



Policy Priorities for Family Resilience

rEUsilience Working Paper Series: 17

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February 2025



*This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No Project 101060410 and Innovate UK, the UK's Innovation Agency. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Innovate UK. Neither the European Union and the United Kingdom nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them. **The deliverable has not yet been approved by the European Commission.***





**Risks, Resources and Inequalities:
Increasing Resilience in European Families**

Title: Policy Priorities for Family Resilience

Date: February 2025

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Citation: Daly, M., Gosme, E., Shorey, H. and Uzunalioglu, M. (2025) *Policy Priorities for Family Resilience*, rEUsilience Working Paper Series: 17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/htcz8_v2



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Policy Priorities for Family Resilience

Work Package 6 is charged with producing and verifying a set of reform proposals and providing a roadmap/set of guidance tools for stakeholders.

The first deliverable of the Work Package set out and worked through the relevant policy considerations that are highlighted by resilience as a concept or goal for policy from the perspective of families. In all, five areas of policy were considered vital from a resilience perspective: parenting-related leaves, early childhood education and care (ECEC), provisions for lone-parent families, those for families coping with a disability or illness on the part of a child, and those for families with a migration background adjusting to or integrating into the new country. One of the main conclusions was that most countries have not integrated a family resilience perspective and as a result have policies that are often inconsistent, that face families with undesirable behavioural and values trade-offs and that exclude significant numbers of families, especially those that differ from the two-parent, nuclear family model.

Deliverable 6.2 is tasked with considering possible reforms and identifying the conditions under which existing systems could be reformed. This report, therefore, has three main aims: to develop a conceptual framework, to review the relevant policy positions (at both national and EU levels) and to prepare the ground for a set of policy principles that would improve policies' contribution to family resilience.

The report consists of four parts and has the following structure. An introductory section outlines the goals, definitions, methodology and evidence underlying the report. The second section considers the EU background by presenting an analysis of the three most relevant EU initiatives: the Work-Life Balance Directive, the European Child Guarantee and the European Care Strategy. The intent of this analysis is to examine the approach taken to family in each of these initiatives and identify the implications for family resilience. The third part of the report turns to policy analysis and develops policy principles oriented to the achievement of three specific goals: better income support for families with children, closing the childcare gap and putting in place a comprehensive network of family support services. A final short section draws a report to a close.



1. Introduction

rEUsilience develops a family-centred approach. What does that mean? As a report from the European Observatory of Family Policy (Serapioni 2023: 21) states: “The family perspective emphasises the importance of considering the complexity of family needs and the implementation of intersectoral solutions in policymaking.” This directs the focus to the different aspects of family life, especially the resources, tasks and transitions that families are faced with and have to manage. The perspective places the spotlight on both child-rearing and care for other family members and considers how policy shapes the resources and opportunities that families have available in light of their structure, composition and socio-economic and other aspects of their position or situation. The relationship between resource level, income-earning and care-giving is central.

The project defines family resilience as follows: family resilience centres on families’ capacities to engage in family life, which involves care-giving, especially for children, and manage the transitions involved in moving from one stage of family life to another and in engaging in paid work without incurring major risk or trade-off.

The avoidance of poverty and social exclusion is one important risk in this context but family well-being in general, and especially the capacity to engage in family life, are also central. The rEUsilience project has worked with the notion of low resources (rather than poverty). This is for several reasons. It allows us to countenance, first, a broad set of resources as being necessary for family life and, second, that families face difficulties that may originate in factors other than low income (although they may be associated with income and lead to income shortages). We refer here especially to family composition and the extent to which families have heavy caring-related responsibilities. The former places the spotlight on parents raising children alone and those with more than two children while the latter highlights families coping with illness, disability or developmental difficulties.

Looked at through this lens policy has two main orientations: support care-giving and enable families with children and other families to make transitions across the life course.

Conceptualising the relationship between family resilience understood in this way and policy highlights three scope conditions for thinking about family resilience as a goal of policy. The first is that the issues encompass both support for all families (that is, on a universal basis) as well as support for particular family situations. This suggests a floor of support for all and more intensive and sometimes different support for particular families. The second scope condition is that three fields of policy and provision are involved: financial support through cash benefits and taxation allowances, leaves from employment for care-related purposes, and services supporting ECEC and family life in general. These are rarely developed or analysed together but a family-centred perspective makes an inter-connected view essential. A third consideration pertains to duration or temporality in the sense of short-term or long-term vision. Thinking of resilience, especially in terms of the capacity for families to make transitions, a long-term perspective is important because the factors causing low resources and precipitating changes in the structure, operation and positioning of families are all typically part of a longer trajectory.



While this set of goals brings the entire policy edifice into the picture, the project focuses on family and care policy as these are the most proximate to families. Family and care policies are understood as the package of supports that states offer to and for families, including income support, employment-related leaves and family-oriented services. We should note, however, that this is a selection and therefore underlines the need to be mindful that all social policies are relevant, including other income support through social protection policies as well as policies for education, health, employment and housing.

Methodologically this report is based on four main analytic exercises which were undertaken over a 12-month period from March 2024 to February 2025. These were grounded on the one hand in an analysis of a set of policies at national and EU levels and on the other hand on the feedback received from three sessions of the project's Policy Lab held between March 2024 and January 2025. The research exercises were undertaken concurrently.

The first research exercise focused on identifying the policy landscape. This exercise was informed by the work undertaken for Deliverable 6.1 which focused on the problematisation of family resilience as a challenge for policy (Daly and Uzunalioglu 2024). This work developed the definition of family resilience outlined above as families' capacities to engage in family life (which centres on care-giving especially for children) and manage the transitions involved in moving from one stage of family life to another and in engaging in paid work without incurring major risk or trade-offs. This kind of thinking pointed the research in the direction of income-related policies addressing financial support for families; needs-based policies recognising additional caregiving requirements; transition-oriented policies facilitating family-based transitions such as childbirth and child-rearing, employment changes, or shifts in family composition; and service-oriented policies designed to holistically support families.

A further analytic exercise reviewed the relevant policy instruments and reforms in these four policy fields on the basis of an extensive data-driven analysis of the policy design, using comparative databases such as Eurostat, OECD Family Database, Leave Network and MISSOC. Given limitations in Eurostat data (where the latest data for the UK is from 2018), and the exclusion of the UK from the MISSOC database, UK-specific data was obtained from UK national databases. Among the fields analysed in detail were family benefits, childcare provision, equivalences between lone-parent and two-parent families and parenting-related leave policies. The research questions guiding the analysis were: What is the nature of the problem? What is the current state of play for that problem in terms of policy provision in the six rEUsilience countries? What does the existing evidence say about these issues? Consortium members were also consulted to provide insights on the proposed policy fields, refine the focus and identify policy priorities from the national perspective. This consultation resulted in narrowing down the focus to three areas: (1) income-related support, specifically the tapering of child benefits and the recognition of children's ages and family size, (2) addressing the childcare gap between the end of well-compensated parenting-related leaves and the start of legal ECEC entitlement and (3) service-based family support.

A third exercise turned the spotlight on the relevant EU documents, that is, as mentioned, the Work-Life Balance Directive, the European Child Guarantee and the European Care Strategy. These were reviewed for their policy orientation to the family and the extent to which they



were informed by an inclusive approach, a flexible approach and recognised the need for complementarity between policies.

A final and vitally important exercise entailed ‘road-testing’ policy proposals and principles at the Policy Lab. Consisting of two panels of experts (which met separately) – family experts and policy experts - the lab was designed to be both a provider or initiator of proposals as well as a locus of discussion and feedback. Hence, the first two sessions of the lab considered in turn the nature of family resilience as a challenge for policy and family support services as a possible response. The third session, held on 28 and 29th of January 2025, was presented with a set of proposals that had been worked out on the basis of the analysis just described. In particular, the policy lab families panel considered a set of proposals on policies in the six countries while the policy panel considered proposals for EU level action. The feedback has been incorporated into this report.

This report is therefore an outcome of a multi-faceted and collaborative process wherein extensive comparative research of country-level and EU analyses was coupled with expert consultations. Throughout we were mindful of the feasibility and scale of needed reforms, in their own right and relative to the existing policy set in the six (and other) countries, all of which have their own social policy trajectory and conceive of resourcing family life in different ways. Furthermore, the countries are at very different stages in relation to the selected policy fields. Hence, instead of making proposals, the report sets out general principles for policy. These are at a higher level of abstraction than proposals and are intended as guides.

2. Scene Setting at EU Level

This section examines the most relevant policies and developments at EU level, reviewing in turn the Work-Life Balance Directive, the European Child Guarantee and the European Care Strategy. The purpose is to analyse these from the perspective of family resilience, interrogating them first on the understanding of family that underpins them and then through the three critical criteria developed for the policy analyses in the project overall: inclusiveness, flexibility and complementarity.

2.1 Work-Life Balance Directive

The European Commission put forward the Work-life Balance Directive following the withdrawal of an earlier proposal for a maternity leave directive, which would have extended the period of maternity leave in Europe.¹ It has been said that the Directive generally broadened the focus of the existing EU legal framework in regard to family-related leave and flexible working arrangements to take account of developments in society over the past decade.² The EU Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158 adopted in 2019 takes a number of steps to support workers with care responsibilities, especially in introducing paternity leave of at least 10 working days, paid at the same rate as sick leave, and mandating parental leave of at least four months per parent, of which two months are non-transferable and to be

¹<http://www.womenlobby.org/Withdrawal-of-the-Maternity-Leave-Directive-is-a-blow-for-women-s-rights-in?lang=en>

² [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739346/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)739346_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739346/EPRS_ATA(2023)739346_EN.pdf)



compensated ‘adequately’. Additionally, the Directive encompasses carers’ leave, mandating that workers can take five days per year to care for seriously ill or dependent relatives. It also gives workers (parents and carers) the right to request flexible employment arrangements. The Directive has a number of different objectives, including ensuring that families do not lose their income due to care responsibilities and supporting more equal sharing of care between women and men. It also seeks to create a more level playing field and equal rights for workers across the 27 countries of the EU.

How does the Directive view family? In the Recitals, reference is made to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union with specific focus on key family-related rights to paid maternity leave, parental leave and the reconciliation of family and professional life. The word family is used in different ways and with different frequency throughout the Recitals: family obligations (10), unpaid family work (11), family-related leave (12), family life (16), family status (16), family income (31).

The concept of family is also used in the Articles of the Directive, with the opening article stating that the subject matter of the Directive is focused on “facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life for workers who are parents, or carers.” This statement is immediately followed by an emphasis on the Directive providing for individual rights related to paternity leave, parental leave, carers’ leave and flexible working arrangements for workers who are parents or carers. So while the family as a unit seems to be considered as a conceptual starting point for the Directive, the focus is on the rights of individual family members to reconcile their paid work with family life.

Individual family figures are also referred to explicitly: mother, father, child. The Directive states, however, that Member States have the competence to define marital and family status, as well as to establish which persons are to be considered to be a parent, mother and father (Recital 18). Fathers are specifically targeted in the Recitals with a stated objective to promote “a more equal sharing of the caring responsibilities between women and men, and to allow for the early creation of a bond between fathers and children” (Recital 19). Moreover, the focus on men and care is evidenced by the use of the term ‘paternity leave’, which is clearly linked to fathers’ rights rather than the choice of a more neutral term such as ‘birth leave’ (e.g. Belgium)³ or ‘pregnancy leave’ (e.g. Finland)⁴ which has since been adopted in some countries following the transposition of the Directive into national law.⁵

While the rights in the Directive are focused on adults, Recital 4 refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the responsibility of parents for the upbringing and development of the child and states the best interests of the child as a primary concern. More specifically, children with disabilities are referred to in Recital 3 on the need for measures “to

³ <https://employment.belgium.be/en/themes/international/posting/working-conditions-be-respected-case-posting-belgium/birth-leave>

⁴ <https://www.infofinland.fi/en/family/financial-support-for-families/benefits-for-a-family-after-a-child-is-born#heading-b4488ffe-5fbf-4a05-9453-df46909658ec>

⁵ For national transposition texts per country, see an overview here: [Directive - 2019/1158 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)



ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.”

The Directive is imbued with a sense of family diversity with reference to multiple types of families and care needs (see discussion below on the inclusiveness of the Directive). While traditional family terms are used, new family terms also feature in the Directive such as ‘equivalent second parent’ (Article 3.1a) which can be relevant for less ‘traditional’ families such as lone-parent families, same-sex families and recomposed families. Some articles of the Directive refer to the rights of the individual irrespective of marital status which is relevant for unmarried families (whether parents with children, or unmarried carers caring for their partners).

Overall, the word ‘family’ is well embedded in the Directive in the sense of family as a recognised unit of society with obligations and status, providing both ‘unpaid work’ (care) and income. Finally, the family is considered from a diversity perspective, and as a two-generation and even multi-generation unit, with the best interests of more vulnerable family members (children, adults with care needs) prioritised as well as the needs of parents and carers.

We now turn to analysing the Directive in terms of the three analytic principles developed through the project for policy analysis. The next sections consider, in turn, inclusiveness, flexibility and complementarity.

