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the Barcelona targets for 2030

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2022/...

of ...

on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 292, in conjunction with Article 153(1), point (i), thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) In order to remove disincentives to female labour-market participation, in 2002 the European Council in Barcelona established targets on childcare to be achieved by 2010: namely to provide early childhood education and care ('ECEC') to at least 33% of children under three years of age and to at least 90% for children between three years of age and the mandatory school age¹. While those targets have been reached as a European Union average, significant differences persist between and within Member States, in particular for children from lower income households and for the youngest group of children.
- (2) The objective of this Recommendation is to encourage Member States to increase participation in accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC while taking into account the demand for ECEC services and in line with national patterns of provision, in order to facilitate women's labour-market participation and enhance the social and cognitive development of all children, in particular of children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

¹ Barcelona European Council of 15 and 16 March 2002 (2002), SN 100/1/02 REV1.

- (3) Care responsibilities for children, particularly for very young children, are a significant constraint on female labour-market participation. In 2021, in the Labour Force Survey, 27.9% of women outside the labour force indicated that looking after children or adults in need of care was their main reason for not seeking employment, compared to only 8.0% of men. In 2019, before the pandemic, those figures stood at 32.6% and 7.6%, respectively¹. At the same time, the employment rate for people with children below six years of age was 90.1% for men compared to 67.2% for women. Unpaid care responsibilities keep around 7.7 million women in Europe from participating in the labour market, compared to only 450 000 men. Women’s disproportionate share of care work is also one of the main root causes of the gender pay gap².
- (4) Women are also more likely to adapt their working patterns to care responsibilities. This has a lasting impact on their careers and contributes to the gender pay gap and to the pension gap. Employed women spend on average 90 minutes more than employed men on housework and direct care activities on a daily basis. Addressing gender gaps in employment represents a clear business case as it contributes to growth and is likely to generate positive impacts on productivity. In addition, addressing gender gaps has well-established positive impacts on poverty reduction and social inclusion and offers a way to respond to the problem of a shrinking workforce.

¹ Eurostat database table LFSA_IGAR, ‘Care of adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons’, percentage of population outside the labour force and wanting to work, age group 15-64.

² Report by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE): ‘Gender inequalities in care and consequences on the labour market’, 12953/20 ADD 1.

- (5) The availability of affordable and high-quality care services has a significant positive impact on the employment situation of carers, in particular women. As the provision of ECEC increased across the Union, the gender employment gap was reduced from 17.7 percentage points in 2002 to 10.8 percentage points in 2021. However, progress has stalled in recent years.
- (6) The European Pillar of Social Rights (the ‘Pillar’) highlights the importance of gender equality, work-life balance and ECEC as key objectives of the Union. The Pillar states that equal treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas, including as regards participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression. It also recognises children’s right to affordable ECEC of good quality, children’s right to protection from poverty, and the right of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.
- (7) The Pillar action plan proposes that at least 78% of the population between 20 and 64 years old should be in employment by 2030. To achieve that target, the action plan sets the goal of at least halving the gender employment gap compared to 2019, including through increased provision of formal ECEC. The action plan acknowledges that increasing the provision of formal ECEC would support stronger female labour-market participation and a better reconciliation between work, family and private life.

- (8) There is a significant divergence among Member States in the way they provide support to parents. In some Member States, more emphasis is placed on offering adequately paid or compensated parental leave schemes for at least the first 12 months of the child's life, resulting in very high take-up rates of parental leave. Other Member States focus more on providing ECEC services to children from a very young age. In the latter group of Member States, children typically participate in ECEC already in their first year, and paid or compensated parental leave does not exceed the minimum required by Union law. The new target for children below three years of age set out in this Recommendation aims at striking a balance between those divergent approaches. In the light of those considerations, for the group of children below three years of age, the overall target is a 45% participation rate towards which all Member States should strive.
- (9) However, Member States that are below the previous target of 33% are not necessarily expected to reach the previous or new target by 2030. Instead, it is recommended that they increase their participation rates by at least a specific percentage which reflects the baseline situation of each Member State concerned and its pattern of parental leave take-up. This should realistically allow those Member States to get closer to the 45% target. Member States that are further away from reaching the target are expected to make a greater effort to catch up.

