



Inclusiveness and Flexibility of Care Policies

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Introduction

As explained in the Introduction to Work Package 5 of the rEUsilience project (see D5.1) the welfare state engages with individuals and families in many ways. In this WP we work with three main mechanisms which ultimately shape this relationship of the welfare state with families:

Inclusiveness: understood as the degree to which rights are available to all irrespective of employment status, citizenship status or other criteria based on family, gender and intersectional characteristics (Dobrotić and Blum 2020).

Flexibility: defined as the extent to which policy either encourages or enables people to make a change in their circumstances and financial/family situations.

Complementarity: the degree to which incentives/disincentives and supports are consistent across policy domains.

This report is one of the three deliverables where we critically examine how inclusive and flexible policies are. We focus on three main policy domains: income protection (D5.1); care policies (D5.2) and parental leave (D5.3). How these different policies complement each other to offer protection against risks to families will be covered in the last deliverable of this WP (D5.5). In all reports we cover the six countries of the rEUsilience project: Belgium, Croatia, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The focus of this report (and the WP5 as a whole) is on policy design. Care policies are divided into Early Years Education and Care (ECEC) and Long-Term Care (LTC).

The premise of WP5 is that social policy supports and promotes family resilience when inclusiveness is embedded across policy domains, when policies are flexible enough as to allow -or even encourage change - and when both inclusiveness and flexibility are complementary across policies.

Considering the inclusion/exclusion element first, policies might include/exclude individuals and families, whether implicitly or explicitly, from access to services and benefits by establishing certain eligibility criteria. That is, by blocking access to some or by giving priority to others.

An example of the former would be the number of years that one needs to be legally resident in a country to benefit from minimum income programmes which *de facto* might exclude many foreign-born and recently arrived migrants from entering the system. An example of the latter is the special consideration that single parent households increasingly receive to facilitate their access to social protection.

A totally inclusive system will be one which guarantees universal access to everyone regardless of their condition and circumstances. In theory, a system which provides for a constitutional right is bound to be universally available because the principle of non-discrimination applies to the very definition of entitlement. This is the case for national public education systems and in some countries, of national health systems. Exclusion might happen via other perhaps subtler ways, for instance by not including some types of healthcare -dentistry, mental health and so on; or complementary education services - school meals, extracurricular activities, etc within the array of services available to all free of charge. Universal access might also be compromised by making people pay -such as co-payments in healthcare or extended school programmes which in many countries are not considered as an essential responsibility of schools. But still, in the case of education and to a lesser extent health, inclusiveness is by and large embedded in the overarching principles of provision. This is not the case when we consider access to other social rights.

Some welfare domains have a much more restrictive understanding of inclusiveness even when defined as universal. Cash transfers that are truly available to all are in most countries very low and so generosity of the provision tends to be linked to more stringent access criteria. Likewise, inclusion/exclusion mechanisms are put in place when supply of public services is insufficient to cover demand -as in social and care services in most countries.

We can think of inclusion/exclusion dynamics in the access to social policies as happening at three levels:

1. By making access conditional on certain individual characteristics: when policies differentiate on the basis of age, sex, sexual identity, race, religious orientation and so on.
2. By making access conditional to certain conditions: employment trajectory or status, citizenship, years of residency, etc.
3. By implementing a complicated administrative process through which individuals and families claim services and benefits.

These three levels function in intricated and complex ways.

In today's welfare states, exclusion by means of individual characteristics (1) has virtually disappeared from policy. As part of democratic advancement, forms of explicit discrimination have been removed from legislation and policies in most cases, except for age which is still often used to discriminate in access. In general, systems of protection have become more inclusive by simply applying European and national anti-discrimination laws.



In the field of family policy for instance, national laws have been modified to cater for family diversity. Whilst in the past more restrictive definitions of what constitutes a family led to discrimination against same-sex couples -in having the right to adopt children, for instance- this is today seen in most high-income welfare states not just as non-acceptable but also illegal. As part of the same process, policies that differentiate between women and men in their role as mothers and fathers are now being reformulated to adopt a more inclusive gender-neutral language oblivious to the sex of the progenitor (i.e. 'birth leaves' instead of maternity and paternity leaves). Although in this latter case, the possible trade-offs between the inclusiveness criteria and the capacity to tackle inequalities in outcomes need to be empirically addressed. Still, to the extent that these changes in entitlements reflect political dynamics that are country specific, growing political polarisation (especially in countries with a large presence of the far right) risks making comprehensive understandings of inclusivity as widening social rights politically contentious.

Eligibility criteria based on the specific circumstances of a person or a family (2) eventually serves to decide who is (and is not) entitled to a certain right. Policies which target a specific group in society -let's say poor families- are more likely to establish strict eligibility conditions than policies which are there for the benefit of everyone or most people in society. Extensive comparative research on minimum income programmes (MIS) for instance shows how the introduction of categorical conditions often leads to the exclusion of potential beneficiaries (Figari et al. 2012). Furthermore, to the extent that only beneficiaries of MIS can access further protection and services (such as free public childcare or subsidised housing), a closed gate to one single programme might lead to the blocking of subsequent gates. It is these intersections which might magnify a person or a family's exposure to risk.

Inclusion/exclusion of policy also happens in a procedural way through specific implementation processes (3). What Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan (2018) call 'policymaking by other means' refers to the administrative burdens that operate -deliberately or not- in the application procedures of benefit systems. As the authors claim, burdens are consequential -they have an impact on people's lives-; are distributive -they affect some groups more than others; and are constructed -in the sense that they are a function of politics and power. In the masterly Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake*, the harmful mistreatment of Blake by an impersonated benefits bureaucracy is a perfect example of exclusion by means of the very -digital-functioning of the system. The Focus Groups carried out as part of WP4 provided plenty of evidence of compliance criteria and requirements put in place to limit support rather than provide help.

Excessive administrative burden on the compliance with rules and requirements also affects the capacity of social protection systems and services to facilitate the resilience of families. A change in the circumstances (such as losing a job after becoming ill as in the main character in Loach's film), often imply a greater exposure to risk and so policy is hugely relevant in protecting (or falling to protect) the negative effects of such change (see D5.1; Daly, 2023). These 3 levels tend to overlap in several ways.



To the extent that individual circumstances (to be or not to be formally employed and for how long, to hold permanent or temporary legal residency, etc) tend to match individual characteristics, the two are intrinsically related. This is in fact the most important point of the burgeoning literature on ‘Matthew effects’: the unintended consequences of social investment policies, including care policies here, is that they tend to give advantage to those who already hold positions of relative privilege in society whilst those who would benefit most tend to be under-represented. If for instance priority to ECEC services is given to families on dual incomes, those with a more precarious attachment to the labour market -this is overwhelmingly the case of women with a migrant background – have greater chances of being excluded. Likewise, to the extent that some groups in society have greater difficulties to navigate a complicated -an increasingly faceless- administrative process, the very implementation of social programmes ends up reinforcing inequalities in society. Institutions and governments are starting to react to this problem precisely by paying attention to how the less well-off benefit from greater public investment. In ECEC for instance the EU’s Barcelona targets of the early 2000s just aimed for an increase in coverage rates (45% of children below the age of 3 and 96% for children aged 3 and above). The goals of the more recent European Child Guarantee initiative do not just target higher levels of coverage but also issues related to affordability and quality. This is in line with the European Care Strategy¹ which encourages Member States to increase children’s participation in ECEC, reduce inequalities in access, and improve both their quality and affordability. In a way, targets have become more sophisticated to integrate different dimensions of inclusiveness of policy which range from the special attention to the more disadvantaged groups and the improvement of early diagnosis and support for children with disabilities and special needs, to the problem of weak professionalization and poor working conditions of staff in the care sector.

Precisely because inclusion/exclusion happens at different layers of policy, flexibility is also relevant to our understanding of how conditionality criteria of social policy might exclude families from some forms of protection but not others. For instance, adults who are not legal residents in one country are likely to be excluded from claiming unemployment protection or anti-poverty subsidies, but by contrast their children are entitled to education services and healthcare.

What appears to be relevant here is that the mechanisms for inclusion/exclusion are not shared nor are they necessarily congruent across policy domains.

The report is organised as follows: first we reflect on the study of inclusiveness and flexibility in care policies. Secondly, we undertake a comparative overview of ECEC in the six national systems to then move to the analysis of inclusiveness of ECEC by looking at availability, eligibility, affordability and quality.

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy, COM (2022) 440 final.



Fourthly, we turn our attention to inclusiveness in LTC systems. The last section offers some tentative conclusions.

1. Inclusiveness and flexibility in care policies

Broadly speaking, care refers to the “labour, resources and relations involved in meeting the needs of those requiring assistance and help because of age, illness, or frailty of some kind” (Daly and León 2022: 21). Care policy usually encompasses a whole range of welfare state services put in place to address very different needs and problems. As such there is great complexity in how different forms of provision address very different needs.

This complexity arises to begin with from the absence of a common conceptual ground of what care means in theory and in practice and where the boundaries that define responsibilities between the state, the market, the family (and women) are. Some countries legally recognize the right to care -be it childcare or adult care- but the entitlements attached to such right are most of the time idly defined and poorly resourced.

