

Investing in Children

ESN analysis of the European Recommendation

ESN working paper

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The European Social Network brings together people who design, manage and deliver social services in public authorities across Europe. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.



Introduction

[The Commission Recommendation “Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage”](#) was published in February 2013 as part of the [Social Investment Package for Growth and Cohesion \(SIP\)](#)¹. It is the result of work undertaken by the European Commission, Member states and stakeholders over the last three years. The Recommendation gives children visibility in the context of Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Tackling and preventing child poverty and improving children’s wellbeing is essential to help Member states achieve the target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million as well as to reduce the rate of early school-leaving to below 10% by 2020.

The Recommendation comes at a time in which the economic crisis and austerity measures are having a major impact on the quality of life for many children, particularly as public spending cuts affect prevention services most of all². Within the Recommendation, the case for investing in children has an ethical and human rights basis, since all EU Member states have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, the case for investing in children is also economic³: policies to alleviate child poverty and promote children’s wellbeing are a social investment that provides a good basis for future economic growth and social cohesion and benefits of investing in children services exceed those on most public projects⁴.

The European Social Network has been as a key stakeholder in helping develop the Recommendation and welcomes the Recommendation for three reasons. First, it recognises the child as a subject of rights by themselves. Second, it takes a multidimensional approach which takes into account not only lack of income but also access to quality education, health and social services. Third, it recognises that policies should focus on children who face increased risks due to multiple disadvantages⁵.

This policy assessment **analyses** the principles of the Recommendation against available evidence. It **compares** principles to previous ESN proposals and includes comments from directors of public social services for children & families. Finally, it **suggests** ways to translate the principles into policy and practice at local level.

The Recommendation calls on Member States to develop integrated strategies based on **three key pillars**:

1. Access to adequate resources
2. Access to affordable quality services
3. Children’s right to participate

¹ The main impact of the SWDs will be determined by how they are mainstreamed through the Europe 2020 and the European Semester processes, cohesion policies and EU funds, but most importantly in terms of agenda setting by Member States; for example, if there are Council Conclusions on these issues.

² European Social Network (2012): Family and Parenting Support -the role of public services.

³ Heckman J., The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children. Available [here](#).

⁴ Rolnick A. & Grunewald R. (2003): Early Childhood Development with a High Public Return, Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank. Available [here](#).

⁵ The Recommendation mentions explicitly the following groups of children: children with special needs or disabilities, children with mental health problems, children in alternative care, street children, undocumented child migrants, children of imprisoned parents, Roma and children in households with particular risks of poverty such as single and large families).

1. Analysis of the first pillar: Access to adequate resources

The two key aspects of the Recommendation under this pillar are:

- The strong link between **parents' participation in the labour market** and children's living conditions
- Provision of **adequate living standards** through a combination of cash and in-kind benefits

Parents' participation in the labour market

The Recommendation emphasises three elements in this area:

- Identifying and tackling disincentives to enter and remain in the labour market
- Support for parents furthest from the labour market to return to work
- Measures to balance work and parenting.

In terms of tackling **disincentives**, the gap in pension contributions has been identified as a major problem mostly for mothers who have had a career break to bring up children⁶. A way of putting this principle into practice would be to maximise the opportunities for employees who have taken parental leave to continue or enhance their pension contributions to compensate for their loss of routine contributions.

Additional support from key services may be required in order that those **parents furthest from the labour market** are able to return to work. This is particularly relevant in terms of childcare services and support for lone parents, which brings us into the territory of the 'active inclusion' recommendation⁷. The problem of in-work poverty and the lack of affordable childcare have been recognised⁸. For instance, even after deducting governments' tax benefits and providing policies for working parents, out of pocket expenses for two pre-school children could be at least 20% of the family budget⁹.

The focus in the Recommendation is on parents' access to the labour market. Having a job can be a necessary precondition to tackle child and family poverty. However, precarious employment, long and unsociable working hours and low-paid jobs might also entail their own problems for families¹⁰. A way to incentivise parents to enter the labour market would be to develop a comprehensive policy that includes leave arrangements for both parents¹¹. Employment law on parental leave and flexible working should maximise (both) parents' choice of how to balance family and working life. Particular attention should be paid to parents on a low income to make sure that they benefit from these arrangements and are provided with extra support if needed to go back to work¹².

⁶ EC (2010): Green Paper towards adequate, sustainable and safe European pension systems, COM (2010) 365/3.