Inclusiveness refers to the extent to which the provisions are envisaged as being available to all, which is here considered especially from the perspective of recognition of family diversity and diversity as regards employment type. A first point of note is that the diversity of families and their needs is highlighted in the Directive through the introduction of guidelines to take into account families in disadvantaged situations during the transposition phase: “Member States are encouraged to assess if conditions of access and detailed arrangements of paternity and carers leave, and flexible working arrangements should also be adapted to special needs, such as those of single parents, parents with a disability or parents of children with a disability or long-term illness, adoptive parents as well as to special situations, such as multiple births and premature births” (Recital 37). Hence, there is recognition of the need for both universal measures for all families and specific measures for families in vulnerable situations.

As well as this explicit reference to different types of families and ensuring their access to the rights established in the Directive, inclusive thinking is built into the design of the Directive through different articles and recitals. First of all, the Directive encourages Member States “to grant the right to parental leave to all workers who exercise parental responsibilities in accordance with national legal systems” (Recital 21). This should pave the way for discussions on the realities of kinship carers or recomposed families, as well as lone-parent families living in multigeneration households where children are cared for by family members other than their biological parents. Second, the Directive makes the right to paternity leave for at least 10 days upon the birth of a child available for fathers or equivalent second parents where and in so far as the latter are recognised by national law (Article 4.1). This is a measure oriented to including within the remit of the Directive lone-parent families, same-sex families as well as recomposed families. Third, the definition of parental leave as leave that can be taken upon



the birth or adoption of a child (Article 3.1.b) explicitly brings in adoptive families. Finally, the Directive specifies that Member States should assess the need for adapting parental leave to the needs of adoptive parents, parents with a disability and parents with children with disabilities or long-term illnesses (Article 5.8).

The Directive is aimed at working parents and working carers, hence inclusiveness also needs to be considered in relation to the diversity of carer relationships considered. The employed carer is provided with five days of leave per year to provide care or support to a relative or person living in the same household, and the concept of 'relative' (Article 3.1.e) extends to a worker's children, parents and partner. There is no reference to a worker's siblings or grandparents for instance.⁶ So while efforts have been made to make the Directive inclusive of all types of families, it still fails to capture certain care relationships, including intense care needs due to disability or illness.

Moreover, even where diversity is built into the policy design with the Directive stating, for example, that the right to paternity leave is to be granted irrespective of marital or family status (Article 4.3), it also explicitly prioritises Member States' competence in defining such marital and family status, as well as establishing which persons are to be considered to be a parent, a mother and a father (Recital 18). This effectively means that some parents or carers whose status is not recognised in national law will not fully benefit from the rights of the Directive. For instance, fathers are generally always entitled to the right to paternity leave (where same-sex families are formally recognised), but the situation is different for co-mothers in a lesbian relationship since, of the 26 EU countries with paternity leave, 14 grant this right to an equivalent second parent while the other 12 do not.⁷ The situation becomes even more complicated for two-father families.

The inclusion of employment diversity also features in the Directive being made applicable to workers with different kinds of employment contracts or relationships (part-time, temporary, fixed-term contracts), as highlighted in Recital 17 and Article 2 of the Directive. However self-employed workers are not covered by the Directive, and the European Commission is obliged to carry out a "study on the rights to family leave granted to self-employed" (Article 18.2.b) as part of its Review report to be submitted to the European Parliament and Council of the EU in August 2027. Moreover, Article 5.4 states that "Member States may make the right to parental leave subject to a period of work qualification or to a length of service qualification, which shall not exceed one year." This can have a negative effect on parents who are in atypical jobs and short-term work contracts, effectively limiting their access to this social right. Similarly, there are conditions attached to the right to request flexible work arrangements (Article 9.4): "Member States may make the right to request flexible working arrangements subject to a period of work qualification or to a length of service qualification, which shall not exceed six months."

⁶ <https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2019-12/744-Etuc-Short-EN-web.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/6048-the-transposition-of-the-work-life-balance-directive-in-eu-member-states-ii-considerable-work-still-to-be-done>



Turning to the second analytic lens – flexibility – the Directive focuses on the work-life balance of parents and carers, hence taking a life course perspective and considering care responsibilities from birth to old age. Moreover, Recital 6 explicitly mentions that work-life balance policies should take into account demographic changes including the effects of an ageing population.

The Directive considers care needs in early childhood and also beyond, referencing different stages of childhood and providing for them through both paternity leave and parental leave. While paternity leave is to be taken “on the occasion of the birth of a child,” parental leave has to be taken “before the child reaches a specified age, up to the age of eight” (Article 5.1), and parents have the right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes for children up to at least eight years (Article 9.1).

As concerns major changes in children’s lives or family situations, families in potentially vulnerable situations are referred to in relation to parental leave, with Article 5.8 calling on Member States to assess the need for the conditions of access to and the detailed arrangements for the application of parental leave “to be adapted to the needs of adoptive parents, parents with a disability and parents with children with a disability or a long-term illness.” However, there are no specific rules defined in the legislation, e.g. making parental leaves longer for parents of children with disabilities or extending the right to request flexible working arrangements beyond eight years. The diversified arrangements for parental leave remain very much in the hands of the Member States, and the obligation on Member States is merely to “assess” rather than to “apply.”

The Directive also aims to assist families with work-life transitions. For instance, flexibility is built into the implementation of parental leave in the Directive, with the possibility of taking it in blocks or spreading it out over longer periods (through individual months, weeks or days). According to Article 5.6 on parental leave, “Member States shall take the necessary measures to ensure that workers have the right to request that they take parental leave in flexible ways.” This can include a reduction of working hours, allowing the worker to stay connected to the labour market, and must take into account the needs of both the employer and the employee. This can be considered positive not only for families but also for employers who would not have to replace workers for blocks of time. The same can be said for paternity leave, with Article 4.1 stating that “Member States may determine whether to allow paternity leave to be taken partly before or only after the birth of the child and whether to allow such leave to be taken in flexible ways.”

Lastly, some flexibility is built into measures like the carers’ leave in regard to how and when the leave is taken: “Member States may allocate carers’ leave on the basis of a reference period other than a year, per person in need of care or support, or per case” (Article 6.2). This provides leeway for transposition of the care leaves in a way that may be more compatible with existing health or disability-related rights already in place.

On a more structural level, Article 10.2 on employment rights clarifies that for workers who fully take their leave in one block “Member States shall ensure that, at the end of leave provided for in Articles 4, 5 and 6, workers are entitled to return to their jobs or to equivalent



posts on terms and conditions which are no less favourable to them...” This is essential in order to prevent any workplace discrimination or job loss linked to parenting and/or care responsibilities.

The Directive also covers flexibility in relation to the workplace. Flexible working arrangements (Article 2.f) are defined as “the possibility for workers to adjust their working patterns, including through the use of remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules, or reduced working hours.” The Directive thereby provides a wide range of options for workplace accommodations, which can further help parents and carers to reconcile their work-family transitions during their professional journey. However, it must be noted that this Directive does not provide parents and carers with a right to flexible working arrangements, but instead a right to request flexible working arrangements, hence requiring negotiations with employers in order to secure this flexibility.

The non-transferability of a portion of the parental leave indicates there is some rigidity built into the design of the Directive. It effectively extends from one to two months the minimum period of parental leave which cannot be transferred from one parent to the other in order to encourage fathers to take parental leave, while maintaining the right of each parent to take at least four months of parental leave as provided for in Directive 2010/18/EU (Recital 20). The justification for this ‘rigidity’ is due to the low take-up of parental leave by men with the tendency across Europe to transfer a considerable portion of their leave entitlements to mothers, affecting thereby also the chances labour market reintegration of mothers following maternity and parental leave.

Turning to the third analytic lens, complementarity spotlights the degree to which policies are seen to be and treated as inter-connected. In this regard, it is important to point out that there are limits to the EU’s mandate which reduce the extent to which a complementary approach is possible. However, the recitals of the Directive, as well as the Commission Communication⁸ accompanying the Directive proposal, make clear conceptual links to the need for complementarity between the employment-related measures in the Directive and other policy areas such as family policy, gender equality, demographic change and care services.

This conceptual link is made either by explicitly referring to the (desired) impact of the Directive on other policy areas (e.g. family, gender equality, demographic change), or by making recommendations for further national actions and investments to complement the new rights acquired through the Directive (e.g. investments in care services, tax-benefit systems, data on gendered leave take-up, extending the rights to self-employed, assessing the needs of families in vulnerable situations, family-supportive workplaces).

The legal basis for the Directive is Article 153(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which provides that “the Union is to support and complement the activities of the Member States in the area of equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work.” Therefore, the Directive is intrinsically linked to gender equality policies, and states that one of the objectives of work-life balance

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2017:252:FIN>



policies should be to help close gender gaps in earnings and pay (Recital 6). It also makes the link between work-life balance and gender equality policies, namely stating that “the imbalance in the design of work-life balance policies between women and men reinforces gender stereotypes and differences between work and care” (Recital 11).

While the scope of the legal requirements of the Directive does not cover care or support services specifically, the recitals of the Directive make the link between leaves, flexible arrangements and care services with a strong statement in Recital 12: “In implementing this Directive, Member States should take into consideration that the equal uptake of family-related leave between men and women also depends on other appropriate measures, such as the provision of accessible and affordable childcare and long-term care services, which are crucial for the purpose of allowing parents, and other persons with caring responsibilities to enter, remain in, or return to the labour market.” The same Recital also refers to links with tax and benefit systems: “Removing economic disincentives can also encourage second earners, the majority of whom are women, to participate fully in the labour market.” This is developed further in the Commission Communication with reference to financial incentives or disincentives for second earners (mostly women) to enter employment or work more hours, and actions planned to support mutual learning and better data collection on this.

The Commission Communication dedicates a section to “Leaves, flexible working arrangements, care facilities and economic disincentives”, and states that as well as the legislative action of the Directive, it is “proposing non-legislative measures to address lack of sufficient or adequate care services or to tackle economic disincentives to work for second earners” and it aims assist Member States in their national reforms. This includes financial support for transnational projects and information campaigns, further studies and data collection on take-up of family leaves and flexible working arrangements through the European Semester, supporting sharing of best practice on smooth transitions between leaves and employment (e.g. provision of breast-feeding facilities at the workplace) and more.

Looked at as a whole, the Directive can be said to provide a solid conceptual and legal basis to ensure that the measures on family leaves and flexible working arrangements are inclusive of different types of families and workers. However, self-employed workers are still outside of the scope of the directive, and there are minimum requirements of previous employment for eligibility of the leaves (up to 6 months for paternity, up to 1 year for parental leave, up to 6 months for requesting flexible work arrangements). The Directive also provides clear legally binding measures to ensure that flexibility is built into the development and review of relevant national policy instruments. Finally, while the EU has limited competences in the field of supports to families, it provides an EU framework with both legislative actions (under the Directive) and non-legislative actions which aim to strengthen the complementarity of the work-life balance rights with other key policies affecting the resilience of families such as care services, data collection, tax-benefit systems, and funding streams.



2.2 European Child Guarantee

The Child Guarantee aims to address child poverty by ensuring that children at risk of poverty and social exclusion have access to the following key services: free ECEC, free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day), free healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing.⁹ It takes the form of a Council Recommendation (adopted by all 27 Member States) meaning that its provisions are only by recommendation to Member States. Adopted in June 2021, Member States were requested to provide a National Action Plan by March 2022 laying out how they aim to respond to the Recommendation. They are also requested to report back to the European Commission every two years with an update on progress made towards implementing the National Action Plan. In 2024 we are now seeing the first biennial reports being published.¹⁰ Member States are also requested to appoint a Child Guarantee Coordinator to coordinate and monitor progress in implementation and maintain consistent dialogue between Member States and the European Commission. The Child Guarantee is being linked with the broader EU policy environment. For example, Recital 27 of the Child Guarantee refers to the EU Social Scoreboard in the context of the European Semester (which highlights the challenge of poverty and social exclusion through Country-specific recommendations). This is complemented by the first version of a Monitoring framework prepared by the Indicators Sub Group of the Social Protection Committee alongside the European Commission published in 2023.¹¹ Furthermore, activities linked to the Child Guarantee can be supported by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), with 5% of the fund earmarked towards measures to tackle child poverty for Member States with high rates of child poverty and social exclusion. This review analyses the design of the Child Guarantee through the lens of inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity. The review does not cover the implementation of the Child Guarantee across the 27 EU countries.

Inclusiveness captures the extent to which the Child Guarantee provisions are available to all children but also the extent to which the Child Guarantee covers the family environment and the needs of families more broadly. The Recommendation is targeted towards ‘children in need’ who are defined in Article 3.a as those under 18 at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Hence the design of the Child Guarantee is not intended to be inclusive of all children (universal approach), but rather offers a targeted approach which aims to close the poverty gap. In Article 5 the Child Guarantee directs Member States’ actions towards certain groups of children experiencing specific disadvantages that increase the risk of poverty, namely: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation, children with disabilities, children with mental health issues, children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin (particularly Roma), children in alternative (especially institutional) care, and children in precarious family situations.

⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021H1004>.

