



Discussion note

EU Child Guarantee National Action Plans

What place for young children with disabilities in the Child Guarantee National Action Plans?



European Association of Service providers
for Persons with Disabilities



This is a Discussion Note produced by the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD).

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Brussels, December 2023

Updated Version: January 2024



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor European Commission can be held responsible for them.

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INTRODUCTION

THE EU CHILD GUARANTEE

According to [Eurostat](#), in 2022, 24.7% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. To address disadvantage and exclusion in childhood, the European Council approved unanimously a [Recommendation](#) in June 2021 establishing the **European Child Guarantee** (ECG).

This is a key step in achieving the European Pillar of Social Rights principle 11 on childcare and support to children, which declares that “children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.”

The Child Guarantee aims to ensure effective access to children in need and their families to a set of key services:

- free early childhood education and care;
- free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day);
- free healthcare;
- healthy nutrition;
- and adequate housing.

Children with disabilities are one of the specific target groups identified within the scope of the Child Guarantee, and they will be the focus on this research.

NATIONAL ACTION PLANS

To ensure the effective implementation of the Child Guarantee, EU Member States were asked to appoint National Coordinators and submit National Action Plans (NAPs). NAPs are intended as living documents that can be subject to revisions and valid until 2030.

Despite the deadline for submissions being March 2022, the last NAP was submitted in December 2023. At the time of this assessment all NAPs are available [here](#), yet those of Spain, Luxembourg, Latvia, France, Austria only in their native language. Literature review of existing [research](#) on the NAPs highlights children with disabilities as a clear target group in most of the NAPs. Nonetheless, sufficient data and clear definitions on “disability”, “special needs” and “mental health” are still lacking, to the detriment of effective provisions ensure access to the key services. Various [reports](#) also summarise the core elements of each NAP, highlighting the measures proposed on the different services.

This briefing builds onto existing analyses and focuses specifically on young children with disabilities, in particular on the measures concerning early childhood intervention (ECI) and inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC), with the aim of providing information that can be used by EASPD members for national advocacy.

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION (ECI)

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a field of family-centred, individualised services for infants and young children (generally 0-3 or 0-6) and their families. They help to identify, prevent, overcome, or minimise at-risk situations. They promote achieving the child's potential, family strengthening and wellbeing by developing a nurturing, stimulating and safe environment. These services are particularly critical for children with developmental delays, physical, intellectual or sensory impairments, or conditions such as autism, and mental health issues. You can learn more about this approach, by consulting the EASPD Position Paper “Family-centred Early Childhood Intervention: The best start in life” available [here](#).

ECI AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC)

For families of children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delays, early identification and support are critical to ensure that children thrive. Investing in the development of robust ECI systems is to foster better development, prevention of abuse and inclusion later in life. ECI is a cardinal tool to prevent institutionalisation and has the objective to enable inclusion in early childhood education and care (ECEC) Participation and access of children with disabilities in ECI and ECEC services supports their social and emotional development and learning and lays the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability, and participation in society. Therefore, these two realms are interconnected and of vital importance to achieve the objectives of the European Child Guarantee.

WHERE IS ECI IN THE NAPS?

This paper presents a breakdown of key measures extracted from the NAPs which tackle ECI, inclusive ECEC, data collection, and national policies about children with disabilities' inclusion, to conclude with a comparative analysis and suggestions for moving forward.

Its most stark takeaway is that, whereas inclusive ECEC is present in all of the NAPs, ECI is mentioned in less than half of them, to different extents and scope. Seven countries foresee measures on ECI explicitly: Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Malta. Another six consider the realm of early intervention from a broader sense: Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Slovenia and Spain. This shows a lack of awareness and prioritisation of ECI in the EU today. Even though research demonstrates the multiple benefits of investing in the creation of ECI systems, it is clear that policy is yet to catch up.



