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)

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

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Summary

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.

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[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

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 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.

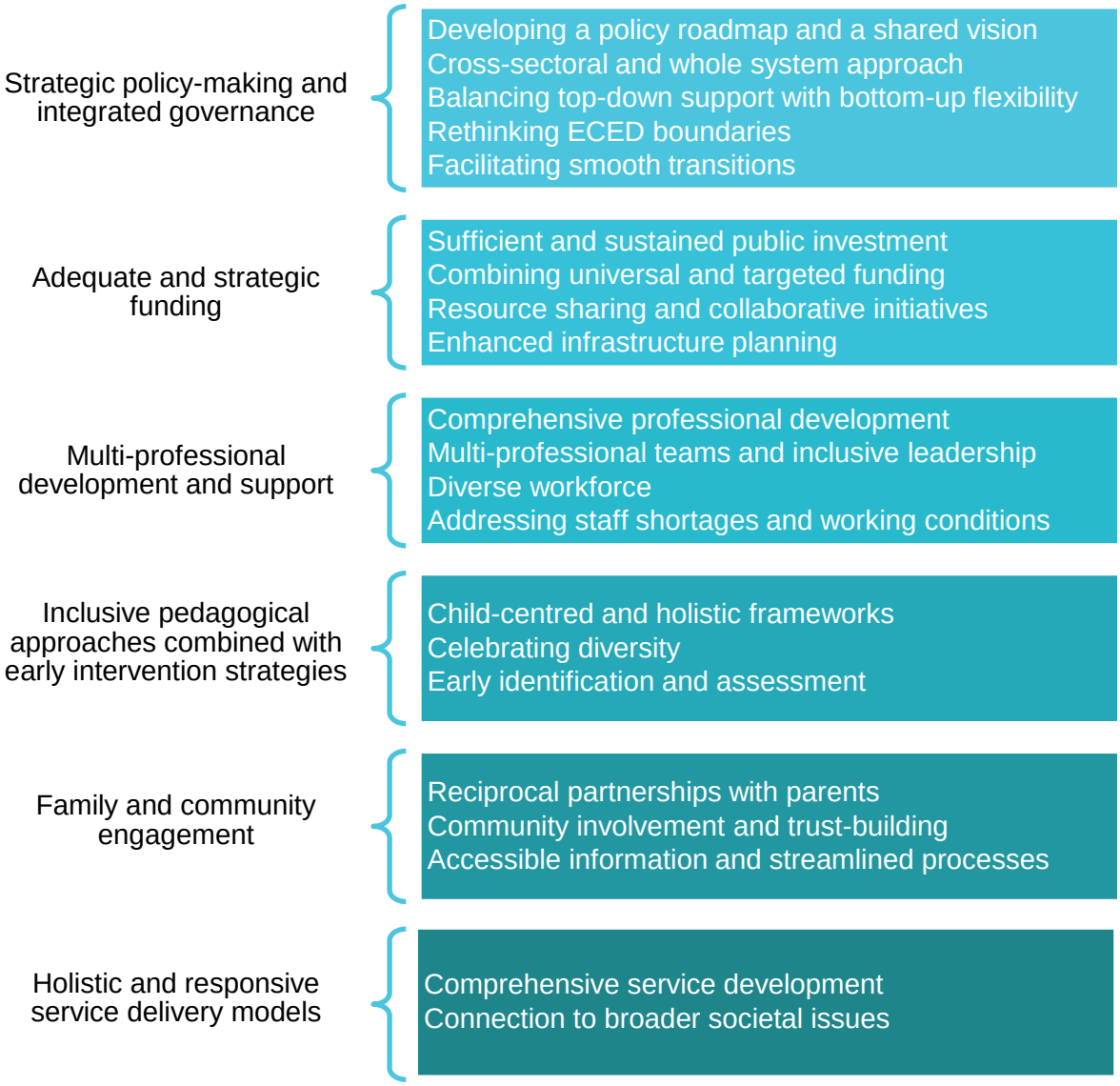
Ways forward

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.

Introduction

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* as:

- it contributes to developing a shared sense of purpose, which helps orienting education and care practice at the team level,
- it enhances professional activities such as collective reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with colleagues, thus contributing to making pedagogical practices more responsive to the diverse needs of children, families and communities.

ECEC leadership has been acknowledged as an important element in *shaping organisational conditions and operational strategies that are supportive of the continuing professional development of the workforce with potential benefits on staff motivation and retention*. Statement 4 of the **European Quality Framework for ECEC**, attached to the 2019 Council recommendation includes professional leadership among those supportive working conditions which can contribute to reducing staff turnover in ECEC.

There is a growing policy interest in a better understanding of what ECEC leadership looks like across diverse settings and contexts – and how it can positively impact quality. However, research on ECEC leadership tends to be rather limited compared to other levels of education. Hence, more exchange on existing initiatives is needed. For this reason, in November 2023, the European Education Area Working Group (WG) on ECEC[3] agreed to explore the topic of ECEC leadership, by supporting the exchange of inspiring practices and policy initiatives. The following questions led the group's discussions between January 2024 and the autumn 2025:

1. Leadership in ECEC: models and practices across Europe

- What are the main functions and tasks associated to centre leaderships?
- What are the main structures of leadership in place?

2. How to train, recruit and motivate leaders in ECEC

- What are the competence requirements/professional profile for ECEC centre leaders?
- What initial and in-service training programmes are provided?
- Which career pathways are currently available?

3. From centre leaders to ECEC system leadership

- How can network leadership support integrated work across sectors (horizontally)?
- As well as across different levels of education (vertically), i.e. 0-3/3-6 in split systems, ECEC/primary schools in integrated systems?

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

The outputs of WG discussions are presented in three thematic reports:

- "*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.
- **This third report *"Leadership for inclusion: Building capacity to strengthen a whole-system approach to early childhood education and development (ECED)"*[4] focuses on how to develop a leadership culture whereby ECEC centre leaders are part of a well-coordinated infrastructure, supporting an ongoing collaboration among service providers and local governance (i.e. municipality) as well as systematic inter-agency cooperation across other sectors like education, social and health**.

The report is structured in four parts:

- the first section considers why investing in collaborative leadership across sectors is important to foster inclusion by drawing on European policies recommendations as well as existing research;
- the second section discusses existing challenges toward the implementation of an integrated early childhood education and development (ECED) strategy;
- the third section sheds light on how such challenges could be overcome;
- the fourth section provides 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. It provides insights on how to translate a vision of leadership for inclusion into practice.

The report presents the results of the discussions during the last six-month period of the ECEC WG's 2024-25 work cycle drawing on the following sources:

- research literature and policy reports;
- discussions on challenges and inspiring practices, highlighting current issues within and across European countries;

[4] 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.

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www.unicef.org/reports/early-childhood-development-unicef-vision-every-child#:~:text=It%20outlines%20UNICEF%E2%80%99s%20intent%20to%20support%20an%20organization-wide,and%20partners%20at%20national%2C%20regional%20and%20global%20levels.

- presentations by experts to deepen the understanding of current issues related to collaborative leadership across sectors and its role in building capacity for inclusive ECED systems;
- examples of policy initiatives and practices shared by WG members in relation to fostering collaborative leadership across sectors and to building capacity for inclusive ECED systems.

1. Why is it important to invest in collaborative leadership across sectors to foster inclusion?

1.1. Persistent gaps in accessing quality ECEC

In 2022, the EU Council Recommendation on Barcelona targets for 2030[5], adopted **ambitious policy goals to increase participation rates in high quality ECEC**, and recommended that Member States increase ECEC participation in relation to their respective current participation rates as follows:

- *ensure that by 2030* ***at least 45 % of children below the age of three*** *participate in ECEC,*
- *provide high-quality ECEC services for* ***children from the age of three*** *in order to reach, by 2030, the target agreed by the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), whereby* ***at least 96 %*** *of children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC.*

The Barcelona targets completed the Child Guarantee ambition to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing the access of children in need to high quality ECEC and school-based activities, healthy nutrition, healthcare, as well as adequate housing conditions, and **to reduce the gap in ECEC participation among children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) and non-AROPE** (*EU Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee,* 2021)[6].

The analysis of EU-SILC survey[7] data which looks at the **situation of accessibility of services for young children across EU Member States shows both positive trends and areas for improvement** (Eurofound, 2025):

- Overall participation in ECEC has increased over time, with more than one third (39.2 %) of children under the age of 3 attending centre-based settings in 2024 across EU. The figures range from 78.9 % in the Netherlands, 62.9 % in Denmark and 59.4 % in France to 11.4% in Romania, 7.3 % in Czechia and 5.1 % in Slovakia.
- For children who are AROPE, the EU-27 average participation rate in ECEC under the age of 3 was 23.6 % in 2024. Participation rates varied from 67.4% in Sweden to 4.3 % in Slovakia (although the reliability of the data for most Member States is low for this age group). In the case of children who are not AROPE, the EU-27 average for children under the age of 3 was 43.9 % in 2024, with the highest figure found in the Netherlands (81.5 %) and the lowest one in Slovakia (5.3%).

A 2024 review of national Child Guarantee progress reports in EU Member States[8], reveals that **persisting disparities among AROPE and non-AROPE children in accessing high quality ECEC might be due to multiple factors**:

[5] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220(01)

[6] http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2021/1004/oj

[7] The EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) aim to collect timely and comparable cross-sectional and longitudinal data on income, poverty, social exclusion, and living conditions.

[8] The findings derived from the cross-sectional review of National Child Guarantee progress reports were presented during the joint meeting of ECEC WG members and European Child Guarantee National coordinators held online in November 2024.

- Barriers such as limited availability and high costs often prevent children from low-income families from attending ECEC, especially in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas.
- Children with disabilities or special needs might face challenges in accessing mainstream settings. Even in the context of free ECEC provision, financial barriers to participation exist (i.e., transport, meals, etc.) along with non-financial barriers (i.e., lack of adequate support ensuring meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the ECEC environment, lack of professional capacity to provide diversified support strategies addressing children's special needs).
- Large disparities in ECEC participation rates exist among EU Member States, especially concerning children under 3 years of age at risk of poverty. However, countries like Denmark, Luxembourg, Estonia, and Sweden have improved access to ECEC, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Closing the above-mentioned gaps is key to achieving EU targets related to several policy domains (e.g., the *Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights*)[9]. To reach this goal, **more efforts are needed to connect various stakeholders involved in providing services to children and families, particularly vulnerable ones**. **This coordination is challenging** due to the many different actors involved and lack of clear operational framework for inter-agency collaboration, **but it is essential for achieving more equitable and inclusive ECEC systems**.

