

CALL FOR EVIDENCE FOR COMMISSION INITIATIVE ON STRENGTHENING OF THE EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE

TITLE OF THE INITIATIVE	Initiative on Strengthening of the European Child Guarantee
LEAD DG – RESPONSIBLE UNIT	DG EMPL – D1
LIKELY TYPE OF INITIATIVE	Commission Communication
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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

A. Political context, problem definition and subsidiarity check

Political context

In her Political Guidelines for 2024-2029, President von der Leyen announced a strengthening of the European Child Guarantee as part of the EU's first ever Anti-Poverty Strategy. In her 2025 State of the Union Address, she further stressed the need for an ambitious Anti-Poverty Strategy, setting out a plan to help eradicate poverty by 2050, backed up by a strong Child Guarantee to shield our children from poverty. A dedicated initiative to strengthen the Child Guarantee, including through investments and reforms, features in the 2026 Commission Work Programme.

The 2021 Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee (ECG) guides the Member States' action to provide for children in need – i.e. children at risk of poverty or social exclusion – free and effective access to early childhood education and care, education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day), and healthcare, as well as effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing. The ECG implementation is supported by Member States' national action plans. Article 12(e) of the ECG recommendation calls on the Commission to report in 2026 on the progress made in its implementation.

The ECG is a deliverable of both the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan. In particular, it aims at delivering on Principle 11 of the EPSR, which confirms the children's right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality and to protection from poverty, recognising that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.

The ECG is also part of the EU acquis under Chapter 19 for employment and social policies, which include the internal legislation to which candidate countries and potential candidates need to align to access the EU. The accession process provides a unique framework for policy dialogue and a crucial tool to strengthen ECG implementation in accession partners.

Since the adoption of the ECG, a number of relevant policy measures at national level have been designed and started to be implemented. At the same time, despite the EU 2030 complementary target (set in the EPSR Action Plan) to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 5 million in comparison to 2019, the number of children in poverty has actually increased, making it even more important to provide children in need with effective access to key services.

Problem the initiative aims to tackle

Over 19.5 million children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU in 2024, with significant differences in the incidence of this risk among Member States (from 11.8% in Slovenia to 34.6% in Spain and 35.1% in Bulgaria).

Children living in poverty or children from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as children with disabilities are more likely to face barriers in accessing goods and services that are crucial for their physical, intellectual and social development. Given the long-term consequences of child poverty for education,

health and labour market outcomes, addressing poverty requires a stronger child-centred approach, both in diagnosis and in policy responses.

Certain groups face compounded disadvantages rooted in structural inequalities and discrimination, notably children with a minority, racial or ethnic background, particularly Roma, those with disabilities, those with migrant or refugee background, those experiencing severe housing deprivation and those in institutional care. Targeted measures for these groups are a policy priority in line with the 2021 Council Recommendation and the EU broader commitment to non-discrimination and equal opportunities.

The social disadvantage is well visible, for example, in early childhood education and care (ECEC), where participation rate among children at risk of poverty or social exclusion remains more than 15 pp. below that of their better-off peers, on average, despite the fact that the former would benefit most from it, also because increasing participation of children in childcare allows parents and especially mothers to increase labour market participation, and Member States' efforts to facilitate their access. At school education level, the equity indicator reveals a growing inequity in educational achievements between young people with or without disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Socio-economic background also remains the largest determinant of early school leaving, often compounded by other factors including ethnic, migrant or refugee backgrounds, and disability.

Similar gaps are found in all the other areas covered by the ECG, ranging from extracurricular activities, including those of an educational, leisure, cultural and sporting nature, which remain out of reach for the most disadvantaged children, including Roma, to healthy nutrition, healthcare and housing, as illustrated by the last update of the EU-level monitoring framework for the ECG developed by the Social Protection Committee. Those gaps result from financial and non-financial barriers hindering children in need's access to key goods and services which remain to be tackled.

Children, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are more prone to harmful environmental conditions, such as pollution, noise and climate change, which contribute to their increased vulnerability and have lasting impacts. Moreover, energy poverty is an emerging and growing barrier, with children in households unable to afford adequate heating or electricity facing heightened health risks and educational disadvantages.

Legal basis

Articles 151 and 153(1)(j) TFEU

Practical need for EU action (subsidiarity check)

There is a need to step up efforts to address challenges related to child poverty, taking into account that the number of children in poverty has increased in recent years and gaps in access to services covered by the ECG persist.

Not doing so would not only conflict with the goal of maintaining a strong Social Europe but also be costly, while failing to protect children's rights to protection, care and well-being. The OECD estimated that the public cost of childhood disadvantages amounts to 3.4% of GDP annually on average in the EU, due to their negative long-lasting effects on their employment prospects, earnings and health outcomes once they turn adults.