The difficulty in delineating what care policy means at both a conceptual and an analytical level resonates in comparative social policy research all the time. Different things might appear under the same rubric; national data might not exist; information might be inaccurate or imprecise because variation is too large, etc. This is the main reason why research on care policy has preferred single cases or focused comparisons while broad macro comparative social policy analyses tend to focus on cash-transfer and exclude services. By making a virtue of necessity, in this report we undertake a first incursion to the analysis of inclusiveness and flexibility in care policy by using a mixture of sources and by openly reflecting upon their (and our) limitations. The first of such limitations is the attempt to put together care for children and care for adults under a supposedly unifying rubric of ‘care policies’ because a) the two address very different needs and risks and b) in the trajectory of welfare state reform over the last decades the two seldom walk the same path.



2. Comparative overview of ECEC national systems

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) refers to any regulated arrangement that offers education and care services to children from birth up to compulsory primary school age. This broad definition serves as an umbrella concept to many different understandings of what ECEC entails in various national contexts. “Any regulated arrangement” offering some kind of service to children and their families from birth to age 5 or 6 ranges from more individualised childcare arrangements (for instance, registered childminders who look after a few children in their own home) to more collective solutions with varying degrees of institutionalisation. Institutional care for children can also mean very different things depending on the country or the region. Importantly also, ECEC varies depending on the age of the child.

All this heterogeneity embedded in ECEC stands in sharp contrast to the rather homogeneous organisation of compulsory education across countries with very specific organisational features such as infrastructure, schedules, ratios, pedagogies, qualifications and working conditions of teachers, etc. This standardisation allows for robust comparisons not just on how the policy is designed but also what to expect in terms of outcomes. The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), for instance, measures 15-year-olds’ performance in key skills and the results are then extrapolated to reflect the quality of national education systems worldwide. The fascinating polysemy that exists within ECEC compromises to a large extent our capacity to find a common ground for comparison and invites us to come up with creative ways to collect, analyse and reflect on the information that is available.

Typology of ECEC services

Childcare and early education services for children under schooling age are extremely diverse with regard to the organisation of its provision in the six countries. While some nations provide a range of options and a certain degree of flexibility, others have more structured systems. These differences in early education systems reflect each country’s approach to childhood policies and the demarcation between education and welfare services. Understanding such differences but also the similarities between the various ways in which ECEC services are organised offers important insights on the development and implementation of effective early childhood education policies. Following OECD Family database criteria, ECEC services can be categorized in two broad groups considering children’s age and educational cycles: centre-based childcare or family day care and pre-school education programmes. For the sake of simplicity in this report we will refer to childcare for all services addressing children below the age of 2 and pre-primary for children above the age of 2 and below compulsory schooling age.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive comparison of ECEC systems across the six countries. One of the aspects that differentiate the systems is their organisation in terms of both the educational stages into which they are divided and the various types of service provision. ECEC is typically structured into at least two fundamental stages or cycles: the first is addressed to the youngest children and the second designed for slightly older ones.



Of the 6 countries, Sweden is the only one which presents a unified pre-school stage, comprising 5 years from age 1 until the beginning of primary education. Across countries the cycles do not necessarily coincide with a specific form of provision. In fact, ECEC settings are more diverse when targeting younger children. Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom provide early childcare in a variety of settings: nurseries, independent childminders, infant schools or playgroups. This decentralised provision of ECEC contrasts with the single setting system in Croatia and Sweden. As table 1 also shows, another distinctive aspect of the different systems is the age brackets around which the services are organised.



TABLE 1. TYPOLOGIES OF CHILDCARE AND EARLY EDUCATION SERVICES

<i>Centre-based / family day care</i>									
<i>Pre-school</i>									
<i>Compulsory schooling</i>									
<i>Age</i>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7/+7	
Belgium	Nurseries (Crèches), Independent childminders (Accueillantes d'enfants indépendantes), or Childcare services (service d'accueil d'enfants)		Pre-primary schools (École maternelle)			Compulsory schooling			
Croatia	Kindergartens (Dječji vrtići)	Kindergartens (Dječji vrtići)		Kindergartens (Dječji vrtići)			Compulsory schooling		
Poland	Crèches (Żłobek)	Kids' clubs (Klub dziecięcy)		Kindergartens/Pre-schools (Przedszkola)			Compulsory schooling		
Spain	Nurseries or Infant schools (Guarderías o Escuelas infantiles)			Infant Schools (Escuela Infantil)			Compulsory schooling		
Sweden	n/a	Pre-school centres (Förskola)					Pre-primary classes (Förskoleklass)	Compulsory schooling	
United Kingdom	Nurseries, Childminders and Playgroups			Nurseries and Playgroups	Reception class (in Primary school)		Compulsory schooling		

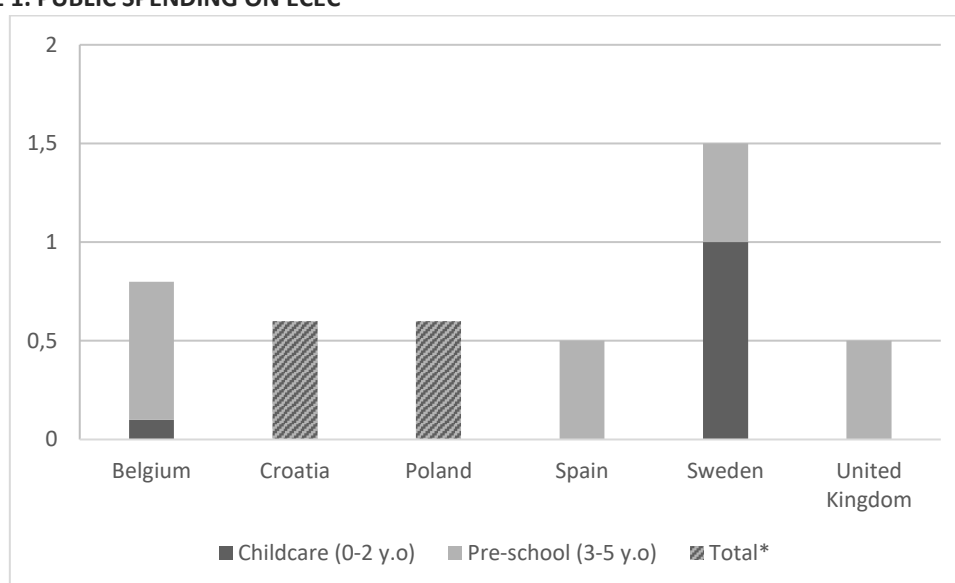
Source: Own elaboration from OECD Family database (2016), complemented and updated with latest data available in Eurydice. **Note:** This table shows the types of ECEC services which, for children not yet of school age, can be divided in two categories: 1) centre-based childcare includes all part-time or full-time childcare provided outside home in licensed centres (nurseries, day care centres, crèches, or playschools). Family day care is traditionally provided in a home setting (both in light blue), and 2) pre-school early education programmes comprising centre-based (or school-based) programmes designed to prepare children for primary (compulsory) education (in darker blue). It also illustrates when each type of ECEC starts, the ages they comprise, and the start of compulsory schooling (in grey).

Expenditure and Coverage in ECEC

In a broad sense, expenditure in ECEC and coverage can be taken as a proxy for the level of inclusiveness. In principle, higher spending should mean greater inclusiveness in the provision to the extent that it implies greater resources allocated to this policy domain. According to the OECD Family Database, Sweden spends 1% of GDP in ECEC, the highest by far of our six countries which can be ranked downwards with Belgium coming second (0.8%), Croatia and Poland (0.6%) and Spain and the United Kingdom exhibiting the lowest public expenditure on ECEC with 0.5% of GDP. Despite greater attention being now paid to ECEC in all countries, only Sweden managed to reach the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) target of allocating at least 1% of the GDP to ECEC.

However, these data must be interpreted with caution for, at least, three reasons. Firstly, some countries do not differentiate between childcare and formal day-care services (for children under 3) and pre-primary education services, for children aged 3 and above. As Figure 1 below shows, this is the case for Poland and Croatia. This makes it impossible to extract consistent conclusions about resources allocation per type of ECEC for different age groups with, understandably, different care and educational needs.

FIGURE 1. PUBLIC SPENDING ON ECEC



Source: Own elaboration from OECD Family Database, 2019 or latest available. Data for Croatia is from Eurostat (2020). *Data cannot be disaggregated by educational level in Croatia and Poland.

Note: Public expenditure on ECEC as a percentage of GDP. It covers all public spending (in cash or in-kind) with data disaggregated into expenditure on childcare and formal day-care services (aimed at 0-2-year-olds) and expenditure on pre-school education services (from 3 to 5 y.o.): kindergartens and day-care centres.



Secondly, spending levels are also sensitive to different classifications and territorial organisation across countries. Decentralisation might play an important role since ECEC policies are often the responsibility of local and regional administrations. Although in principle this does not necessarily imply the lack of reliable data at national level, the degree of regional autonomy in some countries speaks against a reliable 'national average'. In Wallonia for instance some communes do not reach 15% of coverage of public or publicly subsidised childcare whilst many others reach 30%. In Spain, coverage in the Basque Country or the Madrid region is above 50% but in other regions such as Murcia or the Canary Islands levels of coverage are about 20%. Whilst national statistics have systematised data on overall regional expenditure on pre-school education, this is not the case for childcare services. The lack of reliable data on services for the very early years has been pointed out by international and national organisations as a major obstacle to conduct reliable assessments (León et al. 2022).

