

A deep dive into the European Child Guarantee in Lithuania

Main report

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Glossary

AROPE	At risk of poverty or social exclusion.
BMI	Body mass index is a measure indicating nutritional status. It is defined as a person's weight in kilograms divided by the square of the person's height in metres.
ECG	European Child Guarantee.
Children in need	Persons under the age of 18 years who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This refers to children living in households at risk of poverty, those experiencing severe material and social deprivation, and those living in households with very low work intensity.
Children in families at social risk	Children living in families that are at risk due to various social factors such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems; also, children living in segregated areas with high levels of economic deprivation and crime/violence and low education levels.
CGNAP	Child Guarantee National Action Plan.
ECEC	Early childhood education and care.
Energy poverty	The inability to maintain an adequate level of warmth at home due to low household income, the high costs of energy, or the low energy efficiency of buildings.
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund. The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions. In 2021-2027, it will enable investments in a smarter, greener, more connected and more social Europe that is closer to its citizens.
EU-SILC	EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights.
EPSCO	European Union's Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council.
Full-day school	A schooling programme with a strategy of reducing the amount of time spent outside school and providing extra time for education and learning.
HBSC	Health Behaviour in School-aged Children.
Housing cost overburden	The percentage of the population living in a household where total housing costs represent more than 40 per cent of the total disposable household income.

Housing deprivation	Refers to poor amenities in a household such as a leaking roof, no bath/shower and no indoor toilet, or a dwelling considered to be too dark.
Low birth weight	Low birth weight has been defined by the WHO as a weight at birth of <2,500g (5.5lb).
Low-income households	Households with income below 60 per cent of the national mean equivalized disposable income.
Out-of-home care	Accommodation and care of children who are unable to live with their parents. In most cases, children in out-of-home care are under a care and protection order. In the context of Lithuania, out-of-home care includes: (1) Alternative care for children without parental care, divided into family-based care and community-based children care homes; and (2) Out-of-home placements provided for children under parental care. This includes children who are cared for in socialization centres or special educational schools, both overseen by the Ministry of Education, as well as institutional care for children with disabilities, overseen by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour.
Precarious family situation	A concept that captures various risks that could lead to poverty or social exclusion. For children, this includes living in a single-earner household; living with a parent with disabilities; living in a household where there are mental health problems or long-term illness; living in a household where there is substance abuse or domestic violence; children of a European Union citizen who has moved to another Member State while the children themselves remained in their Member State of origin; children having a teenage mother or being a teenage mother; and children having an imprisoned parent.
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility. As part of a wide-ranging response, the aim of the Recovery and Resilience Facility is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions.
SEN	Special educational needs, which refers to learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for children with these needs to learn than others of the same age.
WHO	World Health Organization.

Introduction

The European Child Guarantee (ECG) aims to address the socio-economic vulnerability of children in Europe through an integrated approach that seeks to ensure all children in Europe are guaranteed access to free and effective access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), education, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and decent housing. Meeting these five basic needs through national and European action plans will significantly improve the living conditions and opportunities of children in need. The ECG pays special attention to groups of children who are particularly vulnerable.

Background to the European Child Guarantee

In 2015, the European Parliament called upon the European Commission and European Union Member States, “in view of the weakening of public services, to introduce a Child Guarantee so that every child in poverty can have access to free health care, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition, as part of a European integrated plan to combat child poverty”.

The European Commission proposal for the ECG was adopted by the European Union’s Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) in June 2021. The focus of the ECG is on effective and free access to quality services in the fields of early childhood education and care (ECEC), education, health care, nutrition and adequate housing.

The European Commission (DG Employment) has partnered with the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (UNICEF ECARO) to assess how the ECG could work in practice, and to provide recommendations for the successful design and implementation of the ECG. As part of this engagement, UNICEF ECARO has been working since July 2020 with national and local governments from seven EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain), as well as key national and local stakeholders in these countries.

Part of this support has included the development of deep-dive policy studies for each country. The overall objective of these deep dives is to support the national governments in the seven pilot countries to design, implement and evaluate the ECG. The deep dives are designed to provide the information and evidence base that governments need in order to develop evidence-informed National Action Plans for the European Child Guarantee. These deep-dive analyses look at policies, services, budgets and mechanisms to address the barriers to children’s access to services, as well as their unmet needs in the five thematic areas of the ECG: early childhood education and care (ECEC), education, health, nutrition and housing.

These deep dives are designed to help governments identify those children who should be prioritized in their National Action Plans, and to recommend the policy measures that need to be put in place at national, regional and local levels to complement existing policy measures that have been effective in providing positive outcomes for children. In addition, the deep dives identify, compile and recommend indicators that could be used to monitor and evaluate the impacts of the CGNAPs, as well as providing recommendations on how to address the identified gaps in data.

For more information on the ECG, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

About this report

As part of the preparatory studies for the implementation of the ECG in Lithuania, this document provides a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of the policies, programmes, systems, processes and mechanisms employed in recent years to address child poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania.

In the first and second chapter, we review the situation of child poverty in Lithuania, as well as the basic policy framework currently in place to address monetary poverty, material deprivation and social exclusion among children in the country. In Chapters 3 to 7, we explore the various policy areas at the core of the ECG (early childhood education and care [ECEC], education, health, nutrition and housing), identifying the main lessons learned from the initiatives implemented to date by the various public and private actors in those areas.

These experiences are intended to inform the proposal of specific programmes for inclusion in the National Action Plan for the implementation of the ECG in Lithuania. A series of targets to be achieved by 2030 are listed in order to guide public administrations in the coming years in their efforts to reduce child poverty and social exclusion. A set of key indicators is proposed to monitor the progress of these initiatives.

This deep-dive report is accompanied by a detailed literature review conducted by the same authors. The **literature review** focused on identifying target groups of children in need, barriers to access and the unmet needs of children, which were then covered by the analysis of policy responses in the **deep-dive analysis**.

1. Measures to address material child poverty

1.1. Facts and trends in material child poverty

- The share of people living at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania has decreased since 2016 from 30 per cent to 24.5 per cent in 2020; however, the rate remains among the highest in the EU.
- In 2020¹, 17.1 per cent of households with children were at the high risk of poverty. Out of this, 25.6 per cent of large families and 45.2 per cent of single parent households (mostly mothers) were at the highest risk of poverty, with the latter being among the highest figures in the EU.
- Low expenditure and social protection, as well as the limited impact of social transfers on poverty reduction, have contributed to Lithuania's persistently high rate of risk of poverty. In 2019, national expenditure on social protection as a share of GDP was 12.3 per cent, which is below the EU average of 19.3 per cent.² The impact of social transfers on poverty reduction in Lithuania has typically been limited, but has increased significantly since 2018, reaching 29.39 per cent in 2020.

Lithuania first developed a poverty reduction strategy in 2000, setting goals for the next five years.³ Although successive governments have included individual measures to reduce poverty in their programmes since then, Lithuania has not developed a coherent long-term strategy for tackling poverty. As part of the **Europe 2020** goals, in 2008 Lithuania set out to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 170,000. In 2020, this target was exceeded, with the number having decreased by 218,000 in the period between 2008 and 2020.⁴ However, the rate of people living at risk of poverty in 2020 remained high (20.9 per cent), and has persistently remained among the highest in the EU.⁵ In particular, large families (i.e. those with three or more dependent children) face a poverty

¹ Oficialios statistikos portalas. At-risk-of-poverty rate in households with children. Available at: [https://osp.stat.gov.lt/EN/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=dd312b7c-edc3-4ad3-81ce-534c500cce98#/.](https://osp.stat.gov.lt/EN/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=dd312b7c-edc3-4ad3-81ce-534c500cce98#/)

² Eurostat. 2020. General government expenditure by function. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TEPSR_SP110/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=3a45b344-41c6-4d4b-9032-fd9652c48513.

³ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija (2000). Skurdo mažinimo Lietuvoje strategija. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/administracine-informacija/koncepcijos-strategijos>.

⁴ Europe 2020 targets: statistics and indicators for Lithuania. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-your-country/lithuania/europe-2020-targets-statistics-and-indicators-lithuania_en#poverty-and-social-exclusion.

⁵ Eurostat. 2020. At risk of poverty rate. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TESPM010/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=71422f6a-d0b9-4b86-9e71-fb9028887765>.

rate that is over two and a half times greater than that of their counterparts with one dependent child, despite the decreasing difference over recent years. While child poverty rates have declined over time, around 20 per cent of children remain at risk-of-poverty.⁶

The impact of social transfers in Lithuania had typically been limited but has increased significantly since 2018. In 2019, the impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) has increased from 22.9 per cent to 31.56 per cent (an increase of 8.66 p.p.). In 2020, social transfers (excluding pensions) reduced the rate of the risk of poverty by **29.39 per cent**.⁷ These increases bring Lithuania's rate of social transfers closer to the EU average of 32.62 percent (2020). The low level of spending on social protection and the limited impact of social transfers on poverty reduction⁸, coupled with the lack of a coherent and comprehensive poverty reduction strategy, has contributed significantly to the persistently high rates of poverty in Lithuania.

The National Progress Plan (2021-2030), which is yet to be implemented, refers to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and outlines specific objectives for reducing poverty and social exclusion; however, it **lacks specific goals and indicators on addressing child poverty**. Despite the lack of strategy, **cash social assistance** for families and children has been seen as a primary tool to mitigate the material aspects of child poverty.

1.2. Policies and programmes to address material poverty

In the past two years, several measures have been introduced to strengthen working-age benefits, as well as providing social assistance in cash and family benefits, and thus mitigating the risk of poverty. These measures include an increase in state-supported income (SSI) and its indexation to the amount of minimum consumption needs from 2019; increased coverage and amounts of unemployment benefits; and changes to family benefits through the introduction of a universal-child benefit in 2018. Furthermore, an income disregard for recipients of cash social assistance was introduced, allowing recipients who receive income from work to keep some of their earnings. The measures most relevant to reducing child poverty were the introduction of a **universal child benefit**, which has increased annually, and amendments to **cash social assistance**.

Cash social assistance for families and children

Low-income families and single individuals are entitled to two main forms of means-tested cash social assistance: **social benefits** and **compensation for utility costs for either heating, hot water or drinking water**. The state-supported income (SSI), the base for social benefits, increased by over 20 per cent in early 2018, for the first time in a decade.⁹ Since 2019, the SSI has been indexed to the amount of minimum

⁶ Koutsogeorgopoulou, V. *Reducing poverty and social disparities in Lithuania*, OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1649, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1787/b631de7d-en>.

⁷ Eurostat. Impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) on poverty reduction by sex, 2020. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TESPM050/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=418ab862-2de8-4bca-badf-57cf312c4cfe>.

⁸ Reduction in the percentage of the population at risk of poverty due to social transfers (calculated by comparing the rates of those at risk-of poverty before social transfers with those after such transfers; pensions are not considered to be social transfers in these calculations).

⁹ Koutsogeorgopoulou, V. *Reducing poverty and social disparities in Lithuania*, 2020.

consumption needs, thereby adjusting automatically for price-level changes.¹⁰ A person is **eligible to receive social benefit** if the household's average monthly income per person is **1.1 SSI (137.5 EUR in 2020, and 140.8 EUR in 2021)**. Both individuals and families can receive this benefit. The calculation of average monthly income excludes universal child benefit and a share of income from employment or social protection payments ranging between 20 and 40 per cent, depending on the composition of the family. The amount of social benefits paid to recipients decreases over time, however. For the first six months, the individual receives 1.4 SSI (179.2 EUR per month); between 6 and 12 months, the benefit is reduced to 1.2 SSI (153.6 EUR); and after 12 months, the benefit is reduced to 1.1 SSI (140.8 EUR).

Low-income families and individuals may also be entitled to compensation for the costs of heating, hot water or drinking water. Compensation for these utilities has also increased with the rise in SSI, but households can only receive compensation for one of these three amenities. Eligibility for such compensation is based on income. Heating compensation is paid if heating costs exceed more than 10 per cent of the difference between household income and the SSI. Compensation for hot water cannot exceed 5 per cent of the household income, and for drinking water, 2 per cent of household income.¹¹ These forms of compensation, in particular that for heating, help to increase the disposable income of eligible households, thus reducing their risk of poverty.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government introduced various measures to help those most in need. First, the government increased the SSI limit, establishing the right to social benefits to those with income of between 1 and 1.1 SSI. The amount of social benefit was increased and differentiated based on the duration of payment. Heating compensation was also increased for single persons. Furthermore, the share of income that is disregarded when calculating eligibility for social benefit and in-work benefits in the case of long-term unemployment also increased by 5 percentage points. Further measures include the introduction of a temporary disregard of property value when determining eligibility for social assistance, as well as measures relating to social housing, that will remain in place after the quarantine.¹²

Universal child benefit

In 2018, Lithuania replaced personal income tax (PIT) allowances for parents with a **universal child benefit** for all children. Before 2018, personal income tax allowances were used to reduce income poverty among families with children. A basic tax allowance was granted to each earner, with an additional tax allowance for parents. However, many low-income earners were unable to benefit from the PIT allowance. Since 2014, earners of minimum wage with three or more children have not been taxed; since 2016, this exemption has been extended to those with two children, and since 2017, parents who have one child and earn minimum wage have not been taxed. These changes have excluded an increasing number of low-income families from using PIT allowances.¹³ The universal child benefit of 30 EUR was introduced for all children, from birth until they turn 18. This benefit can be extended until 21, provided that the child pursues a general education programme. This includes children studying in

¹⁰ Reducing poverty and social disparities in Lithuania, 2020.

¹¹ European Commission. Lithuania - Cash social assistance for people on low income, 2021. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1119&intPageId=4668&langId=en>.

¹² Reducing poverty and social disparities in Lithuania, 2020.

¹³ Lazutka R., Poviliunas A. and Zalimienė L. Lithuania introduces a universal child benefit to tackle child poverty. ESPN Flash Report, 2019. Available at: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=per cent C2per cent B7+httpsper cent 3Aper cent 2Fper cent 2Fec.europa.euper cent 2Fsocialper cent 2FBlobServletper cent 3FdocIdper cent 3D20686per cent 26langIdper cent 3Den>.

vocational training institutions that also provide general education. The amount of the benefit has increased since its adoption. In 2019, Lithuania's parliament increased universal child payments to 50 EUR per month. In 2020, **child benefit increased to 60 EUR**, and to 70 EUR in 2021. Universal child benefit will further increase to 73.5 EUR in 2022. In addition to universal child benefit, **special financial benefits are also dedicated to adopted children** until the child turns 18 (160 EUR for a child and 160 EUR for an adoptive parent).¹⁴

A more targeted approach has also been adopted with regard to **children from large and poor families, as well as children with disabilities**. Since 2019, children from these groups have received an additional payment of 20 EUR in addition to the general 50 EUR universal child benefit. Since 2020, these additional payments for children from large families, children from poor families, as well as for children with disabilities, have increased to 40 EUR per month, amounting to a total of 100 EUR/month. **In 2021, the total for the increased universal child benefit (70 EUR) and the increased additional payments (41 EUR) amounted to 111 EUR**. No other vulnerable groups are entitled to higher child benefits.

