

# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ⑤

**Coherence: a  
framework to support  
a common approach**



This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.



## Coherence: a framework to support a common approach

All services should operate within a single and coherent policy framework that ensures a common approach and shared conditions across all services for young children in certain key areas where coherence is an essential value. These key areas, which constitute the framework, should include: access; affordability; pedagogical approach; a curricular framework; participation; evaluation; minimum environmental and staffing standards including the qualifications and conditions of the workforce; and a supportive infrastructure. Constructing and applying this single and coherent policy framework across services for children from birth to compulsory school age will be easier when one department at all levels of government is responsible for all services.

## What does this principle mean?

The principle calls for a single and coherent policy framework across all Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), for children from birth to the age at which they start school. This means consistency across these services in: access; affordability; pedagogical approach; curricular framework; participation; evaluation; environmental and staffing standards; the qualifications, pay and employment conditions of the workforce; and a supportive infrastructure. A single, integrated system.

ECEC contributes to multiple policy agendas. But disparate aims and associated requirements - whether for hours to meet the needs of parents in paid employment; enhancing learning and wellbeing; or optimising physical and emotional development - can usually be better met through an integrated system that adopts a universal, multifunctional and coherent approach to services. Developing such a system and approach to services is best achieved by lead responsibility for all ECEC being given to one government department. Although other departments may be assigned this role, designating Education as the lead department has been the choice of most countries that have moved towards an integrated system. The education system already enacts other important principles, in particular universal entitlement and free attendance; it supports the recognition of ECEC as the first stage in lifelong learning; and it has the possibility of fostering the principle of a strong and equal partnership between early childhood and compulsory education (though the risk of 'schoolification' of all ECEC services by an unreformed and conservative education sector should also be acknowledged). In short, an integrated 0-6 ECEC system, forming an integral part of a re-formed education system, can enhance the position of early childhood services, increase continuity in children's lives, and bring greater effectiveness (including cost) through a sharing of values and understandings, approaches, professional development, expertise as well as the potential for sharing space, building and community resources.

A coherent and integrated system should encompass all levels of government - local, regional, national/federal and European - with clearly defined and adhered to roles and responsibilities at each level. National/federal/devolved governments should be accountable for EU and international entitlements, for ensuring

essential infrastructure exists at all levels, and ensuring that an overall framework is provided at the relevant levels on a basis which recognises different devolved, regional and local needs and perspectives. It is important that devolved/provincial/regional and local levels of government are able to develop and support services that meet the requirements of their communities. This is more easily achieved through allocation of direct funding to these levels of government - on the same basis as most education systems - rather than through nationally/federally distributed tax credits and allowances.

Coherence should also extend to the relationship between ECEC and other policies and services for young children and their families. This means adopting what the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has described as 'rights-based, coordinated, multisectoral strategies' based around 'a systematic and integrated approach to law and policy development in relation to all children up to 8 years old' (2005, para 22). For example, ECEC and leave policies should be coordinated to ensure not only entitlements to well paid leave for mothers and fathers and to ECEC services, but also to ensure there is no gap between the ending of one entitlement and the beginning of the other.

## What is the basis for this principle?

A fully integrated or unitary ECEC system is a necessary condition for, and an expression of, the other *Children in Europe* principles, all of which apply to all services for children from birth to compulsory school age. More specifically, Principle 5 addresses the problems arising from the different historical roots of early childhood services, with one set of 'childcare' services 'often developed as a welfare measure for working class children whose parents needed care while their parents were at work; [while another set of 'early education services' developed] as kindergartens or pre-primary educational activities prior to formal schooling' (Kaga, Bennett and Moss 2010, 7). This resulted in countries developing 'split' systems under separate ministries with different aims, values, users and structures, producing dysfunctional services marked by inequalities, discontinuities and divisiveness, with fragmented and mono-purpose services each focused on meeting a particular need of a particular group of children.