¹⁰ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee_en#JAF

¹¹ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-child-guarantee-has-new-framework-better-monitor-childrens-access-education-healthcare-and-2024-01-19_en



Despite being a policy framework centred on children, family is present in the European Child Guarantee to a certain extent, with general references to “children and their families”. However, again, this is not aimed at all families and primary prevention measures. As well as the families of the children experiencing the five specific disadvantages referred to above, there is also a focus on low-income families (Recitals 16, 20, 23, 24), and on children in precarious family situations (Article 3). For the purposes of the Child Guarantee, precarious family situations are defined as:

“..children exposed to various risk factors that could lead to poverty or to social exclusion. This includes: living in a single-earner household; living with a parent with disabilities; living in a household where there are mental health problems or long-term illness; living in a household where there is substance abuse, or domestic violence; children of a Union citizen who has moved to another Member State while the children themselves remained in their Member State of origin; children having a teenage mother or being a teenage mother; and children having an imprisoned parent.”

Hence the Child Guarantee can be seen as a lever for addressing gaps in overarching child/family policies which do not sufficiently account for diversity of needs, by highlighting children and families who either slip through social protection safety nets or whose needs are not sufficiently recognised. From this perspective, the Child Guarantee is exclusive and targets very specific children and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion in order to push for redress of current national/sub-national policies aimed at provided access to key services (namely the ones highlighted above like healthcare, ECEC).¹² These targeted groups are not exhaustive but chosen so as to reflect those at greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion. According to the Feasibility study undertaken, these target groups were also selected to align with the available data for effective identification and monitoring.¹³ While the Recommendation covers a broad range of children in need through the vulnerabilities and risk factors described, the inclusiveness of families in different situations is dependent on how Member States decide to translate the target groups into their own National Action Plans. Article 11.b recommends Member States to involve key stakeholders in identifying the relevant children in need in their national contexts. Some Member States may offer more targeted measures towards certain groups of children than others. For instance, research assessing the national action plans by COFACE Families Europe from the perspective of children with disabilities and their families shows the large disparities between how Member States have approached efforts to target or not target measures under the Recommendation.¹⁴

The second criterion, flexibility, referring to the extent to which the policy framework encourages or enables people and families to make a change (thereby allowing for transitions), does not concretely feature in the Recommendation. However, there are some parts of the Child Guarantee that do pave the way for such an approach in the implementation at (sub)-

¹² <https://coface-eu.org/publications-key-findings-childguarantee/>

¹³ <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/772097>

¹⁴ https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/COFACE_CGAssessment_June2023.pdf



national level. The Child Guarantee applies to all children at risk of poverty and social exclusion under the age of 18 but does not give any indication as to how these services may grow with the child, providing diversification of measures over time and for different age groups. There is however mention in Recital 19 that tackling child poverty eases the school-work transition, thereby giving extra justification as to why Member States should invest in the Child Guarantee. More specifically, the recital refers to the cost-effective investment in tackling disadvantage from early years as it contributes “not only to the inclusion of children and their higher socioeconomic outcomes when they are adults, but also to the economy and society through better integration into the labour market and social life and improvement in the school-to-work transition”.

Article 10 on Adequate Housing focuses on transition concerning a specific target group: children in institutional or foster care. It recommends that Member States develop measures to “ensure the transition of children from institutional or foster care to quality community-based or family-based care and support their independent living and social integration.” While such a shift away from institutional care is a key point of vulnerability for the child and their family, the Recommendation seems mainly to refer to the notion of flexibility in relation to policies and services (and not children/families. Children may be the point of intervention but the provision of services can go much further. Article 11.d refers to the need for Member States to “develop effective outreach measures towards children in need and their families, in particular at regional and local level and through educational establishments, trained social workers, family-support services, civil society and social economy organisations, with a view to raising awareness and encouraging and facilitating the take-up of the services covered by this Recommendation.” This focus on the take-up of services and working with a wide range of organisations can be considered as a key starting point for measures to help families adapt to change and empower them as rights holders to access the services they are entitled to. Finally, the notion of precarious family situations as defined in the Child Guarantee (see definition in previous section) encompasses some key life transitions such as the presence of a disability, mental health or long-term health challenges; children or families in migration living across two countries (transnational families); the birth of a child in the case of teenage mothers; or children with an imprisoned parent, which constitutes a major change in family environment. While there are some references (direct and indirect) in the Recommendation to transitions being a factor of vulnerability which requires tailored and flexible support, it does not advise or consolidate such an approach.

Complementarity is the extent to which the elements of the Child Guarantee are integrated and work together in a coherent way, or whether there are gaps/contradictions. It is also about complementarity with other related policy areas such as family support, and non-service measures such as income support or labour market integration policies for parents/carers (which are key determinants of child poverty). The strongest example of the push for complementarity of the measures outlined in the Child Guarantee is possibly the call on Member States in Article 11.a to nominate a national Child Guarantee Coordinator “equipped with adequate resources and mandate enabling the effective coordination and monitoring of the implementation of this Recommendation.”



Article 6 on “Enabling policy frameworks” provides different recommendations which indicate that the Child Guarantee has built-in mechanisms designed to ensure complementarity and coordination in the implementation of the measures at national level. Article 6.a recommends Member States to develop an integrated and enabling framework that “ensure(s) consistency of social, education, health, nutrition and housing policies at national, regional and local level and, whenever possible, improve their relevance for supporting children in an integrated manner”. Hence Member States are advised to embed this approach in their National Action Plans, developing initiatives to bridge the gaps between policy areas which govern the specific services covered by the Child Guarantee. Article 6.c calls on Member States to “ensure adequate policies and resources, including through labour market integration measures, support measures for parents or guardians and income support to families and households, so that financial barriers do not prevent children from accessing quality services.” This points to the affordability of the services promoted through the Child Guarantee process, focusing on service types and their quality, but also providing for broader measures which ensure that these services can be accessed by low-income families. Here family becomes a central part of the challenge in reducing the number of children growing up in poverty. There is also acknowledgement that more needs to be done to support the whole family to tackle poverty and social exclusion, beyond interventions specific to the child. Article 6.h refers to complementarity between policy and funding, calling on Member States to “dedicate adequate resources and make optimal use of national and Union funds, in particular the European Social Fund Plus, the European Regional Development Fund, and where appropriate REACT-EU, Invest-EU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Technical Support Instrument.” This points to coherence and complementarity between EU policy and funding frameworks, which is built into the Child Guarantee as stated in Recital 28 stating that all Member States will earmark an appropriate amount of the European Social Fund Plus to tackle child poverty or social exclusion. Article 6.i calls on Member States to take into account the gender perspective throughout the enabling framework, while Recital 15 refers to the need to “guarantee the access of children in need to a set of key services, including mainstreaming a gender perspective in order to take into consideration the different situations of girls and boys.” Complementarity with gender equality policies is therefore also encouraged.

While the main focus of the Child Guarantee is to ensure that children in need access key services, there are various recommendations made to ensure that Member States adopt a coordinated and integrated approach in the implementation phase, including clear links with general social and health policies (Article 6.b).

To conclude, the Council Recommendation for a European Child Guarantee is designed to be inclusive towards a broad range of children with particular circumstances that place them at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion. While the intersecting vulnerabilities of children who span different target groups (e.g. children with disabilities living in severe housing deprivation) are not developed in the Recommendation, the target group approach does allow for greater recognition and prioritising of children and families in more vulnerable situations. The Recommendation could have gone further by taking a broader approach to family diversity – the absence of this approach might mean that the families who may most need these provisions go unnoticed by the system. rEUsilience can contribute here by providing its



improved classifications of families in households for key European social surveys (see Bartova et al. 2023). The principle of flexibility is not substantively addressed in the Recommendation which arguably weakens it since it does not address how services will be designed to respond adequately to transitions in families' lives or how the Child Guarantee grows as children grow. A one size fits all approach to childhood and adolescence misses opportunities to embed the life course perspective in the policy framework. The intention of the Child Guarantee to promote the need for integrated service provision is present but it will remain to be seen how Member States implement this approach at (sub-) national level. It is promising to see that the Recommendation includes calls for mutual learning, sharing of experiences, exchange good practices and follow up on the actions taken in response to this Recommendation as set out in the relevant national action plans (Article 12.b).

A stronger push to recognising how supporting the whole family can fight poverty and social exclusion would have been helpful in moving the Child Guarantee away from an individualised framework and towards a stronger sense of collective welfare and societal progress. Although focusing on children, the Child Guarantee does respond to the concept of family to a degree. Family types are referred to for their vulnerability, families are also a target group, and finally there are a couple of places where family can be seen as a means to further the aims of the Child Guarantee. A central place is in the field of de-institutionalisation where family-based care is promoted (Recital 24 and Article 10.d. Here family becomes a central part of the challenge in reducing the number of children growing up in institutions. There is also acknowledgement that more needs to be done to supporting the whole family to tackle poverty and social exclusion, beyond child-specific interventions. In this regard, Member States are recommended to further labour market integration, parental supports and income support policies (Article 6.c). Family is also seen as a crucial part of the ecosystem of the child, with emphasis being placed on furthering cooperation between family and other key actors to implement the Recommendation. For example, Article 7.k relays the need for “cooperation of educational establishments, local communities, social, health and child protection services, families and social economy actors to support inclusive education, to provide after school care and opportunities to participate in sport, leisure and cultural activities, and to build and invest in educational establishments as centres of inclusion and participation”. There is therefore some recognition of how family plays an important role in the success of ensuring access to these services for children at risk of poverty.

The Recommendation has set the direction for the Child Guarantee but how it is implemented stays firmly in the hands of the Member States and this will serve to determine the extent to which policy and provision move to more closely reflect inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity for families.

2.3 European Care Strategy

The rEUsilience project has sought to understand further how policy systems provide support to family life, with exchange of care for children and for adults being a core tenet of this. Earlier work on the ‘inclusiveness and flexibility of care policies’ focused on evaluating national



systems for ECEC and long-term care.¹⁵ The EU does not hold competence for care policies (both ECEC and long-term care) nor family policy but remains active in shaping these areas through policy direction, promoting cross-country exchange among Member States and boosting investment through funding initiatives. The key policy framework shaping the EU's actions regarding care is the European Care Strategy proposed by the European Commission in 2022¹⁶, a development prompted heavily by the greater awareness of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, stated in her State of the Union address in September 2021 that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought renewed attention to issues facing Europe regarding how it manages care, both informal and formal care, care givers and care receivers. This context would be responded to with a new European Care Strategy. The European Commission proposed a Communication on a European Care Strategy in 2022 alongside two Recommendations for Member States: one on the revision of the Barcelona targets on ECEC and another on access to affordable high-quality, long-term care. The scope of this policy review is limited to assessing the Communication and not the adjoining Council Recommendations as the Communication presents the Strategy. The Communication focuses both on ECEC and LTC, including chapters on the formal care sector, informal care, investment and evidence and monitoring.

The Strategy makes reference to families, to family life and to family realities. The word family or families appears 21 times in the Strategy and is not isolated to the chapter on informal care. It is used in the Introduction (3), in Chapter 2 on improving care services (4), in Chapter 2.1 on ECEC (4), in Chapter 3.2 on informal care 'a better balance between work and care responsibilities' (7), in Chapter 4 on investing in care (1), and in Chapter 5 on improving the evidence base and monitoring progress (2). The only chapters without reference to family or families are Chapter 2.2 on long-term care and Chapter 3.1 on improving working conditions in the (formal) care sector. Hence, it seems that the family dimension of long-term care and the formal care workforce is not yet as mature or politically relevant as it is for ECEC and informal care.

The Strategy aims to address key issues facing both those who receive care and those who give care. The families of people receiving care are taken into account, for example in Chapter 2 the Communication states "Making care services accessible means enabling and providing the means to the people who need care (and their families) to actually make sure of the services available." This highlights that the person receiving care is not seen as isolated from their family, and places emphasis on the role that family can play as a key intermediary network between the person receiving care and service providers. The same conceptualisation is not seen regarding the families of those who provide formal care services. There is no reference to issues related to these families or to potential policy solutions, concerning for example family reunification or the family life realities of migrant care workers.

¹⁵ <https://reusilience.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Inclusiveness-and-Flexibility-of-Care-Policies-website.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0440>



The Strategy responds to issues facing both informal carers and the formal care sector. In Chapter 3.2 the focus is on informal care with the recognition that such care is often undertaken by family members. This has some elements of mainstreaming the family perspective in regard to care, with informal care/carer as a term acting to a large degree as policy language for family carer. Furthermore, the sub-chapters on informal care and formal care are located within the same chapter, giving equal recognition to both and again underlining the importance of family care within care policy reform.

Family is not treated as a particular or static entity. Rather, the Strategy puts the spotlight on a number of different vulnerable situations facing families, making reference to families at risk of poverty or social exclusion, children from homeless families and single-parent families. This brings in the context of structural vulnerabilities and inequalities that pertain to issues of care. Policy solutions are therefore fractured through an inequalities lens, and there is an implicit recognition that some families need more support than others.

Individual family figures are also referred to explicitly: mother, father, child. This allows the Strategy to acknowledge the gender dimension of care, with mothers recognised as dealing with the majority of the care work and fathers inadequately supported by policy systems to engage in care. The term ‘parents’ is also used, but the terms ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are the subject of promoting specific actions. Among these are addressing mothers’ transition into the labour market with reference to tax-benefit systems, employment and access to childcare. The terms ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are also used together to emphasise that both mothers and fathers should share care work and be able to reconcile paid work with family life.