PILOTING THE CHILD GUARANTEE

To test how the European Child Guarantee could work in practice, the European Commission has partnered with UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (ECARO) to run pilot projects in seven Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain. This has been a three-year-long pilot programme involving national and local governments as well as key stakeholders in these countries. Seven 'policy deep dive' country studies have been carried out, in contribution to developing the NAPs. Notably, ECI was the focus of these piloting activities in Bulgaria and Croatia. The former has worked on early intervention for children with disabilities and developmental disorders, inclusive quality pre-school education, prevention and support services aimed at children and families. The latter has improved access to integrated and coordinated ECI services for young children (0-7) with or at risk of developmental delays and those with disabilities and their families in the Medjmurje County. The relevant interventions can be found in more depth [here](#).



FUNDING

Several EU funds are available to implement the European Child Guarantee.

In particular, a share of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is earmarked to tackle child poverty. Member States that had an average rate above the Union average of children of less than 18 years old at risk of poverty or social exclusion for the period between 2017 and 2019, on the basis of Eurostat data, should allocate at least 5 % of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management to those activities.

The countries concerned are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania, and Spain. Other Member States should allocate 'an appropriate amount'.

The Technical Support Instrument (TSI) from the Commissions' Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU Member States to design and implement reforms and can be mobilised to implement reforms to implement (part of) the Child Guarantee Action Plans. This is the case of Greece, that used this fund for assistance for reforms on deinstitutionalisation, inclusive education, and Early Childhood Intervention.

COUNTRY PROFILES

AUSTRIA



Inclusive ECEC: Austrian NAP shows a commitment to inclusive education for the target group of children with disabilities. Implemented measures include the allocation of funding to cover the essential costs associated with providing education and training for school-age children who have severe disabilities, which prevent them from attending a public school for children with special needs. This financial support aims to address the specific educational requirements of each child. Additionally, the implementation of "Schulassistenz" (school assistance services) underscores a commitment to facilitating school-based education for children with disabilities. This service is designed to provide necessary support, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can actively participate in and benefit from the educational process.

BELGIUM



Data on children with disabilities: There is currently very little information available on specific groups of vulnerable children in the Belgian federated entities. To address this lacuna, the NAP puts forth a proposal to set up a process, with a view to the next biennial update of the Child Guarantee Plan, to invest in the inventory of available administrative data, its analysis and the development of proposals and initiatives to arrive at harmonised data for Belgium.

ECI: The NAP commits to ensuring the transition of children from institutional care to quality community/family care, as a core feature of an effective ECI.

Inclusive ECEC: The main areas of action in ECEC are to remove access barriers (financial and non), provide support to children with learning difficulties, and promote flexible care with adapted hours according to the changing needs of children and families.

National Policies: Across all regions and provinces, there are measures foreseen to promote and enact the inclusion of children with disabilities in education, to be overseen by the 'Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance' (ONE). ONE's multidimensional strategy (2021-2025) has 7 points to improve the primary and secondary accessibility of childcare, also foreseeing the establishment of an accessibility task-force, which will mobilise the key players in this area in a cross-cutting manner.

BULGARIA



Data on children with disabilities: As of July 2022, there were 28,080 children with disabilities in Bulgaria.

ECI: According to the Bulgarian Social Services Act (SSA), parents and families do not have to pay for the use of social services financed by the state budget to support early disability intervention for children. Measures for ECI in the NAP encompass: creating and developing an early intervention system, including improvement of mechanisms; effective interaction and staffing of units for early diagnosis of disabilities and developmental disorders; increasing the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information and counselling, therapy and rehabilitation, training and other community-based services.

Inclusive Education: Stigmatisation and discrimination of children with disabilities is what hinders their access to the general education system. Inclusive education is thus identified as a priority policy area in Bulgaria to tackle these persistent issues. The policy framework aims to ensure inclusive environment and support for children with special needs in nurseries and kindergartens by placing a focus on monitoring child development, early identification of developmental difficulties, and provision of early intervention services.

CROATIA



ECI: Establish early detection systems for children with disabilities and or at risk of developmental delays.

