

European expert meeting: the role of the local level in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee

09 October 2024 in Berlin

Report

1. Main findings
2. Background
3. Supporting parents and carers in the first years of life: effective intervention models
4. An international perspective on effective poverty prevention models
5. Utilising effective local poverty prevention systems to implement the European Child Guarantee
6. Concluding remarks

Main findings

Need for increased efforts to reduce the risk of poverty among children and young people

The trend in the amount of children and young people at risk of poverty in the EU is not on track to meet the 2030 targets. In addition, the poverty gap between households with and without children is increasing. Efforts to combat child poverty must be increased.

European Child Guarantee is viewed favourably

According to many participants, the European Child Guarantee (CG) has triggered additional investments at European and national level to prevent poverty and promote inclusion, created platforms for coordination and / or at least increased the priority and visibility for combating child poverty.

From "relabelling" existing measures to providing additional funds

In their national action plans, some countries have essentially listed or relabelled existing activities. Although the participants believe that additional actions and funding should be triggered, some existing approaches and the coordination of existing measures have been strengthened by the Child Guarantee.

Child guarantee as an opportunity for preventive approaches

At the national level, the Child Guarantee has in part led to an improvement in funding opportunities for preventative approaches. This shift from "reactive" to "preventive" poverty policies should be further strengthened. This requires coherent strategies that include national, regional and local levels.

Interdepartmental approaches and the involvement of the finance ministries appear to be helpful

Interdepartmental approaches to combating poverty and promoting inclusion have been among the central demands on national implementation processes since the beginning of the discussion on the Child Guarantee. Those member states that have succeeded in establishing binding cross-departmental coordination structures appear to be particularly successful. Especially when the Ministry of Finance plays a constructive role.

Mixing universal and target group-oriented measures

Successful anti-poverty and inclusion policies have a mix of universal, preventative and target group-oriented activities. Both strategies must be combined and coordinated.

Involvement of stakeholders in the planning and implementation of specific measures

The participants see the community based orientation of support structures and measures as an important prerequisite for needs-based local preventative policies. In addition to aggregated data, this should be based on families and children being able to contribute their lived experience to planning and implementation.

Background

On 09 October 2024, COFACE Families Europe and the Association of German Family Organisations (AGF) jointly organised a European expert meeting on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The 35 participants from civil society, research and ministries exchanged information on the role of the local level in child poverty prevention.

In summer 2021, the EU Member States had adopted the "European Child Guarantee", its target group being "children in need". This includes children living in or at risk of poverty in precarious family situations. However, the Child Guarantee also describes children experiencing other forms of disadvantage as "children in need". Other disadvantages that can make social inclusion and participation difficult include homelessness, disability, a migrant background, ethnic discrimination and institutionalisation. For its implementation, the European Child Guarantee contains commitments by the EU Member States by 2030, to guarantee children in need access to services and goods that are central to their wellbeing and growth to adulthood. These are in particular:

- effective and free access to high-quality early childhood education and care and educational and school-based activities, as well as at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare;
- effective access to healthy nutrition and
- effective access to adequate housing.

Among other, the governments of the member states shall submit a biannual progress report. The

first reports were due in March 2024, only some Member States have met this aim.

The European Child Guarantee recognises the importance of using national and local policy levers to support its implementation through quality services for children in vulnerable situations. Municipalities and services are at the forefront of work to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

According to a report adopted by the European Parliament in November 2023, "more needs to be done to achieve a more comprehensive, intersectoral approach to tackling children's risk of vulnerability and to ensure genuine implementation by removing the policy, political, administrative and financial barriers." This aligns with recent developments in various European nations, where there is a growing focus on enhancing multi-agency collaboration across local service providers. These offer a wide range of early intervention support to families through a proactive, preventive approach, which can facilitate smooth transitions during times of stress or crises, such as poor health, financial hardship, or unemployment.

This expert meeting connected the European Child Guarantee recommendation to the local level, looking more closely at the impact of services on children and their families. Furthermore, it explored different local service models across countries with a view to better understand what works and what does not.

Working languages were English and German.