- (10) Given the significant fluctuation of ECEC participation rates from one year to another, and the fact that 2021 data still reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in some Member States, the average ECEC participation rate over the last five years prior to the adoption of this Recommendation (according to EU SILC data) was chosen as a baseline for determining the minimum increase in ECEC participation for Member States that have not yet reached the previous target.
- (11) At Union level, several recommendations and directives in the areas of gender equality and working conditions address certain issues that are relevant for the Barcelona targets. Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council¹, for instance, creates a framework for a gender-balanced take-up of parental leave and flexible working arrangements, as well as of carers' leave.

¹ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79).

- (12) Several Union initiatives have highlighted the importance of ECEC for children. This Recommendation builds upon those policy initiatives, namely Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)¹, that includes a Union-level target whereby at least 96% of children between three years of age and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC; Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems², that helps Member States to improve ECEC services and underlines that such services must be inclusive, accessible, affordable and of high quality; Commission Communication on the ‘EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child’³, that includes a series of key actions to be taken by the Commission to better promote and protect children’s rights and recognises the role of ECEC as beneficial for children’s cognitive and social development; and Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee⁴, that aims to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have free and effective access to key services, including ECEC, in all regions, including remote and rural areas.

¹ OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1.

² Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4).

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU strategy on the rights of the child (COM(2021) 142 final, 24.3.2021, p. 1).

⁴ Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee (OJ L 223, 22.6.2021, p. 14).

- (13) When investing in ECEC services, Member States should take into account a number of dimensions beyond the mere availability of places, such as the time-intensity of participation, the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion participating in ECEC, as well as the accessibility, affordability and quality of the services provided. This Recommendation therefore sets out measures to tackle those aspects.
- (14) To facilitate labour-market participation for primary carers, predominantly women, the number of ECEC hours attended should be sufficient to allow parents to meaningfully engage in paid work. Participation should be encouraged, taking into account the best interests of the child, while also allowing for gender-equal parental choice regarding work-life balance and the use of ECEC services. Where children do not yet attend ECEC full time, both parents should make use of the rights to parental leave and flexible working arrangements provided for in Directive (EU) 2019/1158, such as part-time work, flexible working hours and telework, so as to ensure that care responsibilities are equally shared, and participation should gradually increase with the age of the child. Given the importance of that dimension, it is important to monitor the time-intensity of child participation in ECEC together with participation in ECEC in general.

- (15) Furthermore, women with low professional skills, migrant women, women from low-income households with children, and female single parents face more barriers to training and to finding a job and more disincentives to enter or re-enter employment because of financial and non-financial constraints on their children's participation in ECEC. Encouraging higher participation of children in vulnerable situations and from disadvantaged backgrounds in inclusive ECEC would have a beneficial impact on their mothers' chances of returning to work. It would also help women to better reconcile their work, family and private life.
- (16) Parents with disabilities and parents with children with disabilities face particular barriers and challenges in terms of access to the labour market. Facilitating the participation of children with disabilities in mainstream ECEC, where appropriate, taking into account the type and degree of disability, expert assessment and the best interests of the child, can help their parents to better reconcile their work, family and private life.
- (17) Participating in ECEC has multiple benefits for children. Evidence shows that the provision of quality ECEC plays a crucial role in improving children's cognitive, social and educational development from an early age. According to the Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care systems, ECEC participation can be an effective tool for achieving educational equity for children in disadvantaged situations, such as children with disabilities or with special educational needs, children within households at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including single-parent households, children with a migrant background, refugee children, Roma children and children from other minority groups, children living in rural and remote areas with inadequate care infrastructure and children in alternative care.

(18) The Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee and the Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation¹ emphasise that equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC is central to breaking the transmission of social exclusion and securing equal opportunities for children in disadvantaged situations. The European Child Guarantee recommends that Member States submit national plans implementing the Recommendation within nine months from its adoption. However, the participation rates of children in disadvantaged situations remain considerably lower, notably among the youngest children, which may result later in worse educational outcomes and high school drop-out rates, in particular for Roma children or children with a migrant background, as well as children deprived of parental care. It is therefore important to close the gap between the ECEC participation of those children and that of the overall population of children. Attention also needs to be paid to reducing the participation gap between the highest and the lowest income quintiles. Participation in ECEC is also relevant for children fleeing the war in Ukraine, as well as for other children seeking or benefitting from protection in the Union. Equal access to mainstream inclusive and non-segregated ECEC services should be ensured for all those potentially vulnerable children.

¹ Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation (OJ C 93, 19.3.2021, p. 1).