Thirdly, the different ways in which governments can support ECEC are difficult in some countries to translate into levels of expenditure as a percentage of GDP. Level of expenditure on ECEC is more accurate when public investment is organised at the state level and through direct provision. It is far more problematic when there is a complex public/private welfare mix that is in one way or another supported by additional and complementary policy arrangements (fiscal allowances for instance). This is the case of the United Kingdom where nurseries are mostly private and families might receive vouchers to cover the costs partially or totally. Thus, the government indirectly invests in ECEC by subsidizing families directly. The degree to which the state supports families financially to access the service will be relevant from the perspective of inclusiveness.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, all countries seem to be increasing their levels of spending on ECEC. Belgium's ECEC spending started at 0.7% in 2009 and gradually increased to 0.8% in 2019. Poland has had an overall steady evolution over the last decade reaching its peak in 2013 (0.6%). Level of spending in Croatia has remained relatively stable fluctuating between 0.5% and 0.6% of GDP over the last decade. The United Kingdom and Spain are the two countries where expenditure has come down despite increasing coverage.

A closer look at coverage indicates the sharp division between the two different stages of ECEC.

Table 2 compares enrolment rates across the six countries, with separate measures for childcare and pre-primary (for children aged 3 and above). When looking at total averages for the six countries, 65% of children are enrolled in ECEC. However, average enrolment rates are much higher for children in the pre-primary years (92%), and drops to 37% for those in childcare. This means that supply is universal or close to being universal for children aged 3 and older but remarkably lower for younger children. In fact, this is reflecting the fact that legal entitlement to ECEC is in most countries only guaranteed for provision close to the beginning of elementary education. Broadly speaking, the younger the children are, the greater the cross-national variability in terms of coverage and type of service provided.



As Table 2 shows, Belgium has the highest enrolment rate for children aged 0 to 2 years old (57%). Sweden and the United Kingdom also present relatively high rates, with 48% and 45% respectively, Spain follows closely behind with just above 40%. Croatia and Poland have the lowest levels of enrolment (20% and 13% correspondingly). These figures may indicate potential challenges or barriers in accessing first cycle ECEC in these countries such as not offering enough public childcare places to cover parents' demands. As mentioned, the scenario is completely different for the pre-primary years in which enrolment rates are practically 100% in the Belgium, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and 88% for Poland and 72% for Croatia. However, when the data is put in context by considering the average number of hours that 0-2 children spend in ECEC, children in Croatia (38h) and Poland (34h) comparatively spend more time per week in ECEC than the other countries. In the United Kingdom the average number of hours per week is 20.

TABLE 2. ENROLMENT RATES IN CHILDCARE AND PRE-SCHOOL

		Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
Enrolment in childcare and pre-school (%)	Childcare (0-2 y.o)	57	20	13	41	48	45
	Pre-school (3-5 y.o)	98	72	88	97	95	100
Average usual weekly hours in ECEC	Childcare (0-2 y.o)	32	38	34	28	31	20
	Pre-school (3-5 y.o)						

Source: Own elaboration from OECD Family Database, 2020 or latest available. Average usual weekly hours in ECEC are not available for pre-school (3-5 y.o.).

Note: This table presents information on the use of ECEC services in the six countries. Enrolment in childcare and pre-school is the percentage of children enrolled in or using ECEC services. Average usual weekly hours in ECEC refers to the average number of hours children spend in ECEC during a usual week. Data is disaggregated into very young children (0 to 2 y.o.) and slightly older children (3 to 5 y.o.).

As can be deduced from the previous analysis, the number of places and offered hours are often not enough to cover the entire ECEC demand. For this reason, some parents need to find alternative care options. Data in Table 3 sheds light on the prevalence of informal childcare arrangements in these countries and provides insights into the varying levels of reliance on informal caregivers. The proportion of children using informal care varies widely across countries and ECEC cycles with a total average of 23%. In most countries, informal care is less used when children are very young (21% on average), and rates increase as they move to the pre-primary years.



When analysing the average number of hours in informal childcare, the trend is exactly the opposite. It tends to be used around 13 hours but, as children get older, the time spent in informal childcare decreases from 15 to 11 hours a week on average.

The United Kingdom and Poland present the highest use of informal childcare arrangements. In Sweden parents barely make use of informal care (0.5 according to the OECD and counterintuitively Spanish parents report just 9%). As for the 3 to 5 years old group, informal use rates range from the 40% in the United Kingdom to the 0% in Sweden. Again, the United Kingdom is the country with the highest percentage of use and Sweden with the lowest. Poland and Croatia present the second and the third highest values (39% and 37%, respectively), followed by Belgium with 32% and Spain's reported use of informal childcare arrangement is about 4%.

Regarding average weekly hours of informal childcare, across countries very young children spend more time in informal arrangements. Belgium, Croatia and Poland have relatively similar average hours, ranging from 16 to 19 hours approx. Spanish parents, in one of the countries with the lowest use of informal childcare, tend to use it for more extended periods each week (21h). In contrast, the United Kingdom with higher use of informal arrangement shows the lowest value (14h). As discussed before, the average number of informal childcare hours decreases for the 0-3 years group, ranging from 19 in Croatia to 8 in Belgium. Yet, with similar figures, average hours go down further in Poland than in Croatia.

TABLE 3. INFORMAL CHILDCARE ARRANGEMENTS

		Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
Use of informal childcare (%)	Childcare (0-2 y.o)	21	26	35	9	1	37
	Pre-school (3-5 y.o)	32	37	39	4	0	40
Average weekly hours of informal childcare	Childcare (0-2 y.o)	16	20	20	21		14
	Pre-school (3-5 y.o)	8	19	16	12		11

Source: Own elaboration from OECD Family Database, 2019 or latest available. Average weekly hours of informal childcare are not available for Sweden.

Note: This table presents information on informal childcare arrangements, defined as the unpaid care provided by grandparents or other relatives, friends, or neighbours. Use of informal childcare is the proportion (%) of children using informal childcare arrangements during a usual week. Average weekly hours of informal childcare refer to the average number of hours children spend in informal childcare. Data is disaggregated into very young children (0 to 2 y.o.) and slightly older children (3 to 5 y.o.).

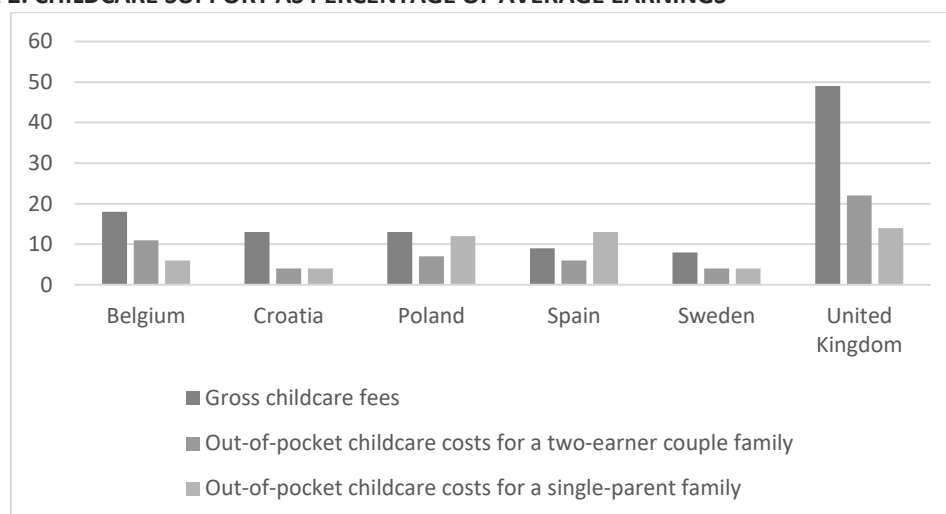


Public support

Together with public spending and coverage, we also look at the extent to which centre-based ECEC services are publicly supported by governments. In Figure 2 we provide data on gross childcare fees as a percentage of average earnings and out-of-pocket childcare costs for two scenarios: a two-earner couple family and a single-parent family, both with two children aged 2 and 3 years old. On average, the gross childcare fee paid for two children in a full-time ECEC centre stands at 18% of average earnings, decreasing to 9% for two earner families and 8% for single-parents families.

As Figure 2 illustrates, gross childcare fees are in general higher than the final out-of-pocket costs for both family types, but there is considerable variation across countries. While gross fees usually decrease after government action, single-parent families in Spain (13%) and Poland (12%) bear greater burdens than two-earner households. In the case of Spain, the burden is even greater than the percentage of gross fees. The United Kingdom stands out as exception for having the highest values: 49% for gross ECEC fees, out-of-pocket costs of 9% for two-earner families and 14% for single-parents. Unsurprisingly, Sweden presents the lowest total numbers (8% gross childcare fees and dropping to 4% for both types of families). Sweden, together with Croatia, are the only countries that have similar levels of out-of-pocket costs for both types of family (4%).

