

THE FAMILY AND PARENTING SUPPORT THEMATIC
WORKING GROUP STUDY VISIT TO SWEDEN
AND DENMARK, 26-30 APRIL 2010
REPORT PARTS I & II

FAMILY POLICIES THAT WORK BEST FOR CHILDREN

Fighting child poverty & promoting child well-being



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Family policies that work best for children” is the final report of a 2-step project to look at what family support policies and practices give the best outcomes for children. Nordic countries demonstrate family policies that work in improving work-life balance, equal employment opportunities and public childcare. Sweden and Denmark in particular were selected as host countries for the study visit because of their low child poverty levels, positive child outcomes and high levels of labour market participation amongst mothers, including lone mothers.

Part 1 provides an overview of family policies in Sweden and Denmark, identifying what delegates to the study visit felt were the critical factors for success. It identifies some key recommendations for policies at local, regional and national level, as well as at European level. Finally it explores some of the remaining challenges that Sweden and Denmark are facing in upholding their strong social welfare system and commitment to inclusion and equality for all children.

Part 2 looks at how some of the delegations participating in the study tour were able to use the lessons learnt on policy and practice to influence policies back home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the fruit of an extremely rewarding study visit organised in Sweden and Denmark on 26th-30th April 2010. This visit would not have been possible without the preparation and expertise of the host country coordinators, Vibeke Bing, consultant, lecturer and a “parent” of the family centres in Sweden, and Inge Marie Nielsen, Head of the Secretariat of the Joint Council for Children’s Issues in Denmark.

The report also benefits from the discussions and insights of the participating delegations from Wales (UK), Ireland, Finland, Bulgaria and the Netherlands and Belgium.

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About the author: Anne Williams is an independent consultant on child and family issues. She has been involved in numerous studies and reports for Eurochild and previously for the European Forum for Child Welfare. She was acting Secretary General of Eurochild in 2004 and provided maternity cover for Jana Hainsworth in 2008. Anne qualified as a social worker in Wales, and worked for many years at NCH Cymru in the field of child protection and family support. From 1999 to 2002 she was Director for Children and Young People at The Children’s Society Cymru, Wales.

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The seven-year Programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies, across the EU-27, EFTA-EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries.

PROGRESS mission is to strengthen the EU contribution in support of Member States’ commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society. To that effect, PROGRESS will be instrumental in:

- *providing analysis and policy advice on PROGRESS policy areas;*
- *monitoring and reporting on the implementation of EU legislation and policies in PROGRESS policy areas;*
- *promoting policy transfer, learning and support among Member States on EU objectives and priorities; and*
- *relaying the views of the stakeholders and society at large.*

The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

For more information see: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/progress/index_en.html



Eurochild^{AISBL}, Avenue des Arts 1-2, 1210 Brussels
T +32 2 511 70 83 - F +32 2 511 72 98 - www.eurochild.org - info@eurochild.org

INTRODUCTION

Members of Eurochild's family and parenting support thematic working group took part in the first study visit organised by Eurochild from 26th-30th April this year. Initiated by One Family Ireland and pioneered by Eurochild as a new tool for mutual learning and information exchange, members from Bulgaria, Finland, Ireland, The Netherlands/ Flanders and Wales led their national delegations on a five-day visit to Sweden and Denmark, participating in a full programme of Round Table policy debates and project visits in Stockholm, Malmo and Copenhagen.

Eurochild, through its members, works to combat child poverty and promote child and family well-being. Having a job remains the best safeguard against poverty and social exclusion, thus a better work-life balance for working parents and quality services for children have become imperative policy issues in most EU member states. Sweden and Denmark were selected as host countries for the study visit because of their low child poverty levels, positive child outcomes and high levels of labour market participation amongst mothers, including lone mothers. **The key objective of the study visit was to gain a good understanding of their family policies and how they interact in practice with labour market policies to enable parents to participate in the labour market, care for their children and have a good quality of family life.** In this context, we focused on the most vulnerable families – the low skilled, immigrant families, lone parent families - and how they are supported to achieve and sustain economic and social inclusion. Family and parenting support services were central to this as a pillar of active inclusion strategies but it should be noted that we were not making a study of family and parenting support "*per se*". This, of course, influenced our choice of project visits.

The study visit falls under Eurochild's first strategic objective of strengthening the Eurochild network. Under this objective Eurochild aims to facilitate peer learning and exchange between member organisations - to show how policies and practice have changed the lives of children and/or their families for the better - and facilitate the transfer of this experience from one member state or region to another. This logically contributes to Eurochild's two other strategic objectives of influencing policy and sharing information and expertise on child poverty and social exclusion.

The project was a two-stage project to look at what family support policies and practices give the best outcomes for children and how lessons learned could be used to influence policy and practice in participating countries.

Stage 1 of the project focused on the approach to family policy in host countries. Part 1 of this report provides an overview of family policies in host countries, identifying those factors that delegates considered critical to successful outcomes. It makes recommendations for policy development at national and European levels and concludes by exploring some of the remaining challenges that Sweden and Denmark face in upholding their strong social welfare systems and commitment to inclusion and equality for all children.

Stage 2 of the project looked at how four of the participating delegations – Bulgaria, Finland, Ireland and The Netherlands/Flanders – were able to use lessons learned in their actions to influence policy and practice in their home countries. Part 2 is the account of that activity.

REPORT - PART 1

A SNAPSHOT OF FAMILY POLICIES IN HOST COUNTRIES

These extracts are taken from the [European Alliance for Families](#) website, where member states present their profiles on family policy and **progress achieved on the EU targets and guidelines agreed within the Lisbon Strategy**.

See:

- http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/families/index.cfm
- www.eurochild.org (via Events-Past):
- Council of Europe, Family Policy Database <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/familypolicy/>

SWEDEN

Swedish family policy is aimed at supporting the dual-earner family model and ensuring the same rights and obligations regarding family and work for both women and men. The main elements are generous spending on family benefits, flexible leave and working hours for parents with young children and affordable, high-quality childcare.

Female employment: The employment rate of women, at 71.8%, is close to that of men (76.7%) (2009: 78% - 83%) and well above the [Lisbon target for female employment](#) (60%). Measured at 81% in 2006, the employment rate of mothers of children under six is the highest in the EU. At the same time, at 1.88 children per woman, the fertility rate is relatively high compared to the EU average of 1.53. A high proportion of women use flexible working arrangements. Female and male part-time employment rates stand at 41.4% and 13.3% respectively, compared to the EU averages of 31.1% for women and 7.9% for men. Women work on average five hours per week less than men, a smaller difference than elsewhere in the EU. The [gender pay gap](#) in Sweden is about the same as the EU average of 17%.

Parental leave: A highly-developed and flexible [parental leave](#) scheme allows and encourages both parents to spend time with their children. Parents are collectively entitled to up to 16 months paid leave per child. Of this, 13 months are compensated at 80% of the previous income up to a ceiling of approximately €42,000 per year (for 2009) and the remaining three months are paid at a fixed rate of (now) €20 per day. (Parents without employment and no previous income receive the flat rate for the whole period). Each parent has a personal, non-transferable entitlement to two months of paid parental leave. The remaining 12 months can be shared between parents. The right to be absent from work full time is restricted to the child's first 18 months. Thereafter parents have the right to decrease their working time by up to 25%, until the child is eight years old or finishes the first year of school. Despite the flexibility of the parental leave system, most leave is still taken by mothers. Nevertheless, fathers in Sweden still take about 21% of the total amount of parental leave days, which is considerably more than most EU member states.

Cash benefits: At around 3% of GDP, financial benefits for children and families represent one of the highest shares in the EU (the EU average is 2.1% of GDP). Along with the high level of labour force participation, this is seen as a major reason for low poverty among children. **At 13% (2008) Sweden had one of the EU's lowest child poverty rates and was among the top-rated nations for child well-being in the 2007 UNICEF report.**

In addition to parental benefits, a range of financial instruments have been implemented to reduce the financial burdens on parents raising children. These include: pregnancy benefit payable for a maximum of 50 days at 80% of the mother's previous income to expectant mothers who are unable to work because of the physically demanding nature of their jobs; temporary parental benefit paid at 80% of annual earnings for a sick child under the age of 12; child allowance (a flat-rate entitlement of all children resident in Sweden)

amounting to ca. €100 per month and per child with supplements for large families ranging from ca. €10 for the second child to ca. €100 for the fifth child.

Childcare: Public childcare is available to all parents and it operates on a whole-day basis. Most childcare facilities are open from 6.30 a.m. until 18.30 p.m. (Municipalities have an obligation to provide pre-school activities for children whose parents work or study; this obligation extends to children of unemployed persons or persons on parental leave, for a minimum of 15 hours a week). Pre-school is free for children aged between four and six for up to 15 hours per week. This will be extended for children from the age of three from 1 July 2010. Parental fees are directly proportional to parents' income and conversely proportional to the number of children in a family. At a maximum, they amount to 3% the family's income and cover, on average, only 11% of the real cost of a place in pre-school. As a result, 47% of children under three and 91% of children between three and six are enrolled in formal childcare. These figures are well above the EU Barcelona targets for childcare provision and the EU-25 averages of 30% and 84% respectively.

New reforms: In 2008, the Swedish government introduced a "child-raising allowance" to allow for a smoother transition between parental leave and work. Applications for child-raising allowance can be made for children over the age of one but younger than three. The allowance is administered by municipalities and can be combined with paid employment. Amounting ca. €300 per month, it is paid to parents after the parental leave period if the child does not take up public childcare. In the same year, a gender equality bonus was also introduced, intended as a tax reduction for parents who share their paid parental leave more equally. The reform also aimed to enhance the educational quality of childcare and introduced a childcare voucher system to give more choice to parents.

DENMARK

Danish family policy is a policy mix of flexible working hours, universal childcare coverage, extensive leave rights and generous individual benefits **aimed at supporting families and improving the work-life balance of parents.**

Female employment: The female employment rate is 74.3% (2008), the highest in the EU, and only 8% lower than that of men. The employment rate of mothers of children under six, at 77%, is the second highest in the EU, after Sweden. The fertility rate, at 1.83 children per woman, is high compared to other EU countries. Women and men in Denmark work shorter hours per week than the EU average: 32.4 and 37.9 vs. 33.9 and 44.1 respectively, so the difference in working hours between women and men is smaller than for the EU as a whole. Flexible forms of employment are widely used by both women and men. In 2008, 36.5% of women and 14.2% of men worked part-time – above the EU averages of 31.1% and 7.9% respectively. Since 2002, the right to part-time work applies irrespective of any provisions laid out in collective agreements. Employees are also protected against dismissal for making a request to work part-time. The gender pay gap in Denmark is about the same as the EU average of 17%.