Source: Arianna Lazzari – 7th meeting of the WG on ECEC (2024-25 cycle) – March 2025

[9] La Hulpe Declaration on the Future of the European Pillar of Social Rights emphasised the necessity of reaching the renewed Barcelona targets on ECEC, by recalling in particular: (I) the importance of investing in universally accessible, affordable and high-quality provision, (II) the importance of ensuring workforce professionalisation and fair working conditions. The declaration also stated that further implementation and strengthening of the European Child Guarantee is essential, along with improving its monitoring. The Competitiveness Compass for the EU, access to affordable and high-quality childcare is key when it comes to increasing labour market participation and productivity. The political guidelines for 2024−2029 state that the European Commission will strengthen the European Child Guarantee, by envisaging a new action plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the first EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. (Source: Eurofound, 2025)

1.2. European policy commitments and recommendations

Investing in collaborative leadership across the ECEC, education, welfare, and health sectors is crucial to enhance the wellbeing and development of all children and to support families, particularly those who are vulnerable or at risk of social exclusion. This holistic approach helps to overcome systemic fragmentation and ensures more effective, child-centred service delivery.

The **Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems (2019)**[10] encourages Member States to ensure adequate funding and a legal framework for the provision of ECEC services:

"Consideration could be given to promoting better cooperation among services or further integration of them for families and children, most importantly with social and health services as well as schools, at national, regional and local levels" (art.6c).

The Recommendation draws on the proposal for a **Quality Framework for ECEC (2014)**[11] that affirmed stakeholders should have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities – and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations. This ensures that ECEC provision will benefit from close collaboration with all services working for children and/or families, including e.g., social and health services, schools and local stakeholders:

"Activities to bring together education and care should not be limited to pedagogic approaches in ECEC settings but should extend beyond the walls of institutions and organisations that are responsible for children's education and well-being in the community. At a local level this implies the creation of participatory alliances among stakeholders which might take the form of inter-agency cooperation (e.g. among ECEC centres and social/health services), inter-professional partnerships (e.g. among ECEC institutions and schools), and networking among stakeholders (e.g. involving NGOs as well as local authorities). For such initiatives to be effective they need to be sustained by a coherent policy framework that proactively fosters inter-institutional collaboration through coordination and long-term investment in local initiatives".

Along this line, the **Council Conclusions on Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion (2018)**[12] stress that "*fighting child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being require a multidimensional and integrated approach, based on three main pillars, including access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services and children's right to participate"*. Acknowledging that promoting and protecting children's rights, combating child poverty and social exclusion and providing all children with equal opportunities – irrespective of their social, cultural, ethnic or otherwise backgrounds – are fundamental objectives of the European Union, the Council Conclusions invite Member States to:

- ensure *equal and equitable access to ECEC provision of good quality for all children, by continuing to improve their accessibility and affordability – through a balanced mix of universal and targeted policies – as well as their inclusiveness by including children with different backgrounds, special educational needs or disabilities, avoiding segregation and incentivising their participation*
- apply *integrated and child-centred approaches targeting all aspects of child development and well-being*;

[10] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)

[11] Proposals for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

[12] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10306-2018-INIT/en/pdf

- further *strengthen the coordination and interaction between health, education, social and child protection systems*, as well as *integrated and coordinated service delivery at local level*;
- continue to provide *multidisciplinary support to children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds such as migrant and refugee children, children belonging to ethnic minority groups at risk of social exclusion (i.e. Roma children), children with disabilities or with special needs, children in alternative care*;
- promote *parents' involvement and practices that establish and deepen partnerships between parents and ECEC services*, as well as *practices facilitating the reach out to parents and families from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities;*
- strengthen *the involvement of and cooperation between all relevant public, private and civil society actors in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of early childhood development and well-being policies.*

The need for investing in better cooperation among the sectors of education (incl. ECEC), early intervention, social and health services to reduce inequalities has been strongly re-affirmed by the **Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee**[13] (ECG) in 2021. While putting the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, **Member States are recommended to build an integrated and enabling policy framework to address social exclusion of children, focusing on breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage**. In implementing the ECG Recommendation, Member States are encouraged to:

- *ensure consistency of social, education, health, nutrition and housing policies* at national, regional and local level and, wherever possible, *improve their relevance for supporting children in an integrated manner;*
- *address the territorial dimension of social exclusion, taking into account the specific needs of children by adopting an integrated and multidisciplinary approach*;
- *strengthen cooperation* with, and involvement of, *national, regional and local authorities, social economy organisations, non-governmental organisations promoting children's rights, children themselves and other stakeholders*, in the *design, delivery and monitoring of policies and quality services for children*;
- take measures to *promote inclusion and to avoid and tackle discrimination and stigmatisation of children in need*;
- *support strategic investment in quality services for children, including in enabling infrastructure and qualified workforce*.

More recently, the **Draft report on Developing a new EU anti-poverty strategy elaborated by the European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs** (2025)[14] draws attention to the need for ***proper institutional coordination*** – along with adequate budgetary resources – to ensure that such integrated strategies are successful in combating poverty. It stresses the importance of ***investing both in vertical coordination among the various levels of decision-making*** (national, regional, local) and ***horizontally across sectors and services delivering the interventions***.

The importance of investing in better coordination across sectors and across educational levels is also recognised as a key aspect of ensuring the equity and inclusiveness of

[13] Member States are recommended to identify children in need and within this group take into account, wherever appropriate in designing their national integrated measures, specific disadvantages experienced, in particular, by: (a) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (b) children with disabilities; (c) children with mental health issues; (d) children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; (e) children in alternative, especially institutional, care; (f) children in precarious family situations (Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021).

[14] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/EMPL-PR-774256_EN.pdf

education systems within the **Council conclusions on inclusive, learner-centred practices in early childhood education and care and school education (2025)**[15]:

- *"The integration of inclusive education principles into education and training systems requires a comprehensive, whole-school approach in which learning processes, teaching practices, assessment methods, the school environment and support services are aligned to provide a comprehensive educational experience and well-being for all learners, and where school leaders, teachers, trainers and other staff reflect the diversity of society".*
- *"Strengthen partnerships between ECEC institutions, schools, social services, healthcare providers, youth organisations and community organisations to support the holistic development of children and learners, addressing both educational and socio-economic factors that influence their learning outcomes and well-being".*

Policy alignment, cross-sectoral cooperation and inter-institutional coordination are therefore unanimously stressed as key success factors of integrated policies aimed at ensuring a positive impact for all children. However, the role of leaders who are supposed to lead these processes both at the level of policy and at the level of practice is often overlooked.

Considering this gap, an overview of existing research on integrated work and collaborative leadership across sectors is provided in the next section.

1.3. Benefits of integrated work and collaborative leadership across sectors: research findings

Integrating early childhood education and development (ECED) policies and services for all children and families, especially those who experience disadvantage, offers significant opportunities to address inequalities and create lasting positive impacts[16].

For this purpose, **developing a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach** – as well as aligning strategies for implementation across e.g., ECEC, early intervention, welfare, health services, etc. – **is crucial to ensure more equitable outcomes for children and families, through integrated support measures tailored to their needs, especially children and families living in complex circumstances**.

Figure 1 details the added value of developing such integrated work.

[15] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/2796/oj/eng/pdf

[16] OECD (2025) *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong*. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en; UNESCO (2022) *Building and strengthening the legal framework on ECCE rights: Achievements, challenges and actions for change*. https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/building-and-strengthening-legal-framework-ecce-rights-achievements-challenges-and-actions

Added value	
For children	Cognitive, social, emotional added value Less abrupt transitions
For families	Perceive less barriers, smoother transitions Better information, smoother or seamless referrals to the 'right' service More holistic support approach (e.g., material and immaterial support) More social cohesion, less isolation Less stigma, feel more welcome, feel more competent in raising their children
For professionals	Feel more competent as they share expertise, build knowledge Improved well-being & feel more valued
For services	More accessible services Service better adapted to the needs of the families Better coordination More innovativion
For policy-makers	Less overlaps More efficiency & cost-reduction (?)

Source: NESET, 2019[17]

Integrated ECED approaches require strong leadership – both at the level of policy decision-making and at the level of practice – to align long-term objectives, share resources, and implement cohesive strategies. **Effective leadership at both policy and service delivery levels fosters coordination, enhances communication, and promotes shared goals among diverse stakeholders.**

- **Leadership capacity-building at policy level** is essential to support the development of a shared understanding across governmental agencies responsible for setting strategic priorities in ECED services' development and funding. Thus, enabling a more effective use of resources.
- **Building leadership capacity at service level** is essential for fostering integrated working across sectors, particularly to address complex social issues such as child poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Capacity-building initiatives that emphasize transformational leadership[18] – such as vision setting, relationship building, and flexibility in relation to contextualised needs – improve cross-sector collaboration. This enables leaders to navigate over institutional and sectoral silos more effectively.

Investing in leadership capacity, therefore, creates the necessary conditions for nurturing cross-sectoral collaboration and make it sustainable over time.

[17] NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

[18] As stated in the first WG report Leadership in ECEC: an overview of models and practices in Europe (2024):

"Within the vision developed by the working group, leadership can be viewed as the result of an evolving process – transforming the pedagogical and organizational culture of ECEC centres over time in relation to all actors involved (professionals, children, families and local communities) and to the policy context – rather than being defined solely by structural features of ECEC systems. In this perspective, developing leadership for quality ECEC has more to do with the process of engaging all actors in decision-making processes and collective practice rather than with the straightforward implementation of leadership models from theory (or policies) to practices." (p. 13)

Inter-agency collaboration and leadership at the level of policy decision-making

Recent studies exploring interagency collaboration across governmental agencies in sustaining policy innovation, found that several factors could facilitate – or rather hinder – collaboration across sectors in the policy-making field[19]:

- ***Institutional proximity*** refers to the extent to which policy actors share similar values, norms, laws, and cultures, influencing their interactions. Institutional proximity shapes interactions within policy networks by fostering or hindering a common understanding of missions and tasks of policymaking.