FIGURE 2. CHILDCARE SUPPORT AS PERCENTAGE OF AVERAGE EARNINGS



Source: Own elaboration from OECD Family Database, 2021. Data for Belgium, Poland and United Kingdom are based on estimates for a specific region or city: Walloon, Warsaw, and England, respectively.

Note: Information on childcare support as percentage of average earnings, including costs of centre-based childcare and government support for using these services. Gross childcare fees stand for the gross amount charged to parents. Out-of-pocket childcare costs are the final costs after applying childcare benefits, rebates, tax burdens or other benefits. Data is presented as percentage of average earnings and divided into family types.



We see significant variations in childcare affordability among the six countries, underscoring the financial challenges faced by families in accessing childcare services. However, recent research shows that in some countries, single parents pay less on childcare fees than two-parent families (expressed as percentage of average wage), but the costs impose a larger burden on their household budget as percentage of household income (Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2020). Despite receiving more subsidies, childcare services still seem to be less affordable for single-parent families.

3. Zooming into ECEC inclusiveness

In this section we examine four relevant aspects of inclusiveness: availability, eligibility, affordability, and quality of ECEC policies. We use data from the InGRID database (*Integrating Research Infrastructure for European expertise on Inclusive Growth from data to policy*). Through an experts' survey, InGRID collects institutional comparative data on public services. Croatia and Spain are not included in this database and therefore we have gathered equivalent information through other secondary national sources. We have also used several Eurydice reports to complement some of the information (i.e. ECEC quality indicators). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of ECEC systems in each country, we provide further detailed case studies that often involve landing at sub-national levels.

Availability

Table 4 shows indicators that comprise aspects such as public accessibility, guarantee of a public place, the number of hours, and non-standard schedules. Public ECEC services are accessible in nearly all six countries for children as young as four months old or above the age of one in the cases of Poland and Sweden. When it comes to the guarantee of a public place in an ECEC setting, there is a greater degree of variability. Most countries (Belgium, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom) guarantee public places for all children over 3 years of age. In Sweden all children aged one and above have a guaranteed place in public ECEC. Croatia is the only country that does not guarantee public places.

In most countries, a minimum number of hours of provision is not contemplated for childcare, except for Sweden, which offers 15 hours per week. In the case of pre-primary, the minimum hours range from 15 in Sweden and the United Kingdom to 25 in Poland and 30 in Spain. Belgium and Croatia do not establish a minimum number of hours per week for either childcare or pre-primary. As for the maximum number of hours, half of the countries (Belgium, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) do not establish any limits, whereas in Croatia there is a maximum of 50 hours/week.

The availability of ECEC during non-standard hours enhances flexibility. In the United Kingdom and Sweden, public ECEC services are accessible during weekends, evenings, nights, and school holidays. In contrast, Belgium provides such schedules exclusively for the youngest children.



Croatia extends ECEC availability to evenings and school holidays, whereas in Poland and Spain ECEC might remain open during the holidays. To conclude, the varying levels of ECEC availability in non-standard hours across the six countries highlight different approaches to support the needs of families. What the information available does not indicate is whether these special services are provided at extra costs for families.



TABLE 4. AVAILABILITY OF CHILDCARE AND EARLY EDUCATION SERVICES

ECEC Availability							Belgium						Croatia						Poland						Spain						Sweden						United Kingdom					
Age	0	1	2	3	4	5+	0	1	2	3	4	5+	0	1	2	3	4	5+	0	1	2	3	4	5+	0	1	2	3	4	5+	0	1	2	3	4	5+						
Is public ECEC available?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Is public ECEC guaranteed?	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NA
Minimum guaranteed hours per week	0	0	0	NA	NA	NA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	25	25	0	0	0	30	30	30	0	15	15	15	15	15	0	0	0	15	15	NA						
Maximum allowed hours per week (NA if no maximum)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	50	50	50	50	50	50	10	10	10	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	30	30	30	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA						
If needed for work, is public ECEC available during ...																																										
Weekends	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NA	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES						
Evenings (6pm to midnight)	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES						
Nights (after midnight)	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NA	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES						
School holidays*	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NA	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES						

Source: Own elaboration from InGRID Database (Expert Survey), 2020. Data for Croatia and Spain have been included.

Note: Data for: French Community (Belgium), Zagreb (Croatia), Barcelona (Spain) and England (United Kingdom).

*School holidays in Spain externally provided within school premises.



Eligibility

Eligibility criteria play an important role in determining access to ECEC, especially in contexts with high demand and limited public places. Table 5 offers a comparative overview of family situations that may impact eligibility and examines the likelihood of eligibility under various circumstances.

In the case of a family with a 2-year-old child, positive eligibility factors include having children with special needs, the number of children in the family, and single parenthood. These are common prioritisation factors, along with unemployment or being on benefits. Interestingly, employment status can have varying effects on eligibility. Working hours and high income may negatively affect eligibility in the United Kingdom, whereas parental leave can limit access to full-time ECEC in Sweden. In Croatia, families where both parents are in paid employment have prioritised access. Distinctively, residency and refugee status impact positively eligibility only in the United Kingdom, Belgium does not establish eligibility criteria affecting any of these circumstances.

When considering a family with a 4-year-old child, which typically corresponds to the last years of pre-school, criteria remain quite similar to those mentioned earlier. In fact, Croatia, Poland and Sweden maintain exactly the same eligibility criteria. There is a relaxation of criteria in Spain and the United Kingdom as public provision is often guaranteed. In Spain access to the three full-time pre-school years before entering compulsory education is fully granted although prioritisation is still in place to allocate a school place. In the United Kingdom this applies for children aged 4 and above.

Affordability

Affordability is closely intertwined with the inclusiveness of ECEC, as it represents a primary access barrier. Typically, affordability is determined by a system of public pricing based on established criteria aimed at facilitating access to ECEC services for vulnerable families. However, these criteria exhibit significant variations among the six countries, resulting in varying degrees of financial support. In Table 6, we present indicators to assess affordability criteria in each country, exploring whether the cost of services fluctuates (increases, decreases, or remains constant) based on specific family circumstances.

For parents with a 2-year-old, the most favourable situation is being a member of a large family, resulting in reduced fees in Belgium, Croatia, Spain, and Sweden. Income is the primary factor contributing to the increase of out-of-pocket expenses, except for Poland and Sweden. Croatia and Spain lower ECEC costs for unemployed parents or those receiving benefits, as well as for single-parent families. In contrast, this circumstance would increase the financial burden in Sweden, and single parenthood has no effect in the other countries. Some countries also consider factors such as children with special educational needs and full-time education. Remarkably, Poland does not establish any criteria for affordability related to these circumstances, and the United Kingdom is the only country reducing fees for refugees.



When analysing the same indicators for a family with a 4-year-old child, circumstances that previously had an effect now lead to an overall relaxation of the affordability criteria. Notably, Belgium, Poland, and Spain eliminate all criteria. This trend follows the pattern previously observed with eligibility, and it is certainly related to expanded availability of public ECEC during the pre-primary years.



TABLE 5. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR CHILDCARE AND EARLY EDUCATION SERVICES (WHETHER ELIGIBILITY IS AFFECTED BY THE FOLLOWING CIRCUMSTANCES)

ECEC Eligibility criteria	Family with a 2-year-old child																							
	Belgium				Croatia				Poland				Spain				Sweden				United Kingdom			
	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P
Eligibility is *+; More likely; =; No effect, -: Less likely																								
Employment (compared to inactive)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	-
Unemployment (compared to inactive) or on benefits	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	+	=	+	+
Work hours	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	-
Income	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	-
Number of children	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=
Single parenthood (compared to parents in couple)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Joint physical custody (compared to child living with only one)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
In full-time education (no job)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
On parental leave (for younger sibling) (compared to employment)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=
Residency (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	-
Refugee status (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	+	+
Child with special needs	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	+	+	+	+	+	=	+	+

ECEC Eligibility criteria	Family with a 4-year-old child																							
	Belgium				Croatia				Poland				Spain				Sweden				United Kingdom			
	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P	PT	FT	G	P
Eligibility is *+; More likely; =; No effect, -: Less likely																								
Employment (compared to inactive)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=
Unemployment (compared to inactive) or on benefits	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=
Work hours	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Income	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Number of children	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=
Single parenthood (compared to parents in couple)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Joint physical custody (compared to child living with only one)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
In full-time education (no job)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=
On parental leave (for younger sibling) (compared to employment)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=
Residency (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Refugee status (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Child with special needs	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	+	+	+	+	=	=	=	=

Source: Own elaboration from InGRID Database (Expert Survey), 2020. Data for Croatia and Spain have been included. Note: Data for: French Community (Belgium), Zagreb (Croatia), Barcelona (Spain) and England (United Kingdom)



TABLE 6. AFFORDABILITY OF ECEC SERVICES (WHETHER THE PRICE OF THE SERVICES VARIES DEPENDING ON THE FOLLOWING CIRCUMSTANCES)

ECEC Affordability criteria	Family with a 2-year-old child					
	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
*Out-of-pocket expenses; +: Increase; =: No effect, -: Decrease						
Employment (compared to inactive)	=	=	=	=	=	+
Unemployment (compared to inactive) or on benefits	=	-	=	-	+	=
Work hours	=	=	=	=	=	+
Income	+	+	=	+	=	+
Number of children	-	-	=	-	-	+
Single parenthood (compared to parents in couple)	=	-	=	-	=	=
Joint physical custody (compared to child living with only one)	=	=	=	=	=	=
In full-time education (no job)	=	=	=	=	-	-
On parental leave (for younger sibling) (compared to employment)	=	=	=	=	=	=
Residency (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=
Refugee status (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	-
Child with special needs	=	=	=	-	=	-