Parental leave: The Danish parental leave system is amongst the most generous and most flexible in the EU. A total of 52 weeks (one year) of leave (maternity, paternity and parental) is available to parents. Compensation of the leave depends on a worker's employment situation and collective agreement conditions; in certain cases it can reach the full level of salary for the full duration of the leave. Four weeks of maternity leave before childbirth and 14 weeks after childbirth are available to mothers. In addition, fathers are entitled to take up to two weeks off work after the birth of the child. Nearly all fathers make use of paternity leave, but this leave constitutes only 8% of the combined leave (maternity, paternity and parental) taken by mothers and fathers. Parents are entitled to 32 weeks of parental leave, with full unemployment benefit rights and a further two weeks without. They may share this as they want. Employees may extend the initial 32 weeks to 46 weeks at a reduced rate of pay and unemployed persons to 40 weeks. If the employer agrees, the parents are entitled to share the leave so both parents are able to work part-time. A system whereby parents can postpone 8-13 weeks of their parental leave to take care of

their child before his or her ninth birthday is being phased in by 2011.

Cash benefits: Spending on social protection benefits for children and families amounts to 3.8% of the Danish GDP, which is more than any other EU Member State spends on support for families. The major proportion of this, 3.6% of GDP, is made up of non-means-tested benefits. **At 10% (2007) Denmark shared the lowest EU child poverty rate with Finland and was among the top-rated nations for child wellbeing in the 2007 UNICEF report¹.**

Cash benefits include: General child benefits (*family allowance*) are paid to the family for each child under the age of 18 – ranging from €183 per month for children under two to €114 for children aged between seven and seventeen. In case of or multiple births, additional benefit is paid until the child's seventh birthday. Some types of adoption also qualify for a one time cash benefit at €5,986. (Lone parent families qualify for additional child allowances (*child benefit*).

Childcare: High quality childcare arrangements help mothers return to employment. (Childcare is guaranteed by municipalities for all children aged 6 months – 6 years). A survey undertaken in 2006 found that 79% of Danish mothers who took parental leave resumed work to the same extent as before. Fees are relative to income: lower income families pay at a reduced rate or receive the services free of charge. In 2007, 70% of children under three and 97% of children between three and compulsory school age were enrolled in formal childcare. 63% and 82% of children of each age group were enrolled for 30 or more hours per week. These figures are well above the EU Barcelona targets for childcare provision and the EU-25 averages of 30% and 84% respectively.

New reforms: In 2005, the Danish government set up the *Family and Working Life Commission* to identify barriers to parents' achieving a good balance between family and working life. A number of the recommendations were taken up, including: longer and more flexible maternity leave; guaranteed day-care availability for all children from six months to school age; free choice of childminding scheme; healthy lunch meals for (the younger) pre-schoolers in day-care facilities; abolition of isolated closing days in day-care facilities; extension of the *Substitute Grandparent* scheme; introduction of a *Balance Award* to enterprises that give priority to the balance between family life and working life.

¹ Child poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Report Card 7, 2007

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

During the plenary sessions of the study visit, delegates worked across delegation groups to identify critical success factors of host countries' family policies and recommendations for good practice that flow from this. They concluded with challenges that remain to be addressed. All presentations from the Round Table debates and project visits on which this analysis is made can be found in the Study Visit section of Eurochild's website².

It should be noted that, although there is much common ground between host countries, there were clear policy distinctions that result in some country-specific comments. It should also be noted that we did not, regrettably, have the opportunity to talk to parents in Denmark, as this proved not to be possible in the final analysis. Comments from parents therefore only relate to Swedish parents.

A CULTURE OF SOCIETY SUPPORTING WORKING PARENTS

One of the most immediately striking things about both host countries is that everything – flexible working hours, parental leave entitlements, family benefits, childcare and family support services - is geared towards sustaining the “working family” model. The high standards of living and generous family benefits and entitlements are predicated on parents working and paying into the social insurance system and this is the cultural “norm”. No-one stays at home and does nothing - nor expects to – unless they are on parental leave, ill or retired from work. For those who have not paid into the system, eligibility for social assistance requires participation in education, training or work experience placements in preparation for work. Everyone “buys into” this – employers, unions, parents, the state. There is no concept of a “benefits culture”.

“We cannot expect benefits if they have not been earned - the system would collapse!” Father, Swedish Open Nursery School

Social assistance payments³ in both countries are regarded as a “last resort”, provided when a person (or family) is temporarily without sufficient means (through wages or unemployment benefits) to meet the necessary costs of living. Every individual is bound to support themselves and must always try to find employment with sufficient pay so long as they are physically and psychologically able to do so.

A SOCIAL CONTRACT BASED ON SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

In Sweden, we found a good example of the kind of family policy that can evolve when the social contract is based on a model of social solidarity that is widely accepted and has become socially embedded over a long period of time. Almost half a century of stable, single-party government, with a political commitment to creating this kind of society, clearly makes it more possible to achieve this. Fred Deven, in his paper for the 2009 Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Family Affairs⁴, argues that:

“if (in Europe) we can really talk about a family policy that mainly centres on the well-being of the family as a unit.....the family policy of Sweden is considered as perhaps the closest, having elaborated quite consistently the dual-earner model over various decades”.

² <http://www.eurochild.org/> (events-past)

³ See: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/familypolicy/>

⁴ Family Policy in Council of Europe Member States, Two expert reports commissioned by the Committee of Experts on Social Policy for Families and Children, June 2009

The parents we spoke to – mothers and fathers on parental leave – at the Open Nursery Centres in Stockholm were testimony to this. They were prepared to accept high levels of taxation to pay for the benefits they all enjoyed:

“We don’t mind paying high taxes as we and our children benefit - we would not want to live in a country where taxes may be lower but the benefits are less and you don’t get to spend time with your children when they are young”.

CLEAR VISION AND GOALS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Clear goals at national level give direction to local policy implementation and a clear context for local service provision. Family policy in both Denmark and Sweden is largely implemented by municipalities, which gives more scope for developing services that are locally responsive and allows more local control. It is also a better basis for collaboration between agencies when everyone is committed to the overall objectives.

Participation in the labour market and the ability to support oneself are clear policy drivers in both countries and family policy is intertwined with this. In Sweden this takes place in a cultural and political context where social cohesion is an equally important driver and this characterises policy implementation and service delivery.

GUARANTEED ACCESS TO CHILDCARE

Subsidised childcare in Denmark is guaranteed by municipalities for all children aged 6 months – 6 years. Fees are relative to income so lower income families pay at a reduced rate or receive services free of charge. Approximately 25% of the real cost of a childcare place is met through fees. The rest is met by municipalities and there are financial penalties for not meeting these obligations. There is a mix of public/private provision but no maximum fee in the private sector.

Recent legislation has produced a shift of focus away from provision for working parents to child-focused services that promote child development within an agreed curriculum. The legislation is intended to create greater coherence between day care facilities, school and after-school provision, as well as having a regulatory effect on quality control. Approximately 70% of day care staff are pedagogues, though not all are qualified.

Municipalities in Sweden have an obligation to provide pre-school activities for children whose parents work or study, and an obligation to provide a minimum of 15 hours a week pre-school activity to children of unemployed persons or persons on parental leave. Fees are directly proportionate to parents’ income and conversely proportionate to the number of children in a family up to a maximum of 3% of the family’s income. From July 2010, pre-school will be free for children aged between three and six for up to 15 hours per week. Approximately 10% of the real cost of a pre-school place is recovered from fees.

Childcare in Sweden has strong pedagogic goals as well as enabling parents to work. Personnel are generally well educated and the pedagogic activity has always been in focus.

UNIVERSAL FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

The delegation was impressed by the high quality, universally accessible family and parenting support services that are available to parents in Sweden through a network of locally based *family centres* that provide maternal health care, child health care, open pre-school facilities for parents and children and preventive social counselling. Different professional groups – midwives, paediatric nurses, paediatricians, pre-school teachers, social workers, psychologists - work together to promote good health for children and parents, a strong social network around families and an “equal parenthood” between mothers and fathers.

Services are voluntary and free of charge and accessed by people from all walks of life. Expectant parents and new parents are frequent visitors. Family centres are an integral part of Swedish welfare society. *Open pre-school* is a nationally regulated – but not legally required – facility for parents and pre-school children where professional pre-school teachers and sometimes social workers work. Premises are equipped for playing and adapted to infants and small children. Services are voluntary and free of charge and neither application nor registration is required. Visitors to open preschool facilities are usually parents on parental leave and their children. When the open preschool is located in the same building as maternity and child health centres, it becomes a family centre.

We visited Hässelby-Vällingby Family Centre, in a suburb of Stockholm with a mixed population but a big socioeconomic gap between poor and well-off families. The result of a collaboration between the Family Support Division and the Preschool Department, the Centre offers a range of individual and group programmes, educational possibilities, self-help groups and family counselling. It is an example of “a low risk strategy, close to the Swedish general welfare model”.

AN INVESTMENT IN PARENTING

There are generous, compensated, parental leave schemes in both countries to allow parents to spend time with their children when the children are young - 16 months collectively for Swedish parents and 52 weeks collectively for Danish parents (this can be prolonged to 18 months at a correspondingly reduced rate of financial support). Parental leave entitlements in Sweden are the right of the individual parent but 6 months of each parent’s leave can be transferred to the other parent with written consent. New rules in Denmark are designed to provide for greater flexibility so that parents can decide how they want to share the “family” entitlement of 32 weeks. In Sweden, the right to be absent from work full time is restricted to the child’s first 18 months but thereafter, parents have the right to decrease their working time by up to 25% until the child is eight years old or finishes the first year of school. In Denmark, a system whereby parents can postpone 8-13 weeks of their parental leave to take care of their child before his or her ninth birthday is being phased in by 2011.

