

## Starting Strong VIII Country Notes

# Bulgaria

The Translating Research into Policies for Quality and Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions in reviewing how recent research advancements on child development, learning and well-being coming from multiple disciplines could help them revisit ECEC policies and identify areas and directions for improvement. Over the last two decades, science made significant progress in understanding the factors that shape early child development, fuelled primarily by advancements in neuroscience but also benefiting from the growing attention that education and social sciences research pays to early childhood. This knowledge holds promise for policies that set strong foundations for life-long learning and socio-emotional well-being and resilience.

However, translating research into policies is a complex endeavour. The policy review built on recurrent and structured exchanges between country representatives of Ministries in charge of ECEC policies (the OECD ECEC Network) and a multidisciplinary group of experts to engage in a collaborative review of evidence that could inform directions for improving ECEC policies. At the beginning of the project, policymakers indicated ECEC areas or challenges where they perceived a need for additional or updated research evidence to inform policy directions in their countries. This led to the identification of the theme of the policy review, which is on how to design ECEC policies to ensure that they help mitigating inequalities in the short- to long-term. The project's final report, *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2025<sup>[1]</sup>), was published as part of the OECD Starting Strong series.

Five countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Ireland, Japan and Korea) engaged more actively in the project. Representatives from these countries were invited to engage in consultation meetings to identify their priority areas and key issues for the development of the ECEC sector, aligned with the objectives and themes of the Starting Strong VIII report. Two workshops were organised to foster dialogue between experts and country representatives, focusing on the key issues identified during the consultation meetings. The information gathered during the consultation meetings and project workshops as well during the preparation of the Starting Strong VIII report informs this country note.

### Context

In Bulgaria, 18% of children lived in income poverty in 2021, a rate above the OECD average (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.1). Many of these children face multiple and interconnected vulnerabilities that exacerbate inequalities, with approximately 10% born into families characterised by young parental age, parental unemployment and limited access to social protection systems (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). As in other countries, inequality of opportunity translates into inequality in students' achievements. In Bulgaria, this is evidenced by the gap in mathematics scores according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) between children from high and low socio-economic status families (see Table 1). This gap widened between 2015 and 2022 and remains above the OECD average.

In addition to existing inequalities, Bulgaria is experiencing social and demographic changes that present challenges for its future (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). The working-age population is in decline, partly due to emigration, while the proportion of older adults is rising, placing increasing demands on social protection and healthcare systems. A decline in fertility rates among women with higher education levels, largely due to high opportunity costs of childbearing, further exacerbates the strain on the shrinking population. Growing influx of immigrants and refugees, many of whom are children, can partly address this decline, but requires integration efforts through improved access to essential services. Recognising these social and demographic challenges, the Bulgarian government has prioritised policies to promote social inclusion and equity through its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2022-2026), developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan aims to improve the quality and accessibility of social services, enhance access to health care, and reduce inequalities.

ECEC can help achieve multiple goals: support both parents' labour market participation and families more globally to boost fertility rates but also build a more inclusive, equitable society and setting the foundations for strong skills development to address future workforce needs. Bulgaria has implemented reforms to expand access to ECEC and improve the quality of services across the country. One such initiative is the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development, introduced in 2024, which aims to expand services in the areas of health and nutrition, education, child protection, parenting support and early childhood intervention through increased investments. During consultation meetings and project workshops, representatives from Bulgaria highlighted that improving access to ECEC and other social services for vulnerable groups, enhancing the quality of the services, and responding to increasing diversity in ECEC settings are key priorities for the country.

The note is structured around the policy areas of the roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion presented in Chapter 1 of the report. It also summarises some of the main findings of the report.

## Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC

With evidence showing that the early years play a key role in children's learning and development trajectories, and that learning opportunities in family environments vary widely between children (see Chapter 3), extended participation in ECEC beyond the almost-universal year before primary education is a key policy direction to address early inequalities. Despite substantial increases in total enrolment rates in recent decades in most OECD countries, some children, because of their characteristics and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, have weaker opportunities to engage in ECEC. In Bulgaria, enrolment rates were slightly below the OECD average in 2022, with 85% of 4-year-olds participating in ECEC; although more recent national data indicate enrolment for this age group of about 89%, equivalent to the most recent OECD average. Comprehensive international data on participation rates for younger children is lacking but available data suggests that enrolment rates are low, with only 13% of 2-year-olds enrolled (see Table 1). National estimates that include participation rates across different types of formal ECEC settings, however, suggest that participation rates for this age group may be much higher and in-line with or even above the OECD average. Although participation gaps in ECEC services by socio-economic status have narrowed over the years (see Chapter 5), studies indicate that significant disparities persist among ethnic minority groups (World Bank, 2016<sup>[3]</sup>; UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). In particular, Turkish and Roma children remain under-represented in ECEC programmes, exacerbating the risks of weaker early development and health outcomes related to the higher rates of poverty experienced by these groups (De Laat, Kraus and van der Harst, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>; UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>).