ECEC Affordability criteria	Family with a 4-year-old child					
	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
*Out-of-pocket expenses; +: Increase; =: No effect, -: Decrease						
Employment (compared to inactive)	=	=	=	=	=	-
Unemployment (compared to inactive) or on benefits	=	-	=	=	+	-
Work hours	=	=	=	=	=	+
Income	=	+	=	=	=	=
Number of children	=	-	=	=	-	+
Single parenthood (compared to parents in couple)	=	-	=	=	=	=
Joint physical custody (compared to child living with only one)	=	=	=	=	=	=
In full-time education (no job)	=	=	=	=	-	-
On parental leave (for younger sibling) (compared to employment)	=	=	=	=	=	=
Residency (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=
Refugee status (compared to citizenship)	=	=	=	=	=	=
Child with special needs	=	=	=	=	=	-

Source: Own elaboration from InGRID Database (Expert Survey), 2020. Data for Croatia and Spain have been included. Note: Data for: French Community (Belgium), Zagreb (Croatia), Barcelona (Spain) and England (United Kingdom)



Quality

The quality aspect of ECEC services encompasses a wide range of elements, such as safety and hygiene, size of groups, educational guidelines and inspections, number and qualifications of the staff members, or parents' involvement, among many others. Because of this variety, assessing quality is a complex task, and there is no single indicator able to fully capture what quality implies. For example, the InGRID data set (2020) also includes curriculum-based indicators of quality. In what follows we use Eurydice and InGRID data to zoom into two key quality indicators: child-to-staff ratios and qualification requirements of professionals.

In ECEC, the child-to-staff ratio refers to the relationship between the number of children in a group within a childcare or pre-school setting and the number of staff members supervising the group. This ratio allows for a rough estimate of the frequency of interactions between professionals and children. However, the indicator is far from perfect since it is restricted to a single aspect of quality. Child-to-staff ratios differ considerably across the six countries and ECEC types. According to data from the sources mentioned before, average child-to-staff ratio is 8.5 in childcare and 16.75 in pre-school.

Countries cluster into three groups depending on ratios arrangements. The first group establishes ratios depending on the educational cycle, with Belgium and Poland specifying maximum number of children in childcare and pre-school, respectively. In contrast, countries in the second group establish progressive ratios based on age, including Croatia, Spain and the United Kingdom. The third group, consisting only of Sweden in our selection of countries, does not specify any national standards regarding ratios or group size. According to InGRID data childcare child-to-staff ratios are lowest in the United Kingdom (4), Belgium (7) and Poland (8), while they are higher in Croatia (14) and Spain (16-20). Generally, ratios are lower for younger children and increase with age. In pre-primary schooling numbers practically double. Countries with highest child-to-staff ratios are Poland and Spain with 25 children per staff member, followed by 20 in Belgium and Croatia. The United Kingdom presents the lowest pre-primary ratio, which is set between 8 and 13 depending on teacher's qualifications.

Regarding qualifications required for ECEC staff, the six countries establish different criteria. Croatia maintains the strictest standards, where the minimum qualification is set at the bachelor level (ISCED, level 6). In contrast, Sweden stands as the most comprehensive system, ranging from levels 0 to 6. In the United Kingdom, a minimum qualification of lower secondary (ISCED, level 2) is required, with a maximum of upper secondary (ISCED, level 3). Spain's requirements start at the latter level for teacher assistants, and extend up to a bachelor's degree. It is worth noting that Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom allow for variations within each educational level, whereas Belgium and Poland establish different requirements for childcare (ISCED, level 3) and pre-primary (ISCED, level 6). These differences may be attributed to the distinct ways in which work at ECEC centres is organised. For example, in Croatia there are no assistants and required qualifications are set at the highest level.



Country cases

Decentralisation adds complexity to the analysis since ECEC policies are often managed by regions or municipalities leading to significant cross-regional disparities. To overcome this problem, we have decided to focus on a single region or city in those cases where there are no national standards: Wallonia or the French Community for Belgium, Zagreb for Croatia, Warsaw for Poland, Barcelona for Spain and England for United Kingdom. Data for Sweden is national.

Belgium

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Belgium is organised in two distinct stages. Childcare services are available for children under the age of 3 in various types of settings, whether subsidised or not: nurseries, independent childminders (home-based), or childcare services. Starting at the age 2.5, children are legally entitled to pre-primary education free of charge. Since September 2020, the final year of pre-primary education has become compulsory (Eurydice 2022a). Public expenditure on ECEC is 0.1% of the Belgian GDP for childcare (0-2 y.o.) and 0.7% for pre-primary provision (3-5 y.o.) (see Figure 1). This allocation increased from 2009 to 2015 and levelled off until 2019 (0.8%). Since Belgium is a federal country in which most competences for families and family policies are devolved to the regions and communities, most of the data in this policy case corresponds either to the French Community or to the Walloon region.

Availability

Children's access to ECEC is recognised as a right; however, there is no legal guarantee of a place. In the French Community, ECEC services are publicly available but only guaranteed for children above the age of 2.5. The variety of centre-based childcare settings, along with home-based provision, enables access even in rural areas. Nevertheless, differences exist across regions and demand typically outpaces supply (Eurydice 2022a). As Table 4 shows, there are no established minimum and maximum number of hours. Regarding non-standard schedules, childcare services for children from 0 to 2 years old are available during weekends, evenings, nights, or school holidays. According to the OECD Family database (2020), 57% of children (0-2 y.o.) are enrolled in childcare, while it increases to 98% for children in pre-school (3-5 y.o.). Additionally, 21% of children aged 0 to 2, and 32% of children in the 3-5 age group make use of informal childcare arrangements (OECD, 2019).

Eligibility

In Belgium, parents register their future child before birth and have free choice of the ECEC setting in which their children will be enrolled. According to InGRID data (in Table 5), there are no overall eligibility criteria in the Belgian French Community. For childcare services (under 2.5 y.o.), priority rules are fixed by law and depend on the type (and size) of public subsidies. Only settings receiving income-related subsidies must prioritise families on employment, low income, single parents and children in care.



Some settings receive an additional subsidy to proactively admit vulnerable families (Eurydice 2022a). From the age of 2.5, children are legally entitled to 23 hours per week of pre-primary education in a pre-primary school. As mentioned earlier, the last year of pre-primary education is compulsory when they reach the age of 5.

Affordability

As shown in Figure 2, childcare fees are 18% of average earnings in the Walloon region, but they drop to 11% for a two-earner family and 6% for a single-parent one once discounts are applied. Since 2019, reforms have been enacted to improve affordability of childcare settings (0-2 y.o.). The fees of subsidised centres are calculated based on the family's income and number of children (more than 2) (see Table 6), while non-subsidised centres might fix their own prices. Financial support is also available for families using childcare services by means of a tax deduction administered at the federal level. From 2.5 years old, children are entitled to free of charge pre-primary education, including most school supplies (Eurydice 2022a).

Croatia

Early childhood education and care constitutes the initial stage of the Croatian education system, addressed to children aged 6 months to 6 years. Although there is no legal entitlement to ECEC services, it is mandatory for children to attend preschool the year before they start compulsory primary education (Eurydice 2022b). ECEC is divided into three cycles: the first cycle (6 months - 1 year), the second cycle (1-3 y.o.), and the third cycle (3-5/6 y.o. since it is possible to start primary school at the age of 6). This division into cycles is primarily at the programme level, as all cycles are offered within a unified setting structure (kindergarten). Public expenditure on ECEC amounts to 0.6% of the Croatian GDP and has been stable since 2009. Due to the high decentralisation of ECEC, this case refers more specifically to Zagreb.

Availability

Public ECEC is available in Croatia for children from 0 to over five years old, although it is not guaranteed (see Table 4). As mentioned before, there is no legal entitlement to a place in an ECEC setting for children of any age. There is also no explicit weekly limit to the number of hours in ECEC, but the daily maximum is set to 10 hours, effectively translating to 50 hours per week. In terms of non-standard schedules, ECEC is available during school holidays, yet many providers operate at limited capacity and many parents do not use this service due to frequent changes in groups, educators and locations. Similarly, services outside regular working hours (7 am to 5 pm) are provided only by a minority of kindergartens. In Zagreb, children cannot be in the public kindergarten before 5 am or after 9 pm and extra-hours are charged €2.65/hour. As indicated in Table 2, 20% of children (0-2 y.o.) are enrolled in childcare settings, whereas enrolment rises to 72% for children aged 3 to 5.



Childcare outside regular working hours, on weekends or during holidays is likely to be primarily arranged through informal or private means. In fact, 26% of 0-2 years old children use informal care and it increases to 37% for the 3-5 group (OECD, 2019).