⁷ Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (notified under document number C(2008) 5737). Available [here](#).

⁸ EC (2013): Staff Working Document "Follow-up on the implementation by the Member States of the 2008 European Commission recommendation on active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market", Brussels, 20.2.2013.

⁹ OECD, "Can Parents Afford to Work?: Childcare Costs, Tax-Benefit Policies and Work Incentives", in OECD, Benefits and Wages 2007: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing.

¹⁰ Greve B. (2012): Reconciliation of work and family life in four different welfare states, NEUJOBWORKING PAPER NO.D5.5. Available [here](#).

¹¹ EC (2010): Directive 2010/18/EU, OJL 68 of 18.3.2010

Adequate living standards

The second aspect of the first pillar focuses on ensuring adequate living standards through a combination of benefits and services. ESN members had analysed the initial outline for the Recommendation in November 2011¹³ and affirmed the need for a combination of cash benefits for all children and additional cash benefits for those on a low income and/or to assist with particular challenges (housing, disability, health conditions). The manner of distribution of cash benefits to children from low-income households should avoid stigmatising those children and maximise the chances of the money being used to benefit the child.

The Recommendation suggests delivering means-tested or targeted benefits and permitting a discretionary use of conditionality, as regards for example parents' behaviour or children's school attendance. This principle has been applied in projects with Roma students to prevent early school leaving, where conditionality centred on school achievement, school frequency and participation in mentorship.¹⁴ The final recommendations of the project actually suggest establishing a personalised minimum threshold for each student in order to receive the scholarship, whilst mentoring should be offered to all students¹⁵.

This is a positive and documented experience of how targeted support and incentives for disadvantaged children can reduce drop out, increase school retention and students' performance. However, as can be seen from the example, the success of the project is attributed to the fact that cash benefits are provided alongside supportive services, such as family, peer and mentoring services.

This experience goes hand in hand with the feeling expressed by directors of social services:

“Benefits are rarely going to be enough to help the families that social services regularly see; they need additional advice and support to help them improve their lives. Public policy should see services and benefits as working together. There should be a stronger emphasis on joint provision of benefits alongside services, whether universal or targeted depending on need” – Christian Fillet, Director of Social Services, Municipality of Willebroek (VVOS), Belgium

¹³ On 14-15 November 2011 ESN organised the Seminar “Investing in Children: Early Years Services and Child Protection” to input onto the EC Recommendation “Investing in Children”. More information is available [here](#).

¹⁴ An evaluation of one of these projects was presented at ESN seminar “Vulnerable Youth in Transition: Care and Support into Adulthood”. The website is available [here](#).

¹⁵ RCRC (2012): Evaluation of the “Support for High School Roma students in Romania” project.

2. Analysis of the second pillar: Access to affordable quality services

Access to services is essential to reduce child poverty and improve child's wellbeing. This is also recognised in the Europe 2020 targets such as the reduction of early school leaving below 10% and the participation of 40% of young people in tertiary education. This is the rationale argued by the European Commission in its [3rd biennial report on Social Services of General Interest](#), where it recognises the contribution that social services can play in implementing the Europe 2020 Strategy and notes that Country Specific Recommendations addressed to 18 Member states cover a variety of social services such as childcare and family support.

They encouraged the Member states to increase the provision of these services, to make them more effective and more efficient, to improve their quality and to ensure they are widely available and affordable. The [Annual Growth Survey 2013](#)¹⁶ asks the Member states to ensure "broad access to affordable and high-quality services such as social and health services, childcare, housing and energy supply".

ESN has advocated general principles for social services for children & families:

- Access to services should be universal with a basic services provision for every child and higher intensity as the needs of the child increases with targeted measures for the most disadvantaged.
- Key services should be planned and delivered according to regular strategic assessment of the needs and preferences of children and families (based both on socio-economic and demographic data but also on the qualitative consultation of children and families).
- A child's needs can rarely be solved solely by one service, in particular where a child is from a disadvantaged background and faces multiple problems. Therefore, key services should be well-coordinated to ensure that professionals have an understanding of what each service offers, how to help a child and their family access the full range of services and have the confidence to work with professionals from other services.
- In cases of risk of abuse or neglect, key services should have in place a clear system to ensure children's safety and wellbeing as far as possible and alert specialist services where additional support and even protection for a child may be needed.
- Key services should continuously improve quality and performance in relation to relevant outcomes (i.e. changes in a child's life and wellbeing) for children, drawing on data and available evidence.
- Children from a poor socio-economic background should not be disadvantaged in access to key services and may need additional support to ensure they have good education and health care.
- Key services should be adapted to ensure that people from an ethnic minority, especially Roma and travellers are able to access them.