- (19) Similarly, children with disabilities have the right to participate in mainstream ECEC on an equal basis with others. Half of children with disabilities are cared for only by their parents. It is therefore important to ensure that ECEC is accessible, inclusive and combined with targeted measures that help address specific needs, including through measures for tackling barriers and segregation, equipping staff with the necessary competencies or hiring dedicated staff to address individual needs, and individualised curricula where needed.
- (20) Particular attention needs to be paid to closing the gap in the participation of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion as well as that of children with disabilities or with special educational needs in ECEC systems where the national administrations of social affairs, health and education are separately responsible for different parts of ECEC.
- (21) A high quality of ECEC is essential for ensuring that children benefit from participation in ECEC. While there is no single way to define and measure the concept of quality in ECEC settings, its essence lies in the quality of interaction between adults and children, irrespective of the ECEC system in place. Member States should ensure the provision of high-quality ECEC, taking into account the various dimensions set out in the Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, including access to ECEC services, the qualifications and working conditions of staff, the pedagogical curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and the governance and financing of ECEC services. Of particular importance are elements such as the staff/child ratio, staff qualifications, and continuous professional training.

- (22) Quality of ECEC provision is also an important factor in establishing trust between parents and the institutions providing education and care, and therefore an important factor in facilitating increased participation in ECEC.
- (23) Accessibility is another important dimension of the provision of ECEC. It includes adequate infrastructure and appropriate reception capacities and opening hours, as well as adaptation to the special needs of parents, and assistance in overcoming complex administrative procedures. Support in navigating administrative procedures should be provided in various forms, including linguistic and digital support, especially for groups in a vulnerable situation or from disadvantaged backgrounds who, for example, are not able to use or do not have access to digital tools. It also includes accessibility for persons with disabilities, including children, parents and professionals, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the accessibility requirements set out in Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council¹.

¹ Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services (OJ L 151, 7.6.2019, p. 70).

- (24) Furthermore, accessibility includes the simplification of procedures and the professionalisation of staff and specialists so as to adequately support children with disabilities or with special educational needs and other vulnerable groups in mainstream non-segregated facilities. Member States should ensure that barriers to the use of ECEC services are removed and prevented, including for persons with disabilities, and that ECEC services are truly inclusive.
- (25) When addressing accessibility, territorial imbalances should be taken into account. Long commuting time linked to distance, lack of or limited transport connections and traffic congestion can be a barrier to participation, in particular for children with disabilities or special educational needs. Remote and rural areas are particularly disadvantaged by the lack of sufficient ECEC services locally. Such territorial imbalances can exacerbate problems of affordability. It is therefore important to consider the different profiles of ECEC services users in mobility plans, and to include territorial coverage in data collection for evaluation and monitoring purposes.

- (26) In many Member States, the high cost of ECEC is still a major barrier to participation. Eurostat data show that the cost factor plays a significant role in the decision not to use formal childcare services in many countries, in particular for households at risk of poverty. According to Union statistics on income and living conditions for 2016, 13% of parents do not make use of childcare because of its cost and 11% have moderate or great difficulties in affording it. Those percentages more than double to 28% and 27% respectively for households at risk of poverty. Scientific research shows the substantial economic, social, educational and developmental benefits of high-quality ECEC. Ensuring affordable ECEC is beneficial for meeting women's upskilling and reskilling needs and for facilitating their labour-market participation; this also has a positive long-term impact on education from an early age, paving the way for a positive lifelong attitude to learning, going beyond the children involved and extending to society at large. Therefore, Member States should ensure that the costs of ECEC are proportionate to household income and do not constitute a barrier to taking up ECEC. Moreover, Member States should also take into account other costs related to participation in ECEC such as transport, clothing and equipment needed in care situations.

- (27) One way to ensure adequate provision of accessible and affordable high-quality ECEC is by establishing a legal entitlement to ECEC, by which public authorities guarantee a place for all children whose parents demand it, regardless of their employment, socio-economic or family status. In most Member States, such legal entitlement already exists but the starting age for the entitlement varies significantly. Ideally, there should not be a gap between the end of adequately paid or compensated maternity, paternity and parental leave and a legal entitlement to ECEC.
- (28) Increasing the availability of high-quality, accessible and affordable ECEC for families and improving working conditions and salaries in the ECEC sector is expected to have economic benefits. At the same time, the fiscal sustainability of investing in ECEC can be optimised by evaluating the impact on public finances and by regularly monitoring and continuously improving cost-effectiveness, building on best practices, including an efficient design of funding mechanisms that is coherent with the overall sustainability of public finances.
- (29) Easy and equal access to adequate online and offline information on ECEC without any discrimination is of key importance for all parents regardless of family composition and status, including civil partnerships, as recognised by national law. This pertains to information on the entitlement to and availability of suitable services, access modalities and eligibility for financial support, where applicable.

