

Investing in Children Services, Improving Outcomes

ESN Peer Review I
Dublin, May 2013

The European Social Network (ESN) brings together people who plan, manage and deliver public social services, together with those in regulatory and research organisations. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Background of the project

The European Social Network (ESN) has been working on aspects related to child poverty and children's wellbeing for the past 6 years. In 2008-2009, ESN had a working group on children and families which comprised of directors of children and family services from across the EU. In 2010, ESN published the report "[Breaking the cycle of deprivation](#)". In 2011, ESN organised the seminar "[Investing in Children: Early Years Services and Child Protection](#)". Throughout 2011 and 2012 we have been [cooperating](#) with the European Commission and Member States in the drafting of the European Recommendation "[Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage](#)" that was published on 20 February 2013 and aims to present Member States with policy guidance in regards to where to invest in children services. This Recommendation outlines **Access to quality services** as an essential pillar. Within the services pillar, the European Commission recognises 5 types of services:

- Reduce inequality at a young age by investing in early childhood education and care
- Improve education systems' impact on equal opportunities
- Improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children
- Provide children with a safe, adequate housing and living environment
- Enhance family support and the quality of alternative care settings

ESN is contributing to the implementation of the Recommendation with an analysis of the national policy and legal framework in selected countries focusing specifically on the *services* dimension of the Recommendation and linking this dimension to other aspects such as access to benefits and children's participation. In order to undertake this analysis, ESN has prepared a template with the aim of gathering information about the legal and policy framework in each country and compare national frameworks with the framework set in the European Recommendation.

During the analytical phase, ESN is organising peer reviews bringing together a delegation from each country comprised of representatives from child welfare and children services directors, national government representatives and services providers. The **first** stage of the exercise took place **in 2013** and featured **Ireland, France, Sweden and Bulgaria**, and the first peer review took place in **Dublin on 15 May 2013**. The second stage taking place in 2014 is featuring another five EU countries. At the Peer Review, participants looked at the European Recommendation policy proposals and at national legal and policy frameworks with a view to identify **gaps** that may hinder implementation and **suggest policy proposals** for public authorities about how services may need to be developed in each country in response to the Recommendation.

During the first stage of the exercise, the analysis has been carried out by:

- **The Agency for Child Protection** from the Ministry of Social Protection in France
- **The Agency for Child Protection and the Agency for Social Assistance** from the Ministry for Labour and Social Policy in Bulgaria
- **The National Board for Health and Welfare** in Sweden
- **The Health Service Executive** in Ireland

Themes

Investment in early childhood education and care

- Provisions in legal/policy framework accounting for the delivery of ECEC
 - Is it universal/free?
 - Is there a co-payment?
 - Do they account for the socio-economic circumstances of families?
 - Are there specific provisions to incentivise the participation of disadvantaged children?
- ECEC cooperation with other services in cases of potential risk, e.g. abuse or neglect

Investment in education to promote equal opportunities

- The “inclusivity” of the education system
- The implementation of desegregation policies to avoid the concentration of disadvantaged children in schools
- Provisions to foster the inclusion of migrant and ethnic minority children and to help children from a disadvantaged socio-economic background to complete compulsory education
- Measures to fight early school leaving (prevention, intervention and compensation)

Investment in health to address the needs of disadvantaged children

- Provisions to address the obstacles faced by
 - Children with disabilities
 - Children with mental health problems
 - Undocumented migrants
 - Pregnant teenagers
 - Children from families with a history of substance abuse

Investment in adequate housing and living environments

- Provisions guaranteeing access of families with children to housing
- Measures to support families with children that may be at risk of homelessness due to eviction

Investment in family support and quality alternative care settings

- Protocols to assess the risks to a child and to put in place appropriate support to prevent harm
- Under child welfare legislation, main reasons for children to be taken into care
- Main provisions to guarantee that children are not placed in institutions
- Main provisions to guarantee that children without parental care have access to services
- Specific mechanisms to listen to and record the voice of the child within the child protection system

