

Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being

**ESN analysis of the SPC report to the EC
August 2012**

The European Social Network (ESN) brings together people who are key to the design and delivery of local public social services across Europe to learn from each other and contribute their experience and expertise to building effective social policy and practice. Together with our Members we are determined to provide quality public social services to all and especially to help improve the lives of the most vulnerable in our societies.



Introduction

In the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Commission plans to publish a Council Recommendation on Child Poverty. To do so, the Commission has been working with representatives from Member States within the Social Protection Committee (SPC) on the text of the future Recommendation. On 27 June 2012, the SPC, the body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the social protection and social inclusion process in the EU, adopted an advisory report to the European Commission (EC) on the Recommendation called *Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being*.

The EC will build on this report to develop a Recommendation on child poverty and well-being, which is intended to be adopted by the end of 2012. This Recommendation will give children visibility in the context of the *smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* that the EU envisages. It could serve as a resource to help Member States achieve the targets to lift 20 million people out of poverty & social exclusion and reduce the rate of early school-leaving to below 10% by 2020. This Recommendation comes at a crucial time in which the economic crisis and austerity measures are challenging the quality of life for many children, particularly the most disadvantaged and socially excluded (children with disabilities, children with mental health problems, children in alternative care, children at risk of neglect/abuse, undocumented child migrants/asylum seekers, Roma and traveller children). From ESN's perspective, this Recommendation should champion disadvantaged children, with whom local public social services (ESN's members) typically have contact.

The SPC advisory report makes a number of proposals on:

- common principles in key areas such as resources, services and child participation.
- a range of indicators of child well-being
- recommendations to the EC and the Member States with regard to follow-up and the most adequate framework for implementing and monitoring the Recommendation in the context of Europe 2020.

ESN's analysis of the report mainly focuses on access to quality services for children and the extent to which the report has emphasized the need to take their voices into account in public services. Likewise, it analyses the indicators suggested and evaluates the extent to which these are specific to the child's wellbeing rather than their parents' income or employment and in how far they capture the situation of children outside traditional households, children in care and in institutions. It will not be feasible to set up some of the indicators we propose at EU level, but the Recommendation could propose that Member States nevertheless establish them at national level.

ESN welcomes the SPC report, which comprises several of the elements ESN had been advocating and believes it is a good step towards the Recommendation as a framework for policy reassessment and action. ESN has strongly supported the idea expressed in the report that child poverty is multidimensional and that reducing child poverty cannot only be done by improving the material well-being of children and families, parents' income and employment, but also (and primarily) focusing on the emotional, physical and social development of the child.

In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ESN supports that the driver for action should be *the best interest of the child* based on their needs and wishes. However, we acknowledge that in many cases improving children's lives also means improving parents' lives (or the lives of other adults involved in the child's upbringing). ESN members in public social services are among the actors responsible for implementing the UNCRC, so ESN welcomes that the report cites and is consistent with the UNCRC. In addition, ESN would remind the Commission that the Recommendation should underline the links between the various key services (education, health and social services), the importance of multi-agency work and the mutual interdependence of benefits and services.

This analysis covers the following aspects of the SPC report:

1. Access to quality services by section (early childhood education and care, education, health, housing and social services)
2. Future recommendations on access to quality services by section
3. Indicators and further suggestions

Proposals for wording that the Commission may wish to use in the proposal for a Recommendation appear in this colour.

1. Access to quality services

ESN welcomes that the SPC report specifically discusses public services access for children and families across Europe, since ESN is seeking to ensure recognition within the Recommendation of the role that social services play for children and families. These services have a particular responsibility for safeguarding children, which is legally established in many countries. Beyond this, their work impacts on children's lives in many ways – through support to children, parents, carers and the wider community from infancy, through education and into adulthood.

ESN believes that access to services is not only important to reduce child poverty and improve child's wellbeing but it is also essential to achieve the Europe 2020 targets such as the reduction of early school leavers below 10% and a 40% of young people in tertiary education. Basic provision for every child should be combined with a higher level of support for each child who needs it in line with the principle of 'progressive universalism'. ESN Members assert that universal services are needed to help them identify which children need additional help/protection.