- (30) The lack of awareness of parents' and children's rights as regards ECEC and its relevance for future educational achievements is an additional hurdle to taking up services which impacts women's labour market participation. Informing parents correctly and thoroughly should lead to well-considered, informed decisions about care options.
- (31) The ECEC sector suffers from staff shortages in many countries. That can be addressed through multiple strategies, such as improving working conditions, career prospects and remuneration, by providing regular upskilling and reskilling possibilities, by developing creative recruitment strategies, and by calling on different under-represented groups to join the ECEC workforce, such as men and persons from various cultural backgrounds, for example migrants and refugees. A simple and rapid qualifications recognition mechanism could help address shortages. For example, Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554¹ addresses the access of those fleeing the war in Ukraine to regulated professions.

¹ Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554 of 5 April 2022 on the recognition of the qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine (OJ L 107 I, 6.4.2022, p. 1).

- (32) The promotion of fair working conditions for staff in ECEC should contribute to attracting new workers and at the same time help ensure that those who are working in that sector are willing and able to remain in their jobs until retirement. It may equally contribute to tackling gender segregation in the ECEC sector. In this context, the International Labour Organization policy guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel¹ give guidance on the possible implementation of recommendations concerning professional and career development, appropriate remuneration, including equal pay, and sustainable employment and working conditions, as well as the promotion of social dialogue in this sector.
- (33) Care for children does not stop when they go to primary school. The care needs of children of primary school age can also limit mothers' labour-market participation and working time if there are no adequate, quality and affordable solutions for care after school and during holidays in the context of national school systems. If no care possibilities are available for older children, the availability of ECEC for younger siblings will not allow the labour-market participation of the parents, which might in turn have an impact on the uptake of ECEC for younger siblings. Member States should therefore provide adequate, quality and affordable out-of-school care. It is recommended that the measures taken by Member States include, where relevant, an offer for the supervision of and support for homework for all children, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

¹ International Labour Organisation, 'Meeting of Experts on Policy Guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel', available at: https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS_236528/lang--en/index.htm

- (34) Work-life balance remains a great challenge for many parents, in particular for women. The difficulty of balancing work and care responsibilities is a major obstacle that contributes to the underrepresentation of women in the labour market. In this context, gender stereotypes often influence the roles of women and men with regard to care. The imbalance between caregiving by women in comparison to men in turn reinforces gender stereotypes regarding both men's and women's occupations and roles.
- (35) This persisting gender care gap should be tackled, in particular by encouraging uptake by fathers of paternity leave, parental leave and flexible working-time arrangements, where relevant, combined with more equal sharing of care responsibilities within couples as regards paid and unpaid work¹. The implementation of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 should enhance the rights of workers with care responsibilities to paternity and parental leave and to request flexible working-time arrangements. Further action should focus on raising awareness of those new rights and monitoring whether workers can fully make use of those rights without experiencing unfavourable treatment at work.
- (36) In addition to other measures to reconcile work, family and private life, flexible solutions for using ECEC should be promoted, as necessary. For example, workers with care responsibilities would benefit from access to complementary childcare services such as early opening, the provision of meals and late closing.

¹ See Council Conclusions on Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Valuation and Distribution of Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work, 13584/20.

- (37) In order to better understand care needs and constraints, Member States should ensure the availability of adequate data with a sufficient degree of granularity, reliability and comparability. Given that Directive (EU) 2019/1158 does not contain specific provisions on data collection, those data should include the take-up of paternity and parental leaves, taking into account the methodological manual for the work-life balance indicator framework developed by the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) to support the proper monitoring and evaluation of that Directive.
- (38) Progress in implementing this Recommendation should be regularly monitored in the context of the European Semester, the annual report on gender equality in the Union and the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal. To that end, Member States should in particular support the Commission in the possible development and calculation of an indicator for measuring the gender care gap, which means the difference in time devoted to care by women and men, the gender pay gap, and the use of time in paid and unpaid work, in order to better understand the interdependencies between those elements with a view to supporting the development of evidence-based gender equality and social policies. Member States should also continue their efforts to design and implement reforms in the ECEC sector, making best use of the Commission's support, including via the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), through the exchange of good practices and the use of appropriate processes and methodologies, and through data collection, stakeholder involvement and more effective and efficient inter-institutional coordination and human resources planning, allocation and professional development in the ECEC sector.