Supporting parents and carers in the first years of life: effective intervention models

Arianna Lazzari (University of Bologna, Italy)



Family centres have been set up as pilot projects in five very different Italian regions, run by Save the Children in professional association with the University of Bologna. This is happening against the backdrop of a change in Italian policy in recent years towards an intersectoral approach to family policy. In 2017, a structural reform was undertaken in which family services from various ministries were brought together under the umbrella of the Ministry of Family Affairs. This eliminated the fragmentation of services and increased accessibility for families. It was

also intended to tackle the social inequalities between northern and southern Italy and between urban and rural areas. It has been recognised as centrally important that families in vulnerable situations should be better supported, and it is likewise vital to invest in the first years of life in order to avoid social and cultural inequalities. As part of the Child Guarantee and the Italian NAP of 2022, family centres and other projects can be supported by the ESF+ and other programmes. The family centres are rooted in a paradigm shift, according to which young children and families are not only supported but also seen as embedded in local communities. In particular, families are reached who are often not reached otherwise. Various stakeholders, such as teachers, early child education and care (ECEC) professionals, social workers, nurses and health workers, were involved in the design of the family centres. The centres are mostly located in state schools and are designed as far as possible as a point of contact for all family matters. To this end, the staff of the family centres are trained to cover areas ranging from pre-school education to health services. A common language for the coordination of activities is also being developed and staff are being given ownership of change. This will enable the family centres to tackle poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon with various targeted measures. The centres aim to tackle social inequalities in pre-school education.

Sandra Fischer (University of Bonn, Germany)



Sandra Fischer pointed out that there are many parallels between Italy and North Rhine–Westphalia (NRW) when it comes to the family centre system. In Germany’s federal system, family services are regulated by federal level through Social Code VIII. The federal states specify the services, particularly in the area of education and in the organisational structures. The municipalities, as the most important level, are responsible for the local infrastructure and the fulfilment of legal entitlements. The non-profit, independent organisations that provide social services are further important players. Funding is mainly provided by the federal states and local authorities, with parents having to pay fees for pre-school education and care services in most federal states.

In North Rhine–Westphalia, there were already family centres before 2006, started by local authorities or independent providers. This was a bottom-up process, exemplifying how the federal system, aside its weaknesses, also has the capacity to provide a laboratory for innovation. In 2006, the federal state began a programme for the further development of daycare centres into family centres and in 2007 anchored the family centres in the state’s first Child Education Act (KiBiz). In this act, family centres are defined as all-day care facilities that provide services in addition to school education and care as well as easily accessible advice and support for families or referrals based on the needs of the local community. Funding for the family centres comes from the state and is linked to a four-year certification. In 2020/21, state funding was EUR 20,000 per

year and it has increased continuously since. To date, the number of daycare centres that have become family centres has grown every year. In 2007, there were 261 certified family centres, and by 2023 there were already around 3,300. About a third of daycare centres in North Rhine–Westphalia are family centres. According to the law, the family centres must follow three guiding principles: 1. orientation towards families, 2. orientation towards cooperation with external partners in the local community, and 3. orientation towards the social space or neighbourhood. Children are supported by supporting their families. This is done through easily accessible services without stigmatisation, through services from a single source and through multisectoral cooperation. The family centres can provide the services themselves or – more often – in cooperation with educational counselling centres. Counselling is offered at the family centre, usually monthly, but sometimes every fortnight or weekly. Staff are often invited to parents’ evenings to facilitate access. Consultations and therapies for healthcare are offered at the family centre or through a home-based service, for example speech therapy. However, it is difficult to obtain funding for this, partly because there is a fear that easy accessibility will increase demand.

Overall, the family centres contribute to a preventative social policy by using daycare centres to reach children and families in the places where they are. Family centres combine primary and secondary prevention and provide an anchor for families in the neighbourhood. Cooperation with external partners is seen as an enrichment by all those involved. However, there are also challenges because cooperation suffers from a lack of financial resources, staffing and specialists. This applies to both the family centres and the external partners. Moreover, specific regulations limit the possibilities for collaboration. The success of family centres can be seen, for example, in the fact that the use of the services in North Rhine–Westphalia is higher than in many other federal states and the gap between families with and without a migration background is smaller – although such a gap also exists there. Family centres are ultimately a good instrument for reaching many families, although perhaps not all.

Kristien Nys (Odisee University of Applied Sciences, Belgium)



Kristien Nys pointed out, that in Flanders, there are similarities to and differences from the approaches presented so far. The services for families there include “Houses of the Child” and family coaches.

The Houses of the Child are national government organisations that offer parents support for children and young people up to the age of 25, although mainly for pre-school children. In the 300 municipalities of Flanders and 19 districts of Brussels, there are 227 children’s homes. However, slightly more than half offer different kinds of support in one or more visible physical location(s). Houses of the Child, which are run by several municipalities or a region, often have that kind of physical location or contact point. Depending on the local situation, the number of external partners worked with varies. An evaluation found that only 29.3% of the Houses

reached all expected families in 2022/23, and these were mainly families who speak Dutch and, above all, mothers. The Houses with a real contact point achieved higher coverage. Furthermore, 20% of the Houses did not acknowledge the socio-economic conditions of family life. One of the challenges is that the Houses are very dependent on local government and local elections to provide a physical point of contact. Federal funding ranges from EUR 1,200 to EUR 87,000 per year, which is one reason for the large differences between the Houses. Local authorities complement this federal funding.