Eligibility

Eligibility criteria for ECEC is extremely diverse across municipalities. While most of them adhere to some of the national provisions for enrolment, only a few have established clear scoring criteria. Under new provisions in 2023, priority must be given to children aged 4 and above, which – due to lack of capacities – may cause difficulties for parents of younger ones. As shown in Table 5, the system does not differentiate part-time or full-time access in terms of enrolment criteria. Children of parents who are employed or on benefits, large and single-parent families, and children with special needs, are prioritised in access. Moreover, in Zagreb priority is also extended to children whose parents are victims of the Homeland War, children in foster or orphanage care, and those about to commence primary school in the next year. Refugees and asylum seekers hold equal access priority as Croatian citizens residing in Zagreb.

Affordability

Childcare fees in Croatia are not regulated at the national level, resulting in variations across municipalities. As Figure 2 shows, gross childcare fees typically represent 13% of average earnings in the country. However, these fees are reduced to 4% for both, two-earner families, and single-parent ones, once subsidies are applied. It is a common practice to offer more substantial discounts to parents with multiple children. In Zagreb, fees are determined based on household income, resulting in a tiered structure with four levels of participation. Consequently, ECEC fees become more affordable for children whose parents receive social benefits, those from single-parent families, children of parents with disabilities, and larger families (see Table 6).

Poland

ECEC in Poland is divided into two educational stages. The first stage, provided for children from 0 to 3 years, is centre-based (crèches, nursery classes at preschools and part-time kids' clubs) or home-based during the first year (day-care providers and nannies). In contrast, the second one (3 to 6 y.o.) is entirely centre-based provided in preschools or preschool classes within primary schools, along with other preschool education settings. ECEC is voluntary except for the 6-year-olds, who are required by law to attend one year of pre-school education (Eurydice 2023a). As figure 1 shows, aggregated public expenditure on ECEC is 0.6% of the Polish GDP. Spending has experienced fluctuations, reaching its peak in 2013 and increasing to 0.6% in 2019, with an average of 0.5% for the time-period 2011 to 2019. Some of the evidence provided in this country case refers to Warsaw.



Availability

Early childhood education until the age of three is responsibility of the local government. However, in Poland there is no legal guarantee to a place in an ECEC setting for children under 3 years old. The main problem is the limited number of 0-3 centres in relation to demand, which is being addressed since 2011 by creating parallel ECEC settings such as kids' clubs (Eurydice 2023a). As Table 4 shows, public ECEC is available for children from 1 to 6 years old, but only guaranteed for those 3 years of age and older (second stage). They are granted a minimum of 5 hours per day without any maximum established. In contrast, for children in nurseries (aged 0 to 2) there is a maximum of 10 hours per day allowed. In general, ECEC services are not available at non-standard hours (weekends, evenings, nights), but might be available during school holidays (for children 1-6 y.o.). According to OECD data (2020), only 13% of the children (0-2 y.o.) are enrolled in childcare settings, increasing to 88% in preschool (3-6 y.o.). In Poland 35% of the children between 0- and 2-years old need informal childcare arrangements, and it rises to 39% for the 3–5-year-old group (see Table 2).

Eligibility

Polish legislation regarding ECEC does not specify access conditions apart from the age requirements for enrolling children in crèches, kids' clubs, day-care providers or nursery schools. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 5, eligibility criteria only apply to prioritise access, without distinguishing between part-time or full-time ECEC. InGRID data indicates that large families (with more than two children), single-parent families, or children with special needs are given priority to access first (0-3 y.o.) and second stage (3-6) ECEC services. When it comes to choosing a centre, working parents, parents returning from parental leave, or economically inactive might be prioritised to access first stage ECEC. Due to the limited network of centres, it is frequent for families to be assigned a centre that is not necessarily close to their homes. As mentioned earlier, children from 3 to 6 years old are legally entitled to pre-school education, with those in the last year (compulsory) being admitted first. When it is not possible to guarantee a public place for all children entitled to be in pre-school, they are transferred to non-public nursery schools (funding 100% of the fees).

Affordability

Gross childcare fees, as percentage of average earnings, stand at 13% in Poland, but out-of-pocket expenses are actually reduced to 7% for a two-earners family and 12% for a single-parent one after discounts (OECD, 2021). Fees for the first stage of ECEC (0-3 y.o.) as well as meals' prices are determined by municipalities, which may establish reductions. Final fees vary across localities and sectors but, in most cases, range from 74. to 213 euros per month. Conversely, the second stage of ECEC (3-5 y.o.) is free of charge for at least 5 hours per day.



Each municipality decides on the duration of free services beyond the minimum and may complement them with extra hours. Regardless of duration, last year (6 y.o.) is completely free of charge.

Spain

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the initial stage of the Spanish education system, which is known as Educación Infantil (Infant Education) and applies to children aged 0-5. Participation is on a voluntary basis, and it is not a requirement in order to start primary education. ECEC is divided into two cycles, each spanning three years: the first cycle (0-3 years) and second cycle (3-5 years). Public expenditure data on ECEC and its evolution (OECD, 2019) should be treated cautiously in the case of Spain, since first cycle of ECEC is decentralised to regions and municipalities. Thus, total public spending is probably higher than the percentages shown in Figure 1. Due to this highly decentralised nature, this country case refers more specifically to Barcelona.

Availability

ECEC in Spain is divided in two cycles: childcare for children aged 2 and younger and pre-school for children aged 3 to 5. Legal entitlement only applies to the second type and all children are guaranteed a place on a full-time basis (Eurydice 2023b). About half of the childcare provision is private or publicly own but externalised to the market. In the three years of pre-school hours are fixed in 30 hours per week, corresponding to the regular full-time centres schedule (usually within primary school premises). In terms of non-standard schedules, ECEC is available during school holidays, externally provided within kindergarten or school premises. This service is considered a voluntary extra-curricular activity, and is subject to subsidised or complete fees. Surprisingly, the OECD reports only 9% of 0-2 years old children use informal childcare arrangements (OECD, 2019).

Eligibility

In the city of Barcelona, eligibility criteria (criterios de baremación) apply to access public ECEC services (see Table 5). Priority is given to families which are recipients of national, regional or municipal minimum income programmes. There are also other complementary criteria such as number of children (families with 2+ children), lone-parenthood and disability. The system does not differentiate part-time or full-time access. Access to pre-school is legally guaranteed, although similar eligibility criteria applies for school selection.

Affordability

According to OECD Family data (2021), gross childcare fees as percentage of average earnings in Spain is 9%, whereas out-of-pocket costs decrease to 6% for a two-earner family and increase to 13% for single-parent families. Fees for the first cycle of ECEC (0-3 y.o.) in Spain vary across regions and municipalities. The municipality of Barcelona applies a system of social pricing (tarificación social) to fix out-of-pocket



expenses (more details are presented in Table 6). Low income families, unemployed or on benefits, large and lone-parent families and children with disabilities pay no or highly reduced fees. Pre-school for children aged 3 and above is free of charge although some services are excluded (school meals and after-school services).

Sweden

Sweden's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system is structured into two stages. The first stage, known as unitary pre-school (förskola), is addressed to children aged 1 to 5 years. The second stage is the pre-primary compulsory class (förskoleklass), which is provided during the year before a child starts primary education, typically for 6-year-olds. Additionally, Sweden offers alternative services such as open pre-schools and home-based pedagogical care. Total public expenditure on ECEC accounts for 1.5% of the country's GDP (see D2.2; Nieuwenhuis et al. 2023), with 1% allocated to childcare and 0.5% to pre-school. Notably, Sweden exceeds the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) target of 1% GDP spending by averaging 1.5% during the period from 2011 to 2019.

Availability

Municipalities are legally required to provide publicly subsidised preschool activities and childcare to all children from age 1 (Eurydice 2022c). The first educational stage (förskola) is centre-based and offers ECEC provision for children aged between 1 and 5. All children aged 3 or above are entitled to free preschool for at least 15 hours per week. While the Swedish system offers multiple voluntary ECEC options and solutions such as municipal schools or grant-aided centres, each type of school must offer equivalent education irrespective of where it is provided. Förskoleklass, the second stage of ECEC starting at age 6, is a full-time and cost-free pre-school education programme provided within primary school premises. As Table 2 shows, enrolment rates in childcare and pre-school are high: 48% of the 0-2-year-old children are enrolled and it raises to 95% for the 3-5 ones, whereas only 1% of the children use informal childcare arrangements (OECD, 2019). Working parents and those in education are guaranteed full-time care, with a minimum of 15 free hours available for those who are inactive or non-employed. Regarding non-standard schedules, public ECEC (1-5 y.o.) is also available during weekends, evenings, nights and school holidays, which are often covered by complementary or alternative structures within the formal system. Despite being available, regulations are less clear in this regard and there is no legal entitlement to ECEC during these periods.

Eligibility

As mentioned before, there is legal entitlement to ECEC in Sweden. Municipalities shall consider the wishes of the parents concerning type of care and centre choices. Children must be offered a place as close as possible to the child's home within four months after the parents' request (Eurydice 2022c). However, eligibility criteria might also apply in order to prioritise access to the different services.



According to InGRID data (in Table 5), children with special needs are given quicker access to a place, while large families (2+ children) are given priority to ensure their children attend the same ECEC centre. Conversely, parents on parental leave may face limitations in accessing full-time ECEC services. The eligibility criteria for 2 and 4-year-old children are the same, with places guaranteed in any case.