National Policies: The 2030 National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (2021) emphasises the important priority of promoting inclusive educational practices and building a culture of diversity, establishing equal education opportunities throughout the education process. For children with disabilities, this is to be achieved through targeted actions:

- Organise, implement, and standardise professional development for educators and professional associates, including those related to inclusive education of vulnerable groups, especially children with developmental disabilities;
- Make an analysis of the needs of hiring an assistant for children with developmental disabilities or a language-communication intermediary or a third educator;
- Monitor the change in the proportion of children for whom an assistant for children with developmental disabilities or a language-communication intermediary or third-party educator is provided;
- Conduct professional development on the topic of inclusive education to enhance the competencies of educational professionals working with children with developmental difficulties.

CYPRUS



ECI: An early intervention program for babies and children up to 3 years old is actively implemented at the School for the Deaf, with funding sourced from national resources.

Inclusive ECEC: A noteworthy component of the inclusive education landscape in Cyprus is the establishment of the Centre for Family Intervention and Support for Autism. This centre, catering to 300 preschool-age children with autism and their families, is a venture led by the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (DSIPD) for the timeframe between 2021-2027, co-financed with 5 million euros from the ESF+.

National Policies: The Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth has worked with the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support on reforming the legislation on inclusive education. The process was completed in June 2021. The reformed legislation places a priority on enabling pupils with special needs aged over 3 years to attend mainstream preschools, promoting inclusive educational practices.

CZECH REPUBLIC



Data on children with disabilities: In 2018 there were around 117,000 children with disabilities in the Czech Republic. Data shows that in the 2020/2021 school year there were 114,108 pupils in primary schools with a need for support measures because of their health status, 77% of whom were in regular classes. In kindergartens, there were 11,547 children, 42 % of whom were educated in regular classes.

ECI: A key recommendation of this NAP is to promote early detection and treatment of diseases and developmental problems. In particular, support psychiatric care and deinstitutionalise facilities for children with mental health problems, at the same time as extending the range of community-based, outpatient and field services for children with disabilities under 3 years of age.

Inclusive ECEC: Support the learning of children with learning disabilities to compensate for their linguistic, cognitive and learning differences and, using inclusive teaching and learning methods, adapt facilities, services and materials for ECEC and for education to respond to the specific needs of this target group. Ensure the availability of qualified teachers, caregivers and other staff such as psychologists, speech therapists, rehabilitation workers, social workers or teaching assistants. Provide methodological support and streamline diagnostic procedures in the field of inclusive education. Introduce measures to promote inclusive education and prevent the creation of segregated classes and schools.





DENMARK

Data on children with disabilities: There is no clear definition of children and young people with disabilities in Denmark. There is also no central register of persons with disabilities. In 2016 there were around 25 in 1 000 children receiving assistance under the Social Services Act on the grounds of disability, but this is deemed to be an underestimate.

ECI: This NAP highlights a willingness to improving early detection of learning disadvantages. More measures are planned upon publication of a study on inclusion and special education.

Inclusive ECEC: In Denmark, the belief is that ECECs and schools are a powerful preventive measure within children's communities which reduce the need for social interventions later in life. National legislation stipulates that all pupils have the right to an education that meets their needs. The requirement is that the pedagogical learning environment in ECEC should take into account children in vulnerable positions with a view to promoting their well-being, learning, development and education. Municipalities and schools can provide support to pupils and organise teaching in ways that support the teaching of pupils with special needs in the mainstream classroom, including via teaching assistants and differentiated learning plans. For pupils needing more than nine hours of support per week, special education may be provided either in the form of support in mainstream classes, in special classes, in special schools or in internal schools.



ESTONIA

Data on children with disabilities: In Estonia there were 10,125 children with disabilities (3.9% of total) in 2020, 18.7% of which live at risk of poverty. A core challenge is that a child may be prevented from participating in early childhood education due to the lack of additional support they need.

