provided by the local government. The parent's fee of the kindergarten and the cost of food can be differentiated depending on the age of the child, management costs of the kindergarten or other circumstances. The most common discount on the kindergarten place is for the second or third child of the same family attending the kindergarten, discount for children of a large family, there are also food allowance or place fee benefits for low-income families.

One of the barriers to accessing early childhood education and childcare is the availability of support services for children. The parents having participated in the survey of early childhood education and childcare, as well as local government officials, find that the availability of support services in kindergartens and childcare institutions is not good. According to the parents the need for support services is many times higher and the availability of support services is much worse than it is provided for in the Estonian Education Information System.

One of the reasons for the delay or lack of assistance is the lack of support specialists. According to OSKA's (*labour market monitoring and future skills forecasting system*) labour needs survey in the field of education for 2018 an additional 600 support specialists will be needed in the coming years due to the growth and replacement needs of support specialists. It is the support specialist in educational institutions who can detect problems early and solve these effectively. At the same time the activities of many specialists are duplicated, repeated evaluations are carried out and various unnecessary activities are performed, all of which in turn reduce the time required to provide real, actual services. In addition to support specialists,

according to OSKA's social work survey 2022 an additional 20% of child protection officials will be needed in the coming years.

### **3.2.2. Access to free education**

In Estonia every child who has reached the age of seven by the first of October of the current year is required to attend the school. The duty to attend school lasts up to the acquisition of basic education or up to the age of 17. Basic and secondary education is free for all students (except private schools) and basic education is a compulsory general education minimum.

The rural municipality or city government ensures the possibility of acquiring basic education for all children subject to the duty to attend school in the administrative territory of the rural municipality or city. To this end the local government assigns a school of residence for each child, taking into account, first of all, the proximity of the place of residence to the school, studying of other children of the family in the same school and, if possible, the wishes of the parents.

The equalization and support fund for local governments provides support to local governments to cover the expenses related to education. In 2021 the total of 357 million euros of support was provided to local governments, a large part of which was labour costs, including 24 million (157 euros per student) for school lunch support and 20 million for enhanced and special operating support. According to Statistics Estonia government education expenditure accounted for 6.6% of GDP in 2020.

It is also important to note the increase in inequalities between children due to the emergency situation and consequent restrictions. Technological and educational inequalities became apparent and increased, including the children had unequal access to the services provided by educational institutions and other organizations working with children during the emergency due to the lack of digital tools and skills. The project "Computer for every schoolchild" which started with a citizens' initiative in 2020, helped to reduce the shortage of digital tools. The Ministry of Education and Research also allocated support for the purchase of almost 2,800 computers for children to attend school in the academic year 2020/2021.

In 2020 every fifth child in Estonia needed an educational support service and every twelfth child needed significant support in the sectors of education, social and/or health care. The need for support specialists has been discussed for years. The audit of the National Audit Office as well as various analyses confirm that receiving assistance for children with special needs may be hampered by an overly fragmented, time-consuming and bureaucratic support system. The review of Chancellor of Justice for 2020 also indicates that the right to receive assistance within the required amount and from a competent support specialist as soon as the child's need for assistance has become clear has still not been guaranteed by laws (Preschool Child Care Institutions Act and Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act).

### **3.2.3. Access to cultural, sports and leisure activities**

According to the study of children's rights and parenting in 2018 the vast majority of children (76%) were able to attend all trainings, hobby groups or private lessons where they wished. The lack of financial means was the reason for 31% of children who have not been able to attend one or more of the desired hobby groups. According to the performance report of 2020 of the Ministry of Education and Research the share of young people involved in and satisfied with youth work has increased year by year - although compared to 2019 there was a slight decrease in the first indicator in 2020.

The decrease of indicator was due to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and reduction of contacts. The studies have indicated that as the emergency situation reduced options to participate in youth work, the opportunities to notice the exclusion of children and young people and to increase their social inclusion also decreased. Consequently, it is important to ensure the access of children and young people to cultural, leisure and sports activities, all the more so as non-formal learning (including youth work) enables children and young people to so-called get out of the economic situation and family influences for a while.

In 2022 the state will support local governments by ensuring the availability and diversity of hobby education for young people with 10.25 million euros. The aim of the support is to improve the availability of hobby education and hobby activities, to offer young people (especially aged 7-19) more diverse opportunities to participate in a hobby school or hobby group in the field of culture, sports and STEM (*science, technology, engineering and mathematics*). The availability of hobby education and the share of young people studying in hobby schools was higher in 2019, especially in larger centres and in the more prosperous municipalities around them. The lower participation was mainly due to the more geographically and economically limited availability of hobby schools. In addition to hobby education and activities, other opportunities for youth work are also important (e.g. activities in open youth centres, camps, student brigades).

Since 2022 the support measure (so-called Culture Backpack Initiative) within the amount of one million euros will be implemented under the guidance of the Ministry of Culture, which enables children and young people, in cooperation with schools and local governments, to visit theatre performances, cinema screenings, museums or other events in the sector as the part of the curriculum, including by considering regional differences and supporting more the areas outside the centres. The funding helps children and young people to develop the subject competencies required by the national curriculum as well as to become creative and multi-faceted individuals.

In the field of children's and youth theatre an important support measure is the application round "Theatre in the countryside" (implemented by the Estonian Centre of Folk Culture) with its subdirections, the aim of which is to improve the availability of professional theatre in the Estonian rural regions.

The services of regional libraries and all events taking place in libraries are free of charge in Estonia and thus accessible to everyone. Regional libraries provide free delivery service for people (including children) who cannot visit the library for health reasons. Librarians are also trained to serve people with special needs.

On 1 January 2014 the provisions of the Museums Act entered into force, which allow free or more favourable access to state museums and the museums operating in the form of a state foundation for several groups of society who are more vulnerable than others.

In 2021 Estonia acceded to the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the so-called Faro Convention). One of the central ideas of the convention is the right of everyone to share in the cultural heritage of their choice. The state should ensure the conditions that support participation in the activities related to cultural heritage - in its definition, research, interpretation, protection, preservation and presentation.

In addition, there are a number of project-based initiatives for children from low-income families. For example, Aitan Lapsi (*Helping Children*) is a donation-based foundation that has enabled children from low-income families to visit performances in all Estonian theatres.

You can apply for hobby education support for children from big families through the Estonian Association of Big Families, you can apply for a scholarship to pay for tuition fee in a hobby

school, for example, through the Union for Child Welfare Foundation, initiative of the Estonian Red Cross Tallinn Society “Ranits” for children from low-income families starting school in Tallinn. The children in alternative care can apply for a scholarship from the Estonian Children's Fund and receive support through the SEB Charity Fund.

#### **3.2.4. Access to one healthy meal a day**

Hot school meals are free of charge for all students in general education schools, including upper secondary schools. The state supports local governments in providing free school lunch through the budget resources of the Equalization and Support Fund.

Free school milk and school fruit and vegetable programs are implemented in pre-school institutions and general education schools. The programs are funded by the European Structural Funds through Agricultural Registers and Information Board.