Family coaching is offered in a three-year programme run by the Flemish regional administration. A (mostly female) family coach makes home visits to families in vulnerable situations. The coaching can last from three months to several years. In three-quarters of the cases, the programme contributes to an improvement in the family’s situation. The family coaches also endeavour to improve housing conditions, but this is often very difficult owing to the lack of quality affordable housing. The continuation of the family coaching depends on the local administrations, so on occasion a programme that is running well is stopped. It would be advantageous if a coordinator took care of the organisation and continuation of the programme so that the family coaches do not have to worry about their working environment and funding. More important than the presence of the family coaches in the child’s home, however, is their attitude, which is important for gaining the family’s trust. Key factors to success were using simple moments of coming together with families (coffee moments) as a starting point and listening to them without judgement.

Key discussion points

During the discussion, it was explained that the family centres in NRW are integrated into various programmes, such as municipal prevention networks and the state programme Frühe Hilfen (Early Help), which is implemented at the local level across all sectors. With regard to the Houses of the Child in Flanders, it was pointed out that, although

they are supposed to cover a child from before birth to 25, they actually mainly reach children up to the age of three. Therefore, schools would be a good place to start. However, this would change the allocation from the Ministry of Welfare to the Ministry of Education, which is less family-friendly. Ways should therefore be sought to bring the family perspective into the discourse on education and school

policy. From the Italian perspective, it was emphasised that ECEC professionals often resist the informal involvement of families. However, once they see the children in their family setting, this attitude often changes. Furthermore, the pilot programme has been running for only two years. The training required is considerable and a change of perspective is usually only achieved through a complex joint process.

The question of the effectiveness of such services was raised, as all countries face the challenge of ensuring that services are provided where there is the greatest need. This was linked to the question of how we could design a demand-oriented system of family policy rather than a supply-oriented one. Kristien Nys pointed out that poverty in a municipality is a good indicator for triggering appropriate measures and selecting municipalities where they will be of most benefit. The approach should be more preventative. Often it is families in moments of transition that pose questions on own initiative, i.e. before a situation of need arises. There is a need to invest in prevention; the measures taken so far are not enough to achieve the European poverty reduction target by 2030. Sandra Fischer emphasised that the family centres in NRW had primarily been introduced in specific neighbourhoods with particular challenges. In general, however, the question is how we combine universal and targeted programmes. A variety of programmes is needed to meet the demand and to gain or maintain broad political acceptance.

The issue of indicators was also discussed. An example from a German district illustrated the data on smartphones for decision-makers on child poverty and the services available for children. It was pointed out that it is tricky to focus solely on the available data or the number of people in poverty. Yet, it is important that families receive the services they need. Every type of family needs to be supported. It was added that local decision-makers are central to identifying local needs and that there are different problems and determinants of poverty in the municipalities, be they crime or unemployment, which need to be tackled. It is necessary to look not only at poverty rates but also at the determinants of poverty and the local potential and stakeholders that can be deployed for integrated interventions.

Filling gaps in provision is also relevant, for example where funding for the Child Guarantee is not used despite existing needs.

The discussion also highlighted existing gaps for families having a migration background. It can be difficult for such families to understand the services available and get an overview of support options. There is also a lot of mistrust towards public institutions; the first reaction is always to reject an offer. It is therefore helpful to partner with migrant organisations to offer services so as to better reach the target groups.

With regard to the two examples presented from Italy and Flanders, the question was raised as to whether the Child Guarantee has had any impact. For example, whether, in addition to the additional funding mentioned, there had also been a change in public discourse, including locally. Arianna Lazzari referred to regional funding, which is subsidised by the ESF+, but the picture is uneven in terms of discourse. There is often a lack of the necessary expertise to apply for and properly use funding. The participants from Flanders pointed out that there is no additional funding through the Child Guarantee in Flanders and that no organisation refers to the Child Guarantee, although some do refer to children's rights. Furthermore, the Child Guarantee is taken into account at the federal level in Belgium, but family policy is made at the regional level. National NGOs are called upon to implement the Child Guarantee, but some NGOs at regional and local levels do not even realise that they are part of this implementation process. A further criticism was that the stakeholders were not included in the development of the NAPs and their implementation.

From a German perspective, the federal nature of healthcare was explained in response to questions. Many stakeholders would have to be involved in order to change the prescription of medical products, for example. In addition, stakeholders fear competition for funding, and health insurers fear that too much demand would be created. It can be complicated to coordinate these problems. As far as social selectivity (unequal access due to social determinants) is concerned, the family centres are mainly confronted with information asymmetries, which lead to differences in uptake, particularly among

families with a migration background, lower income or lower levels of formal education. In addition, the costs incurred by parents could contribute to social selectivity, even if this is highly controversial in research. There is also a lack of coordination between local government departments with regard to housing policy. Social selectivity is exacerbated by the fact that local authorities have to respect the autonomy of non-profit organisations and therefore rarely have any influence on how housing is allocated to certain types of families. All of these barriers have a greater impact when there is a shortage of housing.