¹⁶ The Annual Growth Survey launches the European semester for economic policy coordination, which ensures Member States align their budgetary and economic policies with the Stability and Growth Pact and the Europe 2020 strategy. It is the basis for building a common understanding about the priorities for action at the national and EU level.

Under this pillar, the Commission recommends Member states to invest in **5 services**:

- A. Early childhood education and care
- B. Education systems impact on equal opportunities
- C. The responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children
- D. The provision of safe and adequate housing and living environment
- E. The enhancement of family support and quality alternative care

A. Investing in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Under ECEC, the Commission's recommendations to the Council of Ministers focus on three key points:

- The provision of affordable, adapted and inclusive ECEC
- Mechanisms to incentivise the participation of disadvantaged children in ECEC regardless parents' labour market situation
- The role of the parents in ECEC programmes

In line with existing EU policy commitments¹⁷, Member states should make sure that every child from the age of three until the age of compulsory schooling has access to a place in ECEC services. Although there has been a general increase of the EU average in participation, a number of countries are far below the benchmark¹⁸. Investment in ECEC services must focus not only on accessibility but also on quality. If ECEC placements are of low quality, this provision would be "a waste of money", according to Professor Edward Melhuish from Birkbeck College (London) at 2011 ESN Seminar on Early Childcare Services¹⁹.

In some European countries there have been very high levels of provision of early childcare services, such as France, Germany, Northern Italy, the Netherlands, and now the UK. Some of these countries are now putting into place policies and research mechanisms to try to maximise the quality of provision. ESN's general principle on quality and performance for key services is clearly relevant here.

It is important that the Commission asks Member States specifically to incentivise the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As per ESN's proposals for general principles on access to key services, access to quality ECEC should not be dependent on income; likewise, families from a poor socio-economic background should not be stigmatised in the way that they access these services.

¹⁷ The European benchmark in the Education and Training 2020 strategy (not considered to be a target) to be reached by individual countries by 2020 suggests that at least 95% of children between years of 4 year old and the age of starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education across the EU by 2020.

¹⁸ In 2009 the early childhood education participation rate was 91.7%. Information taken from: Background Paper Update on European policy cooperation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and early school leaving (ESL) for the Meeting of the Stakeholder Advisory Group on ECEC/ESL in DG EAC (at which ESN participates).

¹⁹ On 14-15 November 2011 ESN organised the Seminar "Investing in Children: Early Years Services and Child Protection" to input onto the EC Recommendation "Investing in Children". More information is available [here](#).

The rationale behind universal ECEC provision is that if certain services were only targeted at the disadvantaged, this may increase discrimination, so the position of the disadvantaged may worsen. From research²⁰, it is known that disadvantaged children not only learn from their peers but also from the environment in which they are. Therefore, they benefit from mixing with other children. In addition, ESN Members recognise that the universal provision of services can act as a preventive method, helping to identify families that need parenting support or children who may be at risk of neglect or abuse.

There is a wealth of data from life course studies linking adversity in early life to poor literacy and educational attainment, anti-social and criminal behaviour, substance abuse and poor mental and physical health. According to Esping-Andersen²¹, the assurance of high quality day care could be the single most effective policy in homogenising early childhood investments and reducing inequalities in educational attainment and income. Early education investments have been compared to other kinds of public investment, with the conclusion that they a return that far exceeds the return on most public projects²².

It has been argued that funding should be directed to early education because of its long-term benefits. Nobel Prize winner James Heckman describes how individual productivity can be fostered by investment in young children, particularly children in poverty or other adverse circumstances²³. Participation of disadvantaged children in targeted high quality childcare programmes is particularly beneficial and can be considerably more effective than giving families of disadvantaged children unrestricted cash transfers²⁴.

In regards to the importance of working with parents, ESN welcomes the emphasis placed on ECEC's role in supporting parents as main educators and the use of ECEC as an early warning system.