In Sweden we were impressed by the commitment to supporting parents before the birth of a child and during the time when parents are on parental leave - and how this has become a cultural “norm”. Since the seventies, when corporal punishment of children was prohibited, the government has supported ways of strengthening positive parenting. Since then, all maternity and childcare centres have to offer parent training groups. Although it is totally voluntary to use the services of these centres, 99% of all expectant parents, new parents and parents of pre-school children make use of them.

“Each parent of a pre-school child goes to his or her child health care centre as naturally as all children go to school”, Swedish Family Centre Association

This seems to be an essential building block for the future, enabling good parent-child and family relationships to be established and upholding what we know to be in a child’s developmental interest, physically and emotionally⁵. It is also supported by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, which – in its Second European Quality of Life Survey⁶ – recommends (among other things) that:

Given that growth in both employment and population levels plays an important role in ensuring sustainable growth, policies that facilitate the transition to adulthood (especially the entry into employment) need to be considered in terms of how they support partnership and parenthood.

5 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (IRC), Report Card No. 8 - The Child Care Transition. A League Table on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2008

6 Second European Quality of Life Survey: Family life and work, Eurofound, March 2010

RESPONDING TO CHANGING FAMILY PATTERNS

There is clearly a need to respond to diversity within families beyond what has been the “traditional” two-parent family. In both host countries we now see a strong push to progress towards *shared parenting* as the accepted behaviour of separated parents.

The Parent Responsibility Act (2007) in Denmark means parents automatically share custody of their child on the establishment of paternity and, where joint custody exists, courts may only terminate it where compelling reasons exist. Furthermore, it is now the entitlement of *the child* to have contact with the parent with whom he/ she does not live (previously this right was vested in the non-custodial parent) and both parents have to participate in the practical and financial arrangements to make this happen.

Social assistance payments can be made to non-resident and non-custodial parents to facilitate contact in cases of financial difficulty. Statistically, families are distinguished as either “residence” families or “contact” families. A “residence” family is where a child/ren of one of the family members is enrolled in the population register at that address. A “contact” family is where a child/ren of one of the family members does not share the same address. Some families can be both “residence” families (having a child/ren registered at that address) and “contact” families (having a child/ren registered at another address). Universal child benefits (*family allowance*) are paid to families who have “residence” status. “Residence” families who are lone parent families qualify for additional child allowances (*child benefit*). There is also provision for advance payment, from public funds, of child support to the “residence” parent if the other parent defaults. This is recoverable retrospectively.

In Sweden, the Committee on Economy and Cooperation between Separated Parents has been set up to look at what incentives – including financial incentives - may be needed to change behaviour and encourage separated parents towards an equal sharing of childcare responsibilities that, in effect, means the child residing with each parent on alternate weeks. The costs and needs of the child will be examined, including whether a special “child account” can be a solution. There already exists provision for advance maintenance payments through social insurance if the parent liable to pay maintenance for the child fails to pay. The liable parent incurs a debt to the state. In 2008, social insurance paid maintenance support for 13% of all children in Sweden (Social Insurance Report 2008:15). The effect on work/life balance for lone parents will also be considered. A discernable “conceptual shift” away from “lone parenting” to “shared parenting” appears already to be taking place and the results will be interesting to see. The Committee will, however, be looking at the *effects on children* of shared parenting before coming to a position on this.

A COMMITMENT TO GENDER EQUALITY

In Sweden, the goal of combining work and family is intertwined with the goal of gender equality. The introduction of parental insurance in the seventies saw a shift away from one-earner to dual-earner families and signalled a shared responsibility by parents for their economic situation and their children – what is now termed the “dual earner-dual carer” model. It allowed fathers to take more responsibility for childcare by taking more parental leave and mothers to return to the workplace sooner so they are not disadvantaged in terms of career opportunities by taking most of the leave. This model also reinforces children’s right of access to both parents.

In reality, however, most leave in Sweden is still taken by mothers, although fathers take about 21% of the total amount of parental leave days, which is significantly more than most EU Member States. In Denmark most fathers take the 2 weeks paternity leave but this constitutes only 8% of the combined leave (maternity, paternity and parental) taken by mothers and fathers collectively. Labour market segmentation also persists, with many women – in both countries - opting for lower paid jobs where there is more flexibility in working conditions and often more generous leave entitlements (for example in the public sector). The gender pay gap in both countries remains at the EU average.

As part of the 2008 reforms, Sweden introduced a “gender equality bonus” that provides tax relief of up to 300€ a month for parents who share parental leave more equally. The effect is that, for families with low

income or average income, the financial reasons for the mother to use most of the parental leave will be almost eliminated. It will not cover income loss in high income families but will still make a difference. The strategy is criticised as interventionist by those who prefer giving families more control over how they use their leave entitlements. However, this may well result in more families acting in a “gender-unequal” manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the debate on critical success factors, a number of recommendations can be made:

AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

- Strong policy coherence nationally with clear goals of achieving a collective commitment to supporting parents to work, spend time with their children and have a good quality of family life
- Family policies that centre on the well-being of the family and are underpinned by a commitment to social and intergenerational solidarity
- A clear policy framework that enables effective devolution of responsibility to local areas to enable more locally responsive services and more effective collaboration between professionals
- Guaranteed access to good quality, integrated childcare and early education services that are flexible and low cost and not tied to employment
- A solid foundation of integrated, universally accessible family and parenting support services that are non-stigmatising, inclusive, child-centred and start from a position of building individual and collective strengths and competences. The “family centre” model is a good building block and primary health care services an effective “gateway” to other services
- An investment in preparation for – and enrichment of – the parenting experience as a cultural “norm” in a society that values children and supports the family as the natural nurturing unit of children. Compensated and flexible parental leave entitlements that allow parents to be at home with their child for at least one year underpin this
- A commitment to gender equality in the labour market and equality of responsibility for childcare and domestic responsibilities. The Swedish “dual earner/ dual carer” model is a good place to begin
- A commitment to monitoring the practical application and impact on children of new policy direction, for example formal “shared parenting” arrangements. The best interests of the child should always be the policy driver

AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

- Promote and support continuous monitoring of the impact on children of evolving reconciliation policies that responds to what children have to say on whether the work/ life balance is right for them
- Promote an approach to reconciliation of work and family life that recognises the importance of the “happiness” factor and responds to what families have to say about the quality of their lives⁷

⁷ For more detailed discussion on this see: Second European Quality of Life Survey: Family life and work, Eurofound, March 2010

DISCUSSION ON REMAINING CHALLENGES

In any “success story”, there are some groups who risk being “left behind” - groups who are particularly vulnerable and at greater risk of marginalisation. In host countries this means families without stable employment and/or poor employment prospects – families who are therefore “outside” the system of social insurance that is the key to everything - adequate income, parental insurance benefits and leave entitlements.

“If you’re in the system you have everything, if you’re outside it, you have nothing”, Father, Swedish Family Centre

“The strong connection between the labour market and parental insurance, as well as most parts of social insurance, may make marginalised groups even more marginalised. It may create barriers to exit marginalisation and make it very hard to become ‘included’ once one has been ‘excluded’” (Family Policy in Sweden, 2008, Ministry Social Insurance Report 2008:15)

Both host countries identify the same vulnerable groups, as illustrated by the following reports from the ICSW Nordic Conference on Child Poverty, November 2009⁸

“Social policy is changing in Denmark and the system of assistance to low-income families means smaller economic benefits and time limited support. Stimulation to work is looked upon as the solution.....(but) the gap between those who have and those who have not is increasing. Families with low income are vulnerable in different ways and the most hard-stricken families are the families with a single mother, unemployed parents.....and immigrant parents” Senior Lecturer, Social University College, Copenhagen

“Risk for child poverty was higher for children in families with foreign background (30.2%), children with a single parent (25.9%) and highest for children with foreign background and a single parent. Nearly half of them (49.2%) are categorised as poor. Child poverty is also related to segregation between different parts of the big cities. In the big cities you find both the richest and poorest districts - in six districts child poverty was shown as higher than 40%, pointing at very segregated housing areas” Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare Investigator

THE SITUATION OF LONE PARENT FAMILIES

	Child poverty rate % (Eurostat)	Child poverty rate in lone parent households % (Eurostat)
Sweden	13 (2008)	26 (2008)
Denmark	10 (2007)	17 (2007)
EU 27	20 (2007)	34 (2007)

Although lower than the EU average, lone parent families are still over-represented in child poverty statistics in both countries.

In Denmark, cash benefits for lone parents are a mix of universal and targeted benefits, whereas in Sweden, there are no special benefits for lone parents because they are supported within a gender-neutral family policy based on individual entitlements. Additional benefits are therefore accorded on the basis of need as

⁸ Child Poverty in the Nordic countries, International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), www.icsw.org

opposed to status, for example, “means-tested” housing allowance. However, the biggest take-up of this is by lone parents. Similarly, in 2008, 18% of lone parent households received social assistance, either intermittently or continuously. The objective is always to get people back into the labour market as soon as possible. A strategy to reduce absence from work due to ill-health has had some success, with the length of time on social assistance currently averaging a maximum of 10 months.

The move towards “shared parenting” in both host countries may be an interesting development.

Lone parents in Sweden are able to access support services through universally accessible services – such as the Hässelby-Vällingby Family Centre described above - where the model is one of “empowerment” through confidence and skills building, a “by-product” of which is attainment of higher qualification levels and, logically, increased employability potential. There were no services dedicated to lone parents “per se”.

HÄSSELBY-VÄLLINGBY FAMILY CENTRE, STOCKHOLM

Hässelby is a suburb of Stockholm. The population, about 65 000, is a mixed population. There is a huge socioeconomic gap between poor and well-off houses.

Rate of immigrants from outside Europe	14% (average in Sweden 6%)
Rate of low income families	13% (average in Sweden 10 %)
Rate of low income single parent	33% (average in Sweden 34 %)

Child poverty rate index

Hässelby immigrant children	41% (average in Sweden 24 %)
Hässelby “Swedish” children	5% (average in Sweden 5 %)
Hässelby all children	15% (average in Sweden 11%)

All families with pre-school children have access to the open nursery school. Most visitors are, for different reasons, not on the labour market. They are on parental leave with their newborn child for a year or two, unemployed or on sick leave. Many unemployed are refugees and immigrants.

