



## A Roadmap for Every Child

### ***EU Alliance for Investing in Children reaction to the 2026 Social Package with focus on the Communication “Breaking the Cycle of Child Poverty – Strengthening the European Child Guarantee” (ECG)***

#### Introduction

The EU Alliance for Investing in Children welcomes the European Commission’s 2026 Social Package as an important step towards strengthening Europe’s social dimension and reaffirming the EU’s commitment to children’s rights, social inclusion and equal opportunities for all children.

The package includes several important policy initiatives that can contribute to better protection of children’s social rights across Europe. In particular, the Alliance welcomes the strong interlinkages between the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS), the Communication “Breaking the Cycle of Child Poverty – Strengthening the European Child Guarantee” (ECG), the Council Recommendation on Housing Exclusion, and the Communication on Enhancing the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities up to 2030.

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate an increasing recognition that child poverty and social exclusion cannot be addressed through fragmented or short-term measures. Instead, they require integrated support systems, coordinated governance, prevention-focused policies, and sustained investment in children and families.

The Alliance particularly welcomes that the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy is explicitly designed to complement and reinforce the strengthened European Child Guarantee. The two initiatives are closely interconnected and share common objectives around prevention, integrated support services, outreach to the most vulnerable children and their families, and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and exclusion.

At the same time, it is essential that **the distinct mission and added value of the European Child Guarantee remain clear and protected**. While broader anti-poverty measures supporting households, employment, housing and social protection are necessary and welcome, the European Child Guarantee must continue to serve as the dedicated and child rights-centered EU framework guaranteeing access to quality key services for children in need, including early childhood education and care, healthcare, education, healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The Alliance also welcomes the accompanying Staff Working Document assessing the implementation of the European Child Guarantee to date. The document provides a valuable overview of progress, remaining gaps and good practices across Member States, while also highlighting persistent inequalities in access to

services and support systems. However, it would have been preferable to publish it in the second half of 2026, so that it could have taken into account all the biennial reports submitted by Member States and served as a roadmap for the operationalisation of the strengthened Child Guarantee. In any case, it should be considered together with the Communication itself, as it provides important operational guidance and evidence for future implementation efforts.

## “Breaking the Cycle of Child Poverty – Strengthening the European Child Guarantee”

**The Alliance welcomes that the Communication acknowledges several key points from our analyses and recommendations.** Firstly, it recognises that the EU is not on track to achieve its 2030 child poverty reduction target and the high social and economic cost of child poverty, estimated at 3.4% of EU GDP annually in OECD countries. We also welcome the growing recognition that investing in children delivers long-term returns for social cohesion, democratic resilience, and Europe’s future competitiveness.

This **rights-based approach** reflects the framework for which the Alliance has long advocated: child poverty must be addressed through guaranteed access to essential quality services for children in vulnerable situations, and with wider and holistic strategies to protect all children, families and carers.

**While the Communication is strong in its diagnosis, it remains less clear on the implementation architecture needed to turn its objectives into measurable change.** The strengthened Child Guarantee now needs a Commission-led operational framework that clarifies what Member States are expected to do, how revised National Action Plans should be strengthened, how progress will be monitored, and how children, families, civil society, local authorities and frontline services will be meaningfully involved.

### Pillar 1: Supporting families and households where children live

The Alliance welcomes the stronger focus on **supporting families** through the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. Robust social protection systems, adequate income support, quality employment, affordable housing, and access to childcare are essential for preventing child poverty and supporting children’s wellbeing. We particularly welcome the recognition that **poverty is multidimensional and cannot be addressed through income measures alone.** The stronger emphasis on integrated support systems, prevention, and early intervention to support families is therefore highly important.

At the same time, the Alliance stresses that **labour market participation alone cannot be presented as the primary or sole pathway out of poverty.** While access to quality employment is important, many families continue to experience poverty despite employment. **Adequate minimum income systems, robust social safety nets and accessible public services remain essential for protecting children and families from poverty and exclusion.**

The Alliance welcomes the planned **Commission Recommendation on enhancing the efficiency of child-related benefit systems in addressing child poverty.** Child and family benefits play a crucial role in preventing poverty and social exclusion, and their adequacy, accessibility, take-up and coordination should be strengthened across Member States. However, child benefits should remain rights-based,

adequate, and non-stigmatising. Monitoring and fraud-prevention mechanisms must not become punitive or discriminatory towards families in vulnerable situations. Families should not be portrayed as likely to misuse benefits. Efforts should instead focus on simplifying procedures, improving outreach and ensuring that support effectively reaches children and families most in need.

The Alliance strongly welcomes the increased focus on **prevention** and **family strengthening**. Poverty must never be a reason for separating children from their families. Stronger community-based services, integrated family support, parenting programmes, family-centred early childhood intervention, and accessible local services are necessary for communities to thrive, and to prevent unnecessary family separation and support children's wellbeing.