  In this sense, if decision-makers responsible for different policy sectors (i.e. ECEC and education, child and family welfare, early intervention and healthcare) are guided by similar rules, norms, and ways of working, policy objectives and strategic priorities are more likely to be aligned. Institutional proximity also contributes to lowering the costs associated with collaboration as sharing a common "working language" and decision-making protocols can lead to smoother coordination and exchange of information across sectors.

- ***Cognitive proximity*** refers to the extent to which policy decision-makers from different sectors similarly perceive, interpret and understand the world, social phenomena and societal challenges.

  In this sense, a common knowledge base and agreed definitions (i.e. child poverty, family vulnerability, social disadvantage…) are needed if educational, social and health programmes are to be informed by shared perspectives. This implies developing a coherent framework for interpreting

  - shared challenges (e.g., striving for social inclusion and providing equity of opportunity in societal contexts increasingly characterised by socio-economic and cultural inequalities)
  - and potential solutions (e.g., increasing accessibility to high quality ECEC for societally disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, investing in inclusive education, providing a comprehensive approach to preventive family support and early intervention).

  This can enhance effective communication across sectors and increase synergetic actions (e.g., adopting policy tools, funding and technical support instruments that facilitate coordination in resource allocation for policy implementation).

- ***Social proximity*** refers to the extent to which policy decision-making processes are embedded in social relationships and shared experiences among policy actors across sectors. Policymakers do not operate in isolation. They are embedded within various social networks and spheres of influence which play an important role in fostering inter-agency collaboration. Prior collaboration experiences enhance trust among policy actors through mutual commitment. Several studies on policy networks highlighted that trust is a positive force that enhances information flow, reduces uncertainty and creates a virtuous cycle of collaboration[20]. Effective interactions among policy actors rely on committed and durable relationships, rather than on mere adherence to formal regulations. Trust leads to open communication, reducing the need for extensive formal agreements or strict oversights.

  In this sense, collaborative experiences allow decision-makers who are responsible for different policy sectors (e.g., ECEC, education, welfare, health, preventive family

[19] Sun, Y., Jiang, L., & Cao, C. (2025). Multiple proximities and inter-agency collaboration within a policy network: The case of innovation policymaking in China. *Technovation*, 141, 103169.

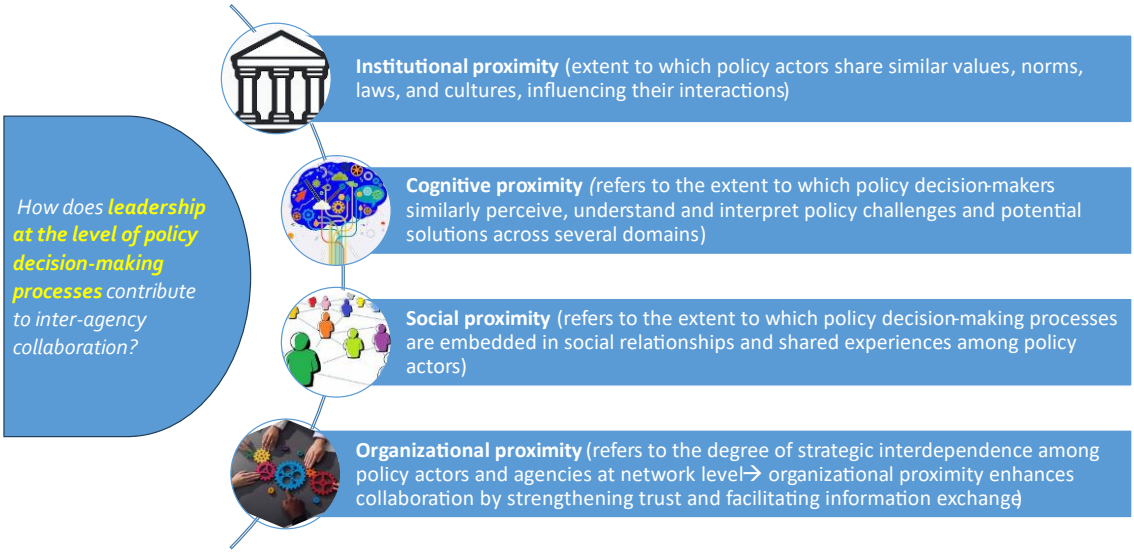
[20] Ansell, C., Gash, A. (2008) Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), pp. 543–571. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032

support, culture) to develop a shared professional language and compatible working methods in service delivery. This facilitates effective collaboration processes and interaction routines in the field of practice as well.

- ***Organisational proximity*** is defined as the degree of strategic interdependence between several policy actors and agencies at the network level. It enhances collaboration by strengthening trust and facilitating information exchange.

  Several studies state that a shared third-party partner (i.e. NGO organization) helps to strengthen trust between governmental agencies. Thisin turn is a critical enabler of effective collaboration. Shared third-party partners might facilitate more effective information exchange and joint initiatives among governmental agencies[21]. .

Figure 2 summarises these research findings:



Inter-agency collaboration and leadership at the level of service delivery

Leadership at the level of service delivery plays a crucial role in enhancing integrated work in local communities, if networks among e.g., ECEC, education, welfare, and health services are established and nurtured over time. This is essential for **creating comprehensive, child-centred, and family-focused services that address complex issues such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion**. Effective **network-leaders** must adapt to mediating across diverse organisations and professions, moving beyond traditional top-down approaches of service delivery: they must embrace a more collaborative, distributed, and inclusive approach to integrated working across services.

A literature review reveals that network **leadership plays an instrumental and multifaceted role in fostering more integrated approaches**[22], especially in the context of

[21] Leal Filho, W., Dibbern, T., Dinis, M. A. P., Cristofoletti, E. C., Mbah, M. F., Mishra, A.,& Aina, Y. A. (2024). The added value of partnerships in implementing the UN sustainable development goals. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 438, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2024.140794

[22] INTESYS (2016) *Integrated Early Childhood Education and Care. Results of a European Survey and Literature Review*. www.issa.nl/integrated-early-childhood-education-and-care-results-european-survey-and-literature-review

ISOTIS (2020) *A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination. Evidence from Europe and Future Directions*: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5cf633dfa&appId=PPGMS

NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

complex ECED systems[23] or complex settings like centres for children and families[24]. **The challenges faced nowadays by professionals and organisations operating in the field of ECEC, education, welfare and health are often too complicated for a single service to cope with** (i.e. socio-economic inequalities, socio-cultural diversity and multilingualism, poverty and exclusion, disability and special needs). Therefore, **collaborative leadership models across services are increasingly necessary** to implement flexible solutions that are tailored to the diversified needs and resources in each community.

Alisauskiene, S., Hanssen, N. B., & Kairienė, D. (Eds.) (2023). *Interprofessional and Family-Professional Collaboration for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care.* Springer Nature.

Verheijen-Tiemstra, R., Ros, A., Vermeulen, M., & Poell, R. F. (2024). Fostering collaboration through inclusive leadership: Exploring the behaviour of childcare and school leaders in Dutch child centres. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241227686

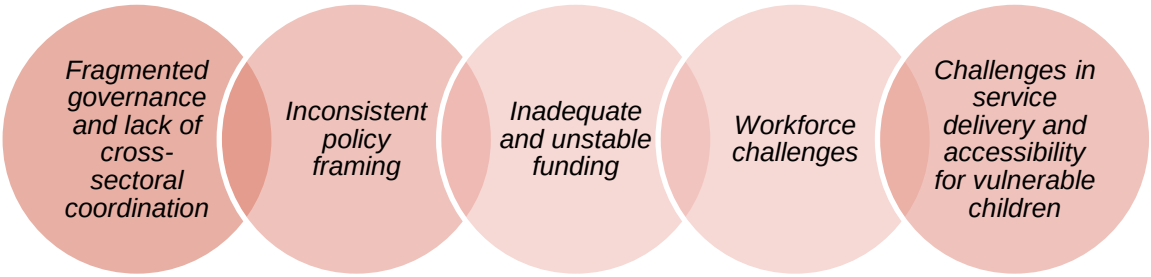
Ooms, M., Fukkink, R., Devlieghere, J., Dreier, A., Fischbach, R., Langner, J. And Van Lombergen, L. (2025). Interprofessional collaboration in ECEC: a review of European countries with different levels of system integration. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2484266

[23] Vargas-Barón, E. (2013) 'Building and Strengthening National Systems for Early Childhood Development'. In Britto, P.R., Engle, P.L. and Super, C.M (eds) *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*. Oxford University Press: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199922994.003.0024

[24] Vaggers, J., & Anderson, E. S. (2021). An essential model for leaders to enable integrated working to flourish: a qualitative study examining leaders of Children's Centers. Journal of Interprofessional Care, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2021.1897553

2. Challenges toward integrated early childhood education and development (ECED) strategies

Analyses of policy reports and papers, briefs and working documents developed by international and European Agencies and Working Groups (OECD, 2025[25], EEA WG on ECEC, 2021[26]; EEA WG on Schools, 2025[27]; EASNIE, 2025[28]) as well as research findings and EU-funded project results (ISOTIS, 2020[29]; INTESYS, 2016[30]) reveals that **significant and complex challenges exist on integrating early childhood services across several sectors, like education, welfare, and health.** They often relate to the multi-sectoral nature of policy initiatives addressed at children and their families, and meeting their diverse needs, especially in the case of children and families facing multiple disadvantages. The most significant challenges are illustrated below:



Fragmented governance and lack of cross-sectoral coordination

- **Siloed systems**: ECEC, health, and social welfare services often work in "silos". They operate under different ministries or departments, leading to a lack of cohesion in ECED initiatives. These silos lead to fragmentation, complicating access to services – especially for vulnerable children and families, making it challenging to provide comprehensive support in relation to their complex needs.
- **Multi-level governance complexities**: policies are developed and implemented at multiple levels (national, regional, local), with significant authority often residing at local levels in ECED. While this can allow for responsiveness to local communities, it can also lead to duplicated and competing efforts and confusion among families. Vertical coordination (across governance levels) and horizontal coordination (across sectors at a given level) are both critical but are often lacking.