The Strategy does not use the terms ‘maternity leave’, ‘paternity leave’, ‘parental leave’, ‘carers’ leave’ as defined and utilised in Article 3 of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive of 2019.¹⁷ Instead, it takes forward the term ‘family leave’ to encompass all these different terms in one. For instance, in Chapter 2.1 on ECEC, it is used in the context of the childcare gap where adequately paid parental leave ends before legal entitlement to ECEC begins. Elsewhere in the Strategy family leave is used in a broader sense to encompass all situations where family members are required to take time off from paid employment to engage in informal care work. A notable example is in the introduction where the Strategy refers to the disproportionate impact that inadequate care services have on women, stating that “This leads to women taking long absence for family leave, reducing working time and withdrawing early from the labour market.” In this usage, the situation of those looking after children and those providing care for adults with disabilities or older persons can all be combined, promoting the perspective that care needs arise across the life course.

Turning to the second analytic lens, the term ‘inclusive’ is used frequently in the Communication but only in reference to ECEC and not to long term care. The references to inclusiveness sit within the focus put forward across the Communication that ECEC services must be of high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive. Focusing in on inclusiveness, the Commission states that all children should have access to ECEC no matter their background. In the recommendations of Chapter 4, specific attention is paid to “in particular children at

¹⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158>



risk of poverty or social exclusion and for marginalised groups such as Roma, children with a migrant background, children with disabilities, and children deprived of parental care.” This list mirrors actions undertaken through the European Child Guarantee, which seeks to ensure access to a key set of services, including ECEC services, for children in vulnerable situations.¹⁸

Extending beyond the European Child Guarantee, the European Care Strategy aims to boost the inclusiveness of ECEC through calling for a Council Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets which provide Member States with targets relating to children’s participation in ECEC services. Recommendations on inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities, those with special needs or with special educational needs are laid out in Article 7 of the proposed Council Recommendation.¹⁹ This attention on increasing the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is supported by the framing that children’s participation in ECEC acts as an intervention contributing towards breaking the cycle of inequality and disadvantage, boosting future employment possibilities and reducing future risk of poverty and social exclusion. Whilst specific vulnerabilities related to children receive the most attention concerning inclusiveness, the need for ECEC services to be inclusive to families at risk of poverty or social exclusion is also referred to. This is notably linked to the need for ECEC registration systems to not place administrative barriers that make it difficult for families to access services.

Inclusiveness is also referred to in relation to disability. The Communication states in Chapter 2 that accessibility “may require adapting the facilities to enable physical access for care receivers and caregivers with disabilities.” The Commission states that actions under the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 will boost inclusiveness in this regard.²⁰ Again, the Strategy retains its dual focus on caregivers and care receivers, broadening its inclusiveness and scope.

Turning to the third lens, flexibility is addressed in the Communication through the lens of work/family reconciliation, meaning that there is a push for flexibility to support care givers in combining paid work with care work. In Chapter 3.2 on ‘A better balance between work and care responsibilities’ the document states “they (care givers) should have access to services that enable them to reconcile their caring responsibilities with their professional lives.” In order to operationalise this work/family reconciliation, flexibility is required at three levels as stated in Principle 9 of the European Pillar for Social Rights: “Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and to have access to care services.”²¹

The Communication shows an awareness that if care services are to better support work/family reconciliation then they must be flexible to families’ realities and schedules rather than imposing rigidity. Chapter 2 states that “making the services accessible means that different working time patterns might require care at atypical hours, e.g. for shift or night

¹⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021H1004>

¹⁹ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220(01))

²⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0101>

²¹ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b7c08d86-7cd5-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF



workers". This is particularly key given the realities of the new world of work, where the traditional 9-5 Monday to Friday working schedule is not as widespread as in the past. For example, in Chapter 2.1 it is stated: "Where parents' working hours are not compatible with schooling hours, affordable and quality out-of-school care plays an important role for children". Promoting flexible childcare services for families is, then, viewed as a key part of the puzzle of work/family reconciliation.

Another key aspect is the Strategy's promotion of 'flexible working arrangements' or 'flexible working time arrangements' as provided for through Article 9 of the Work-Life Balance Directive. Under the Directive, workers with care responsibilities (for children or adults) have the right to request flexible working arrangements, such as telework, reduction in working hours, and flexitime, from their employer to better support their care work. The Strategy reiterates this right and the Commission commits in Chapter 3.2 to monitor the take-up of flexible working time arrangements through the monitoring framework produced by the Employment and Social Protection Committees. The Commission also calls on Member States to further their data collection on the uptake of flexible working time arrangements, for example through Harmonised European Time Use Surveys.

In general, flexibility is framed by the notion of choice, with the Commission clarifying in Chapter 3.2 that "People with caring responsibilities should have a choice about the extent to which they want to combine care with paid work." This should support greater flexibility for families to decide how much they can engage with paid work and which palette of care services, leaves and flexible working arrangements they utilise. However, the Communication retains a large focus on tackling care-related issues as they relate to labour market participation. Is there also access to flexible care services for people with care responsibilities not engaged in paid work? Or is flexibility only an enabling factor of paid employment?

Turning finally to complementarity, as previously mentioned, the fact that the Communication on the European Care Strategy brings together ECEC and long-term care serves to show the Commission's intention of increasing the complementarity of these policy areas under the commonality of care. These policy areas are typically dealt with by different departments both at the EU and the Member State level: for example, a split between education, health, employment, social welfare and others. The Strategy reinforces this to an extent by keeping actions stemming from the Strategy separate, such as a Council Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets for participation in ECEC and a Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care.

The Strategy highlights common issues as a way to bridge both policy areas. These include the high costs of formal care services, lack of availability, lack of recognition and poor working conditions of formal care workers, and informal carers struggling with burnout and to balance paid work with care. Grouping these issues in this way attempts to expose the breadth of the problems across European societies and promote further action with more linked-up thinking regarding care needs throughout the life course. For example, long-term care workers and those in ECEC are brought together in Chapter 3.1 under the umbrella of issues facing care workers. Actions that respond to these shared issues are put forward, notably in Chapter 3 on making the care sector more resilient and gender balanced, Chapter 4 on investing in care,



and Chapter 5 on improving the evidence base and monitoring progress. These policy areas cannot always be brought together, but the Communication does show how in certain areas complementarity is desirable.

The Strategy also identifies a lack of complementarity between policies relating to parents with children, namely the childcare gap which refers to the period of time between the end of adequately paid parental leave and legal entitlement to a place in childcare (considered further below). The result of these policies not lining up with each other is that families are forced to find their own solutions to childcare, potentially impacting their family income and ability to return back or enter to paid work. The Commission states in Chapter 2.1 “Ideally, there should be no gap between the end of adequately paid family leave and a legal entitlement to a place in early childhood education and care.” The Commission goes on to invite Member States to establish a legal entitlement to ECEC with attention paid to the length of adequately-paid family leave, in essence taking steps to close the childcare gap.

In sum, the Communication on the European Care Strategy is framed in a way that includes discussion of both ECEC and long-term care. There are clear efforts to increase the inclusivity of ECEC services, especially related to the inclusion of children in vulnerable situations. Flexibility is integrated into the policy design but the focus rests on reconciling care responsibilities with paid work, through measures such as care-related leaves, flexible work arrangements and access to care services. There are examples of complementarity between policies and policy areas in the Communication but this aspect is generally under-considered.

Taken as a whole, the analyses of the three EU instruments focusing on care needs and provisions as well as work-life reconciliation broadly demonstrated where the EU stands when it comes to supporting families with care-related needs. On the one hand, it appears that caregiving is acknowledged as a broad concept that spans a lifetime with varying degrees of intensity for different family constellations. On the other hand, care is still regarded as a time-bound need and its ongoing nature is not necessarily fully taken into account. In regard to the gendered nature of care, the recommendations are often vague or not strong enough to establish a new narrative.

3. Framework and Principles for Policy Reform

The analysis undertaken of existing policies highlights three main challenges in regard to the degree to which and how policies support familial resilience. These are:

- Inadequate financial support for families leading some families to have too low an income and therefore unable to move from a position of absorbing income shortages to adapting or transforming their situation;
- Lack of income and service support with family-based transitions such as the birth and early years of a child, transitions of children through schooling, transitions of parents between home and employment, developing care needs of adults;
- General lack of service support for families, especially in regard to support with family functioning (so-called ‘family support’).

The table below sets out how these are rooted in particular policy features and ‘translate’ into policy reform foci.



Table 1 The Policy Landscape for Familial Resilience

Problem	Cause	Reform focus/Levers of change	Potential Remedy
Inadequate financial support for families	Failure to take account of the exigencies and full costs of child-rearing	Levels and forms of income support to families	Universality in the availability and coverage of child and family benefits; Targeting of child age, number of children, intensity of care need and families by number of parents
Lack of support with family-based transitions – the childcare gap	Exclusions of some families from entitlement to leave and ECEC; Narrow (if any) recognition of transitions through parenting-related leaves and ECEC	Conditions governing entitlements to parental leave and ECEC	Universalising the entitlements to parenting-related leaves and ECEC, fixing the childcare gap
Lack of service support for families	Weak, inadequate or inconsistent recognition of the challenges of family life (child-rearing and care of others) and families' needs for support	The role and resourcing of family support services	Development of comprehensive family support services as a universal floor of provision + additional services for families with additional needs

The three main suggested policy aims that follow from this are:

1. Better income support for families with children with a particular concern for low-resourced families;
2. Closing the childcare gap;
3. Putting in place a comprehensive set of family support services.

As mentioned, rather than suggesting specific reforms, it was decided that setting out general principles would be a more appropriate approach, not least because of the diversity of provision and philosophies in the different countries. In what follows operational issues are not considered but it should be noted that such operational issues – especially in the sense of barriers to claiming benefits and services – are relevant to almost every principle and were consistently raised by the families in the focus groups as a barrier for them. This includes information scarcity, difficulty in accessing benefits and services and unhelpful staff. The priority should be to put in place a good system of support for families which should operate



to the highest standards regarding making full information available, creating a system of support that is easy to access and is person-centred. As mentioned, the proposals have been devised cognisant of the wide variation across the rEU silience and other countries. This makes reform and transition much more onerous for some countries than others. The supporting tables on provision in the six countries as presented in the text and in the Appendix give an idea of this.

3.1 Principles for Policy

3.1.1 Principles for Better Income Support for Families with Children

Child-related Income Support Should Be Available on a Universal Basis to All Families with Children

Universal child benefits protect and recognise the value of all children and provide a basis for more particular assistance to families. They are an investment in the next generation regardless of the family’s resource levels. A core principle underlying universality is to support all parents with the costs of child-rearing. Moreover, universal benefits are relatively simple to administer, effective as regards take-up and have the significant advantage of predictability for parents (Child Poverty Action Group 2023).²²

At present of the six rEU silience countries Croatia and Spain have no universal child benefits and the UK has a parental income cap in place for receipt (in a change instituted in 2013) (see Table 2). All except Sweden and the UK (with Scotland as an exception) have in place a second tier of income support specifically for families with children.

Table 2 Key Features of Income Support for Families with Children (as of 2023/2024)

	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Universal system of income support for families with children	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Second tier of income supports for families with children	Yes (integrated in the first tier)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No England Yes Scotland

Sources: Daly (2023); MISSOC (2024).

The Child-related Income Support Should Grant an Adequate Level of Support

As well as the structure of the income support to families for children, there is also the crucial matter of the level of that support and in particular its adequacy.

²² <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Money%20Well%20Spent.pdf>



There is currently no specification of ‘adequate’ and, as far as is known, no national or international benchmark exists on this. There are two main ways to think about adequacy. One is in terms of the ‘input’- the value or volume of income support needed to adequately cover the costs of a child. There are different ways in which this value can be calculated. One is to use a cost-based approach. The approach of minimum income standards is relevant here as it calculates the cost of children and other family members needed to live at an acceptable standard of living.²³ Using this approach, the monthly costs of children by age group in Flanders (Belgium) as of December 2024 have been calculated as follows: 0-5: €420; 6-11: €543; 12-18: €665; 18-24: €798.²⁴ A related way of thinking of adequacy is in terms of an ‘essentials guarantee’ in the sense of individuals and families being able to afford essential items and costs. Put forward by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the UK, the essentials are: food and non-alcoholic drinks, electricity and gas, water, clothes and shoes, communications, including phones, internet and postage, travel and sundries (toiletries, haircuts, cleaning materials, bank charges).²⁵

A second way to think of adequacy is in terms of the outcome to be achieved. This turns the spotlight on the role or contribution of child income support to a situation of either zero child poverty and/or one where families with children do not have higher poverty risks than those without children. In general, higher social expenditure on family and child benefits is associated with lower poverty rates for children (Hallaert et al. 2023).

To achieve adequacy, rEUsilience countries as well as others are likely to have to raise their levels of expenditure on child-related income support. As Table 3 shows, the countries vary quite widely in their current levels of investment in family and child policy.²⁶ Poland and Sweden are the highest investors with family and child payments close to 3% of GDP, both exceeding the EU average of 2.3%. Spain has the lowest level of investment followed closely by Croatia. The second set of data in Table 3 shows some association (although not a perfect correlation) between level of expenditure and rates of poverty or social exclusion for children under 18 years of age.

²³<https://www.jrf.org.uk/a-minimum-income-standard-for-the-united-kingdom-in-2024>; https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/active-inclusion/minimum-income/reference-budgets_en?prefLang=sk

²⁴ www.gezinsbond.be

²⁵ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>

²⁶ Family-children function of social protection spending refers to: i) financial support to households for bringing up children, ii) financial assistance to people who support relatives other than children, iii) provide social services specially designed to assist and protect the family, particularly children.