Multi-faceted and inter-related effects of personal and environmental factors influence participation in ECEC (see Chapter 5). Some barriers to participation are direct, relating to the availability, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services, while indirect barriers (complex administrative requirements, lack of

awareness of ECEC benefits, social norms or a low level of trust in provision quality) hinder access to otherwise available services. Direct and indirect barriers tend to disproportionately affect families from low socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds. Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC involves addressing both direct and indirect barriers. The evidence demonstrates that barriers to ECEC participation in Bulgaria are indeed multifaceted: a combination of limited availability of spots, information gaps, social exclusion and discrimination contribute to low participation rates, especially among disadvantaged groups (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>).

Providing effective support to make ECEC affordable to all families and progressively moving towards universal free access is a key direction to reduce barriers to participation. Since 2023, all public ECEC in Bulgaria is free for all age groups, including costs for meals. While there is no guarantee of free ECEC outside of the public system, the national government also has several mechanisms to provide financial support to families who have applied for but are not granted an ECEC place in the public sector (e.g. due to capacity shortage). In such cases, funds can be used to access other forms of early education for children, including to cover some of the costs for private kindergartens or to engage in specific activities (e.g. individualised early learning services).

The availability of ECEC services where families live can be a key determinant of children's participation in ECEC. In most OECD countries, lower-income regions are typically underserved while both urban and rural areas can display relatively high unmet demand due to a shortage of facilities. In Bulgaria, the overall supply of kindergartens serving older children (ages 3- 7) generally exceeds demand in most districts. However, exceptions exist in larger cities, such as Sofia, where services are insufficient or not geographically accessible to meet the needs of the growing number of families with young children. In contrast, nurseries for younger age groups (0- 3) face a more widespread shortage, particularly in rural areas. Many villages lack nurseries entirely, while others have only a single facility available (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). To address these challenges, the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development includes measures to expand access to ECEC by increasing the number of centres and improving the infrastructure of existing facilities. Additional funding has been allocated for these initiatives for the period 2024-2026, aiming to enhance the quality and availability of services, particularly in underserved areas.

For legal entitlements to ECEC to translate into higher enrolment, they require designing regulations that place responsibility on local authorities to ensure sufficient places and meet quality objectives, accompanied by suitable investments in infrastructure and provision of qualified staff, with targeted support for disadvantaged areas or for vulnerable children. In Bulgaria, children are not guaranteed a spot in ECEC facilities until the compulsory year at age 4. Families with younger children are required to apply for spots through their municipalities. Municipalities are able to set their own criteria for admitting children, and most rely on the following: residence within the catchment area; parents in employment or education or on parental leave; experience in a nursery setting for applying to kindergarten at age 2 or 3; presence of siblings in the same establishment; social criteria such as loss of parent, parental disability, or large families with three or more children. Municipalities use similar criteria to allocate nursery places, for which the supply is far more limited. This shortage likely leads many families in Bulgaria to rely on informal childcare (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1). Evidence shows that streamlining and expanding the eligibility criteria within administrative systems can promote equitable access to ECEC, particularly in contexts without legal entitlements to ECEC services. When selection criteria for ECEC placement are determined locally or by individual providers, inconsistencies can arise, impacting access and coverage, especially for more vulnerable populations. Guiding principles or standardised selection criteria introduced at the central level, designed and built upon robust data systems can promote uniformity in access and ensure that vulnerable children are not further disadvantaged due to their socio-economic backgrounds.

Understanding the role of ECEC in children's lives is necessary for motivating parents to use these services and to enhance ECEC participation in many OECD countries. Some parents of children under the age of 3 may view ECEC services as a childcare solution rather than as an experience supporting child

development. The view that ECEC services are not suitable or of low quality for younger age groups is also related to social norms that emphasise the importance of childcare at home, particularly provided by mothers. In Bulgaria, limited beliefs in the benefits of ECEC contributes to families' reluctance to use these services (World Bank, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>). To address this, the European Social Fund Plus project, *Bright Start*, introduced parenting programmes and information services aimed at encouraging ECEC participation, with targeted supports for marginalised communities and small towns. However, the perceived quality of ECEC services poses an additional challenge. According to a survey of Bulgarian parents, one in five believes that ECEC services for younger children do not match the quality of care provided at home, citing issues such as large group sizes and insufficient attention to children's individual needs (Yosifov et al., 2018<sup>[7]</sup>). These perceptions contribute to lower participation rates in certain regions, even for 3- 5-year-old children, despite the widespread availability of ECEC services. Evidence from other countries shows that ensuring all ECEC services are of high quality could indeed foster greater trust among parents, encouraging more families to choose formal ECEC services over informal alternatives (see Chapters 5 and 6). Equally important is enhancing transparency and communication with parents regarding ECEC quality, such as through the publication of monitoring reports (e.g. with information on quality standards, staff qualifications, safety measures) Integrating information channels into frequently used early childhood services, such as healthcare, social services and other social hubs accessed by families can play a key role in reaching vulnerable families, ensuring that even those who may not actively seek information are well-informed (see Chapter 10).