### COMMON FEATURES OF SPLIT ECEC SYSTEMS

The split system, which is the most common, structures ECEC services according to the age of the children. Provision in the split system is delivered in separate settings for younger and older children. Usually, the transition from one setting to the next takes place when children are around 3 years old, but it can be at 2½ years or as late as 4 years in some countries. The division reflects a split between ‘childcare’ services with provision in some form of non-school centre and ‘early education’ services, where provision is sometimes based in the same building as primary schools. In the typical split system, the responsibility for ECEC governance, regulation and funding are divided between different authorities. The ministry responsible for health, welfare or family affairs is usually in charge of provision for younger children, while the ministry of education is responsible for the provision aimed at older children. Consequently, educational guidelines normally apply only to provision for older children. In the split system, the requirements for staff qualifications also usually differ depending on the type of provision, with tertiary degrees in ECEC required mostly in settings for older children. Moreover, conditions of access may vary greatly; with a legal entitlement usually applying to older children and not to younger children (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, 33).

- Organisation: Differences in way children are grouped and number of adults (EC Childcare Network, 1988, 163-4)

Over a decade later the first report of the OECD *Starting Strong* review of 12 countries, the majority of them now EU members, noted the persisting division between education and care (OECD, 2001). Its lead reviewer went on to describe this division as “still strongly entrenched in many countries”, as a result not only of the rarity of national administrations radically rethinking their responsibilities, but in some cases because of opposition within the education sector to taking on responsibility for the non-academic care of young children, and a lack of conviction, particularly in countries influenced by market rationales, that childcare should be publicly supported in the same way as education (Bennett, 2003. Pp.26-27). The second report of OECD review, now covering 20 countries, pointed to some positive developments associated with decentralisation, enabling in some cases integration of early education and care services at a *local* level (OECD, 2006). But it saw continuing problems resulting from different approaches to ‘education’ and ‘care’, adding that “early childhood education and care systems tend to be more fragmented under governments that see early care as a private responsibility for parents and not a public responsibility” (*ibid.*, 46).

The problems arising from such split systems have been recognised for decades. For example, the initial report of the European Commission’s Childcare Network (ECCN), listed some of the adverse consequence:

- Quantity: fewer services for children under than over three
- Hours: publicly funded services for under threes more likely to be available all day and most of the year; those for over threes for shorter period with longer holidays
- Cost: publicly funded services for over threes less expensive than for under threes
- Orientation: ‘school’ services for over threes and kindergartens have pedagogic orientation and seen as universal; other services are oriented to health and care
- Responsibility: varies between education, health, welfare or social services authorities
- Regulation and supervision: different regulation particularly between those publicly funded and other services.
- Workers: extensive differences in training, qualifications, pay and conditions

The European Commission-funded programme *Working for Inclusion*, which examined the role of ECEC and the ECEC workforce in reducing child poverty and promoting social inclusion (Children in Scotland, 2010), found that fully integrated systems were ‘both an indication and an essential component of low poverty and high social inclusion’, making an important contribution to a package of interconnected policies. They were characterised by high levels of universal entitlement, more equal access to services and a better paid workforce across the whole age range from birth to six years. In countries with split or partially integrated systems attendance at formal services was found to be marked by high levels of social difference. The gains were particularly significant for children under the age of three years. In Denmark, Sweden and Finland, which all have fully integrated ECEC systems, there were high overall attendance rates at formal services and little difference in the use of formal services between children of mothers with lower and higher levels of education. By contrast, in the Netherlands and the UK where the systems are split or partially split, children with mothers with higher levels of education were three times as likely

to make use of formal services as those from families with a lower educational level.

## What is the EU position?

The EU's first policy statement on ECEC, the 1992 *Council Recommendation on Childcare*, implied the need for a more integrated approach: member states should ensure that services 'combine reliable care from the point of view of health and safety with a general upbringing and pedagogical approach' and seek to 'meet the different preferences, needs and circumstances of children and their parents, while preserving coherence between different services'. Although not an official statement, the widely cited report by the European Commission Childcare Network, *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children*, was more specific, calling for governments to provide a "coherent statement of intent for care and education services to young children 0-6, with one department "being nominated (nationally and locally) to implement this policy" (EC Childcare Network, 1994, 10, 11) It also proposed targets common to all services in areas such as educational values and objectives, environments, access, staff-child ratios, employment, and collaboration with parents and communities

In 2011, a European Commission *Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care* concluded that "[a] systemic approach to the ECEC services means strong collaboration between the different policy sectors, such as education, employment, health, social policy... This requires a coherent vision that is shared by all stakeholders, including parents, a common policy framework with consistent goals across the system, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities at central and local levels".