Another targeted measure aimed at large families and those raising children with disabilities is the 'Family Card' ('Šeimos kortelė'), which guarantees discounts on certain goods and services provided by partner organizations. These discounts may be applied to groceries, necessities, and certain services in the public and private sectors, and may be one-time or recurring. However, the services available through the family card are limited: the discounts offered are often not substantial enough to make these services accessible to the most vulnerable. In addition, service providers that offer 'family card' discounts are often based in bigger cities, making them less accessible to targeted families in rural areas.¹⁵

One-time payments

In June 2020, following the first quarantine, the government agreed a **one-time COVID-19 benefit** to be paid to all children who receive child benefit. A sum of 120 EUR would be paid to all those who received just the universal child benefit. Meanwhile, children from large families, those from poor families, and children with disabilities who received both the universal child benefit and the additional payment would receive 200 EUR. The one-time COVID-19 benefit aimed to mitigate the adverse socio-economic effects of the pandemic. Like universal child benefit, it was administered by municipalities without requiring any additional applications from parents. In the case of families experiencing social risk, the benefit was provided in the same way as universal child benefit – through the provision of food items, payments for ECEC or extracurricular education costs; or via social cards used to purchase food and necessary items. Approximately 374,100 children received the one-time benefit of 120 EUR, and approximately 133,600 children received the 200 EUR benefit.¹⁶

In addition to universal child benefit, additional child benefit and regular benefits for adopted children, several one-time payments have been used to support new parents and children. A **one-time payment of 440 EUR is paid to each newborn or newly adopted child**. In the case of adopted children, a one-time payment of 440 EUR is paid after adoption, regardless of whether the child received a one-time

¹⁴ LR Socialinės Apsaugos ir Darbo Ministerija. 2020 Išmokos vaikams. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/seima-ir-vaikai/socialine-parama-seimoms-ir-vaikams/ismokos-vaikams-ismokos-kudikio-besilaukiancioms-moterims-vaikus-auginantiems-tevams#Iper cent C5per cent A1mokaper cent C4per cent AFvaikinusvaikper cent C4per cent 85>.

¹⁵ Information obtained through focus group discussions.

¹⁶ LR Socialinės Apsaugos ir Darbo Ministerija. 2020. Seimas pritarė: visi Lietuvos vaikai gaus vienkartinę išmoką. <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/seimas-pritare-visi-lietuvos-vaikai-gaus-vienkartines-ismokas>.

payment at birth. For children up to 1.5 years old living in family- or community-based care, the one-time payment of 440 EUR is given, provided that no one-time payment was paid at birth or upon their first time in foster care. **A one-time payment of 257.2 EUR is also given to pregnant women** who are not eligible for maternity benefit 70 days before their planned delivery date.

1.3. Recommendations

Despite recent expansions, the overall social benefits system in Lithuania remains somewhat limited in terms of its transformative potential to address child poverty and social exclusion. Aside from universal child benefit, the cash social assistance system relies on means-tested measures applying fairly strict conditions or one-time payments that do not necessarily contribute to a long-term reduction in poverty. In comparison to other OECD members, social spending in Lithuania also remains relatively low.¹⁷ Furthermore, rigid eligibility assessments and a lack of knowledge concerning available support also contribute to the reduced accessibility and effectiveness of social assistance programmes. Room existing for the strengthening of key cash social benefits for families with children. The key recommendations to increase the impact of the social benefits system in reducing child poverty are as follows:

- **Increase public spending on social protection**, to reach the 2015 EU27 average for cash transfers to families and children; and **expand the use of targeted measures** to meet the needs of more vulnerable groups. Currently, only children with disabilities and children from large families receive an additional payment of 41 EUR on top of their universal child benefit. Other groups identified in the ECG scheme, e.g. migrant children, Roma children, should be also considered for such support.¹⁸
- Develop a **more individual-based approach** to social benefit provision. Currently, municipalities do not provide social benefits on the basis of individual plans or individual needs assessments.
- **Reduce the rigidity of eligibility criteria and bureaucratic processes.** Relatively strict eligibility criteria (for means-tested social benefits) and bureaucratic rigidity may exclude the most vulnerable families and children. For example, a slight increase in income may lead to the termination of a social benefit or compensation, even though that increase does not match the amount of the social benefit or compensation for utilities.
- **Streamline eligibility assessment via an integrated, electronic information-sharing system** such as SPIS¹⁹, to provide a 'one-stop shop' point of access for various services, and reduce the need for bureaucratic processes to assess eligibility. It is important to ensure that that municipalities record, store and update the data regularly and in a uniform manner.
- **Improve public knowledge about the resources and support available through the development of digital information and consultation platforms aimed at different target groups.** Lack of knowledge may exclude potential beneficiaries from using the support that is available. Potential recipients may not access the available social benefits due to their lack of knowledge about them, a lack of knowledge regarding how to navigate complicated bureaucratic procedures, or a lack of understanding as to how receiving one type of benefit might influence their right to receive another benefit or wages from employment. The **Youth and Children Information and Counselling System (JAVAKIS)**, which focuses on youth

¹⁷ OECD. 2020. Economic Survey: Lithuania 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Socialinės paramos šeimai informacinė Sistema. Available at: <https://www.spis.lt/Titulinis/Apie>.

and children, could be further developed to serve other groups such as migrant children, as well as children and families with disabilities.

In addition to the above recommendations, Lithuania should aim to increase its overall spending on social protection to ensure that it meets the current needs of the most vulnerable, and should set out specific goals and targets for child poverty reduction. The table below provides a summary of the proposed goals, indicators and targets for effective poverty reduction through the cash social benefits system, in line with the goals and targets set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights.²⁰

²⁰ European Pillar of Social Rights: Indicators 2020. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-pillar-of-social-rights/indicators/social-scoreboard-indicators>.

TABLE 1. PROPOSED 2030 TARGETS AND INDICATORS ON CHILD POVERTY

Nº	GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	SOURCE	CURRENT PERIODICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET
1	By 2030, halve the proportion of children living in child-specific material deprivation (baseline 2019)	Child-specific material deprivation (0-17 years)	Material deprivation is defined here as a child's inability to access five or more items from a list of 18 personal, household and child-specific indicators	EU-SILC	Annual	Primary	Monitor	Result	7.7% (2019)	3.35%
2	By 2030, halve the proportion of children living at risk of poverty or social exclusion (baseline 2015)	Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) (<18 years)	A child is considered at risk of poverty or social exclusion if he or she presents at least one of the following characteristics: relative income poverty, severe material deprivation and/or living in households with low work intensity	EU-SILC	Annual	Primary	Monitor	Structural	23.1% (2020)	15.35%
3	By 2020, reach the EU27 (2015) average for social benefits to families and children	Social protection benefits to families and children per capita (at purchasing power parity)	Social protection benefits in the form of cash transfers for households with children. Data are per capita and on average.	ESSPROS	Annual	Primary	Monitor	Process	476.58 (2019)	641.58
4	By 2030, reach the EU27 (2019) average for cash transfers to families and children	Cash benefits to families and children per capita (at purchasing power parity)	Social protection benefits in the form of cash transfers for households with children. Data are per capita and on average.	ESSPROS	Annual	Primary	Monitor	Process	403.29 (2019)	448.49
5	By 2030, improve the effectiveness of cash transfers on child poverty reduction (baseline 2015)	Impact of social transfers on poverty reduction, focusing on children aged <18)	The effectiveness of social transfers refers to a reduction in the percentage of the risk of poverty rate, due to social transfers. Focus on children by age groups (pre-primary, primary, secondary). ! Data disaggregated by ECG target groups are needed.	EU-SILC	Annual	Primary	Monitor	Result	Overall: 29.39% (2020)	32.03%

Source: compiled by PPML.

2. Measures for reducing the social exclusion of children

- Deinstitutionalization and the provision of community-based services can provide adequate individual support that is often lacking in institutional care, and thereby guarantee children a good quality of life, both now and in the future.²¹
- A lack of services for children and young people at risk of poverty pushes them into deeper exclusion. The provision of timely, integrated and comprehensive services to families and children at risk of social exclusion is particularly important in breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.²²

This chapter reviews the key measures used to address the social exclusion of children in Lithuania. In addition to social benefits aimed at reducing material child poverty, Lithuania has taken several steps to address the social exclusion of children. The key measures aimed at reducing social exclusion include the **deinstitutionalization of childcare** for children without parental care, and the **development of integrated services** for families and children at risk of social exclusion. These measures aim to reduce the number of children in institutional care while simultaneously developing and delivering comprehensive social services to reduce the number of families and children at risk of social exclusion and family separation, enabling them to receive all necessary help within the family. These measures are in line with the priorities and goals set out in various international documents such as **the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2006)**, which aims to ensure that every child should be able to enjoy an adequate standard of living for their physical, mental and social development, and to be able to grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

2.1. Integrated services for families and children at risk of social exclusion

To improve the outcomes of children in need and ensure all their needs can be met while living with their families, Lithuania has developed integrated services for families and children at risk of social exclusion. In 2003, Lithuania approved the **Conceptual Framework of the State Policy on Child Welfare** to guide the development of policies focusing on children's well-being. **The Child Well-being Programme for 2013-2018** set out to develop comprehensive services for families and children. **The action plan for complex services for families 2016-2023**²³ and **the Child Wellbeing programme 2019-**

²¹ European Commission. Deinstitutionalisation of child care systems in Europe - Transition from institutional to community-based services, 2018. Available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=9056>.

²² Lithuanian National Anti Poverty Network. Poverty and Social Exclusion in Lithuania, 2020.

²³ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras . 2016. Dėl Kompleksiškai teikiamų paslaugų šeimai 2016-2023 m. veiksmų plano patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/7cf92540e6b511e5ba46c884bbd2b4fd/asr>.

2021²⁴ took a more holistic and integrated approach to ensuring effective access to public services by families and children, ensuring that children can grow in family environments; providing preventative interventions in crisis situations faced by families at risk of social exclusion, as well as measures aimed at supporting the integration of children within communities and society.²⁵

Integrated services for families aim to provide **comprehensive services located as close as possible to families at risk of social exclusion**, and to empower them to deal with problems and crises so that children can continue to grow up with their families.²⁶ Specific measures may include parental skills training; psychosocial help; training in family life skills such as managing family finances; mediation; childcare provision; transportation services; the organization and coordination of integrated services that encompass social, educational, health and legal services; disseminating information and consulting with the target groups about available services; as well as personal assistant services for people with disabilities.²⁷ The successful provision of complex integrated services rests on inter-institutional cooperation at municipal and national levels, and the capacity to provide services that respond to the individual needs of recipients. To facilitate better inter-institutional cooperation between education, social services, health and other institutions, each municipality has established the position of an **inter-institutional cooperation coordinator**.

However, a study in 2020 of services aimed at families and children found a substantial lack of services for certain groups of children and their parents. These groups include: 1) pregnant women and mothers raising children aged 0-2; 2) teenagers living in precarious situations, those experiencing violence, as well as those engaging in youth crime; 3) children experiencing violence who lack timely services; 4) teenagers with alcohol and drug addiction problems, especially the youngest ones (aged 8-14 years). For parents, accessing necessary and timely services is hardest for: 1) those in poverty; 2) single parents; 3) parents with mental disabilities; 4) parents raising children with disabilities; and 5) parents of children with special educational needs.²⁸

In 2018, Lithuania introduced **case management ('atvejo vadyba')** to improve the connection between services and their recipients in each municipality. Case management aims to provide comprehensive help, encompassing not only social services, but also education, health and other areas. Case management aims to ensure that when there is an assessed need for complex support and assistance to a family and the children growing up in it, all of the necessary help and services are provided in a coordinated manner. Case management is mandatory for families in which violations of child rights have been identified. To place greater emphasis on the preventive work, since 1 January 2020, case management has also applied to families with children in which no child rights violations have been identified, but who require complex assistance. In such cases, either the family itself or organizations or institutions (e.g. NGOs) that are working with the family can submit a request to the municipality for a case manager to provide a complex family and child assessment, and coordinate the organization of all necessary support services and measures. The municipality organizes the assessment of the child and the family's needs. If a clear need for complex support is identified, a case manager is appointed to provide a complex assessment and work with the family. The case manager assesses the risk factors

²⁴Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras. 2019. Dėl Vaiko gerovės 2019-2021 m. veiksmų plano patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/c529aef6e20411e8afb8c03742fcbc66/asr>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2021. Kompleksinės paslaugos šeimai <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/seima-ir-vaikai/seimos-politika/kompleksines-paslaugos-seimai>.

²⁷Dėl Vaiko gerovės 2019-2021 m. veiksmų plano patvirtinimo.

²⁸ Tamutienė, I. 2020. Vaiko Gerovės politikos pokyčių vertinimas vaiko teisių apsaugos Lietuvoje reformos kontekste ir NVO galimybių dalyvauti viešųjų paslaugų teikima. Tyrimo Ataskaita.

as well as the family's strengths and develops an individual care plan that addresses the risks and builds on existing strengths. The case manager then coordinates the implementation of the individual care plan in collaboration with other services, as required by each family.

The child and family assessment covers three main areas – child development, the development of parental skills, and a consideration of social factors. According to the needs identified, case managers plan and coordinate the implementation of a plan involving relevant services that help to meet these needs. Furthermore, they are responsible for monitoring the family's progress and adjusting the assistance accordingly.²⁹ The case management system allows individualized help to be provided to families, tailored to their specific needs and situations. Before the introduction of the case management system, children would be taken away from families if a certain level of risk had been identified. The introducing of case management services gives families experiencing social risk a chance to ameliorate their situations. Since this is a relatively new measure, no evaluation or data collection system has yet been developed to assess its effectiveness or to collect data regarding which groups of service users benefit most from this intervention.³⁰

Another means of outreach to clients and of providing integrated services are **mobile teams**. These usually comprise three professionals (a psychologist, a social worker and a professional in the treatment of addictions). Mobile teams have been established under the auspices of the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service. Currently, there are a total of 24 mobile teams across Lithuania, carrying out intensive work with families in crisis, in which serious violations of the rights of the child have been identified, such as violence or abuse. These teams aim to intervene early, solving the crisis and helping to remove the identified risk factors, and in this way, to prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families. Mobile teams visit families in their own living environment, which also helps them to reach families living in remote areas who may have limited access to services. Usually, the team works with the family for 30 days, with the possibility of prolonging the work for another 10 days. After this work is complete, the specialists develop recommendations for further work, which are submitted to the case managers, who continue the work with the family and the child.