Paid parental leave offers multiple benefits to families as well as society at large, such as enhancing fertility rates in ageing societies. However, these benefits may entail trade-offs that require careful policy design. Paid leave during the first six months is linked to positive outcomes for both parents and children, whereas the added benefits beyond this period have been shown to be minimal. Without complementary supports such as access to high-quality ECEC, parental leave policies may inadvertently hinder women's labour market participation or increase reliance on informal care arrangements over formal, centre-based ECEC services (see Chapter 4). In Bulgaria, the parental leave system contributes to high opportunity costs for women as a result of limited ECEC availability and unequal leave provisions for mothers and fathers (OECD, 2023<sup>[2]</sup>). Fathers are entitled to an optional 15 days of paternity leave, but take-up rates are notably low. In contrast, mothers benefit from extended maternity leave of approximately 59 weeks, with the possibility to extend this time further. This disparity in parental leave provisions, coupled with the limited availability of high-quality ECEC services, reinforces traditional caregiving roles for women and provides minimal incentive for a return to the labour market. The extended parental leave also means higher opportunity costs for highly skilled women, contributing to the lower fertility rates observed among this group. To address these challenges, the Bulgarian government introduced an extended parental leave entitlement of two months for fathers and a right to flexible work arrangements for all parents in 2022. Evidence shows policies that encourage shared parental leave combined with gender balancing incentives and ECEC supports can make these policies more efficient in shifting caregiving expectations more equitably between parents, further normalise maternal workforce involvement and increase ECEC enrolment (see Chapters 4 and 5).

## Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children

In addition to broader participation, the quality of ECEC, and particularly the quality of children's interactions with others within ECEC settings (process quality), matters for children's development, learning and well-being. However, a large body of evidence documents variability in the quality of ECEC between and within types of ECEC (see Chapter 6), which is problematic when more vulnerable children consistently receive lower-quality services, as this means that children's experiences in ECEC settings are unlikely to level the playing field among children. Particularly in systems with a variety of types of provision, participation in more regulated and intense forms of ECEC tends to be lower among children from

disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, often meaning they experience lower levels of process quality. In Bulgaria, ECEC governance is split between the Ministry of Health, overseeing nurseries, and the Ministry of Education and Science, overseeing kindergartens. Several independent bodies under the Council of Ministers, alongside the Ministries of Finance and Labour and Social Policy, also hold regulatory roles. Kindergartens are monitored by the National Inspectorate of Education like the rest of the schooling sector and by the Ministry of Health for hygiene and space compliance, whereas nurseries receive monitoring only from the Ministry of Health. Municipalities and regional authorities play a key role in governance, supporting quality assurance, professional development, and local strategies, but capacity constraints and unfilled vacancies for these roles limit their effectiveness. The State Agency for Child Protection also monitors and evaluates compliance with child protection policies, which cover all ECEC settings. In 2022, Bulgaria introduced a National Quality Framework (NQF) for ECEC with European Commission support, aligning with the EU Quality Framework for ECEC. The NQF spans all ECEC settings (0–7 years) and includes indicators across five dimensions: access, workforce, educational content, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and financing. The Ministry of Education is enhancing co-ordination with the Ministry of Health to support NQF implementation across the full age range.

Curriculum frameworks informed by the high-quality features identified by research and applicable to a broad range of settings and types of provision can strengthen quality and equity across an ECEC system (see Chapter 6). In contrast, the fragmentation of curriculum frameworks and lack of coverage of some segments of the sector can lead to inconsistencies in quality provision within ECEC systems. Bulgaria's State Educational Standard for Preschool Education sets the overall goals and content of the kindergarten curriculum. Kindergartens then have autonomy for curriculum implementation. The curriculum standards are broad and include emphasis on the importance of time for free play in kindergarten, as well the importance of continuity with the learning content for the first stage of primary education. For nurseries, however, there is currently no curriculum in place. This reflects the strong health orientation of the nursery system and a view from this sector that education does not begin before kindergarten. Evidence shows that research-based curriculum frameworks that cover all age groups but describe developmentally appropriate goals for each of them and orient responsive and intentional interactions from staff can have a major influence not only in shaping high-quality experiences in ECEC settings but also in enabling a more equitable distribution of cognitive, social and emotional, and well-being outcomes among children. These in turn can support alignment and co-ordination across stages of education both within ECEC (from one ECEC setting to another) and towards primary education, extending the benefits of high-quality ECEC experiences beyond early childhood (see Chapter 6).

