

EASPD Policy Paper

EASPD Contribution to the European Commission's public consultation on the Strengthening of the European Child Guarantee



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Introduction

The European Child Guarantee (ECG) stands as a pivotal instrument in the fight against child poverty and social exclusion, enshrining the implementation of Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights that guarantees specific measures to enhance equal opportunities for the most vulnerable ones, including children with disabilities and children in institutional care. Still, since the adoption of the Child Guarantee in 2021, while overall EU poverty levels have decreased, child poverty has risen, with [24% of children affected in 2025](#).

The European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) is the leading voice of disability services across Europe. Representing over 20,000 services in 50 different countries, we promote human rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality support. Our work focuses on key areas essential to quality support provision. This includes Inclusive Living, Employment, Education, Early Childhood Intervention, Person-Centred Technology, Workforce Development and Human Resources, Arts, Culture & Sport, and Policy Impact.

EASPD has long championed the adoption of the ECG, supported its dissemination and tracked its implementation, both independently, and as a member of the [EU Alliance for Investing in Children](#). Our contribution on the Strengthening of the ECG focuses on two areas:

1. [Developing Early Childhood Intervention \(ECI\)](#) systems for children with or at risk of disabilities and developmental delays by expanding early identification and intervention programmes that are family and strength based.
2. [Accelerating access to inclusive education](#): ensuring access to quality inclusive education for all, including children with disabilities, by removing barriers and upskilling professionals from early childhood education and care (ECEC) onwards.

These measures must be viewed in close coordination with other key initiatives under the Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, including the second phase of the Disability Rights Strategy, the upcoming Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on fighting housing exclusion, and the Anti-Poverty Strategy. EASPD's contributions on these initiatives have highlighted key points on ECI and inclusive education¹.

¹ [Contribution to the Disability Rights Strategy](#), Contribution to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on fighting housing exclusion, and [Position Paper on the Anti-Poverty Strategy](#).

Strengthening the ECG through the development of comprehensive ECI systems and the transition toward inclusive education represents a crucial opportunity to advance children’s rights, reduce inequalities, and promote long-term social inclusion across the European Union.

The proposed measures aim to support Member States in building coordinated, family-centred, and inclusive systems that ensure all children can thrive from the earliest stages of life. EASPD stands ready to support the implementation of these measures. Leveraging our expertise and network, we can contribute to capacity-building, mutual learning, and the sharing of best practices, ensuring policy commitments deliver lasting impacts on the ground.

EASPD Proposals to strengthen the European Child Guarantee

Measure 1: Facilitate the establishment of national Early Childhood Intervention systems

Research in neuroscience shows that a **child’s early development is profoundly influenced by their environment**, as supportive, nurturing, and responsive surroundings are essential to optimal brain development. Without quality support, families are at higher risk of social exclusion and have to fill the gap of services with their financial resources, and time. This increases the risk for the children to be placed in institutions, as parents may be uncertain how to address their child’s disability or meet their needs.

Children separated from their families and communities are at higher risk of lower cognitive and social developments as rotating staff cannot ensure the same level of security or provide the love that comes from the long-term bond of a family. Children in institutions are at higher risks of poorer health and nutrition, educational exclusion, adult institutionalisation, and fewer opportunities and inclusion in society.

Family-centred ECI can prevent institutionalisation by empowering families, while tackling challenges as early as possible. ECI refers to a field of family-centred, individualised services for children with, or at risk of, disabilities and developmental delays, typically from birth to 3 or 6, and their families. By identifying and tackling challenges as early as possible, ECI has proven to improve school readiness, support pre-primary education and inclusion in mainstream education, reduce school dropout and grade repetition. This results in better educational achievements, improved long-term social and employment prospects, and helps prevent poverty and social exclusion.

Despite broad agreement on its importance, ECI systems remain, in many countries, fragmented, overly medicalised, and lacking family support. Unequal access, notably in disadvantaged areas, undermines children’s rights to timely, coordinated care.² Barriers to the development of family-centred national ECI systems include a lack of shared understanding of policy makers and professionals on what quality ECI is as well as poor or no data in most countries on the availability and quality of existing ECI services.

To address these challenges, we recommend that the European Commission adopt the following key initiatives to support Member States in developing comprehensive, family-centred ECI systems, in synergy with the second phase of the Disability Rights Strategy:

1. Conduct an EU-wide study on ECI policies and practices. It should:

- **Clearly define quality ECI systems** as trans-disciplinary, family-centred, based on early identification, coordinated service delivery, workforce training, inclusive practices, and continuous monitoring.
- **Map availability, accessibility and quality of ECI services** across Member States, and of children in vulnerable situations, using where possible data coming from ECG National Action Plans monitoring frameworks.
- Showcase **promising policies and practices**.
- **Identify common patterns, recommend actions and process** to establish ECI national systems, and **recommend indicators** at national and European levels to improve monitoring of availability and quality of family-centred ECI support.

2. Develop comprehensive guidelines on ECI, grounded in this study, which should:

- Provide **operational guidance** for establishing national ECI systems, integrating ECI into national ECG Action Plans, improving coordination across services, reaching children in vulnerable situations.
- Underline the importance of establishing a **unified and systematic early detection programme** at national level, embedded within national ECG Action Plans, to ensure early identification, timely referral, and coordinated support across services.