2.2. Deinstitutionalization

The deinstitutionalization of the childcare system promotes the transition towards family-and community-based care by preventing the unnecessary separation of children and providing family-based care to children who are separated from their families. Deinstitutionalization helps to **integrate children into communities and the wider society to reduce the risk of segregation and social exclusion**.³¹ Deinstitutionalization in Lithuania began with the adoption of the **Strategic Guidelines for Deinstitutionalization (2012)**³² and the subsequent action plan for the Transition from Institutional to Community-Based Services for the Disabled and Children Deprived of Parental

²⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinės Apsaugos Ministerija. 2018. Atvejo vadybos teisinis reguliavimas.

³⁰ Information obtained through the interview programme.

³¹ European Commission. 2018. Deinstitutionalisation of childcare systems in Europe - Transition from institutional to community-based services. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=9056>.

³² Dėl neįgalių vaikų, likusių be tėvų globos vaikų, suaugusių neįgalių asmenų socialinės globos namų deinstitutionalizacijos strateginių gairių patvirtinimo. 2012. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.437781?jfwid=q8i88l7l1>.

Care (2014).³³ These reforms aimed to create a comprehensive range of services that would enable every child and their family or guardians to receive individual services and community assistance closer to home and according to their needs, replacing institutional care with family- and community-based alternatives.

Deinstitutionalization in Lithuania was foreseen as occurring in two stages: 1) creating the necessary conditions for transformation (2014–2017), which focused on restructuring and increasing the availability and accessibility of services; and 2) developing regional infrastructure for family- and community-based services (planned for 2017–2020 but extended to 2023). To facilitate the development of regional infrastructure, the Lithuanian government has established the Child Protection and Adoption Department under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, integrating regional child protection agencies under its umbrella.³⁴ Following this centralization in 2018, the number of institutional care facilities decreased significantly, from 92 in 2018 to 62 in 2021, as did the number of children in institutional care – from 2,667 in 2018 to 1,093 in 2021. In the previous years, the changes were less substantial.³⁵

Alternative care is provided to children in situations where: 1) children are separated from their families due to violations of their rights and associated risks; 2) children are placed voluntarily into residential/institutional care (while the parents maintain their parental rights). The latter situation usually occurs in the case of children with severe disabilities and children with complex emotional needs and/or complex behavioural issues. It is important to highlight that the **deinstitutionalization process currently focuses only on children who have been separated from their families and placed into the alternative care system.**

Alternative care for children without parental care may be organized in the form of: 1) family-based care provided by relatives (kinship care) or foster care families, including professional foster carers; 2) a family-based residential facility (šeimynos); or 3) residential alternative care provided through small community-based childcare homes (bendruomeniniai vaiku globos namai). In 2021, there were 6,622 children without parental care in alternative care. 2,959 (around 45 per cent) were cared for by their family members (kinship care); 1,563 (around 24 per cent) were in residential care facilities, of whom 866 were in institutional care and 697 were in community-based care. 1,605 were in foster families and 188 in professional foster families, and 307 children – in a family-based residential facility.

Deinstitutionalization is very important to reducing child poverty and social exclusion. Research from 2020 demonstrates that thus far, deinstitutionalization has improved life for children without parental care.³⁶ Both their social workers and the children themselves reported that they had made more social connections, demonstrated better educational outcomes, found new hobbies, and acquired new necessary life skills such as cleaning up, doing laundry, cooking and more.³⁷ **Deinstitutionalization should therefore be continued and expanded.**

³³ Įsakymas dėl perėjimo nuo institucinės globos prie šeimoje ir bendruomenėje teikiamų paslaugų neįgaliesiems ir likusiems be tėvų globos vaikams 2014–2020 metų veiksmų plano patvirtinimo. 2014. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/e4169490984411e3aad2c022318814db?jfwid=j9ohh56eu>.

³⁴ Opening doors. 2018. Country factsheet Lithuania. <https://www.openingdoors.eu/where-the-campaign-operates/lithuania/>.

³⁵ Oficialios Statistikos Portalas. 2020. Childcare institutions. Available at: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=8129a443-c9dd-4839-b828-914f89b9fc3a#.

³⁶ Contextus. Institucinės globos pertvarkos I-ojo etapo vertinimas, 2020. <https://www.pertvarka.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Pertvarkos-vertinimo-ataskaita.pdf>.

³⁷ Ibid.

Despite the positive impact of deinstitutionalization, the process has begun to stall. Not all institutional care facilities have been transformed to community- or family-based care; some have been transformed only partially, retaining institutional status for some of their services. The key challenges for deinstitutionalization are the **lack of a unified national vision and approach to deinstitutionalization** and, consequently, **a lack of coordination and continuity in the measures implemented**. As a result, some regions of the country lack a well-functioning and sustainable network of services³⁸ Further obstacles have been posed by **a lack of knowledge concerning the process and incentives** used to facilitate deinstitutionalization in relation to the administrators and employees of institutional care.³⁹ The deinstitutionalization process is sufficiently well funded: EUR 76 million of EU structural funds have been allocated for the transition from institutional to family and community-based care in Lithuania. Of this, EUR 38 million have been allocated for the development, piloting and implementation of new social services; the remaining amount is used for the development of infrastructure.⁴⁰ However, less **attention has been paid to allocating investments in training and attracting new specialists, retraining social workers**, and increasing awareness of the process among the relevant stakeholders to ensure the effective development of alternative care.

The lack of adequately developed community-based services following the closure of institutional care facilities may lead to children being sent back to their families or to alternative care without appropriate preparation or support. This may expose them to increased social risk.⁴¹ Ensuring the quality of the newly established community-based care services is also a challenge: often an institutional culture remains even in alternative care. This can be exemplified by very strict rules regarding the time at which children must return home, strict daily routines, and rigid housekeeping rules.⁴² Social workers also report having insufficient knowledge in providing psychosocial support to children in crisis situations, children with complex emotional needs, those manifesting extreme behaviours, and other mental health issues. Also, like institutional care, alternative care still lacks measures to help older children leaving care facilities to prepare for adult life.

2.3. Recommendations

- **Develop and improve the accessibility of services targeting the most vulnerable families and children** at risk of social exclusion, such as single mothers with children younger than two years old; teenagers, especially those with addiction problems; and parents and children with mental or physical disabilities.
- **Increase the number of specialists able to effectively provide integrated services through training and interdisciplinary training, as well as creating new jobs.** There is a substantial lack of specialists in general; however, the scarcity of specialists is especially pronounced in rural areas. Many qualified specialists often move to bigger cities in pursuit of better salaries and opportunities, leaving smaller towns and rural areas under-served.

³⁸ Opening doors. Country factsheet Lithuania, 2018.

³⁹ Lazutka R., Poviliūnas, A. and Žalimienė, L. 2016. Resistance to the deinstitutionalisation of the childcare system in Lithuania.

⁴⁰ Opening doors. Country factsheet Lithuania, 2018.

⁴¹ Pivorienė, J. 2020. Deinstitutionalization of the child care system in Lithuania. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 11(4.1), 121–131. <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs114202019941>.

⁴² Institucinės globos pertvarkos I-ojo etapo vertinimas.

- **Promote the principle of subsidiarity and the involvement of NGOs** to foster the more decentralized provision of alternative care and other services as close as possible to the people in need, thus ensuring easier accessibility, especially in rural areas.
- To accelerate the national process of deinstitutionalization, Lithuania should **develop a national strategy and a regulatory framework covering the remaining residential institutions and developing alternative care services across the country, paying particular attention to reducing** geographic disparities between different municipalities and ensuring the more even development of integrated social services across the country.
- To ensure the quality of alternative care services, the government should further develop a professional foster care network for children with complex needs who are often in long-term care. To provide more tailored services, the government should diversify the provision of care services, targeting various groups of children with more specific and complex needs (sexual abuse, substance misuse, disabilities, etc).
- Develop comprehensive support services for children leaving care to support their effective transition to independent life.

To better facilitate the process of deinstitutionalization, it is important to establish a clear monitoring framework for the systemic collection of data that can be compared with other countries across the EU. The table below summarizes potential indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of measures used to reduce social exclusion.

TABLE 2. PROPOSED 2030 TARGETS AND INDICATORS

Nº	GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	SOURCE	CURRENT OR PROPOSED PERIODICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET
1.	By 2030, halve the proportion of children and adolescents in residential care (measured as a share of the total number living in alternative care).	The percentage of children aged 0-17 in residential care, out of the total number of children in alternative care at a specific point in time.	-	Data Care project	Annual	Primary	Monitoring	Process	33.4 per cent (2021)	16.7%
		Number of childcare institutions at the end of the year.	-	National Statistics Office	Annual	Primary	Monitoring	Process	62 (2020)	32
2.	Develop comprehensive integrated services for families and children at risk of social exclusion.	Number of children growing up in families who receive integrated family support services.	Total number of children, as well as disaggregated by age (0-12 months, 13-36 months, 3-6 years, 7-17 years); by disability status; income status; ethnic origin/background.	National Statistics Office	Annual	Primary	Monitoring	Process	-	
		Number of cases of children who have lost parental care and been separated from their families.	Total number of children; total number of cases; numbers disaggregated by age (0-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-14, 15-17 years), by type of alternative care.	National Statistics Office	Annual	Primary	Monitoring	Process	-	
		Number of cases of children being assigned to alternative care, by reason.	Total number of cases, disaggregated by the municipality, rural-urban area; by age (0-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-14, 15-17), by gender, by reason for which they are assigned to alternative care	National Statistics Office	Annual	Primary	Monitoring	Process	-	

Source: compiled by PPMI.

3. Free and effective access to quality early childhood education and care services

3.1. Facts and trends in access to quality ECEC services

- Attendance in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services is universal among pre-school children aged 6 (with some exceptions for children aged 5) in Lithuania, but average enrolment rates remain low for younger children, especially those below 3 years old. The situation is particularly complicated among children aged 0 to 2, as ECEC services for this age group are mainly available only in private for-profit settings, although only a small number of children attend private ECEC, and vulnerable families cannot afford these services.
- Disparities exist in access to ECEC between rural and city areas, as well as among children from different family backgrounds. Access to ECEC is much more limited in rural areas, as well as for children from single-parent families, children from low-income families, children with a migrant background, children with special educational needs and those with disabilities.
- The successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee (ECG) in this area requires improved access to ECEC services for the most disadvantaged groups; a greater focus on children with disabilities and special needs; the continued expansion of ECEC, particularly for the youngest children; the promotion of flexible ECEC services that enhance work-family balance; and the improvements to quality with regard to children's group sizes, and the updating of methodologies and improved teacher's competences.

This chapter begins by exploring the main challenges experienced by vulnerable groups in Lithuania in terms of access, and the quality of ECEC. These include obstacles to ECEC access for children between 0 and 5 years old, particularly those within the lowest income quintiles; those living in families at social risk; children with disabilities and special needs; children from single-parent families; and children living in rural areas. Later, we go on to explore the quality of services and the reasons for a lack of quality.

Children in need

The case of ECEC services in Lithuania is especially complicated, due to a long history of political attention being directed towards stay-at-home mothering.⁴³ As in all post-Soviet countries, the nuclear family type has always been considered to be of the highest value. Family policies have aimed to encourage the formation of such families via such political tools as generous parental leave benefits. As a result, insufficient political attention has been paid to the development of ECEC services, leading to an extreme shortage and to the inflexibility of ECEC services in Lithuania today, particularly for children between the ages of 0 and 2.

During the academic year 2020-2021, a total of 132,501 children were enrolled in pre-school and pre-primary education in Lithuania. In 2019, only 16.2 per cent of children aged 3 years old or younger attended formal ECEC⁴⁴, while 60 per cent were taken care of solely by their parents.⁴⁵ The share of children aged between 4 and the age at which compulsory pre-primary education starts (5-6 years old) who participate in early childhood education and attend pre-school establishments has increased by 12.2 percentage points (from 79.7 per cent in 2007 to 91.9 per cent in 2017). It remains well below both the EU27 average (94.8 per cent in 2018)⁴⁶ and the EU target for 2021-2030 (96 per cent).⁴⁷ Attendance rates for ECEC varies greatly even between neighbouring municipalities, with the rate among children aged 0-3 ranging from 8.5 per cent (Alytus region) and 69.2 per cent (Alytus city).⁴⁸ In 19 Lithuanian municipalities, ECEC attendance rates among children between the ages of 0 and 3 fail to reach 33 per cent. All of these municipalities are in smaller regions and rural areas (Panevėžys region, Raseiniai region, Skuodas region and others). According to a public audit report 'Are we using the opportunities of pre-school education to ensure a more successful future for children?'⁴⁹ (2018), municipalities are uneven in ensuring access to pre-school education, and ECEC attendance rates are much lower in rural areas than in cities.

Since 2016, pre-primary education has been compulsory in Lithuania, and should be available to all. Nevertheless, in 2018-2019 only 61.3 per cent of six-year-old children living in rural areas were educated under pre-school education curricula, compared with 113.7 per cent in urban areas (many of the children living close to the cities also attend ECEC services in the city, therefore the number exceeds

⁴³ Skubiejūtė, G. 2020. Vienų motinų šeimos Lietuvos šeimos įstatymų kontekste. Available at: <https://www.zurnalai.vu.lt/STEPP/article/download/15392/17002/29938>.

⁴⁴ Eurostat 2021. Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp210/default/table?lang=en.

⁴⁵ Eurostat. 2019. How do parents organise childcare in the EU? Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210330-1>.

⁴⁶ European Commission. 2020. The Education and Training 2020 targets. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2020/en/chapters/chapter2.html>.

⁴⁷ European Commission. 2021. Early Childhood Education and Care. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/early-childhood-education-and-care_en#:~:text=In%20the%20Council%20Resolution%20on%20a%20strategic%20framework,starting%20age%20for%20compulsory%20primary%20education%20in%20ECEC.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Educational Development Programme 2021-2030. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/protokolai/%C5%A0PP%20projektas%20\(2020-08-17\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/protokolai/%C5%A0PP%20projektas%20(2020-08-17).pdf).

⁴⁹ Aukščiausioji audito institucija. 2018. Ar išnaudojame audito galimybes sėkmingesnei vaikų atečiai užtikrinti?

one hundred per cent).⁵⁰ Rates were even lower in 2020-2021, when restrictions were in force due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 55.6 per cent of children in rural areas and 90.6 per cent in cities attended pre-primary education. Due to under-developed ECEC services, **children in rural areas are among the vulnerable groups of children in relation to access to ECEC**. In most cases, these children do not have ECEC facilities available close to their home, and therefore experience various barriers to access such as transportation, as well as a lack of learning support specialists.⁵¹

In addition, one of **the most vulnerable groups of children** in relation to access to ECEC is **children with special educational needs and disabilities**. In 2020, 23,123 **children with special educational needs** were integrated into general-purpose groups within ECEC centres.⁵² In 2020, 56 out of 716 ECEC settings provided targeted services to children with special educational needs in specialized groups integrated into mainstream ECEC facilities.⁵³ All of these ECEC centres were located in cities. The main reason for the insufficient inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities into general ECEC is a lack of learning support staff. This situation is especially complicated in rural areas, where ECECs suffer from a lack all types of learning support specialists, particularly speech therapists and psychologists. The main reasons for this shortage of staff is a reluctance to work in rural areas and insufficient training (there is a lack of the necessary workshops and training in smaller Lithuanian municipalities). For the same reasons, there are no ECEC settings in rural areas providing targeted services for children with special educational needs in specialized groups integrated into mainstream ECEC facilities.