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Family-children_function
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/spr_exp_func_custom_15505542/default/table?lang=en



Table 3 Public Spending on Family and Child Benefits and the Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion among Children

	Public spending on family and child benefits as % of GDP (2023 or the latest available)	At risk of poverty or social exclusion rate of children under 18 (2023)
Belgium	2.12%	19%
Croatia	1.85%	17.3%
Poland	2.99%	16.9%
Spain	1.38%	34.5%
Sweden	2.74%	21.6%
UK	2.25%	30%
EU-27	2.3%	24.8%

Sources: Eurostat (2024)²⁷; IFS (2024)²⁸; OECD (2020)²⁹.

A further matter pertains to the up-rating of benefits. To retain adequacy, benefits need to be regularly updated. Countries vary widely on relevant practices. Belgium and Spain adjust the levels according to the consumer price index each year (although variations in regional practices in Belgium should be noted³⁰) while in Croatia family benefit levels are a fixed amount linked to the State Budget which have remained unchanged since 2002. In Poland the government updates the rates every three years. In Sweden, any adjustments to the level of family benefits are made as a parliamentary decision and there is no yearly adjustment necessarily. In the UK child benefits are not automatically adjusted for inflation or other changes and indeed there is no statutory requirement for these benefits to be updated.³¹ Rather, uprating is at the discretion of the Secretary of State. This has led to proposals to regularise up-rating under the rubric of the ‘child lock’³² whereby child-related income support is linked to whichever is the higher – inflation or earnings – and hence regular uprating and retention of value is locked in.

The Child-related Income Support Should Operate on a Principle of Recognising the Additional Needs of Some Families

There will always be families that have additional needs. The rEUsilience research has highlighted four main family situations that elevate the need for financial support: low income, one parent, child illness or disability, large numbers of children.

Countries vary in terms of whether and how they recognise and give additional support to these different types of family situation.

To take low-income families with children first, Belgium stands apart from the other five countries in making provision for such families through a system of income-based social

²⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/spr_exp_func/default/table?lang=en

²⁸ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/child-poverty-trends-and-policy-options>

²⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/family-benefits-public-spending.html?oecdcontrol-9202e3bf52-var3=2020&oecdcontrol-89cf33ff83-var1=GBR>

³⁰ <https://www.missoc.org/missoc-database/comparative-tables/>

³¹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9498/CBP-9498.pdf>

³² https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/uk-child-poverty/child_lock_report_social_security.pdf



supplements (in both Flanders and Wallonia especially) which are part of the child-related income support system. In Flanders for example, a major reform in 2019 instituted a new set of social supplements along with a reformed administration and IT system that automatically pays out benefits and checks eligibility for the supplements building on yearly incomes and only taking into account yearly changes to the situation (without the compulsion for over payments to be repaid). Poland, too, has both a universal and targeted family income support system. As well as the universal family allowance - Family 500 Plus (Family 800 Plus since 1 January 2024³³), there is an income-tested Family Allowance that has many supplements that recognise the extra needs of lone parents and large families especially. There is also Family Care Capital (*Rodzinny kapitał opiekuńczy*) which aims to strengthen the capability of the family to organise care between the end of the paid parental leave and the age of preschool entry. This is only given in respect of children aged between 12 and 35 months and from the second child on. In the other countries, additional supports for children tend to be based on a means tests rather than rights. Such means tests tend to be cumbersome and often expensive to administer and can be associated with significant levels of non-take-up.

In regard to lone-parent families, these families emerge as among the most deprived of all family types in almost all countries (judged on the basis of their prevalence of poverty or social exclusion for example) (see Figure A1). The causal mechanisms at work include lower income and earning capacity, the possible role of gender and intersectional inequalities and weaknesses or absences in existing policy (e.g. on child maintenance) (Nieuwenhuis 2020). When the countries' policies for supporting lone-parent families are examined, two countries – Croatia and Poland – have additional supports built into their child-specific support systems for such families. Croatia's means-tested child allowance is offered at a different rate according to the type of family with the children of lone parents receiving a higher benefit. The Polish Family Allowance pays a benefit per child that is more than double that paid for other children. Flanders through its Social Allowance pays additional benefits for single parents with children born before the start of 2019 but not for children born subsequently. Neither Spain, Sweden nor the UK grant additional specific income support for children from lone-parent families – if their income is low they may receive extra support through the social assistance system in these countries.

Turning to families with a disabled or ill child, research suggests that they are more prone to disadvantage and tend to face financial difficulties and experience stress and anxiety as compared with families without a child with a disability (Dowling and Dolan 2001; Harris 2008). An analysis by Save the Children using 2020 Eurostat data for 14 European countries estimated that nearly half (46%) of children with disabilities were vulnerable to being at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with risks being heightened if they live in rural areas or in low-income families (Nanou et al. 2021).

When it comes to policies supporting these families, although varying in nature, generosity and conditions, all the rEUsilience countries offer some financial assistance for families where there is a child with a disability or some other particular need (Daly 2023). The income transfers are typically paid to parents or carers and sometimes after the child's 18th birthday

³³ <https://www.gov.pl/web/family/family-800>



are paid directly to the child themselves (Daly 2023). In Poland, three different cash benefits are offered for families where there is a child with intense care needs. These are a Special Attendance Allowance, a Medical Care Allowance and a Nursing Benefit (Daly 2023). Spain has a monthly disability benefit paid for children under 18 who have a disability of at least 33%.³⁴ Like Poland, Sweden offers different types of financial assistance for families with children with health-related needs. One of these is an Assistance Allowance allocated for children needing an average of 20 hours of care support each week (Daly 2023). Another is a Nursing Allowance in case the child has a disability and requires special care. Lastly, there is an Additional Cost Compensation if the family is facing costs exceeding SEK14,325 (approximately €1,241) annually due to a child's disability. In the UK there is a Disability Living Allowance for children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland which is available up to the age of 16 for children who have difficulties in walking or who need more extensive care than children without disabilities. Scotland has a Child Disability Payment available for children with either a mental or physical disability until the child reaches the age of 16 years. All payments vary the rate by the degree of disability.

Large family size is another potential situation of family income need. Deprivation and poverty tend to grow along with family size (see Figure A1). The causal pattern is complex and includes compositional effects (as in the number of parents in the family for example) and intersecting social and economic factors (Gornick and Jantti 2012). Four of the six countries recognise the needs of larger families by increasing the value of benefits as the number of children grows (usually beyond 2) (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Poland and the UK are the exceptions; indeed, the UK effectively penalises larger families by decreasing the value of child benefit after the first child and imposing a 'benefit cap' whereby families on the means-tested Universal Credit receive supplements only for two children regardless of how many more children the family has (House of Lords Library 2024).

Recognition of the Additional Costs of Transitions in Families Should Be Built into the Child-related Income Support

Transitions are normal in families, associated both with structural changes (as in the number of parents and/or the number of children) and the changing age profile of the family. There are a number of factors at play here with costs especially to the fore. The evidence indicates that expenditures rise for the costs of older children although the care needs of younger children also add significantly to families' costs and therefore the estimation of whether an older child costs more than a younger one is not so straightforward (Bartek 2016; Bradbury 2008).

As the following table shows (see also Table A1), none of the rEUsilience countries has age-related additions in their main child benefit systems. Belgium did so until a major reform in 2019 which aimed to treat all children equally. Poland and Spain do have some elements of this but only in the means-tested benefits.

³⁴ <https://www.mugeju.es/prestaciones/prestaciones-familiares/prestacion-por-hijo-cargo-discapacitado>



Table 4 Additional Income Support as Children Grow Older

	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Payment variation by age of the children in:						
the universal benefit	No (since 2019)	Not Applicable	No	Not applicable	No	No
the supplemental benefits	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Sources: Daly (2023); MISSOC (2024).						

3.1.2 Principles for Closing the Childcare Gap

The childcare gap refers to the period in the lives of young children and their parents when there is no formal support with childcare (either parenting-related leaves or services). This is usually measured as the gap (if any) between when parenting-related leaves end and access to ECEC begins. In practice, this places the spotlight especially on what supports exist for child rearing in the period after birth to up to 3 years or even school age (typically age 6). Policywise, the combination of the (customary) three parenting-related leaves – maternity, paternity and parental – and ECEC are under the spotlight. The research measuring the gap usually takes the period of well-paid leaves – defined as leave that replaces at least two-thirds of the (previous) wage of the beneficiary – and the onset of legal entitlement to ECEC as the respective indicators. There are other factors that contribute to the gap as well though – for example not qualifying for leave, lack of places in ECEC and associated costs – but these are not considered here.

Paid Statutory Leave Should Be Universal for All Parents

Paid leave is vital to the health and well-being of parents, children and families. This was recognised historically by the introduction of statutory maternity leave as a foundational principle of state support for child-bearing and child-rearing as well as the health and well-being of mothers. Statutory paternity leave and parental leave tend to be newer and less established (Daly and Ferragina 2018). Leaves specifically for fathers aim to grant fathers an entitlement to be absent from work and encourage greater gender sharing of parenting. It is now generally agreed that parental leave makes up a necessary third type of leave. This extends the period of leave and tends to be made available to both parents with various conditions attached so as to achieve a range of desired outcomes.

The principle of universalism means that there should be no inequality in the statutory leave entitlements of those in employment and those not in employment. The ideal way to achieve this is to break the link to employment for leaves. This would be a major change in all the



reUsilience countries as well as more widely since parenting-related leaves (the term used in this report to refer to all three types of leave) are typically conceived as a right of employees. At the present time in many countries there are two factors that act to exclude people from qualifying for parental leaves (Table 5).

A first exclusionary factor is the limiting of leaves to those who are employed. This may mean the exclusion of those who are not in employment, those who are self-employed, those claiming some benefits and those who are based in the home. To take an example, Table 5 shows that most countries strictly delimit paternity leave to those who are economically active. Sweden is the exception making all leaves available to both the unemployed and those who are classified as economically inactive. Of the three types of leave, maternity leave is the most inclusive. Croatia, Poland and Sweden make maternity leave available to both the unemployed and economically inactive while Spain excludes both groups and Belgium and the UK exclude those who are classified as economically inactive.

Looking at parental leave, it tends to be quite exclusive, although Croatia joins Sweden in making the leave available to both the registered unemployed and those who are economically inactive (Table 5; Table A2 gives further details). None of the other countries give these two population sectors access to parental leave.

Table 5 Unemployed or Economically Inactive Parents' Eligibility for Parenting-related Leaves (as of 2024)

	Maternity		Paternity		Parental	
	Unemployed	Economically inactive	Unemployed	Economically inactive	Unemployed	Economically inactive
Belgium	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Croatia	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Poland	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Spain	No	No	No	No	No	No
Sweden	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UK	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

Sources: Dobrotić et al. (2024)³⁵; MISSOC (2024).

A second factor acting to generate exclusions is the attachment of conditions to the leaves. Employment leaves are typically based on the 'standard employment relationship' (EIGE

³⁵ Country notes:

Belgium:https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/Belgium.pdf

Croatia:https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/Croatia.pdf Poland:

https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/Poland.pdf

Spain:

https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/Spain.pdf

Sweden:https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/Sweden.pdf

UK:https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2024/United_Kingdom.pdf



2024).³⁶ Custom and practice mean not just that the right is constructed as an entitlement for workers but that conditions are attached to eligibility. These conditions may include type of employment, employment history, earnings level, citizenship status, family constellation or sexual orientation of the parents. The conditionalities in place risk or actually exclude significant numbers of parents from qualifying.

Table 6 shows that the self-employed are excluded in Belgium, Spain and the UK. Moreover, except for Poland, all of the five countries require some duration of previous insurance, actualising a period of contribution to the social security system.

Table 6 Eligibility for Parental Leave for Those who are Economically Active (as of 2024)

	Self-employed	Contract duration	Sectoral differentiation
Belgium	No	Yes	Yes
Croatia	Yes	No	Yes
Poland	Yes	Yes	No
Spain	No	Yes	No
Sweden	Yes	No	No
UK	No	Yes	Yes

Source: Dobrotić et al. (2024).

Contract duration refers to the existence of eligibility criteria conditioned on contract duration. It can be seen from Table 6 (and Table A.3 which gives further detail) that it is a widespread condition for parental leave (which, as mentioned, is the most exclusive type of leave of all). In Belgium, parents are required to have a minimum of 12 months of contract during the 15 months preceding the start of parental leave and regulations in place in Poland and Spain explicitly ordain that the total length of parental leave cannot exceed the contract duration. In the UK, employed parents must complete one year of continuous employment with their current employer to be eligible for parental leave. Sector of employment can be a further source of exclusion, although it is not as widely-used a condition as contract duration. Belgium applies the contract condition only to private-sector employees. In Croatia, those in the farming sector are required to have three years of residence prior to childbirth to qualify for parental leave and in the UK, agency workers or contractors are not eligible for parental leave, which is limited to people classified as ‘employees.’³⁷

There are no comprehensive statistics available on the proportion of economically active parents who do not qualify for the leaves taken together. Table 7 shows the estimated exclusions from parental leave for the countries for which the evidence is available. The proportion of parents who are in employment yet are ineligible for parental leave is visibly large in Belgium, Spain and the UK due to the exclusion of self-employed parents or the application of other conditions. Exclusion appears to be particularly high in the UK, where about one-third of potential parents is estimated to be ineligible.

