



European  
Social  
Network

# Consultation response

## European Commission's Communication on the Rights of the Child (2011-2014)

12/08/10

**European Social Network**  
ID Number: 94402711517-87

5th Floor, Victoria House  
125 Queens Road  
Brighton BN1 3WB  
Tel: 00 44 (0) 1273 739039  
Fax: 00 44 (0) 1273 739239

ESN is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. Our mission is to help change the lives of the most vulnerable in our societies through the delivery of quality social services. With Members in local public social services across Europe, we bring together the people who are key to the design and delivery of vital care and support services to learn from each other and contribute their experience and expertise to building effective social policy at European and national level.



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## Introduction

European Social Network (ESN) welcomes the intention of the Commission to adopt a Communication on Children's Rights (2011-2014) at the end of 2010 to further advance the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The present paper responds to the questions raised in the Consultation document under the heading **Vulnerable groups of children** because these are under the responsibility of local public social services which form the majority of the membership of ESN.

ESN, as the independent network for social services in Europe, supports the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified by all EU Member States. Therefore, most ESN members are aware of it and work in a legislative framework that recognises it. Social services contribute to the implementation of the UNCRC as they have a **particular responsibility for safeguarding children** and young people which is legally established in many countries. Their work impacts on children's lives in many ways. This role gives social services a valuable insight into the lives of children, particularly vulnerable groups of children.

### 14. In your experience, what are the groups of children in a situation of particular vulnerability? Do you have data and figures relating to these situations?

In 2008 ESN decided to approach the important social challenges affecting children and families through a working group that brought together people with experience of managing mainstream public childcare and specialized services for vulnerable children alongside others with a strong background in research and policy development. Based on the work of the Group, ESN has identified the following groups of children in situations of vulnerability:

- Children who are victims of violence or sexual abuse
- Children with mental health problems, physical disabilities or sensory impairments
- Young offenders
- Children from minority ethnic groups or from migrant families
- Children who have drug addiction problems
- Children in institutions and out-of-home care
- Children who live in large and single parent families living at or below the poverty line because of not earning enough in their paid employment.

## 15. What are the activities of your organisation relating to vulnerable groups of children? What are the difficulties and problems that you encounter on the ground when developing actions in favour of vulnerable groups of children?

Members of the ESN working group on Children & Families shared knowledge from their countries and reflected together on their experience of working directly with vulnerable children and families. They particularly highlighted the importance of:

- Working with families
- Working with vulnerable children
- Working in partnership
- Working for excellence

### Working with families

In Hungary, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has developed micro-regional programmes to develop social and child welfare services in the most disadvantaged regions. Marta Korintus (Institute for Social Policy and Labour, Hungary) emphasized the need to **help families in difficult areas to access childcare**. In this sense, the aim of these programmes is to establish networks of social and child welfare services based on local resources and to ensure a consistent framework of services.

### Working with vulnerable children

Help provided by social services is vital for these children and very often constitutes their only chance to improve their situation.

The Group identified that it is important to **give children a voice**, and it is important to do so not only to each child individually but also to children collectively. Francesc Reverter (Social Welfare Department of Barcelona province, Spain) explained that in Sant Feliu de Llobregat (Barcelona), declared “child-friendly city” by UNICEF, there is a “Children’s Council”. It gives the city council the point of view of children. It is also a platform for familiarising children with the mechanisms of democratic participation.

### Working in partnership

Multiple forms of social exclusion are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, poor housing conditions combined with poor educational background could give a child reduced opportunities in the labour market in later life. Therefore, the **coordination of different services** is particularly necessary to help children escape from poverty and social exclusion.

These partnerships must be well-managed and benefit from strong political leadership. Leif Gjørtz Christensen (Head of the Social Department of the Municipality of Aarhus, Denmark) explained that in Denmark cooperation between Social services, Schools and Police (SSP) can be applied to all levels of intervention, from strategic service design to street level implementation.

## Working for excellence

It is necessary to ensure the **quality of services**, and in order to do so, needs assessment, performance management and cost effectiveness should be considered.

Furthermore, social services gather data on the situation of children at risk and how this evolves over time. Martial Milaret (Director of services for children and families, *Département de l'Orne*, France) reported that in the French *départements*, the Social Aid Service for Children (*Aide Sociale à l'Enfance*) collects data from the children using their services in areas such as their degree of autonomy, their health status and how they interact with others. The data gathered on the situation of socially excluded children also shed light on the effectiveness of interventions by social services and help them to build evidence-based practice (i.e. practice that is based on analysing and evaluating what works).

The **main challenges** identified as regards the delivery of services for vulnerable groups of children are related to the **administrative structure** of the country.

In Denmark, for instance, following the municipal reform of 2007, the setting of general objectives and monitoring of outcomes in the field of social policy is now carried out at the national level. Regions are in charge of health, whilst local authorities are responsible for health prevention and social welfare, employment and education policies. Therefore, local authorities are responsible of ensuring that childcare and child protection are delivered in coordination with other policies.

The complexity of the administrative system in Hungary was also raised by the Hungarian member of the working group whilst in Ireland some of the challenges faced are the **general lack of data** and how to support young people with **mental health problems**. The whole group agreed that the issue of coordination between agencies is a constant challenge.

**16. Are you aware of good practices, initiatives or programmes that contribute to better protection of the most vulnerable groups of children? Are you aware of cross-border initiatives in this area (e.g. cooperation, or participation in common projects, with organisations in other Member States, exchanges of good practice, etc.)?**

The second meeting of the ESN policy & practice group children and families focused on quality monitoring systems, including examples of working practices.