² https://earlybrain.eu/?page_id=440.

- Highlight **long-term socio-economic benefits**, contributing to reduced inequalities, lower reliance on institutional care, improved outcomes tracked through ECG indicators (education, health, inclusion).
- Align with existing EU strategies, such as the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the EU Disability Strategy, and the Council Recommendation on integrated child protection systems.

3. Integrate the Guidelines for curriculum development in ECEC in the ECG framework, to embed reskilling of staff in early identification of developmental risks³:

- Focus on **(up)skilling the ECEC workforce** in early identification and intervention.
- Member States should integrate the Guidelines as a core implementation measure of their ECG National Action Plans, ensuring adequate training is provided to professionals to detect and support developmental risks from the earliest age.
- Upskilling of the ECEC workforce should be **monitored** through national and ECG monitoring frameworks.

4. Scale up the use of EU funding tools (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Technical Support Instrument among others) to support the implementation of ECI as part of the ECG's implementation in EU Member States:

- This should support **capacity building**, cross-border collaboration, and the exchange of good practices among ECI stakeholders.
- Encourage Member States use the Technical Support Instrument to implement reforms on ECI and guide reforms' implementation.
- Promote the exchange of knowledge and best practices **with international** partners and experts to enrich the ECG's implementation with global perspectives.

³ As part of the [Union of Skills Strategy](#), the European Commission plans to develop Guidelines for curriculum development in ECEC. As mentioned in EASPD [Position Paper on the Union of Skills](#), ECEC settings are among the first environments where a child's development occurs, making them central to observe, identify and address potential developmental issues. Equipping ECEC professionals to identify and address developmental risks early would directly contribute to tackle the root causes of disadvantage. Consequently, embedding these Guidelines into the Child Guarantee becomes a strategic action to break the cycle of poverty and guarantee equal chances for every child from the very start.

5. Include (potential) EU candidate countries in mechanism for peer learning, to foster exchange of good practices as well as to provide them the tools to establish national ECI system as a part of their pre-accession process:

- Identify and promote **good policies and practices on ECI from (potential) candidate countries** to be included, if relevant, in the EU Study and Guidance.
- Encourage the organisation of **regular regional conferences and other peer-learning activities** on the creation of national ECI systems, bringing together EU Member States, (potential) candidate countries, EU institutions, national ECG Coordinators, civil society, and international experts and organisations (e.g. UNICEF)⁴.

6. Establish structured mutual learning processes between the Disability Platform and Child Guarantee Coordinators:

- These should strengthen **capacity building** and facilitate **systematic exchange** between Member States and organisations involved in ECI.
- They should support the **identification and scale-up of effective, family-centred approaches**, while guiding and reinforcing the implementation of national reforms in line with the objectives of the ECG and the UNCRPD.

7. Embed ECI in the Child Guarantee monitoring framework, and European Semester process:

- Develop **specific indicators** to monitor the accessibility, availability, and **quality of ECI services** and of early identification, including the participation of the most disadvantaged children.
- These should be integrated into the **ECG's monitoring framework** and the Social Scoreboard under the European Semester review.
- Encourage **Country-Specific Recommendations** on ECI to improve policy coordination and social convergence across the EU, foster investment in high-quality and inclusive services, participate in the fight against poverty and contribute to EU long-term sustainable economic development.

⁴ [The High-level Conference on the ECG co-organised by UNICEF, the European Commission, and the Croatian government, in March 2026, in Zagreb, and the creation of the ECG Learning Hub](#), are good examples of possible peer learning initiatives.

- Encourage Member States to develop **national monitoring frameworks** on ECI, using common indicators developed by the EU. The [Bulgaria 2024 Annual Plan for Promoting Early Childhood Development](#) (referred in its ECG National Action Plan) contains specific indicators to measure ECI and that could serve as a source of inspiration.

Together, these initiatives would inform and guide national reforms to design, implement, and scale up ECI systems, develop monitoring tools, and inform future EU policy initiatives.

Measure 2: Support the transition toward inclusive education

Research shows that inclusive education significantly improves both academic and social outcomes for children with disabilities compared with segregated settings. Access to inclusive education is essential for promoting social equity and in ensuring that all children, including those with a disability, to reach their full potential. Benefits include higher test scores, greater engagement, stronger social skills, and the promotion of empathy and cooperation among all students, contributing to more socially cohesive school environments.

Inclusive education must start at the earliest age to dismantle barriers, before they solidify, but also to support the building-up of social cohesion, and equal opportunity from the start of a child’s development. This would ensure that all children, regardless of ability or background, build the foundational skills necessary for a truly integrated society and to flourish in life.

Inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) and education are two of the core service areas under the ECG, which aims to ensure effective and free access to these services for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. It has contributed to increased policy attention, improved monitoring, and some progress in access to education and ECEC across Member States. However, access remains uneven in practice, with persistent disparities, insufficient support, and barriers to inclusion, particularly for children in vulnerable situations, including children with disabilities.⁵ Education systems remain far from fully inclusive, with structural challenges such as segregation, unequal resource allocation, and gaps in support services continuing to limit equal opportunities.