Children from low-income families (considered to be those families which receive less than 125 euros per month per family member) living in rural areas experience a double disadvantage, and their families experience even greater difficulty in affording ECEC services. According to EU SILC 2016 *ad hoc* module data, 57.5 per cent of low-income families reported experiencing some difficulty in affording ECEC services, while 23 per cent experienced moderate difficulty.⁵⁴

Statistics show that the higher the parents' income, the more likely they are to make use of ECEC for children under 3 years old. In Lithuania, only 7 per cent of AROPE children up to the age of 3 years old attended ECEC in 2019. The European average for the participation AROPE children in ECEC stands at over 20 per cent.⁵⁵ This inequality occurs mostly due to a lack of development of public ECEC services for the youngest children, as the majority of ECEC services for these children (between ages of 0 and 2) are mainly available in private for-profit settings, as there is a shortage of placements in public ECEC.

Children of single parents also have trouble in accessing ECEC services, as their parents experience a higher burden of additional costs such as children's daily meals, and have very limited time in their

⁵⁰ Own calculations, based on data on the resident population (aged 6) at the beginning of the year, accessible from the Official Statistics Portal. Available at: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en_GB/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize#/.

⁵¹ Eurostat. 2016. Children by household type, income group, degree of urbanization and main reasons for not meeting needs for childcare services. Available at: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

⁵² Official Statistics Portal. 2021. Children with special educational needs integrated into general purpose groups of pre-school education schools. Available at: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=6efa7f73-0c20-48c3-b296-02f343763cc0#/>.

⁵³ Official Statistics Portal. 2021. Number of pre-school establishments with special groups. Available at: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=ec2083e6-0114-439d-a934-a41f9482015c#/>.

⁵⁴ Eurostat. 2016. Children by household type, income group, degree of urbanization and main reasons for not meeting needs for childcare services. Available at: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

⁵⁵ European Commission. 2019. Education and Training Monitor 2019.

<https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/volume-1-2019-education-and-training-monitor.pdf>.

schedules to take their children to ECEC centres – especially when these are located far from home. Unfortunately, single parents usually do not receive any priority with regard to the enrolment of their children in ECEC centres (which depends on the policy of the ECEC centre, or municipality, in the case of public ECEC), or state support for transportation and discounts relating to ECEC services. Moreover, they actually are in even more disadvantaged situation compared with nuclear families in certain municipalities, where priority over ECEC places goes to those children who have both parents registered in the same city.⁵⁶ In cases where single mothers are not given priority over enrolment into ECEC, additional requirements may apply, such as the absence of the father's name on the child's birth certificate.

Very low rates of ECEC attendance are recorded among **children living in families at social risk**. In 2020, only around 64 per cent of these children attended any form of ECEC. The main reasons include their parents' reluctance to send their children to ECEC, the unavailability of transport, and a lack of services for children with special needs.⁵⁷ To address these issues, from September 2021, compulsory ECEC was introduced for children living in families at social risk, and additional financing was granted to municipalities that have assigned children from families at social risk to ECEC.⁵⁸

Another vulnerable group is **children with a migrant background**. Research shows that educators in Lithuanian ECEC centres lack sufficient skills to work with children in other languages, and few ECEC facilities provide services in foreign languages.⁵⁹ The same issue applies to returnee children. Lithuanian ECEC lacks adequately prepared educators, as well as the educational tools and methodology, to work with immigrant children. Moreover, there is an insufficient number of psychologists that who would be able to help children to adjust more quickly to the new culture and learning system.

3.2. Policies and programmes to ensure access to ECEC services for children in need

In this sub-section we review the main recent policy measures implemented in Lithuania to encourage the promotion of ECEC for children under the age of five; to eliminate the barriers to access to ECEC; to improve work-family balance and parental care; and to ensure specific attention is paid children who are likely to experience particular disadvantage or difficulties (children with a migrant background, children with disabilities and special educational needs, children in situations of extreme vulnerability). Given the wide distribution of responsibilities for ECEC regulation, planning and service provision, we examine policy measures at national, regional and local levels.

⁵⁶ Kauno miesto savivaldybės taryba. 2019. Available at: <http://www.kaunas.lt/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2015/07/mokescio-tvarkos-aprasas-naujas-2020-2.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Eurostat. 2020. Children receiving formal childcare services by household type, income group, degree of urbanization and level of difficulty to afford formal childcare services. Available at: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

⁵⁸ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2021. Dėl Privalomojo ikimokyklinio ugdymo nustatymo ir skyrimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.423753/asr>.

⁵⁹ PPML. 2018. Švietimo paslaugų sugrįžusiems asmenims poreikio savivaldybėse tyrimas. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/svietimas/%C5%A0vietimo%20paslaugos%20sugr%C4%AF%C5%BEusiems_galutin%C4%97%20ataskaita_20181120.pdf.

This chapter examines both the strengths and weaknesses of the measures currently in place, while discussing good practices highlighted by experts and key informants. Its main objective is to formulate recommendations for action that are in line with the identified needs, successful policy examples, and the priorities that are to guide the European Child Guarantee (ECG).

According to the interview data, children between the ages of 0 and 5 who do not attend ECEC services are most vulnerable, particularly those in large families (where children tend to raise each other), those in distant rural areas, and children living in families at social risk. These children experience greater vulnerability, since it is almost impossible to monitor their health, nutrition and safety. At this age, if children are not involved in any formal care settings, they are less visible to the system and are particularly dependent on their parents, who may be abusive, lack parenting skills, abuse alcohol or drugs, and more. The Lithuanian government therefore seeks to improve the accessibility, flexibility and quality of ECEC services and to ensure that all children attend ECEC.

Strategic goals and efforts to improve access to quality ECEC

One of the main documents in relation to the development of ECEC services in Lithuania is the National Education Development Programme for 2021-2030.⁶⁰ This sets out a plan to improve the quality of and overall access to education in Lithuania. One of the key components of the **National Education Development Programme for the years 2021-2030** is to improve the accessibility and quality of ECEC, and to achieve a target of having 95 per cent of children between age of 3 and the age of compulsory education attending ECEC (in 2018, 88.9 per cent of children between the ages of 3 and compulsory education attended ECEC).⁶¹ The programme also seeks to increase the number of municipalities that have an attendance rate of over 80 per cent among children aged 3 years and over. The number of such municipalities is expected to rise from seven in 2019-2020 to 10 in 2030. The third goal of the programme is to raise the number of children from families at social risk (families with parents who lack social and parenting skills, suffer from addictions, etc.) who receive compulsory ECEC. In 2020-2021, 75 children from families at social risk attended ECEC. This number is expected to rise to at least 1,500 in 2024.⁶² Meanwhile, the Education Development Programme for the years 2021-2030 created by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports seeks to ensure access to ECEC for all children, to improve access to ECEC among the most vulnerable children, and to ensure that learning curricula are up to date.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Educational Development Programme 2021-2030. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/%C5%A0PP%20\(projektas%202021-09-30\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/%C5%A0PP%20(projektas%202021-09-30).pdf).

⁶¹ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021-2030 m. švietimo plėtros programa.

⁶² Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2021. XVIII Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo planas. Available at: <https://lsadps.lt/images/20210302VPNPprojektas-skelbimui.pdf>.

⁶³ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2021. Dėl 2021-2030 metų Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerijos švietimo plėtros programos patvirtinimo (TAP-21-1595(2); 21-31778(3)). Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/2c7722f151d211ec86bdc0a6d573b32?positionInSearchResults=0&searchModelUUID=5f52d8d9-edc8-4b05-a550-bbc5f13067ad>.

TABLE 3. GOALS AND TARGETS TO IMPROVE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF ECEC FOR CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 3 AND COMPULSORY PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION, AS SET OUT IN THE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2021-2030 AND THE XVIII GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGIC PLAN

GOAL	STARTING STATE	Target	
		2024	2030
To increase the percentage of children between the ages of 3 and compulsory education attending ECEC	88.9%(2018)	-	95%
To increase the number of municipalities that have an ECEC attendance rate of over 80% among children between the ages of 3 and compulsory education	7 (2019-2020)	-	10
To increase the number of children between the ages of 3 and compulsory education from families at social risk who attend ECEC	75 (2020-2021)	1 500	-

Source: Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2021. XVIII Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo planas; Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Educational Development Programme 2021-2030.

To achieve these goals, the programme foresees that municipalities will be provided with assistance in creating new sites (and adapting existing premises), as well as implementing modular kindergartens, 'family kindergartens' and other pre-educational organization models. Moreover, it foresees the modernization⁶⁴ of learning equipment and methodology, and the provision of appropriate educational tools to existing nurseries and kindergartens. Appropriate learning tools and methodologies are expected to be used for children with SEN and those from families at social risk, to ensure the inclusion of these children into ECEC. Teachers' competences are to be improved via such tools as peer-learning.⁶⁵ The new types of establishments should improve the accessibility of ECEC services to all children, with particular attention being paid to the youngest children, between the ages of 0 and 3. From 2021 onwards, each year the government is to allocate at least EUR 30 million of support provided by the Recovery and Resilience Facility⁶⁶ or other financial support from the European Union, for the development of ECEC infrastructure.⁶⁷

To improve the accessibility of ECEC services, in 2021 the government allocated EUR 21,400,680 (EUR 19,665,490 from European Funds and EUR 1,735,190 from the funds of the state budget of the Republic of Lithuania).⁶⁸ Indicators for monitoring the implementation of these measures include the number of ECEC facilities renovated and modernized, the number of new ECEC centres or additional facilities established, and increases in the numbers of children attending these centres.

⁶⁴ Švietimo aprūpinimo centras. 2016. Vaikų darželių modernizavimas – erdvės kūrybai ir saviugdai. Available at: https://www.sac.smm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/08_Vaiku-darzeliu-modernizavimas.pdf.

⁶⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2021. XVIII Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo planas. Available at: <https://lsadps.lt/images/20210302VPNPprojektas-skelbimui.pdf>.

⁶⁶ European Commission. 2021. Laying the foundations for recovery: Lithuania. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/com-2021-386-lithuania_factsheet_en.pdf.

⁶⁷ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas. 2020. Švietimo įstatymo Nr. I-1489 2, 7, 8, 24, 36, 47 ir 67 straipsnių pakeitimo įstatymas. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/d4c5bb0024de11eb8c97e01ffe050e1c?jfwid=i3h7wzzn6>.

⁶⁸ ES investicijos. 2021. Ikimokyklinio ir priešmokyklinio ugdymo prieinamumo didinimas. Available at: https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemonės/ikimokyklinio-ir-priesmokyklinio-ugdymo-prieinamumo-didinimas.

TABLE 4. INDICATORS FOR MONITORING THE IMPROVEMENT OF ECEC ACCESSIBILITY, DEFINED IN EU INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

MONITORING INDICATOR	INTERMEDIATE VALUE (31 DECEMBER 2018)	TARGET VALUE BY 31 DECEMBER 2023
Proportion of children aged 1-6 educated in ECEC centres renovated using ERDF funds	25%	46%
Capacity of the childcare or education infrastructure receiving investment	1,390	14,380
Education providers where at least one educational space has been created or renovated using ERDF funds	0	50
Number of new ECEC places created using ERDF funds	0	2,000
Number of spaces in ECEC renovated using ERDF funds	0	2,256
Number of ECEC facilities renovated using ERDF funds	0	50
Infrastructure of ECEC facilities renovated using ERDF funds	0	40

Source: ES investicijos. 2021. Ikimokyklinio ir priešmokyklinio ugdymo prieinamumo didinimas.

In 2021 the government allocated EUR 8,593,138 (all from European Funds) to improve the quality of ECEC centres. This funding is shared between ECEC and general education schools. Indicators for monitoring the implementation of this measure include the increased number of teachers who will have participated in professional development courses, and the number of ECEC centres and schools who will have received additional budget.

TABLE 5. INDICATORS FOR MONITORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MEASURES DEFINED IN THE EU INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

MONITORING INDICATOR	INTERMEDIATE VALUE (31 DECEMBER 2018)	TARGET VALUE BY 31 DECEMBER, 2023
Proportion of schools that have received ESF funding to improve the quality of education	70%	70%
Number of employees of educational institutions who have participated in ESF activities	233	2,330
Units of ECEC centres that have received funding to improve the quality of education	0	80

Source: ES investicijos. 2021. Ikimokyklinio ir bendrojo ugdymo mokyklų veiklos tobulinimas.

Financing of ECEC

Every child in Lithuania is entitled to at least 20 hours of ECEC services a week funded by the state, with the rest of the time being financed by a public ECEC provider (for example, the municipalities). Municipalities have the right to determine the fees for education, meals or other services provided to children participating in ECEC. In cases where children do not obtain placements in public ECEC, some municipalities provide EUR 100 compensation for children to attend private ECEC.

Funds per child per year are calculated by adding together yearly education funds, yearly catering funds and yearly transport funds.⁶⁹ Educations funds are calculated by multiplying the average conditional coefficient of the fixed part of the teacher's official salary, the basic amount of the official salary established by the parliament (Seimas) of the Republic of Lithuania, the individual education coefficient, and 12 months of social security contributions. The notional amount of one meal (including breakfast, lunch, dinner and/or other meals) per day (EUR 3.3) per child is calculated by multiplying this amount by the number of days spent in ECEC per year (251 days). Transport costs are calculated by dividing an amount of 1.5 minimum monthly salaries for a driver and an accompanying person by the notional number of 18 children being transported, multiplied by the social security contributions and by 12 months, plus the notional amount of one transport maintenance rate per child (EUR 2) multiplied by the number of days spent in ECEC per year (251 days). Funds are allocated to municipalities from the budget of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Budgets are allocated according to the number of children in public ECEC centres.

Ensuring the quality of ECEC

To ensure the quality of ECEC services, requirements for the sizes of children's groups and service provision were set in 2010 by the Ministry of Health.⁷⁰ Between the ages of 0 and 1, there should be no more than six children in a group; between the ages of 1 and 2, no more than 10 children; between the ages of 2 and 3, no more than 15 children; and between the ages of 3 and 6, no more than 20 children. In groups where children are below the age of 1, two teachers must work at all times; in groups of children above 1 year old, two people must work in the group, with at least of them being a qualified teacher. One child with an intellectual, hearing, visual or developmental impairment, or any type of disability, equates to two children.