For Flanders, it was added that the issue of insurance was a major obstacle when trying to bring existing leisure activities into schools in Flanders. Another problem was the question of whether it was part of the job description in schools to supervise such leisure activities. Waiting lists play a major role in the issue of social selectivity in Flanders. There is a tendency towards restrictive definitions of target groups, which leads to the exclusion of families with complex problems. The family coaches counter this trend by looking for families with complex problems and providing them with social services directly instead of just putting them on a waiting list. As far as mental health services are concerned, the take-up is generally low. Most of the Houses of the Child focus on the first years of life. Organising meetings in the Houses for parents to attend with their young children is normally successful, but it is difficult to organise meetings for parents and their teenage or young adult children.

There are other services for teenagers, sometimes in the neighbourhood, where they can meet and talk to one another or with mental health professionals. In addition, psychologists have been increasingly introduced in schools, which has also increased demand from the psychologists' point of view and could lead to work overload.

Monitoring of the Houses of the Child was discussed. Reference was made here to the evaluation studies, which emphasised that there was no guarantee of quality in the Houses of the Child and equally little support for the quality of their services. It was also noted that the funding for the Houses was completely inadequate for implementation and that the sustainability of funding was a general problem, which meant that a map of the services offered would look different every year. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to create a package or checklist of necessary ingredients of such services for families from existing experience, so that they could also be implemented elsewhere. For example, a combination of grassroots-level NGOs and school-based hubs would seem essential to create a family centre surrounded by strong community-based networks. There are family centres in six or seven European countries, including Estonia, Finland and Croatia, and it would be interesting to bring them together to look at the details of implementation and combine them with the knowledge gained during the meeting.

An international perspective on effective poverty prevention models

Jörg Fischer (Erfurt University of Applied Sciences, Germany)



Jörg Fischer focused on the effectiveness of prevention, which is much more difficult to determine than the effectiveness of intervention. It was a question of how needs and services fit together and what the success factors are. To this end, he presented key evidence-based pointers, from other policy areas as well, from which family policy could learn.

In Germany, there are many services but we learn too little from them, especially from our mistakes. We are not courageous enough to learn from failures. The effectiveness of prevention models is difficult to assess, as you have to measure something that does not happen because it was successfully avoided. The effectiveness debate is understood in very technical terms, but he highlighted that in times when “fake news” is of concern, “perceived truth” also needs to be taken into account in politics. The idea of the effectiveness of family policy is not high on the agenda, either in politics and administration or among the service providers. In addition, there are many normative assessments in circulation with little empirical underpinning. For example, there are many different ideas about what a “good family” is and what a family’s real needs are. Furthermore, politics is quite far removed from young families. For these reasons, family policy can quickly be appropriated, for example for nationalist ideas of motherhood. Because of its own weakness, family policy is unable to counter this well. At the same time, however, family policy has also become more successful. Its programmes are in high demand – but the question is: are they also being used by

those who need them? Family policy is inherently a preventative approach, as it is intended to strengthen families, but this is not used enough as an argument in external communication on family politics, e.g. by the organisations. Family policy needs a stronger understanding of prevention, although there is too often a blurring of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

In the development of family policy, the transition from child protection to poverty prevention has primarily been about learning from mistakes or even disasters. The intervention approach was overstretched, which highlighted the need for prevention. Child protection only begins once a problem has tertiary prevention. The regular structures of the youth welfare offices are reactive. Many parents have seen them as the “child removal police” and have avoided contact with them. Since 2012, on the other hand, the preventative approach of early support has been pursued for pregnant women and parents of children under the age of three. The aim here is to strengthen parents, which is a primary and secondary preventative approach. However, the highest poverty rates are found among older children, for whom there is also less political and public attention. Youth welfare, social services and health authorities should cooperate and learn from one another, as well as from independent organisations and civil society. The more far-reaching approach of poverty prevention is ultimately pursued in the German NAP for the Child Guarantee. Many local authorities are doing excellent work here but need more support from the federal level. In the area of poverty prevention, however, it is unacceptable to “explain” to families how they should live within a budget that is simply not sufficient. Instead, a transition from behavioural prevention to situational prevention is necessary. This would mean creating the social and environmental conditions to prevent poverty. Community orientation is a useful approach. But currently the social space of families is almost always defined from the outside (for instance statistically) and not necessarily as the space where people have their social relationships. The

latter can only be achieved with participation of the families.