Objectives

- Promote mutual learning within the framework of the EU Recommendation
- Improve knowledge and understanding of services, particularly social services, in combating child poverty and promoting children's wellbeing
- Ensure that the EU and national governments keep child poverty and wellbeing high on their agendas
- Maximize the potential provided by the Recommendation as a framework for designing, implementing and monitoring measures and services to combat child poverty and promote children's wellbeing
- Develop/foster cooperation amongst stakeholders –Local public services, users/civil society organizations, welfare agencies and research organizations within the framework of the Recommendation

Report of the Peer Review I, Dublin, May 2013

Introduction

The first peer review of the project brought together representatives from national child welfare agencies and directors of children services at local level (members of ESN), national government representatives and services providers from Ireland, France, Sweden and Bulgaria. Participants looked at the policy proposals of the EU Recommendation and at national legal and policy frameworks. The aim was to identify gaps that may hinder its implementation and suggest policy proposals for public authorities on how services may need to adapt in response to the Recommendation.

The European level

The event was opened by **Frances Fitzgerald**, Minister for Children and Youth from Ireland, who explained the changes that are currently taking place in Ireland in the area of **child welfare** and **child protection**. She also described the legal changes that were brought to the Constitution to make sure that children have rights of their own as individuals (rather than only within the family) and touched upon the issue of direct cash payments versus building services infrastructure: *“A significant amount of direct cash payments has been made in Ireland, but there has been a lack of evidence as to whether this was the right approach. Now direct cash payments have been reduced to 3 billion Euro as opposed to 270 billion Euro dedicated to building services infrastructure; particularly, more accessible and more affordable subsidised child care is needed, since evidence shows that this type of investment yields far long term return.”*

Julius Op de Beke, Policy Analyst at DG Employment at the European Commission, argued for the Recommendation from an economic point of view, as *“without the necessary investment in children's upbringing and education, many will, as adults, not be able to live up to their full potential; this could undermine the prosperity of the next generations of Europeans.”* In terms of services, Mr Op de Beke argued that *“children need access to services that play an essential role in their development, such as early childhood education and care, health or housing services”*, and defined some of the ways the Commission is

pursuing implementation through country specific recommendations for member states and using the EU budget for 2014-2020 to provide co-funding opportunities for social investment in children and to trigger national policy change.

The national organisation of services

Delegates listened to presentations from the four different countries which gave an overview of the national legal and policy frameworks in terms of **access to early child care, education, health, housing and child protection services.**

Ireland

Paul Harrison, Head of Policy and Strategy from the Health Service Executive (HSE), the key agency that delivers health and social services throughout the country, presented the Irish framework for children services. Mr Harrison explained that there is a free pre-school programme for children aged 3 to 4, and an early start pre-school programme for children in areas of disadvantage but the state budget is limited for children under the age of 3. Children have most of their health needs covered through primary care – for instance, 83% of newborn babies are visited by public health nurses 48 hours after discharge from hospital. With regards to children in state care, 90% of them currently live with families: *“When I started as a social worker, 90% were living in institutions. I am glad we managed to reverse this situation.”* Further changes to the social services in Ireland are expected as a new agency with a focus on child protection and family support (but not including children with disabilities) is to be created as a separate entity from the HSE.

France

Marie-Paule Martin Blachais, Managing Director of GIPED (the State Agency for Child Protection), presented the situation in France. Similar to what happens in Ireland, children’s health needs are covered through primary care and there are 20 mandatory health visits for all children between birth and the age of 6, while there are more specialised centres (CAMSP) with a range of professionals working together for children with disabilities aged 0-6. In terms of child protection, Ms Blachais explained that *“at the beginning of 2011, 1.9% of all children were supported by at least one child assistance measure of the state. Half of the children were living with their families and the other half were in placement, be it foster care (53%) or residential care (38%).”*

Sweden

Pär Alexandersson, Programmes Officer at the National Board for Health and Social Welfare explained that the children services covered in the peer review were regulated by the education, health care and social services acts in Sweden, which are part of a system based on the individual (rather than on the family). Mr Alexandersson explained that *“the difficulties with building a comprehensive picture are due to the fact that the system is decentralised with regions responsible for health and municipalities for schools and social services.”* Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Sweden is optional, but 84% of children aged 1-5 were enrolled in pre-school in 2012. There are entitlements for children of unemployed parents and all children are entitled to at least 525 hours of ECEC from the age

of 3. The National Board is responsible for an investigation and documentation system of child protection cases that are used by municipalities.