To support children with special educational needs, ECEC centres can employ teaching assistants. For children with hearing impairments, translators of sign language may be employed; tiflopedagogues (specialists in education for the visually impaired) may be employed for children with vision impairments. These specialists should serve no more than 24 children each. In all cases, ECEC centres should have speech therapists (with one speech therapist providing services to no more than 30 children) and special pedagogues (providing services to no more than 24 children). For children who study in special education ECEC centres or special education groups, the funding is double. Such centres and groups are subject to different requirements regarding children's group sizes – depending on the special needs of the children within the group, its size may vary between 3 and 10 children. Moreover, from 2024, all children with special educational needs will have to be provided with the opportunity to attend whichever ECEC centre is closest to their home.⁷¹

With regard to the preparation and professionalism of ECEC educators, the government has established the Description of Requirements for Teacher Qualifications.⁷² According to this law, all ECEC educators must have a university or college degree, have completed a pre-school teacher training programme or

⁶⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2018. Dėl Mokymo lėšų apskaičiavimo, paskirstymo ir panaudojimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/bf34a4e088fa11e8af589337bf1eb893/asr>.

⁷⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija. 2010. Dėl Lietuvos higienos normos HN 75:2016 „Ikimokyklinio ir priešmokyklinio ugdymo programų vykdymo bendrieji sveikatos saugos reikalavimai“ patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.AF02472A1EBF/asr>.

⁷¹ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. Mokymasis ir švietimo pagalba specialiųjų ugdymosi poreikių turintiems mokiniams. Available at: <https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/smm-svietimas/specialiuju-ugdymosi-poreikiu-turintiems-mokiniams>.

⁷² Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2014. Dėl reikalavimų mokytojų kvalifikacijai aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/7f45d9f02f7911e4a83cb4f588d2ac1a/asr>.

have accumulated at least 15 years' experience of working in ECEC before the year 2014. Pre-primary education teachers must have completed pre-school and/or a primary education teacher training programme and, in accordance with the procedure established by the Minister of Education, Science and Sports of the Republic of Lithuania, they must have taken 40 hours of pre-school group courses or relevant subjects during their studies. All teachers who have pedagogical qualifications can teach in ECEC after attending a 40-hour pre-school and pre-primary education course. All specialists who have university diploma may teach in ECEC if they completed at least 60 hours of pedagogical studies during their studies. Moreover, all ECEC teachers must have completed special pedagogy and special psychology courses. To improve the inclusion of children with a migrant background, teachers are recommended to have completed a course of at least 40 hours on the methodology of teaching the Lithuanian language to children aged 0-6 years.

Nevertheless, insufficient attention is paid to the quality and improvement of teachers' qualifications within ECEC settings. In 2018, 36 per cent of public ECEC centres did not meet hygiene requirements due to the size of their groups, which were larger than those specified in the national requirements (which stipulate the numbers of children per teacher, depending on their age, up to a maximum of 20 children per teacher).⁷³ Moreover, although municipalities are required to provide ECEC educators with five days of qualification courses per year, the data show that 35 per cent of ECEC providers do not have enough budget to fulfil this requirement, and that 63 per cent of ECEC providers did not guarantee five days of qualification courses in 2018.⁷⁴ Recruiting, training and supporting educators is a crucial part of ensuring quality services, but not all childcare providers can afford to train their staff. There are not enough funds to support regular learning, including how to communicate and better involve children with special needs, how to enhance children's development and learning, and how to work with children from different cultural backgrounds. In 2017, Lithuania spent just 18.4 per cent of its education expenditure on pre-primary and primary schools, the lowest share in the EU (EU average: 32.0 per cent)⁷⁵, while in other levels of education, investment in Lithuania exceeds the European average. The national audit in 2019 has shown that pre-school teachers receive on average 36 per cent lower salaries compared with teachers in general education.⁷⁶ Low salaries and a lack of training reduce teachers' motivation. Therefore, acknowledging the profession's lack of attractiveness due to low salaries and challenging working conditions, the government has since 2020 provided ECEC teachers (pre-school and pre-primary education) with the same salary as primary school teachers. Nevertheless, the profession's persistent lack of attractiveness fuels the current shortage of ECEC teachers and teaching assistants in Lithuania.⁷⁷ According to interview data, every ECEC centre lacks between one and two teachers, with a shortage of at least 63 teachers in the Klaipėda region alone. With regard to learning support specialists, during the school year 2021-2022, there are just 99 speech therapists, 14 psychologists, 23 social pedagogues, 11 special pedagogues, two surdopedagogues and one tiflopedagogue working across the county^{78,79}.

⁷³ Valstybinio audito ataskaita. 2019. Ar išnaudojame ikimokyklinio ugdymo galimybes sėkmingesnei vaikų atečiai užtikrinti?

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ European Commission. 2019. Education and Training Monitor 2019. Available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/volume-1-2019-education-and-training-monitor.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Europos Komisija. 2019. Pagrindiniai duomenys apie ikimokyklinį ugdymą ir priežiūrą Europoje.

⁷⁸ Švietimo valdymo informacinė sistema. 2021. Pedagoginiai darbuotojai pagal amžių ir lytį.

⁷⁹ Švietimo valdymo informacinė sistema. 2019. Ikimokyklinio ugdymo institucijų skaičiai ir vaikų skaičiai pagal savivaldybes. Available at: <http://svis.emokykla.lt/ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/>.

Furthermore, there is a lack of a more systematic, centralized and up-to-date monitoring system that might help to ensure quality and consistency between ECEC providers⁸⁰. Guidelines have been prepared regarding which aspects should be evaluated, both for ECEC providers and for the ECEC system as a whole. These include access to ECEC, the qualifications of teachers, curricular, financing and management, and monitoring (quality of education and meeting individual children's needs)⁸¹. It is expected that an external, centralized, evidence-based assessment system will be established by 2022. Currently, external evaluation is very fragmented in Lithuania, and there is a lack of a common vision and evaluation tools. To develop a systematic approach to the assessment of ECEC, nonformal and formal education, the government has allocated EUR 2,023,000 from the ESF.⁸²

Content of pre-school education

Pre-school education is carried out according to a pre-school education programme, which is prepared by the team at each ECEC centre.⁸³ These programmes are based on the needs of children in the ECEC centre, as identified by centre managers, teachers and learning support specialists. To help identify the needs of the children and develop well suited education programmes, criteria are set out by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, together with methodological recommendations. These criteria and methodological recommendations include tools to help children improve their achievements in academic, artistic, and social areas, according to their age and developmental stage.⁸⁴ Recommendations also provide teachers with information about how to recognize the potential and needs of children, and how to approach them. For example, if a teacher identifies a case of avoidant attachment, they should help the child to recognize and express their emotions in a verbal manner. The ECEC programmes are also modified according to individuals' special educational needs, recommendations provided by the Pedagogical Psychological Service, and the needs expressed by the parents or legal guardians of the children.⁸⁵

Content of pre-primary education

Pre-primary education is compulsory for all children in Lithuania and is intended to help improve their academic achievements and social inclusion. The usual age for pre-primary education is 6 years old, but some exceptions are made in which children are allowed to start pre-school at the age of 5, according to the needs of their parent(s). Pre-primary education is organized according to the programme of pre-primary education prepared by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. This programme sets out

⁸⁰ European Commission. 2021. Education and Training Monitor 2021. Lithuania. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0ec94e81-57df-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

⁸¹ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2019. Kaip vertinama ikimokyklinio ir priešmokyklinio ugdymo paslaugų kokybė? Available at: https://www.nsa.smm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Ikimokyklinio-ir-priesmokyklinio-ugdymo-paslaugu-kokybe_internetui.pdf.

⁸² Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra. 2018. Projektas "Neformaliojo vaikų švietimo, ikimokyklinio, priešmokyklinio ir bendrojo ugdymo vertinimo, įsivertinimo tobulinimas ir plėtotė". Available at: <https://www.nsa.smm.lt/stebesenos-ir-vertinimo-departamentas/projektai/projektas-neformaliojo-vaiku-svietimo-ikimokyklinio-priesmokyklinio-ir-bendrojo-ugdymo-vertinimo-isivertinimo-tobulinimas-ir-pletote-09-2-1-esfa-v-706-03-0001-2/>.

⁸³ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2020. Ikimokyklinio ugdymo programa. Available at: <https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/smm-svietimas/svietimo-sistema-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/ikimokyklinio-ugdymo-programa>.

⁸⁴ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2015. Ikimokyklinio ugdymo metodinės rekomendacijos. Available at: https://www.ikimokyklinis.lt/uploads/files/dir1049/dir52/dir2/17_0.php.

⁸⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2011. Dėl specialiosios pagalbos teikimo mokyklose (išskyrus aukštąsias mokyklas) tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.EE3AFE320A27>.

goals, objectives, and implementation measures to ensure quality education for children. The main objectives of pre-primary education are to develop social, health, cognitive, communication and artistic competencies. Programmes are organized according to children's age and developmental stage, as well as their individual capacities. Children with special educational needs are provided with adapted programmes, which are developed in conjunction with support specialists and the child's parents.

At this stage of education, children's achievements are already assessed. Children are observed and guided to improve their performance, and their work is assessed in comparison to their previous work. These assessments are carried out in private, and the results are recorded in child's book of achievements. They are discussed privately with the child's parent(s) and help educators to choose further teaching methods and direction. After completing pre-primary education, children must be able to develop social relations, to distinguish between good and bad behaviour, to ask for help, to adequately express their emotions, to take care of their nutritional needs, to search for information, to formulate abstract concepts and more. Due to a fairly challenging programme of pre-primary education and academic inequalities between children, pre-primary education may be extended for some children (such as those with SEN) who began pre-primary education at the age of 5, from one year to two years, to ensure that all children begin primary school with an equal level of knowledge.⁸⁶

Measures to improve access to ECEC for children in need

Depending on the municipality, different groups of children are prioritized in terms of access to ECEC centres. In most municipalities, priority goes to large families, brothers and sisters, children who have been mandated to attend ECEC, and the children of employees of the ECEC centre.⁸⁷ In addition, certain municipalities such as Vilnius also prioritize children who live in institutions or alternative care, and the children of diplomats. According to the interview data, such priorities are not always reasonable; as mentioned previously, they may discriminate against single-parent families as well as families who have only one child. The number of children or family type does not reduce the necessity for parents to remain in employment. Moreover, priority being given to children whose parents work in the ECEC centre or children of diplomats are based on the advantages rather than the vulnerability of the children, resulting in even greater inequality between children.

Pre-school education may be made mandatory for children living in families at social risk.⁸⁸ Mandatory pre-school education for children in families at social risk is the government's attempt to reduce inequalities in academic achievement during the school year (as children who attend ECEC are known to demonstrate better academic achievements later in life), and to ensure the safety of these children. Children are assigned to compulsory pre-school education by a person appointed by the director of the municipal administration. The Child Welfare Commission monitors the education of each child who has been assigned to compulsory pre-school education throughout the period of education. However, this measure has not yet achieved its full potential; it has therefore been planned to expand shuttle services and to finance the employment of accompanying persons, as the lack of these services has been identified as the main barrier to access.

⁸⁶ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2021. XVIII Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo planas. Available at: <https://lsadps.lt/images/20210302VPNPprojektas-skelbimui.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Vilniaus miesto savivaldybės taryba. 2019. Dėl vaikų priėmimo į Vilniaus miesto švietimo įstaigų ikimokyklinio ir priešmokyklinio ugdymo grupes organizavimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/5cc33d10182f11eabbd2d79178d400a0>.

⁸⁸ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2012. Dėl Privalomo ikimokyklinio ugdymo nustatymo ir skyrimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.423753>.

In September 2021, a new law was introduced in relation to compulsory ECEC for children from families at social risk. This law provides additional financing to municipalities and ECEC providers that enrol children assigned to compulsory ECEC, as it was noted that the biggest barriers to access with regard to the application of compulsory ECEC were a lack of transportation and additional financial burdens such as meals and salaries for accompanying persons.⁸⁹ Data shows that since the increase in financing in September 2021, 413 children from families at social risk have already begun attending ECEC (there are around 4,000 children between ages of 0 and mandatory pre-primary education living in families at social risk in Lithuania, but this attendance rate of 413 children is counted only among those children between ages of 3 and mandatory pre-primary education)⁹⁰. It is expected that with this additional funding for the school year 2021-2022, around 1,000 children at social risk (i.e. around 25 per cent) will begin attending ECEC.

To increase access to transport to and from ECEC centres, additional budget has been allocated. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport now provides an additional EUR 1.3 million to cover the education, nutrition and transportation of children from families at social risk, including accompanying persons. Since 2021, all children who live 3 km or more away from ECEC centres are entitled to transport services. Children living in families at social risk are also provided with free meals and all necessary learning equipment. Another important measure is the education of parents with regard to the benefits of ECEC. Dialogue with parents is intended reduce their reluctance towards their children's enrolment in ECEC. Currently, insufficient attention is paid to families' needs, and parents are insufficiently informed, as research shows that in cases where social workers are involved, parents are much more likely to support their children's attendance at ECEC centres.

To improve the integration of children from ethnic minorities, all ECEC centres are obliged to provide at least 5 hours of Lithuanian language lessons per week.⁹¹ Nevertheless, according to data from interviews with representatives of the Roma community, insufficient attention is paid to Roma children and children with a migrant background, who usually do not attend ECEC services, mostly due to cultural differences (education is not perceived as being of value in Roma culture), their parents' illiteracy, and living in rural areas where there are no ECEC centres. Another important issue is the mobility of parents. This can complicate the situation, as children can only attend ECEC centres that are located near the children's registered living place. When these places change frequently, not all parents go through the process of registration, and therefore cannot enrol their children into ECEC. According to 2019 data provided on the Roma platform, in 2018 only five Roma children attended ECEC centres in Lithuania, and 14 children were registered in ECEC.⁹²

⁸⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2021. Dėl Privalomojo ikimokyklinio ugdymo nustatymo ir skyrimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.423753/asr>; Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Educational Development Programme 2021-2030. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/%C5%A0PP%20\(projektas%202021-09-30\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/%C5%A0PP%20(projektas%202021-09-30).pdf); Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2021. XVIII Vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo planas.

⁹⁰ Švietimo valdymo informacinė sistema. 2021.

⁹¹ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas. 2020. Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo įstatymo Nr. I-1489 30 straipsnio pakeitimo įstatymas. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/c38a03b0226711eb8c97e01ffe050e1c?jfwid=i3h7wlbyz>.

⁹² Romų platforma. 2019. Ugdymo įstaigos. Available at: <http://www.romuplatforma.lt/svietimas/>.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, 25 Lithuanian **returnee children** were registered at ECEC centres, and a total of 800 foreign students received both ECEC and school education services in Lithuania.⁹³ Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, the research shows that ECEC educators lack sufficient skills to work with children in other languages, and an insufficient number of ECEC facilities provide services in foreign languages.⁹⁴ The same issue applies to returnee children. ECEC centres lack adequately prepared educators, as well as educational tools and methodology, to work with immigrant children. Moreover, an insufficient number of psychologists are available to help children adjust more quickly to the new culture and learning system.