Food aid is distributed four times a year to the recipients of subsistence benefits (Estonian minimum income scheme), recipients of benefits from certain local governments and people in shelters. Food aid is equally available in all regions of Estonia. Food aid is supported by the European Structural Funds (FEAD) and distributed by the state's long-term partner Estonian Food Bank in cooperation with local governments.

There are further initiatives in the distribution of food aid, such as Estonian Food Bank, which is the country's strategic partner in creating a support network for those individuals and families who are not entitled to FEAD-funded food aid. Priority is given to the families with young children, including single-parent families.

In addition to the above, each local government is obliged to provide emergency social assistance to the person who is in a socially helpless situation due to the loss or lack of means of subsistence, by ensuring at least food, clothing and temporary accommodation. Emergency social assistance is provided until he or she is no longer socially helpless due to loss of or lack of means of subsistence.

#### **3.2.5. Access to free healthcare**

Estonia has a joint state health insurance which ensures equal quality medical care for all insured people. All children under the age of 19 whose main residence in Estonia is entered to the population register are covered by health insurance. In addition, pregnant women, the unemployed, those on parental leave, dependent spouses, carers of disabled people and people with partial or no capacity for work have the right to health insurance in Estonia. A regular child health monitoring system has been established in Estonia. Doctors and specialists monitor children's development, growth, weight, hearing, vision and speech. In addition, they help children develop healthy dietary and exercise habits and provide advice on all other health issues. Children's health monitoring is free of charge and is financed by the Estonian Health Insurance Fund. A guide has been created to monitor children's health, including a checklist for monitoring health by age and activities.

All newborns are automatically registered on the list of the mother's family doctor. In the first days of life newborns are screened for hypothyroidism and phenylketonuria. For prophylactic reasons a healthy infant is regularly monitored by a family nurse during the first year of life.

A child aged 6-7 should undergo a pre-school health examination by the family doctor and the parent should provide the school with an officially certified statement of the children's health record. According to the 2015 analysis of the National Audit Office less than 4% of pre-school

children aged 3–6 attended health examinations at the prescribed frequency, the children attend health examinations the least at school age: 8–20% of children attended examinations depending on age.

When a child is admitted to school, the parent's consent to provide school health care is requested. The school nurse conducts health examinations for the 1st, 3rd, 7th and 11th grade students. The 5th and 9th grade students should go to their family doctor for a health check-up. According to the 2015 data of the National Audit Office not all children receive the same school health care service and the content and quality of the service are not monitored. As at 2 May 2016 there were 20 schools (1,651 students) without a contract for the provision of school health care services and half of the children whose school nurse had noticed a health problem did not visit the doctor.

The Estonian immunisation schedule has been prepared in cooperation with experts, by taking into account the prevalence of vaccine-preventable infectious diseases, the age at which children are most at risk, the best time to vaccinate and the safety and efficacy of vaccines. The vaccines in the immunisation schedule are free of charge and are funded by the Estonian Health Insurance Fund. According to the WHO recommendation the coverage of immunisation of two-year-old children should be 95%. In 2019 the coverage of two-year-old children in Estonia ranged from 91–94%, depending on the vaccine. However, according to the study, the coverage of vaccination in Estonia according to the entire immunisation plan is lower than could be expected based on the coverage with individual vaccine components.

The Estonian Health Insurance Fund pays only for the dental care services provided in the list of health care services for the insured persons under the age of 19. The Estonian Health Insurance Fund also finances orthodontics (including braces) for the children with serious diagnoses. The study ordered by the Estonian Health Insurance Fund indicates that although prevention and free dental care are gradually improving, the dental health of Estonian children is still poorer than the European average. The children from Ida-Viru (24.3%) and Lääne-Virumaa (24.3%) had the lowest number of visits to the dentist. However, more than 177,000 children have never visited a dentist as at 2019.

Since 2006 the Estonian Health Insurance Fund together with the Estonian Society of Family Doctors has developed a quality system for family doctors. The aim of the quality system is to motivate family doctors to actively engage in disease prevention and control of the spread of infectious diseases, to monitor patients with chronic diseases more effectively and to provide people with a larger-scale health care service.

### **3.2.6. Access to adequate housing**

The ensuring of housing is a social service organized by local government, the purpose of which is to ensure the possibility of using housing for the person who, due to the socio-economic situation, is unable to provide housing that meets the needs of himself or herself and his or her family.

The subsistence costs are supported under the subsistence allowance scheme (minimum income scheme in Estonia). The subsistence allowance is the state's financial support for the people in need, which is paid by the local government if all other measures aimed at alleviating poverty have proved to be insufficient. It is paid to the households whose monthly income (including wages, some benefits and allowances) is below the subsistence level prescribed by law (in 2021 it was 150 euros for the first family member, 180 euros for minor children and 120 euros for each subsequent adult family member per month) after deducting the housing costs.

In Estonia the programs aimed at young people and families with many children have been initiated to support the acquisition and renovation of housing (support measures are implemented by KredEx).

1. Home support for families with many children aimed at improving the living conditions of low-income families with three or more children up to the age of 19. Families can use the support to buy, renovate or expand a home and upgrade their home systems.
2. The housing loan guarantee is meant for young families and young professionals who desire to take a loan for buying or renovating housing and seek to reduce their down payment obligation. The housing loan guarantee makes it possible to buy an apartment, house, plot of land or summer cottage. A young family is a parent(s) or guardian(s) raising a child up to and including the age of 15.

Local governments provide continued care services for young people who have left alternative care and guardianship to support their independent living and continuing their studies. Thus, local governments are obliged to provide housing (incl reimbursement of housing costs), cover personal expenses and needs-based support services and benefits. 133 young people received continued care services with the total cost of 644,746 euros in 2019. The state reimburses local governments for the costs of continued care services through a support fund.

### **3.2.7. Benefits and allowances for children and families**

The well-being of families with children is greatly influenced by economic coping, especially if there are fewer maintenance providers in the family than dependents, such as single-parent families. Estonia's family policy measures are among the most advanced in Europe and effective in preventing and reducing child poverty. The benefits and allowances applied in Estonia to families with children are as follows:

- Parental benefit - cash benefit upon the birth of a child, the purpose of which is to ensure replacement income for persons raising a child under 3 years of age and to support the reconciliation of work and family life.
- Maintenance allowance - support for a child whose parent(s) are not fulfilling the maintenance obligation. Maintenance allowance can be applied for during both court and enforcement proceedings.
- Family benefits - financial benefits financed from the state budget through the budget of the Ministry of Social Affairs, which are paid to ensure the well-being of families with children. The purpose of family allowances is to ensure for families with children the partial reimbursement of expenses relating to the care, raising and education of children.
- Parental pension and health insurance cover.
- Social benefit for a disabled child.
- Fee for additional days off for a parent of a disabled child.

### **3.3. Feedback of children and young people, local governments and organizations involved**

#### **3.3.1. Feedback of children and young people**

The Union for Child Welfare, in cooperation with the ambassadors of Union for Child Welfare for children's rights, collected feedback from children and young people to find out their opinion on the target groups of the Estonian Child Guarantee and the barriers specific to the target groups that have occurred upon availability of the necessary services and suggestions for improving the situation.