- (39) The wording ‘early childhood education and care’ should be understood, as defined in the Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC, as referring to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to the compulsory primary school age — regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or programme content — and includes centre and family day-care, privately and publicly funded provision, as well as the provision of pre-school and pre-primary services.
- (40) In order to assess the impact of this Recommendation, the Commission in collaboration with the Member States should monitor its progress and report regularly on it to the Council,

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

1. This Recommendation aims to encourage Member States, taking into account their national circumstances, to increase participation in accessible, affordable, and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) in order to facilitate and encourage women's labour-market participation and to enhance the social and cognitive development of children and their educational success, in particular for children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. This Recommendation concerns ECEC for all children.

TARGETS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

3. (a) It is recommended that Member States provide high-quality ECEC services in line with national competences, levels of parental leave take-up and patterns of ECEC provision, ensuring that by 2030 at least 45% of children below the age of three participate in ECEC according to EU SILC data.

Notwithstanding the first subparagraph, it is recommended that Member States that have not yet reached the target set in 2002 of a 33% participation rate in ECEC for this age group increase participation, by 2030, by at least a specific percentage in relation to their current participation rate as set out in points (i) and (ii) of this point. The current participation rate shall be calculated as the average participation rate in ECEC of children below the age of three achieved in the years 2017-2021 according to EU-SILC data. It is recommended that Member States increase ECEC participation in relation to their respective current participation rates as follows:

- (i) by at least 90% for Member States whose participation rate is lower than 20%;
or
 - (ii) by at least 45%, or until at least reaching a participation rate of 45%, for Member States whose participation rate is between 20% and 33%.
- (b) It is recommended that Member States provide high-quality ECEC services for children from the age of three in order to reach, by 2030, the target agreed by the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)¹, whereby at least 96% of children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC.

¹ OJ C 66, 26.2. 2021, p. 1.

INDICATOR FOR INTENSITY OF PARTICIPATION

4. It is recommended that Member States support a level of availability of ECEC services that is compatible with the child's well-being and development and allows for the meaningful labour-market participation of parents, especially mothers, while also allowing for gender-equal parental choice in the use of ECEC services.
5. It is recommended that Member States take steps to make ECEC services available in a way which allows children to participate at least 25 hours per week.
6. It is recommended that Member States promote the availability of ECEC services or of complementary services before and after regular working hours of ECEC services, as appropriate, so as to allow for travel time and to make childcare fully compatible with the child's wellbeing and the parents' working hours and their need to reconcile work, family and private life.

INCLUSION OF CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS, CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, WITH SPECIFIC NEEDS OR WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

7. It is recommended that Member States:

- (a) have targeted measures in place to enable and increase participation in ECEC of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion or with a migrant background, and children with insufficient knowledge of the language of schooling, as well as children with disabilities, with specific needs or with special educational needs;
- (b) take the necessary steps to close the participation gap in ECEC between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and the overall population of children;
- (c) strive to increase the participation in mainstream ECEC of children with disabilities, children with specific needs or with special educational needs, when appropriate; and
- (d) support training programmes for ECEC staff designed to support them in offering high quality ECEC for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as children with disabilities, with specific needs or with special educational needs.

QUALITY

8. It is recommended that Member States ensure that:
- (a) ECEC services for all children are of high quality, in order to contribute to the healthy physical, social, emotional, cognitive and educational development and wellbeing of the child, and in order to increase parents' trust in the services; and that
 - (b) the national or regional Quality Frameworks which Member States are encouraged to develop in line with the Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems include the provision of services for children of both age groups covered by this Recommendation; Quality Frameworks should in particular provide for:
 - adequate staff-child ratios and group sizes, taking into account the age of children and any disability or special educational needs they may have, in particular in split ECEC systems, so as to avoid gaps in terms of care;
 - support for the professionalisation of all ECEC staff, including by increasing the required level of initial education and ensuring continuous professional development, including knowledge of children's rights, through adequate and lifelong training opportunities; and
 - a safe, nurturing and caring environment, a quality curriculum and learning opportunities appropriate to the specific needs of each category of children and each age group, and a social, cultural and physical space that offers a range of possibilities allowing children to develop their potential.

TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION

9. It is recommended that Member States address challenges for children and their families in accessing a suitable education and care facility by providing sufficient territorial coverage of ECEC provision. To that end, it is recommended that Member States, in particular:
- (a) organise the provision of ECEC adequately across urban and rural areas, affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods regions and outermost regions, taking into consideration national structures as well as the specific features of areas, including the density of the child population and the distribution of children by age, in a way that is fully in line with desegregation and non-discrimination principles and in close cooperation with local and regional authorities; and
 - (b) take into account, as appropriate, the need for reasonable commuting times, including for parents using active mobility and public transport, when organizing ECEC or developing policy on where ECEC services are located.

AFFORDABILITY

10. For children other than those covered by the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, who should enjoy free education and affordable and effective access to high quality ECEC services as defined in that Recommendation, it is recommended that Member States ensure that the net cost of ECEC is reasonably proportionate to other household expenses and disposable income, paying particular attention to low-income households, including low-income single-parent households. In particular, Member States are encouraged to:
- (a) limit out-of-pocket expenses for parents; and
 - (b) where applicable, introduce sliding-scale fees proportionate to family income or a maximum fee for ECEC.

ACCESSIBILITY

11. It is recommended that Member States continuously remove obstacles to equal access to ECEC for all children in a non-discriminatory manner. In that context, particular attention should be given to:
- (a) offering solutions for parents with atypical working hours to better reconcile work, family and private life, while ensuring the child's wellbeing;

- (b) addressing the specific needs of single parents, most of whom are women;
- (c) improving access to ECEC regardless of the labour market status of the parents in a manner coherent with providing incentives to work;
- (d) ensuring the accessibility of buildings, infrastructure, community support services and transport as well as learning material and digital tools for parents and children with disabilities or with special educational needs;
- (e) offering effective educational and care support and appropriate information and communication for children and parents with disabilities or with special educational needs as well as those in vulnerable situations, and addressing linguistic and cultural barriers, including barriers faced by children with a migrant background, so as to enable children's participation in ECEC offered in mainstream facilities that are inclusive and non-segregated;
- (f) proactively providing support and clear information about the benefits of attending ECEC and about existing opportunities, eligibility rules, and administrative procedures for access to ECEC services to all parents on a non-discriminatory basis, regardless of family composition and status; and
- (g) providing administrative support for enrolment, with particular attention to parents in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

12. It is recommended that Member States consider introducing a legal entitlement to ECEC. When determining the starting age for that entitlement, it is recommended that Member States take into account the availability and length of adequately paid or compensated maternity, paternity and parental leave, and aim to avoid gaps between the end of such leave and the start of ECEC.

COMPLEMENTARY SERVICES AND OUT OF SCHOOL CARE

13. In addition to providing ECEC services, it is recommended that Member States ensure a comprehensive approach to care for children, taking into account the care needs of children of different ages, including those of primary school age, by facilitating affordable, accessible and high quality out-of-school care for children in primary school (after-school and holiday cover), including those with disabilities or with special educational needs, taking into account the national organisation of school and holidays. It is recommended that Member States include in those services, where relevant, support for homework for all children, including in particular children from disadvantaged backgrounds or in vulnerable situations.

AWARENESS OF RIGHTS

14. It is recommended that Member States promote parents' awareness of their rights, including, where applicable, of the entitlement to a place in ECEC, bearing in mind that different traditions and backgrounds may influence the knowledge and perception of, and trust in, the ECEC system.

15. Member States are encouraged to proactively inform parents about the possibilities, benefits and costs of using ECEC and, where applicable, about the financial support available. Consideration should be given to:
- (a) the parents' needs for information on ECEC taking into account the diversity of their skills, capabilities, socio-economic background, and any disability; and
 - (b) making information easily accessible online as well as offline, taking into account different language needs and the availability of digital tools.
16. It is recommended that Member States put in place effective, impartial and accessible complaints procedures for reporting issues or incidents to the competent authorities.

STAFF WORKING CONDITIONS AND SKILLS

17. It is recommended that Member States support quality employment and fair working conditions for ECEC staff, in particular by promoting social dialogue and collective bargaining and by supporting the development of attractive wages, adequate working arrangements, high standards in occupational health and safety, and equality and non-discrimination in the sector, while respecting the autonomy of the social partners.