Bulgaria

Martina Krasteva from the State Agency for Child Protection in Bulgaria described the vast plans for change in child welfare that are currently taking place in the country. Decentralisation has given a higher role to municipalities, who are responsible for ECEC services. These are mostly based on co-payment for parents, with some exceptions (disability, single parents, socio-economic disadvantages). In Bulgaria 82% of children under the age of 5 participate in ECEC services. In education, regional inspectorates are responsible for the supervision of measures to ensure the integration of migrant, ethnic minority and children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. *“For instance, schools should have psychologists and staff must be trained to help children with special needs; there is also a mobile group of psychologists in the regions.”*

Country gaps

Hugh Frazer, an expert on social inclusion policies from National University of Ireland Maynooth, led a discussion with delegates. He started with the reminder that *“the Recommendation was initially foreseen as an income recommendation for families, but thanks to networks like ESN which insisted on the multidimensional nature of poverty and the need to highlight the role of services, this has changed.”*

Below, are some of the recurrent country-specific gaps highlighted in the discussion.

In **Ireland**, delegates referred to the lack of **inter-agency work** and the need for a framework coherent enough to call it national, but which also allows for local flexibility, as well as the need to **evaluate the outcomes** of interventions for children in the long run.

In **Bulgaria**, the **accessibility of services** in all regions and the need to strengthen support for municipalities who play a key role in provision were highlighted as key issues. Furthermore, the development of **multidisciplinary work** was seen as essential especially in a setting where public authorities are trying to get significant changes in education, deinstitutionalisation and social welfare in a very limited amount of time.

In **France** the lack of intermediate structures to progress between residential care for children and social protection for **young people transitioning into adulthood** was identified as a particular issue. This adds to the lack of clarity within the legislation as to which are the **rights of the child** and which are the rights of the family.

In **Sweden** delegates highlighted whether the development of free schools, which reinforce the freedom of choice for parents, is the right approach in terms of promoting equal opportunities for all children; they referred to the importance of **monitoring needs** better and planning services based on needs and outcomes are seen as possible ways to improve children services.

Policy recommendations

The final round table chaired by ESN's chief executive John Halloran focused on measures that national governments should undertake to ensure the implementation of the Recommendation. Some of the directions highlighted include the need to:

- put in place reforms ensuring that social services are sustainable from a financial point of view, but also from the point of view of political leadership and staff training (Pravda Ignatova, Ministry of Social Policy in Bulgaria)
- develop a national strategy for childhood with fighting poverty and improving children's wellbeing playing a part of the strategy. In terms of governance, this includes the need to re-enforce decentralisation and better communication between national and local levels, (Hélène Escande, Ministry for Health and Social Affairs, France)
- address transitions (for example, school-secondary school-adult life) and multiple disadvantages (such as disability and child protection), and to motivate and support practitioners (Cate Hartigan, Health Services Executive, Ireland)
- make sure that the effects of poverty are less severe and education does not exacerbate disadvantages but becomes a driver of equal opportunities for children (Pia Fagerström from the Ministry in Sweden).

Conclusion

Concluding, John Halloran acknowledged the important role of public services to ensure that children develop to their full potential and break the transmission of disadvantage across generations. The European Social Network will continue the policy and research project **Investing in Children Services, Improving Outcomes** by preparing the four country profiles as well as a second peer review in 2014, which will focus on 5 more countries.

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