³⁶ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/return-labour-market-after-parental-leave-gender-analysis>

³⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/parental-leave/eligibility>



Table 7 Estimated Proportion of Potential Parents Ineligible for Parental Leave (as of 2016)

	Women	Men
Belgium	17%	23%
Croatia	0	0
Poland	0	0
Spain	10%	17%
Sweden	0	0
UK	28%	32%
Source: EIGE (2021). ³⁸		

Well-paid Leave Should Be Accepted as a Principle for all Parenting-related Leaves

The level of payment attached to the leaves is crucial. If leaves are not well-paid, there is differential capacity and willingness to take them, reducing their effectiveness and potentially worsening gender and class-based inequalities (Dobrotić and Blum 2019). Hence, payment level is another potential barrier.

When the remuneration levels stated in official policy in the rEUsilience countries are examined, as Table A4 shows, Croatia recompenses the worker’s full wage for all three leaves and Spain does so for both maternity and paternity leave (but it imposes a ceiling on both and note also that Spain offers no paid parental leave). Poland provides full wage replacement only for paternity leave. All the other countries recompense a percentage of the wage. Of these, Sweden applies a 78% wage replacement rate for all three leaves; Poland replaces around 75% for maternity and parental leaves whereas Belgium uses a replacement rate of between 75% for both maternity and paternity leave (with an upper ceiling for both at some €171 a day) and a flat rate payment (€978 a month) for parental leave. The UK relies largely on flat-rate payments for maternity and paternity leave (and has no paid parental leave). This payment arrangement is known to make the leave less attractive, especially to fathers. Although a 90% wage replacement formula is used for the first 6 weeks of the maternity leave in the UK, the flat-rate payment for the remaining 33 weeks is considered comparatively low at £172.48 a week.

Table 8 below (and Table A4 in the appendix) confirms that the UK is the country most adrift of a principle of well-paid leave with only 8 weeks in all of well-paid, parenting-related leaves in comparison to, say, Croatia which has 66, Poland with 63 and Sweden with 60. Spain is the country that comes closest to the UK but it has 32 weeks of well-paid, parenting-related leaves (albeit all as either maternity or paternity leaves).

³⁸https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/who-eligible-parental-leave-eu-28?language_content_entity=en#:~:text=Parental%20leave%20is%20granted%20to,in%20all%20EU%20Member%20States.



Table 8 Total Duration of Well-paid, Parenting-related Leaves (as of April 2024)

	Weeks of well-paid, parenting-related leaves
Belgium	43
Croatia	66
Poland	63
Spain	32
Sweden	60
UK	8
Source: Dobrotić et al. (2024).	

There is no agreement of what is well-paid, with the most widely-suggested norm being the very general ‘preventing an income loss while on leave’. Countries have different practices. In Sweden, for example, the statutory pay covers 78% of the former wage up to a ceiling and collective agreements compensate for the foregone income (Duvander et al. 2024). However, the provisions differ widely across countries, especially when maternity, paternity and parental leave are administrated separately. According to the OECD Family Database,³⁹ in 2023, across the EU, the average remuneration rate of maternity leave was estimated as 83.6%, ranging from 22% to 100%. The average payment rate of paternity leave across the EU was 78.2% and the EU average payment level of parental leave (including home care leave) was estimated at 52% for mothers and 45.6% for fathers. When all paid leave that mothers and fathers are exclusively entitled is calculated, the EU average is estimated at 65.8% and 64.6%, respectively.

The EU’s 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive did not set a benchmark for minimum remuneration levels for parenting-related leaves. The second clause of Article 8 come closest in treating paternity leave payment as a health-related payment by articulating it as “an income at least equivalent to that which the worker concerned would receive in the event of a break in the worker’s activities on grounds connected with the worker’s state of health, subject to any ceiling laid down in national law.” In the following clause of the same Article, the Directive leaves open the parental leave remuneration formulation stating: “such payment or allowance shall be defined by the Member State or the social partners and shall be set in such a way as to facilitate the take-up of parental leave by both parents.”

Setting principles about the remuneration level raises issues of how the leaves are funded. This is an important consideration affecting the likelihood of reforms. If the leaves are paid by employers, it will be difficult for reform to happen. We therefore would suggest that the leaves should be publicly funded in the main. This might also help to reduce discrimination.

There is no agreement on the ideal duration of the leaves either. While the provision of paid parenting-related leave helps to safeguard women’s employment participation, extended leave provisions have been found to be negatively affecting their labour market returns (Boeckman et al. 2015; Pettit and Hook 2005). Typically referred to as the motherhood penalty (or motherhood earnings or wage penalty) (Budig and England 2001), smaller negative effects on labour market participation are observed when the paid parental leave period is of moderate duration (between 1 and 2 years). More recent single-country case studies on

³⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-family-database.html>



Germany and Spain showed that long periods of parental leave (3 years or more), especially when combined with little or no payment, have resulted in delayed re-entry to the labour force and caused a motherhood penalty (Dominguez-Folgueras et al. 2022; Mari and Cutuli 2021).

Equality among Families Should Be Accepted as a Principle especially by Recognising the Additional Needs of Some Families

Drawing attention to equality continues the theme of the research project as a whole which is to draw attention to low-resourced families. One group of parents that need additional leave are those with a child who has a disability, illness or developmental need. Research makes clear that these parents experience high levels of stress and risk unemployment or underemployment (Brown and Clark 2017). Care-giving is more demanding in this situation and the opportunity costs are higher.

Patterns of supporting such families vary widely (Table A5). All countries (except the UK) recognise child disability for paid leave purposes. There are different approaches to how these parents are accommodated, however, with some countries using general parenting-related leaves whereas others have particular leaves for parents caring for a child with a disability or long-term illness. Belgium follows the former approach, allowing parents to use the unpaid parental leave (4 months per parent) until their child is aged 21, as opposed to the regular cut-off at 12 years. It does not offer any specific leaves for these families. Polish parents of children with disabilities are given an additional 14 weeks of parental leave as well as a specific 36-month means-tested childcare leave paid at a flat rate available until the child reaches the age of 18 (Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis 2023). The remuneration for this leave is higher for families with disabled children and is extended with an additional 36 months for lone parents with disabled children.

Spain also extends the duration of the birth and childcare leave when the child is born with a disability or other need by one week and mothers get an additional two weeks that is paid (total of 56 days) (Meil et al. 2023). Furthermore, Spanish parents of children with disabilities are allowed to reduce their working time; this is considered a form of unpaid leave but is credited with up to 2 years of full-time social security contributions. Croatia and Sweden do not make any concession to families with disabilities in their general parenting-related leaves but they do have disability-specific leaves. Croatian parents of children with disabilities can take parental leave paid at a monthly flat rate or reduce their working hours to part-time (receiving 70% of the budgetary base) until the child reaches the age of 8. Sweden offers a temporary paid parental leave of 120 days a year until the child is 12 years (which can be extended to 15 years in certain circumstances). Financial compensation is paid to the caregiving family member for up to 100 days to provide care for an ill or disabled family member. The benefit is paid at the rate of 80% of the previous salary during these 100 days. The UK does not provide an equivalent measure of special or extended leave for the families affected by significant care needs on the part of a child.

A second group of families that may require additional support is lone-parent families. In many countries, lone-parent families are 'disadvantaged' relative to two-parent families in terms of the leave that they are entitled to. This occurs indirectly by virtue of the fact that many of



these families are without a father or a second parent and therefore are not entitled to paternity leave and the part of the other parenting-related leaves that is reserved for the father or the second parent (many of the parenting-related leaves now specify a non-transferable period for the second parent). An equalisation of leave entitlement, therefore, would address an inequality if not deprivation and significantly improve the lives of lone-parent families.

Sweden is the only country that has fully equivalent leave for lone-parent and two-parent families, allowing the parent with custody to take all of the leave as desired (Table 9). In Spain, a constitutional rule was enacted on 6 November 2024 to give lone mothers 10 additional weeks of paid birth and childcare leave (26 weeks instead of the regular 16).⁴⁰ Croatia and the UK are at the other end of the spectrum in that their parenting-related leave set-up makes no extra allowances for lone parents. Poland is closest to Sweden in recognising that lone parents might need longer leave, offering a flat-rate leave allowance to such parents for an additional 12 months.

Table 9 Specific Parental Leave Measures for Lone Parents (as of 2024)

	Specific parenting-related leave premiums for lone parents
Belgium	68% higher flat-rate parental benefit as compared with other families
Croatia	None
Poland	Flat-rate allowance for an additional 12 months
Spain	An additional 10 weeks of paid birth and childcare leave for lone mothers
Sweden	If the custody is only with one parent, that lone parent can use all parental leave benefit days (that are normally available for two parents)
UK	None
Source: Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis (2023).	

Gender Equality Should Remain a Core Principle of Parenting-related Leaves

There is now quite detailed knowledge of how the design aspects of leave affect their take-up by gender and other factors (e.g. Jørgensen and Søgård 2024; Karu and Tremblay 2018). In particular, the evidence is convincing that, unless fathers are incentivised or the family is sanctioned, gender bias in leave take-up is likely to continue. Countries have been responding to this, not just in terms of increasing the payment levels for fathers' leave but also by making some leave non-transferable, setting quotas for each parent and applying sanctions when the option is not taken (in the sense of the family losing the leave entitlement for non-take-up).

The details are complex within and across countries.

Table 10 offers an overview outlining the rules regarding transferability of the three types of leave and the gender equality orientation.

An explicitly gender-neutral and gender-equal leave design is found most profoundly in Spain and Sweden. In the former the leave entitlement is equalised between the parents, which is 16 weeks of birth and childcare leave (maternity and paternity leaves are terms no longer

⁴⁰ <https://global.lockton.com/us/en/news-insights/spains-constitutional-court-increases-single-parents-childcare-leave>



used). Sweden offers new parents two weeks of maternity and paternity leave followed by 240 days of parental leave for each parent. Ninety of these 240 days are exclusively allocated to mothers, known as the mother’s quota, and another 90 days are allocated to fathers, known as the father’s quota. The remaining 150 days can be transferred between parents according to their wishes. Croatia and the UK follow a very different model. Croatia transposed the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive to give four months of parental leave to each parent, two of which are reserved for mothers and fathers exclusively. However, fathers’ eligibility for parental leave in Croatia is contingent on mothers’ eligibility, which diminishes the notion of parental leave as an individual entitlement for each parent for each child. A similar gendered approach is found in the UK where the concept of ‘shared parental leave’ is actually a transfer of maternity leave. And here too not only is the father’s eligibility for this leave dependent on that of the mother but it is also dependent on their willingness to share their leave with their partners. Belgium and Poland sit in the middle of this range. Maternity, paternity and parental leave are distinguished from each other, with longer periods of initial maternity leave allocated to mothers and equal options of parental leave offered to both parents. Belgium provides parents with four months of parental leave, which is an individual and non-transferable entitlement. Poland offers a mix of transferable and non-transferable options, allowing parents to make choices. In Poland of the 41 weeks of parental leave, nine are allocated exclusively to each parent and the remaining 23 weeks is a family entitlement.

Table 10 Transferability and Gender Orientation in Parenting-related Leaves (as of 2024)

	Parenting-related leave provisions	Transferability	Gender orientation
Belgium	15 weeks of maternity leave for mothers 20 working days of birth leave for fathers 4 months of parental leave per parent as an individual right	Non-transferable	Gendered (longer periods of leaves for mothers)
Croatia	29.8 weeks of maternity leave for mothers 10 days of paternity leave for fathers 4 months of parental leave per parent of which 2 months are exclusively allocated to each parent	Both transferable and non-transferable	Gendered (fathers’ eligibility depends on mothers’ eligibility)
Poland	20 weeks of maternity leave for mothers and other parents or carers 2 weeks of paternity leave for fathers 41 weeks of parental leave of which 23 weeks are a family entitlement, the remaining 18 weeks are equally distributed between both parents	Both transferable and non-transferable	Gendered (longer periods of leaves for mothers)
Spain	16 weeks of birth and childcare leave for mothers 16 weeks of birth and childcare leave for the parent 8 weeks of parental leave per parent	Non-transferable	Gender equal and neutral
Sweden	2 weeks of maternity leave for the mother 10 days of paternity or temporary leave due to childbirth or adoption for the other parent or carer 240 days of parental leave for each parent. 90 of these days are reserved exclusively for each parent	Both transferable and non-transferable	Gender equal and neutral



UK	52 weeks of maternity leave for mothers. 50 weeks of this leave can be transferred to the other parent (known as shared parental leave) 2 weeks of paternity leave for fathers or mothers' partner 18 weeks of parental leave per parent as an individual right. Only 4 weeks can be used in one year	Both transferable and non-transferable	Gendered (fathers' eligibility depends on mothers' eligibility and willingness to share)
Source: Dobrotić et al. (2024).			

At present then, there is no consensus on what is the best approach to achieve gender equality with three different approaches in place in (just) six countries. The matter is clearly extremely complex. There is considerable experimentation and innovation in the field though, which suggests an appetite for reform. It is not clear how new measures – such as limiting transferability – affect or effect gender equality. This needs to be kept under review.