Developing a skilled ECEC workforce is paramount to ensuring a successful implementation of the curriculum framework and high-quality interactions with all children. Initial education that includes training specifically to work with children, covers a broad range of areas, and includes a practical component can support staff in all roles and types of provision with their work. In Bulgaria, ECEC workforce qualifications vary within the ECEC sector. Core practitioners in nurseries hold tertiary qualifications (ISCED Level 6 or higher) in medical fields, primarily as nurses but also including midwives, physician's assistants and paramedics. In kindergartens, the core practitioners are known as "children's teachers" or "pedagogues" and have bachelor's degrees in preschool pedagogy. In both nurseries and kindergartens, professional staff are supported by assistants with secondary education (ISCED Level 3), but no specific training pathways or requirements exist for this group. Professional development for kindergarten staff follows the school system model, with leaders assessing staff needs and selecting relevant training. National-level training is available for leaders, but staff report shortages in opportunities, especially for assistants. Nursery staff, including qualified nurses and assistants, also face limited access to professional development (Bulgaria's Ministry of Education and Science, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). Evidence shows that mechanisms for quality improvement, in particular for a better implementation of the curriculum include providing opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer

learning and feedback (e.g. mentoring) and targeting supports for participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.

## Making ECEC inclusive for all children

Increasing social and cultural diversity characterises the populations of children participating in ECEC across OECD countries. Growing levels of diversity are driven by multiple factors, including the expansion and greater accessibility of ECEC services as well as global migration and forced displacements. Further, most children with special education needs participating in ECEC do so in mainstream settings. ECEC can support inclusion by focusing on the strengths that come with diversity, leaving behind deficit views on the capacities and potential of children from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds and by combining universal and targeted approaches, in line with tiered models of support for young children. In Bulgaria, ECEC settings face challenges in supporting the inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds. In addition, increasing numbers of children with special educational needs are enrolled in ECEC settings that lack technical equipment or educational resources to support inclusive practices (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[9]</sup>; UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). To address this challenge, the Bulgarian government made changes to the Inclusive Education Act in 2023, which now requires and supports kindergartens to provide technical resources to support children with special educational needs such as dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia.

Continuous professional development is key to support ECEC staff in developing more inclusive practices and implementing a curriculum framework that values diversity. In Bulgaria, limited access to professional development opportunities undermines the readiness of the ECEC staff to effectively support children with diverse needs (Bulgaria's Ministry of Education and Science, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>). For example, 64% of assistants reported having no access to professional development opportunities related to working with marginalised groups. Transversal competencies and attitudes (e.g. addressing biases, valuing diversity) are a foundation for more specific and targeted skills (e.g. supporting home languages). Delivery can favour team-level, guided reflection and practical responses to diversity in local contexts. Continuous training specifically targeted at leaders of ECEC settings can play a pivotal role in creating a school- or setting-wide culture of respect and appreciation for diversity and in enabling staff to deal more effectively with diverse classrooms.

The presence of an additional professional in the classroom can facilitate children receiving more individual help and attention during activities, from either the support staff member or the teacher, which in turn means that their needs are more likely to be met. In Bulgaria, the availability of specialist staff trained to support children with special educational needs is limited, with most of these professionals concentrated in urban areas (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[9]</sup>). Further, kindergarten group sizes can reach up to 23 children, with child-to-staff ratios slightly higher than the OECD and European averages. These larger group sizes, combined with the shortage of specialist staff, can create challenges for supporting children with special educational needs (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). Although each kindergarten group can accept up to three children with chronic diseases or special educational needs, exceptions can be made when no other alternatives exist in the municipality. As part of the Action Plan for the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030), an increasing number of pedagogical specialists are trained to support the needs of children with special educational needs in mainstream education settings. Targeted staffing and creating multi-professional teams are important mechanisms to be mobilised for better equipping ECEC settings to serve populations of children with different characteristics (see Chapter 7).

In turn, system- and setting-level monitoring and assessment can help authorities and staff to better understand and identify variability in children's needs and strengths, and to assess the quality of the targeted supports provided to children, as a complement to the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC. Tools can complement the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC to

support inclusive staff practices. In 2016, Bulgaria launched the *Together from the Kindergarten* project, a joint initiative of the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF, which resulted in the development of a screening tool to support teachers in identifying the needs of children entering kindergarten programmes and promoting more inclusive practices in ECEC (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[9]</sup>). To scale its implementation, training sessions have been conducted to enable two to three staff members per kindergarten to effectively use the screening tool. The insights gathered from the screening can be leveraged to request additional funding for specialist positions within kindergartens and to design tailored support measures for enrolled children.

## Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities

The co-ordination and combination of ECEC policies with policies targeting families and communities can launch vulnerable children on more favourable trajectories (see Chapter 8). Intentionally developing ECEC programmes that support parents to foster children's well-being and early learning, especially programmes that integrate well into parents' habits and do not add to existing stress burden, can amplify children's positive experiences in ECEC and lead to sustained effects over time (see Chapter 10). In Bulgaria, the kindergarten curriculum emphasises active collaboration with parents, viewing them as essential partners. Engagement approaches are locally determined, accommodating the schedules of working parents. Nationally supported initiatives, such as a programme inviting parents to read stories in classrooms, aim to foster a welcoming environment, improve parent-kindergarten communication, and support linguistic development for children and non-fluent parents. In contrast, nurseries for children under age 3 operate on a model where parents entrust the institutions with their child's care during attendance hours. Communication focuses on children's health and well-being during pick-up and drop-off, but parents are typically not permitted inside the settings beyond these brief interactions. Data suggest that many ECEC staff in Bulgaria lack the skills to effectively collaborate with families and face challenges in fostering these partnerships (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). To address these challenges, the new National Quality Framework introduced collaboration with parents as a central aspect of the quality standards for ECEC programmes for children aged 0- 7. As the Ministry of Education and Science works with their national partners as well as municipalities and ECEC settings to implement the National Quality Framework, they envision that practices in place across nurseries and kindergartens to engage with families will start to converge. In addition, the Bulgarian government has incorporated parenting support into its Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development in 2024. This initiative aims to improve early learning opportunities at home by providing families with information on child development and home learning activities. It can complement parental engagement measures, as ECEC participation rates are low for the youngest children. Overall, these approaches are particularly pertinent given the large socioeconomic disparities in activities that promote early literacy and numeracy at home (see Table 1).

ECEC settings and their staff are also well-placed to co-ordinate with other professionals working with families, in addition to families themselves, and to engage with schools to facilitate transitions, especially for more vulnerable children. Staff and leaders need to be trained for these roles and supported to co-operate with other professionals, for instance by allocating time for work without children. While not all ECEC staff (and leaders) need to engage in these extended tasks, those who do should have explicit recognition of their role and status. Bulgaria has a network of social workers and specialists trained to engage with under-served communities and support children's access to ECEC. These workers can be hired by ECEC centres to strengthen inclusion and outreach efforts. However, ECEC staff in Bulgaria face significant challenges in collaborating with other professionals. Data show that 85% of ECEC staff lack access to training that supports cross-sector co-operation (Bulgaria's Ministry of Education and Science, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>). Among the various options for better co-ordinating services, integrated service hubs bring together an array of services to support families with young children and can be organised with different combinations of programmes and tailored goals to match community needs and interests (see Chapters 4

and 10). They can provide a soft entry point to education and care services, with which families facing adversities may not otherwise engage (see Chapter 5).

To sustain the benefits of high-quality ECEC, continuity across children's developmental stages and education settings is essential. This includes aligning curricula, learning expectations and pedagogical practices to ensure smooth transitions and gradual exposure to enriched content, particularly for more vulnerable children, avoiding unnecessary redundancy of content (see Chapter 8). In Bulgaria, the link between ECEC attendance and children's outcomes is evident: attending ECEC for more than two years is positively and significantly associated with higher mathematics performance scores at age 15 (see Table 1). The kindergarten curriculum supports children for school education by equipping them with a diverse set of skills across areas such as language, mathematics, fine arts, music, design and technology, physical education, and understanding the world. To facilitate transitions between ECEC and primary school, Bulgaria has implemented a portfolio system documenting children's educational and developmental progress during kindergarten. This portfolio is shared with primary schools to ensure continuity and support communication with families.

## Improving governance and funding

A policy mix that aims to increase ECEC enrolment, ensure all children benefit from quality services, and provide enhanced support proportionate to children and families' needs requires adequate funding and mechanisms that steer the system towards these objectives (see Chapter 9). In Bulgaria, total expenditure per child on ECEC is below the OECD average (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.1). Private expenditure as a share of total expenditure for pre-primary education has decreased and remains below the OECD average (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.2). Kindergarten funding is primarily determined by enrolment numbers, with additional allocations to support vulnerable groups. As part of the changes made in 2023 to the financing of institutions in the preschool and school education system, kindergartens can request further funds to recruit additional staff including education mediators and social workers to support access and inclusion efforts. These funds can also be used for working with non-Bulgarian-speaking children, helping to address linguistic barriers to participation and learning.