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[25] OECD (2025) *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong*. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en

[26] EEA Working Group on ECEC (2021) *Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care. Providing high quality education and care to all young children.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/399018

[27] EEA Working Group on School (2024) Roadmap for ensuring school success for all – A practical 'living' guide for the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success – Thematic report. European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/9794835

[28] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE] (2025) C*ross-Sector Collaboration and Governance in Inclusive Education Systems: Background paper for the Advancing Collaboration in Education and Collaborative Action for Inclusive Education activities.* www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Cross-Sector%20Collaboration%20and%20Governance%20in%20Inclusive%20Education%20Systems.pdf

[29] ISOTIS (2020) *A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination. Evidence from Europe and Future Directions*: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5cf633dfa&appId=PPGMS

[30] INTESYS (2016) *Integrated Early Childhood Education and Care. Results of a European Survey and Literature Review*. www.issa.nl/integrated-early-childhood-education-and-care-results-european-survey-and-literature-review

- **Unclear responsibilities and duplication**: responsibilities for advancing ECED across government institutions are often not clearly delineated or mutually understood. This leads to a duplication of efforts and inefficiencies. The lack of an overarching authority to manage coordination often exacerbates these issues.
- **Lack of unified leadership and shared vision**: the absence of coordinating leaders – who should be responsible for coherent policy steering at the national level – is often combined with weak inter-institutional leadership within the ECED community, as various agencies may be too strongly associated with their sectoral mandates. This hinders the possibility to achieve a common vision on high quality provision for children and families, at both the governmental level and the level of service delivery. This might result in failing to achieve an integrated strategy and aligning funding to shared priorities.

Inconsistent policy framing

- **Divergent solutions and terminology**: differences in defining the problem may lead to a proliferation of ECED frameworks and varying terminology, making it difficult to achieve consensus on solutions and actions.
- **Policy-practice gap**: there is often an inconsistency in policy interpretation and implementation, meaning that institutional and pedagogical practices at the service level may not reflect the inclusivity aspired to in national laws.

Inadequate and unstable funding

- **Insufficient public investment**: public investment in ECED is generally low compared to other levels of education, and budget constraints are tight across many countries, also affecting preventive family support and social programmes.
- **Challenges in resource allocation**: flexible funding models can be difficult to implement due to a reluctance to shift from traditional models, and challenges in quantifying needs accurately. Uncertainty of funding for inter-agency work is also a major barrier to sustained integration efforts: funding is often short-time project-based, instead of long term and sustainable.

Workforce challenges

- **Difficulties in multi-professional teamwork**: different professional statuses and languages used by professionals from various sectors (such as ECEC, health, education, social services, ...) can create barriers to effective collaboration and shared understanding within multi-professional teams.
- **Lack of joint professional development opportunities**: staff working in various sectors (e.g., ECEC, early intervention, preventive family support programmes, ...) often lack shared in-service training opportunities allowing them to create a shared “working language”. Also, there is often a lack of adequate support facilitating inter-professional collaboration in multidisciplinary teams.

Challenges in service delivery and accessibility for vulnerable children and families

- **Availability and affordability**: there is often an insufficient number of high-quality ECEC services available, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods or remote areas. High costs for families also remain a major barrier, disproportionately affecting vulnerable families.
- **Structural and cultural barriers**: vulnerable families may face challenges to access services due to a range of factors, e.g. inflexible operating hours, geographical distance, physical obstacles, complex administrative requirements,

multiple application procedures and funding schemes, and barriers to information. Sometimes different cultural values, fear of stigmatisation or a lack of trust in formal services and welfare institutions (i.e. social services) might be barriers for families to access services and prevent them from receiving integrated support which might be in line with their needs.

- **Difficulties in transitions**: the transition from home to ECEC, between different ECEC settings, from ECEC to primary school can be challenging, especially for vulnerable children and families. Inconsistent curricula and pedagogical approaches across these stages can lead to a "fade-out" of benefits, for children and families.

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

3. Opportunities and ways forward toward integrated ECED

In an integrated ECED system, collaborative leadership at the level of policy decision-making and at the level of service delivery is essential.

Despite this consensus, implementing such approaches remains challenging in practice. During difficult times – characterised by reduction of public funding and staff shortage – those who are in leadership positions might often revert to their core tasks. They might perceive inter-agency collaboration and integrated work across sectors/services as additional burdens that require significant effort, feeling hesitant or reluctant to engage in cross-sectoral work. Therefore, establishing the necessary preconditions is crucial to facilitate effective collaboration and ensure the sustainability of integrated services, even in challenging circumstances. **By implementing integrated and multi-faceted strategies, countries can enhance the quality, equity, and inclusiveness of ECED services, significantly improving outcomes for all children and families, but specifically vulnerable children and families, and contributing to more cohesive and inclusive societies**.

This chapter considers research findings in this domain and proposes a policy roadmap towards integrated ECED approaches.

3.1. Effective network leadership practices: research findings

Research findings highlight the importance of improving policy decision-makers' leadership skills and creating better coordination systems to help government agencies work more effectively together in making policies[31]. Research also suggests that **designing effective coordination mechanisms which cultivate diverse forms of proximity is increasingly important,** as highlighted in section 1.3 of this report. For example, **central and local governments** can enhance organisational and cognitive proximity by establishing cross-ministerial and cross-sectoral alliances, joint innovation projects, and collaborative training programmes which involve key decision-makers from different policy domains[32]. **Monitoring and evaluating** the progress and effectiveness of inter-agency collaborative initiatives can be useful to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments accordingly[33].

Considering that **social proximity plays a critical role in facilitating inter-agency collaboration, establishing initial connections among governmental agencies is crucial to lay the foundation for future collaborations.** For example, **inter-departmental steering groups** could be created at national level for better coordinating initiatives across different policy domains. Also, **local coordination platforms** could be established under

[31] INTESYS (2019) *Policy Recommendations for strengthening integration in early childhood systems*: www.issa.nl/policy-recommendations-strengthening-integration-early-childhood-systems

NESET (2019)The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma. European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

ISOTIS (2020) *A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination. Evidence from Europe and Future Directions*: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5cf633dfa&appId=PPGMS

[32] Serapioni, M. (2023), *Towards Greater Family Policy Integration Across Europe: Overcoming sectoral fragmentation in supporting families with young children*, European Observatory on Family Policy, Brussels. https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Towards-greater-integration-in-family-policy-across-Europe.pdf

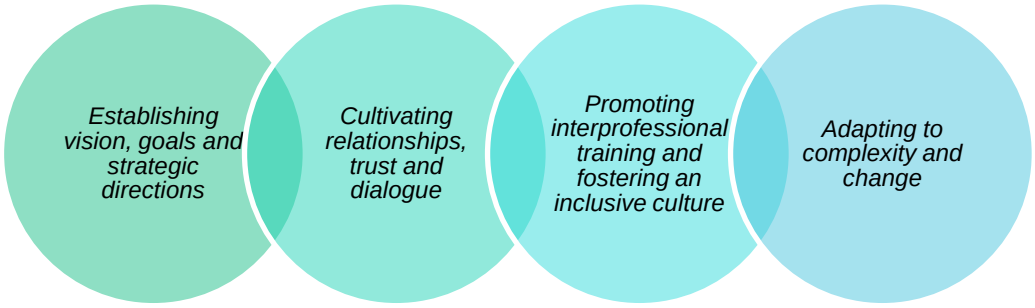
[33] OECD (2025) *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en

local governments to increase the effectiveness of policy implementation through a "tailored approach", responsive of community needs and resources[34].

Furthermore, considering that **institutional factors play an important role in shaping inter-agency collaboration**, more attention could be given to create **systematic opportunities for peer-learning and exchange among policymakers working across policy domains** both within and amongst countries[35]. **Local policy makers and administrators could collaborate in developing strategic plans for resource management**. In fact, inter-agency collaboration in service delivery can only be fostered if economic resources are efficiently allocated across sectors, reducing competition for resources among services and sectors[36].

Network leadership enables integrated working to flourish by engaging in strategic planning, cultivating relational trust, implementing structural support, and promoting collaborative practices among staff[37]. **Effective network leadership is transformative: it requires strategic vision, the ability to build and sustain relationships, a commitment to inclusive practices, continuous professional development, and active engagement with all stakeholders to create cohesive and responsive service systems[38]**. Network leaders should be able to mediate across diverse organisations and professions. It also entails building coordinated leadership platforms supporting multi-professional peer-learning and exchange among ECED services' leaders over time[39].

The main characteristics of effective network leadership practices are identified by research as follows.



[34] COFACE (2024) The role of the local level in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee: https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/COFACE-AGF-KeyFindings-ChildGuarantee.pdf

[35] Milotay, N. (2018). Scientific advice, policy formation and early childhood education and care in the EU: The intersection of research, policy and practice. *The Sage Handbook of Early Childhood Policy. London: Sage*, 19-31.

[36] Britto, P. R., Engle, P. L., & Super, C. M. (Eds.) (2013) *Handbook of early childhood development research and its impact on global policy*. Oxford University Press: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199922994.001.0001

[37] Omdal, H. & Roland, P. (2020) Possibilities and challenges in sustained capacity-building in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions: ECEC leaders' perspectives, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28:4, 568-581.

[38] NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

[39] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE] (2025) C*ross-Sector Collaboration and Governance in Inclusive Education Systems: Background paper for the Advancing Collaboration in Education and Collaborative Action for Inclusive Education activities.* www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Cross-Sector%20Collaboration%20and%20Governance%20in%20Inclusive%20Education%20Systems.pdf

ISOTIS (2020) *A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination. Evidence from Europe and Future Directions*: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5cf633dfa&appId=PPGMS

Establishing vision, goals, and strategic direction

A primary task of network leadership is to participatively create a shared vision, purpose and direction of the collaborative effort. This ensures a coherent, holistic child-centred approach, starting from children's rights and the needs of the families and the community:

- **Co-constructing a shared vision among ECED services in the community**: network leaders should not only provide the overall vision for service delivery, but also set the direction for collaboration with other services in the community[40]. This involves establishing a common vision that articulates why partners are working together: in the best interest of the children and the families. Leaders must ensure that all staff members share this common vision[41].
- **Setting shared goals which guide professional practices:** network leaders are responsible for setting research-informed and practice-based programmes and practices, identifying specific short-, mid- and long-term objectives, and maintaining staff focus on agreed-upon goals and actions. Successful collaboration critically depends on organisations and their members sharing a common purpose and focusing on it[42].
- **Defining roles and mandates:** clear roles and mandates for network leaders working in ECED settings should be defined in local policies. At the same time, network-leaders should establish clear mandates to professionals engaged in integrated collaboration and clarify expectations for their role, ensuring that everyone's responsibilities is clear[43].