In Denmark, we visited Alexandra College, a specialist resource at the other end of the spectrum. The College aims to aid young lone mothers, or expectant mothers, from disadvantaged backgrounds to get good educational qualifications, employment and an independent life. It is a small, self-governing residential establishment with a capacity to accommodate 11 young mothers and their children in high standard apartments. Places are funded by the municipality and the admission criteria is selective. It is a costly resource but has an almost 100% “success” rate. Length of stay is 2-3 years. It is not currently up to full occupancy due to restricted municipality funding.

THE ALEXANDRA COLLEGE, COPENHAGEN

Around 1,000 babies are born to young mothers in Denmark every year. Only around 22% are able to access training or get into the (higher) education system.

The Alexandra College for vulnerable young pregnant women and young mothers aims to support young mothers to obtain a life of great value for themselves and their children. The main focus is a self-supporting life achieved through a relevant education. In the college the young mothers receive counselling, social guidance and care.

The College is unique in Denmark but there is money set aside centrally to assist other municipalities on application.

THE SITUATION OF THOSE FURTHEST AWAY FROM THE LABOUR MARKET

In Denmark, we visited the Centre for Progress and Job Training known as Brøndby House of Development in a suburb of Copenhagen. The project demonstrated a highly structured employment activation programme for attendees who have low skills/ low educational levels and are dependent on social benefits as they are not insured. The Centre offers a wide remit of “bridge-building” activities to promote labour market inclusion and social inclusion. It is part of the Municipal Job Centre. The overall objective is to get people back into employment and into the social insurance system. Financial incentives are provided to employers who employ people from the Centre. Until 2 years ago, jobs could usually be found for those ready for work within 24 hours but the economic recession has slowed this down and people may now be in different kinds of programmes for several years. Particularly affected are young people under 30 years of age. Parents attending the Centre are provided with childcare places.

HOUSE OF DEVELOPMENT, BRØNDBY MUNICIPALITY, COPENHAGEN

Brøndby has 35,000 inhabitants, 3.5 % of whom are dependent on social benefits and need special employment access support. The Centre only accepts people who are dependent on benefits who usually have low skills/ educational levels. Approx. 44% of attendees have an immigrant background.

Individual job plans are made for attendees over a period of 3-6 months and training, work experience placements and internships are accessed. Additional psychological and counselling support is available to those who need to overcome problems before they are ready for work. This accounted for approximately half of attendees. There is a discrete youth programme for 18-25 year olds and longer-term integration programmes for immigrant attendees that could last up to 7 years. Some come from war-torn countries and suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. In these circumstances, they may move on to retirement.

The Centre tries to match aptitudes and interests to available jobs but, ultimately, people are trained to meet labour market demand and non-cooperation results in loss of benefits. *Normally, moving into employment means moving out of poverty as the minimum wage is relatively high.*

THE SITUATION OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Social and economic integration of immigrant families is becoming an increasing imperative in the EU generally as globalisation and mobility within an enlarged union have had their effects. In countries such as our host countries - that were previously largely homogenous societies – this probably presents the biggest challenge and greatest potential destabilising effect. Concentrations of immigrant communities not only put pressure on housing, health and education systems, but also mitigate against social cohesion goals. The

consequences for children are higher risks of poverty, disadvantage and, ultimately, alienation from their adopted countries. In Sweden, we visited the Solstrålen “family centre” in Malmö where the challenges are very well illustrated:

SOLSTRÅLEN FAMILY CENTRE, MALMÖ

Malmö is the third city of Sweden, close to Denmark and the rest of Europe. The way to Sweden from Europe passes through Denmark. Many immigrants and refugees coming to Sweden stay in Malmö for a more or less long time.

Malmö is also an old industrial town. The income gap is very high. The suburb Rosengård... is a deprived area. Even in Rosengård, there are big differences between the different residential areas. In the poorest part, 97% of the population are immigrants from all over the world. In another part, live Swedish people and immigrants from Denmark. The Danish immigrant law says that when a Dane is married to a foreigner they are not allowed to settle down in Denmark for the first years of marriage. That is why they go to Sweden.

In the Rosengård area 96% of the children have their roots in another country. The percentage of Sweden is 24.

Rate of immigrants outside Europe	30%	(average Sweden 6%)
Rate of low income families	64%	(average Sweden 10%)
Rate of low income single parent	79%	(average Sweden 34%)

Child poverty rate index

Rosengård immigrant children	60 %	(average Sweden 29%)
Rosengård “Swedish children”	27 %	(average Sweden 5%)
Rosengård all children	59%	(average Sweden 11%)

All families have access to the services provided at the Centre. The almost hundred per cent coverage of Maternity and Child Health Service offers a unique possibility to identify pregnant women and young families with difficulties and to promote health and well-being amongst all of them. First of all families are offered the national child health programme, the EPDS (post natal depression) screening and different activities to promote the parent-child attachment. At the same time, dental health activities, family guidance, parent groups, information about Swedish society and access to the open nursery school are available.

Different professional groups collaborate in order to deal with the patterns of local needs and morbidity by using empowerment methods and interdisciplinary work. The medically-oriented health system must apply psychological and social methods and staff to be able to act effectively in the social arena. Child health workers have to act as child health advocates with individual families as well as on a community level. The question is how traditional health services can contribute to social cohesion.

“The centre has given me hope.....I didn’t have to ask for anything, it was offered.....I want to study to go to university.....I want a better life for myself and my children”, Immigrant lone parent, Swedish Family Centre

“(Nordic countries)... have a unique history of strong welfare systems with policies which effectively reduced poverty. Now there is a need to deepen the knowledge of child poverty and how it has changed during the last 10-15 years and what measures the welfare states can take to reduce (poverty levels)”, Concluding remarks, ICSW Conference, November 2009

REPORT - PART 2

FRAMEWORK FOR REPORTING

Delegates were asked to report on follow-up activity by the end of October 2010 and presented their reports⁹ to the meeting of the Family and Parenting Support Thematic Working Group that took place in Orebro, Sweden on 3rd November 2010, prior to Eurochild's 7th Annual Conference. Given the relatively short timeframe between the visit to Sweden and Denmark and the meeting in Orebro, delegates were asked to focus on concrete outputs from the visit - actions to impact directly on policy or practice development or activities such as seminars and conferences to share information, stimulate debate or shape opinion. An assessment of outcomes for children would demand a longer term tracking exercise that, amongst other things, would need to take account of how adopted policy or practice was implemented in a different national context. Whilst acknowledging the intrinsic value of this to the mutual learning process, it is beyond the scope of this project.

The framework within which reporting was undertaken was therefore agreed as the following:

- From the previously undertaken national family profiles¹⁰, a short resumé of the **aspects of policy and/or practice delegations wanted to change or improve** and the reasons for this, supported by relevant data relating to the current situation of children
- **Key learning points** that delegations took from the study tour relating to policy and/or practice in host countries and **how these have been used** since the visit to influence the national agenda, providing details of activities and outputs - what has been produced and/or organised nationally; what collaboration has taken place within delegations/ with other delegations/ with host countries
- A brief commentary on **what was considered feasible to influence and/or change nationally**, given the cultural, political and financial environment, explaining positive and negative developments in family policy that constitute the backdrop to this.

This last point was included in view of the impact of the financial crisis on public expenditure across Europe and the evidence Eurochild has from its members of the vulnerability of benefits and services to children and families in the current climate.

⁹ Delegates' reports of follow-up activity (October 2010) are available at Eurochild website:
[http://www.eurochild.org/index.php?id=394&tx_ttnews\[pS\]=1291032139&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=405&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=287&cHash=0f806ed93a0cc5ab748724162065073d](http://www.eurochild.org/index.php?id=394&tx_ttnews[pS]=1291032139&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=405&tx_ttnews[backPid]=287&cHash=0f806ed93a0cc5ab748724162065073d)

¹⁰ Delegates' profiles of national family policies (April 2010) are available at Eurochild website:
[http://www.eurochild.org/index.php?id=394&tx_ttnews\[pS\]=1290947245&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=405&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=287&cHash=875ae7f22184867ac72eb711c7b3b505](http://www.eurochild.org/index.php?id=394&tx_ttnews[pS]=1290947245&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=405&tx_ttnews[backPid]=287&cHash=875ae7f22184867ac72eb711c7b3b505)

RESUMÉ OF COUNTRY REPORTS

BULGARIA

The report from Bulgaria was provided by Dani Koleva, Policy Director, National Network for Children, Bulgaria¹¹. She comments that:

“The study tour provided us with a space for exchange and learning which allowed the National Network for Children – Bulgaria to ensure quality input into the Bulgarian policy development process. The Deputy Minister’s first-hand experience was also critical in pushing our change agenda forward. In addition, the study tour has strengthened our contacts and relationships with policy-makers thus making the network better positioned to influence policy and practice on children and family issues”.

Policy context: A major policy shift is foreseen in Bulgaria to move away from a “crisis-oriented” culture to a more supportive “family-oriented” environment focused on preventive services and early intervention strategies. Allied to this is a major deinstitutionalisation programme - the *Vision for the Deinstitutionalisation of the Children in the Republic of Bulgaria* - adopted by the government on 24 February 2010, that commits to closure of 137 institutions for children and a moratorium on the placement in institutions of infants and young children up to the age of 3 within the next 15 years.

A significant amount of structural funds – 30 million Euro - has been allocated for the first project for children with disabilities, *Childhood for All*, with 5 million Euro planned for 4/5 infant homes transformation to be piloted in 2011. As part of the operational programme *Human Resources Development*, there are plans to develop national foster care campaigning and to strengthen the capacity of child protection departments. A rationalisation of child protection administration is also foreseen.

Rationale for change or improvement: Family policy in Bulgaria currently focuses on services for children at risk rather than supporting children and families to prevent problems *before* they occur. Only 1.2% of GDP in Bulgaria is spent in support of the family, compared with an average of 2.1% throughout Europe and in excess of 3.5% in countries like Denmark or Luxembourg. Bulgaria ranks last in Europe on funds for family support per capita – EUR 30 per person compared to an EU average of EUR 470 – and Bulgarian families receive the lowest child benefits in Europe that are also means-tested. The number of children in specialised institutions at the end of December 2009 was 6730. The number of children in foster care and other types of community-based care was, comparatively, extremely low.

The political commitment to closing the institutions is undoubtedly “a huge step forward”. At the same time, despite the efforts of the state, in effect, “the gate of the institutional care system is still widely open”. The number of children placed in institutions in 2009 was 2094, 1416 of them up to 12 months old.