Enhanced co-ordination and alignment between different funding sources (e.g. central and sub-central) but also funding areas (e.g. measures targeting ECEC affordability, infrastructure, workforce and quality assurance) can steer the ECEC system towards enhanced equity and quality (see Chapters 5 and 9). In Bulgaria, financial responsibilities for ECEC are shared between the national government and municipalities. The national government sets staff salaries and allocates funding to municipalities, which hire ECEC leaders and staff and manage physical infrastructure. Municipalities may retain full budgetary control of ECEC settings or delegate this responsibility to individual settings, as occurs in over 58% of public kindergartens. Municipalities and ECEC settings can also seek additional funding sources, such as independent grants. The choice of specific funding allocation mechanisms can enable central authorities to steer funding recipients towards enhanced quality and equity in ECEC. Mechanisms based on detailed analyses of local population characteristics and needs and demand for ECEC services as well as on population growth can lead to more funds to areas or communities with insufficient ECEC services and thereby mitigate inequalities.

Workforce wages are a significant component of ECEC expenditure across OECD countries. Low compensation hampers the ECEC sectors' capacity to attract and retain qualified individuals, especially when other working conditions are also challenging. A high turnover of staff can be detrimental to process quality since children need to develop a stable relationship with a limited number of adult figures and since staff teams need time and continuity to engage in effective collaboration and peer learning. In Bulgaria, salaries for kindergarten teachers and leaders are set nationally, aligned with those of schoolteachers and comparable to teacher salaries in other Eastern European countries. Between 2014 and 2020, significant

investments in teacher salaries resulted in substantial increases (Hulpia et al., 2024<sup>[10]</sup>). There is currently no shortage of kindergarten teachers, and the competitive salaries may sustain interest in the profession. However, the recent increases have created limited room for salary growth within the profession, which may have implications for teacher retention in the long-term. Salary data for nursery staff and kindergarten assistants are unavailable, but the wages for teaching assistants are reported to be low, particularly in urban areas with high demand for kindergarten places. In addition, Bulgaria faces widespread shortages of qualified nurses and teaching assistants (Government of Bulgaria, 2024<sup>[11]</sup>).

Setting objectives for equity and quality at the system level can be further supported with the development of indicators to track progress and achievement of such objectives (see Chapters 9 and 10). Data systems that support monitoring and continuous quality improvement at the programme level can ensure local flexibility is balanced with national oversight in ways that meet programme goals and quality standards. These efforts, however, require building the capacity of actors to collect and use sufficiently disaggregated data for decision-making.

Placing ECEC policies as part of a broader landscape of social and education policies can help reduce inequality of opportunity. This requires aligning governance for a more integrated policy approach. In particular, a whole-of-government approach calls for high-level policies and national commitments to support co-ordinated services throughout childhood (see Chapter 10). One key challenge is the historical division between nurseries and kindergartens, which poses significant logistical and cultural barriers to unifying these sectors. In 2022, proposed legislation to create a unified ECEC system by transferring nurseries to the Ministry of Education's authority failed to gain sufficient parliamentary support, perpetuating the split structure in ECEC governance. In addition, Bulgaria currently lacks formal mechanisms for horizontal communication across sectors (e.g. health and education) beyond the high-level Interdepartmental Working Group for Planning and Coordination of Early Childhood Policies. These gaps in cross-sectoral co-ordination hinder ECEC staff's ability to effectively support parents in meeting the diverse needs of their children (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). They also limit children's access to essential services required to monitor their development and provide timely support. While recent reforms, such as the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development, have prioritised improved co-ordination in ECEC policies, achieving the Council of Ministers' vision for an integrated system for children from birth to age 7 will require stronger national-level co-ordination.

### Box 1. A selection of pointers from the policy roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion

A policy roadmap informed by research evidence and other countries' experiences can ensure ECEC leads to stronger outcomes for children (especially more vulnerable ones), supports inclusion and mitigates inequalities with a lasting impact. This box highlights key policy pointers (see Chapter 1) that are relevant in Bulgaria's context, as well as policy examples drawn from other countries.

**Policy pointer 1: Address both direct and indirect access barriers to reduce gaps in participation in ECEC.** In Bulgaria, ECEC enrolment rates have improved, with socioeconomic disparities in participation gradually narrowing. However, barriers to participation persist, especially for children from diverse backgrounds. Policy directions to address direct and indirect barriers to participation gaps in ECEC in Bulgaria include:

- *Enhance ECEC infrastructure planning, combining local and national investments, with a focus on areas with vulnerable children and service shortages.* Canada, for example, has developed a collaborative funding approach for ECEC expansion, aligning federal, provincial and local efforts to ensure access to affordable, high-quality services, especially in under-served areas (see Chapter 5, Box 5.1).
- *Set up accessible information channels and streamline administrative processes for enrolment in ECEC service.* In Germany, for example, a research project providing support for parents to navigate ECEC enrolment processes and offering targeted assistance to vulnerable families has demonstrated successful outcomes in enrolment rates. In Korea, the "Go First School" website simplifies pre-primary education enrolment with English translations and is used to prioritise the needs of vulnerable families, enhancing accessibility and efficiency (see Chapter 5, Box 5.3).
- *Promote family and community involvement in ECEC to strengthen trust in the quality and inclusiveness of ECEC services.* In New Zealand, for example, the Engaging Priority Families programme collaborates with community organisations to support vulnerable families in accessing ECEC services, guiding them through enrolment, highlighting the benefits of participation for child development, and building connections with ECEC services and at-risk communities (see Chapter 5, Box 5.4).

**Policy pointer 2: Set mechanisms for quality improvement and equitably expand opportunities for meaningful interactions between children and ECEC staff.** The split ECEC system in Bulgaria has resulted in distinct regulations, workforce qualifications and quality assurance mechanisms across sectors, leading to disparities in process quality across different types of ECEC provision. To address these issues, Bulgaria is working to implement the National Quality Framework across all ECEC settings. Policy directions to ensure that children consistently experience high-quality interactions in ECEC settings include:

- *Ensure that young children are covered by a child-centred and comprehensive curriculum framework that captures all aspects of children's development (cognitive, socio-emotional and physical) and includes structured, skill-specific components within a play-based approach, and that guides staff on intentional practices.* In Flanders (Belgium), the Pedagogical Framework for Childcare for Babies and Toddlers guides centre-based and home-based ECEC for children under three. It emphasises four areas for holistic development: identity, motor skills, self-expression, and understanding the world, while supporting interactions with children and families. The frameworks also aim to provide a firm pedagogical basis for practice in interactions

with both young children and their families in centre-based and home-based childcare settings. (see Chapter 6, Box 6.2).

- *Provide opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer learning and feedback, and target supports for participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* In Norway, a mentoring scheme for newly employed graduate teachers in ECEC supports their transition into the profession, helping to recruit, develop and retain skilled ECEC teachers and leaders. Financial incentives are provided to ECEC providers to compensate for staff absences during training, ensuring high-quality professional development is accessible and sustainable, particularly for staff working with the youngest children and in vulnerable communities (OECD, (2020): Chapter 2).
- *Regularly monitor both structural and process aspects of quality within settings and provide incentives and support for improvement.* In Flanders (Belgium), for example, the Measuring and Monitoring of Quality (MeMoQ) project has implemented a comprehensive pedagogical framework for children under 3, supporting continuous quality improvement in both centre-based and family-based childcare (see Chapter 6, Box 6.2). In the United States, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) provide quality benchmarks, financial incentives and technical assistance to ECEC providers (see Chapter 9, Box 9.2).

**Policy pointer 3: Identify and respond to variability in children’s needs and strengths to make ECEC inclusive for all children.** Bulgaria faces significant challenges in supporting the inclusion of children from diverse and special educational needs backgrounds in ECEC settings, with many centres lacking educational and technical resources. Limited access to professional development for nursery staff, a shortage of specialist professionals, and large group sizes in nurseries further hinder the implementation of inclusive practices. Policy directions to support diversity and inclusion in ECEC settings in Bulgaria include:

- *Ensure services for children and families provide support in which the intensity and personalisation of measures increases with the level of need, following a tiered model approach.* For example, Ireland’s Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides targeted staffing through access to early-years specialists who can coach and mentor other staff in ECEC services (see Chapter 7, Box 7.3).
- *Provide continuous professional development, primarily at the team level, that helps ECEC staff adopt more inclusive practices by addressing both attitudes and specific skills.* For example, Ireland’s AIM promotes inclusion in ECEC through a professional development programme that equips practitioners to implement inclusive practices and trains Inclusion Coordinators to lead these efforts (see Chapter 7, Box 7.2).

**Policy pointer 4: Build on ECEC together with other social services and schools to better support vulnerable families.** Bulgaria’s ECEC system faces gaps in cross-sectoral co-ordination to support families with young children, limiting children’s access to essential services. The lack of continuity between nursery and kindergarten further hinders efforts to scaffold children’s skills and facilitate smooth transitions within the ECEC sector. Policy directions to better connect ECEC services with families, communities and other social services include:

- *Develop training for ECEC staff on working with parents (with particular attention to vulnerable families) and support co-operation with other professionals.* For example, Australia’s National Child and Family Hubs Network provides a shared framework to unify service hubs across jurisdictions. It fosters peer learning, knowledge exchange, and professional support for those working directly with children and families (see Chapter 10).