The national level can fully prevent poverty through its legislation and by combating the causes of poverty. The federal states, on the other hand, can only prevent poverty to a limited extent, e.g. in the area of education. Finally, the municipalities are not in a position to undertake poverty prevention at all, as this would overload them; instead, they can only address the consequences of poverty. The most important success factor in the municipalities is that their leaders are behind it, not the income of the municipality, city vs. state or the party majority.

When asked about the suspicion often voiced by the state that the resource-oriented approach of

strengthening families is not the most efficient way, as the financial resources are not used directly for the children, Jörg Fischer emphasised that there is a clear evidence showing that early help is reaching the target groups across the board. However, cultural change is still lacking and the administration should utilise networks for its own further development, especially at management level. There is now evidence that families are now being reached who were not reached by child protection, for example through “welcome visits” at home. In addition, these services are generally not just one-offs; rather, the transition to other services such as early childhood education and care is more successful, e.g. in the form of increased utilisation by low-income families.

Olivier Thévenon (WISE Centre – OECD)



Integrated approaches to family policy face a number of challenges. The OECD observes the policies for children of its Member States and tries to identify success factors and support the countries bilaterally in their child policies. Many OECD countries use coordinated and integrated approaches to child policy, with an increasing focus on the first years of life or the first 1,000 days. Client-centred approaches are often pursued, e.g. with the help of case managers.

Member States are focusing on children’s rights and the well-being of children and families. Many countries have placed the steering of the integrated

strategies in the hands of the welfare or health ministry, some even with the head of government. It is also important that the strategy is not too broad or to set priorities. Ireland’s 2014 children’s strategy, for example, covered all dimensions of a child’s life, but this approach was less successful in terms of implementation. The Australian approach, in which the ministries have to cooperate on only a few key issues, is more strategic. The added value of cross-sectoral cooperation is not always clear to everyone involved, as cooperation always costs financial and human resources. Strong arguments in favour of cooperation are therefore necessary.

By 2022, 21 of the 34 OECD countries had adopted an integrated children’s policy plan. Implementation requires strong leadership from the centre of government, which is more helpful for prioritisation than a link to a specialist ministry. One of the challenges is that the ministries initially tend to simply add their activities into an overall strategy instead of coordinating them with one another and changing them if necessary. The municipalities are the most important players in the implementation of the Child Guarantee and must share what they have learnt with one another and with other local stakeholders. They need to identify the needs of families, work together with local stakeholders to translate these needs into an integrated local strategy and implement it in cooperation with the families. Small municipalities are often overwhelmed by having to

implement several integrative strategies at the same time.

Olivier Thévenon summed up by saying that the municipalities need tools with which they can share what they have learned with one another. The national level of government should provide guidelines and resources for the municipalities and communicate the objectives, key areas and target groups as

well as techniques for identifying the needs of families. It should also offer regular meetings to monitor progress for continuous learning. Integrated approaches are an important policy tool, but they come with many challenges and costs that need to be considered in order to accelerate learning at national and local level.

Martin Lichte (European Social Network)



Martin Lichte explained that the European Social Network, as an alliance of various actors at national and local level as well as civil society, aims to prevent families from being overburdened, to prevent harm to children, to prevent the separation of children and their families and to reduce child poverty and its higher costs in the future.

Key elements are the early recognition of problems, e.g. by trained nursing staff in hospitals. Local support networks are important, as are support and counselling for parents and access to childcare facilities. As many families do not know what services they can receive, information about the available services is needed, as well as support and advice on how to navigate through them. It is very important to work with families in a spirit of trust, with the best interests of the child at the centre. Cooperation between different departments and facilities requires the exchange of data and the necessary legal agreements. Child Guarantee examples of implementation include the avoidance of institutional care for children with learning disabilities in Bucharest (Romania) by the establishment of a daycare

centre, which is accessible at very low cost and offers psychological care and counselling as well as family, group and speech therapy. Home care is also offered so that the children do not have to be institutionalised. Another example comes from Sardinia (Italy), where there is an initiative by parents with brain-damaged children. Here, social inclusion plans were developed together with the local government to avoid institutionalisation. This approach is now being extended to the whole of Italy. The third example mentioned was a residential area in Aarhus (Denmark), where various professional groups have organised an interdisciplinary breakfast. This involves health workers, cultural professionals, educators and social workers for families and employment. The interdisciplinary exchange has led to increased participation of families in the labour market and a reduction in absenteeism at school. This has saved the municipality over 100,000 Danish kroner (approx. EUR 13,500) per family per year. Romania is particularly affected by the problem of “care chains” (global care chains). Around 4% of children lack parental care because their parents work abroad – often in caring professions. This is why parental counselling is now offered at airports. There is also support for grandparents who look after their grandchildren. As a result, the school performance of 74% of the children affected has improved. In Barcelona (Spain), the prevention of the transmission of trauma from parents to children is being tackled. This is done through a specialised service with parent counselling, couple counselling and support for the children. In Belgium, community nurses reach 96% of families with newborns to provide them with health services and other family services. If necessary, contact is made with social workers for further services, e.g. social housing. A digital case management programme also enables

the exchange of data between different authorities. The project has been positively evaluated but there is a lack of stable funding, as the respective municipality has to step in after a start-up phase.