“The importance of ECEC services working with parents cannot be over emphasised. The early years is actually when parents are often more receptive to working with services. For instance, in France the collective participation of parents in ECEC infrastructures is ensured through parents’ councils and pre-school councils where parents are represented” - Marie Paule Martin Blachais, Managing Director GIP “Enfance en Danger” (National Public Institution on Child Protection Policy), France

²⁰ Very early evidence: how early can we predict future educational achievement (2003) Parenting behaviours and children’s development from infancy to early childhood: changes, continuities and contributions.

²¹ Esping-Andersen G. (2006): Families, Government and the Distribution of Skills. Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Esping-Andersen G. (2008): Childhood Investments and Skill Formation. International Tax and Public Finance, 15(1): 19-44.

²² Rolnick A. & Grunewald R. (2003): Early Childhood Development with a High Public Return, Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank. Available [here](#).

²³ Heckman J. J. (2004): The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children, Working Paper 5, Invest in Kids Working Group Committee for Economic Development.

²⁴ Currie J. (1998): The Effect of Welfare on Child Outcomes: What We Know and What We Need to Know. JCPR Working Papers, Northwestern University/University of Chicago Joint Centre for Poverty Research.

B. Improve education systems' impact on equal opportunities

The main principles in this area focus on children facing particular disadvantages such as children from migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, Roma and children in financial difficulties. ESN welcomes these principles but urges Member States to give due attention to children with disabilities and children in care, groups that are missing from this section of the Recommendation.

The Recommendation encourages Member states to implement inclusive high quality education, which promotes the emotional, social, cognitive and physical development of children. These recommendations reflect previous ESN proposals, such as the need for schools to promote a holistic approach to child development. Likewise, schools should do everything possible to bring the necessary resources to every child, including the most disadvantaged. This should enable as many as possible to progress in mainstream schools, where this respects the best interests of the child, their needs and wishes.

A particular emphasis is placed on implementing comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving encompassing prevention, intervention and compensation mechanisms. This links well with the Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving²⁵ as well as the investment priorities within the European Social Funds that are already being used by several ESN members in regional and local authorities (e.g. the regional ministry of social welfare in Galicia) to provide for second chance programmes for early school leavers²⁶.

Finally, the Commission recommends that Member States put in place measures towards enhanced cooperation between schools and parents. Research tells us that a particular focus should be placed on children in care²⁷. With this in mind, children, school staff and parents need to be seen as partners. Examples of how to implement this principle in practice would be pastoral staff based in schools linking with families in need and also other agencies, visiting teachers for Roma/travellers to help children get into and stay in schools, parent support networks, in which parenting skills are developed.

ESN believes that policy-makers should in addition take a more strategic focus on prevention and early intervention mechanisms than is present in the Recommendation. An example of how to implement this principle would be a model where social workers are assigned as contact workers for every school, new routines for collaboration in specific cases and mutual staff training and development programme²⁸. As rightly pointed out by the Commission in its Recommendation on Early School Leaving²⁹, early school leaving is not only a school issue and should be addressed across a range of family, social, health, local, employment and education measures.

²⁵ Proposal for a Council's Recommendation on Policies to reduce Early School Leaving. Available [here](#).

²⁶ These programmes are available [here](#) and [here](#).

²⁷ The YIPPEE project is the first European study of young people from public care and their educational pathways after secondary school. Available [here](#).

²⁸ A similar model is implemented by ESN member, social services in Botkyrka. Further information is available [here](#).

²⁹ Proposal for a Council's Recommendation on Policies to reduce Early School Leaving. Available [here](#).

“The law states that pupils with special needs shall get the help they need to improve their educational objectives. Though this is mainly the responsibility of the school, good interaction with social services and health care are often required.”- Pär Alexandersson, Programmes Officer, National Board for Social Welfare, Sweden

C. The responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children

The essential recommendation within this area is that Member States “ensure that all children can make full use of their universal right to health care”³⁰. More specifically, the Commission asks Member States to address the obstacles faced by children and families in vulnerable situations (costs, cultural and linguistic barriers), to invest in prevention (particularly in the early years), and to devote specific attention to certain groups (children with disabilities, mental health problems, undocumented children, pregnant teenagers and children from families with a history of substance abuse).

The Recommendation of a universal right to health implies that health services are not conditional on residency status and do not exclude children based on cultural or linguistic background. As stated in the general ESN principles for key services, there is a need for a strong cultural adaptation for local health (and social) services through a clear understanding of cultural and migration needs.

ESN members have stated³¹ that free preventive health care should be available for every child: regular check-ups and home visits in the early years should enable health professionals to identify potential health problems (physical and mental) early on and provide health advice and health care accordingly.