## **Pillar 2: Strengthening the European Child Guarantee**

The Alliance welcomes the reaffirmation of the European Child Guarantee as the central EU instrument to ensure access to essential services for children in need. The Communication rightly recognises that progress towards the EU's 2030 poverty reduction target is not on track and acknowledges persistent implementation gaps, including fragmented service delivery, insufficient outreach, weak coordination and unequal access to services.

### **We particularly welcome the stronger focus on:**

- early childhood education and care (ECEC),
- school meals and healthy nutrition,
- educational support, culture, sport, leisure, and other extracurricular activities for healthy development,
- child and adolescent mental health,
- mentoring and support into early adulthood,
- online and offline safety,
- continuity between the Child Guarantee and Youth Guarantee,
- and targeted support for children facing intersecting disadvantages.

The Alliance also welcomes the recognition that children facing the highest barriers require tailored and proactive approaches, including **Roma children**, children with disabilities, children living in single-parent families, children coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ children and children in alternative care, including those in residential care.

The Alliance also calls for the **structural expansion of quality school meals** for children in need, supported by sustained EU and national funding. School meals should be treated as a practical anti-poverty, health and education measure, not only as an isolated nutrition initiative.

However, **major gaps** remain regarding how Member States **will systematically and concretely identify and reach children who remain invisible to services**, particularly children with a migration background, including undocumented children. This group is not mentioned once in the Child Guarantee Communication and has remained particularly underrepresented in the National Action Plans, leaving a clear gap in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee for migrant children (especially those undocumented), and other children with specific vulnerabilities.

**The welcomed approach developed for Roma children should be mirrored for all groups facing structural exclusion**, including children with disabilities, children in alternative care, children experiencing homelessness, children in precarious family situations, children living in single-parent families and children affected by residence-status barriers.

**The Commission should support Member States in developing concrete outreach methodologies**, including proactive identification, community-based mediation, cooperation with civil society and frontline services, non-discriminatory data collection, and low-threshold access points for children and families who do not currently engage with public services.

The Alliance welcomes the stronger focus on **child mental health**. However, mental health should not be approached only through the lens of digitalisation and online risks. A broader and more comprehensive approach is needed, addressing family environments, housing insecurity, social exclusion, violence, schools system and curricula and more broadly, all educational pressure stemming from rigid educational systems, and access to community-based support services. Education environments can play a decisive role in addressing the mental health of children, but, once again, neither should be seen in isolation but rather in a holistic way. There is also a need to strengthen the focus on maternal mental health, as the evidence is unequivocal: a mother's health directly influences her child's development from pregnancy onwards.

The Alliance takes note of the proposed **European Child Guarantee Card** pilot. If properly designed, such a tool could help reduce administrative barriers and improve coordination between services within countries. However, all planned legislation and policies such as the Digital Fairness Act, the revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the Action Plan on the Protection of Children against Crime and the toolkit on radicalisation **must remain firmly grounded in children's rights**, accessibility, data protection, non-discrimination and non-stigmatisation principles. The pilot Card must also include strong safeguards for children and families with insecure residence status, and trust-building measures to ensure that the Card does not create new barriers for those who already fear or struggle to access public authorities.

The Alliance also welcomes the stronger links between **the Child Guarantee and the Youth Guarantee**, particularly through the proposed toolkit on pathways to adulthood. A stronger life-cycle approach can help ensure continuity of support from early childhood into independent adulthood. However, stronger links with the Youth Guarantee must be supported by additional resources and must not lead to the redirection of funding intended for the Child Guarantee.

### **Pillar 3: Governance, monitoring and funding**

The Alliance welcomes the stronger focus on governance, monitoring and participation across the Social Package. The Communication rightly acknowledges the importance of involving children, families, civil society organisations, public health agencies, schools, local authorities and people with lived experience in the implementation and monitoring of policies affecting them.

However, the Communication **does not clearly explain how Member States should revise their National Action Plans**, what minimum standards these plans should meet, how successful practices will become a baseline across the EU, or how progress will be monitored. **Revised plans** must not depend solely on national political will. They should include clear targets, indicators, budgets, responsibilities,

timelines, outreach strategies and mechanisms for child, family, civil society, public health, schools, and local authority participation.

While strengthened cooperation with both the **European Economic and Social Committee** and the **Committee of the Regions** is planned through the Conclusion of a Cooperation Framework and a Joint Action Plan, the Alliance regrets the absence of a similarly concrete and structured framework for cooperation with civil society organisations and child-rights networks. Similarly, **more structured and permanent participation mechanisms are still needed at both EU and national levels**. The findings reflected in [2025 Eurochild Flagship Report](#) confirm that many civil society organisations continue to face challenges in being meaningfully involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of National Action Plans.