⁵ <https://easpd.eu/resources-detail/analysis-of-the-uncrpd-committee-recommendations-on-article-24/>

The ECG offers significant untapped potential to further accelerate reforms, strengthen upward convergence across Member States, and ensure that all children can access quality, inclusive education from the earliest stages of life.

1. Conduct an EU-wide study on inclusive education, including examples of promising models across Europe and beyond. It should:

- **Map the availability, accessibility, and quality of inclusive ECEC and education** across Member States, building where possible on data from ECG national Action Plans and monitoring frameworks.
- **Identify successful strategies** supporting the transition from segregated to inclusive education systems, particularly in early childhood settings.
- Provide **recommendations and practical frameworks** to guide Member States in designing and implementing inclusive education reforms.
- Propose **indicators** at national and EU level to strengthen monitoring of inclusion, participation, and learning outcomes.

2. Develop comprehensive EU guidelines on inclusive education, grounded in this study and designed to support implementation of the Child Guarantee. These guidelines should:

- **Define** quality inclusive education systems as rights-based, learner-centred, and supported by adequate resources, trained professionals, and accessible environments.
- Set out **key pillars**, including early inclusion in ECEC, individualised support, inclusive curricula, teacher training, multidisciplinary cooperation, and continuous monitoring.
- Provide **operational guidance** for national reforms and for integrating inclusive education into ECG National Action Plans, improving coordination across sectors, and reaching children in vulnerable situations.
- Highlight **long-term benefits for all children**, including improved educational attainment, reduced inequalities, and stronger social inclusion, contributing to outcomes tracked under the ECG.
- Ensure cooperation with the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education with existing EU frameworks, including the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the EU Disability Strategy, and the UNCRPD, Article 24 and General Comment No 4.

3. Strengthen the role of the Child Guarantee in supporting workforce development, notably by integrating upcoming EU initiatives such as the Guidelines for curriculum development in ECEC into its framework.

- Ensure these guidelines include a strong focus on equipping ECEC and education professionals with skills for **inclusive teaching**, and provision of adequate support, as well as curricula for support teachers.
- Encourage Member States to **integrate** these guidelines into their ENG national Action Plans as a core reform measure.
- **Monitor** workforce upskilling through the ECG monitoring framework.

4. Promote the use of EU funding instruments (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Technical Support Instrument among others) to support the implementation of inclusive education as part of the ECG's implementation in EU Member States:

- Support **capacity building, cross-border collaboration, peer learning**, and exchange of good practices on inclusive education between EU Member States, but also (potential) candidates' countries as well as international stakeholders.
- Encourage Member States to make full use of the **Technical Support Instrument** to design and implement reforms supporting the transition to inclusive systems, including transition from ECEC to education and from education to Vocational Education and Training and employment.

5. Establish structured mutual learning processes on inclusive education linking the Disability Platform, Child Guarantee Coordinators, and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to support continuous exchange between Member States and stakeholders.

- Facilitate the identification and scaling up of effective inclusive education policies.
- Support the implementation of national reforms and promote convergence towards inclusive systems in line with the ECG and the UNCRPD.

6. Include (potential) EU candidate countries in mechanism for peer learning, to foster exchange of good practices as well as to provide them the tools to establish national inclusive education system as a part of their pre-accession process:

- Identify and promote **good policies and practices on inclusive education from (potential) candidate countries** to be included, if relevant, in the EU Study and Guidance.
- Encourage the organisation of **regular regional conferences and other peer-learning activities** on the creation of inclusive national education systems, bringing together EU Member States, (potential) candidate countries, EU institutions, national ECG Coordinators, civil society, and international experts and organisations (e.g. UNICEF).

7. Strengthen monitoring and policy coordination on inclusive education within the Child Guarantee and the European Semester.

- **Develop specific indicators** to measure access, participation, and outcomes in inclusive ECEC and education, particularly for children in vulnerable situations. **Integrate** these indicators into the ECG monitoring framework and the Social Scoreboard.
- Encourage the inclusion of inclusive education in **Country-Specific Recommendations** to drive reforms and investment.
- Support Member States in developing **national monitoring frameworks** using common EU indicators.

EASPD Resources on ECI, inclusive education, and the European Child Guarantee

- [EASPD Position Paper on family-centred ECI](#) (2022)
- [Early Childhood Intervention \(ECI\) in the context of displacement](#) (2023)
- [ECI Greece project](#) (2021-2024)
 - [Collection of policies and practices](#)
 - [Trainings](#)
 - [Policies and practices.](#)
- Study: [Human-rights-based Support, Empowering Families and Informal Carers of Persons with Disabilities](#) (2025)
- [Building a Brighter Future: A White Book to Advance Early Childhood Intervention \(ECI\) in Europe](#) (2025) – including good practices and recommendations.
- [National factsheets](#) on support for children with disabilities within the ECG National Action Plan (2025)
- [Study on the UN CRPD recommendations on the implementation of Article 24 on the right to inclusive education](#) (2025)



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