Affordability

In terms of affordability, Figure 2 shows that gross childcare fees as a percentage of average earnings in Sweden is 8%, which is reduced to 4% for both two-earner families and single-parent households after applying public pricing adjustments. Municipal and grant-aided independent preschools for 0-2-year-olds charge fees, but these services receive public subsidies. Fees are calculated based on the combined household income and the number of children attending ECEC, with a maximum fee cap. The system also offers reductions for larger families and parents in full-time education (see Table 6). While there are no discounts for parents on unemployment or on benefits, low-income families are exempt from charges (Eurydice 2022c). Children aged 3 and older benefit from 15 hours of free pre-school per week, and the compulsory pre-school class for 6-year-olds is entirely free, including transportation.

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, early childcare years (0-2) provision is offered in a variety of settings. Private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) sectors coexist alongside public childminders. Government-funded ECEC for 3-year-olds is provided in public nursery schools, some primary schools, and academies. Additionally, children are entitled to attend full-time reception class the year before they begin primary education (4 y.o.). As figure 1 shows, total public expenditure in ECEC is 0.5% of the GDP, which is fully invested in pre-primary education for 3-5-year-olds (OECD, 2019). It is noteworthy that spending on ECEC has decreased from 0.7% in 2009 to 0.5% in 2019. Since childcare policies are devolved, varying across the country, this policy case specifically focuses on England.

Availability

According to InGRID data (2020), ECEC is publicly available in the United Kingdom, but a place is only guaranteed from age 3 onwards. As mentioned before, a variety of ECEC settings is offered to cover the early years including day nurseries, independent nursery schools and nursery classes in independent schools, as well as childminders, playgroups, and children's or family centres. Most of this provision is of private initiative. However, there are also public nursery schools and nursery classes in primary schools and academies providing government-funded ECEC (2-4 y.o.). Since 2010 there is legal universal entitlement to a minimum of 15 hours of ECEC per week for all 3 and 4-year-olds. This is complemented with free childcare for 2-year-olds, when families qualify for specific benefits, and an extended programme which provides an extra 15 hours per week to eligible working parents of children aged 3 and 4. Apart from this, no entitlement to free provision exists for children under 2 but parents may



benefit from tax exemptions and rebates in order to compensate costs. As Table 2 shows, as of 2018, 45% of the children between 0 and 2 years of age were enrolled in childcare. For children aged 3 to 5 enrolment was 100% in 2020. Informal care is widespread in the United Kingdom: 37% for children below 2 and 40% for children aged 3 to 5 (OECD, 2019). Additionally, ECEC services are also available during non-standard schedules: weekends, evenings, nights, and school holidays (Table 4).

Eligibility

As shown in Table 5, eligibility criteria are applied to access ECEC services for 2-year-old children. Unemployed parents, families with refugee status, or children with special needs are given overall priority to access public ECEC, whereas employed or higher-income earning parents may face greater challenges securing a place. The same criteria also apply when accessing part-time services or a guaranteed place but differ from those established for 4-year-olds. Since there is a legal entitlement to ECEC for children aged 3-4, these criteria only apply to access part-time services. Parents in employment are more likely to be eligible for part-time ECEC, but being unemployed or in full-time education may negatively affect access. Eligibility is not affected by any other circumstances.

Affordability

Gross childcare fees in the United Kingdom are 49% of average earnings, but out-of-pocket expenses are reduced to 22% for a two-earner family and 14% for a single-parent one (see Figure 2). The cost of ECEC services varies depending on family circumstances. According to InGRID data, factors such as employment or family size (with more than two children) and having a higher income or working hours increase childcare expenses. However, these costs are decreased for parents in full-time education, having refugee status, or children with special needs. Regarding ECEC for 4-year-olds, being employed, on unemployment, in full-time education or having a child with special needs are conditions that potentially reduce expenses, whereas the number of working hours or of children (more than two) tend to increase them.

4. Analysing inclusiveness of LTC policies

The focus of this section is on assessing the inclusiveness of Long-term care policies (LTC) across the six countries. Long-term care refers to care for people needing daily living support over a prolonged period of time. LTC policies involve cash support and services and there is a very different history and trajectory to them in Europe. On average LTC expending account for 1,5% of GDP across the OCDE but as in ECEC cross-national variation is very large. Contrary to ECEC, demand in LTC and despite increase in public provision is mostly covered informally by women. According to Spasova et al (2018) there are four main challenges common to all countries: 1) access and adequacy of LTC provision, 2) quality of formal home care as well as residential services, 3) employment of informal carers, and 4) financial sustainability of the



national systems. Our analysis follows a similar structure to the previous analysis for ECEC. We thus consider relevant aspects of inclusiveness such as eligibility, availability and affordability, and quality of LTC policies. We rely on data sourced from MISSOC, with the most recent information available as of January 2022. The only exception is the United Kingdom, for which the latest data is July 2019.

Eligibility

One of the most relevant dimensions of LTC inclusiveness is related to entitlement and eligibility criteria. Table 7 considers entitlement in terms of citizenship, residency, and employment requirements as well as other access conditions. In addition, we have also included indicators on the evaluation process of dependency since it can significantly affect access.

Most countries share residency-based entitlement conditions for LTC. Croatia, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom only require legal residency status. However, Belgium and Spain differ. Belgium's entitlement is employment-based but, including assimilated categories, is practically extended to most residents. None of the countries impose a minimum residency period, except for Spain, which has the most exclusionary requirement, demanding five years of residency, with two of them immediately preceding the application. Apart from this case, no other further requirements are set.

Regarding the eligibility criteria for accessing LTC services or benefits, some of the countries require a qualifying period, a minimum level of dependency, or a specific age. The most widespread criterion is the requirement for a minimum degree of dependency accreditation. While Spain and the United Kingdom conduct a general assessment for LTC access, Belgium and Poland apply it for specific benefits. Neither Croatia nor Sweden impose minimum dependency levels as a condition for access. In terms of qualifying periods, Spain sets it before assessing dependency, while Belgium and the United Kingdom require it only for specific benefits. It is worth noting that the nature of these qualifying periods varies: the Spanish one is residency-based, Belgium establishes contributory periods, and the United Kingdom's is determined by the duration of incapacity. Croatia, Poland and Sweden do not have qualifying periods. Reaching a specific age is one of the factors considered in Poland and the United Kingdom. However, in both cases, it serves primarily as a reference to organize access to LTC in each country and it is not discriminatory. In contrast, Belgium sets a minimum age requirement to access certain benefits.

Table 7 sheds light on the evaluation of dependency, highlighting significant variations in evaluators and procedures across the six countries. Belgium, Croatia, Poland, and Spain rely on medical or health professionals for dependency assessments, while also involving other professionals. In contrast, Sweden and the United Kingdom exclusively employ social workers and non-medical professionals as evaluators. Furthermore, the categories of need also display variation. Croatia stands out as the only country assessing dependency without specific categories. Belgium and Sweden adopt different categories depending on regions and municipalities. In contrast, the United Kingdom establishes four levels, followed



by Spain with three and Poland with two. Regarding the review process, Poland and Sweden are stricter by setting an end date for the disability period, followed by revision. The United Kingdom opts for periodic yearly revisions, whereas Belgium, Croatia, and Spain conduct reviews solely when there are changes in health conditions.

TABLE 7. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA AND PROCESS FOR ACCESSING LONG-TERM CARE PROVISION

LTC Eligibility and process		Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
Entitlement	Residency or employment-based criteria	All salaried workers and assimilated	All residents	All residents	Citizens and legal residents	All residents	All residents
	Further requirements	NO	NO	NO	5 years, 2 preceding application	NO	NO
Conditions	Qualifying period	Only for some benefits	NO	NO	YES	NO	Only for some benefits
	Minimum level of dependency	Only for some benefits	NO	Only for some benefits	YES	NO	YES
	Age	Only for some benefits	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Evaluation of dependency	Evaluators and procedures	Medical professionals	Evaluation board: medical and other professionals	Medical or regional non-medical professionals	Evaluation board: social and health professionals	Municipal Social workers	Social care or non-medical professionals
	Categories of need	Different categories depending on regional level	Assessment with no specific categories	2 levels of incapacity and 3 for disability	3 degrees of dependency, including 2 levels each	Different categories depending on municipalities	4 categories of need and risks
	Review	Only if conditions change	Only if conditions change	At the end of disability period	Only if conditions change	At the end of disability period	Periodic, yearly

Source: Own elaboration from MISSOC, 2023. Latest data available for the United Kingdom is 2019.



Availability and affordability

In terms of availability, Table 8 outlines the presence or absence of LTC services and benefits. All six countries offer home care, semi-residential care, and residential care as integral components of their LTC policies, ensuring that citizens have access to a variety of care options. Thus, LTC provision is available across the countries. However, there are considerable differences in the scope of services provided. For example, home care ranges from nursing care in Belgium to a more comprehensive design in Sweden. Additionally, certain countries provide other benefits in kind, with Belgium, Poland, and Sweden extending such coverage, while Croatia and Spain do not. These benefits are complementary measures such as parking permits, tax advantage for their vehicle, reduction card for public transport (in Belgium) or housing adaptation in Poland and Sweden. The availability of cash benefits is another critical aspect of LTC systems. Most of the countries provide cash benefits, offering individuals the flexibility to choose services that best meet their needs. In contrast, Sweden does not offer cash benefits within its LTC system, suggesting a preference for in-kind provisions. With this exception, all the other countries allow users to choose service providers.