The following target groups were most likely to be identified by children and young people: children from poor families, children from violent families, children with disabilities and special needs, big families, children from single-parent families, children from another cultural background, children of immigrants or minorities. In addition, children in the middle of a conflict between parents, children with two same-sex parents and children who have nothing to do with free time were mentioned as target groups.

#### **Barriers of target groups in accessing the service**

Children and young people are concerned about children in poverty, as they say that children in poverty may lack control over their situation, domestic support and confidence in the future. Children and young people believe that access to services by children from poor families may be hampered by the fact that these children are already being bullied, they are feared to talk about their problems or feel ashamed, as poverty can be a social stigma for them. Material circumstances in the family or financial instability can also be limiting factors. The respondents pointed out that children may not have the necessary support from their parent(s), as the parents lack information about the opportunities and support offered or the parents simply do not want to help. Teachers may also not notice the problems and needs of a child in the opinion of children and young people.

Children and young people also pointed out that participation in education can also be hampered by material resources for the purchase of study materials as well as for pursuing hobbies and participating in class trips, by thus limiting these children's valuable childhood experience. In addition, the school that is too far from home and the lack of transport to go to school may be an obstacle, there are also fewer activities outside the area's centres.

In case of children from violent families, children and young people feel that they may be prevented from accessing services because they are not taken seriously about family problems and the children themselves lack confidence in the social worker.

Children and young people believe that people keep distance from children and young people with disabilities due to their peculiarities and the child with special physical need may not get to school, as the family does not have enough resources and support at the local level.

#### **Measures to improve the situation of target groups**

According to children and young people, in order to improve the situation of children from poor families, the situation should be mapped to find out what these children lack. Children need more counselling and support by providing them with free, high-quality and professional psychological support. Children and young people suggested that visiting a school psychologist could be made compulsory (once a school year) or youth-to-youth counselling could be offered to the children with similar problems. Parents also need support (for example in the form of

trainings) so that they can identify and support their child's concerns. Some families may need financial support, for example, to buy healthy school meals or necessary digital equipment.

According to children and young people, children and young people from violent families should be offered more support both at school and in kindergarten (for example more therapists and social workers) so that children can talk about their concerns to a specialist. It was also felt that confidence in the support system should be increased, for example through student councils, who could create a better relationship with the social system. Among other things, the awareness of the availability of help through information sharing should be raised and trainings in both schools and adult workplaces should be conducted.

According to children and young people an analysis of transport and means of transport to and from school could be carried out in order to understand the transport needs of children with disabilities and special needs (especially in big cities).

### **3.3.2. Feedback of local governments**

All Estonian local governments (79) were involved in the preparation of the action plan for the Child Guarantee in order to find out their opinion on the target groups of the Estonian Child Guarantee and their inherent barriers to the availability of necessary services and suggestions for improving the situation.

Local governments identified the following target groups the most: children with special needs and disabilities, children from families with difficulty in coping, children from big families, children from single-parent families and children of parents with mental health and/or addiction disorders. In addition, for example, the children of parent(s) with special needs and disabilities, children with mental health problems and/or addiction problems and children with behavioural problems were mentioned.

#### **Barriers of the target groups in accessing the service**

In the case of barriers for several different target groups, local governments pointed out that the existence of barriers may be related to parents who do not have parental skills, but the parenting programs or social skills training to support them are also not offered. The parent may not have an internal desire to cooperate or ask for help, due to which information about the child's need for help does not reach the child protection officials of the local government and the parent may not have enough information about the possibilities and services of receiving help. The domestic situation caused by parents may also hinder, due to which participation in education, hobby education and school trips and the availability of health care services may be limited.

In case of several target groups local governments have pointed out the barriers related to the location of the provision of service, too high a price, long waiting times or lack of service and specialist. The inability of educators to network and the inner desire to notice and help can also be an obstacle. According to local governments access to the services of children with special needs and disabilities may be hindered by the lack of cooperation with parents, parents may not understand the child's need for help or may not help the child access the service, and may refuse to support the child due to overly complicated administration. The lack of a suitable form of education for children with special needs in the area was highlighted as a bottleneck in access to education.



The barriers to participation in early childhood education and childcare for a child with special needs could be related to the lack of special groups, special educators and speech therapists, too expensive service, location and the unsuitable time to provide the service. There are few different support groups and support persons in rural areas.

The barriers for children from families with coping difficulties may be related to the parent's own actions or omissions: the parent does not enter the child to the list of kindergarten, the parent does not notice or acknowledge the problem or seek help. Children may have problems accessing healthy food or lack healthy eating habits, and school-age children may therefore not consume school food. The barrier related to the early childhood education and childcare is that the child does not attend kindergarten due to the parent and therefore it is not possible to notice the child's need for help at an early stage.

The parents raising a child alone may not cooperate, they may be too busy to notice and acknowledge their child's need for help.

In case of children of parents with mental health or addiction disorders, local governments point to long queues for the services provided by support specialists, parents' own stigmas regarding mental health and economic difficulties.

### **Measures to improve the situation of target groups**

Local governments made several suggestions on how the situation of the target groups of the Child Guarantee could be further improved. For example, there would be a need to set priorities at the societal level, improve networking related to children in need, educate and encourage the community to inform about the children in need and/or neglected through various channels. Bullying prevention programs could also be implemented to develop children's empathy, create jobs close to home to support parents, including providing them with parenting training, counselling and other necessary assistance.

In order to support access to education, local governments see an increase in the number of support specialists in both schools and kindergartens, who would notice the child's need for help as early as possible and, if necessary, refer them to the appropriate specialist. Local governments suggested that calming rooms could be helpful in schools. Local governments also see that children can be supported through hobby groups and long-day groups beyond school hours and it would be important for the school to provide more meals (e.g. breakfast and a snack for children of long-day groups).

According to local governments, in order to ensure the access to services for children with special needs, the needs assessment system should be reorganized or a local government-level service centre should be established or services should be provided to similar target groups (e.g. group therapy, i.e. one specialist/service for several people at a time). Support services could be provided in schools in your area or by setting up a support group once a week in the house of culture, in the library and at nights or on weekends. The number of support specialists should also be increased and they should be offered social guarantees to contribute to cooperation, involvement and awareness-raising.

To support the participation of children from families in coping difficulties in early childhood education, all meals of the kindergarten day could be free of charge. More effective support measures would be needed to support children living with a single parent and support services should also be provided for families who have lost their rental apartment to find a new home.

The children of parents with mental health or addiction disorders would need the service of a family support person and free leisure facilities for families to support long-term addiction treatment (including co-dependency).

### **3.3.3. Feedback of organizations**

The advocacy organizations for the children and families were involved in the preparation of the action plan of the Child Guarantee in order to find out their opinion on the Estonian target groups of the Child Guarantee and the specific barriers to accessing necessary services and suggestions for improving the situation.

The involved advocacy organizations for children and families identified the following target groups the most: children with special needs, children growing up in poverty and in single-parent families, children from violent families, children of parents with mental health and/or addictive disorders. In addition, the involved organizations mentioned, for example, children with an elderly guardian, children with a serious illness and children of parents working in another country.