“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” –Martial Millaret, Director of Children and Families, Département de l’Orne (ANDASS) France

The Recommendation asks Member States to devote special attention to children in vulnerable situations. The link between vulnerability and poor health has also been recognised by ESN members.

“Poor health is a mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of poverty so that more attention should be paid to improving children’s health. Children born into poor families have poorer health as children receive lower investments in human capital, and will have poorer health as adults.”-Cate Hartigan, Assistant National Director, Disability Services, HSE, Ireland

³⁰ Article 24 of the UNCRC states:

“1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services”.

³¹ ESN Seminar “Early Years Services and Child Protection”. Information available [here](#).

ESN Members have pointed to ways to implement this: for instance, improve access to health care in rural areas, reserving a percentage of places in “crèches” for children from single-parent families, establishing specific child and family health centres similar to mother and child health services in Finland or child centres in the UK in which health and social services work together.

D. The provision of safe and adequate housing and living environment

The main recommendation of the Commission to Member States is to allow children to grow up in a safe, health and child-friendly environment that supports their development and learning needs.

“Community facilities, schools, shops, public transport, play and recreational spaces all need to be located within easy access. Design needs to take into account best practice in terms of limiting likelihood of anti-social behaviour and residents (all ages) need to be supported to have an input and play a part in addressing issues as they occur.” – Máire Igoe, Senior Executive Officer, Children's Services Unit, Dublin City Council, Ireland

The implementation of this principle in practice requires a coordinated interagency approach.

“In town planning and housing provision, cooperation amongst services is key. With this in mind, in England the government has transferred public health responsibilities from health to Local Government. Newly established Health and Wellbeing Boards will include the Local Authority's Director of Public Health and Directors of Adults and Children Social Services. This offers a platform for better integration of services, including health and housing”. – Patricia Kearney, Director of Children Services at Social Care Institute for Excellence in England

Other Commission proposals here include affordable and quality housing, avoid evictions and family separation, and avoid ghettoization through a social mix in housing. All European countries have some kind of social housing but its concentration may lead to a particular district becoming a focus for social problems. Some have become ghettos of poverty, where children grow up in a different culture to the mainstream, and stand little chance of escaping the cycle of deprivation. Social problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction/drug dealing, criminality and lack of value of education may also be prevalent. Local authorities should take measures to promote a social mix of communities and reduce the risk of a concentration of social exclusion. In practice, there could be the need to plan a percentage of ‘affordable housing’ in mixed areas.

E. The enhancement of family support and quality alternative care

The Recommendation explicitly mentions that poverty should never be a justification for removing a child from parental care. The focus here is on a legitimate but very narrow concern in a small number of countries about avoiding the removal of children from families **solely** on grounds of a low income³².

³² M. Renoux (2008): Réussir la protection de l'enfance: avec les familles en précarité, M. Cecile Renoux, ATD Quart Monde and Ed. de l'Atelier.

According to ESN members, the child's best interests must be taken as the primary consideration for any decision in this field. All the child's needs (nutrition, childcare, education, health, housing, sports, socio-cultural activities) must be covered so that they can realise their full potential. All key services should share a duty of child protection: as all children come into contact with health and education, these services, for example, are well-placed to identify potential risks and support needs for families.

The implementation of this principle means that child protection and social services together with the courts must undertake a multi-disciplinary assessment of the family situation, parenting skills, the risk of harm and the resources in the community in order to safeguard the child's wellbeing. It is on this basis that the difficult decision about placing a child in alternative care has to be taken. The needs assessment would consider whether the child's development is compromised by issues of abuse, neglect, family violence, alcohol, serious addictions as well as the possibilities to work cooperatively with parents to solve the problems identified.

"In France, social services together with child protection and justice undertake a multi-disciplinary assessment to analyse the family situation (e.g. violence, alcohol and drugs), parenting skills (e.g. abuse, neglect) to see whether the development of the child may be compromised. Likewise, resources in the community will be identified as well as ways to cooperate with parents." - Marie Paule Martin Blachais, Managing Director GIP "Enfance en Danger" (National Public Institution on Child Protection Policy), France

"The reasons to take a child into care are a combination of economic, psychological and social problems possibly combined with inappropriate social services support. For example, serious parental addictions, domestic violence and neglect are serious reasons to take into account in the needs assessment. The role of material assistance and support for families with children is essential together with a combination of community social services and services at home." - Martina Krasteva, Expert on child policy at the Agency for Child Protection, Bulgaria

Therefore, though poverty may be part of the assessment, it is never the sole reason to take a child into care. Member States' child protection policies should ensure a good alert system of concern and referral and a high-quality assessment of the needs and risks. The primary goal always has to be to ensure the child's safety, whilst also offering multi-professional support to the child and the family.