Following discussions with our members, ESN has proposed that a number of overarching principles on key services be incorporated into the Recommendation:

- regular strategic assessment of children's needs in a local area
- structural coordination between services and individual cooperation between professionals
- a duty for all services to alert child protection authorities in cases of neglect and harm
- quality monitoring and continuous improvement based on outcomes in children's lives
- accessibility of services to minority ethnic groups
- accessibility of services to children from a disadvantaged background
- a legal requirement to listen to the child, which should be acknowledged by all agencies.

Although some may feel that these elements are taken for granted in Europe today, they are not universally recognised or not implemented. Even if it is not legally binding on Member States, the Recommendation is a good opportunity to re-assert them.

Early childhood education and childcare services (ECEC)

ESN welcomes the recognition in the SPC report that ECEC should be made universally available, but differs from the SPC in the idea that the universality of the service removes *'the need to engage in the task of identifying and targeting the most disadvantaged'*. ESN members providing these services tell us that basic provision for every child must be complemented by targeted measures for the most disadvantaged. Universal services are needed because they help to identify which children need additional help/protection.

ESN welcomes the SPC reference to the participation of children in ECEC across Europe and recognises that, in addition to availability, ECEC services should continuously improve quality and performance, by measuring changes in a child's life and wellbeing. We know from our members that services still do not adequately assess whether what they are doing is effective. If it is not effective, then it is not a good use of public and professional resources.

ESN welcomes the SPC report reference to enhancing the quality of ECEC services and agrees that *'the staff should be fully prepared to understand and meet the individual needs and interests of each child'*. ESN suggests ECEC professionals have specific skills and training (please see below under *Suggestions on future Recommendation*).

ESN would have liked to see a greater emphasis on the role of ECEC services in identifying children and families with additional needs or facing particular problems, including risks of child neglect or abuse; and the need to have mechanisms in place so that they can then ensure that specialist services are alerted and help is provided. ESN welcomes the references that the report does to the difficulties for disadvantaged children and families to access quality ECEC. **ECEC access should not be dependent on income; families from a poor socio-economic background should not be stigmatised in the way that they access these services.**

Education

ESN Members' attitude to the role of education is shaped by working with schools, particularly to support the most vulnerable children. ESN welcomes the remarks on *'integrated educational approaches focusing on educational quality, social skills and child's participation'*. Indeed, schools should take a holistic approach to child development, which is not only based on academic achievements but also on social and emotional competences, so improving every child's overall well-being and development.

However, the preventative approach within education is not sufficiently highlighted in the report. ESN values the importance given by the SPC to a greater involvement of parents in education, but would like to see the role of guardians and other adults in the child's upbringing also recognised. Likewise, ESN welcomes the SPC call to prevent segregated

schools settings, since ESN believes that **schools should enable every child to progress in mainstream education respecting the child's needs and wishes.**

ESN welcomes the SPC remark that fighting ESL 'means integrated multi-level responses linking the home, the child, the school, adult education, community and relevant services'. However, ESN thinks that the SPC report should have also highlighted the role of local authorities, as was done in the Recommendation on Early School Leaving, which stated: *'Strategies for combating ESL have to take as a starting point an analysis of the main reasons behind ESL for different groups of pupils, regions, localities or schools...'*

ESN believes that **local authorities/municipalities are well-placed to carry out such an analysis, bringing together the knowledge and experience of local partners, services and citizens to create adequate strategies, on the basis of a legitimate local democratic process¹.**

Healthcare

In ESN's view, particular emphasis in the Recommendation should be placed on access to healthcare of the most disadvantaged children. Therefore, we welcome the fact that the SPC report has a section on *'factors behind inequality in children's health outcomes'*. ESN agrees with the SPC that *'while most EU countries ensure a form of universal access to healthcare, many obstacles remain related to poor supply in disadvantaged areas or for disadvantaged communities'*.

In ESN's view, health services should seek involvement from social services where necessary to ensure that disadvantaged children and families benefit from universal access to health care and follow up on health advice (see below for specific wording proposals on the future Recommendation).

We also welcome the SPC focus on prevention, since preventive measures reduce health inequalities. Such measures should include pre-natal care in order to identify potential problems early. If there is a problem and depending on the nature of this problem, the follow-up could be done by doctors and social workers – here again, cooperation between services is essential.