Key learning points taken from the study visit: On a policy level, key points were (1) the need for clear vision and goals at national level (2) the importance of integrated, universal family support services (3) the need to guarantee access to child care (4) the impact of early childhood education and care on child poverty – factors at the heart of the “critical success factors” of Sweden and Denmark identified in the *Part 1 Study Visit Report*.

On a practice level, Bulgarian delegates were impressed by the integrated approach to supporting families and the empowerment philosophy that distinguishes the Swedish Family Centre model. Detailed discussions on philosophy and methodology are planned with local stakeholders in 2011 as part of the pilot infant homes transformation and the National Network for Children (NNC) is committed to pursuing further what Sweden and other participants in the study tour can offer to feed into this process. Whilst there is a political

¹¹ National Network for Children, Bulgaria: <http://nmd.bg/en/nmd-network/about-nbd/>

commitment and significant momentum for change, it is recognised that an input of external expertise is needed to effect this.

How learning points have been used to influence the national agenda: The study visit provided clear messages and recommendations that were disseminated across the national network and led to NNC's adoption in June 2010 of a clear policy position and advocacy messages. This provided a strong platform from which to input into the policy development process, supported by the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy who participated in the study visit. Recommendations fed into the Deinstitutionalisation Action Plan Expert Group, the Infant Homes Concept Transformation and the Interdisciplinary Policy Working Group set up by Government to look into policy and legislative changes in the area of children and families. NNC meetings with working group members and key policy makers complemented this advocacy work, as did local media interviews.

NNC also produced a statement supporting government plans to introduce obligatory pre-school for 5 year old children. They participated in a Parliamentary round table debate in July 2010 and contributed to a parliamentary discussion on concrete legislative texts in August 2010.

The current policy status is that:

- the Deinstitutionalisation Action Plan is now formally approved by the Council of Ministers;
- the Infant Homes Concept is formally approved by the Ministry of Health;
- the Cross-portfolio Working Group has approved a concept which commits to the development of a dedicated family policy that supports children and families before problems occur rather than providing services reactively;
- amendments to legislation on pre-school provision for 5 year olds were approved by Parliament on 23 September 2010.

Comment on feasibility of effecting change or improvement in the current climate: Resistance to the economic shift to putting families first is expected from some quarters but the expectation is that the commitment to a dedicated, well-defined family policy will counter this. The pending health care reform - a priority for the Ministry of Health - is delaying the Infant Homes Concept approval and changes in political leadership are also a delaying factor. Pension reform - and the high political and social priority given to this - might also mean that policy reform for children and families will be given lower priority. However, despite these delays, **it is considered to be more a question of when rather than if the reforms will be implemented**, given the approval of the national deinstitutionalisation strategy in February 2010 and the involvement of the European Commission and other stakeholders, such as UNICEF and the OAK foundation, who input and support the process. That said, ensuring access to services and support in the current economic climate is regarded as "a constant challenge!".

FINLAND

The report from Finland was provided by Lassi Lainiala, Family Researcher, Population Research Institute, The Family Federation of Finland¹², on behalf of The Family Federation and the Central Union of Child Welfare. He comments:

"The experience and knowledge gained from the study visit was shared with a nationwide working group on parental leave in which two of our delegate members take part. The Swedish model of flexible parental leave has been introduced as good practice in a parental leave working group set by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The Family Federation of Finland has built a model of parental leave inspired by the Swedish model. Improvements to the parental leave system, mostly to the length of leave, are expected."

¹² The Family Federation of Finland: http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/in_english/population_research_institute/family_research/

Policy context: There is a need to create a better balance between work and family life in Finland and, although not a current political issue, Finnish policymakers are very open to positive suggestions in this area of development. In a recently held national survey of what citizens think about family policy (in which The National Federation of Finland was involved), the vast majority of respondents thought that more flexible working time arrangements was the best way to improve the situation of families, alongside more and better part-time jobs and increased “home care allowance”. This allowance is the benefit a parent can access after 10 months paid parental leave if a child is not in day care and is under 3 years old – but it is not related to previous earnings and is currently only at the level of EUR 314 per month.

A longer period of well compensated parental leave, and an increased share of parental leave for fathers, is needed. The state also needs to target financial support more accurately to reduce the income gap between population groups, in particular to improve the situation of lone parent families, which was widely accepted in the national survey. The need to monitor inequalities in support services for families is also evident. Currently, municipalities are left to out-source these and there are concerns that many will have insufficient resources in the future to continue to provide the services that children and families need.

Rationale for change or improvement: The number of families in the lowest income band in Finland has increased and child poverty has increased dramatically as a result. Although child poverty levels are, comparatively, amongst the lowest in Europe, income distribution data from *Statistics Finland* shows a dramatic upward trend in the numbers of Finnish children living in poverty - 13.8% in 2007 compared to 4.7% in 1995. Lone parent families, families with children under three years of age or with special needs, families with more than 3 children and families with a jobless household member are the most vulnerable.

The working family model is preferred by all stakeholders in Finland but flexible working hours are only available to about half of Finnish workers and the prospects of working flexible hours very much depend on the sector in which the employee is working. Flexible working is also gendered in favour of men, who have more opportunities of working flexible hours than women. The limited period of well compensated parental leave also means that a high number of families with young children under 3 years old are at risk of experiencing “temporary” poverty. Only half of Finnish mothers work when a child is less than 3 years old. In contrast, levels of employment amongst mothers of children more than 3 years old are amongst the highest in Europe. Concerns about the continued quality and accessibility of child care services - near to families and not too big group sizes - are also being raised. Smaller municipalities, in particular, face considerable financial challenges as demographic imbalances challenge their sustainability.

Key learning points taken from the study visit: The Finnish Delegation was interested to learn more about host countries’ measures to promote reconciliation of work and family life, in particular the open consultation in the workplace that takes place in Sweden and Denmark and the Swedish system of parental leave. They want to import the Swedish culture of greater flexibility in the workplace and build a model of parental leave inspired by the Swedish system.

How learning points have been used to influence the national agenda: Two delegate members participate in a parental leave working group set up by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. They have introduced the Swedish model of flexible parental leave as good practice and The Family Federation of Finland has built a model of parental leave for Finland inspired by the Swedish model. The new model of organising parental leave got a good response from different stakeholders and – although the work is not yet completed - positive improvements are expected as a result of the work done in the working group.

Delegates who participated in the study visit have also written statements considering improvements in social care and effective systems for measuring child wellbeing. This work is still ongoing. In addition, delegates’ organisations have written about the experiences of the study visit in their magazines. The huge media attention attracted by the national survey on family policy is also fuelling nationwide discussions on a daily basis. The Family Federation hopes this will generate positive reactions amongst policy-makers and respect for citizens’ opinions on how family policy in Finland should be developed.

Comment on feasibility of effecting change or improvement in the current climate: Finland was amongst the most affected countries during this economic crisis - when demand for its mainly capital-goods intensive exports collapsed - and the costs of the recession and demographic ageing remain a challenge to

fiscal sustainability. Even if there is consensus amongst unions, parents and the state about the changes needed to sustain the working family model, employers are sceptic about policy change in the current economic climate. Finland's Parliamentary elections will be held next spring and, whereas political parties have not signalled any intention of cutting family benefits or services, significant improvements in family benefits are unlikely in the current economic situation. However, **improvements to the parental leave system, mostly to the length of leave, are expected. The case for targeting more benefits towards lone parents could also be accepted by policy-makers.**

IRELAND

The report from Ireland was presented by Stuart Duffin, Welfare to Work Manager, One Family Ireland¹³ on behalf of the Irish delegation to the study visit. One Family Ireland is the lead advocacy agency nationally for people parenting alone and sharing parenting. Stuart comments:

"Lone parents and parents sharing parenting are often the first casualties in an economic crisis. They have the least leeway in the workplace and are often penalised the most for taking time out for family commitments....We learned a lot from the study visit - on universal service provision and interagency protocols - and have used this in our advocacy activities.....The study visit gave us "ammunition" to challenge perceptions!"

Policy context: Lone parents have been consistently over-represented in poverty figures in Ireland, even during the years of economic boom, and numbers of lone parent families have been steadily increasing. In times of financial crisis, lone parents and those sharing parenting stand to be the most vulnerable as budget cuts impact on families already under pressure financially and socially. In their 2011 pre-budget submission to the Department of Social Protection, One Family describes the reality of life for one-parent families in Ireland:

"The number of one-parent families with children under 20 years of age increased by 70.4% between 1997 and 2006. In 2006, one-parent families represented 22% of all families with children in this age group - an increase of 36% since 2002" (Population Census 2006).

"In 2008, 17.8% of people living in one-parent families were living in consistent poverty, compared to 4.2% of the general population... one-parent families also report higher levels of 'at risk of poverty' - 36.4% compared to 14.4% of the general population" (EU-SILC 2008).

"In 2008, lone parent households also reported the highest deprivation levels of any household type, with 24.2% of individuals in these households experiencing three or more of eleven deprivation items" (Press Release posted October 7th, 2010).

Whilst One Family recognises that *"public finances are under extreme pressure, and will continue to be so in to 2011 and beyond"* (they) are calling on the government to *"make good its commitment to protect the most vulnerable from the harshest cuts"*, contending that further budget cuts run the risk of *"laying the basis for greater and wider inequality in Irish society that could take a generation to address"*.

Rationale for change or improvement: Historically, Ireland has had a more generous welfare support system than service system and a balance between the two needed to be found. Equally, the benefits for families and the state of universal access to services needs further exploration. Realistically, in the current economic situation, both universal income supports and services are under threat. Lone parents with children over 14 years of age, for example, will lose their entitlement to the One-Parent Family Payment and "earnings disregard" (ability to earn a small amount without losing benefit) from 2011, with no indication that the level of "earnings disregard" on Job Seekers' Allowance will be increased to compensate for this or that

¹³ One Family Ireland: <http://onefamily.ie/policy-and-campaigns>

the kind of part-time working usually taken up by main carers will be facilitated. Given that many one-parent families receiving welfare benefits are already in poverty or at risk of poverty, One Family urges the government not to make further benefit cuts but to enhance supports that assist lone parents to acquire the skills, qualifications and confidence to move into sustainable jobs. More comprehensive, inclusive family and parenting supports are needed and strong anti-poverty targets linked to improving the well-being of children and families.