The Alliance therefore calls for the establishment of **a structured cooperation mechanism or a structured dialogue between the European Commission and the EU Alliance for Investing in Children** as well as **the national consultation mechanisms**, including regular dialogue, consultation on policy developments, involvement in monitoring processes, and support for evidence-sharing and participation of children and families with lived experience.

The Alliance welcomes the stronger links between the European Child Guarantee and **the European Semester**. The European Semester should become a stronger accountability tool for monitoring child poverty reduction and implementation of the Child Guarantee across Member States, through annual meetings of European Semester contact points on the Child Guarantee. Child poverty and Child Guarantee implementation should be addressed systematically in the European Semester, including through regular analysis of implementation gaps and systematic Child Guarantee-focused Country-Specific Recommendations. We also welcome the Commission's commitment to improving poverty monitoring through the European Semester, including the development of **new indicators by 2028**. We encourage the Commission to ensure that these indicators include child-specific and disaggregated data, including by age, disability, ethnic or racial background, migration status, family situation, and care experience.

At the same time, **funding commitments remain insufficiently concrete**. The Communication recognises the importance of EU funding and refers to the EUR 9.6 billion earmarked under the current ESF+, but it does not reflect **the decisive role of the 5% ESF+ child poverty earmarking**, the need to apply it to all Member States, or the need for stronger earmarking in countries with above-average child poverty. It also does not respond to the repeated call for a dedicated Child Guarantee envelope of at least EUR 20 billion.

The proposal relies heavily on future ESF+ calls and additional investment channels, but project calls and private/philanthropic contributions cannot replace predictable, public, ring-fenced and accessible funding. The Alliance is also concerned that the planned stakeholder platforms and coalitions involving **philanthropic** and **private actors** do not sufficiently clarify the role of civil society organisations and children's rights organisations.

**Social investment and innovation must remain firmly grounded in children's rights, quality services and public accountability.** The Alliance reiterates its call for:

- a strengthened and visible ESF+,

- at least 5% earmarking for tackling child poverty in all Member States,
- stronger allocations in countries with above-average child poverty rates,
- at least 30% social spending earmarking,
- a dedicated European Child Guarantee envelope of at least EUR 20 billion under the next MFF,
- stronger social and child-rights conditionalities,
- and accessible funding for civil society organisations and local actors.

**The Alliance also calls on the European Commission to publish a comprehensive 2027–2030 roadmap for implementation of the strengthened European Child Guarantee.** This roadmap should clarify:

- how Member States should revise National Action Plans,
- how progress will be monitored,
- how stakeholders will be formally, systematically and meaningfully included,
- how children in vulnerable situations will be addressed and reached, and their families supported,
- and how the strengthened framework will be implemented consistently across Member States.

**The next phase must focus on concrete delivery through:**

- reinforced child-rights center approach,
- stronger revised National Action Plans including more indicators
- measurable targets and timelines,
- dedicated budgets and responsibilities,
- robust monitoring frameworks,
- systematic use of the European Semester,
- a structured mechanism ensuring the meaningful participation of children and civil society organisations,
- and stronger outreach to children facing the highest barriers.

Finally, the Alliance also welcomes the reference to the Child Guarantee beyond the EU and calls on the Commission to support candidate and potential candidate countries in developing Child Guarantee-inspired measures, including through EU external funding instruments and cooperation with children and civil society.

Europe now has an opportunity to build a coherent, rights-based and preventive social agenda that places children at its centre. The success of the Social Package will ultimately depend on sustained political leadership, coordinated implementation and long-term public investment capable of delivering real change for children and families across Europe.

**ANNEX:**

**Alliance particularly welcomes and offers its expertise and collaboration on these key actions and initiatives announced in the Social Package:**

<b>Instrument / Initiative</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
First-stage consultation of social partners under Article 154(2) TFEU on activation, equality and childcare	Ongoing
School meals cooperation with the School Meal Coalition, EU School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme and ESF+	Ongoing
European Semester recommendations on child poverty	Ongoing
EIB and Council of Europe Development Bank cooperation	Ongoing
ESF+ call on national governance frameworks and Roma NEETs	2026
Mentorship programmes through the Teachers' Agenda	2026
Horizon Europe call on innovative solutions in ECEC	2026
Curriculum and pedagogical guidelines for ECEC	2026
ESF+ call on culture and sport for social inclusion	2027
Toolkit with UNICEF on child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing	2027
Guidance on social inclusion of Roma children	2027
European Child Guarantee Card pilot	2027
Toolkit linking the Child Guarantee and Youth Guarantee	2027
ESF+ call on national governance frameworks and Roma NEETs	2026
Compendium of good practices	2027
Commission Recommendation on enhancing the efficiency of child-related benefit systems	2027