National Policies: In Estonia there is a plan to modernise and optimise the education system through the Education and Youth Programme 2022-2025, which should address the aforementioned barriers. At the same time, there is a foreseen reform of the support system for children with special needs. It entails creating opportunities to identify the child's need for help as early as possible (at the age of babyhood and infancy), clearly in line with ECI principles. Their actions within the ECG will also include supporting children with mental health problems and developing parental education, training and support services to support children with disabilities.

FINLAND



Data on children with disabilities: The main challenge to be overcome in Finland is a general lack of data on children with disabilities in Finland. Hence, to ensure the implementation of Child Guarantee, data is to be collected according to relevant metrics in the coming years.

National Policies: Finland developed its first National Child Strategy in 2021, with an implementation plan (2019-2023) of 30 specific measures. The ECG is thus implemented as part of the work on this strategy, which identifies the specific vulnerabilities faced by children with disabilities, such as heightened discrimination. The Finnish National Action Plan on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities encompasses the measure of promoting learning support in ECEC settings by developing a model for learning support. The responsible body for this is the Ministry of Education and Culture.

FRANCE



Data on children with disabilities: As of September 2021, over 400,000 children with disabilities were in school, which is 100,000 more in comparison to September 2016. Of these, more than eight out of ten are schooled in a mainstream educational environment, whereas the remaining are in specialised institutions. Here lies the main matter of concern emerging from the French NAP: although there are initiatives aimed at regulating institutions, there is still no plan to eliminate them.

Inclusive ECEC: The French NAP clearly states that there will be a concerted effort to promote the schooling of children with disabilities. This ambition is part of the process of creating a large public service inclusive school allowing each student with a disability to find the modalities of schooling most adapted to their needs. In particular, to improve the reception of children with chronic illnesses and disabilities in nurseries, the state grants an enhanced subsidy to inclusive day nurseries that receive these children.

GERMANY



Data on children with disabilities: Children with disabilities are reported to be around 415,780 (3% of all children).

Inclusive ECEC: Strengthening the quality of early childhood education and care is an urgent concern, especially also with regard to inclusive education. Implementation of the concept of “prejudice-aware education” (VBuE) in 275 nurseries so that these institutions are reinforced and further developed as places of peace, education, and equality.



GREECE

ECI: The Greek NAP highlights the use RFF funding for early intervention for people with disabilities and integration of people with autism spectrum disorders. The development of the early intervention system will also be used for the diagnosis of disabilities. Moreover, this funding will be leveraged to provide technical support for the "Reform of the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) framework for children with disabilities" as Technical Support (DG REFORM- Technical Support Instrument). This shall facilitate the transition from closed care institutions to community care. From this NAP it is evident that children with disabilities are consistently included in policy frameworks in Greece, especially with regards to inclusive education and ECI.

Inclusive ECEC: Structural barriers for children with disabilities to integrate in the mainstream education system in Greece include: challenges related to the (physical) access to schools, lack of qualified staff (particularly in rural and remote areas), as well as the partial lack of adapted material and supporting equipment. Important initiatives have been taken in recent years to promote the principles of inclusive education (e.g. Objective 12, National Action Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Strategic Action Plan for Equal Access to Education for Students with Disabilities). The ESF+ 2021-27, including ESF+ Regional programmes will be used to fund ECEC places. Piloted activities include an 'Inclusive Education Guide' developed in schools and a program developed for the establishment of inclusive school communities.



HUNGARY

ECI: Thanks to the EU project on the cross-sectoral development of early intervention, Hungary has been able to make a real difference for families whose children are at risk of having a developmental disability in early childhood. A key objective is to regulate children's educational paths and to improve access to services for children. Within this project, a validated assessment tool has been developed for children under 3, which, in addition to early screening, allows the monitoring of progress by assessing the child upon entering and leaving the establishment. The NAP mentions that there will be continued efforts to strengthen early warning and pedagogical support system.