Finally, ESN welcomes the reference made to outreach services for disadvantaged communities and to training staff to work in a multicultural environment. ESN has previously emphasised that **there is a need for a strong cultural adaptation for local health (and social) services through a clear understanding of cultural and migration needs.**

Environment and housing

The SPC states that *'children have the right and need to live in a safe, clean and healthy living environment'*; ESN would like to add that **children should be able to grow up in a child- and family-friendly local environment in which not only key public services are in place but there is also access to leisure, culture, sports and other facilities.**

¹ ESN Position Paper "Tackling Early School Leaving in Europe", June 2011

ESN welcomes the SPC acknowledgement that housing policies should raise quality standards and help young parents and low-income families with multiple disadvantages. ESN believes that one way of doing that is **with good and affordable housing that is planned and provided based on various rental and buying schemes that are accessible to people on a low income.**

In regards to territorial planning, ESN welcomes the proposal of the SPC in regards to *'prioritise the development of areas with multiple disadvantages'* and the replacement of segregated areas *'with a social mix of housing'*. Noting that **the concentration of disadvantage leads to problems, there could be a requirement to plan X% of affordable housing in housing programmes, both public and private.**

Finally, ESN believes that planning should not only focus on housing but also on the infrastructure surrounding homes. Local planners should use the concept of "child-friendly places" so that when they make decisions, they ask themselves "how would this affect children in my town or district?" This implies consultation with children and families at local level, e.g. children's councils.

Social services and child protection

ESN welcomes the SPC recognition that national governments must protect children against violence and abuse (in line with Article 19 of the UNCRC). The SPC sees *'poverty and social exclusion as underlying factors in placements in alternative care'* but also notes that *'key factors such as parents' health, lack of personal skills, substance abuse can be exacerbated by economic precariousness which puts a toll on parents availability and emotional wellbeing'*. ESN had previously highlighted these circumstances when Patricia Kearney from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (ESN member in the UK) said at ESN's seminar 'Investing in Children' that "whilst child protection issues can occur in all kinds of families, poverty is a stress upon good parenting".

In certain countries such as France, legislation does not exclude poverty/material deprivation as a reason for taking a child into care (though only if it represents a danger to the health, security or morality of the child)², whilst in others such as the UK not having suitable accommodation may be a reason³. Social services would (or should) normally be working to ameliorate the situation of the whole family, before pursuing the removal of a child through the courts, unless there is risk of harm or neglect. However, in most EU countries child welfare legislation excludes poverty/material deprivation as a reason for the child to be taken into care⁴. The family circumstances that lead up to a Court decision to place a child in care are often complex and involve a mixture of factors so it may be difficult to identify a single determining factor. Substance abuse, alcohol addiction and poor mental health may all be involved.

² Article 375, paragraph 1 of Loi n° 2007-293 du 5 mars 2007 réformant la protection de l'enfance (1). Available at: http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=E4BC9674E0967CC86CE870CFBBCF65C4.tpdjo06v_3?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000823100&dateTexte=20120814

³ Article 20, paragraph 1 of 1989 Children Act. Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41>

⁴ Children in alternative care, National Surveys, Eurochild, January 2010.

As for the role of social services, the assessment of risk is the core of child protection work for children's social workers. They have to put in place appropriate support to prevent neglect and abuse. The decision to take a child into the care of the State is made by a Court, on the advice of social workers and in some cases the police.

It is clear that if a child is at risk of harm it is very difficult to improve their wellbeing or to lift them out of poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, ESN welcomes the recognition made by the SPC that investment in high quality social services is essential in helping to lift children out of poverty.

ESN agrees with the SPC that the higher prevalence of children from a disadvantaged background in alternative care calls for a preventive approach. ESN has previously recalled that **child protection and social services should act on the principle of prevention and early intervention by offering appropriate support both to the child and to their parent(s)/guardian(s).**

In regards to parenting support services, ESN recognises their fundamental role in prevention and is conducting research with members; results will be available in the autumn.