According to interview data, the most successful programme for **children with special educational needs and psychological and behavioural disorders** is ‘**The Incredible Years**’. Funding of EUR 1,150,000 has been allocated to this programme, which was implemented by the Institute of Hygiene between 2016 and 2021. The programme is presented in detail in the chapter ‘Free and effective access to health care’, but is also relevant to ECEC, as part of it is dedicated to pre-school education. In the Pre-school Basic parenting programme, parents learn how to build skills for school readiness, and are encouraged to partner with teachers and day care professionals to promote children’s emotional self-regulation and social skills. According to the interviews, this programme helps to improve communication between child, parents and ECEC educators, and ensures that all of the child’s needs are met and that the child is provided with all necessary help.

All in all, a tendency towards improvement can be seen in the provision of ECEC services in Lithuania. More financing is being directed to an increasing number of ECEC services providers, attention is being paid to the most vulnerable groups of children and their successful inclusion, as well as to improvements in the quality of ECEC overall. Nevertheless, not all groups of children and their families are covered in the goals recently set for the improvement of the accessibility of ECEC, including single-parent families and Roma children.

3.3. Recommendations for improving access to free and quality ECEC services

Both the OECD, and recommendations provided by the EU in the framework of the European Semester, foresee the availability and quality of ECEC services as playing a major role in improving children’s equality, reducing poverty and social exclusion.⁹⁵ High-quality early childhood education and care has been shown to provide a wide range of benefits for individual children – particularly those who are most disadvantaged. These benefits include supporting children’s social and emotional well-being, lowering the risk of school dropout, and even contributing to higher learning and employment

⁹³ PPMI. 2018. Švietimo paslaugų sugrįžusiems asmenims poreikio savivaldybėse tyrimas. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/svietimas/%C5%A0vietimo%20paslaugos%20sugr%C4%AF%C5%BEusiems_galutin%C4%97%20ataskaita_20181120.pdf.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ OECD. 2020. Early Childhood Education: Equity, Quality and Transitions. Report for the G20 Education Working Group. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/early-childhood-education-equity-quality-transitions-G20.pdf>; European Commission. 2019. Council Recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Lithuania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Lithuania. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1560258494533&uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0515/>

outcomes later in life⁹⁶. Children's participation in ECEC also offers greater opportunities for mothers and other caregivers to participate in the workforce, increasing household earnings and breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty.⁹⁷

This section therefore sets out key recommendations relating to ECEC to be considered in the development of the NAP for the implementation of the ECG in Lithuania. These recommendations draw on previously identified gaps in policy and the unmet needs of the most vulnerable children in Lithuania, as well as on the general recommendations provided to Lithuania at European and international levels. It is important to address the barriers that families may encounter when accessing and using ECEC services, such as costs, poverty-related barriers, geographical location, barriers relating to inadequate provisions for children with special needs, cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as a lack of information for parents⁹⁸. The Council Recommendations includes five key competences for a qualitative system. All of these are also addressed in the proposed recommendations for a Lithuanian NAP – access to ECEC; the training and working conditions of staff in ECEC; the defining of appropriate curricula; governance and funding; and monitoring and evaluation systems.⁹⁹

Make ECEC universal for children from 0 years old to the age of primary education, with priority being given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds

For 2021-2030, the Member States have agreed on a new ECEC attendance target of 96 per cent.¹⁰⁰ With pre-primary education having been made compulsory and universal for all children in Lithuania, it is now important to shift the focus towards younger children, with particular attention being paid to disadvantaged children. It is important to improve access to high-quality ECEC systems, in line with the statements set out in the 'Quality framework for early childhood education and care', and the 11th principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which states that ECEC services should be accessible, affordable and inclusive for all from as early an age as possible¹⁰¹. It is foreseen that by 2023, municipalities should provide ECEC to all 4-year-old children whose parents require a place; for all 3-year-olds by 2024; and for all 2-year-olds by 2025.¹⁰² One concept that could help in charting a course towards the achievement of this goal is 'progressive universalism', meaning that the provision of education should be expanded in a way that benefits disadvantaged children at least as much as their

⁹⁶ European Commission. 2018. Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0271>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Council of the European Union. 2019. Council Recommendation on High-Quality Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN.

⁹⁹ European Commission. 2021. Early Childhood Education and Care. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/early-childhood-education-and-care_en#:~:text=Based%20on%20a%20Commission%20proposal%2C%20the%20Council%20adopted,of%20their%20early%20childhood%20education%20and%20care%20systems.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ European Commission. 2021. Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NESET-AR1-2021_report.pdf.

¹⁰² European Commission. 2021. Education and Training Monitor 2021. Lithuania. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0ec94e81-57df-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

better-off peers.¹⁰³ Every family that requires ECEC should be able to gain a place, despite their socio-economic status, type of family, or employment status.¹⁰⁴

Because children from vulnerable backgrounds tend to attend ECEC less often than their peers, priorities regarding enrolment should be set accordingly, with attention being given to children with migrant backgrounds, children with SEN and disabilities, children from low-income families and families at social risk, children from large families, and single-parent families. These children, especially those with SEN and disabilities, should also been given priority in attending an ECEC centre as close as possible to their home. In the current context in Lithuania, priorities regarding ECEC enrolment are set on the basis of unclear reasons (such as priority being given to children whose parents work in ECEC), and favour children who already have better life circumstances (such as the children of diplomats, children from two-parent families). It is important to set these priorities in accordance with children's increased vulnerability and reduced opportunities to access ECEC.

Making ECEC services accessible to all population groups - and ensuring that disadvantaged groups benefit first, not last - requires additional, adapted measures such as more staff, better infrastructure and increased financing. It is expected that by 2025, ECEC in Lithuania could become universal for all - but only EUR 20 million is foreseen for the development of infrastructure. Approaches that support progress towards the universal availability of ECEC recognize that providing additional funds to support access among disadvantaged groups can be an effective strategy to increasing attendance, especially for children from migrant, disadvantaged or low-income families. The European Social Fund+ could be used as an additional source of funding to employ and train more ECEC staff and implement outreach measures. Partnerships with the private sector offer another way to improve both inclusivity and coverage, especially in the case of Lithuania, where there is a strong reliance on the private sector to meet demand. Through the use of the European Social Fund+ and government funds, compensation for the price difference between public and private provision (which is currently compensated at the rate of EUR 100), could rise to 100 per cent for families who cannot gain places for their children in public ECEC centres but cannot afford private ECEC services.

Pay greater attention to informing parents and to their needs

In 2012, the EU commissioned a review of the literature on child poverty and disadvantage. This review identified that a low level of parental education and a lack of information about the benefits of ECEC influences children's attendance rates in ECEC.¹⁰⁵ This research also revealed that parents tend to enrol

¹⁰³ The Education Commission. 2017. Ensuring quality education for all: progressive universalism. Available at: <https://educationcommission.org/updates/ensuring-quality-education-progressive-universalism/>.

¹⁰⁴ European Commission. 2021. Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training System in Europe 2021. Overview of major reforms since 2015. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/sites/default/files/structural_indicators_2021.pdf; European Commission. 2018. Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0271>.

¹⁰⁵ Council of the European Union. 2019. Council Recommendation on High-Quality Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN.

their children more frequently after consulting with social workers. It is thus important to inform parents about the benefits of ECEC services to their children.¹⁰⁶

Difficult bureaucratic processes can also affect a parent's interest in enrolling their children into ECEC. It is therefore important to simplify such processes and provide parents with support when going through them. In addition, the rate of enrolment in ECEC is affected by a lack of response from ECEC services to the needs of individual parents and children. It is therefore important to ensure that all such needs are met by ECEC providers. In particular, it is especially important to ensure close contact is maintained with parents during crises such as the pandemic.¹⁰⁷ To increase demand, parents and caregivers need to understand the advantages of children participating in ECEC, and to see that their children are included and belong. For the most marginalized families – those living in poverty, with a migrant and/or second-language background, or parents and caregivers with very low levels of education themselves – outreach can be more effective and beneficial when linked with other services. For example:

- It could be beneficial to work with hospitals to educate new parents about the benefits of ECEC, and to enlist advocates among paediatricians and other health professionals who provide ongoing care to small children¹⁰⁸;
- Lithuania should also consider significantly expanding home visits, ensuring regular visits to rural families to discuss topics relating to child health and development. These outreach visits could be funded from the European Social Fund+.

Inclusion of children with SEN

In the Inclusive Early Childhood Education Literature Review, comment is made on the critical need to support ECEC for children with special educational needs.¹⁰⁹ Early childhood services are particularly important, as these can contribute to children's health as well as their social and cognitive development. Currently, only around 20 per cent of children with SEN attend mainstream ECEC in Lithuania, with the main barriers to access including a lack of professionals and methodology to provide children with the necessary early childhood education and care.

The OECD states that it is crucial to strengthen the SEN curriculum in pre-service training programmes to improve the capacity of the teaching workforce to support students with SEN.¹¹⁰ In-service training is also required. Engaging the Ministry of Health in the creation of a quality monitoring system could help, by integrating health and ECEC. Paediatricians and other health care professionals should be trained on the basic elements of ECEC, including the identification of children with special needs and the overall importance of ECEC. Several studies in Lithuania show that opportunities for training in SEN are very limited for ECEC teachers. In certain parts of the country there is a lack of specialized

¹⁰⁶ European Commission. 2018. Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

¹⁰⁷ European Commission. 2021. Governing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care in global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f85b5bc8-e516-11eb-a1a5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>; European Commission. 2021. Early childhood education and care and the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding and managing the impact of the crisis on the sector.

¹⁰⁸ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania Highlights. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/Education-in-Lithuania-2017-highlights.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ OECD. 2017. Raising Performance in Lithuanian Education: An International Perspective. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Kalbos-pranesimai/Andreas_Schleicher_1.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Education in Lithuania Highlights.

workshops and training, and 45 per cent of ECEC teachers lack methodological guidance and support measures. One of the main determinants of insufficient training is a lack of financing. To improve the situation with regard to funding, use could be made of ESF+ funds, which seek to invest in people and human capital.

In addition, it is important to reduce children's group sizes – a factor that has a significant influence on the quality of services, and which provides educators with the opportunity to pay more individual attention to each child, especially those children with SEN. Certain municipalities lack places in kindergartens and nurseries, which sometimes leads to inadequate solutions such as increasing the numbers of children in classrooms.¹¹¹ Current regulations in Lithuania prescribe how many children may be included in a single group, but even where two pre-school teachers are employed to work with an enlarged group, they fail to address the special needs of children with disabilities, ethnic minorities or refugees who do not possess sufficient skills in the national language. Instead, it would be beneficial to regulate the number of children with and without SEN, per educator. In this way, equality could be achieved between ECEC providers and group sizes could be reduced, as ECEC providers could no longer rely solely on the maximum number of children in the group, but would have to arrange the sizes of groups according to the number of educators and learning support specialists. One important structural factor that the government could regulate is the staff-child ratio. A smaller number of children per staff member facilitates positive staff-child relationships.

Address issues of gender inequality and reconciliation of work and family life

Gender equality is another important aspect in relation to ECEC. The majority of single parents in Lithuania are single mothers, whose participation in the labour market is reduced due to a lack of access to free ECEC services. Countries are increasingly focusing on early years policies – not only to raise outcomes for individual children, but also to support families in overcoming intergenerational poverty, for example by facilitating female participation in the labour market and promoting social and economic development more broadly.¹¹² Such policies are important in removing obstacles to employment, especially for women, and are especially beneficial in improving the labour market opportunities of single parents and women from low-income households.

In response to the employment challenges faced by parents, it is also important to provide flexible ECEC services. There is a lack of services that are available in the evening or at weekends, which can prove problematic for parents who have rotating work schedules. It would therefore be beneficial for dedicated ECEC centres –or any ECEC centre, upon parents' request – to provide services at weekends, overnight, or to work longer hours on a daily basis. This could be achieved by embracing the financing provided by the European Social Fund+. In addition, it is crucial to ensure access to ECEC for the youngest children, with priority being given to the children of single parents, usually single mothers.

¹¹¹ European Commission. 2019. Feasibility Study on Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania.

¹¹² European Commission. 2018. Commission Staff Working Document. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0173&from=EN>.

Address geographical disparities

Lithuania cannot currently ensure equal enrolment in ECEC across Lithuania, and demand exceeds supply.¹¹³ Increasing the enrolment of vulnerable children will first and foremost mean improving infrastructure and increasing the number of qualified staff, as well as the number of available places for all children, especially for the youngest children. Rural areas have less provision than urban areas, and in urban areas a lack of resources often means that poorer neighbourhoods have fewer high-quality childcare places available.

It is important that clear guidelines are set at national level in relation to structural quality and financing. This will help to avoid inequalities in conditions for children, depending on where they are born. Funding on a larger scale also ensures consistency between richer and poorer regions, avoiding a situation in which municipalities with a higher prevalence of low-income families lack the means to serve the needs of those families and to provide the necessary childcare places. It is also necessary to ensure equality in the quality of services delivered by ECEC providers for children with SEN and disabilities, to ensure that these children receive high-quality services close to their homes.¹¹⁴ ERDF and ESF+ funding could be used to develop and equip ECEC centres and improve ECEC services for children with SEN in rural areas. It is also important to ensure that ECEC centres engage in networking between themselves and other institutions that could benefit vulnerable children.

Support ECEC workforce

Successful integration of the most vulnerable children, such as refugee and Roma children, children with SEN and disabilities, requires higher-level competences on the part of ECEC staff.¹¹⁵ These include intercultural competences and knowledge of specific communities, knowledge regarding child development and the effects of various disabilities, as well as ways to approach and work with such children. As research has shown, professional development of the workforce in Lithuania is not yet sufficient.

More time and money need to be invested in the continuous professional development of working teachers. Teachers should receive training in classroom settings as part of their initial teacher training, with an emphasis on training teachers to interact with young children and use the available curricula and methodological guidelines.¹¹⁶ Strong connections with institutions providing teacher training for ECEC could be further expanded to include on-site training or mentoring for teachers, through observations and feedback on teacher-child interactions and classroom practices. Students studying ECEC pedagogy should spend more time on site observing children, teachers, various critical situation as well as communicating with children and getting involved and taking part in the organization of classroom activities.

Professional development should be embedded into the process of quality monitoring, creating a system that focuses on measuring quality, reflecting on the results, and supporting teachers to make

¹¹³ OECD. 2017. Raising Performance in Lithuanian Education. An International Perspective. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Kalbos-pranesimai/Andreas_Schleicher_1.pdf.

¹¹⁴ European Commission. 2018. Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

¹¹⁵ European Commission. 2021. Early Childhood Education and Care.

¹¹⁶ Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

improvements on the basis of this monitoring. If quality monitoring is integrated into professional development, investments in monitoring will be more likely to lead to changes in quality in classrooms.