“If one-parent families are to move out of poverty and to experience full equality they must have access to the type and quality of services that will support them to access education, skill development and employment that will also assist them to positively manage their work and caring responsibilities” (One Family 2011 pre-budget submission)

Key learning points taken from the study visit: Delegates gained a better appreciation of the framework that exists in host countries for the integrated provision of support services for children and families and how this works at both the national and local level, as well as the rationale for universal service provision, preventive approaches and early identification of additional needs. Delegates also gained a clearer appreciation of the situation of lone parents and those who share parenting in host countries, where the policy focus is on universal supports and labour market participation for all adults - backed up with generous parental leave and childcare - as opposed to the targeting of benefits in Ireland. Participation in the debate on shared parenting was also timely as this has now become an important issue in Ireland. In relation to the interface between benefits and services, the visit provided an opportunity for delegates to see how services complement income support mechanisms in host countries, especially in relation to childcare, and to observe the way the social insurance systems operate, compared to the welfare benefits system in Ireland.

How learning points have been used to influence the national agenda: Senior level government representatives took part in the study visit and interagency discussions - with advocacy input from One Family - have been an on-going process, especially in relation to income supports, the debate on activation of lone parents and the debate on the optimal balance between services and income supports. One family has also used the knowledge gained through the study visit to advocate for universal supports for families in Ireland with politicians and the media. Importantly, learning points from the study visit have informed One Family's 2011 pre-budget submission to the Department of Social Protection, notably:

- Recommendations on removing the “poverty traps” facing lone parents include personal facilitators to provide “a first point of guidance and advice to lone parents on their welfare, employment, education, training, housing, childcare and parenting support options” and the provision of “affordable, quality childcare places...including after school and holiday provision, especially for those lone parents who from 2011 will no longer be eligible for the one-parent family payment”;
- Recommendations on parenting support include the availability of “additional supports for those parenting alone or sharing parenting to attend parenting courses and parent mentoring services” and the provision of “specially trained facilitators to work with new parents who are parenting alone to support them to access family and parenting services during the early years of their children's lives as well as to maintain and enhance their links with the labour market”.

On a practical level, in September 2010, One Family launched their “New Futures” programme to assist lone parents who are distanced from the labour market to develop and begin implementing realistic career plans. Funded by the European Social Fund and the Irish Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the programme runs for 5 months and successful completion earns accreditation by the Further Education and Training Awards Council.

Comment on feasibility of effecting change or improvement in the current climate: A 15 billion Euro budget cut was anticipated in the December budget announcement at a time when unemployment levels stand at 17%. In the meantime, on 24th November 2010, the Irish government announced its “National Recovery Plan 2011-2014” - an emergency budget that outlines a programme of budget cuts in the wake of the government's decision to accept a package of financial assistance from the European Union, the United Kingdom and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In response, One Family warns that:

“...any of the planned cuts in social welfare payments or in the minimum wage announced in the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014 will directly increase the thousands of one-parent families already living in povertypoverty rates for one-parent families remain the highest for any family type.....cuts in the minimum wage, together with increases in the tax take from low income workers, especially in the absence of any jobs or childcare strategy, will make this situation even worse for lone parents and their children..... **The emphasis of any reform should be on reducing poverty and social welfare dependency for lone parents by facilitating access to sustainable employment.....this means supporting those with childcare responsibilities to gain the skills and qualifications they need to be able to participate in any hoped for recovery in jobs in the years to come...**” (Press Release, posted 30th November 2010).

THE NETHERLANDS/FLANDERS

The Netherlands/ Flanders reports were provided by Caroline Vink, Senior Expert on International Youth Policy, The Netherlands Youth Institute¹⁴ and Nele Travers, Executive of EXPOO¹⁵, the Flemish Expert Centre on Parenting Support. The Netherlands Youth Institute and EXPOO made up a joint delegation, led by The Netherlands Youth Institute, as they shared a common interest in the development of parenting support policies and programmes and were already in a collaborative working relationship. They comment:

“We think that improved outcomes for children not only rely on financial support frameworks for parents, but also on how successful policies are in creating social networks for parents and giving parents the tools they need for successful taking care of their children.”

Policy context: The situation in the Netherlands regarding family policy was unclear when their report was written. The new government had only been installed a few days previously and was signalling major policy and structural changes against a background of an 18 billion Euro budget cut. The Ministry for Youth and Families was to be discontinued and responsibility for the child and youth care system devolved to local level. Local youth and family centres would be the new “front offices” for the child and youth care system, although it was not clear at that point what this would mean in practice. The strategy to develop youth and family centres in every municipality by 2011 was a “flagship” strategy rolled out in 2008 with the aim of “connecting, upgrading and strengthening” the supports already available to young people and families on growing up and parenting. At the heart of a preventive support system, the key features of the centres were that they should be “easily accessible, recognisable and close to home” (Newsletter of Netherlands Youth institute, July 2010). There is now a centre – fully operational or in development - in almost all of the 441 Dutch municipalities. The Netherlands Youth Institute provides the professional support that underpins the development of the centres and staff teams.

In Flanders and Brussels, the organisation of parenting support is an important part of Flemish family policy and is regulated by legislation. The regulatory decree¹⁶ of July 2007 specifies parenting support as the “easily accessible, basic support to parents and persons with parental responsibilities in the upbringing of children”. The emphasis is on prevention - both to prevent damage to children and young people and to prevent the use of much more expensive forms of support and care at a later stage – but parenting support is also seen as a means of strengthening the quality of life of families and children even when there are no problems. The 2007 decree provides for six provincial support centres - one in each of the provinces and one in Brussels - and 14 “parenting shops” – one in each central Flemish town and one in Brussels. It also provides for Parenting Support Coordinators, who support the development of parenting support plans at local level and the development of cross-community networks. EXPOO was set up within this legislative framework and operates under the auspices of the Flemish “Child and Family” government agency. Its purpose is to provide practical assistance to the field of parenting support through “collecting, enhancing and disseminating” relevant knowledge and expertise.

¹⁴ The Netherlands Youth Institute: <http://www.nji.nl/eCache/DEF/1/05/642.html>

¹⁵ EXPOO: <http://www.expoo.be/parenting-support-in-flanders>

¹⁶ Flemish Parliament Act of 13 July 2007 on the organisation of parenting support (Belgian Official Gazette 14.VIII.2007)

Rationale for change or improvement: The Netherlands/Flanders delegation was interested to learn more about host countries' approach to the universal provision of parenting support, in which there is room for targeting services towards specific groups, but where the emphasis is on empowering parents and fostering social networks, as well as helping to equip parents with the skills they need for parenting. Delegates were also interested in whether this approach produces better outcomes for children and to what extent family centres contribute to this.

The Netherlands Youth Institute has organised three international expert meetings – one every year since 2008 - to input into the development of The Netherlands youth and family centre strategy. Participation in the study visit added another dimension to this, in particular, through the opportunity to learn more about the Swedish approach to professional development that underpins integrated working and the empowerment of parents – a key theme of the 2010 meeting. EXPOO was also interested to know more about multi-professional collaboration in Swedish open access centres.

Key learning points taken from the study visit: The value of international exchange of knowledge, expertise and experiences was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Netherlands/ Flanders delegation. The importance of coordination and effective cross-sectoral working in combating family poverty and disadvantage was also a strong influencing point. Particularly appreciated was the approach to multi-agency working in the Swedish family centres, the professional attitude of staff and the emphasis on the empowerment of parents in all aspects of professional activity.

How learning points have been used to influence the national agenda: In The Netherlands, there are two main activities that have taken place or are in development that link to the study visit. The first relates to the international expert meeting on the professionalisation of youth and family centre staff (referred to above) that took place on 10th September 2010. The Netherlands Youth Institute invited Mrs Vibeke Bing to join this group and she contributed to the event as a speaker and workshop facilitator. Vibeke Bing was the “host” coordinator of the study visit in Sweden and is recognised as the “architect” of Swedish family centres. Further discussions on workforce development will draw on her contribution and other learning points taken from the study visit experience. The second activity is The Netherlands Youth Institute's initiative to organise the first European conference on parenting support in spring 2012. The aim is to provide a Europe-wide forum for researchers, practitioners and decision-makers to share views and experiences on parenting support through plenary sessions, workshops and informal social meeting places, with a clear expectation that this will grow into a sustainable initiative in the future. Collaboration with partners and networks in other European countries will be sought, anticipating the involvement of Eurochild and partners from the “expert meeting” group.

In Flanders, EXPOO published a report of their impressions and learning points from the study visit on their website to make information available to all actors in the parenting support field. They also organised a briefing with core partners and stakeholders in Flanders. On the 10th December 2010, they hold their third annual conference on parenting support and have invited Vibeke Bing to contribute to “bring the story of the Swedish Family Centers to Flanders”. They will take forward ideas from the study visit to feed into future project planning, in particular development of the workforce and the need for a variety of parenting supports, as well as additional support for the most vulnerable groups.

Feasibility of effecting change or improvement in the current climate: The timing of the report made it **difficult to comment on this in The Netherlands in view of the new political situation, the extent of budget cuts and, worryingly, no reference to family policy in the coalition document.** Nevertheless, The Netherlands Youth Institute would like to continue to learn from colleagues abroad about reaching out to parents and creating low threshold meeting places that support the creation of social networks, but also make it possible to identify additional parenting support needs at an earlier stage and in a non-stigmatising way. They have offered to host Eurochild's next family and parenting support event in May 2011, doing some cross-border work with Flemish colleagues.

In Flanders, EXPOO will take forward the learning points referred to above in advising the government on their policy on the organisation of parenting support. However, they know that **there is little extra budget available in the coming years so “great realisations” are not expected.**

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In writing this report, I am struck by the dedication of study visit participants to keeping their goals for children and families on the national agenda at a time of unprecedented financial and social uncertainty. For some, this even threatens their organisational survival. Their achievements in these difficult circumstances speak for themselves and their activities continue. They reflect, not only dedication, but also realism in assessing what is achievable and in finding credible and creative ways of doing things to achieve the desired results. Crucially, they are keeping alive in the minds of politicians and policy-makers our collective responsibility to uphold the rights of children and families and to promote intergenerational solidarity. This is key to developing fairer and more sustainable responses to the major challenges the European Union is currently facing. In parallel, there is a need for continuous monitoring of the fall-out from the economic crisis on a Europe-wide basis, as child poverty levels rise and benefits and services for the poorest children and families come under threat. Eurochild is well-placed to do this and through its members, plans to launch its position paper on the impact of the crisis on children and families early in 2011.

