

PROTECTING CHILDREN: WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP ACROSS CHILDREN'S SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public administrations hold child protection obligations which they fulfil by setting up **child protection systems**. These systems consist of formal and informal structures, functions, and capacities and involve various actors, including children, families, communities, and professionals.

Child protection systems in Europe differ greatly and have been categorised based on: their **focus** (on risk, family support, or the child), the **degree of protection** they offer, ranging from preventing child exploitation, deprivation, and maltreatment to ensuring children's wellbeing and safeguarding their rights.

A child's right to protection is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is further supported at the European Union (EU) level by initiatives like the **European Child Guarantee** (ECG) and the European Commission's **Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child**.

With this publication, ESN aims to further contribute to the realisation of the ECG for the most vulnerable children as well as the European Commission's Recommendation on integrated child protection by analysing how universal and specialist children's services across Europe put in place coordination, essential to promote an integrated approach to children's support. Bringing together our questionnaire findings, analysed in light of existing literature, and the insights and best practice presented during our 2024 seminar, we cover four key thematic areas: cooperation, prevention, child participation, and child protection workforce.

Cooperation

For child protection to be holistic, effective, and efficient, there is a need for cooperation between professionals working **across disciplines** such as social welfare, education, health, and justice and **at different levels** (international, national, regional, and local).

This interagency work demands the existence of **legal frameworks for cooperation, clear mandates, comprehensive protocols, joint training**, and **informal networks** that foster communication, mutual trust and understanding, and a culture of shared responsibility. Sufficient **time and resources** are also paramount, as is adopting a **child rights-based approach** according to which children's safety and wellbeing come first.

Prevention

Public administrations have a duty to **prevent family separation**. They must, therefore, address concerns like parental mental health conditions and addictions, housing problems, and poverty to prevent them from escalating any further and keep families together. This involves putting in place **universal services**, such as childcare, as well as **programmes targeting the most vulnerable families**, such as mobile social workers and specific family therapy.

At the same time, governments need to invest in **family- and community-based alternative care** for children without parental care, including through the development and promotion of foster care, and the introduction of better incentives and support for foster carers.

Child Participation

Children have the **right to participate** in decisions that affect them and to see their wishes, fears, and anxieties taken into consideration in the planning of child protection interventions and measures.

Full implementation of this right requires, in addition to legal frameworks and guidelines on the topic, efforts at multiple levels: a systemic **cultural shift** to empower children, **sufficient staff who have been adequately trained on child protection and have the time** to effectively engage children, and professional development in **age-appropriate communication** and **tools and methods** that foster child participation.

Child Protection Workforce

Keeping children safe from harm and involved in decision-making is only possible when the child protection workforce is **skilled, competent, and adequately resourced**.

For this purpose, state authorities must invest in improving the **education and lifelong training** of professionals working in child protection, including increasing their knowledge of international and EU frameworks. They must also promote the **availability** and **retention** of the child protection workforce, including through better work conditions, adequate workloads, and increased support and social recognition.

