European Education Area Strategic Framework - **Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

Leadership for inclusion: Building capacity to strengthen a whole-system approach to early childhood education and development (ECED) - SUMMARY

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate B – Youth, Education and Erasmus+
Unit B.2. – Schools and multilingualism

Contact: Géraldine Libreau

E-mail: *eac-wg-on-ecec@ec.europa.eu*

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

Leadership for inclusion: Building capacity to strengthen a whole-system approach to early childhood education and development (ECED)

SUMMARY

Manuscript completed in December 2025

Background

Good leadership has been recognised as a crucial condition for ensuring the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision since the adoption of the European Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019). In the recommendation, *supporting the professionalisation of ECEC staff and leaders is seen as a successful strategy to improve ECEC quality.*

The European Education Area Working Group (WG) on ECEC[1] dedicated its work cycle 2024-25 to ECEC leadership and already published the following outcomes:

- "*Leadership in ECEC: An overview of models and practices across Europe"* explores how ECEC leadership is understood in research and enacted in practice, with specific reference to the functions and tasks associated to centre leadership and to the existing structures of leadership in place. It is completed by a *Reflection Tool to organise leadership in ECEC* which offers decision-makers an opportunity to review the organisation of their national / regional / local system.
- *"Leadership in ECEC: Competences and training"* delves into competence requirements associated to leadership profiles, as well as into existing training programmes and career pathways supporting their professionalisation; it includes a proposal by the WG for a Competence profile of ECEC centre-based leaders.

The WG third report *"Leadership for inclusion: Building capacity to strengthen a whole-system approach to early childhood education and development (ECED)"* provides a comprehensive analysis of leadership's role in nurturing inclusive early childhood education and development (ECED) systems across Europe[2]. It aims to address the challenges and opportunities to empower collaborative leadership to support integrated work across sectors such as ECEC, schools, health, and social services, to enhance the learning and welfare of young children and their families.

The report presents the WG's vision to develop holistic ECED strategies and is strongly anchored in research findings and successful practices shared by members of the WG.

Why is it important to invest in early childhood education and development (ECED) strategies?

A wide range of European and national policies aim to fight children's poverty and social exclusion, increase access to ECEC and improve learning prospects. While some progress is being made, there are still large gaps of participation in ECEC, and families with children at risk of poverty or social exclusion do not always have access to basic services.

Policy and research increasingly recognise that integrating early childhood education and development (ECED) policies and services for all children – and especially for vulnerable children and families – offers significant opportunities to address inequalities and create

[1] Register of Commission expert groups and other similar entities

[2] Building on the EU Council Conclusions on "*Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion*" this report adopt the concept of Early Childhood Education and Development to broaden the meaning of Early Childhood Education and Care, in the perspective of recognising the multidimensional aspects connected to children's holistic growth in the early years and how they could be supported through integrated work. While ECEC focuses more on aspects of children's education and well-being that could be supported in daycare / preschool institutions, the concept of ECED encompasses a comprehensive approach where children's growth is supported holistically through education, responsive care, health, nutrition, safe and stimulating environments.

As stated by UNICEF (2023): "Every child has the right to the best start in life. This includes the right to good nutrition and stimulation, responsive care and early learning, health and a safe environment. These rights provide children with the opportunity to grow and develop to their full potential. As children thrive, entire communities grow, and a more sustainable and peaceful future is possible." Early Childhood Development - UNICEF Vision for Every Child | UNICEF

lasting positive impacts. Investing in collaborative or integrated work, which bring together policymakers and stakeholders from various fields, such as ECEC, school education, social and health services, is the best way to provide an efficient support to these vulnerable children and families.

To make this a reality, collaborative leadership across sectors and governance levels is crucial and leads to developing holistic strategies focussed on early childhood education and development.

Challenges

Despite the evident benefits, numerous challenges impede the effective implementation of integrated ECED strategies. They often relate to the multi-sectoral nature of policy initiatives addressed to children and their families, and meeting their diverse needs. Fragmented governance and lack of cross-sectoral coordination pose significant barriers, alongside inconsistent policy framing and insufficient funding. Furthermore, workforce challenges remain, affecting the quality of services. .

The report outlines the fragmented governance and administrative obstacles and lack of cohesive strategies that hinder seamless integration across sectors. It also shows that these factors contribute to disparities in outcomes for children and families. Discrepancies in sectoral regulations can be additional barriers to effective cooperation.

Addressing these challenges requires policies that are designed to be responsive to the multifaceted needs of children and their families - especially the most vulnerable ones – anda comprehensive, cross-sectoral approach that involves strategic and sustained funding, integrated governance, collaborative leadership, a well-supported and qualified workforce.