Inclusive ECEC: Hungary is committed to ensure full accessibility for persons with disabilities in creches and education buildings. Adapting facilities and educational materials of ECEC using inclusive teaching and learning methods; a special curriculum is to be prepared for pupils with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities. For this purpose, qualified teachers and other professionals must be available. From 1 January 2020, the amount of the special education allowance increased significantly and its scope was extended to include early childhood educators who also work with children with special educational needs.



IRELAND



Inclusive ECEC: The main objective of current national programmes is to promote inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC. Ireland will therefore allocate €2.0185 billion to develop the 'Special Educational Needs' initiative to have students with special educational needs attend mainstream schools, providing them with the support, resources, and additional teachers if/when necessary. For the additional support, they will also develop the DEIS initiative (Deliver Equality of Opportunity in Schools).

National Policies: The 'Digital Strategy' will aim to further embed the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, to facilitate inclusive education for children with disabilities.

ITALY



Data on children with disabilities: By 2020, there were around 300,000 student children with disabilities in Italy.

ECI: Other than architectural barriers in the field of education, the main barrier encountered by children with disabilities is a lack of access to specialist and preventive services in the field of health. As a result, the NAP underlines the eagerness to begin early intervention in the first 1000 day of life.

Inclusive ECEC: In Italy, the inclusive education system where pupils with disabilities being placed in mainstream classes is well established. This NAP aims to increase the range of educational support and mediation services for students with disabilities. The core targets for 2023 were to increase the percentage of schools accessible to students with motor disabilities (from 34%) through priority resources for regions with lower coverage, as well as to increase in the number of support teachers from 5,000 (2022) to 9,000 (2023). This would come hand in hand with the creation of 228,000 new places in ECEC settings, to more than double public coverage for 0-3 years.

National Policies: This NAP announces the upcoming creation of an inter-institutional round table on minors with disabilities to identify barriers in different areas like school.



LATVIA



Data on children with disabilities: In 2022, Latvia there were 8,988 registered children with disabilities.

Inclusive Education: For children up to the age of five, as well as parents of children who are undergoing preschool education programs (both within and outside educational institutions), there will continue to be the option to utilise the services of municipal pedagogical medical commissions for special needs assessment, as has been the case until now. Based on the recommendations of an educational or clinical psychologist, speech therapist, or special education trainer, and in accordance with the child's special needs, teachers are charged with developing an individualised education program plan indicating adjustments and support measures. The Project "Competence-Based Approach in Education Content" (2016-2023) foresees training and supporting staff to adopt inclusive teaching methods. It has also led to more educational content, thus improving opportunities for all children in Latvia.

LITHUANIA



Data on children with disabilities: The Ministry of Social Security and Labour is currently drafting an amendment to the Resolution No.695 (dated back to June 2004), which will allow for the collection of more statistical data on children with disabilities.

Inclusive Education: Although all Lithuanian children should be included in general education schools, 44 special education schools with a total of 3,800 pupils were still operating in 2019. In 2018, 9% of general education schools did not have specialists to help pupils, 53% of schools did not have psychologists, and 28% of schools did not have special pedagogues or speech therapists. Children with special educational needs also have more limited opportunities for non-formal education. Moreover, children with disabilities still face many problems related to physical accessibility to learn in general education establishments. There is a shortage of special educational needs teaching assistants as well as a lack of an individual-centred approach to child learning and development.

LUXEMBOURG



Inclusive Education: Many measures are already underway to improve the equal opportunities in education for children with disabilities. These include: comprehensive inclusion programmes for pupils with special needs, modern and differentiated language learning, a wide range of support courses.

National Policies: Today, the country's educational landscape is expanding and diversifying to meet the needs of students and create more equitable learning conditions. The '*Service de médiation scolaire*' (SMS) created in 2018 covers the two core areas of expertise: the prevention of early school leaving, plus the contribution, through individual complaints, of the inclusion of children with special or specific educational needs.



MALTA



National Policies & inclusive education: Malta's 2021-2030 National Strategy on the Rights of Disabled Persons strategy places a significant amount of attention on early detection and intervention. It also emphasises the need to safeguard the right to quality education.