Cultivating relationships, trust, and dialogue

Effective network leadership is fundamentally **relational.** This requires leaders to actively build and maintain networks of trust and respect, especially where children and families face complex problems. Network-leaders should build a collaborative culture and distribute leadership. Sufficient time and resources should be allocated for network leaders to support staff in developing participatory approaches to engage with children and families, and reaching out to the most vulnerable communities.

- **Building and re-building relationships:** this is identified as one of the main processes necessary for integrated working to flourish. Network-leaders facilitate connections and nurture networking by developing robust and respectful relationships among professionals, in the awareness that this needs to be repeated regularly over time[44].

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[40] INTESYS (2019) *INTESYS Toolkit: Towards Integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Systems – Building the Foundations.* https://www.issa.nl/intesys-toolkit-towards-integrated-early-childhood-education-and-care-systems-building-foundations

Omdal, H. & Roland, P. (2020) Possibilities and challenges in sustained capacity-building in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions: ECEC leaders' perspectives, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28:4, 568-581.

[41] Nores, M., & Fernandez, C. (2018). Building capacity in health and education systems to deliver interventions that strengthen early child development. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1419*(1), 57-73.

[42] ISOTIS (2020) *A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination. Evidence from Europe and Future Directions*: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5cf633dfa&appId=PPGMS

[43] NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

[44] Alisauskiene, S., Hanssen, N. B., & Kairienė, D. (Eds.) (2023). *Interprofessional and Family-Professional Collaboration for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care.* Springer Nature.

- **Fostering trust:** network-leaders should facilitate trusting communication and reflection among staff members of their organisation. At the same time they should create opportunities for inter-professional collaboration among staff working in other services from different sectors[45].
- **Promoting mutual respect and facilitating inter-professional dialogue:** network-leaders should promote a professional culture of mutual respect and solidarity. Network-leadership is grounded in common missions, shared values, and collective agency[46]. Network-leaders foster both informal encounters and formal opportunities to build inter-professional cooperation and promote dialogue about professional identities. This aligns with network-leadership's need to foster democratic participation, trust, and ongoing dialogue[47].
- **Coordination and mediation:** network-leaders' roles involve coordination within other ECED services, but also services from other sectors, to facilitate the co-construction of shared practices, enhance the coherence of integrated interventions for children and families, and mediate between different actors (policy decision-makers, stakeholders and families) at local level[48]. Local coordination platforms should be established as formal structures facilitating regular meetings among services' leaders within ECED networks, thus promoting collective reflection about shared challenges, exchange of inspiring practices, negotiating reciprocal roles and resolving disagreements[49].

Promoting interprofessional training and fostering an inclusive culture

Network-leaders enable integrated working to flourish by helping staff to develop a better understanding of their professional identity and a growing sense of professional and ethical responsibility. Research recalls that *effective collaboration in multi-professional teams is built on the competence and confidence of all professionals in their respective expertise, coupled with an unbiased understanding of the unique contribution each discipline brings*

Vaggers, J., & Anderson, E. S. (2021). An essential model for leaders to enable integrated working to flourish: a qualitative study examining leaders of Children's Centers. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2021.1897553

[45] Omdal, H. & Roland, P. (2020) Possibilities and challenges in sustained capacity-building in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions: ECEC leaders' perspectives, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28:4, 568-581.

Alisauskiene, S., Hanssen, N. B., & Kairienė, D. (Eds.) (2023). *Interprofessional and Family-Professional Collaboration for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care.* Springer Nature.

[46] NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

INTESYS (2019) Policy Recommendations for strengthening integration in early childhood systems: www.issa.nl/policy-recommendations-strengthening-integration-early-childhood-systems

[47] Verheijen-Tiemstra, R., Ros, A., Vermeulen, M., & Poell, R. F. (2024). Fostering collaboration through inclusive leadership: Exploring the behaviour of childcare and school leaders in Dutch child centres. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241227686

Ooms, M., Fukkink, R., Devlieghere, J., Dreier, A., Fischbach, R., Langner, J. And Van Lombergen, L. (2025). Interprofessional collaboration in ECEC: a review of European countries with different levels of system integration. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2484266

Educational Leadership Network Europe [ELNE] (2025) *Reflections on Collaborative Leadership. The promise and complexity of collaborative leadership in education*: www.elnenetwork.org/global/gene/link.php?doc_id=53&edit_lang=en

[48] NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma.* European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

[49] INTESYS (2019) Policy Recommendations for strengthening integration in early childhood systems: www.issa.nl/policy-recommendations-strengthening-integration-early-childhood-systems

ISOTIS (2020) *A comprehensive overview of inter-agency working as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities and discrimination. Evidence from Europe and Future Directions*: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5cf633dfa&appId=PPGMS

to the team[50]. Network-leadership is complex requiring emotionally intelligent approaches[51]. As network-leaders strengthen collaboration, particularly in contexts with strong disparities or "fault lines" between sectors, **network-leadership approaches should focus on three dimensions:**

- **Facilitate belongingness:** nourish stable and meaningful interpersonal relationships among staff operating across different services and different sectors
- **Value uniqueness:** support perspectives and orientations from staff from different sectors, even when those perspectives might be divergent from mainstream views in one specific sector. As valuing uniqueness is crucial to ensure successful cooperation in multi-professional teams[52], professional development support should be provided to leaders to fully actualise this approach in multi-disciplinary teamwork, especially considering that such competence is not commonly exercised in leaders' everyday practice[53]
- **Support reciprocal learning:** network-leaders should allocate resources to emphasise networking with other services among their staff and to stimulate the creation of (multi -) professional learning communities fostering inter-professional collaboration across services[54]. Research shows that staff ongoing professional development accompanied by coaching, reciprocal observations and collective reflection can be effective tools to sustain the creation of professional learning communities, where professionals from different services and sectors are motivated and empowered to learn from each other[55].

Adapting to complexity and change

Finally, in complex ECED systems, network-leaders should think systematically and employ creative problem-solving to navigate constant change[56]. Network-leaders should reflect on how operational issues are inter-connected and create synergies across stakeholders at local level. **Adopting a problem-solving mindset that appreciates connectivity, visualises complexity, and explores new possibilities enables network-leaders to**

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[50] Sun, Y., Skouteris, H., Tamblyn, A. et al. (2024) Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Early Childhood Education: A Scoping Review. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01836-0

[51] Vaggers, J., & Anderson, E. S. (2021). An essential model for leaders to enable integrated working to flourish: a qualitative study examining leaders of Children's Centers. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2021.1897553

[52] Karila, K., Kupila, P. (2023) Multi-professional teamwork in Finnish early childhood education and care. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 17 (21). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-023-00124-5

[53] Verheijen-Tiemstra, R., Ros, A., Vermeulen, M., & Poell, R. F. (2025). Understanding leaders' learning pathways in inclusive leadership: integrating learning logs with guided reflection. *Human Resource Development International*, 28(4), 567–590. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2025.2505836

[54] NESET (2019) *The role and place of ECEC in integrated working, benefitting vulnerable groups such as Roma*. European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/432465

Ooms, M., Fukkink, R., Devlieghere, J., Dreier, A., Fischbach, R., Langner, J. And Van Lombergen, L. (2025). Interprofessional collaboration in ECEC: a review of European countries with different levels of system integration. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2025.2484266

[55] INTESYS (2019) I*NTESYS Toolkit: Towards Integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Systems – Building the Foundations.* https://www.issa.nl/intesys-toolkit-towards-integrated-early-childhood-education-and-care-systems-building-foundations

Omdal, H. & Roland, P. (2020) Possibilities and challenges in sustained capacity-building in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions: ECEC leaders' perspectives, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28:4, 568-581.

[56] Vargas-Barón, E. (2013) 'Building and Strengthening National Systems for Early Childhood Development'. In Britto, P.R., Engle, P.L. and Super, C.M (eds) *Handbook of Early Childhood Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*. Oxford University Press: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199922994.003.0024

better adapt services to local needs and resources[57]. This, in turn, can support the development of a **tailored and community-based approach to practice innovation that addresses more responsively the emerging needs of children and families in each community.

At the same time, network-leaders need to develop a in-depth knowledge of policy change and be aware of the impact that institutional knowledge exerts on professional practice. Due to decentralisation processes, **complex ECED systems are increasingly designed implemented, and coordinated at the regional or local levels. This put network-leaders of community-based services in a key position for influencing bottom-up policy change**.

As strengthening ECED policy planning and implementation constitutes a major challenge in many countries, **building the capacity of network-leaders in integrated work across sectors and empowering their role in decision-making processes by establishing cross-sectoral coordination platforms** seems to be crucial [58].

3.2. Policy guidelines towards ECED strategies

The above analysis **sheds light on possible ways forward** to guide network-leadership in achieving integrated ECED strategies through six key elements:

Strategic policy-making and integrated governance	Developing a policy roadmap and a shared vision Cross-sectoral and whole system approach Balancing top-down support with bottom-up flexibility Rethinking ECED boundaries Facilitating smooth transitions
Adequate and strategic funding	Sufficient and sustained public investment Combining universal and targeted funding Resource sharing and collaborative initiatives Enhanced infrastructure planning
Multi-professional development and support	Comprehensive professional development Multi-professional teams and inclusive leadership Diverse workforce Addressing staff shortages and working conditions
Inclusive pedagogical approaches combined with early intervention strategies	Child-centred and holistic frameworks Valuing and celebrating diversity Identification of special needs and early intervention
Family and community engagement	Reciprocal partnerships with parents Community involvement and trust-building Accessible information and streamlined processes
Holistic and responsive service delivery models	Comprehensive service development Connection to broader societal issues

[57] Vaggers, J., & Anderson, E. S. (2021). An essential model for leaders to enable integrated working to flourish: a qualitative study examining leaders of Children's Centers. Journal of Interprofessional Care, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2021.1897553

[58] Nores, M., & Fernandez, C. (2018). Building capacity in health and education systems to deliver interventions that strengthen early child development. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1419*(1), 57-73.