The inspiration and support for the study visit came from Eurochild's Family and Parenting Support Thematic Working Group. The group recently adopted a policy position paper¹⁷ on family policies (see Annex) in which, amongst other things, it makes specific recommendations to EU Member States, who ultimately have the responsibility to ensure the development and implementation of coordinated family policies. Many of these recommendations are informed by the experience of the study visit and previous activities undertaken by the group to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience. It is fitting to end this report with reference to these recommendations¹⁸:

Promote reconciliation measures and create a favourable policy environment for positive parenting -

While parenting is in many respects private, Member States have at their disposal a range of measures that can foster the right conditions for positive parenting. Strong policy coherence nationally aimed at supporting parents to work, spend time with their children and have a good quality of family life is essential.

Reconciliation of professional, private and family life is a crucial area of intervention. Granting adequate maternity and parental leave to parents has important consequences for the well-being of children. Leave should provide equality of rights to all parents to ensure a child is not discriminated against because of its parents' marital status or family constitution..... reconciliation measures should be framed in a wider socio-economic context recognising the potential of family support and early childhood services in contributing to enhanced maternal employment, reduced poverty, better parenting skills and greater family and community cohesion.

Creating the right conditions for positive parenting requires that structural problems in society are both recognised and addressed. Reconciliation measures and parenting support cannot and should not substitute efforts to tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage.

Invest in family and parenting support services - Parenting support should be an integrated part of policy development. Public authorities should create inclusive and child-centred structures and services that enable parents to acquire good parenting skills. This would be a major step towards laying the groundwork for genuinely positive parenting. Support should be universally available, provided in a non-stigmatising way and coupled with additional help for the most vulnerable.

Policies should create an enabling environment for... informal support (creating and strengthening existing social bonds and encouraging new links between parents and their family, neighbours and friends) - semi-

¹⁷ Eurochild Policy Position on Family Policies (November 2010):
http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/ThematicPriorities/FPS/Eurochild/Eurochild_policy_position_on_family_policies_FINAL_adopted_on_3_November.pdf

¹⁸ For the full set of recommendations refer to the Eurochild policy position on family policies in the Annex.

formal support (empowering parents' and children's associations and NGOs and activating a range of self-help and other community-based groups and services) and formal support (facilitating access to public services)....

A professional and resourced workforce is essential to the delivery of effective parenting support. Member States should ensure that practitioners – whether paid or unpaid – receive appropriate training and support to ensure quality standards.

Increase public investment in childcare services - It is crucial to recognise the importance of accessible, affordable and high quality childcare services – both pre-school and after-school – in facilitating parents' labour market participation, achieving greater equity in educational outcomes, and contributing to children's overall physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. There exist strong arguments that this investment will produce long-term savings and public spending efficiencies, all important in the current period of belt-tightening.

Sensitive, available and sustainable early childhood education and care services have also been shown to promote adaptive coping in children living in poverty and ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.

A key message for national governments and local authorities is to emphasise more parental involvement in early childhood services, not only by offering the basics of information or a network, but also by offering educational support and by developing a style of working with parents that empowers rather than deskills them.

Ensure an effective governance coupled with effective resourcing - There is a need to have a clear policy framework that enables effective governance and delegation of local services to ensure more locally responsive services for children and their families as well as more effective collaboration between professionals. Nevertheless, a combination of a certain freedom of local action and a certain level of control has been proved to be a useful way of promoting service delivery standards. This presupposes the definition of basic quality criteria for all services in order to ensure that public funding is used wisely and so as to bring to an end a phenomenon which leads to the least affluent families using lower quality services.

Effective resourcing from national authorities must also be guaranteed and should be coupled with additional support for the most vulnerable.

Foster evidence-based policy and practice - Family policies and parenting support services and programmes should be evidence-based and reflect best practice. Whenever possible, this support should be monitored and evaluated through indicators that respect diversity in service delivery and assess the implementation of family policies at all levels of governance.....longitudinal assessment of long-term outcomes for children and families providing the cost effectiveness of policies and objectives remains a challenge.

ANNEX – EUROCHILD POLICY POSITION ON FAMILY POLICIES¹⁹

Eurochild is an international network of over 90 children’s organisations working across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Eurochild is one of the largest advocacy organisations on children’s issues at EU level whose work is underpinned by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Eurochild campaigns for the realisation of children’s rights across Europe. We focus particularly on those children at risk of poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. Our members are working directly with children and families or are campaigning on their behalf. Eurochild’s thematic working groups provide a forum for members to exchange knowledge and practice in specific areas. They currently focus on: children’s participation, early years’ education and care, children in alternative care, and family and parenting support.

According to Eurochild, all policies and services aimed at family and parenting support must be underpinned by the following principles:

- 1) Frame family policies within a children’s rights approach as defined by the UNCRC:** Children and young people are recognised as citizens in their own right, as well as being part of a family, who, as they develop, have increasing control over their lives and influence over the policies and decisions that affect them. A child-rights approach is embodied in the notion of “positive parenting” as defined by the Council of Europe²⁰.
- 2) Create the right conditions for positive parenting to take place:** This includes resourcing parenting – in terms of skills, information, material, psychological and social support – and removing the barriers which exist, for example measures to promote a better reconciliation of family and working life.
- 3) Invest in early intervention and prevention services for families:** To support children’s growth and development and guarantee equal opportunities there is a need to put preventive measures in place to strengthen parental responsibility and to target families at risk. Investment in services to support parents, help them develop better coping strategies and understand the importance and value of good parenting must be strengthened. The value of early intervention programmes should by no means result in neglected the services for parents of older children such as teenagers.
- 4) Support parents’ empowerment and participation:** Policies designed to support parents in their parenting task should work in partnership with them to build on existing strengths in a manner that empowers them, allowing them to make informed choices based on the best interests of the child. There is also a need to consult with parents in the decision-making about changes to policies which influence service provision. Authorities must ensure that the voice of parents is included in the development of policies.
- 5) Recognise and respect diversity** in relation to family patterns, family composition and size, cultural differences and gender differences, in keeping with the best interest of the child.
- 6) Ensure adequate and universal family benefits:** Universal child benefits are an important expression of intergenerational solidarity. Universal access is less bureaucratic and has more effective take-up. However,

¹⁹ This policy position was drafted by Agata D’Addato, Eurochild Policy Officer & Coordinator of the Thematic Working Group on Family and Parenting Support. It was adopted by the Thematic Working Group on Family and Parenting Support in Orebro (Sweden) on 3 November 2010.

²⁰ Council of Europe Recommendation 19(2006), December 2006. This Recommendation on policy to support positive parenting encourages states to recognise the importance of parental responsibilities and the need to provide parents with sufficient support in bringing up their children. Members States are recommended to take all appropriate legislative, administrative and financial measures to create the best possible conditions for positive parenting. Other recommendations set legal standards on coherent and integrated family policies, family mediation, child day care, and children’s participation in family and social life. Eurochild supports the Council of Europe’s recommendations.

coverage across Europe is currently patchy and rarely provides an income sufficient to lift families out of poverty. Benefits should be received automatically, cover children's basic needs and be adjusted according to the child's age and the number of children in a family. Universal child benefits should nevertheless be coupled with targeted benefits for those most in need.

7) Respect children's right to be heard and ensure that the views and experiences of children are taken into account in the development of services and policies that affect them.

To respect these values and achieve the underlying objectives, stakeholders at all levels need to work together to put in place the necessary strategies, policy measures, quality standards and monitoring, and to implement policy that is coherent and comprehensive.

RATIONALE FOR EU ACTION

All EU Member States have ratified the **UNCRC** which provides the overall framework to guide programme and policy interventions with and for children. For the majority of children the family home is where they will realise many of these rights. Parents have a pivotal role as guardians and advocates of children's rights with a responsibility on the state to act as final guarantor. The UNCRC recognises parents' key role – Article 18 enshrines the right of both parents to receive support and identifies them as the people with primary responsibility for decisions relating to their children. The entry into force of the **Lisbon Treaty** in December 2009, which recognizes children's rights among the EU's objectives and embodies the EU Fundamental Rights Charter, reinforces the grounds for further EU action.

Tackling **demographic change** is a major policy challenge for the EU. Among the positive policy responses recommended by the EU to Member States is to promote demographic renewal in Europe through better conditions for families and reconciliation of work and family life. The EU has taken several initiatives aimed at supporting family policies within Member States by facilitating peer reviews, pooling information and data, and assessing the effectiveness of policies²¹. The "European Alliance for Families"²², which provides a platform for a high level discussion between Member States on family-friendly policies, is a clear example of the investment in supporting families in a rapidly changing social context. Whilst these efforts are welcome, children's rights and analysis of the impact of policies on the quality of childhood are too often neglected in this agenda.

The **Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC)** – which is the mechanism through which EU Member States and the European Commission have been cooperating in the field of social policy since 2000 and which is now under revision – has proven to be an important instrument for creating a space for child poverty and well-being to be addressed across the EU and for making progress. Tackling child poverty is now a priority of most EU Member States to improve the quality of life of children and break the intergenerational inheritance of disadvantage. The 2010 European Commission Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion²³ emphasises that "*it is of particular importance to improve the reconciliation of work and family-life. Supporting children and families is investing in a sustainable future for Europe.*"

Eurochild and its members believe that good parenting is key to successful outcomes for children. Family environments characterised by factors associated with good parenting have also shown to be a protective factor for children growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods²⁴. Support, information, preventative action, and a network of parenting and relationship support can be crucial in helping families cope.

²¹ See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=502&langId=en>; http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/index_en.html; www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database.

²² See http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/families/index.cfm.

²³ See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=757&langId=en>.

²⁴ Seaman P., Turner K., Hill M., Stafford A. and Walker M. (2006), Parenting and Children's Resilience in Disadvantaged Communities, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The implementation of the European Commission's **Recommendation on active inclusion**²⁵, which stresses the importance of three pillars – adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services – to support the integration in society of excluded people is essential in this field. Eurochild welcomed this development but called on Member States to put children's best interests at the heart of active inclusion policies²⁶. This means policies must recognise the irreplaceable role of parents in their children's upbringing and reflect a holistic approach to parental leave, labour market policies, family and early years' services, and the formal education system.