The National Inclusive Education Framework is designed over ten central themes and invites schools to embark on a journey towards the development of high quality inclusion. Schools are invited to implement, review and commit towards inclusive policies and practices. Thus, providing high quality education for all learners to embrace social equity and achieve an inclusive society. This framework embraces the principles of ownership, diversity, autonomy, planning and research. It also explicitly encompasses a dimension of early intervention to further facilitate inclusive access in child care centres, early childhood settings and compulsory school years.

To ensure accessible and inclusive education, Malta will develop Individualised Educational Plans (IEP's) for all students with a disability and provide supplementary allowances for students facing specific disadvantages depending on the course type and year.

POLAND



Inclusive ECEC: In this NAP, a key objective is to provide access to early childhood development support services and programmes for children with disabilities. This is to be achieved via the following targeted actions:

- By 2023: Raising awareness of inclusive education for people with disabilities. Training for the staff of the education system in inclusive education, including early support for child development and family support;
- By 2025: Implementation and popularisation of bilingual education for deaf people;
- By 2030: Preparation of human resources for the implementation of inclusive education.

Overall, by 2030, the rate of children attending mainstream schools in Poland should increase from 65% to 85%. Poland wants to create an inclusive education system for all learners, also by increasing the number of established Specialist Centres for Inclusive Education Support to 17 by 2025 and 285 by 2030; developing 9 validated solutions to improve the quality of inclusive education by 2030; and improving the competences of 13,300 representatives of teaching staff by 2030.

ESF+ funding will be leveraged to prevent the emergence of segregated classes in ECEC and in educational institutions. Commendably, this NAP places an in-depth focus on improving inclusive education for children with disabilities with measurable targets.

PORTUGAL



Data on children with disabilities: In Portugal there are 75.546 children and young people benefiting from disability social benefits. The number of children and young people with disabilities in mainstream public education grew by approximately 67% between 2010 and 2018.

Inclusive ECEC: To ensure access to quality early childhood educational responses, the NAP proposes an extensive list of strategic objectives and comprehensive measures, including an extension of kindergartens' response capacity to meet demand, a progressive implementation of free kindergartens in collaboration with the State and the social sector, the definition of a qualification plan for social responses aimed at children aged 0-3, the provision of internet access and quality digital educational resources for schools, and the establishment of "accompanied study spaces" through peer mentoring or tutorial processes. Altogether, these underscore a holistic approach to child development.

ROMANIA



Data on children with disabilities: The NAP points out that there is no data regarding school segregation based on disability in Poland.

Inclusive Education: A clear aim for the next years is to improve access to inclusive, quality education for children from vulnerable groups. This ensures better educational outcomes and lower drop-out rates, which are great problems in Romania. Recent legislative changes (in 2022) are expected to improve the accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care in particular.

SLOVAKIA



Inclusive ECEC: A core problem identified by the NAP is the inaccessibility of the existing early childhood education system. To resolve this, work will focus on improving access to early childhood care, and *pre-primary* education, including for children with disabilities. To encourage inclusion and promotion of desegregation in education, the NAP proposes measures to improve cognitive, emotional and pro-social skills of children as well as to foster the development of care staff capacities and flexible forms of care. For the next period until 2030, methodological support for schools and founders in the admission of children with disabilities to pre-primary education. The purpose of this task will be to remove the barrier to the participation of a child with a disability in kindergarten, and to support the kindergarten in the inclusion of a child, in cooperation with the child's family. So far, projects supported under the call within the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic are also currently being implemented, such as *Assistant educator in kindergarten*.



SLOVENIA



ECI: The NAP as a whole is highly aligned with values that underpin ECI, as it promotes child participation and community-based forms of support.