#### **Barriers of the target groups in accessing the service**

Among the target groups, the involved organizations identified the barriers related to the availability of services beyond the target groups due to the high variability in the availability of assistance between local governments, lack of service standards and their implementation, and the availability of assistance due to lack of transport. Among other things, it was pointed out that during the emergency situation and restrictions of COVID19 some families were unable to benefit from what educational institutions and other organizations working with children could offer due to the lack of digital tools and skills, which put them in an unequal position.

The organizations cited a number of parental restrictions as barriers to accessing children's services. For example, a parent cannot ask for help, there is no awareness of different ways to get help, or the parent does not understand the child's need for help. Opposing beliefs of the parents and domestic violence can also be barriers.

According to the organizations, the barriers for children with special needs are related to the fact that the parent does not have a support network for caring for the child and therefore the parent may have difficulty participating in the labour market and studies. The availability of social services has deteriorated. The barriers of children with special needs in participation in early childhood education and childcare are often related to the fact that there is still a lack of kindergarten places in local governments and the conditions of kindergarten and care for children with special needs still need to be improved. There is also a shortage of support specialists and the larger-scale need for speech therapy support was mentioned separately.

The barriers of children living in poverty to access of services may be related to poor housing conditions, whereby many families may not have the financial means to repair their homes and children grow up in poor conditions, are ashamed to invite visitors and may be victims of peer exclusion and bullying. Unexpected costs will also affect other families with children, as the sharp rise in energy prices and the forthcoming green revolution could put many families with children who are already struggling with coping difficulties in poverty, as their housing is not energy efficient enough and there are not enough funds for reconstruction. Poor knowledge of money wisdom of parents can also be an obstacle.

Another barrier of the children from a violent family to access services is that corporal punishment of the child is normal for some families and the harm caused to the child by the latter is not understood.

The child whose parent has a mental health or addiction disorder may lack parental support, meaning that he or she does not have a safe adult to guide and monitor that the child receives the services he or she needs. The child probably does not have the knowledge or courage to ask for help. The difficulty may be, among other things, an authoritarian parent who decides on the child's well-being without taking the child's wishes into account.

### **Measures to improve the situation of target groups**

The advocacy organizations for children and families identified the following activities to improve the situation of the Child Guarantee target groups: higher quality and more comprehensive prevention and increase in the number of child protection officials, proactive provision of services by creating clearer standards for services, increasing the volume of special services already in early childhood education, enhancing and developing parental education (e.g. as a preventive work already in family education lessons) and improving the availability of parenting programs. In addition, organizations see it as important to offer long-day group opportunities to the students of older grades as well, to find opportunities to provide food support. Children could be taught social and personal skills, measures to combat various forms of bullying could be strengthened, including the ability of school staff and students to cope with diversity and resolve conflicts.

The organizations consider it important to identify attitudes related to, for example, immigrants, children with addictions and special needs, and to create nationwide campaigns to change attitudes and accept differences. There is a need to raise public awareness of the rights of the child and of informing the child in need.

In order to support children with special needs and disabilities, the representatives of the organizations recommend creating a tolerant and caring environment in educational institutions, where it is possible to talk about the acceptance, understanding and assistance of people with disabilities. It is recommended to consistently allocate resources to create a safe and developing learning environment for all, including children and young people with special needs, at all levels of education starting from kindergarten. The creating of such an environment would involve the training of different parties, adapting the learning environment and implementing bullying prevention programs. The representatives of the organizations recommend that all children with special needs and disabilities be provided with all the services permitted by law.

According to advocacy organizations, regional disparities in the provision of services should be reduced and cooperation between health, social and educational services should be continuously enhanced to ensure the availability and quality of support services for children, regardless of the child's place of residence or special educational needs.

In order to realize their talent, out-of-school educational programs could be offered to children with special needs in different areas, recommended by the organizations involved.

Decent housing is recommended for children living in poverty. To this end, support programs for the construction of municipal housing or its accessibility in different regions should be established or strengthened. Also, national measures for the rehabilitation of housing should be created. In order to prevent parents from getting into debt, the control of express loans should

be established and the debt collection system should be reviewed, including have cooperation with bailiffs.

Advocacy organizations recommend setting up a mapping system for children at risk and improving cross-sectoral cooperation, including networking. The organizations believe that local governments should have more services and help to improve the family's livelihood. For example, the subsistence level should be raised to support older children on very low incomes and this increase should be linked to an increase in the cost of living in the future. Creating jobs close to home for the parents would support the parents' livelihood.

A functioning system should be set up to support children growing up in a single-parent family which helps to identify the need for help of these children and provide appropriate support. In addition to modernizing financial support measures, support should be provided to parents in the form of expanding access to counselling services (including conciliation, therapy and free legal aid). With regard to maintenance allowance, the automatic reduction of maintenance by half the amount of family benefits should be abandoned, as well as to improve the efficiency of the recovery of maintenance and the communication between the child and the parent.

According to the representatives of the organizations the intervention of the local government should be made faster and more resolute for the benefit of children from violent families and children experiencing violence, as children living in violent environments also need to be protected in extreme cases by being separated from their families, including taking into account the children's own views and real interests. In order to support victims of violence, it would be necessary to make it economically possible to leave a violent relationship, for example by providing financial support or housing to start an independent life. In order for the services to reach the victims, it would be necessary to communicate the victim support system and the services as a whole more widely (incl. in Russian, in a child-friendly or simplified version). It was also pointed out that there is a need to invest more to prevention and to promote positive, non-violent and inclusive parenting methods.

The early detection in kindergarten, medicine, community and educational institutions, as well as cross-sectoral inter-ministerial cooperation are essential to provide support for the children of parents with mental health or addictive disorders. The organizations involved suggest that more services for children could be provided to the family instead of financial support.

#### **4. TARGET GROUPS OF CHILDREN IN NEED**

Based on the recommendations of the Commission, the situation of Estonian children and the feedback from the parties involved, the target groups of the Child Guarantee action plan are the following:

1. children with special needs, including children with disabilities;
2. children growing up with one parent;
3. children with mental health problems;
4. children in alternative care;
5. children from a violent family and children experiencing violence.

#### **Observations across target groups**

The feedback from the parties involved, statistics describing the situation in Estonia and the studies referred to above indicate that the children in Estonia have unequal conditions for

accessing services depending on the region. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the child's place of residence and mother tongue when implementing support measures across target groups, incl children may belong to several different target groups and need additional support in every way. The children covered by the Child Guarantee are also more likely to be bullied by children or adults.

**The child's place of residence affects the risk of poverty or social exclusion.** The National Audit Office emphasizes in its annual report published in November 2020 that the whole of Estonia outside Harju and Tartu counties is a periphery where the sustainable provision of essential services appears questionable. Regional differences also appear in the statistics on poverty indicators and this has been a major problem in Estonia for decades.

**Intra-regional inequalities.** When assigning measures to the target groups of the Child Guarantee, it should be taken into account that resulting from the administrative reform the territories of local governments may be large in Estonian terms and also unevenly covered by transport connections and as local governments have a requirement to provide a school of residence - it may be too far from the child's place of residence. The common indicator of the target groups of the Child Guarantee is the lack of support from the parent (s) (material, time, knowledge and skills-based) which means that children often have to manage on their own. The availability of services and support services for each target group is of considerable importance.