The Communication further proposed that one of the policy issues meriting more cooperation between member states was 'moving towards ECEC systems which integrate care and education' (European Commission, 2011). The policy officer responsible counted the arguments made for "universal access and the emphasis on a coherent vision' as amongst its most significant aspects (Children in Europe, 2011 26).

The subsequent 2011 *Conclusions on Early Childhood Education and Care*, by the Council of Ministers, also acknowledged the need for 'a systemic and more

integrated approach to ECEC services at local, regional and national level involving all the relevant stakeholders — including families'. Its call for action, however, was more tentative. Measures, it said, 'could include... promoting cross-sectoral and integrated approaches to care and education services in order to meet all children's needs — cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and physical — in a holistic way' (Council of the European Union, 2011, emphasis added).

Most recently, the Report of a Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission (European Commission 2014) concludes that 'fully integrated systems seem to offer more coherence across ECEC policy (e.g. regulation and funding, curriculum, workforce education/training and working conditions, monitoring and evaluation systems) as well as more resources allocated to younger children and their families'; and that 'unitary systems – by providing a more coherent framework for governance and funding across the ECEC sector - lead to better quality and more equitable ECEC provision and result in greater financial efficiency.'

## Current situation in the EU and EEA

The most recent report undertaken at an EU level found that 8 member states had fully integrated ECEC systems (3 Nordic states, 3 Baltic states, Croatia and Slovenia), while 16 had split systems. This left 4 member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, UK) that had elements of a unified system, but were not fully integrated, with services still being split on one or more key dimensions (e.g. access, funding, workforce, type of provision). For example, England has integrated administration and policy making (in the Department for Education) and a single system of regulation and curriculum for all early childhood services; however, access, funding, type of provision and workforce remain divided, leaving a system still split between 'childcare' and 'early education'.

In addition, of the 3 members states of the EEA, 2 had fully integrated systems, while one was split. Overall, all 5 Nordic countries have adopted full integration, all in education. All other countries with an integrated or semi-integrated system have located administrative and policy making responsibility in education. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, pp.33-34).

Overall, therefore, Europe has moved further than other regions in the world towards adopting single and coherent policy frameworks and integrated ECEC systems - yet split systems still preponderate.

The relationship between leave and ECEC entitlements shows even less coherence, with only 4 EU member states (the 3 Nordic states + Slovenia) and 1 EEA country (Norway) having integrated entitlements that leave no gap between the end of well paid leave and the start of an entitlement to ECEC (Moss, 2014, 34). All of these 5 countries also have fully integrated ECEC systems.

## Examples of the principle being realised

As noted above, 8 EU member states and two members of the EEA have fully integrated ECEC systems, i.e. a single and coherent policy framework that ensures a common approach and shared conditions across all services for young children in certain key areas where coherence is an essential value. In most cases, these systems have been functioning well for some years, exemplifying the feasibility and sustainability of an integrated approach.

### THE FOLLOWING SPECIFIC EXAMPLE IS TAKEN FROM COHEN AND RØNNING (2015)

Norway was slower than other Nordic countries in developing its ECEC services but it established the basis for its unitary system and the development of its services through legislation in 1975. The Kindergartens Act of that year followed extensive public debate and a Commission which discussed the best way to develop a holistic approach to services for young children. The Act adopted a common name – *barnehage* or kindergarten - for the separate elements of education and care that it brought together in one service. The name was seen as belonging to neither schools or daycare services and reflected an emphasis on free and creative play in keeping with the Froebelian influence on some of Norway's early preschool services. The Act gave all children with disabilities a right to a kindergarten place. Education institutions were set up to train the main workforce group in a holistic early years pedagogy in which learning, care, and the concept of 'upbringing' were seen as inseparable.

As the kindergartens [centres for children from 1 to 5 years] developed, public debate focused on the need to make changes in the schools – to the content of the school curriculum and the length of the school day. In 1997 the age at which children start school was reduced from 7 to 6 years and school curriculum was reformed to include play as an approach to learning. Pre-school teachers [a graduate profession working with children from 1 to 5 years] were able to work in schools if they took a post-graduate course in reading, writing and basic mathematics. To compensate for the short school day, *SkoleFritidsordning* or SFO (school-age childcare), was introduced as a statutory requirement from 1997, requiring local authorities to provide school-age childcare for children in the first four years of primary school, including school holidays.