The Right and Entitlement to ECEC Should Be Universal for all Children

There are different ways of organising entitlement to ECEC for children and their parents. Taking the perspective of the child, one approach is to set an age threshold at which legal entitlement to ECEC begins, another is to guarantee a set number of hours to children while a third is to give priority access to certain groups of children or families.

In regard to the age of legal entitlement at present there is great variation - of 5 years between the onset of legal entitlement to ECEC in the six countries. Sweden grants access at the lowest age (12 months) and Croatia the highest (at 72 months). However, the practice of specifying an age of legal entitlement is not widespread. In the EU as a whole, half of the member states fail to mandate legal entitlement and access to publicly-funded childcare even for low-income children (Baptista et al. 2023). Moreover, low-income children have priority access to publicly-funded childcare in only eight EU countries (ibid).

Table 11 ECEC Legal Entitlement, Number of Hours and Priority Access (as of 2023/2024)

	Legal entitlement to ECEC	Number of hours	Priority access
Belgium	2 in Flemish-speaking community 2.5 in French-speaking community and German-speaking community	Not specified	Yes, for children of employed parents, parents looking for employment, parents in vocational training children of lone parents, children from low-income families and children in care*
Croatia	6	Not relevant	None
Poland	3	Not specified	None
Spain	3	Not specified	Priority access to the first cycle of ECEC – 0-2 years - for pupils at risk of poverty and social exclusion
Sweden	1	Minimum 3 hours per day and 15 hours per week is	Yes, for the children of unemployed parents or parents



		guaranteed. The municipalities are required to provide preschool activities and childcare for children aged 1–12 years to the extent necessary for their parents to be able to work or study or for the child’s own needs	on parental leave for another child Children (aged 1-12) with special needs are offered a place sooner
UK ⁴¹	2	15 hours a week for 2 year olds; 30 hours for 3-year-olds	Yes, in the case of a disability, children are entitled to 15 hours of ECEC weekly from age 2 onwards
Source: Eurydice (2024). ⁴² * These details are mainly for the French-speaking community.			

In regard to specifying a set number of hours, only Sweden and the UK do so. In the former case, a minimum of 3 hours a day and 15 hours a week is guaranteed from the age of 1 year and in the UK the guarantee is for 15 hours a week of free provision for children aged over 2 years and 30 hours for 3-year-olds. The UK entitlement to free provision was extended to children from aged 9 months whose parents are in employment from September 2024.

Four of the six countries prioritise access for children from (differently defined) disadvantaged backgrounds. For Belgium, these are children whose parents are in employment or looking for work or in training, those in lone-parent families, those from low-income families or children in care. Spain prioritises children who are at risk of poverty. Sweden gives priority access to the children whose parents are unemployed or on parental for another child. In the UK, while the legal place guarantee starts from age 3, if the child has a disability or if the parents are on benefits, they are entitled to a place in ECEC for 15 hours a week from age 2 onwards. Poland does not specify a priority group of parents or children for the purposes of access to ECEC.

There Should Be No Gap between the End of Well-paid, Parenting-related Leaves and the Onset of the Child’s Right to ECEC

Table 12 shows the childcare gap in the six countries, highlighting Sweden as the only country with no gap, with an overlap of one month between well-paid, parenting-related leaves (a term we use when all three leaves are taken together) and legal entitlement to ECEC. Taken as a whole, the size of the gap is notable, although there is variation. Croatia has the longest gap – well-paid parenting-related leaves ending at just after the first year of the child’s life (14 months) and the legal entitlement to ECEC starting at the age of 6, leaving an effective gap of 58 months. Apart from Sweden, Poland has the smallest gap (at 21.8) months followed by the UK (22.6), Belgium (26) and Spain (28.6). The gap is differentially constituted in the countries. For example, Poland has a relatively long period of well-paid, parenting-related leaves and an early (relatively speaking) onset of legal entitlement whereas Belgium has a short leave and a

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.uk/check-eligible-free-childcare-if-youre-working?step-by-step-nav=f517cd57-3c18-4bb9-aa8b-1b907e279bf9>

⁴² <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/data-and-visuals/early-childhood-education-and-care>



relatively early commencement of a legal entitlement to ECEC (at 30 months). In the UK there is a very short period of well-paid, parenting-related leaves (before the child is even two months old) and the legal entitlement to childcare not starting until the child is 2 years of age (as of September 2024). One thing that becomes clear when the childcare gap is the focus is that it is provision for the youngest age groups (under 3s) that is the issue in most countries.

Table 12 Childcare Gap (as of 2023/2024)

	Child's age in months at:		Gap in months between end of well-paid, parenting-related leaves and start of legal entitlement to ECEC
	End of well-paid parenting-related leaves (month of child's life)	Onset of legal ECEC entitlement for all children (month of child's life)	
Belgium	4	30	26
Croatia	14	72	58
Poland	14.2	36	21.8
Spain	7.4	36	28.6
Sweden	13	12	1 month of overlap
UK	1.4	24	22.6

Source: Dobrotić et al. (2024).

There are a number of ways to address the gap but these involve different choices. The main potential remedies are as follows: well-paid parenting-related leaves that extend over a long(er) duration; an early onset of legal entitlement to ECEC; and both being of middling duration (in other words they meet in the middle). Existing policy tells us there is no easy solution. The first, a former policy in some countries, risks a negative gender and labour market impact (incentivising mothers to remain out of employment for a long period and limiting their career prospects or slowing down their career progress) (Bergemann and Riphahn 2023; Evertsson and Duvander 2011). The second raises issues around the appropriateness of out-of-home care for very young children and cultural values in that regard.

Some Families have Additional Needs Regarding ECEC and Should Be Supported

Across the rEUsilience countries, the ECEC provisions for children with a disability or illness vary (Table 13). With Belgium as an exception, children (2 years old) with such special needs have priority access to ECEC services in the other five countries (León and Cerrillo 2023). The situation changes when the child reaches 4 years, with Spain and the UK joining Belgium in giving no priority access to ECEC for children with special needs after this age. When it comes to a guaranteed place in ECEC or financial support for ECEC specifically for children with special needs, Sweden and the UK are exceptional in offering guaranteed ECEC places for these children (again for those at the age of 2). Additional financial support for ECEC for these families is also offered in Spain and the UK.



Interestingly, some countries distinguish between the additional ECEC-related support for children suffering disability or illness by age. As mentioned, such children with special needs at the age of 4 no longer have priority access to ECEC in Spain or in the UK. The place guarantee offered for 2-year-olds in the UK also disappears for 4-year-old children with special needs. The start of legal entitlement for publicly-available ECEC might be playing a role in this shift, which may also resonate with the case of Belgium. This underlines the point that there is little recognition of additional support needs for children with disabilities in the majority of countries concerned here.

Table 13 Recognition of the Situation of Children with a Disability or Illness for Access to ECEC (as of 2024)

	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Priority access	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Place guarantee	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Financial support for ECEC	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

Source: Daly and Uzunalioglu (2024).

Another group of families that may need additional support for ECEC is lone-parent families. This is particularly relevant since lone-parent families often have smaller budgets compared to two-parent families. Investigating the impact of investment in child benefits, childcare services and parental leave on mothers' observed poverty risk in most of the EU member states (plus Norway, Switzerland and Iceland) from 1994 to 2015, research has found that public investment in childcare mattered greatly - diminishing mothers' poverty risk and narrowing the gap between single and coupled mothers (Zagel and Van Lancker 2022). How do the rEUsilience countries manage this? Summarised in Table 14, it is clear that providing priority access to ECEC for children from lone-parent families is the norm only in Croatia, Poland and Spain. But with the exception of Sweden which guarantees access for all children, no other country offers a place guarantee for children from lone-parent families.

Table 14 Recognition of the Situation of Children from Lone-parent Families for Access to ECEC (as of 2024)

	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Priority access	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Place guarantee	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

Source: León and Cerillo (2023).

In general a principle of inclusiveness and access should govern ECEC.

ECEC Should be Governed by a Principle of Flexibility



ECEC needs to be better aligned with the reality and variations in family life. It needs especially to react to the increasing flexibilisation and precarisation of employment that constitute an important set of constraints on families. Fixed hours in facilities are commonplace and access conditions (including fees) are widespread. Hence many people are excluded and Matthew effects – whereby low-income families are less likely to gain or have access – are widespread (Pavolini and Van Lancker 2018).

3.1.3 Principles for Putting in Place Comprehensive Family Support Services

Family support services are oriented to improving family functioning and grounding child-rearing and other familial activities in a system of supportive relationships and resources (both formal and informal) (Daly et al. 2015: 12). These are prioritised in this report for three main reasons. The first is that the primary research undertaken with families indicated that support is a foundational condition of family resilience (especially in terms of families being able to respond to the transitions involved in family life and significant change in their situation). That is, support encapsulates a key set of needs. The second is that for some families support is a scarce resource. Third, this is an under-considered type of policy response, especially in terms of a nationally-legitimated and well-resourced set of family support services.

There is now general agreement that services are a vital part of the policy landscape for child and family well-being (along with cash transfers and other forms of support such as parenting-related leave). There is an extensive evidence base on the positive impact that family support policies and practices can have on outcomes for children, parents and families (e.g. Daly et al. 2015; Molinuevo 2013). These include impacts such as combating the impact of parental separation and stress in relationships (Lakind and Atkins 2018). The evidence on the existence and nature of family support services is scarce and what there is suggests a great diversity in family support provision across European countries, with significant variation in the scope, depth, organisation, delivery and funding in the support provided (Jiménez et al. 2024). Not alone is there variation across countries but there is also variation within them, from region to region for example and from town to town. Moreover, the complexity is increased by virtue of the range of actors and modes of provision involved.

Offering support through public and other policies is a complex task and there are many questions about it and how to provide for families' needs.

Family Support Services Should Be Universally Available and Range from General to Highly-specialised Support

Family life is increasingly complex and it can be argued that all families need support at different stages or periods, or at least that that support should be available to them. Family needs differ, of course, and there is a consensus in existing scholarship on the need to differentiate family support by levels of intervention. One such differentiation made is that between family functioning needs, parenting-related needs and more specialised needs (Riding et al. 2021). The classic differentiations for policy-relevant categorisations are rooted in understandings of prevention drawn from public health – these are primary (preventing the emergence of a problem), secondary (working on a problem in its early stages) and tertiary prevention (limiting the damaging effects or worst consequences of a problem already established) (Devaney et al. 2013; Hardiker et al. 1991).



What would a comprehensive set of family support services entail in practice? One of the best guides is provided by Gilligan (2000) who elaborates both on the nature of the need and the services appropriate at three different levels as follows:

Developmental Family Support: This seeks to strengthen the social supports and coping capacities of children and adults in the context of their neighbourhood and community. It has a preventive orientation. Among the relevant types of provision here are:

- personal development groups,
- recreational projects,
- child and youth programmes,
- home management and budgeting skills,
- parent education or other adult education relevant to family living.

Compensatory Family Support: This seeks to compensate family members for the negative or disabling effects of disadvantage or adversity in their current or previous experiences. Gilligan suggests that this can be part of a range of strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion as well as other problems. Among the relevant types of provision here are:

- high quality day nursery programmes for preschool children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- school attendance and completion programmes,
- targeted youth services for those at risk
- intensive relationship counselling
- parent and family support groups and training programmes.

Protective Family Support: This seeks to strengthen the coping and resilience of children and adults in relation to identified risks or threats experienced in families. It is therefore oriented to families that are experiencing significant difficulties. Among the relevant types of provision here are:

- respite fostering, refuges and support groups for those experiencing domestic violence, addiction or other serious situations in which functioning and safety are endangered;
- behaviour management programmes for parents who have difficulty with children's behaviour;
- intensive youth work groups focused on issues such as bullying and self-esteem;
- intensive relationship or therapeutic interventions.

There Should Be a National-level Framework for Family Support Services Premised on Local-level Provision

In many cases and countries, with Belgium and Sweden as potential exceptions among the six rEUsilience countries, family support services (among others) are ad hoc and fragmented. They often evolve organically from local action/activity and have a local character. There is merit in local provision as it is close to need but the importance of a national framework – as



a national-level commitment but also to serve overview and planning functions - is to be emphasised (Riding et al. 2021).

Family Support Services Should Be Guided by a Holistic Approach

The OECD, among many other organisations, points out that children’s needs, especially children who live in disadvantaged backgrounds, are often multiple and complex and necessitate coordinated actions in different policy areas and service systems (Thévenon and Dirwan 2023). This calls for government ministries, agencies and other service providers to better collaborate. The European Parliament (2024) has called for a comprehensive intersectoral approach to tackling children’s risk of vulnerability.⁴³ The Family Centre model is the most common form of family social service although it is not widespread (OECD 2015: 60). The Children’s House (*Huizen van het Kind*) operating in the Flanders region of Belgium is an example of an integrated model (Serapioni 2023).⁴⁴ These houses focus on providing holistic support in the areas of preventive health care, parenting support, and community building and serve as centralised hubs, bringing together various universal and targeted services under one roof for ease of access. Family Hubs are a similar idea, developed, for example, in the last few years in England on a pilot basis through the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme which funded 75 local authorities to develop joined up service provision in the form of family hubs in their areas.⁴⁵ The ideal is that the centres bring together a co-located range of services grounded in the view that an integrated set of services is best to promote the well-being of both children and their parents.