**The exchange of information between social, educational, health and law enforcement sectors is incomplete and the roles and responsibilities of the parties are unclear.** The assessment of a child's need for assistance and the provision of assistance are fragmented between different areas and institutions, the roles of the parties are unclear and there is no comprehensive overview of the support needed by the family. As a result, getting help is often difficult and time-consuming and does not support problem prevention.

In Estonia **there is a lack of parental education and general support for parental coping** for parents of children of different ages in order to prevent risks endangering the child's well-being and development. The parent's poor parental skills jeopardize the child's ability to cope and access to necessary care. The coping of adult family members is directly linked to a child's risk of poverty and social exclusion.

#### **4.1. Children with special needs and disabilities**

Target group size: As of 2020 there are 36,500 children in need in Estonia, i.e. 14% of all children need more or less additional support from the social, educational and/or health care sector. The number of disabled children in Estonia at the end of 2020 was 10,125 (3.9% of children), a few years earlier there were 12,949 children with disabilities (5.1% of children), i.e. the number and share of disabled children has slightly decreased. The distribution of the severity of the disability has been in a similar proportion for many years: 3660 children with moderate, 5796 with severe and 669 children with profound disability.

Key challenges:

- According to statistics the households of children with special needs and disabilities are one of the largest groups at risk of poverty.
- The parent(s) of a child with special needs or disabilities may have an unstable income: more than 30% of the parents caring for a disabled child do not work and the reason of the latter for almost half of them is caring for a disabled child.

- A child may be prevented from participating in education due to the lack of additional support he or she needs in both early childhood and general education, as the usual teaching methods that take into account the average Estonian student may not be suitable for the student with special needs.
- The understanding the child's need for help and situation is hampered by the ignorance of specialists or parents or the lack of awareness and fear of members of society.
- In order to receive support due to the child's need for help, the parent has to make several applications in the social, educational and health fields and may not receive help in time, as information is fragmented between different areas.

#### **4.2. Children growing up in a single-parent household**

Target group size: according to Eurostat 14.7% of Estonian children lived in a single-parent household in 2020.

Key challenges:

- If there are fewer providers of maintenance in the family than there are dependents, it can be difficult to cope financially. As a result the child has fewer opportunities to participate in education, hobby education and sports and cultural life.
- The support measures for single parents vary widely in size and as to underlying principles and do not contribute to poverty reduction in its current form.
- The failure to comply with the maintenance obligation by the child's other parent puts the parent raising the child alone in a more difficult position.
- A single parent has a heavy burden on raising children which can lead to the child's need for help being missed and the child(ren) receiving less daily support.
- Single parents lack free counselling services (including conciliation, therapy, legal aid).
- According to statistics on the separation of children from the family, single parents make up almost three quarters of the parents whose parental rights are restricted or taken away.

#### **4.3. Children in alternative care**

Target group size: as at the end of 2020 the institution-based alternative care service had 800 children in substitute and family houses (745 aged 0-17, of whom 18 were under 3), of whom 254 or 32% of children growing up in institutions had severe and profound disabilities. 65% of the children in alternative care are in family based alternative care: 145 children in foster families (138 aged 0-17) and 1332 under guardianship (1216 aged 0-17).

Key challenges:

- Providing alternative care according to the needs of children, including there is no adequate implementation of interventions to mitigate relevant traumatic experiences and provision of family-based care that better supports the child's development.
- Replacing institutional services with family-based support is hampered by the lack of families willing to take on children with different needs on a temporary or long-term basis.

- Although institutional care for young children has decreased, 2.3% of the children in institutional alternative care were aged 0-2 at the end of 2020 (18 children). It is important to stop placing infants to the institutions.
- When the child reaches the age of majority and the need for help continues, a smooth transition to the social protection system is not guaranteed.
- The provision of continued care services is uneven based on local governments.

#### **4.4. Children from a violent family and children experiencing violence**

Target group size: overview data on the number and proportion of children in all Estonian children are not available. The size of the target group can be described by Statistics Estonia's relationship survey "Safe relationships within family, at work and outside work", the data of which will be published in the first half of 2023. The size of the target group is also described, for example, by the numbers of criminal cases of violence against children and the numbers of children involved in cases of domestic violence.

Key challenges:

- Professional support for children lags behind the late detection and notification of the need for help, as well as the lack of specialists (including child protection officials).
- The awareness of child protection officials and other specialists working with children about the impact of (domestic) violence on the child's well-being and development is uneven, in particular, the harmful effects of systemic, including mental, domestic violence on the child are underestimated.
- The significant proportion of the adult population (42%) consider corporal punishment of children to be a necessary and understandable means of education in certain situations. Although the actual use of educational violence is lower than this, the attitudes normalizing violence encourage children who are victims of violence not to be noticed in the community or it is not considered necessary or appropriate to notify of it.
- The sexual crimes against children are very often concealed and therefore more difficult to detect, as 90% of these are committed by a person close to the child. Children with an already weaker social background who have previously been subjected to other types of violence at home, whose parental relationships are violent or whose parents have little interest in the child's well-being are more likely to experience sexual violence.

#### **4.5. Children with mental health problems**

Target group size: according to the survey of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) every third 11–15-year-old has experienced a depressive episode in the 2017/2018 academic year, every fifth 13–15-year-old has thought about suicide during the year.

In one form or another all children of the target groups of the Child Guarantee are in a vulnerable situation in terms of mental health, and as mental health problems worsen, participation in services becomes more difficult.

Key challenges:

- Mental health problems have been stigmatized in society and therefore children's mental health problems have been underestimated (for example, absenteeism due to mental health difficulties compared to physical illness).
- Timely specialist support is not ensured for children with mental health problems, including availability varies by region.
- According to TAI there were 24 child and adolescent psychiatrists working in Estonia in 2019, but the need is much higher. Among other things, there is a shortage of clinical psychologists, school psychologists, mental health nurses.

## 5. COMMUNICATION AND AWARENESS RAISING

According to the principle of communication of the Child Guarantee it is important that children in need and their families are aware of their rights to key services and that they are able to ask for these, if necessary. Information measures are an important element of the effectiveness of the Child Guarantee, and in addition to providing adequate, timely and targeted information, communication also means direct information to the target groups to reach the most vulnerable individuals and communities.

In case of communication aimed at children it is important that children know their rights, including the right to receive key services. There is also a need to raise general awareness of the purpose of the Child Guarantee, including child poverty, social exclusion and measures to improve the situation.

When introducing the rights of the child and the Child Guarantee, children and young people should be involved and different formats should be created with their participation in order to reach the target groups. For example, guest lessons, social media campaigns, games, the creation of supporting documents for schools, youth work institutions and specialists to explain about the Child Guarantee.

Therefore, communication should take place within each support activity in order to reach the necessary target group and to raise awareness of the availability and need of measures.

In organizing the well-being of children and families the Social Insurance Board is responsible for implementing the national child protection policy, implementing national strategies and coordinating cross-sectoral cooperation and prevention in the field of child protection. Through the cooperation on child protection and coordination of prevention the Social Insurance Board offers local governments strategic counselling to include the well-being of children and families in local government development plans and to plan prevention activities. For this purpose, the local government can use the health and well-being profile as a tool for analysis, the compilation of which provides a cross-sectoral overview of a specific local government, including an overview of the well-being of children and families and the factors influencing it.