Overall, it is important to ensure that:

- Every teacher is provided with continuing professional development (CPD). CPD consists of in-service training, and includes both subject-based and pedagogical training. CPD should be considered one of a teacher's professional duties;
- Every teacher should have attended courses in special education and psychology, and is able to provide individualized learning programmes for children with SEN. This knowledge should be periodically updated via CPD, and teachers should have opportunities for consultations about individual children's situations and needs;
- Every teacher should have attended IT courses and possess decent IT skills, so that they can use various technologies and computer programs during their work;
- Teachers should have more opportunities to attend various courses and internships abroad;
- Video feedback should be provided to teachers who have attended courses shorter than six months;¹¹⁷
- More, longer training interventions should be integrated into daily practice, helping to improve interactions between teachers and children;
- Further successful efforts could include raising the status of the ECEC profession by creating high professional standards, offering attractive professional status and career prospects, providing time for staff for the purpose of professional activities such as engaging with parents and collaborating with other professionals and colleagues.¹¹⁸

The quality of jobs in the ECEC sector could also be improved by reducing child-staff ratios and group sizes; providing competitive salaries and other benefits; setting reasonable schedules/professional workloads; providing relevant learning support and material for staff to use with children; and employing competent and supportive centre managers.¹¹⁹ Moreover, interview data shows that in relation to children with migrant backgrounds, it is of great benefit to have staff who can represent the diversities of the target communities. This could help to better integrate children and reduce resistance by parents by building mutual trust. To address parental resistance, it is also important that ECEC staff possess relevant knowledge and sensitivity towards parents experiencing poverty or/and social risk.

As mentioned previously, it is also important to ensure that a sufficient number of staff are employed in ECEC centres. Lower numbers of children per adult are associated with children being able to spend more time with adults, resulting in more feedback for the children as well as less stress for teachers. Structural measures that address shortages in the ECEC workforce should be considered in order to avoid overworking existing staff, which would negatively affect the quality of education and care practices.¹²⁰ Due to a shortage of ECEC teachers, consideration should also be given to the recruitment

¹¹⁷ Eurofound. 2015. Early childhood care: Getting it right from the start. Available at:

<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/news/news-articles/early-childhood-care-getting-it-right-from-the-start>.

¹¹⁸ Council of the European Union. 2019. Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN; European Commission. 2021. Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NESET-AR1-2021_report.pdf.

¹¹⁹ European Commission. 2019. Feasibility Study on Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania.

¹²⁰ European Commission. 2021. Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NESET-AR1-2021_report.pdf.

of assistants to work with teachers, and to increasing teachers' salaries. Although teacher salaries have already been increased, given the importance of maintaining contact with children's parents especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, a further increase in salary should be considered.¹²¹

Set clear requirements for ECEC curriculum

Curriculum guidelines or frameworks are a powerful tool to improve the pedagogical quality of services in which young children participate. The curriculum should set common goals, values and approaches that reflect society's expectations with regard to the role settings play in meeting children's needs and encouraging their development towards their full potential.¹²² A curriculum needs to be planned within an open framework that acknowledges and addresses the diverse interests and needs of children in a holistic manner, including addressing differences between boys and girls, children with SEN, children from ethnic minorities, and children from families at social risk.

It is currently recognized that **the curricula of ECEC centres in Lithuania better meet the needs of girls than boys**.¹²³ More space should be provided for boys to play active games, as well as more toys that meet their needs (such as robots). Teachers should also evaluate their behaviour differently (e.g. boys tend to concentrate on one thing at a time and tend to demonstrate power during group activities, while girls mature earlier, and are naturally more social and empathic, etc.). In addition, children born since the advent of the internet are less interested in the same kinds of toys as previous generations; consequently, toys should be more technology-based, reflecting contemporary life (e.g. recycling games; books including sound stimulation, etc.) It is also important to take into account the challenges of globalization when creating curricula, and to ensure that a national identity is formed by making the content relatable (e.g. concentrating more on class trips and providing children with national practices that are close to their everyday life and which stimulate creativity, such as pottery or singing).

Moreover, it is important to ensure that **ethnic identities of Lithuania's national minorities** are tackled as well as global topics. Teachers could organize events with minority families, enabling them to present their culture to the other children. It is important that minority children maintain their culture but learn about Lithuanian culture as well, particularly with regard to language. These children should be supported through additional Lithuanian language lessons; teachers should speak to them in Lithuanian as often as possible, using repetitive vocabulary. In cases where children have no knowledge of the Lithuanian language, opportunities should be offered for parents to spend time during classes to ensure that their children feel safe and understood. In the case of especially talented children, it is important to ensure that they feel recognised and encouraged, that they receive more stimulating tasks, are provided with opportunities to demonstrate leadership, and are not simply left alone due to the fact that they can complete tasks on their own. Moreover, it is beneficial to invite various interesting people to share their stories with children, such as artists, scientists and others.

¹²¹ European Commission. 2021. Governing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care in global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic; European Commission. 2021. Early childhood education and care and the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding and managing the impact of the crisis on the sector. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c14645b2-24f8-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-233017740>.

¹²² European Commission. 2021. Early Childhood Education and Care; European Commission. 2021. Education and training monitor 2021. Lithuania.

¹²³ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija. 2015. Ikimokyklinio ugdymo metodinės rekomendacijos. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/tevams_ugdymo_planai/knyga%20-%20rekomendacijos.pdf.

Children from families at social risk should also receive extra attention. ECEC centres should take into account that these children may be hungry or do not have facilities at home to ensure their hygiene needs are met; therefore, the provision of food and hygiene facilities at ECEC centres is extremely beneficial. Extra attention should also be paid to the health of these children, as well as their need for encouragement and the boosting of self-esteem. Teachers should be aware that the parents of these children may also be depressed and should approach them with empathy, and if such possibilities exist, organize self-help groups within ECEC facilities.

In relation to **children with SEN**, it is important to follow the recommendations provided by Pedagogical Psychological Service and doctors, and to ensure that teachers approach child in a manner that is acceptable to the child. In addition, teacher's expectations of the child should be adequate, and they should provide children with adequate tasks, and should not treat these children as any less important or capable than the rest of the group. In cases where a child's special needs have not yet been recognized, it is important that teachers pay attention to signs that could mean that child has special needs, and should consult with specialists.

Curriculums should be based on collaboration between the staff, children and parents. An essential factor in developing a collaborative approach to the curriculum is the ability of individual staff to analyse their own practice, identify what has been effective and, in partnership with their colleagues, develop new approaches based on evidence. The curriculum framework should help ECEC staff to engage with parents to foster children's development – for example, by raising parents' awareness about the role and importance of activities in the ECEC centre. The curriculum and guidelines can encourage positive staff-parent interactions by recognising the role of parents in their children's development. They should also provide guidance for ECEC staff to successfully engage parents in the centre's activities. ECEC programmes should be responsive to individual needs and respectful of diversity benefit all children and contribute to building the foundations of an inclusive society. At a national or systemic level, a curriculum can guide the work of all ECEC settings and contexts – and at a local level or that of an individual setting, it can describe the day-to-day activities of the centre and therefore reduce inequalities between centres. Research shows that many differences currently exist between ECEC centres in Lithuania, and not all parents have access to the centres they would prefer. It would be beneficial to find out why parents prefer certain ECEC centres, and what needs such centres meet in comparison to other ECEC providers. Such centres could then be used as an example to improve other ECEC centres and harmonize curricula between them.

Approaches that support holistic learning and children's development could include ensuring a balance in the provision of social-emotional and cognitive development; acknowledging the importance of play; contact with nature; the role of music; arts and physical activity; promoting participation, initiative, autonomy, problem-solving and creativity. They can also encourage a learning disposition to reason, investigate and collaborate; foster empathy, compassion, mutual respect and awareness in relation to equality and diversity; offer opportunities for early language exposure and learning through playful activities; and consider, where possible, tailored multilingual early childhood programmes that take into account the specific needs of bi/multilingual children. In addition, they can offer guidance to providers regarding the age-appropriate use of digital tools and emerging technologies; promote the further integration of ECEC into the education continuum; and support collaboration between ECEC and primary school staff, parents and counselling services for a smooth transition for children to

primary school; as well as fostering an educational environment that is inclusive, democratic and participatory, embracing and integrating the voices of all children.¹²⁴

Ensure policy goals oriented towards improving access to and the quality of ECEC

When improving access and the quality of ECEC services, it is important to make a strong public policy commitment to ECEC – backed by a bold vision, strong plans and adequate funds – to guarantee access on an equal basis.¹²⁵ Clear, unambiguous legislation regarding the right to free or publicly subsidized early childhood education is one way to encourage equitable access. Including ECEC as a central priority in national education strategies and plans – with clear targets, indicators and ministerial leadership – can make a significant difference in terms of the political and financial importance given to the sector. When everyone is given a strong start, this helps to reduce the costs involved in addressing poor results later on and sets children on a trajectory to stay in school and fulfil their learning potential.

Mechanisms to ensure adequate and equitable funding are required in the Lithuanian context, because local governments are responsible for ECEC services. In such contexts, robust governance and accountability mechanisms across decentralized levels are important to ensure the efficient allocation and use of ECEC resources at all levels of government.

Develop comprehensive quality monitoring

A monitoring system is one of the main issues raised at policy level with regard to the quality of ECEC services. Currently, three visits abroad (to Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands) are foreseen to observe monitoring systems in these countries and apply the best, most relevant practices in Lithuania.¹²⁶ After these visits, a methodology for external evaluation will be prepared. To ensure the quality of monitoring, it must be comprehensive and cover the quality of structure, processes and staff, as well as child development, learning and well-being. The monitoring and assessment framework needs to cover structural features of quality (child-staff ratio, qualification levels of staff), process quality (e.g. interactions with children, the content of activities) and outcome quality (looking at the benefits for children, families, communities and society).¹²⁷ In addition, monitoring should extend from national level down to level of individual settings and should be complemented by various data that could help in providing targeted support for the most vulnerable children.¹²⁸ Monitoring should include assessments of the accessibility of ECEC for children living in rural areas, children from low-income

¹²⁴ Council of the European Union. 2018. Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN; Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija. 2015. Ikimokyklinio ugdymo metodinės rekomendacijos. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/tevams_ugdymo_planai/knyga%20-%20rekomendacijos.pdf.

¹²⁵ OECD. 2020. Early Childhood Education: Equity, Quality and Transitions. Report for the G20 Education Working Group. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/early-childhood-education-equity-quality-transitions-G20.pdf>; European Commission. 2021. Early Childhood Education and Care.

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¹²⁷ European Commission. 2018. Commission staff working document Accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0173&from=EN>; European Commission. 2021. Early Childhood Education and Care.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

and single-parent families, families at social risk, and children from ethnically non-Lithuanian families. The quality of staff, price of services, curricula, and governing and funding should also be monitored.¹²⁹

General quality criteria need to be set at the highest possible levels, but should also include regional and local levels, and should ideally be aligned with the EU's ECEC Quality Framework.¹³⁰ It is important to promote the transparent and coherent monitoring and evaluation of ECEC services at the appropriate levels, with a view to policy development and implementation.¹³¹ There is a need for age-appropriate monitoring methods and self-evaluation tools, including questionnaires and observation guidelines as part of quality management at both system and service level. It is important to foster children's participation, to identify their concerns and ideas and take into account the perspectives of children as well as their parents as part of the assessment process.¹³² All stakeholders, including ECEC staff, should be engaged and empowered during the implementation of any monitoring and evaluation process. Information from both self-assessment and external evaluations of the quality of ECEC system should be used as the basis for improvement.¹³³ Such an indicator evaluates the quality assurance system rather than the quality of provision and should take into consideration such questions as the extent to which data is based on self-evaluation, how difficult it is to collect the data, how quickly the data is used to strengthen ECEC provision, and other issues. Another important indicator is the public availability of information regarding the quality of the ECEC system. Transparency and publicity are motivators towards better quality; thus, it is important to ensure that information is available at system level about the quality of ECEC provision (it is not necessary to provide information about individual ECEC providers and other stakeholders), the outcomes achieved by the ECEC system, to monitor the complexity of an online system, and more.¹³⁴

External evaluation is also crucial.¹³⁵ The regular external monitoring of ECEC institutions would help to identify quality-related problems within the sector and provide guidelines for the on-going improvement of the services.¹³⁶ Municipal education officials could be tasked with monitoring the quality of care through the implementation of a quality monitoring template developed through consultation among Ministry staff, municipal education officials, providers and researchers.¹³⁷ This template would lay out what activities are developmentally appropriate, suitable learning

¹²⁹ European Commission. 2018. Monitoring the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care – Complementing the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework proposal with indicators. Recommendations from ECEC experts. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/825252b4-3ec6-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-69837044>; European Commission. 2014. Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf.

¹³⁰ European Commission. 2014. Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

¹³¹ Council of the European Union. 2018. Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN

¹³² European Commission. 2014. Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

¹³³ European Commission. 2018. Monitoring the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care – Complementing the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework proposal with indicators. Recommendations from ECEC experts.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Eurydice. 2019. Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe-%E2%80%93-2019-edition_en.

¹³⁶ European Commission. 2019. Feasibility Study on Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania.

¹³⁷ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania. Highlights. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/Education-in-Lithuania-2017-highlights.pdf>.

materials/resources at these stages, effective learning practices, and acceptable ways of assessing early learners. The Ministry of Education and Science should provide municipal officials with guidance – or requirements – concerning the frequency of monitoring. In addition, the Ministry should take steps to ensure that municipalities across the country have access to staff who are experts in ECEC, to assist them in meeting their responsibilities.

TABLE 6. CRITERIA AND INDICATORS FOR THE MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF ECEC SERVICES

Nº	GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	SOURCE	PERIODICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET
1	By 2030, to have no gap in ECEC attendance for children in 1st and 5th income quartile.	Gap in ECEC attendance for children in 1st and 5th income quartile.	Proportion of households with below 60% or median equivalized income with children attending ECEC.	EU-SILC (2016)	Ad-hoc module – Irregular	Primary	Evaluation	Structural	5% of children between the ages of 0 and 3 from low-income ¹³⁸ families attending ECEC 35% children between ages of 0 and 3 from high-income families attend ECEC.	50% of children attending ECEC in all income quartiles.
2	By 2030, have at least 50% of children enrolled in the first cycle (96% in the second cycle).	% of children (0-6 years) enrolled in ECEC (first and second cycle).	Percentage of children enrolled in the first cycle (ages 0-3 years) and second cycle (ages 3-6 years).	EU-SILC (2016)	Annually	Primary	Monitoring	Result	44.2% in the first cycle and 90.3% in the second cycle.	At least 50% in the first cycle and 96% in the second cycle.
3	By 2030, universalize	Children with special needs	Percentage of children with	ŠVIS	Annually	Secondary	Monitoring and evaluation	Structural	23,123 of children	100% receiving

¹³⁸ Below 60% or median equivalized income.

	the coverage of children with special needs.		SEN attending general public ECEC.						with SEN. 19.9% (2018) are in general public ECEC.	attention within 6 months.
4	By 2030, provision of ECEC will be universal and free of charge.	Cost of early childhood education (0-3 years).	Monthly direct and indirect costs (including food, clothing, transportation and educational materials) to be borne by parents or caregivers of children aged 0-3 years.		Irregular	Primary	Monitoring	Structural	Price of ECEC for children between ages of 0 and 3 can vary between EUR 200 and EUR 600, depending on its location (as most services are only available in private settings).	Zero costs (free)
5	By 2030, ensure that a gap of attendance to ECEC between urban and rural areas is lowered.	% of children attending ECEC in urban and rural areas.	% of children between of ages of 0 and 5 attending ECEC in urban areas and the % of children between ages of 0 and 5 attending ECEC in rural areas.	ŠVIS	Annually	Primary	Monitoring	Result	74.1% of children between ages of 0 and 5 attended ECEC in urban areas and 32.8% of children between ages of 0 and 5 attended ECEC in rural areas	At least 96% of children between ages of 0 and 5 attend ECEC in both urban and rural areas.