For example, a new law concerning special support for children and young people at risk of poverty was passed in Denmark in 2006. This law introduced **quality standards in the provision of social work** for children **and improved knowledge sharing** among stakeholders. One element of the reform was the introduction of a system of notification for children and young people at risk that enables the **transfer of administrative data on families** when they move to another city. Local authorities are

required to carry out a needs assessment within the four months from the time that notification is received. This needs assessment covers aspects such as child development and behavior, family matters, school and education, health and well-being, leisure time and friendships. This assessment is then used as the basis for an action plan with specific measures and objectives.

In the Czech Republic, children's services are regulated in the framework of "**socio-legal protection**". "Socio-legal protection" services have the duty to ensure that the rights of all children are guaranteed. Consequently, they need to be notified when children are perceived to be in a risk situation. Socio-legal protection services are provided free of charge and they include shelters for mothers and children, accommodation for children in case of an emergency, counseling, probation programmes for young offenders and leisure and educational activities such as family planning. Children with special needs are also assisted by social workers, who work in partnership with teachers, judges, probation officers, policemen, psychologists, etc. Social workers also assist parents in order to guarantee a positive environment for children.

They are encouraged to give their opinion in different ways depending on their age (e.g. asking their friends or relatives, through play, etc.). Having their feedback rather than having them as passive recipients of services enables social workers to make the interests of the child the centre of their work.

In the province of Barcelona (Spain), the Office of Children and Young People is responsible for the **design of policies for children and young people**. The Office monitors the situation of children and young people in foster or adoptive families. It is also responsible for the management of the Observatory of the Rights of the Child, whose main task is the monitoring and analysis of child protection policies. The office also provides support to registered organizations in the implementation of the Observatory's recommendations as well as ensuring the fulfillment of the UN Rights of the Child and European legislation in this matter.

The services provided include services for children with special needs, the creation of local networks for supporting children and young people, **psychological and legal support** for victims of violence or sexual abuse, support for young people addicted to drugs and respite care for disabled people. There is also a lot of emphasis on raising awareness about the rights of the child.

As regards **cross-border initiatives** with the aim of protecting vulnerable children, the European Social Services Conference 2010 hosted a workshop **on international cooperation between the governments of Catalonia and Morocco** to ensure the protection of unaccompanied migrant minors.

This workshop presented a notable example of international cooperation designed to address the problems of care arising from the entry of unaccompanied foreign minors into the EU. The project, aimed at mutual understanding between Morocco and Europe

to improve the systems of child protection, has received the support of the Thematic Group Migration of the UN System in Morocco (UNHCR, IOM, UNDP, Unicef).

**17. What concrete initiatives do you consider necessary to better protect the rights and promote the best interests of vulnerable children? Do you consider that the EU can contribute to these initiatives and if so how?**

ESN welcomes **initiatives that support the work that social services** across Europe undertake with vulnerable children. In addition to the duty to **safeguard children**, the work of public services for children is underpinned by **values** that put the interests of the child before other considerations.

ESN's working group on children and families produced a report, in which we promoted policies and action at EU level which would encourage:

- Extra **help for the most vulnerable families** to access mainstream services and achieve a healthy work/life balance
- Continuous **assessments and monitoring** of a child's needs
- **Partnership** working with colleagues from education, health and justice
- The pursuit of **excellence** in social work practice

Local public social services are an important agent in guaranteeing the **rights of vulnerable children**. In order to set out an effective strategy on the rights of children in Europe, the EU therefore needs to reflect the challenges faced by social services. This may particularly include promoting the shift from institutional to community care (e.g. fostering, adoption, prevention work) for children whose parents cannot look after them. The EU has positively contributed to framing child poverty in a multidimensional perspective and to maintaining the eradication of child poverty and exclusion as a priority in national policy agendas, mainly through the social OMC. Yet more needs to be done to recognise that local public services play a vital role in supporting vulnerable children in their families or in their local communities and that this contribution needs to be properly resourced by all Member States.

In many ways, the child rights and child poverty paradigms are different ways of talking about improving the lives of children in Europe. In order to do so, their rights have to be safeguarded. Here it is where local public social services play a fundamental role. Therefore, it makes sense that also at the European level the work of DG JLS and DG EMPL be complementary and that the two DGs should reinforce each other's work to the above-mentioned common end.

At the same time as the DG JLS is considering a revision of the EU's child rights framework, DG EMPL is building on the social OMC with the launch of the European Platform against Poverty. We hope that it will help ESN and its members, as leaders and managers of social services in local and regional governments, to play their full role in fighting child poverty by learning from experiences in other countries and collaborating with actors from other sectors in policy dialogue at European level.

## Conclusion

In the framework of the 2020 Strategy, the Commission has identified five main objectives for 2020, which will serve to guide the process on a European level and will be translated into national objectives.

One of these fields is the fight against poverty. In the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, special emphasis should be placed on the fight against child poverty, as they form one of society's most vulnerable groups and by reducing child poverty it is possible to break the cycle by which poverty is passed on from generation to generation; hence, reducing poverty in general.

ESN is committed to supporting social services to make a practice led contribution to the EU and national policy making for children and young people and welcomes the efforts of the Belgian presidency of the EU to obtain a firm commitment from Heads of State to fight child poverty.

*Contact: [alfonso.montero@esn-eu.org](mailto:alfonso.montero@esn-eu.org) / 0044 1273 739 039*