TABLE 8. AVAILABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY OF LONG-TERM CARE PROVISION

LTC Availability and Affordability		Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
Availability	Home care	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Semi-residential care	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Benefits in kind						
	Residential care	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Other benefits in kind	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Cash benefits	Cash benefits	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
	User's choice	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
Affordability	Cost-sharing for benefits in kind	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Means test	Only for some benefits	YES	Only for some benefits	YES	NO	Only for some benefits
	Indexation	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
	Cumulation	Only for some benefits	YES	Only for some benefits	YES	NO	YES
	Taxation	Only for some benefits	NO	Only for some benefits	NO	NO	Only for some benefits

Source: Own elaboration from MISSOC, 2023. Latest data available for the United Kingdom is 2019.



Turning to the affordability of LTC services, the table highlights key elements influencing the financial aspects of long-term care. Though in varying degrees, and under different conditions, cost-sharing for benefits in kind is a common practice, with all six countries implementing such arrangements. A comparative evaluation of the degree to which these expenses are publicly participated is not feasible, given the insufficient data available in MISSOC. Means testing is a significant factor that affects affordability, as it is frequently applied to allowances or cash benefits, and also to determine public fees. While Belgium, Poland and the United Kingdom impose means tests only for selected benefits, Croatia and Spain apply them to a greater extent. On the contrary, Sweden does not employ means testing, which suggests a more accessible system for citizens who need LTC services.

As shown in the last three rows of Table 8, indexed or non-taxed benefits, along with being allowed to cumulate benefits with other sources of income are factors contributing to alleviate the economic burdens faced by LTC users. Indexing, for example, ensures that the erosion of purchasing power is considered by periodically or automatically adjusting benefit amounts in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Half of the countries (Belgium, Poland and the United Kingdom) have established indexation mechanisms, whereas Croatia and Spain present non-indexed benefits. It is worth noting that countries without indexation still conduct amount revisions, albeit not on an automatic or fixed basis. Regarding cumulation of LTC benefits with earnings from work or other benefits, in Croatia, Spain and the United Kingdom is generally allowed, while Belgium and Poland limit cumulation to specific benefits. Allowing them could contribute to foster employment participation and enhancing complementarity among different benefits. Another aspect to examine within the affordability component is whether the benefits are subject to taxation. In this sense, LTC systems tend to avoid taxing benefits (Croatia, Spain and Sweden), whereas Belgium, Poland and the United Kingdom only tax certain benefits.

Quality

Available data concerning quality of LTC policies is scarce and fragmented. MISSOC does not provide specific information to assess key components of quality such as professional qualifications or patient-to-staff ratios. However, quality is also inextricably related to the workforce. In this context, we examine quality assurance systems as a proxy to assess organisational quality within professional providers of LTC. Then, we analyse the conditions under which informal LTC care is provided, including aspects such as the legal recognition and requirements for informal carers. Additionally, we compare the various resources of support for LTC informal care.

According to data in MISSOC, Belgium, Croatia and the United Kingdom do not report the establishment of quality assurance systems within their formal structure of LTC provision. In contrast, Poland, Spain and Sweden have implemented quality assurance systems designed to oversee and enhance the quality of LTC professional sectors. However, it is worth noting that the actual impact of these mechanisms on quality improvement requires further study. In Poland and Spain, quality of care is monitored separately for the



healthcare and social assistance sectors, defining different standards. Goals and quality standards of professional LTC services are set by the municipalities in Sweden.

Informal carers play a significant role in meeting a substantial portion of LTC demand. The circumstances involving non-professional care are therefore of research interest (see Table 9). Informal care is characterized by its voluntary, unpaid, and unqualified nature, typically provided by partners, family members, other relatives, or friends. Belgium is the only country that formally acknowledges the role of informal carers. There are no legal definitions of informal carers in Croatia, Poland and Spain. While the majority of countries do not impose any specific requirements for caregivers, several conditions have to be fulfilled in order to be recognised as an informal carer in Belgium. In the Croatian case, no strict conditions are imposed, but carers may receive training from a practitioner.

As Table 9 shows, however, there is a wide range of measures that can be deployed to support informal care. Three of them are notably prevalent across the six countries: the implementation of cash benefits or allowances as compensation for caregivers (Belgium, Poland and the United Kingdom), the inclusion of informal carers into the social security systems (Croatia, Poland and Spain) and the provision of temporary relief services designed to offer caregivers some rest (Poland, Spain and Sweden). Spain and Sweden additionally offer information, support groups and related activities to support caregivers.

Regarding care leaves, Belgium and Croatia establish leaves for long-term carers, while in the rest of countries they would be understood as a labour right. In summary, there are significant variations in the available support for informal caregivers across the six countries. Caregivers in Poland and Spain are offered a greater diversity of support options, while the United Kingdom only provides payable care allowances.



TABLE 9. QUALITY OF LONG-TERM CARE PROVISION

LTC Quality		Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom
Professional providers	Quality assurance system	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO
Informal carers	Legal recognition	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
	Requirements	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Support for Informal carers	Cash benefits	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
	Contributions	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Information, support groups or activities	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO
	Care leave	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
	Temporary relief	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO

Source: Own elaboration from MISSOC, 2023. Latest data available for the United Kingdom is 2019.

5. Concluding remarks

This report has attempted to identify degrees of inclusiveness and flexibility in care policies. The task is troublesome for a number of reasons and we have explicitly addressed such limitations. Still this is a worthy and important endeavour to the extent that it reveals key aspects of how policies support or fail to support the many care-related risks that families are confronted with throughout their lives.

The most important feature of care policies affecting inclusiveness is limited universalism. In the case of ECEC, some countries have progressively incorporated the right to care and to be cared for as a legal entitlement, but this does not always translate into comprehensive and inclusive care systems of provision. Of the six countries studied Sweden is the only one to ensure universality through a wide spectrum of public provision for all children from the year of their first birthday onwards. In several of the countries studied, the most effective strategy to increase coverage in ECEC has been lowering the entry age in pre-primary schooling. Children are legally entitled to pre-primary education free of charge starting at the age of 2.5 for 23 hours/week in Belgium; the year of the child's 3rd birthday and for 30 hours/week in Spain; and for 3 and 4 years old in the United Kingdom for a total of 15 hours/week. In Belgium, Croatia



and Poland attendance the year before entering elementary education has become compulsory. This is a trend that has followed a strong drive to make ECEC more education oriented and for the services involved it has often implied a move in the governance structure from welfare services to educational authorities. By and large, to the extent that educational services tend to be better resourced, with higher quality standards and more homogeneity within and across countries, this is a move towards more inclusiveness. However, there are also risks associated with the downgrading of the more caring and custodial elements which are essential for very young children and still more so when they are affected by special circumstances.

For the very early years, children aged 2 and younger, supply is more limited, regionally diverse, targeted and costly. As far as supply is insufficient to cover demand, prioritisation elements are introduced to guaranteed greater inclusiveness. This is the second level at which inclusion/exclusion dynamics might happen as described in the introduction. Children with special needs, large and lone parent families have priority to enter childcare services in most countries. Regions vary in the importance they give to other circumstances. When for instance, ECEC is seen as supporting work/family balance priority is usually given to dual earner households. By contrast, when ECEC is integrated together with other anti-poverty mechanisms then priority criteria include being the recipient of social benefits or claiming unemployment. Categories of inclusion also reflect wider political strategies. For example, while economic migrants have difficulties in entering ECEC, families granted refugee status have direct access to services in the United Kingdom.

Restricted public provision in a context of escalating demand (given population ageing) also leads to more stringent access criteria in LTC. Countries impose conditions such as means-testing, residency, employment or degree of assessed dependency requirements. Nevertheless, we have seen a wide cross-national variation as to the actual criteria introduced.

Entitlement criteria do not alone reflect overall inclusiveness however. In this report we have shown how in the case of ECEC single parenthood grants priority access and reduced pricing in all countries. Still, in Spain, Poland and the United Kingdom these families end up paying more for childcare, proportionally speaking, than two earner households. For LTC services, means testing affects affordability and it is frequently applied to restrict access. In Sweden where access is not conditional to means testing LTC is more accessible to those who need it regardless of their income.

With regard to flexibility we need to further study how different policy domains addressing the same or similar risks interact with each other. For instance, in Sweden public childcare provision does not start until the child is one year old because generous parental leave schemes allow for families to have the time and resources to look after their offspring during their first year. Another important component of flexibility is whether comprehensive public provision allows for the right of families to choose the type of service that better suits their needs and circumstances. In the case of childcare, Belgium, Sweden and the United Kingdom present a more diversified offer but whilst in the United Kingdom this is mostly informal



and private, only in Sweden does a diversified supply not compromise universality. In Spain both ECEC and LTC are expanding but with a high degree of rigidity (public ECEC for instance is provided with a fixed schedule and 30 hours/week). In the case of LTC, Belgium, Poland and Sweden extend coverage to other complementary measures such as parking permits or housing adaptation. Croatia and Spain do not contemplate these additional measures.



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