Based on the analysis the local government can plan activities to increase the livelihood and well-being of children and families and to prevent risks. The measures taken to implement any preventive action should, inter alia, support the objectives set out in national and/or international strategies. Thus, the National Child Guarantee Action Plan will become an important strategic basis for local governments as well.



## 6. STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

The Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, local governments, advocacy organizations of children and families, children and young people were involved in drawing up the Child Guarantee action plan to find out their opinion on the target groups of the Estonian Child Guarantee and the inherent barriers to the availability of the necessary services and suggestions for improving the situation.

It is planned to involve different parties in the different stages of the National Child Guarantee Action Plan (preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation) (Table 1).

	Ministries and government agencies operating in the area of government	Local governments	Educational institutions	Advocacy organizations of children and families, third sector	Children and young people, ambassadors of the rights of the child of the Union for the Child Welfare
Preparation	X	X		X	X
Implementation	X	X	X	X	X
Monitoring	X	X	X	X	X
Evaluation	X	X	X	X	X

## 7. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE OBJECTIVES

The European Commission's Social Protection Committee's Indicators Sub-Group has a task to develop a framework for evaluation of the Child Guarantee. An initial list of indicators at EU level has been agreed, but work on the indicators will continue in 2022. The approved indicators have been listed in the initial version of the evaluation framework “*Initial Version of the Monitoring Framework for the European Child Guarantee*” (as of February 2022).

Estonia will take into account the Commission's evaluation framework when establishing the system of indicators and will base its national quantitative and qualitative targets more narrowly on the target groups of children in need defined in the Child Guarantee action plan (Chapter 4) and the planned measures (Chapter 8). Chapter 8 describes the qualitative and quantitative objectives for each measure, together with the baseline and target levels. Each indicator is linked to a specific measure and target group.

The indicators described in Chapter 8 currently coincide with the objectives and target levels of national programs and development plans related to the welfare of Estonian children. These are not necessarily the final Child Guarantee measure indicators for monitoring the action plan, as it is important that the indicators in the sectoral development plans are in line with the indicators of Child Guarantee action plan in order to avoid confusion and overuse of existing similar indicators. For example, the Welfare Development Plan 2023-2030 will be updated in 2022, during which suitable indicators will be reviewed and selected to evaluate the situation, therefore the indicators set in the Child Guarantee (more precisely, Chapter 8) are expected to be updated if necessary. Although an initial list of indicators at EU level has been agreed, work on indicators at Commission level will continue in 2022. Therefore, the task of the cross-sectoral working group is to review the indicators set out in the action plan and to establish a common evaluation framework based on the Commission's final list of indicators and national indicators to monitor the implementation of the action plan.

## 8. MEASURES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CHILD GUARANTEE

### Provision and development of the parental education and parenting support services

Target group: measure across target groups

Indicator	Initial level	Target level 2022	Target level 2023	Target level 2024	Target level 2025
Parents who feel they need advice and help but do not know where or to whom to turn or do not dare to address anyone <i>Source: Study of Children's Rights and Parental Education, Praxis</i>	53 % (2018)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases
Acceptance of corporal punishment of children by parents <i>Source: Study of Children's Rights and Parental Education, Praxis</i>	42 % (2018)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases

#### Planned activities in the period of 2022-2030 to ensure timely necessary support for the parents who need advice and assistance in raising a child in the form of parental training or other parenting support measures:

- The Family Mediation Act regulates the state bases for the organization of family mediation services and conciliation services, which are scheduled to enter into force on 1 September 2022.
- Development of programs supporting couple and family relations and parental education for young people and parents and improving their availability throughout Estonia
- Development of a business model to assess the needs of the family expecting a baby and the ones with a newborn to better support families with greater need for help through the midwife's repeated post-natal home visits.

Supporting the establishment of community-based prevention and family work centres at local level to provide integrated health and social services, taking into account the need of the family for pre- and post-natal support.

#### The social protection system that supports the economic coping of families and the reconciliation of work and family life

Target group: across target groups

Indicator	Initial level	Target level 2022	Target level 2023	Target level 2024	Target level 2025
Impact of family benefits and parental benefit on reducing the absolute poverty of children aged 0-17, %	64% (2019.a)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases

<i>Source: Statistics Estonia, Estonian Social Survey</i>					
At-risk-of-poverty rate of an adult and families with child/children, % <i>Source: Statistics Estonia, Estonian Social Survey</i>	37.5% (2020)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases
Absolute poverty rate of an adult and families with child/children (s), % <i>Source: Statistics Estonia, Estonian Social Survey</i>	6.4% (2020)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases

**Planned activities in the period of 2022-2030 to ensure the timely and lawful payment of benefits and allowances, including the development of necessary services for children and families to maintain or improve their quality of life:**

- Improving the conditions for the payment of sickness and care benefits for parents of young children after they return from work after parental leave.
- Modernization and harmonization of the support measure package for single-parent families (survivors' benefits, single-parent support, maintenance allowance) to ensure better economic coping for single-parent families and reduce the risk of children falling into poverty.
- Development of debt counselling, including expansion of service provision across Estonia and preparation of an action plan for the prevention and mitigation of cross-sectoral debt.
- Developing benefits and services to reduce poverty and improve people's independent living.

**Supporting children with mental health problems**

Target group: children with mental health problems

According to the initial assessment the objectives of the measure should increase the volume of mental health services provided at the primary level and improve access at the community level. More detailed goals and indicators will be developed after the child's mental health survey is conducted (see Chapters 4.5 and 11).

**The planned supporting activities for the whole population that support the achievement of the initial goal:**

- At the beginning of 2022 the Mental Health Department was established in the Ministry of Social Affairs.
- In February 2022 application rounds were opened for two support measures that will enable local governments and primary health care centres to receive financial support from the state in 2022 for the provision of psychological assistance and mental health support services to the residents of the region.
- An action plan on mental health is being prepared.

- In order to alleviate the shortage of specialists, the professional year of both clinical psychologists and psychologist-counsellors, i.e. the so-called community psychologists, will be increased to improve the availability of the services they provide.
- The activities of the national mental health helpline and online counselling will be continued and the provision of pastoral care services in care institutions and the development of the quality of services provided in children's mental health centres will also continue.
- The Estonian Foundation for the Disabled supports the establishment of support groups for the people with mental disorders and their close ones and advice on compiling a crisis map.

### **Ensuring effective and targeted assistance for the children in need through cross-sectoral cooperation**

Target group: measure across target groups

Indicator	Initial level	Target level 2022	Target level 2023	Target level 2024	Target level 2025
Number of referrals involving children in danger and abused children <i>Source: Data register of social services and benefits</i>	569 (2020)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases
Percentage of children separated from the family among children aged 0–17 <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, Statistics Estonia</i>	0.11% (2020)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases

### **Planned activities in the period of 2022-2030 to develop a well-functioning child protection system to prevent child abuse and ensure prompt and effective support measures for children and families in need:**

- Development of an integrated model of social, educational and health care services, regulating the provision of both local government and state level services.
- Upgrading the child protection system to ensure that the need for help is identified more quickly and that aid is more effective, including:
  - o developing cross-sectoral case management with an emphasis on integrated work processes, use of evaluation tools and documentation of operations;
  - o creating a comprehensive and systematic IT solution that improves data exchange, better identifies the child's need for help and supports high-quality decision-making based on the child's need for help and case management for child protection officials and network members;
  - o creating an evidence-based toolkit with guides and other assessment tools.
- Renewal of basic education and state in-service training for child protection officials.