It is indeed positive that the Commission supports community-based and family-like solutions in alternative care over large-scale institutions since the text explicitly asks Member States to "stop the expansion of institutional care and promote quality, community-based and foster care within family settings". Applying this principle in practice, governments should make an explicit commitment to avoid institutionalisation (including orphanages or special residential schools) and to develop an alternative home-like environment (foster family, small group home) with appropriate care and support for children in care.

ESN welcomes that the Commission makes an explicit reference to the need to ensure that children without parental care have access to quality services, including during the transition to adulthood. ESN has previously emphasised that “particular efforts should be made by education, health and other services to prioritise and provide extra support for children in care, since evidence³³ shows that children in care typically perform poorly in education and may need extra help”³⁴. Children looked after by public authorities are likely to have a different pattern of transition to independent adulthood than other adolescents.³⁵

3. Analysis of the third pillar: children’s right to participate

The preamble of the Recommendation recognises that the standards and principles of the UNCRC (ratified by all EU Member States) must guide EU policies and action with an impact on the rights of the child. In fact, the UNCRC provides the legal framework for the participation of children, notably the right to be heard in all decisions affecting them (Art. 12), the right to freedom of expression (Art. 13) and the right of access to information (Art. 17).

Under this pillar, the Commission advises Member States to undertake actions in two areas of participation:

- Children’s participation in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities
- Children’s participation in decision-making affecting their lives

Children’s participation in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities

The Recommendation asks member states to address barriers such as cost, access and cultural differences so that all children can participate in recreational, leisure and cultural activities. ESN recognises that it is essential to implement the child’s right to engage in these activities in line with Art. 31 of the UNCRC³⁶. In practice, in order to promote a holistic approach to child development that is based also on social and emotional competences and improves every child’s overall well-being. Attention should be paid to other informal learning opportunities, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, some of whom may not learn these lessons at home.

Children’s participation in decision making affecting their lives

Social services are committed to informing and consulting the child and parent or carer fully of their situation, the decision-making processes affecting them and what care and support is available. In addition, participation is one of the guiding principles of Art. 12 of the UN UNCRC) Therefore, children’s participation in all areas of policy-making that affect them should be promoted at different levels of government.

³³ M. Stein & E. R. Munro (2008): *Young People’s Transition from Care to Adulthood*, International Research and Practice, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

³⁴ ESN response to the Stakeholder Consultation undertaken by the European Commission in December 2011 (on request).

³⁵ ESN’s Spring Seminar 2012 focused on these issues, drawing on available research evidence and practice examples for young people leaving care.

³⁶ ESN (2012): *Children’s Services Combating poverty, promoting wellbeing Good Practices in Multi-Agency Work and Children’s Participation from Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Iceland, Ireland and Spain*.

There should be adequate training for professionals working with children to facilitate the meaningful participation of children in policy-making³⁷.

Finally, linking back to the services pillar of the Recommendation, ESN believes it is important that policy-makers pay attention to children's participation in the area of child protection. It is a specialist area and one where the right to be heard is considered critical in social work practice today. Therefore, ESN urges policy-makers to specifically recognise 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"³⁸. Finally, ESN suggests that Member States recognise that children in public care and involved in child protection cases should have access to independent legal representation.

4. Investing in Children: implementation at European, national, regional and local level

The European Commission's Recommendation to the Council of Ministers serves as a framework for policy re-assessment and action at national level. ESN sees a number of opportunities for action at national and local levels in four areas: strengthen synergies and governance; strengthen evidence-based approaches; address child poverty in the EU 2020 Strategy and use EU funds for delivery.

Given that the Recommendation seeks to address child poverty and social exclusion through comprehensive design and **enhanced coordination**, it can act as a stimulus to strengthen synergies across sectors and improve governance arrangements in national policy.

What can local and regional authorities do?

- Put in place partnerships³⁹ between public authorities and civil society, families and children to develop innovative services based on an assessment of needs and wishes of users.
- In order to strengthen governance, develop/support independent monitoring mechanisms through a panel of independent experts/the Ombudsman for children.