2. Suggestions on future recommendations on access to quality services

Early Childhood Education and Care

ESN proposes that the Commission in its Recommendation suggest **further developing ECEC** as the best tool to help reduce the gaps for the most disadvantaged. There should be the recognition that **holistic ECEC programmes take account of a child's physical, psychological, emotional, nutritional and social needs and development and adapt according to different stages of a child's development.**

Regarding **the qualifications of ECEC staff**, Member States may wish to ensure training covers the following areas: developmental child psychology; risk and protective factors; optimal relationship ability; language development skills; engagement with children and their parents; availability of other key services; advice on parenting; balance between discipline and free play.

In regards to **the affordability of ECEC**, ESN proposes that the Commission strengthens the text of the Recommendation in the following way: **Families from a poor socio-economic background should be encouraged to access ECEC services and the competent authorities should make sure that these families are not stigmatised in the way that they access these services.** However, ESN understands that governments may allow for frameworks under which there is some means-testing to allow those who can afford to pay more, to do so.

ESN would like to suggest **two further points** to be incorporated into the text of the Recommendation:

- **ECEC should begin during pregnancy with support especially for first-time parents on health, development and learning. Member States should make sure that every child**

from the age of three (ideally from the age of one) until the age of compulsory schooling has access to a place in ECEC services.

- ECEC services should be capable of identifying children and families with additional needs or facing particular problems, including risks of child neglect or abuse; they should then work with specialist services so that they are alerted and help is provided.

Education

In regards to the role of schools as **an early warning system**, ESN suggests a more specific wording for the Recommendation:

The education system should be part of the early intervention mechanism, in which besides teaching, attention is paid to the health, social and the emotional needs of children. To do so, there should be greater involvement of health, social services and education. Educators and teachers should be trained to recognise the early signs of distress and have access to professional advice from specialist social services.

ESN agrees with the SPC in the need to devote specific efforts to **a greater involvement of parents** and local communities but insists on the need to emphasise the role of those outside traditional households and therefore, suggests a more careful and inclusive wording as follows: *A greater involvement of (biological) parents and guardians should be sought in children's education; particular focus should be placed on children in foster families and corporate parents (e.g. local authorities, regional and national administrations) since children cared for by the state perform worse⁵.*

ESN would like to suggest **one more proposal** to be incorporated into the text of the Recommendation:

- *Schools should do everything possible to bring the necessary resources to every child, particularly the most disadvantaged, to enable them to progress in mainstream education, rather than being placed in an alternative form of education. In these decisions, the child should have the opportunity to express their needs and wishes.*

Health

The Recommendation should encourage Member States to provide **universal access to health care for all children** and **assess the obstacles faced by the most disadvantaged**. In this regard, ESN suggests making the wording of the Recommendation more specific as follows: *Health services should seek involvement from social services where necessary to ensure that disadvantaged children and families benefit from preventive health care and follow up on health advice like anybody else.* Member States may wish to consider specific measures such as reserving a percentage of places in crèches for children from single-parent families or establishing specific child and family health centres.

In regards to **the reduction of health inequalities**, ESN suggests that particular support is given to two groups of disadvantaged children who have been identified by social services

⁵ Young people from a public care background pathways to education in Europe. Available at: <http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/yippe/>

as having particular difficulties in accessing health care: children from a poor socio-economic background and children from ethnic minorities (particularly Roma and travellers).

Children from a poor socio-economic background may need additional support to ensure they have adequate health care, requiring the cooperation of health and social professionals working with these groups. Whilst a lack of money can be a barrier to health provision and healthy activities (fee-based medical services, sport, healthy eating), parents may also not be educated about healthy habits.

ESN would like to suggest that **one more proposal** in relation to the second point: **Key services should be adapted to ensure that people from an ethnic minority, especially Roma and travellers, are able to access them.** Where people from different cultures and religions live together; services need to understand how (other) cultures work, as traditional methods may not be effective.

Housing

ESN highlights the recommendation made by the SPC regarding **children in care**. ESN would like to see in the Recommendation a proposal for **an alternative home-like environment (foster family, small group home) with appropriate care and support encouraged for children in care**. Member States may wish to review their housing and local planning provision to ensure that new affordable housing does not lead to a high concentration of social problems.