In addition, there is scope to step up EU efforts, given the large disparities in Member States' performance in the fight against child poverty. These disparities are particularly acute where concentrations of severe disadvantaged communities exist, requiring coordinated EU responses and synergies with initiatives such as the EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030, the Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030 and the LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026-2030.

B. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how

The ECG has been instrumental in encouraging many Member States, and recently also candidate countries and potential candidates, to invest in provision of services for children in need, to promote corresponding reforms and to support exchange of good practices.

In view of the rising incidence of risk of poverty among children and of persistent gaps in access to key services by children in need, the Commission, in line with the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, intends to step up efforts through further actions strengthening the ECG, especially by closing identified gaps.

There is also a need to support the ECG implementation through horizontal enablers, promoting strengthened national governance frameworks and integrated delivery of services, involving stakeholders, ranging from local authorities to children and civil society organisations.

Enhancing parents' access to adequate resources is also key to accelerate child poverty reduction, meet the 2030 complementary target, and set the path toward the 2050 ambition of helping eradicate poverty.

To meet these challenges, different types of action could be envisaged, including:

- reforms and investments yielding high rates of social and economic returns, particularly in areas such as inclusive and affordable ECEC and school education, including raising basic skills proficiency and school meal programmes,
- further guidance to the national and sub-national authorities on effective measures to address child poverty,
- guidelines for curriculum development in early childhood education and care to strengthen early acquisition of basic skills,
- the Basic Skills Support Scheme (part of the Education Package) to support school intervention that reduce early learning inequalities and help learners attain adequate basic skills by the end of compulsory schooling,
- strengthening targeted and sustained support for children facing multiple barriers, including children with disabilities, from racialised groups including Roma, and migrants,
- strengthening school-based activities and promoting equal and inclusive access to out of school extracurricular activities, including those of an educational, recreational, cultural and sporting nature as a key driver of social development, well-being and inclusion for the most disadvantaged children, including Roma and other racialised children.
- addressing energy poverty as a specific barrier to children's health, well-being and educational outcomes with targeted measures for the most disadvantaged families,
- enhancing child participation in defining needs and solutions to eradicate child poverty,
- mutual learning activities,
- funding support.

The initiative will also serve the purpose of reporting on progress with the implementation of the Recommendation, as per its Article 12 (e).

Likely impacts

The planned initiative is expected to bring positive impacts by directing investments and reforms to strengthen both the ECG and policies to combat child poverty and exclusion more broadly.

This will contribute to safeguarding fundamental rights and to upkeeping social cohesion in the EU. In the longer run, through breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, the successful implementation of strengthened ECG will contribute to economic growth and prosperity by better participation in the labour market and society of today's children. In the shorter run, it will also facilitate labour market participation of their mothers, what can contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty through providing a second income in the household makes. In terms of the spatial distribution across the EU, countries and regions with higher incidence of child poverty will especially benefit.

The sustainable development goals most likely to be positively affected by the initiative are: #1 (No poverty), #2 (Zero hunger), #3 (Good health and well-being), #4 (Quality education), and #10 (Reduced inequalities)

Future monitoring

A robust governance and monitoring system is in place for the ECG and will remain relevant for the follow-up of the planned initiative. It includes:

- the Benchmarking Framework on Childcare and Support to Children, established to monitor two key aspects of the principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights: children's right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality (principle 11a) and children's right to protection from poverty (principle 11b),

- the EU Monitoring Framework for the ECG, agreed by the Social Protection Committee,
- the biennial progress reports by the Member States to the Commission (the next round is due in March 2026).

In the context of the ECG strengthening, specific attention will be paid to accelerate progress in the fight against child poverty and in the ECG implementation, strengthening existing monitoring tools and clearer accountability, including towards children, without creating unnecessary administrative burden.

C. Better regulation

Impact assessment

The planned initiative is meant to map the gaps in implementation of the ECG and propose new initiatives to be undertaken to close those gaps, including through reforms and investments improving access to services, in a potential Communication format. As such, it does not directly undertake action carrying financial consequences. Consequently, no impact assessment is planned.

Consultation strategy

In order to correctly identify the priorities for strengthening the ECG, the Commission needs to gather evidence on gaps and weaknesses in its implementation.

The biennial progress reports by the Member States to the Commission include information relevant for assessment of progress with implementation.

Relevant stakeholders to gather additional information from include national, regional and local authorities, civil society organisations, educational establishments and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion and integration, children's rights, inclusive and accessible education and non-discrimination, including national equality bodies. Insights from children and social inclusion practitioners are also welcome.

The call for evidence will be open for four weeks. Replies can be made in any of the 24 official EU languages. A factual summary report, as well as a synopsis of all the consultation results, will be prepared and published after the consultation closes.

In line with the European Commission's Better Regulation policy to develop initiatives informed by the best available knowledge, we also invite scientific researchers, as well as academic organisations, learned societies, and scientific associations with expertise in the research on child poverty and social exclusion, to submit relevant published and pre-print scientific research, analyses and data.