The Belgian Presidency of the EU is leading on the adoption of a declaration by all Member States in November which will commit them to keep their commitment to the Barcelona targets on child care (or adopt more ambitious targets where they have already been achieved), plus a commitment to developing and monitoring quality criteria such as staff-child ratios, pedagogical approach, accessibility, affordability. At the same time, a European Commission Communication on early years and education is expected in January 2011, which will include guidelines on accessibility (in its broadest sense, i.e. inclusivity), affordability (including the discussion on universal vs. targeted services), and pedagogical approach. The Hungarian Presidency is planning a conference in February for the dissemination of the Communication, which should culminate in Council Conclusions. This will launch an EU process of Member State involvement in setting standards, agreeing policy objectives and exchange of good practices.

EUROCHILD RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS THE EU MEMBER STATES

It is the responsibility of the state or appropriate level of government to ensure the development and implementation of coordinated family policies.

Eurochild proposes specific recommendations to the EU Members States:

→ Promote reconciliation measures and create a favourable policy environment for positive parenting

While parenting is in many respects private, Member States have at their disposal a range of measures that can foster the right conditions for positive parenting. Strong policy coherence nationally aimed at supporting parents to work, spend time with their children and have a good quality of family life is essential²⁷.

Reconciliation of the professional, private and family life is a crucial area of intervention. Granting adequate maternity and parental leave to parents has important consequences for the well-being of children. Leaves should provide equality of rights to all parents, to ensure a child is not discriminated against its parent's marital status or family constitution. However, reconciliation measures should be framed in a wider socio-economic context recognising the potential of family support and early childhood services in contributing to enhanced maternal employment, reduced poverty, better parenting skills and greater family and community cohesion.

Creating the right conditions for positive parenting requires that structural problems in society are both recognized and addressed. Reconciliation measures and parenting support cannot and should not substitute efforts to tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage.

²⁵ See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32008H0867:EN:NOT>.

²⁶ Eurochild (2008), Break the poverty cycle now! Why children matter in the EU's active inclusion debate, Policy statement, 2 November 2008.

²⁷ Eurochild (2010), Family policies that work best for children – Fighting child poverty and promoting child well-being, Report from the family and parenting support study visit to Sweden and Denmark, 26-30 April 2010.

→ Invest in family and parenting support services

Parent support should be an integrated part of policy development. Public authorities should create inclusive and child-centred structures and services that enable parents to learn and practise good parenting skills. This would be a major step towards laying the groundwork for genuinely positive parenting. Support should be universally available, provided in a non-stigmatising way and be coupled with additional help for the most vulnerable²⁸.

As outlined in the Council of Europe Recommendation on positive parenting, policies should create an enabling environment for each of the following forms of parents support:

- a) informal: creating and strengthening existing social bonds and encouraging new links between parents and their family, neighbours and friends;
- b) semi-formal: empowering parents' and children's associations and NGOs and activating a range of self-help and other community-based groups and services;
- c) formal: facilitating access to public services.

Eurochild supports increasing investment in formal, training and education but recognises also the importance of community-based services and informal support structures. We must validate parent support work, whether this takes place via informal, semi-formal or formal mechanisms.

A professional and resourced workforce is essential to the delivery of effective parenting support. Member States should ensure that practitioners – whether paid or unpaid – receive appropriate training and support to ensure quality standards.

→ Increase public investment in childcare services

It is crucial to recognise the importance of accessible, affordable and high quality childcare – both pre-school and after-school – services in facilitating parents' labour market participation, achieving greater equity in educational outcomes, and contributing to children's overall physical, emotional, social and cognitive development²⁹. There exist strong arguments that this investment will produce long-term savings and public spending efficiencies, all important in the current period of belt-tightening.

Sensitive, available and sustainable early childhood education and care services have also been shown to promote adaptive coping in children living in poverty and ensure that every child has the best possible start in life³⁰.

A study produced by the Eurydice network³¹ asserts that poverty has the strongest impact on children's educational failure and that one of the most important elements to ensure high-standard care and education is parental involvement. A key message here for national governments and local authorities is to emphasise more parental involvement in early childhood services, not only by offering the basics of information or a network, but also by offering educational support and by developing a style of working with parents that empowers rather than deskills them.

²⁸ Eurochild (2007), Promoting children's rights through positive parenting policies, Report from the members exchange seminar, Northern Ireland, 26-27 April 2007.

²⁹ Eurochild (2010), Early years education and care: towards more (e)quality across the EU, Policy briefing n. 6.

³⁰ Eurochild (2009), Improving the well-being of young children in Europe: the role of early years services, Discussion paper.

³¹ Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009), Tackling social and cultural inequalities through early childhood education and care in Europe. This would launch an EU process of Member State involvement in setting standards, agreeing policy objectives and exchange of practice.

→ Ensure an effective governance coupled with effective resourcing

As stressed in a recent report from Eurofound³², the importance of local authorities needs to be emphasised. *“Good family and parenting support programmes should involve the local authorities, giving them a sense of ownership. Parents and local people must be empowered to persuade local authorities to spend money in a way that makes sense for people”.*

There is a need to have a clear policy framework that enables effective governance and delegation of local services to ensure more locally responsive services for children and their families as well as more effective collaboration between professionals. Nevertheless, a combination of a certain freedom of local action and a certain level of control has been proved to be a useful way of promoting service delivery standards³³. This does presuppose the definition of basic quality criteria for all services in order to ensure that public funding is used wisely and so as to bring to an end a phenomenon which leads the least affluent families to use lower quality services.

According to an article³⁴ that the King Baudouin Foundation has commissioned from Brigid Grauman, *“Local authorities funding for infants and children should be seen as preventive action that makes for long-term savings. Investing in children is not an expense but a commitment to a sustainable future for Europe”.* Effective resourcing from national authorities must also be guaranteed and should be coupled with additional support for the most vulnerable.

→ Foster evidence-based policy and practice

Family policies and parent support services and programmes should be evidence-based and reflect best practice. Whenever possible, this support should be monitored and evaluated through indicators that respect diversity in service delivery and assess the implementation of family policies at all levels of governance³⁵. However, longitudinal assessment of long-term outcomes for children and families providing the cost effectiveness of policies and objectives remains a challenge³⁶.

EUROCHILD RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Eurochild emphasises to:

→ Strengthen the EU coordination in the social field

Thanks partly to the Open Method of Coordination on social inclusion and social protection, the fight against child poverty and the promotion of child well-being have been repeatedly recognized as a top political priority by EU leaders – most recently by the Declaration signed by the EU Trio Presidency (Spain, Belgium and Hungary) at the Belgian Presidency conference on 2-3rd September.

The Social OMC is currently under revision and there is uncertainty about what the proposals from the European Commission on the EU coordination in the social field in the new social architecture of the EU will

³² Eurofound (2010), Developing support to parents through early childhood services, Workshop report, Brussels, 27 November 2009.

³³ Community control, exercised through local partnerships, is the overarching principle of Sure Start programme. See <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2006/sure-start>.

³⁴ Brigid Grauman (on request of the King Baudouin Foundation) (2010), Investing in child poverty is our insurance for the future, Focus, 2 October 2010.

³⁵ Eurochild (2009), Monitoring child well-being: better policy and practice, Report from the 6th annual conference, Cyprus, 11-13 November 2009.

³⁶ Maluccio A.N., Canali C., Vecchiato T., Lightburn A., Aldgate J. and Rose W. (2010), Improving Outcomes for Children and Families Finding and Using International Evidence.

contain and how the Flagship Initiative of a European Platform against Poverty will articulate with the Social OMC³⁷.

Eurochild calls on the European Commission to ensure a more strategic effort to:

- Build a common data set and facilitate benchmarking and peer learning across Member States in the field of family policies.
- Encourage monitoring and evaluation of existing services and develop necessary indicators including quantity and quality criteria.
- Deepen and broaden of the engagement of stakeholders, including children and young people themselves.
- Ensure a greater focus on the most disadvantaged groups and make a greater link with poverty and social inclusion. Poverty remains the key driver of children becoming looked after by the state and entering the care system in many countries³⁸. The complex and multi-layered problems faced by families suffering persistent hardship need to be better understood and responded to in order to avoid unnecessary removal of children from parental care.

→ Adopt a Recommendation on child poverty & well-being

To further boost the work of Member States in the field of child well-being, **Eurochild is supporting an European Commission Recommendation on child poverty and well-being**. A key element of the Recommendation will be a commitment to ensure that children grow up in families with **adequate resources** to meet their essential needs³⁹.

Having a job remains the best safeguard against poverty. Nonetheless children's well-being depends on parents' jobs being sufficiently well-paid to lift families out of poverty and parents having enough quality time to spend with the children. Precarious employment, unsociable working hours and low paid jobs can have a detrimental impact on child development. The best interest of the child – both in terms of their right to family life, right to play and leisure, right to education – must be considered as an integral part of employment policy.

→ Link to the future EU Strategy on the rights of the child

The Stockholm Programme⁴⁰ adopted by the European Council in December 2009 commits the European Commission to developing “*an ambitious EU strategy on the rights of the child*”. Such a strategy commits the EU to *taking children's rights into account “systematically and strategically” across all EU policies*.

Eurochild believes fiercely in the right of every child to enjoy a happy childhood. Achievement of this goal also makes economic sense. Wise public investment in children and families can be expected to reap long-term benefits in terms of savings on social and health costs, improved productivity, a more cohesive society and increased active citizenship.

Eurochild calls on the European Commission to ensure that stronger link is made between family policies and the child-rights agenda at EU level and with the well-being of children, within a broader framework of mainstreaming children's rights across all EU policy and action.

³⁷ Eurochild (2010), Europe 2020 & the European Platform Against Poverty - Where will action against child poverty & social exclusion fit within the next EU 10-year strategy?, Policy briefing n. 7.

³⁸ Eurochild (2009), Children in alternative care – National surveys – 2nd edition.

³⁹ Call for an EU Recommendation on Child Poverty and Child Well-being, Background paper to the Belgian EU Presidency Conference on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being, 2-3 September 2010.

⁴⁰ Council of the European Union, The Stockholm Programme – An open and secure Europe serving and protecting the citizens, 9 December 2009.