Martin Lichte summarised by saying that local ecosystems of community-based social services are needed to meet the needs of children and families, e.g. through daycare. Cooperation between institutions should be supplemented by informal networks in which people can easily make contact with one

another. Professional rules for coordinators and case managers are very important, as are data exchange and the handling of data protection. Outreach measures are necessary for an increased coverage rate. However, prevention and integration are not a mandatory municipal duty, and therefore there is always a risk that activities will not be continued for lack of resources. Therefore, perhaps the most important recommendation is that government at the national level must provide municipalities with stable funding for these tasks.

Key discussion points

Discussion focused on whether the good examples stand only for themselves or represent a policy change towards more cooperation in general. It was pointed out that at least early support systems in Germany represent a systemic change. It was also noted that working methods were changing in the direction of integration and prevention, as were the services, but that attitudes would need more time for a comprehensive policy change. A cultural change was needed to think beyond one's own logic of action. In the 1990s, attempts were made to improve administration with new public management by replacing its logic with a market logic, which proved to be a fallacy. Today, network logic would not replace administration, but rather complement it. However, there was a lack of suitable mechanisms for transferring the findings.

With regard to the functionality of networks, it was emphasised on the one hand that informal networks

are meaningful, in which representatives of different ministries know one another and can use shortcuts in the official channels. It was also noted that networks are particularly successful when institutional networks are supplemented by some degree of informality. It could be useful to get to know the political players in their context or to organise and include community actors and stakeholders in institutional networks. Here, the family organisations could open doors to create access to the networks and shape them. Overall, informal networks are very successful, but they require a great deal of coordination. Many stakeholders are therefore already talking about coordination fatigue. We need to adapt to this and avoid creating too many such networks and thus creating a new level of structures. Clearly, it is not possible to rely on informal coordination alone. There is also a danger that too many silos of networks will emerge, even though each of these networks wants to break down silos.

Utilising effective local poverty prevention systems to implement the European Child Guarantee

Jiri Švarc (GD EMPL – European Commission): State of play on the implementation of the Child Guarantee



Jiri Švarc presented the European Child Guarantee and the status of its implementation. The proportion of children at risk of poverty is rising slightly. We are therefore not on track to achieve the 2030 targets. The causes include COVID-19 and the rise in inflation. However, it is worrying that child poverty is increasing slightly while overall poverty is falling slightly. The gap between households with or without children has therefore widened. In some countries, however, child poverty is falling, which shows that there are ways to reduce it.

In the meantime, all member states have submitted their NAP, and most have also submitted their first biennial progress report. These documents have been published on the Child Guarantee website, mostly in English (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=de>). The approaches vary, but the overall picture of the state of development is good.

The Child Guarantee aims to address the social exclusion of children and defines groups of children in need for whom certain key services are to be provided. It also supports the goal of reducing child poverty.

In early childhood care and education (ECEC) participation, there is a gap between children who are and those who are not at risk of poverty (AROPE), which is quite large at 16%. The causes include

costs, geographical accessibility and other barriers to accessibility. Many member states are expanding childcare, e.g. Poland is in the process of creating 100,000 new places. When expanding childcare, care should be taken to ensure that the aforementioned gap is not widened.

The measures in the NAPs are often universal programmes. Measures should be taken to ensure that disadvantaged children have at least the same access as other children. The NAPs also often include measures to expand childcare and healthy school meals, which is to be welcomed. Only a few measures relate to housing and healthy eating, as implementation is difficult here. When it comes to monitoring, many member states have difficulties identifying the target groups of children in need because of a lack of data. However, there are many administrative data in various state organisations that could be used more effectively. Some states encounter obstacles when it comes to data protection (GDPR). Others, however, do not, which indicates that ways can be found here. There are also the familiar problems of coordinating different policy levels and departments.

Member States can be provided with technical and financial support as required, financed by the European Social Fund+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and other EU budget streams. Several Child Guarantee reform projects are being implemented or are in preparation via the Technical Support Instrument of DG REFORM. Although this is only a drop in the ocean, it does also trigger further investments. With the CG national coordinators, a platform has been created for Member States to learn from each other. The Child Guarantee also helps to increase the visibility of the policy area, not least by putting family policy on the agenda of governments and the Council of Ministers. In the European Commission, a new Commissioner, Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu, will be responsible for the Child Guarantee and will have a mandate to strengthen it.