Strategic policy-making and integrated governance

- **Developing a policy roadmap and a shared vision**: countries can benefit from a clear policy roadmap that builds on research evidence and international experiences to inform the design of ECED policies. This roadmap should strategically combine universal and targeted approaches, and align ECED with the broader landscape of early years and family related policies. A shared vision at the government level for children's learning, development, and well-being, and families preventive support, leads to better alignment of strategies and resources with intended policy objectives. In this sense, **peer-learning activities involving policymakers from different ministries** could be an important forum for exchanging values, norms and laws (as well as considerations on their effective implementation in different country contexts). It could lead to **generating a collective understanding of defining priorities involving several policy domains[59]. Peer-learning and exchange opportunities among policymakers and administrators** could be fostered also within regional and local **coordination platforms**, **where** shared decision-making protocols and operational tools fostering collaboration in service delivery are developed. Integrated national policy plans and structures can support coordination across government silos and strengthen collaborative efforts. While models vary by country, they aim to place children and families at the centre of these policy, programmes, and services.
- **Cross-sectoral and whole-system approach**: a "whole-system approach" requires collaboration among various levels (national, regional, local) and sectors (ECEC, education, health, welfare, …) to ensure policies, resources, and governance frameworks are aligned – both vertically and horizontally – with common long-term goals to support children and families, especially those in vulnerable situations[60].
- **Balancing top-down support with bottom-up flexibility**: successful coordination and integration requires a combination of top-down support *(*e.g., stable and sustainable funding, legal frameworks for cooperation) and bottom-up local input (e.g., commitment to early childhood initiatives, building capacity for implementation), along with shared values and strong leadership. This allows for responsiveness to local community needs while maintaining overarching policy goals.
- **Rethinking ECED boundaries**: policies can broaden the role of ECED beyond a single institution serving only early years, considering its potential for children of a wider age range, families, and communities. This includes, for example, extending the role of ECED into the primary school years, and in other sectors.
- **Facilitating smooth transitions**: developing mechanisms to support coordinated services helps sustaining benefits from one service to another and avoids 'gaps' from one service to the other, especially in split systems. It should cover the whole childhood period, starting with prenatal services and continuing through early childhood and primary school, and include preventive family support services. ECEC staff and the staff of other related services (such as primary education, out of school

[59] For example the European Education Area and Pillars of Social Rights, to make reference to the existing panorama influencing ECED policies at European level.

[60] UNESCO (2020) *Inclusive Education and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration between Education and Other Sectors. Background paper prepared for the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and education*. Paris: UNESCO. unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373664

care, welfare,.) should coordinate to ease transitions, especially for vulnerable children and families.

Adequate and strategic funding

- **Sufficient and sustained public investment**: ECED systems require adequate public funding that is sustained throughout childhood, mitigating the common drop in spending between the end of maternity leave and the start of pre-primary education in most countries[61].
- **Combining universal and targeted funding**: a strategic policy mix includes universal approaches that reach all children and families, and targeted approaches aimed at the most vulnerable, in line with the concept of proportionate universalism[62].
- **Resource sharing and collaborative initiatives**: promoting resource sharing across ECEC services, schools and services operating in other sectors (e.g., health, welfare, culture) and across regions[63], fosters collective responsibility and a more efficient use of resources and expertise to meet the diverse needs of children, families and local communities.
- **Enhanced infrastructure planning**: better planning of ECED integrated networks and coordination platforms, combining local and national investments and focusing on areas with vulnerable children and families, and service shortages, is critical for accessible and equitable infrastructure expansion.

Professional development and support

- **Comprehensive professional development**: ECEC staff and leaders need adequate initial training and continuing professional development in inclusive approaches, diversified strategies, and cultural responsiveness. Work-based training and team-level reflection over the boundaries of service-level are essential and must include the leadership level[64].
- **Multi-professional teams and inclusive leadership**: fostering multi-professional teamwork with complementary areas of expertise (e.g., health, education, social services, culture, welfare...) can provide more tailored support to children and families with diverse needs. Systemic support must be provided to centre-leaders through various strategies and initiatives to develop innovative approaches and foster collaboration[65].

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[61] COFACE (2025) Childcare gap in the European Union: https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Observatory_childcaregap_website.pdf

[62] Dierckx, M., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2020). Proportionate universalism in child and family social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, *25*(2), 337-344.

Kemp, L., Donohoe, K., Matthews, P., & Aspery, W. (2025). Translating 'proportionate universal healthcare' into meaningful system design to optimize equity in child and family services. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *81*(11), 7231-7244.

[63] As for example in the school cluster system in Portugal, presented in section 4.

[64] Ooms, M., Fukkink, R., Devlieghere, J., Dreier, A., Fischbach, R., Langner, J. And Van Lombergen, L. (2025). Interprofessional collaboration in ECEC: a review of European countries with different levels of system integration. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1–16.

Sun, Y., Skouteris, H., Tamblyn, A. et al. (2024) Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Early Childhood Education: A Scoping Review. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01836-0

Fukkink, R. G., & van Verseveld, M. (2020). Inclusive early childhood education and care: a longitudinal study into the growth of interprofessional collaboration. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, *34*(3), 362–372.

[65] Langner, J., Fukkink, R. G., & Hansen Sandseter, E. B. (2024). Interprofessional collaborative practices for children with speech, language and communication needs in early childhood education and care: comparing Dutch and Norwegian perspectives. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *39*(5), 675–692.

- **Diverse workforce**: attracting and retaining a more diverse ECED workforce, including leaders and practitioners from minority backgrounds, can increase awareness of diverse needs and strengths of children and families, and facilitate responsive practices[66].
- **Addressing staff shortages and working conditions**: sufficient funding is essential to ensure adequate staff composition and improve working conditions, making the profession more attractive for qualified staff. This is even more the case in a context of cross-sectoral collaboration and integration.

Inclusive approaches combined with early intervention strategies

- **Child-centred and holistic frameworks**: develop ECED frameworks that value diversity; maintain a holistic, play-based approach for children's wellbeing and involvement and to support children's cognitive, social-emotional, physical development, stressing the reciprocal relation with families and involvement of the local community[67].
- **Valuing and celebrating diversity**: frameworks should value and affirm all forms of diversity, including children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds, explicitly supporting multilingualism and home languages, and generating awareness of equality, equity, diversity and inclusion. This includes promoting a culturally rich environment, designing predictable routines which are "readable" for all children, and intentionally sustaining meaningful relationships among children and adults through rich, warm and meaningful interactions[68].
- **Identification of special needs and early intervention**: implement systems for accurate identification of children's needs and strengths, including developmental delays, using validated observation tools. Support staff in defining the strengths of all children, but also in engaging in sensitive and careful communication with parents when specific needs are assumed. Developing protocols for data sharing and linking at both individual and service levels – while respecting data protection and privacy requirements – is crucial to develop integrated early intervention strategies that involve a balanced and supportive collaboration between ECED and specialised staff (i.e. physiotherapists, speech therapists, developmental psychologists, etc.)[69].

Family and community engagement

- **Reciprocal partnerships with families**: ECED programmes must work with parents, as they are the first educators of their children. It should consider and build on the needs of the parents, and there should be reciprocal relationships with them, providing them all-round preventive support.
- **Community involvement and trust-building**: promote community involvement to strengthen the accessibility of services for children and families, and develop a trustful relationship between children, families, local communities and the ECED

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[66] As in the example of Elmer crèches in Brussels, presented in section 4.2 of the first WG report.

[67] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE] (2025) C*ross-Sector Collaboration and Governance in Inclusive Education Systems: Background paper for the Advancing Collaboration in Education and Collaborative Action for Inclusive Education activities.* www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Cross-Sector%20Collaboration%20and%20Governance%20in%20Inclusive%20Education%20Systems.pdf

[68] OECD (2025) *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong*. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en

[69] OECD (2025) *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong*. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en

services[70]. This can involve community-based initiatives, outreach activities, and recruiting staff from diverse communities as "cultural brokers", bridging the community and the services.

- **Accessible information and streamlined processes**: set up accessible information channels and streamline administrative processes for enrolment in ECED services (e.g., multilingual assistance, simplified eligibility verification). Integrated ways of working, like in service hubs, can help to overcome these obstacles by bringing together an array of support for families with children: by working together "under one roof" these services can become 'less hard to reach' for families[71].

Holistic and responsive service delivery models

- **Connection to broader societal issues**: consider integrating ECED with broader societal issues like children's rights, social justice and climate policies, as children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to socio-economic inequalities and climate change disruptions. In this sense, connecting ECED integrated frameworks with broader societal issues can enhance the policy advocacy capacity of local communities, especially the most marginalised ones[72].
- **Comprehensive service development**: acknowledge that addressing early inequalities requires a mix of services across health, nutrition, sanitation, education, culture, labour, housing, and protection as *no single strategy can eliminate opportunity gaps*.

[70] INTESYS (2019) *Policy Recommendations for strengthening integration in early childhood systems*: www.issa.nl/policy-recommendations-strengthening-integration-early-childhood-systems

[71] INTESYS (2019) *INTESYS Toolkit: Towards Integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Systems – Building the Foundations.* https://www.issa.nl/intesys-toolkit-towards-integrated-early-childhood-education-and-care-systems-building-foundations

[72] OECD (2025) *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong*. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b78f8b25-en

4. Insights into practice

4.1. Building leadership capacity through integrated policy frameworks and sustained governance support: the example of Iceland and Reykjavík municipality.

Both the Prosperity Act and the Reykjavík Education Policy 2030 support a well-coordinated system of services for children and families by establishing clear mechanisms for integration and investing in the professional capacity of the staff responsible for service delivery.

The Prosperity Act: Investing in Specialised Coordination Roles

The Prosperity Act (formally, *the Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity*)[73] **seeks to enhance child well-being by ensuring the provision of comprehensive services to children and families**. All services promoting children's well-being must prioritise the child's best interests. Service providers are expected to respect the rights and responsibilities of parents and caregivers, as well as the child's own rights, considering the child's views according to their age and level of development. By placing children at the core of the welfare system, the Act ensures that all children – and their families – do not get lost among various service providers across municipalities and government agencies.

To achieve this, **a coordinator is assigned to any child in need of initial support or assistance**. The coordinator's role is to enhance child well-being through comprehensive services and early intervention, and to offer information and guidance on available services. If further targeted assistance is required, the coordinator continues to monitor and facilitate the integration process. Typically, coordinators operate within healthcare, preschools, primary or secondary schools, or the social services of a municipality. This coordinator serves a vital leadership function in the coordinated system by offering information, guidance on available services, and ensuring access and continuity of care.