ECEC services were developed through a partnership between the local *kommuner* or municipalities and national government – until 2006 the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs and subsequently the Ministry of Education and Research. The respective roles of all levels of government are clearly defined. The national government legislated for entitlements to services, set targets and provided earmarked funding to municipalities to support expansion. A child's entitlement to a service is from 12 months – linked, with some flexibility, to the end of Norway's 'well-paid' parental leave (47 weeks of parental leave at 100% of earnings or 57 weeks at 80%).

Norwegian municipalities (with support from the county governor level of administration) have a lead role in developing services and, from 2003, strengthened responsibilities and increased financial support to subsidise 80% of running costs and lower parent fees through a maximum parental fee. They also regulate services – around a half of them are privately owned, receiving the same subsidies but with legislative underpinning of quality. Legislation covers staff qualifications, staff-child ratios and kindergarten goals and governance, parent fees and, since 2013, regulations which allow a limited 'reasonable' profit, only defined as reasonable if the staff costs are not substantially lower than municipal kindergartens (Ellingsæter, 2014:64).

By 2010, 90% of children from the age of one to 5 attended kindergarten fulltime and more than 60% of all six to nine year olds (including 75% of six year olds) attended school-age childcare. The kindergartens are open for up to ten hours a day although attended on average for 30-35 hours a week, staffed by a workforce that under 2012 proposals will involve 50% of staff having a graduate teacher/pedagogue qualification. The national government's earmarked funding has now been replaced by block grants to the municipalities.

Norway is a good example of the benefits derived from developing a single coherent system, common approach and shared conditions across key areas, as called for in Principle 5. It also illustrates some policy features which are helpful in achieving this: conceptualising ECEC as a community service rather than a consumer product; supporting local democratic leadership in the development of services alongside clearly defined roles at all levels of government; providing funding directly for services; and recognising the changes required in schools as well as preschool services in developing the strong and equal partnership advocated in Principle 9.

## Next steps

Following the lead set by the EC Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care, member states that still have split or only partially integrated systems should put in place a medium-term (10-15 year) programme to move towards a fully integrated early childhood system, covering all 'key areas where coherence is an essential value'. This is not an easy task, with various obstacles and objections that need to be addressed. In particular it is important to ensure that an integrated system in education is not subject to 'schoolification', and that the opportunity is used to develop common values and understandings across pre-schools and schools, and to develop a 'strong and equal partnership' between the two stages.

Integration also has resource implications, as it will usually mean improving the qualifications, pay and employment conditions of the large number of 'childcare' workers, through the development of a common 0-6 graduate profession. However not only will this phase out

an unacceptable exploitation of people doing important work, it will also further gender quality, since nearly all these people are in fact women. Further, it creates a new and growing field of good quality employment, re-valuing and upskilling a large sector of employment.

Fortunately there is much proven experience and good practice in Europe to assist in the process of transformation; cross-national cooperation and sharing can assist in overcoming obstacles, objections and concerns and developing programmes for moving towards integration. Here the European Union can play a leading role. The EC Communication initiated a collaborative programme using the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to help member states "identify, analyse and spread effective policy approaches in ECEC and transfer them to their own contexts" (European Commission, 2011, 8). Developing coherent, integrated services is an obvious candidate for this treatment. The Working Group on ECEC that proposed key principles for a Quality Framework in 2014 utilised the OMC process.

The European Commission is currently considering what further actions should be taken on ECEC. As part of this review, the Commission should consider whether now might be a good time to consolidate the extensive work undertaken in Europe on ECEC in recent years, by proposing a framework Directive on ECEC. This was first recommended to the Commission in 1988 in the initial report of the EC Childcare Network to ensure, amongst other issues, coherence in availability, hours, cost, purpose and orientation across all services for young children. A policy initiative of this kind could set out clearly, but with room for national interpretation, clear principles for the future – including the need for a coherent approach to services for young children.

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