Key discussion points

Jiri Švarc emphasised that, in his opinion, the relevant social ministers and stakeholders are serious about the Child Guarantee, but naturally the financing is often a challenge. The Child Guarantee is only a recommendation, and there are a large number of recommendations from the Council, only a few of which become a visible and widely supported initiative. From this perspective, the Child Guarantee is a success but remains a voluntary framework. It needs political will at the national level, and there are some examples of this. Whether the success is sufficient, however, is a difficult question.

With regard to the frequent criticism, that the Member States are re-labelling and have merely written existing measures into their National action plan, he explained that the Child Guarantee is not a new policy per se and member states have been acting in these policy areas already, it rather puts the children exclusion in the spotlight with calling for more focused or targeted actions.. The majority of the measures could be seen as re-labelling, but there are certainly new elements or adjustments to the measures. It has proved to be very helpful that some countries have to use part of the ESF+ funds for the Child Guarantee. There are some good projects there.

One stakeholder asked about the timeline presented on a slide, which ended with the full implementation of the Child Guarantee in 2030: how should it be determined in 2030 whether it has been fully implemented if no implementation reports are planned for 2030? Jiri Švarc expects that the Commission will rely on the previous implementation reports and its own monitoring to assess the overall implementation of the Child Guarantee by 2030. Progress on the core issues of the Child Guarantee as well as a reduction in child poverty and gaps in accessibility are already a great success.

The Commission also plans to keep the ball rolling between the biennial reports so as to continue monitoring national implementation. There will be bilateral meetings to go through the plans and reports. This is a two-way exchange that it is hoped will lead to reflection in the Member States, the Commission does not plan to publicise the proceedings of these bilateral contacts which allows for an open dialogue at the technical level. The participants regretted this and noted that the Commission's comments on the NAPs had also been very helpful for the NGOs and that this would also apply to comments on the biennial implementation reports.

Martina Kottmann (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, Germany)



Martina Kottmann pointed out that, although Germany has not yet submitted its biennial implementation report, Germany has been busy implementing the Child Guarantee. As the Child Guarantee covers

a very broad range of topics and includes many stakeholders, the Ministry of Family Affairs therefore commissioned a feasibility study for their implementation. The NAP was presented in July 2023, incorporating the results of stakeholder participation. The 350 measures included were not all new, of course, as there were already many ongoing and planned measures. The NAP Committee was the first body on child poverty to be set up at federal level. Relevant ministries as well as NGOs and researchers are represented there. The biennial implementation report is currently being drawn up and many coordination processes are required within the government. A cabinet meeting for its adoption is scheduled for 11 December 2024. The content part of the report has been prepared by the German

Youth Institute under its own authorship, and the federal government and participating stakeholder groups as well as a team of youth experts will submit comments.

The substantive work on the implementation of the Child Guarantee in Germany has three priorities. The first is coordination at a concrete level, including the comparatively high-ranking appointment of Parliamentary State Secretary Ekin Deligöz as Child Guarantee National Coordinator and the upcoming development of a “Child Opportunities 2030” mission statement to strengthen cooperation between the ministries and achieve a common understanding. The second priority is cooperation with research

and civil society through the German NAP Committee, which has met three times so far and is active in several working groups. The third focus is the participation of children and young people in accordance with the Council Recommendation. The State Secretary has made two tours of Germany and spoken to many children in daycare centres and other institutions about opportunities for children. In addition, the team of youth experts had been set up and consulted on issues relating to the Child Guarantee. As poverty prevention primarily takes place at the municipal level, this is a focus of the first biennial report, including two expert reports. Good feedback has been received from the municipal level, including at two organised event

Hanna Vsevirov (Ministry of Social Affairs, Estonia)



Hanna Vsevirov explained by way of introduction that, in Estonia too, the NAP only reported on what had already been done and planned. Nevertheless, the NAP had lent force to some of the initiatives, including integrated activities in at municipal level.

In Estonia, there are only two political levels, the national and the municipal, the latter being primarily responsible for services for families. Half of the population and children live in the capital, Tallinn, while the smallest municipality has around 5,000 inhabitants. The fertility rate is also declining in Estonia.