- *Strengthen the application of the national quality framework to cover an array of services around families and children, possibly applying to service hubs.* For example, in Queensland (Australia), Early Years Places (EYPs) are provided in more than 50 rural, remote and high-growth communities across the state to make it easy for families to connect with services to support their child's early development. EYPs deliver a mix of integrated services and activities, including playgroups, ECEC, child and maternal health services, and family and parenting support for families with children aged up to 8 years-old (see Chapter 10, Box 10.1).

**Policy pointer 5: Set funding and monitoring mechanisms to steer the system towards quality and equity and better integrate ECEC within the broader landscape of social and education policies.** Bulgaria's ECEC system faces challenges in ensuring equitable access and quality due to fragmented governance, limited funding per child compared to OECD and European averages, and shortages of qualified staff in nurseries and support roles. Policy directions to strengthen funding and governance include:

- *Design funding allocation mechanisms between levels of governments (e.g. conditional grants) that provide support and incentives to steer funding recipients towards quality and equity.* In Singapore, the Anchor Operator (AOP) and Partner Operator (POP) schemes condition funding on fee caps, quality certification and staff professional development, with additional support for disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs (see Chapter 9, Box 9.2).
- *Design funding mechanisms that ensure wages are aligned with ECEC staff roles and responsibilities, including for assistants, and incentivise workforce quality, particularly in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* New Zealand's Equity Funding helps providers in low-income or culturally diverse communities improve quality through higher spending on staff and curriculum. Providers hiring more qualified staff receive additional resources to offset costs, encouraging workforce quality (see Chapter 9, Box 9.3).
- *Build data systems and processes that are meaningful to monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements.* In Australia, the *Restacking the Odds* initiative has developed "lead indicators" to help co-ordinated services to collect and share data, enabling informed policy, funding and programme decisions. The initiative also supports frontline providers in building capacity for sustained and consistent data collection and use (see Chapter 10, Box 10.3).

**Table 1. Indicators of quality and inclusive early childhood education and care**

Report ref.	Indicator	Ref. year	Indicator type	Bulgaria	OECD average <sup>1</sup>
<b>Context</b>					
Fig. 1.1	Relative child poverty rate	2021	%	18.4	12.4
Fig. 3.3	Gini coefficient of income equality ( <i>ranges from 0: max. equality to 1: max. inequality</i> )	2022	Gini coefficient	0.37	0.31
Fig. 3.4	National population below relative poverty threshold	2022	%	13.0	11.1
Fig. 1.2	Socio-economic gap in maths performance, age 15 ( <i>adv. - disadv.</i> )	2022	Mean score diff.	108	93.5
<b>Policy area 1: Reducing gaps in participation</b>					
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 4	2022	%	85.0	89.1
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 2	2022	%	13.3	45.4
Fig. 1.4	Trend in socio-economic participation gap, age 4	2005-2015	Trend	Narrowed	No change
Fig. 5.5	Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a two-earner couple family	2023	% of avg. earnings	0	12
Fig. 5.6	Agreement with statement "preschool children suffer with a working mother", adult population	see Annex B	%	27.2	33.5
<b>Policy area 2: Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children</b>					
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 02	2022	%	<i>m</i>	32.2
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 01	2022	%	<i>m</i>	50.3
Fig. 1.5	Diff. in maths performance by ECEC participation, age 15 ( <i>&gt;2 years - =2 years participation</i> )	2022	Score diff.	22.0	5.2
<b>Policy area 3: Making ECEC inclusive for all children</b>					
Fig. 7.1	Children reported as multilingual in ECEC, age 10 in reference year	2019	%	15.1	13.4
Fig. 7.2	Children with special educational needs in mainstream settings	2020/21	%	<i>m</i>	79.0
<b>Policy area 4: Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities</b>					
Fig. 3.6	Socio-economic gap in home activities for early literacy and numeracy ( <i>adv. - disadv.</i> )	2019	Percentage points	42.9	22.1
<b>Policy area 5: Improving governance and funding</b>					
Fig. 9.1	Expenditure on ECEC per child, ISCED 02	2021	PPP USD	7 921	11 735
Fig. 9.2	Share of private expenditure on ECEC, ISCED 02	2021	%	4.2	14.2
Fig. 9.5	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 02	2021	%	78.1	57.6
Fig. 9.4	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 01	2021	%	<i>m</i>	67.0
Fig. 9.7	Share of per capita spending on family benefits and education (0-17) for children aged 0-5	2019	%	<i>m</i>	28.4

Note: *m* = Missing.

<sup>1</sup>Countries included in the OECD average vary depending on data availability, refer to Annex B for further information. The average for Figure 7.1 includes only the following countries or sub-national entities: Belgium (Flanders), France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

\*Data come from EU-SILC, and refer to average attendance of 3-5-year-olds in 2010 and 2023

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