Inclusive ECEC: The objective is to upgrade the implementation of assistance for pupils with learning difficulties in accordance with education guidance decisions. This foresees providing learning support to children with learning disabilities to bridge their linguistic, cognitive and educational gaps. It will also imply the development and adaptation of facilities and educational materials for preschool education and care and educational institutions for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The preparation and design appropriate responses to their specific needs, by using inclusive teaching and learning methods in more accessible formats. Finally, it stipulates a focus on the provision of qualified teachers and other professionals such as psychologists, speech therapists, social workers or teaching assistants.

SPAIN



Data on children with disabilities: 2020 data shows that there are 129.540 (certified) children with disabilities in Spain. The NAP announces the preparation of specific studies on child poverty, disaggregated by groups, per category children who experience a situation of vulnerability, like disability. These will be supplemented by regular ad hoc surveys and impact assessments, to bolster the available statistics and data.

ECI: Notably, the Spanish NAP identifies deinstitutionalisation of children with disabilities as a key priority area for action, which goes hand in hand with the establishment of a family-centred ECI framework.

Inclusive Education: A key transversal objective is to promote inclusive environments for these children, fighting against segregation in school. This foresees activities to improve support measures for students with special educational needs, via common educational innovation projects. To this end, Spain will develop a Plan for Inclusive Education for all students with special needs within ten years. It will be part of the New Organic Law on Education (LOMLOE), with an increased investment of 5% of GDP by 2030.

SWEDEN



Data on children with disabilities: Roughly one in five children (22%) in Sweden have a disability.

Inclusive ECEC: Children with disabilities are entitled to appropriate support in early childhood education in Sweden. Nonetheless, the progress report in this NAP shows that some pupils with disabilities risk of not being adequately supported by their school so that they have the same opportunities as other pupils to succeed in school. This may be because the school does not make sufficient adaptations based on their disability or because the staff lack sufficient knowledge.

National Policies: To ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs they should receive support, guidance and stimulation to achieve their potential and learning outcomes. Education should be accessible and comparable for all, regardless of disability. Yet, there are still special schools in place for those with severe learning difficulties or hearing, speech and visual impairments. The regulatory framework for such special learning centres is to be clarified.

THE NETHERLANDS



Data on children with disabilities: Although the NAP reports that there are some two million people with a disability in the Netherlands, it is not specified which portion of this is children.

Inclusive Education: The Dutch policy is that a school must either admit a learner with special needs or help the learner find another, more appropriate school. This could be a mainstream school or a school for special education. All schools must have a document that details what special needs the school is equipped to address. All schools (both special and mainstream) must be part of a regional consortium of schools that together cover all categories of special needs. Learners who are not able to attend a mainstream school may be referred to a school for special education through a declaration of admission issued by the regional consortium.

Dutch policy for special needs education will be monitored through an extensive research programme in the coming years. Suggestions for policy improvement will also be made. Up to now, from this NAP there are no incentives to promote inclusivity in mainstream ECEC centres, nor to up-skill staff or to adapt regular schools to diverse learning needs. The focus is still on funding special needs schools rather than fostering inclusive environments.



MAIN FINDINGS

Disability is a strong aspect in all the European Child Guarantee National Action Plans. There is a comprehensive and concerted effort shared by EU Member States to create inclusive environments for children with disabilities.

Nonetheless, a **common challenge that emerges is the difficulty in accurately defining and collecting data on children with disabilities**. A few countries are missing statistics on how many children with disabilities there are in their country altogether, such as Romania. To overcome this, many NAPs propose ways to improve data collection in the coming years, such as Spain, which brings forth the preparation of specific studies on child poverty, disaggregated per category like disability, to be accompanied by ad hoc surveys and impact assessments. This is an example that could be followed, as such data is essential to inform policy decisions effectively and monitor progress.

For what concerns ECI, the term itself is rarely present in the NAPs. Still, a total of 13 countries do include references to early intervention for children with disabilities.