The services offered are organised into three levels:

- The primary level consists of basic services available to all children and parents, such as education, sports, and general health services. Early support is provided based on an initial assessment of the child's needs, with the coordinator working at this level.
- The secondary level offers individualised and structured support aimed at ensuring a child's well-being. If the assessment indicates the need for secondary level support, a Case Manager is assigned to the child or family. The Case Manager is responsible for providing access to services, designing a support plan, and overseeing its implementation.
- Tertiary level services involve specialised support to prevent any threat to the child's well-being.

The Act supports coordination across sectors by assigning specific professional roles to manage service integration and early intervention. This approach represents an investment in dedicated leadership capacity focused on connecting services. By

[73] The full-text version of the Act, translated into English, can be retrieved in the law repository of the Icelandic Government web-site: https://www.government.is/library/04-Legislation/Act-Integration-Child-Services-Children-Prosperity-86-2021.pdf The Act is complemented by the *Children's prosperity handbook* – developed by the National Agency for Children and Families in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Children and UNICEF – to support to support local authorities and government agencies in the process of law implementation: https://island.is/en/manuals/childrens-prosperity-handbook/implementing-the-childrens-prosperity-law

establishing and defining these roles, the Act ensures that specialised professional leadership is in place to facilitate the integration of services across different sectors, prioritizing the child's best interests.

Reykjavík City Education Policy 2030: Investing in Professional Development and Collaboration

The *Reykjavík City Education Policy 2030 - Let Dreams Come True*[74] emphasizes the importance of creating innovative school and recreational activities to meet children's current and future needs, by promoting staff development and professionalism. Ensuring equal access to diverse activities suited to children's interests – as well as enhancing children's fundamental understanding of society and nature – are key goals of the city education policy: "the purpose is to prepare children to live responsible lives in a free society fostered by understanding, peace, mutual respect, human rights, and friendliness". By acknowledging that the upbringing and education of children and adolescents is a societal task that occurs both formally and informally, the policy is in harmony with the national curriculum for preschools and primary schools, and existing policies of the Department of Education & Youth and Reykjavík City.

Against this background, **the policy explicitly invests in the capacity of the educational workforce to enhance quality and coordination among formal and non-formal services**, thereby supporting the development of an integrated system:

- **strengthening staff professionalism:** a core action supporting the policy's implementation is the commitment to **increase the number of professionally trained staff**. Furthermore, the policy aims to **strengthen professional development and collaboration with the University of Iceland, School of Education**.
- **ongoing capacity building:** the implementation phases include a continuous focus on capacity enhancement through **professional collaboration and development**. Specific capacity goals include enhancing **cultural sensitivity & multicultural competences of staff**.
- **encouraging coordination through staff capacity:** the policy explicitly targets coordination across educational levels by committing to **increase cooperation between preschools, compulsory schools, and after-school programmes**. By investing in professional capacity and collaboration, staff members are better equipped to coordinate and integrate services effectively across the educational lifespan (preschools, compulsory schools, and leisure centres).
- **funding for innovation and cooperative projects:** the policy allocates funding for innovation and development, aiming to create a culture that encourages development and innovation. A portion of this annual funding (25%) is reserved for **larger cooperative projects**, which specifically supports leaders and staff in coordinating services and integrating new practices across different educational institutions.
- **cultivating leadership culture:** the policy's implementation is a process intended to foster leadership by building trust to be innovative, take risks, make mistakes, and adopt resilience and a growth mindset in a learning community.

[74] https://reykjavik.is/en/education-policy-through-2030-let-dreams-come-true

4.2. Working with local governments to develop a local early childhood strategy sustaining integrated leadership: the Primokiz approach

Primokiz is an **evidence-based program developed by the Jacobs Foundation to improve access to quality early childhood services for young children**. The Foundation granted ISSA the license to distribute the program, which ISSA then sub-licenses to interested members and partners to implement at local/country level. **Building on the Jacobs Foundation's established Primokiz approach and insights from the INTESYS project, ISSA is working to promote policies and practices that support integrated early childhood services across different countries.**

The program collaborates directly with local governments to develop a sustainable knowledge infrastructure, and capacity for creating responsive and comprehensive early childhood strategies. It emphasizes a participatory process tailored to the local context, connecting political commitment with local expertise, resources, and the needs of children and families.

Primokiz is mainly a process-driven initiative focused on fostering collaboration and coordination across sectors. Led by local governments, cross-sector teams collect and analyse data, establish priorities, develop strategies based on evidence and community vision, and implement measures that address the specific needs of children and families in their communities.

The Primokiz approach contributes to creating a coordinated leadership model for integrated early childhood 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 role of local governments in ensuring quality early childhood services

Local governments hold a decision-making role in setting local priorities and addressing them properly for people living in their city/municipality. These authorities are well-positioned to make a difference for young children and their families by ensuring the following.

Source: UNICEF ECARO and ISSA (2023) "*Strengthening local governments' capacity to ensure quality, equitable and comprehensive services for young children and their families ECD Toolbox for Local Governments*". www.unicef.org/eca/media/35546/file/ECD%20Toolbox%20for%20Local%20Governments.pdf

Establishing Local Authority Leadership and Political Will

The municipal involvement in Primokiz is crucial for providing legitimate and sustainable leadership. This is ensured by:

- **securing buy-in and legitimacy:** the process begins by getting buy-in from local authorities. Political will is identified as a key element that legitimizes the entire process and ensures that the resulting strategy will be accepted and adopted by decision-makers
- **-sustainability and funding:** local government buy-in ensures sustainability for the work and favourable decisions regarding the funds needed for implementing the strategy. The inclusion of early childhood components in local development strategies indicates the assumed responsibility of public authorities for achieving the objectives
- **connecting spheres:** the approach uniquely connects administrative entities with the political sphere, the local early childhood expertise and practice, and private actors in the field of early childhood (horizontal and vertical cooperation)
- **increased interest:** one of the lasting achievements observed in municipalities is the **increased interest of the local government** in early childhood and the services needed by this age group and their families.

Mandating Cross-Sectoral Teams under Local Leadership

The core mechanism for creating coordinated leadership is the establishment of cross-sectoral structures led directly by the municipality:

- **formation of Local Action Teams (LATs):** a key step in the Primokiz process is to **set up local cross-sectoral teams led by the local government**. These teams ensure the involvement of all relevant and different stakeholders from across the local early childhood system
- **modelling cross-sectoral leadership:** cross-sectoral collaboration is a key element of Primokiz, defined as **bringing together data and expertise from all sectors providing early childhood services under the leadership of local authorities**. This structure models and supports a culture of networking, dialogue, and collaboration at the local level
- **integration of sectors:** the approach conveys the message that early childhood is a **cross-cutting issue** for which the education, social services, and health sectors are jointly responsible. Mayors explicitly valued the resulting cross-sectoral collaboration, noting that bringing together specialists from the social, education, and health sectors contributes to finding the best solutions for service development
- **catalysing local capacity:** the involvement of the local authority catalyses expertise and capacity across a wide range of stakeholders at the municipality level. These municipality-level teams act as an engine for the development of early childhood initiatives, representing a lasting achievement of the process.

Using Data for Strategic, Integrated Planning

The local government implements a participatory, data and needs-driven process that leads to the development of a shared strategy for cross-sectoral collaboration based upon:

- **locally-led situation analysis:** municipalities lead a situation and needs analysis, integrating existing and new, relevant data. This analysis brings together specialists, practitioners across early childhood sectors, local government representatives, families, and community members.

- **needs-based strategy development:** the situation analysis is used to decide jointly on short-, medium-, and long-term priorities for improving services across sectors. This data-informed, participatory process leads to the development of needs-based, locally relevant strategies/plans with funds allocation and financial projection.
- **comprehensive view:** the strategies developed reflect a comprehensive, child- and family-centred view on the early childhood system, ensuring that formal, non-formal, and informal services are considered. The goal is to achieve an aligned strategy that links services to achieve the greatest possible impact corresponding to the various needs of children and their families.

4.3. Fostering cross-sectoral collaboration in contexts of decentralised governance: the case of Vila Nova de Gaia in Portugal

Collaboration mechanisms between the central state and municipalities are crucial in decentralized governance contexts, as they provide the necessary structure, resources, and strategic alignment to foster integrated working. In Portugal the devolution process, formalised through Decree-Law 21/2019, interlinks three governance levels. The national level defines curriculum guidelines, the legal framework, and teacher recruitment, while municipalities assume responsibility for infrastructure, non-teaching staff, transport, school meals, and extracurricular activities. Schools remain responsible for coordination, family engagement, and curriculum implementation; however, they cannot introduce major changes to the latter.

Collaboration mechanisms between municipalities and the central state include the creation of Local Education Councils, inter-administrative contracts, shared training initiatives, and joint curriculum projects. Municipalities support professional and curriculum development and pedagogical innovation, particularly through fostering inter-institutional collaboration in areas such as inclusion and early transitions. However, challenges persist, including limited ECEC-specific training for municipal staff, fragmented governance across sectors, and disparities in resource allocation and strategic vision. To address these, **opportunities for stronger local leadership arise from the devolution process, such as through building municipal capacity and supporting school leaders.**

The municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia was presented as a case study. To resolve local challenges, strategic actions included the creation of a local ECEC task force, co-designed professional development programmes, a transition framework between preschool and primary education, and investments in inclusive learning environments. Furthermore, the GAIAaprende+i flagship programme provided extended hours in preschools, inclusive activities for children with special needs, and holiday support for families. **Integrated working is supported by mechanisms that institutionalize dialogue, promote shared responsibility, and ensure coherent development across governance levels.**

Institutionalizing Dialogue and Strategy

Collaboration mechanisms establishing formal structures that mandate coordination across the different governance levels (national, municipal, and school) are essential for participatory and responsive decision-making. In the case of Portugal, these include:

- **local education councils:** these serve as strategic forums that bring together schools, municipalities, and social partners. Empowering these councils as **strategic drivers for coordination** can play an important role for enhancing leadership capacity at local level, as local leadership is able to flourish when dialogue mechanisms are institutionalized

- **inter-administrative contracts:** these formal agreements define the specific decentralized responsibilities. **Clear mandates and tools**, supported by inter-administrative contracts, **ensure that the infrastructure for coordination and shared responsibility is in place** for sustainability
- **coordination protocols and platforms:** developing **coordination protocols** between **schools and municipalities** is a step toward enhanced integrated working. Policy recommendations emphasize creating **regional coordination platforms** to align the efforts of national, municipal, and school-level leadership.