## Learning opportunities and organization of education

Target group: measure across target groups

Indicator	Last actual level (2020)	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2035
Percentage of children aged 3 to school age who have attended a pre-school establishment <i>Source: EHIS</i>	91.6%	92%	92%	92%	92.5 %	92.5 %	95%
Drop-out rate in stage III of full-time study (%): total/boys/girls <i>Source: EHIS</i>	0.2/ 0.3/ 0.1	0.25/ 0.3/ 0.2	Keep the level	Keep the level	Keep the level	Keep the level	Keep the level
Drop-out rate in vocational educational institutions (at the level of vocational secondary education in the 1st academic year) (%) <i>Source: EHIS</i>	9.4	8.9	<11	<11	<11	<11	<11

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

### In order to achieve the goal, the following activities will take place in 2022-2025:

- Organizing and developing the education network which supports the separation of basic school and upper secondary school, establishment of state upper secondary schools, optimization of educational infrastructure, modernization of the learning environment, implementation of inclusive education, improving access to education and increasing cooperation between educational establishments. In addition, the network of schools for students in need of support will be reorganized, learning conditions and access to services will be improved. Local governments and private school operators receive support for the creation of small solutions so that children in need of support can be included in ordinary schools.
- In order to ensure access to general education, educational support is provided to the operators of municipal and private schools, necessary study places in state schools are provided and the implementation of IBO curricula and the development of the European School are supported. Free school meals have been ensured in cooperation with the state and local governments.
- In order to ensure access to vocational training, vocational training volumes are planned, study places are provided and measures are provided to support students' coping.

## Youth sector

Target group: measure across target groups

Indicator	Last actual level (2019)	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2035
Percentage (%) of local governments where youth work services are at least at the “advanced” level	50	53.2	54.8	56.4	58	60	
<i>Source: EHIS</i>							

The activities of the Education and Youth Program 2022-2025 will support the development of the availability and quality of youth work (incl hobby education) and will continue to support the diversification and availability of youth hobby education and activities. The aim of the activity is that high-quality youth work (incl youth hobby education) is available all over Estonia and creates opportunities for all young people (aged 7-26) for diverse development, success experiences, enrichment of experience and independence.

### **In order to achieve the goal, the following activities will take place in 2022-2025:**

- Implementation of a support scheme for hobby education and activities for young people, as a result of which high-quality and diverse hobby education and activities will be better accessible for young people.
- Implementation of support instruments to ensure the availability of youth work in open youth work, hobby education, hobby activities and youth camps, as a result of which youth work is evenly regionally available in Estonia.
- Development of a youth information service and mediation of youth information to young people, as a result of which young people are aware of their opportunities and choices for better organization of their lives.

## **Supporting young people at risk**

Target group: measure across target groups

The activities of the Education and Youth Program 2022-2025 will ensure equal opportunities for all young people to improve their quality of life and promote the social inclusion of risk groups (including young people in NEET status) and reduce the risk of young people being stayed away or left alone. The transition of young people to working life and independence will be supported and support systems will be developed to support the young people being excluded from studies and labour market.

The aim of the activity is to provide equal opportunities for young people to participate in youth work and as a result in society, regardless of the financial income of the family and young person, place of residence, special needs, trust or other social and demographic conditions. The implementation of the activities set out to support young people at risk is monitored in accordance with the Youth Guarantee Action Plan.

## Succession planning and development of teachers, learning approach and environments

Target group: measure across target groups

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

Indicator	Last actual level	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2035
Percentage of students who have not been repeatedly bullied in the last two weeks (%)							
4th grade							
8th grade	67.8	66.0	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases
11th grade	74.2	79.3	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases
Students of vocational educational institution	89.1	92.4	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases
	- (Data for 2020)	92.4	-	-	-	increases	-
Percentage of early childhood education teachers who agree that kindergarten and various non-kindergarten specialists, including doctors, support and child protection specialists and the police, etc., cooperate well in supporting children with special needs <i>Source: Satisfaction survey</i>	59.2	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases
Percentage of teachers in general education schools who find that the school and various out-of-school specialists, including police officers, counsellors, doctors, psychologists, youth workers, etc., cooperate well in supporting children with special educational needs <i>Source: Satisfaction survey</i>	65.3	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases	increases
Participation of Estonian children and young people in culture <i>Source: Survey of the Ministry of Culture</i>	initial level will be specified with the survey of 2023						2030 increases

### Curriculum and school organization development activities:

- Development and supporting of national general education curricula (incl learning materials). The quality of education will be ensured through the updating of the national curriculum for 2021-2022 and its further development. For example, the list of learning

outcomes in the field of social subjects was supplemented with learning outcomes aimed at the development of information-critical thinking and the valuing of multiculturalism and active citizenship. The need to integrate the subjects such as problem solving, taking responsibility, money wisdom, sexual health (health education), LGBT issues and migration related topics into learning has also been taken into account in formulating learning outcomes. More attention has been paid to the issues of culture, including cultural diversity. The curriculum for civic education has paid more attention than before to maintaining mental health and developing prosocial skills.

- The availability of education is supported by e-schoolbag including electronic learning materials and to which there is free and unrestricted access. Electronic museum lessons have also been shared through e-schoolbag. 923,065 euros have been added to the general education support in 2022. The support is distributed by considering different regional availability of cultural institutions and the resulting higher transport costs with bigger support for the areas outside the centres.
- In order to ensure equal opportunities in early childhood and basic education, the implementation of the principles of inclusive education will be continued, incl the availability of study counselling services will be ensured; non-Estonian-speaking students are supported in acquiring the Estonian language and schools in regions with weaker socio-economic backgrounds, educational integration is supported.
- The creating of a mentally and physically safe and mobility-friendly learning environment and organization is supported.

### Support for children with special needs and disabilities

Target group: children with special needs and disabilities

Indicator	Initial level	Target level 2022	Target level 2023	Target level 2024	Target level 2025
Percentage of parents or main carers of disabled children who say they have not been able to use social service(s) at all or enough, but would need these for their disabled child or would need more. <i>Source: Survey of coping and needs of families with children with disabilities.</i>	30% (2017)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases
Percentage of parents who are at the labour market 6 months after starting to receive childcare and/or support service for disabled children <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs</i>	74.65% (2018)	remains at the same level or increases	remains at the same level or increases	remains at the same level or increases	remains at the same level or increases

### Planned activities in the period of 2022-2030 to ensure the provision of faster, more effective and comprehensive assistance to children:

- Development and implementation of the combined nursing and care service for children with high care and assistance needs in order to reduce the care burden on families and



support coping. The development of the service is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF).