Support children and families in the child's best interest

In the final Recommendation, **ESN would like to see this title replaced** by 'Social Services and Child Protection'. In ESN's view, *'supporting children and families having in mind the child's best interest'* should be the driver of any action, rather than just of this section. In the same way that access to education and health are headlines, social services and child protection should be one of the headlines under 'Access to quality services'.

Key services (education, health and general social services) should have in place a clear system to ensure children's safety and wellbeing as far as possible and alert specialist services (e.g. child protection) where additional support and protection for a child may be needed. ESN would like to see that **the Recommendation strengthens childcare services** by recommending that **key services** (education, health and social services) provide help and support to parents/guardians and family members involved in childcare or advise them on where such help and support can be sought.

In regards to the complex issue of **preventing children's removal**, child protection and social services should act on the principle of prevention and early intervention by offering appropriate support both to the child and to their parent(s)/guardian(s), such as parenting programmes, family support work, parents' self-help groups, mental health or addiction support where necessary. Child protection and social services should assess the situation of the child and family and the risk of harm and put in place appropriate support to prevent neglect and abuse.

Governments should make an **explicit commitment to avoid institutionalisation** (including orphanages or special residential schools) and develop alternatives for children currently living in institutions through this wording: For instance, an alternative home-like environment (foster family, small group home) with appropriate care and support must be available for children cared for by the state.

ESN believes it is important to talk about **children's participation** specifically in the area of **child protection** as well as generally under the third pillar. It is a specialist area and one where the right to be heard is considered critical in social work practice today. Therefore, ESN suggests the Commission's Recommendation specifically recognises that: **the voice of the child must be heard and recorded in decisions concerning his/her future. If the wishes of the child cannot be taken into account then clear reasons must be given by competent authorities.** Finally, ESN believes that the Recommendation should recognise that **children in public care and involved in child protection cases should have access to independent legal representation.**

3. Suggested indicators on access to quality services

This part of the assessment analyses the indicators suggested by the SPC. We are particularly concerned to ensure that there are some indicators on a child's wellbeing, rather than solely their parents' income or employment. Although the household and employment statistics are those that are available at EU level, Member States ought to put in place (if they have not already done so) a more sophisticated set of indicators. The household and employment data also does not capture the situation of children outside traditional households, notably children in care and in institutions.

We welcome the recognition that the SPC has given to developing a set of indicators that covers the three policy pillars of the Recommendation. However, it is easy to see from EU household income statistics that more families with three or more children, one-parent families and children living in jobless households are at risk of poverty, but these are not necessarily the determining factors.

A more sophisticated analysis of the causes of poverty and social exclusion has to be undertaken. However, some children have been invisible in the statistics on child poverty, e.g. children in institutions, victims of violence, abuse and neglect, and children with disabilities. ESN has previously emphasised that in their national strategies, Member States should report on the situation of these groups of children, for example the number of children in care. Comparisons could be made between the number of children living in institutions, living with their biological families, with foster families and in institutions.

ESN believes that looking at the provision of ECEC services from the age of 4 is not enough for various reasons; 4 is the age of compulsory schooling in several Member States and the provision of services for those at the age of 4 and upwards is already addressed within the 95% EU 2020 Target⁶. Instead, ESN believes that 10 years after, the commitment agreed at Barcelona in 2002 should be further developed as follows.

⁶ More information available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/childhood_en.htm

Taking into account the scientific evidence of investing in the early years and UNICEF proposals for the 0-5 age range, ESN members have suggested that family support should begin during pregnancy and ECEC ideally from the age of one.

Therefore, ESN suggests Member States establish a set of indicators on ECEC analysing:

- provision of services (private vs. public and contracting out services by public authorities)
- coverage rate of demand in the 0-3 age range
- proportion of households not having a ECEC place
- professional/child ratio
- proportion of children in vulnerable situations.

In regards to early school leaving, ESN believes that in addition to accounting for the proportion of students leaving education early, Member States should also assess vulnerability factors (disability, migrant status, whether the child is in alternative care, has been abused or bullied and whether children participate in decision-making processes in schools).

The set of indicators presented in the report doesn't account for the number of children involved with social services, but ESN believes that this information is essential and suggests that Member States collect data regarding the proportion of households in touch with social services and analyse the reasons, particularly the proportion of abused children or who have suffered violence (including sexual) at home or externally.

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