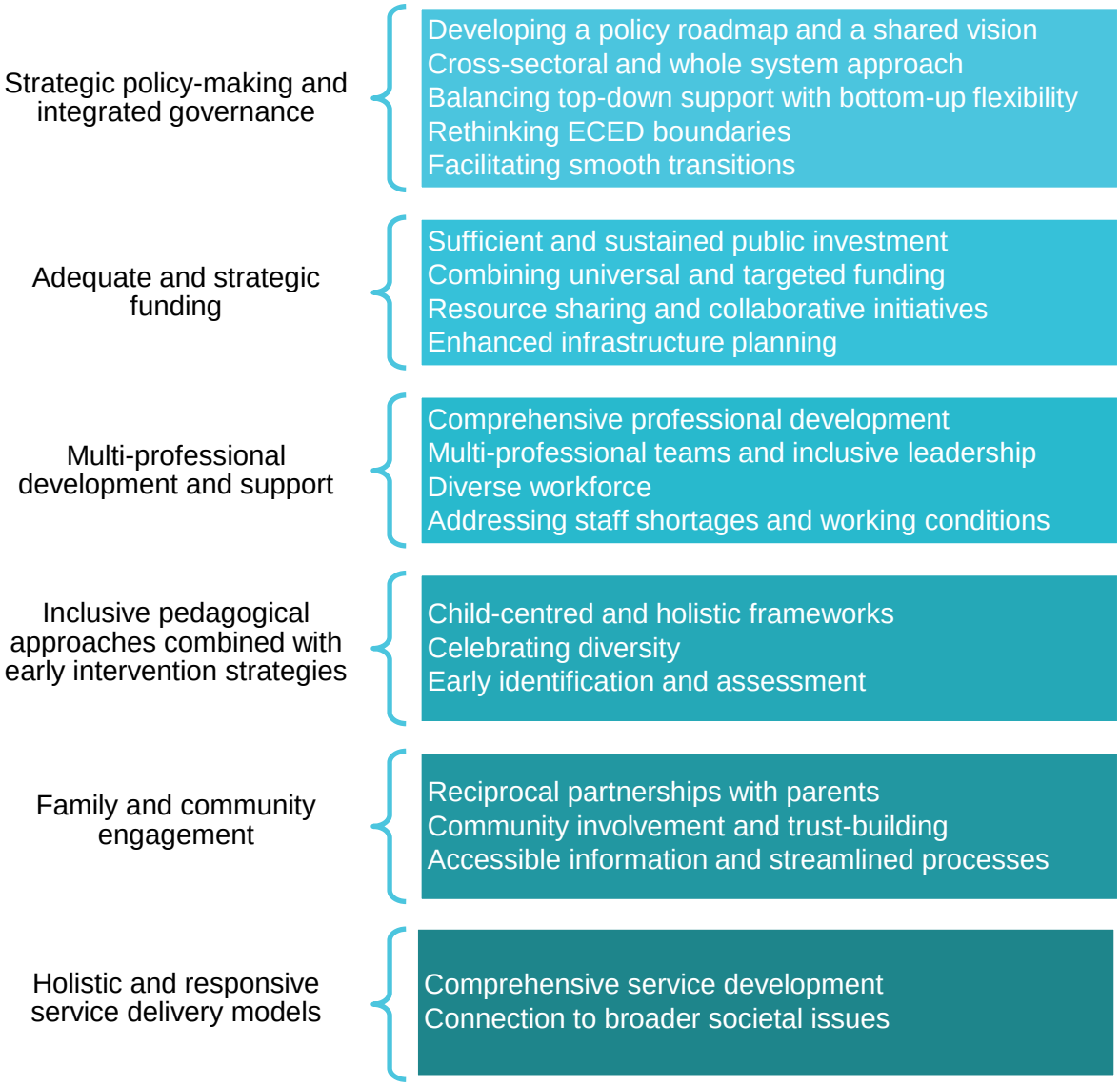
Ways forward

In an integrated ECED system, collaborative leadership at the level of policy decision-making and at the level of service delivery is essential and widely recognized as beneficial for children, families, professionals, services and policymakers.

The **main characteristics of effective network leadership practices** can be identified as follows:

- Establishing vision, goals and strategic directions
- Cultivating relationships, trust and dialogue
- Promoting interprofessional training and fostering an inclusive culture
- Adapting to complexity and change

On that basis, the WG identified **key elements to guide leadership in achieving integrated ECED strategies:**



Practice examples

The last part of the report provides insights on how to translate a vision of leadership for inclusion into practice, through successful examples focused on building leadership capacity toward integrated working across sectors, both at the level of policy decision-making and at the level of service delivery. The following examples are presented in-depth in the full report:

- The Icelandic Prosperity Act and the Reykjavík Education Policy 2030 strategy support a well-coordinated system of services for children and families by establishing clear mechanisms for integration and investing in the professional capacity and specialised roles of the staff responsible for service delivery.
- The Primokiz approach contributes to creating a coordinated leadership model for integrated ECED services primarily by placing local governments (municipalities) at the centre of the process and mandating a structured approach to cross-sectoral collaboration through political buy-in. The model is built on key elements that ensure integration, coordination, and sustained leadership at the local level.
- The Portuguese municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia created a local ECEC task force, supported the co-design of professional development programmes, a transition framework between preschool and primary education, and investments in inclusive

learning environments. Integrated working has been supported by mechanisms that institutionalize dialogue, promote shared responsibility, and ensure coherent development across governance levels.

- In the German Land of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) daycare centres have been used as existing infrastructure to start piloting an innovative model of service delivery: the Family Centres. They aim to provide children and families with integrated and holistic support tailored to their specific needs. Family centres thus have the potential to contribute to a preventive social policy, especially for disadvantaged groups. The integrated working model itself is structurally supported by a legal framework, which sets the context for defining the leadership role of professionals coordinating cross-sectoral cooperation within Family Centres.

Conclusion

Investing in cross-sector collaboration and collaborative leadership is pivotal in fostering inclusive early childhood policies. Such collaboration not only helps in reducing educational inequalities, but also in tailoring support to the diverse needs of children and families, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE EU

In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct information centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you at: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

On the phone or by email

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

– by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),

– at the following standard number: +32 22999696, or

– by email via: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications from: https://op.europa.eu/en/publications. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu

Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.