To embed the Child Guarantee in the national system, a “Prevention Council” has been formed at ministerial level, in which all ministries essential for implementation are represented. The Prevention Council has several working groups, including one on social welfare. Local authorities and NGOs are also represented. The Prevention Council is responsible for the NAP and the monitoring of both the Child Guarantee and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. A state “Social Insurance Board” is responsible for state services and supporting the municipalities, particularly in the area of children’s rights policy. All measures in the NAP are anchored in the strategies and action programmes of the ministries, and the Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for the social welfare strategy, including the associated child and family programme, which has a four-year budget, annually extended by an additional year. It is helpful that the Ministry of Finance is also represented on the Prevention Council. Nevertheless, it is not always possible to expect additional funding for measures; rather, existing funds need to be used to achieve better results. However, if the ministers agree, they can make a decision in the Council, which is then channelled into the budget preparation process by the ministers with a good chance of success. One example of this was the support for parents of young people with drug-related problems, where even the Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs made funds from their budgets available to the Ministry of Social Affairs.

The digital sector is perhaps an interesting example of implementation. Estonia also had a fragmented system here. It was too difficult for families to find support services. For children with special needs, for example, 14 tests were required before they could receive the help they needed. In order to make the welfare system more integrated, data on needs will now be passed on from the state level to the municipalities. The data are then transferred from the health register to the social register and from there daily to the child protection social workers. The municipalities must then contact the parents within 10 days and ask what support they would like to receive. The issue of data protection was quite controversial but the feedback from the parents played a major role in the decision about implementation. There is now an opt-out option for families and no medical data or diagnoses are transmitted to the local authorities, only the fact that there has been a request for support. Parents now receive the support much more quickly.

Key discussion points

In the discussion, it was pointed out that the offers change over time and it is a challenge to keep the databases up to date. Although this also applies to Estonia in principle, Hanna Vsevirov explained that there is only one database there, which provides an overview and therefore avoids duplication of work. In addition, the focus is not on specific services but on needs and the respective health and/or family conditions that trigger them. She also explained that there are similar facilities to the family centres in Estonia, which are called “family nests”. However, there are increasing needs in families and less and less labour available to provide family services. Many families in need also do not utilise the services offered by local authorities. It is important that no attempt is made to replace human contact with digital tools. On the contrary, the aim is to bring the few specialists available into direct contact with the families in need by relieving them of other tasks.

The ministries are currently developing a new system in which social services are based on key life events, adopted from OECD research. For example, 14 life events have been identified, such as having a baby. Although this still involves various processes in different administrations, these take place in the background, while there is a seamlessly connected and user-friendly process for citizens. Citizens do not need to apply for the benefits; they are offered them proactively. For example, after a birth, parents automatically receive an email notification about social benefits, tax benefits, parental leave, etc., including a calculation of monetary benefits based on income. Parents can then choose with one click whether to accept the offer, which parent will take parental leave, etc. Another example of a life event is having a family and needing help. This need could be due to a disability, excessive demands or violence, for example. Another life event should be added to the system in 2026, namely an irreversible health condition of the child. This would allow special arrangements to be planned in good time, e.g. for school.

Hanna Vsevirov explained that the take-up rate of social services is now close to 100%. But a few years ago, it was around 25% for certain social services for children in poverty that had to be applied for from the municipality. It should be noted here that the Child Guarantee has helped a great deal in scrutinising whether the target groups with specialist support needs are really being reached.

One participant asked at what point the parents consent to data sharing. According to Hanna Vsevirov, this happens as soon as the parents appear for a medical examination or, since 2022, by law in the best interests of the child. In addition, parents can refuse services when contacted by a social worker, except in cases of violence. Most families are very satisfied with the contact.

Concluding remarks

Annemie Drieskens (European Family Policy Observatory)



Annemie Drieskens concluded by referring to the large number of different approaches that had been mentioned and learnt about in the discussion. It was positive that everyone was endeavouring to tackle

the common challenges for a change to integrated services and prevention. One takeaway she had was that digitalisation could help administrations to act more proactively. These steps should be taken in close cooperation with families and family organisations. She highlighted common tasks that need to be worked on together with different stakeholders.

This includes adequate funding for the Child Guarantee and the sustainability of projects and programmes at local level. Informing and guiding families about the available services is another important task. She explained that the results of the expert discussion and the models presented would be further explored and studied with the European Observatory in the coming weeks and months.

Annemie Drieskens concluded the session by inviting participants to a conference of the Observatory to be held in Brussels on 25-26 September 2025 involving numerous stakeholders (research, practitioners and policy-makers) to discuss the transition from a fragmented to a more integrated landscape of services for families.

Imprint

Publisher:

COFACE Families Europe

Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Familienorganisationen (AGF) e. V.

Editing:

Lars Vogelsang, Elizabeth Gosme, Sven Iversen

Photos:

AGF e. V.

Layout and typesetting:

COFACE Families Europe

Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Familienorganisationen (AGF) e. V.

December 2024



COFACE Families Europe is supported by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). This document is produced with the support of the European Commission but does not necessarily reflect its views.

The AGF is supported by:



Bundesministerium
für Familie, Senioren, Frauen
und Jugend