- According to the Social Welfare Act support services for children with severe and profound disabilities are organized by local governments, who receive annual support from the state budget for the performance of the task based on children with severe and profound disabilities living in the area. The local government unit can use the support for childcare, support person, social transport or other social services for children with severe and profound disabilities, which help to reduce the care burden or additional needs of the family of a child with severe and profound disabilities. Since 2023 the target group of the use of funds will be expanded, after which support can be provided to all families of children with high care and assistance needs to reduce the care burden, and a nationally identified disability is not a prerequisite for receiving services.
- Reform of the support system for children with special needs:
  - Creating opportunities to identify the child's need for help as early as possible (at the age of babyhood and infancy) and to provide necessary support in a timely manner in all age groups in order to prevent the need for assistance from escalating.
  - Combining the assessments of children with special needs in different areas to reduce duplication and time to receive help.
  - Development of a clear and simple support system for the parent of a child with special needs, which automates data requests and reduces the number of applications.
  - Development of a care service for children with high care and assistance needs, which enables the parent to rest from the constant burden of care.

### Alternative care and family-based alternative care

Target group: children in alternative care

Indicator	Initial level	Target level 2022	Target level 2023	Target level 2024	Target level 2025
Percentage of children placed in non - institutional alternative care out of all children placed in alternative care	65% (2020)	68%	69%	70%	70%
<i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs</i>					

### Planned activities in the period of 2022-2030 to ensure opportunities for children in need of alternative care to grow up in a family instead of institutions, needs-based support for young people surviving alternative care and high quality of alternative and continued care:

- Clarification of the content and quality requirements of services, development of trauma-competent care and provision of services to children with special needs, both on a family and institutional basis.

- Establishment of a state-regulated and funded support system for family-based alternative care providers that takes into account all forms of family-based alternative care.
- In cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry of Justice, modernization of regulations concerning guardianship and adoption, ensuring the uniform approach in support of children and families in the preparation and support of family-based alternative care.
- Establishing clearer requirements for the planning and provision of continued care to ensure more effective support for young people leaving alternative care, including clearer requirements for the planning and provision of continued care for local governments and the network, and ensure the necessary preparation to work with the target group.

### **Creating a smooth journey for abused children from perceiving the need for help up to help**

Target group: children from violent families and children experiencing violence

Indicator	Initial level	Target level	Target level	Target level	Target level
		2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of referrals of children in danger and children abused <i>Source: Data register of social services and benefits</i>	569 (2020)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases
Percentage of children separated from the family among children aged 0–17 <i>Source: Ministry of Social Affairs, Statistics Estonia</i>	0.11% (2020)	decreases	decreases	decreases	decreases

### **Planned activities to create a smooth journey for abused children from perceiving the need for help up to help in the period of 2022-2030**

- Ensuring child-friendly procedures and assistance for children who have experienced violence, taking into account the rights and interests of the child, including by facilitating cooperation and data exchange between different institutions (incl wider implementation of the children’s house model).
- Creating guidelines for identifying abuse and facilitating the reporting of a child in need of help by clarifying both legislation and sector-specific guidelines, and by using IT solutions that enable prompt exchange of information.
- Improving the competence of child protection officials and other specialists working with children for more informed handling of cases of domestic violence and violence against children.
- Introducing assessment tools suitable for Estonian conditions and making these available to specialists working with children, which would help to identify child abuse and assess its extent and impact.

- Making different means of intervention more accessible to children who have experienced violence and to adults who have used violence against children (e.g. programs meant for the parents who have used violence, parent-child therapies).

## **9. POLICY FRAMEWORK**

A high-level child protection council has been established in Estonia with the aim of strengthening and enhancing the organization of child protection at the national level, including prioritizing the protection of rights of children and welfare of children, defining short- and long-term child and family policy goals and making appropriate political choices. Among other things, it is important for the council to have an overview of child welfare reforms, draft amendments to acts and long-term plans of ministries. The council consists of: Minister of Social Protection, Minister of Education and Research, Minister of Justice, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Culture, Chancellor of Justice and representatives of relevant agencies and citizens' associations, associations of local governments and children's and youth organizations.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for coordinating partnerships at various levels (including cross-sectoral ones). Thus, under the leadership of the Child Guarantee Coordinator, an overview of the implementation of the Child Guarantee action plan will be provided to the child protection council, on the basis of which the council can assess the various stages and results of the action plan and to make agreements on the implementation of the Child Guarantee. The provision of overview to the child protection council is timed in line with the overview to the European Commission and the Council of the European Union.

## **10. EUROPEAN UNION FINANCING**

Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 repealed Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013 and established a European Social Fund + (hereinafter ESF +) through which Member States can contribute to the eradication of poverty with a view to breaking the cycle of disadvantage across generations and promote social inclusion by ensuring equal opportunities for all, reducing barriers, tackling discrimination and addressing health inequalities.

According to the principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights children have the right to protection from poverty and the children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. Therefore, EU Member States should programme an appropriate amount of their resources of the ESF+ funding for the measures set out in the National Child Guarantee Action Plan to directly support children in the areas of childcare, education, health, adequate housing and food.

Member States that had an average rate above the Union average of children of less than 18 years old at risk of poverty or social exclusion for the period between 2017 and 2019, on the basis of Eurostat data, should allocate at least 5 % of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management to those activities. According to Eurostat, 15.2% of the Estonian children lived at risk of poverty in 2020, which is lower than the EU average (19.5% as the EU average in 2020), which is why Estonia does not have to follow this recommendation.

Through ESF +, Estonia has planned to develop parental skills programs, including the development and establishment of community-based prevention and family work centres, support for children with trauma experience and complex problems, development of alternative care and support for the transition of child protection to a new case management model. The total cost of the activities is estimated to be approximately 42 million.

## **11. DATA COLLECTION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

In order to describe the situation of Estonian children, data monitoring will be continued based on existing surveys and databases, while additional surveys will be conducted in the coming years. For example, the data on children's mental health in Estonia are insufficient: the volume of questions in previous surveys is limited, the data obtained are scarce and some age groups have not been covered in the surveys (especially younger age groups). Therefore, a survey on children's mental health will be commissioned in 2022 (to be completed in 2023), the aim of which is to map the mental health situation of children and create preconditions for regular monitoring of the mental well-being of Estonian children.

Also, a survey of the household profile and life organization of families with children will be conducted in 2022 at the request of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the purpose of which is to map the household profile of Estonian children, to compare different forms of household and the organization of life of their families, including the distribution of custody, economic coping, living conditions, etc. The survey of families with sufficient representation of children also provides a picture of the prevalence of single parents according to different definitions and reasons for single parenthood (e.g. termination of marriage or cohabitation, death of another parent) and describes the situation of children growing up in a single parent's household and the needs of single parents in raising children in a more detailed perspective, including regionally.

Poverty alleviation of children growing up in a single parent household has also been selected for the Estonian Public Sector Innovation Program, where a qualitative study is conducted to understand the problem and develop a solution that helps to map the problems and needs of single parents from the target group's point of view.

The process of evaluating the Child Guarantee action plan will map the need for additional research and data collection or its improvement. Special attention is paid to the area where the children live when collecting and monitoring data.