4. Conclusion

This report is based on a detailed analysis of relevant EU and national policies from the perspective of how they view and support families’ needs. The analysis hones in on income support, the relationship between parenting-related leaves and ECEC and family support services in the six countries as well as a number of EU policies, in particular the Work-Life Balance Directive, the European Child Guarantee and the European Care Strategy.

All told, the reviews undertaken indicate at least two ‘incompletions’ in the chain implied by the concept of work-life balance policies (which is now one of the most prominent ways of envisaging how the relevant policies should be thought about and what their goal is). Such incompletions relate in the first instance to the extent to which policy is attuned to the general nature of family life, which as the rEUsilience project has continually emphasised involves transitions as normal. The evidence shows rigidity and narrowness in many aspects of policy as well as gaps such as failing to recognise the costs and exigencies associated with children as they grow and the fact that family structure and hence family resources vary significantly across time and space. A second incompleteness relates to under-recognition of the constraints faced by low-resourced families. This project highlighted especially three family situations that jeopardise sufficient resources access: a situation of low income, illness or disability on the part of a child or children, a situation when only one parent is present. The extent to which

⁴³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2023-0462_EN.html

⁴⁴ <https://www.huizenvanhetkind.be/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme>



there is insufficient recognition of the situation of these families is very striking. This is particularly obvious in parenting-related leaves which, through setting a high bar for access, privilege and pivot the support for families that are better off (those where the main or both parents are in relatively secure employment). Conditions attaching to the leaves - such as employment duration, type of employment and even in some instances occupational sector - act to exclude new parents from sectors of the population that may be low resourced, including for example those in precarious employment, those on benefits and those based full time in the home. The tying of leaves to the standard employment relationship is a significant cause of exclusion.

These two blindspots are to be found also in income support and family support services. In the former regard, the spotlight is placed on the extent and adequacy of income supports for families with children and the extent to which this income support recognises that some families need additional support. In regard to family support services, questions can be raised about whether policy is fully informed about and recognises the needs of all families for support at various times as well as provision for families with high needs.

There is, of course, cross-country variation and hence one needs to temper generalisation. There is no perfect country that has got it all right and countries prioritise different aspects of the rather complex and wide-ranging policy framework considered in this report to define 'policies for family resilience'. The two incompletenesses are to be found in all countries, albeit to varying degrees. This situation and policy landscape leads us to focus on setting out policy principles rather than a detailed set of reforms. The underlying thinking is that such policy principles set out guidelines or norms that countries should seek to achieve, starting from where they are.

The following 15 policy principles are offered as a guide for countries and international institutions to reshape policy to achieve better resilience on the part of families. The principles, which are generally similar across the three fields, relate to coverage (endorsing a universal approach), adequacy (in terms of amount and sufficiency), inclusion (recognition of additional need) and the absence of gaps.

Principles for Better Income Support for Families with Children

- Child-related Income Support Should Be Available on a Universal Basis to All Families with Children
- Child-related Income Support Should Grant an Adequate Level of Support
- Child-related Income Support Should Operate to a Principle of Recognising the Additional Needs of Some Families
- Recognition of the Additional Costs of Transitions in Families Should Be Built into the Child-related Income Support.

Principles for Closing the Childcare Gap

- Paid Statutory Leave Should Be Universal for All Parents
- Well-paid Leave Should Be Accepted as a Principle for all Parenting-related Leaves



- Equality among Families Should be Accepted as a Principle especially by Recognising the Additional Needs of Some Families
- Gender Equality Should Remain a Core Principle of Parenting-related Leaves
- The Right and Entitlement to ECEC Should Be Universal for all Children
- There Should Be No Gap between the End of Well-paid, Parenting-related Leaves and the Onset of the Child’s Right to ECEC
- Some Families have Additional Needs regarding ECEC and Should Be Supported
- ECEC Should be Governed by a Principle of Flexibility

Principles for Putting in Place Comprehensive Family Support Services

- Family Support Services Should Be Universally Available and Range from General to Highly-specialised Support
- There Should Be a National-level Framework for Family Support Services Premised on Local-level Provision
- Family Support Services Should Be Guided by a Holistic Approach.



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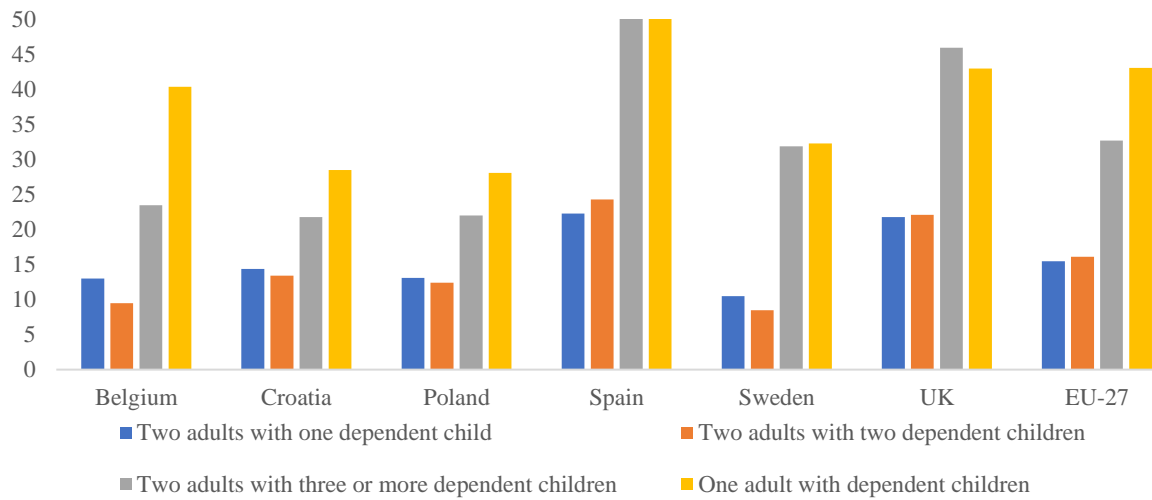
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Appendix

Background Supporting Information

Figure A1 Percentage of Households at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion by Household Size and Composition (2023)



Source: Eurostat (2024).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Eurostat (2024b) Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by income quantile and household composition [ilc_peps03n__custom_14868635], https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PEPS03N



Table A1 The Details of Benefits Available by Children’s Age and Family Size

	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Number of children (large family supplement)	Yes Varies between €101 for the 1 st child and €316 for the 3 rd child	Yes ⁴⁷ Baby bonus (€66.36 per child) is added to the child allowance for the third and fourth child.	Yes ⁴⁸ Families with 4 or more children are entitled to tax exemption of income, up to a maximum of PLN 85 528	Yes ⁴⁹ One-time payment of €1,000	Yes for the second child: SEK 150 for the third child: SEK 580 for the fourth child: SEK 1,010 for each child from and after the fifth: an additional SEK 1,250	No
Age of the children	Yes Monthly age supplements (average of the regions) 6-11 years: €18 12-17 years: €28 >18 years: €31 No age supplements for children born after 1/1/2019	No	Yes <5 years: PLN 95 (€22) 5-18 years: PLN 124 (€29) 18-24 years: PLN 135 (€31)	No	No	No
Sources: Daly (2023); MISSOC (2024).						

⁴⁷ <https://gov.hr/en/child-allowance/702>

⁴⁸ [https://www.elfac.org/policies/poland/#:~:text=Large%20families%20are%20entitled%20for,%E2%80%9C500%20%2B%20program%E2%80%9D\).](https://www.elfac.org/policies/poland/#:~:text=Large%20families%20are%20entitled%20for,%E2%80%9C500%20%2B%20program%E2%80%9D).)

⁴⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1129&langId=en&intPageId=4790>



Table A2 Unemployed or Inactive Parents' Parenting-related Leave Entitlements (as of 2024)

	Maternity	Paternity	Parental
Belgium	Unemployment benefits and 19.5% supplement to the gross daily wage for unemployed mothers, up to a maximum of € 142.74 per day for the 1 st month of unemployment. An additional 15% supplement to the gross daily wage, up to a maximum of € 134.66 after. Inactive mothers are not eligible	Unemployed or inactive fathers are not eligible	Unemployed or inactive parents are not eligible
Croatia	6 months of maternity exemption and pension insurance until the child turns 1 for unemployed mothers, if they are registered as unemployed for at least 6 uninterrupted months or 9 months with interruptions in the last 2 years prior to the birth of the child. Inactive mothers can benefit from 'Maternity care for the child' (6 months) if they have a permanent residency for at least 5 years; flat-rate benefit calculated as 70% of the 'budgetary base' (€309.01 per month), up to the 6 months of a child	Unemployed or inactive parents are not eligible	Unemployed parents are entitled to maternity exemption from work (for 6 months, from 6 months after childbirth until the child turns 1) and pension insurance until the child turns 1, if they are registered as unemployed for at least 6 uninterrupted months or 9 months with interruptions in the last 2 years prior to the birth of the child. Inactive parents must have at least 5 years of permanent residency status; flat-rate benefit calculated as 70% of the 'budgetary base' (309.01 per month) up to the 6 months
Poland	Unemployed or inactive parents are entitled to a parental benefit of PLN1,000 (€237) per month during the first year after childbirth	Unemployed or inactive fathers are not eligible	Unemployed or inactive parents are not eligible
Spain	Unemployed or inactive parents are not eligible	Unemployed or inactive fathers are not eligible	Unemployed parents are not eligible
Sweden	All mothers are eligible for parental leave (Residency-based condition) (see parental leave)	All parents are eligible for parental leave (Residency-based condition) (see parental leave)	All parents are eligible for parental leave (Residency-based condition) paid at SEK 250 (€23) per day for 240 days per parent
UK	Recently unemployed mothers are eligible for maternity allowance of	Unemployed or inactive fathers are not eligible	Unemployed or inactive parents are not eligible

	£184.03 weekly for 39 weeks. Inactive mothers are not eligible		
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Sources: Dobrotić et al. (2024); MISSOC (2024).

Table A3 Details of Eligibility for Parental Leave for Those who are Economically Active (as of 2024)

	Self-employed	Contract or service duration	Sectoral exclusions
Belgium	Self-employed parents are not eligible	Employees must complete a minimum of 12 months of employment with their present employer within the last 15 months prior to childbirth	Public sector employees are exempt from the contract duration condition
Croatia	Self-employed parents are eligible	No conditionality on contract or service duration	Farmers must have 3 years of residency prior to childbirth
Poland	Self-employed parents are eligible	Parental leave period cannot exceed the duration of employment contract	No sectoral exclusions
Spain	Self-employed parents are not eligible	Employees on temporary contracts can only claim parental leave that is shorter than their employment contract	No sectoral exclusions
Sweden	Self-employed parents are eligible	No conditionality on contract or service duration	No sectoral exclusions
UK	Self-employed parents are not eligible	Employees must complete at least 12 months of continuous employment with their present employer before childbirth	Parents with 'worker' status do not qualify for parental leave

Source: Dobrotić et al. (2024).

Table A4 Duration and Level of Remuneration of Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leaves (as of 2023/2024)

	Maternity			Paternity			Parental		
	Total leave (weeks)	Total paid leave (weeks)	Compensation rate	Total leave (weeks)	Total paid leave (weeks)	Compensation rate	Total leave (weeks per family)	Total paid leave (weeks per family)	Compensation rate
Belgium	15	15	75-82%	4	4	82-100%	34.4	34.4	Flat rate (€997.80 per month)
Croatia	29.8	29.8	100%	2	2	100%	34.4	34.4	100%
Poland	20	20	81.5-100%	2	2	100%	41	41	70-100%
Spain	16	16	100%	16	16	100%	170.7	-	-
Sweden	2	2	77.6%	2	2	77.6%	77.4	55.7	77.6% (195 days) and then flat rate (€15.12 paid for 45 days)
UK	52	39	90% (6 weeks) and then flat rate (€215.92) paid for 33 weeks)	2	2	Flat rate (€215.92 per week)	18	-	-

Source: Dobrotić et al. (2024).

Table A5 Parenting-related Leave Provisions for Families with Children with a Disability, Developmental Need or Illness (as of 2023/2024)

	Belgium	Croatia	Poland	Spain	Sweden	UK
Additional parenting-related leaves in the case of children with disabilities	Yes, parents can use parental leave until the child's 21 st birthday	No	Yes, 65 weeks of parental leave (instead of regular 41 weeks)	Yes, one week of additional maternity leave	No	No
Specific leaves in the case of children with disabilities	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Length of leave	Not applicable	Until the child is 8	An additional 36 months of means-tested childcare leave up to the child's 18 th birthday	Option to reduce working time to receive unpaid leave which is credited for up to 2 years of full-time social security contributions	A temporary parental leave of 120 days per year until the child is 12 (can be extended until age 15)	Not applicable
Remuneration	Not applicable	Paid at 125% of the budgetary base rate a flat-rate payment (€551.80 per month), payment to the value at 70% of the budgetary base if parents reduce their working hours	Paid at a flat rate of €89.38 per month (which can be extended up to 72 months)	No	Paid at 77.6% of the average wage with an upper ceiling of SEK 393,750 per annum	Not applicable

Source: Daly and Uzunalioglu (2024).



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*This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No Project 101060410 and Innovate UK, the UK's Innovation Agency. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Innovate UK. Neither the European Union and the United Kingdom nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them. **The deliverable has not yet been approved by the European Commission.***

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