Ensuring Pedagogical and Curriculum Coherence

To overcome existing challenges related to weak continuity between different educational stages in Portugal, collaborative mechanisms focusing on joint development activities were developed as follows:

- **joint curriculum projects:** these projects, which can focus on areas like STEAM, inclusion, or artistic expression, are co-developed in partnership with local authorities. Understanding curricula as evolving frameworks, co-constructed and informed by practice, can support pedagogical coherence across pre-, primary and secondary school education
- **development of transition frameworks:** collaboration supports the creation of guidelines and resources for educational transitions, focusing on continuity between preschool and primary education. In Vila Nova de Gaia a transition framework was co-created by involving preschool and primary school teachers, with municipal facilitation, to focus on shared pedagogical principles and family involvement
- **comprehensive project support:** municipal support helps foster **comprehensive preschool projects** that integrate curriculum, learning environment, and family engagement. The ultimate result of such collaboration is often increased coherence between preschool practice and local education policy.

Shared Capacity Building and Cross-Sectoral Alignment

To address the fragmented support systems between social, education, and health services – as well as the limited strategic alignment between municipal investment and pedagogical priorities set by local schools – the Municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia developed the following actions:

- **shared training initiatives and strategy:** in-service training initiatives were co-designed in partnership with local Teachers' Training Centres, with a focus on topics that were considered relevant by teachers (such as inclusive practices, early literacy and collaborative learning) thus strengthening professional identity and reflective practice among preschool and primary school staff. Logistic support and co-funding for training implementation was provided by the Municipality as part of this shared training strategy.
- **addressing sectoral fragmentation:** integrated working across sectors was promoted through the **creation of a local ECEC task force**, comprising school leaders, preschool coordinators, municipal education, and social action staff. Monthly meetings are carried out to align priorities, monitor initiatives, and respond to evolving needs of children and families in the local community.

Financial and Resource Integration

Central state funding mechanisms needs to ensure that municipalities have the necessary resources to perform their decentralized responsibilities in relation to school infrastructure,

non-teaching staff, transport and school meals. For this purpose, the funding of Municipalities under the devolution process encompasses:

- **financial transfer agreements:** annual agreements between the central government and municipalities defining the financial resources allocated for educational management, including maintenance, transportation, meals, and non-teaching staff
- **municipal fund for education:** a designated fund that allocates resources based on the number of students, educational facilities, and specific local needs, ensuring adequate financial coverage for all municipalities
- **compensation fund for increased responsibilities:** To address disparities in resource allocation, a compensation mechanism provides additional financial support to municipalities facing higher costs due to increased educational responsibilities
- **monitoring and accountability**: annual reporting to the Direção-Geral das Autarquias Locais (DGAL) ensures transparency and compliance in the use of allocated funds, promoting effective financial management
- **access to external funding:** municipalities can access additional funding through EU structural funds and national initiatives, focusing on areas like infrastructure and digitalization.

These sustained collaborative actions strengthened trust and communication between schools and the municipality, demonstrating that municipal capacity-building must effectively accompany the new responsibilities devolved by the central state.

4.4. Supporting integrated services “under one roof”: the role of leaders in Family Centres in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany)

In 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 centers 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 in NRW[75], which sets the context for defining the leadership role of professionals coordinating cross-sectoral cooperation within Family Centres:

- **legal enshrinement:** in NRW, Family Centres are enshrined in law, which is noted as a success factor for supporting integrated work at the local level
- **mandate for cooperation:** according to the law, Family Centres must follow guiding principles, including **orientation towards cooperation with external partners in the local community** and orientation towards the social space or neighbourhood. Family centres are defined as all-day care facilities that **provide services or referrals for easily accessible advice and suppor**t, often **requiring multi-**

[75] Ministeriums für Kinder, Jugend, Familie, Gleichstellung, Flucht und Integration des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2020), Gütesiegel Familienzentrum Nordrhein-Westfalen:

https://www.familienzentrum.nrw.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Publikationen/ISA_br_Guetesiegel_web_RZ__1_.pdf.

Ministeriums für Kinder, Jugend, Familie, Gleichstellung, Flucht und Integration des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2025): https://www.familienzentrum.nrw.de/.

sectoral cooperation. This legal mandate defines the requirement for integrated work that leaders must oversee and implement.

An evaluation study examining the effectiveness of this model[76], offered interesting insights regarding **leaders' role in these settings, the challenges they face in relation to resources and time allocation**, and the general consensus that **specific training is necessary** to successfully implement integrated work. The study reveals that a significant factor impacting on how leaders can support integrated working in family centres is related to the **lack of dedicated funding and time**. As leaders of family care centres in NRW are drawn from the existing staff, this resource constraint limits the practical implementation of integration, as further detailed below:

- **general funding and time constraints:** funding for the Family Centres is general, meaning there is no specific attribution to certain integrated working activities, which creates a problem regarding time constraints for leaders
- **provider dependency:** the ability to give leaders time to manage and foster integrated work depends heavily on the non-profit provider running the centres upon public subsidies (highly diverse situations)
- **impact on cross-sectoral cooperation:** integrated working relies on multi-sectoral cooperation and engagement with external partners. This cooperation, however, sometimes suffers from a lack of financial resources, staffing, and qualifications of personnel, which applies to Family Centres and their external partners.

Moreover, cooperation sometimes suffers from sectorial regulations that actually work as barriers for cooperation (e.g. regulations in the healthcare system). The evaluation study also emphasized that **dedicated in-service training is a critical success factor for enabling leaders to adequately support integrated working**, as developing a shared understanding in multi-professional teams is vital for collaboration, especially given that professionals from different disciplinary fields may not share the 'same language'. However, the opportunity to avail of specialised training also hinges upon the capacity of Not-For-Profit providers to accommodate this.

4.5. Sustaining leadership capacity across early childhood and preschool institutions through joint in-service professional development programmes (Italy)

The results of the Erasmus+ project INTRANS[77] show that **joint continuing professional development** (CPD) can significantly **support leadership capacity for fostering collaboration** between professionals working in early childhood centres (attended by children aged 0 to 3) and in preschool settings (attended by children aged 3 to 6).

In the Italian context, **the research and development programme aimed to support the implementation of the reform on the integrated 0-6 system[78]**, by promoting the dissemination and upscaling of innovative practices fostering educational continuity. As part of the InTrans consortium, the Department of Education of Bologna University designed, piloted, and implemented an intensive CPD program involving approximately 50 professionals, including pedagogical coordinators from municipal and private not-for-profit services, as well as pedagogical leaders in state-maintained preschools. In collaboration with the Emilia-Romagna region and local education authorities, the program combined

[76] Stöbe-Blossey, Sybille et al. (2020), *Familienzentren in Nordrhein-Westfalen. Eine empirische Analyse*, Springer VS.

[77] https://www.issa.nl/intrans

[78] https://www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/

theory and practical activities. The theoretical component was focused on raising awareness, among participants, about the importance of sustaining inclusive transitions by drawing on international research findings; while the practical component was focused on providing participants with methodological tools to critically review transition practices implemented in their services, by centring reflection on the experiences of children and families in transitions. Participants were then encouraged to co-design small-scale transition projects to be piloted in their local settings. To support implementation and follow-up, CPD sessions were mainly conducted in mixed groups, bringing together professionals from state-maintained, municipal, and private Not-For-Profit providers clustered around geographic areas.

The results from focus groups carried out with participants 6 months after the end of the program shed light on **several mechanisms through which joint CPD programmes can support the development of leadership capacity for fostering inter-professional collaboration** between early childhood educators and preschool teachers working for different ECEC providers.

Developing a Shared Pedagogical Vision and Language

The attendance of the joint CPD programme proved to be successful in sustaining the development of a **unitary pedagogical vision and language,** promoting continuity of educational approaches and practices across 0-3 and 3-6 services, for the following reasons:

- **systemic understanding:** the training enhanced leaders' ability to have a **clear view of the complexity of the education system** and increase their ability to read and understand the complexity of the various levels of governance
- **combining research and practice:** successful outcomes were related to the CPD programme's characteristic of **developing a shared pedagogical vision by combining research and practice**
- **developing a common professional language**: participants were encouraged to share their views about children's images, families' participation, inclusion and diversity starting from reflection on their everyday practices in mixed groups (encompassing leaders from different institutional backgrounds - 0-3/3-6 services, state-maintained, municipal, or private providers).

Fostering Inter-Professional Networks and Exchanges

The fact that CPD activities were primarily carried out in **'mixed groups'** – including professionals working in state-maintained, municipal, and private providers within the same geographical area – was key to:

- **encouraging collaboration:** the training methodology utilised **Professional Learning Communities** where participants learned from each other through sharing experiences and critical reflection. This led to professional encounters, exchange of good practices, and the construction of new initiatives together
- **developing informal networks:** a successful outcome of experimental transition projects was related to the CPD's ability to **sustain the development of inter-professional collaboration** through informal networks created at the local level.

Strengthening Distributed Leadership and Operational Skills

While acknowledging the different institutional, organisational and educational cultures (State-maintained, Municipal, and Private Not-For-Profit institutions) where pedagogical coordinators and school principals were operating, the CPD programme encouraged them to **experiment new models of distributed leadership by**:

- **offering operational tools:** participants were provided with **methodological tools to critically review strengths and weaknesses** of the transition practices implemented in the services they were coordinating, as well as to **co-design small-scale improvements** to be piloted within inter-professional coordination teams in their local context
- **developing leadership capacity:** the programme focused on developing leadership skills connected to **team coaching** and **inter-professional collaboration** in mixed ECEC teams.

Systemic Conditions for Sustainability

The leadership capacity built through the CPD programme proved to be sustainable only where it was supported by a competent system of governance. Findings from the InTrans research project revealed that joint CPD initiatives can significantly contribute to reform implementation from a grassroot perspective depending on the following conditions:

- **local context support:** the success of experimental projects was closely linked to contextual factors, particularly the support provided by school directors and/or local authorities, which played a key role in ensuring sustainability
- **infrastructure utilisation:** success also relied on the possibility to avail of **established pedagogical coordination networks** to upscale innovative practice
- **policy and systemic support:** combining CPD with **policy advocacy initiatives** is critical to ensure the sustainability and scalability of good practices on the long term, by allowing the **transformation of informal inter-professional collaboration networks** into **stable coordination platforms** conceived as infrastructure for integrated working.

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