18. It is recommended that Member States address skill needs and worker shortages in ECEC, in particular by:
- (a) improving initial and continuous education and training to equip current and future ECEC workers with the necessary skills and competencies;
 - (b) building career pathways in the ECEC sector, including via upskilling, reskilling and information and guidance services;
 - (c) offering attractive professional status and career prospects to ECEC workers;
 - (d) implementing measures to tackle gender stereotypes and gender segregation and to make the profession more attractive; and
 - (e) developing professional networks for persons employed in the ECEC sector, where appropriate.

TACKLING THE GENDER CARE GAP

19. It is recommended that Member States encourage equal sharing of care for children between parents by:
- (a) combating gender stereotypes and encouraging a balanced participation of both parents in care responsibilities on an equal footing, including through communication campaigns; and
 - (b) promoting and supporting the availability and gender-equal uptake of family-friendly work arrangements, as well as the uptake of parental leave by both parents, especially men, over the life course.

GOVERNANCE AND DATA COLLECTION

20. It is recommended that Member States ensure sound and effective policy governance in ECEC, in particular by:
- (a) ensuring strong cooperation between different policy-making institutions and ECEC services, and supporting cooperation with other policy-making institutions and services in charge of early childhood development and education; and

- (b) mobilising and making cost-effective use of appropriate and sustainable funding for ECEC, including by making use of Union funds and instruments, and by pursuing policies conducive to the sustainable funding of ECEC services that are coherent with the overall sustainability of public finances.

21. It is recommended that, where relevant, Member States develop or improve data collection on:

- (a) the participation of children in ECEC, on a regular basis and with adequate sample size where surveys are used, disaggregated by age and, where possible, by sex, including with reference to children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- (b) the differences in time use in paid and unpaid work between women and men with care responsibilities, preferably by using time use surveys on the basis of the standard set by the Harmonised European Time Use Surveys;

- (c) the take-up of parental leave disaggregated by sex, from administrative data in a Union-harmonised way making use of the work-life balance indicator framework developed by the joint subgroup of the EMCO and the SPC;
- (d) the working conditions of staff in ECEC, covering in particular the aspects referred to in Recommendations 17 and 18; and
- (e) ECEC shortages, accessibility, affordability and quality of ECEC on a regular basis, and on the territorial distribution of ECEC, notably to assess territorial disparities, including in remote and rural areas.

22. It is recommended that Member States scale up efforts to ensure that data are comparable at Union level and have a sufficient degree of granularity.

IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

23. It is recommended that Member States inform the Commission of the set of measures taken or planned to implement this Recommendation within 18 months of its adoption, building where relevant on existing national strategies or plans. Where appropriate, reference can be made to reports submitted under existing reporting mechanisms, such as the Open Method of Coordination, the European Semester and other relevant Union programming and reporting mechanisms.

HEREBY WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:

24. (a) improve regular data provision, in collaboration with Member States, by making available on the Eurostat website, as well as on the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal, the following:
- (i) a further breakdown by age, and, where appropriate, by household income quintile, of children's participation in ECEC, as well as of the time-intensity of participation and the participation rate for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion;
 - (ii) confidence intervals for the EU-SILC main indicator 'Children in formal childcare or education' and other relevant indicators alongside the participation rates to ensure comparability across years and countries; and
 - (iii) more comprehensive explanatory information on the data collected, in particular as regards ECEC programmes covered by the definition of the indicators;
- (b) mobilise Union funding to support national reforms and investments in ECEC;
- (c) explore the possibility to develop further indicators in cooperation with the EMCO and the SPC and in close cooperation with the Education Committee and the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks, and seek to facilitate the exchange of good practices and mutual learning among Member States, as well as technical capacity-building activities, and continue to support Member States in their efforts to design and implement reforms in the area of ECEC, in particular via the Strategic Cooperation Framework in education and training and the TSI;

- (d) encourage Union agencies such as the European Institute for Gender Equality and Eurofound to collect data regularly, develop indicators and carry out analyses on the gender care gap, the gender pay gap, and the use of time in paid and unpaid work, on individual and social activities by women and men with care responsibilities and on work arrangements throughout their working life;
- (e) monitor the implementation of this Recommendation in the context of the annual report on gender equality in the Union, and existing arrangements of the European Semester, with the support of EMCO and the SPC, and – for children above three years of age – the Education and Training Monitor.

25. Report to the Council within five years on progress made in relation to this Recommendation.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council

The President