Investment in research and analysis is essential to strengthen the evidence basis for policies. Likewise, the development of specific indicators on children is crucial to assess whether and how policies impact on children's lives. ESN has been concerned to ensure that there are indicators on wellbeing and access to services besides on income and employment.

³⁷ Integrating Children's Perspectives into Policies in the Andalusian Public Health System –presentation available [here](#).

³⁸ ESN (2012): Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being, ESN analysis of the SPC report to the European Commission.

³⁹ Three priority roles for such partnerships engaging public authorities and civil society may include:

- Awareness-raising (e.g. the proved benefits of investment in child well-being)
- Monitoring (e.g. good and bad practices)
- Delivery of effective and innovative services (e.g. services promoting the direct participation of users in design and implementation).

The indicators presented in the Recommendation do not address children in most vulnerable situations, such as children outside traditional households (e.g. in alternative care) or the number of children involved with social services⁴⁰. ESN suggests that Member states collect data regarding the proportion of households in touch with social services and the reasons (e.g. proportion of abused children or who have suffered violence) and proportion of children in alternative care (with breakdown by disability, health and social circumstances, etc.).

What can local and regional authorities do?

- Develop interventions and pilots (partnerships between public authorities, NGOs, children and families) and ensure that they are backed by a robust evaluation from a cost-effectiveness approach⁴¹.
- Develop a participative methodology in indicator design which involves children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds in debates about the key factors to be measured and in testing indicator proposals.
- Ensure that public authorities have up to date data in regards to the proportion of households in touch with social services and reasons, as well as children in alternative care.
- Look for any opportunities for EU funding (European Social Fund, Horizon 2020 and the Programme for Social Change and Innovation) to support the development of evidence-based policies and interventions.

The Commission asks Member States to firmly place child poverty and social exclusion as key issues in the **Europe 2020 Strategy** and the National Reform Programmes (NRPs). In practice, the Recommendation's principles should be reflected in the implementation of the EU2020 strategy and mainstreamed into the Europe 2020 governance cycle each year; i.e. as an explicit priority in the Annual Growth Survey, in the guidelines and guidance notes for the National Reform Programmes (NRPs)/National Social Reports (NSRs) and National Social Reports (NSRs), and in the country-specific Recommendations. Member states, especially in IMF/EU programme countries, should carry out ex-ante and ex-post social impact assessment of austerity measures, to ensure that such measures do not have a negative impact on children.

What can local public authorities do?

Get in touch with your SPC member to identify who is drafting the NRP/NSR in your country and find out details about the process. Local authorities should be involved in regular dialogue forums with the rest of stakeholders, feeding into the NRP and NSR process and participate in focused thematic reporting on child poverty and wellbeing.

The Commission asks Member States to make appropriate use of **EU funding** to support the delivery of the policy proposals outlined in the Recommendation. The Commission could therefore take a pro-active role in clarifying and providing information on the role of the different funds, e.g. a handbook highlighting the main funding opportunities would be a

⁴⁰ EC (2013): the Staff Working Document on Demographic and Social Trends refers to this issue.

⁴¹ Cost-effectiveness analysis may include different types of research work: control groups and evaluation reports, audit and inspection findings/data, routine monitoring data, client and user experience data, expert view and insider knowledge and stakeholder consultation.

useful asset. The EC could monitor Member states' use of EU funds to ensure it is line with the principles of the Recommendation.

What can local public authorities do?

- Explore the potential to fund local solutions developed through partnership approaches between public authorities, civil society and children and families; e.g. through Erasmus for All to reduce early school leaving and improve people's skills.
- Look for EU financial instruments to support the policy priorities outlined in the Recommendation (see above); amongst others, the development of evidence-based policies and interventions through the European Social Fund (ESF), Horizon 2020 and the Programme for Social Change and Innovation, and access to education, learning, sport and leisure through Erasmus for All.

The role of ESN

ESN is contributing to ensuring the implementation of the Recommendation through the project "Investing in children services, improving outcomes", an analysis of the national framework in selected countries. It focuses specifically on the "services" dimension of the Recommendation and links this dimension to other aspects such as access to benefits and children's participation. ESN will compare national frameworks with the European Recommendation and afterwards make policy proposals for public authorities. As part of this project, ESN is holding various peer reviews bringing together a delegation from each country comprised of local authorities, national government representatives, child welfare agencies and non-governmental service providers.

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