The prioritisation of access to ECI is strongest in eight European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Malta. These NAPs specify concrete ways to roll out early intervention programmes and improve access to support services to enable such programmes. Many of them focus on improving their systems for early identification, such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Malta, and Croatia. The latter does this as a follow up to the piloting of the ECG which focused on ECI. In the case of Italy generally commits to begin early intervention in the first 1000 day of life. Bulgaria, has a comprehensive approach, as a follow up of its ECG pilot which focused on ECI. Their NAP follows up on this with measures to create and develop a national ECI system, with the aim of increasing the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information, counselling, and more. We can find a similar comprehensive approach also in Greece, which mobilised multiple EU funds (Recovery and Resilience Facility and Technical Support Instrument) to develop a national ECI system. Altogether, these are elements that can serve as a blueprint for other EU countries to begin their work on ECI.

To a different extent, it can be argued that **Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Slovenia and Spain also encompass ECI in their NAPs**. In fact, these countries highlight the importance of transitioning children from institutional care to quality community or family care, thereby setting the ground for broader recognition of the urgency to develop effective ECI strategies.

Most visibly, **across all EU Member States there is a strong commitment to inclusive education, by ensuring that children with disabilities have access to quality ECEC that meets their needs**. The common hurdles faced when trying to achieve this goal are the inaccessibility of educational institutions, insufficient amount of trained staff, lack of adequate educational support and services, scarcity of adapted materials and care.

Efforts are centred around eradicating segregation in schools, ensuring that children with disabilities are included in mainstream educational settings and have access to necessary support. To this end, the focus is on enhancing the competencies of educators and professionals working with children with disabilities through training programs and the provision of support services. Moreover, measures are foreseen to ensure full accessibility of educational buildings and to adapt facilities, educational materials, and teaching methods to the needs of children with disabilities in ECEC settings. Attention is brought to collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and international organisations to implement effective inclusive education initiatives, with national and European funding allocated to support these efforts.

All of these elements combined show a positive trend in European countries whereby NAPs are used to provide a solid basis to design, plan and carry out inclusive ECEC initiatives. Nonetheless, these ambitious goals should not remain empty promises and must be followed-up in the coming years to ensure their effective operationalisation. To this end, accompanying national policies that have been extrapolated from the NAPs where present, can be of vital support to bolster mainstreaming and upscaling of relevant measures into full-fledged systems of inclusive ECEC.



MOVING FORWARD

Critical to the promotion of ECI is its integration within broader policy frameworks, including those related to deinstitutionalisation, independent living, and ECEC. Recognising the relationship between deinstitutionalisation, ECI and ECEC is paramount, as ECI plays a pivotal role in preventing placement of children in institutions and fosters the successful inclusion and participation of children in ECEC settings. Both ECI and ECEC should be viewed as complementary services, offering seamless support to children at risk of or with developmental delays and disabilities, ensuring their holistic development and social inclusion from a young age.

The European Union (EU) can have a significant influence on national policy development and modelling of good practices for ECI and in shaping and strengthening ECI research, policies and services. There is a pressing need to evaluate the existing landscape of ECI policies and facilitating the mainstreaming of such policies which can be done through:

- developing EU Guidelines can further guide the establishment and enhancement of national ECI services and systems;
- greater use of EU financial instruments for the development of ECI systems. As negotiations for future funding are approaching, it's imperative to ensure that ECI remains a focal point, securing adequate resources for its advancement;
- establishing a EU-level collection of good policies and practices in ECI and by organising mutual learning on ECI in the framework of the Child Guarantee governance.

NAPs implementation provide an unprecedented momentum for the creation of ECI systems at national level. This can be fostered by:

- amending NAPs to include or strengthen actions towards ECI, starting from/such as measures to increase awareness of the ECI conceptual framework, assess the state of play of systems for risk identification and service provision to children and their families, and create national plans for the establishment of ECI systems;
- funding this through the opportunities given by EU financial instruments such as European funds ESF+ and the Technical Support Instrument.

This discussion note is meant to generate discussion within the EASPD membership as a basis to identify actions that the network can take in order to push this agenda forward at national and European level. This includes finding common answers on how to disseminate the information covered in this paper, promote the above-mentioned recommendations, and endorse concrete strategies to make them happen.

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