Source: compiled by PPMI.

4. Free and effective access to quality education

4.1. Facts and trends in access to quality education

- Schooling in Lithuania, which should be free and accessible to all and promote equity and social cohesion, instead reproduces the country's inequalities via 'hidden' costs and a lack of inclusion for children with special educational needs and other vulnerable children. As a result, the most vulnerable children are more likely than other children to experience educational underachievement.
- The challenges include socio-economic school segregation, educational inequalities between schools, insufficient numbers of learning support specialists, transport, laboratories, IT infrastructure, insufficiently qualified teachers and difficulties experienced when working with children with special educational needs or those with migrant backgrounds, as well as insufficiently well adapted school facilities.
- The effective implementation of the ECG in this area will depend on harmonizing the quality of education across the country; reducing the educational segregation of the most vulnerable children; improving teachers' qualifications; and effective collaboration across all administrations with responsibility for education.

This chapter begins by exploring the main challenges for vulnerable groups in Lithuania in terms of access to, and quality of, general education. These include obstacles experienced by children with disabilities and special educational needs, children with a migrant background and children living in rural areas, with regard to access to formal and non-formal education. Later, we explore the quality of services and the reasons for a lack of quality.

Children in need

One of the most vulnerable groups with regard to free and effective access to quality education is **children with special educational needs**. In 2018, across Lithuania, 98.57 per cent of children were enrolled in mainstream education classes.¹³⁹ This number is above the European average (97.83 per cent), but the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education notes that having high levels of children with SEN enrolled in mainstream classes does not mean that a sufficient quality of education is ensured. There is also a lack of quality support and individual attention given to children with special learning needs. Although all children in Lithuania should be included in mainstream schools, in 2019

¹³⁹ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. 2018. EASIE Dataset Cross-Country Report. Available at: <https://www.european-agency.org/data/cross-country-reports>.

there were still 44 special education schools open, with a total of 3,800 pupils.¹⁴⁰ In 2018, 9 per cent of mainstream schools had no learning support specialists, 53 per cent of schools did not have psychologists, and 28 per cent of schools had no special needs educators or speech therapists. Children with special educational needs also have less access to non-formal education. In 2019, only 30 per cent of children with special educational needs attended non-formal education, as few of the available options for non-formal educational activities are applicable to children with special educational needs and disabilities. Meanwhile, children with disabilities still face many problems relating to physical access in general education schools.

Another vulnerable group whose educational needs are unmet is **children in low-income families**. The average annual cost of school supplies per child amounts to between EUR 240 and EUR 280, towards which low-income families receive EUR 80 in benefits. In 2016, 29 per cent of households in Lithuania found it very difficult or moderately difficult to cover the costs of formal education.¹⁴¹ Among low-income families, this figure was 42 per cent, rising to 61 per cent among single-parent households. Inequalities between households reproduce inequalities of opportunity among children and their academic achievements. A lack of financial resources and a paucity of role models can undermine the aspirations of disadvantaged students, with negative consequences on the effort they invest at school.¹⁴² Children from low-income families attain lower academic achievements compared with their peers. Lithuanian PISA tests from 2018 reveal that 15-year-old children from disadvantaged backgrounds performed less well at school compared with their better-off peers.¹⁴³ Children from low-income families also tend to drop out of school 1.7 times more often than their peers. These children are also twice as likely to continue their studies at a vocational school, and are less likely to pursue a university degree.¹⁴⁴

Data show that **children with a migrant and other ethnic background** also are at a great disadvantage. Children with other ethnic identities face challenges in combining family and school life, having to choose between schooling in their native language and Lithuanian schools. In 2020-2021, there were 90 migrant children studying in Lithuanian schools in the Lithuanian language rather than in their mother tongue.¹⁴⁵ During the academic year 2020-2021, there were 31,502 children studying in minority schools (Russian, Polish and others), and in 2021, 1,710 foreign children began attending schools in Lithuania.¹⁴⁶ The data show that for the minority children who study in non-Lithuanian language schools in Lithuania, there are not enough books available in their native languages (Russian, Polish, Belarusian). Those books that are available are out of date, while exercise books are much more expensive compared with similar learning materials in Lithuanian. Moreover, there is a lack of laboratories in non-Lithuanian schools, particularly in rural areas. Meanwhile, migrant children and returnee children who face language barriers are not provided with adequate language courses, especially in relation to distance

¹⁴⁰ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. 2021-2030 m. švietimo plėtros programa. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/protolai/%C5%A0PP%20projektas%20\(2020-08-17\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Administracine%20informacija/planavimo%20dokumentai/pletros%20programos/protolai/%C5%A0PP%20projektas%20(2020-08-17).pdf).

¹⁴¹ European Commission. 2020. Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee.

¹⁴² PISA 2015 Results.

¹⁴³ OECD. 2015. PISA 2015 Results. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264273856en.pdf?expires=1626261132&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=7756E3998D4D502249058B6F53B8BD19>.

¹⁴⁴ MOSTA. 2018. Lietuvos mokslo, studijų ir inovacijų būklės apžvalga. Available at: <https://strata.gov.lt/images/tyrimai/bukle-2018-web.pdf>.

¹⁴⁵ Specialiųjų ugdymosi poreikių turintys mokiniai bendrojo ugdymo mokyklų bendrosiose klasėse.

¹⁴⁶ Lietuvos tautinių mažumų švietimo būklės analizė.

learning.¹⁴⁷ There is also a lack of psychological support for migrant or returnee children, and insufficient preparation for teachers working with children with migrant backgrounds.¹⁴⁸ Schools that do not have relevant experience and tools for working with children with a migrant backgrounds may also hesitate to enrol such children, who therefore experience discrimination. With regard to migrant children, the most complicated situation arises in relation to the children of illegal migrants. Children who do not have a sufficient level of Lithuanian language to study in mainstream education attend equalization groups. In these groups, children learn the Lithuanian language as well as other major subjects such as maths, English and science. Children can study in these groups for up to two years. Nevertheless, teachers are insufficiently prepared for working with migrant children. In 2020, only 34.7 per cent of teachers reported feeling sufficiently able to work with migrant children.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, teachers do not have the necessary teaching materials, and there is a lack of learning support specialists.

One of the most marginalized groups in Lithuania consists of **Roma children**. These children suffer from language and other cultural barriers, as well as extreme deprivation and discrimination. They tend to drop out of school at a very young age, and only a small share of Roma children graduate from secondary or even primary school. In 2015, only 27 per cent of Roma children completed primary education and only 2 per cent attained a secondary education.¹⁵⁰ Eight per cent of Roma children are illiterate. Data from the stakeholder consultations and interviews show that the main reason for the reduced attendance of Roma children in schools is cultural attitudes, as education is not seen as one of the main values in Roma culture. In addition, children experience stigmatization and discrimination in schools, they are slower than their peers due to language barriers and a lack of experience regarding certain school subjects. Roma children do not usually attend ECEC facilities and do not study the basics with their parents as non-Roma Lithuanian children usually do, and therefore have lower levels of school achievement and less motivation to learn.

Children living in rural areas also experience greater challenges in access to education, particularly with regard to accessing school-based after-school activities, as no transport is available. Overall, children in rural areas receive a lower quality of education, due to a shortage of teachers and other learning support specialists, joint classes, a lack of choice in (and fewer opportunities to attend) after-school activities, a lack of laboratories and a lack of use of technology.¹⁵¹

The use of technology during classes at public schools across Lithuania is not well developed. In 2017, city schools in Lithuania possessed an average of 5.3 projectors per 100 children and 2.5 interactive boards per 100 children.¹⁵² In rural areas, there were only 1.9 interactive boards per 100 children, but a higher number of projectors compared with schools in cities, at 7.5 per 100 children. Moreover, compared with the European average, Lithuania has a significantly lower percentage of digitally equipped and connected secondary schools.¹⁵³ According to the consultation with stakeholders and interview data, a lack of education in IT was a significant barrier during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many

¹⁴⁷ Švietimo paslaugų sugrįžusiems asmenims poreikio savivaldybėse tyrimas.

¹⁴⁸ 2021-2030 m. švietimos plėtros programos pagrindimas.

¹⁴⁹ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2020. Migrantų integravimas bendrojo ugdymo mokyklose. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/tyrimai_ir_analizes/2020/S%C5%A0PA%20Migrant%C5%B3%20integravimas%20bendrojo%20ugdymo%20mokyklose%202020%20Nr%207%20lapkritis%202020-11-30.pdf.

¹⁵⁰ Romų platforma. 2021. Švietimas. Available at: <http://www.romuplatforma.lt/svietimas/>.

¹⁵¹ 2021-2030 m. švietimo plėtros programos pagrindimas.

¹⁵² Lietuvos tautinių mažumų švietimo būklės analizė.

¹⁵³ European Commission. 2019. 2nd Survey of Schools: ICT in Education.

children – especially those living in lower-SES families – did not know how to properly use computers during home schooling and could not receive support from their parents, who were also IT illiterate.

4.2. Policies and programmes to promote free and effective access to quality education for children in need

In this subsection, we review the main recent policy measures implemented in Lithuania to improve access to and the promotion of equality in the quality of general education. We analyse the measures and financing that is directed towards eliminating barriers to access, including transport, access to non-formal education activities, school hours, lack of learning support specialists and more.

School education in Lithuania is divided into three parts – primary education (grades 1 to 4); principal education (grades 5 to 10); and secondary education (grades 11 to 12). Children can attend public schools, which are run by municipalities or by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, or private schools run by private service providers. Admission to general education programmes is granted the school head and the admissions commission.¹⁵⁴ Children are admitted to schools in accordance with the Description of the Procedure for Consecutive Learning according to General Education Programmes approved by the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania. Priority is given to children who live in the area assigned to a particular school. The remaining places may be filled by other children regardless their living location, with priority going to children with special educational needs, children whose brothers and sisters are already learning at the school, and those children who live closest to the school.

For secondary education, children can choose to attend any school, but the priority is given to children who have already completed primary education at the same school and children who live closest to the school. According to the interview data, such rules discriminate against children who live in poorer parts of cities or in small towns, as there may be big differences in quality between schools, with the best schools usually being inaccessible to children from poorer backgrounds. Children who attend lower-quality primary and principal schools have a lower chances of enrolling in the best secondary schools. More specialized schools and private schools select their students according to their motivation and previous grades, and some schools also have entry exams. Moreover, interview data shows that many schools are reluctant to enrol children with special educational needs and children with migrant backgrounds.

Strategic goals and targets to be achieved

Lithuania's expenditure on education almost reaches the EU average – in 2019, public expenditure on education amounted to 4.6 per cent of GDP, while the European average was 4.7 per cent.¹⁵⁵ As a percentage of total public expenditure, spending on education in Lithuania is above the EU average at 13.3 per cent, compared with an EU average in 2019 of 10 per cent). Moreover, the share of 'other

¹⁵⁴ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2020. Įsakymas dėl priėmimo į valstybinę ir savivaldybės bendrojo ugdymo mokyklą, profesinio mokymo įstaigą bendrųjų kriterijų sąrašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.16E25DC8B244/BWdmUJkqnG>.

¹⁵⁵ Eurostat. 2019. General Government expenditure by function. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TEPSR_SP110/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=a7d7f833-0a40-484d-b65c-1f99fd1ebd7.

expenditure’, which includes items such as school transport and meals, was the highest in the EU (26.2 per cent vs. 12.2 per cent across the EU). However, it is important to ensure that funds are allocated more effectively than is currently the case. At present, there is a lack of autonomy for school leaders in allocating financial resources, as well as a requirement to spend “not less than the previous year”, resulting in a lack of motivation to save money and distribute finances effectively.

One of the main documents that aims to reduce inequalities and improve the distribution of finances in education in Lithuania is the **Educational Development Programme for 2021-2030**. This document has already been mentioned as the main strategic document in the section on ECEC, as the Programme covers all levels of education in Lithuania. The main issues and solutions identified in this programme in relation to general education are as follows:

1. Inequality in PISA results among children, particularly when comparing children learning in cities with those in rural areas. The main problems identified include insufficient monitoring of pupils’ achievements, insufficient up-to-date learning materials, a lack of individual approach, and a lack of correspondence between learning programmes and the needs of economic markets.
2. There is an insufficient number of students with special educational needs attending general schools. The participation of children with special education needs in education is expected to rise to 97 per cent by 2030, compared with 57.6 per cent in 2019-2020. The main areas identified as problematic were lack of competences among teachers, a lack of learning support specialists, and a lack of support for children and their parents.
3. Unequal access to education among children with disabilities and children from low-income families. The participation of children with disabilities in general schools is expected to increase to 75 per cent by 2030, compared to 48.6 per cent in 2019. The main areas identified as problematic include a lack of accessibility in schools for children with disabilities, and a lack of opportunities for children from low-income families to enrol in higher education institutions.
4. Insufficient access to non-formal education. It is foreseen that 75 per cent of all children and 50 per cent of children with special educational needs will attend non-formal education by the year 2030, compared with 60.3 per cent of all children and 30 per cent of children with special educational needs in the year 2018. The main issues identified are insufficient supply compared with demand (including a lack of transportation and financial support for various non-formal educational activities, a lack of activities for children of certain ages and interests), as well as a lack of non-formal education options for children with special educational needs.
5. Migrant and returnee children experience difficulty in integrating into the Lithuanian education system. The main issues identified include insufficient preparation of children before arriving to Lithuania, and insufficient help being provided in schools.
6. The unattractiveness of the teaching profession in Lithuania. The main issues identified are low salaries, lack of career opportunities and unattractive working conditions. It is expected that the number of teachers working in schools after graduation will increase (65 per cent by the year 2030, compared with 42 per cent in 2019), as will the proportion of teachers with Master’s degrees (40 per cent by 2030, compared with 15.8 per cent in 2019).

To address these issues, additional financing has been allocated (see Table 7).

TABLE 7. FINANCIAL PROJECTIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2021-2030

GOAL	FINANCIAL SUPPORT (EUR, millions)	SOURCES OF FUNDING		
		EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND	EUROPEAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUND	DNA*
To improve the quality of education and reduce disparities in academic achievements	240	70	40	59
To improve access and inclusion in education	190	69	51	5
To improve integration of migrant and returnee children	50	-	-	-
To improve the attractiveness of teacher's profession and to improve teachers' qualifications	70	-	10	8

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Educational Development Programme 2021-2030.

* DNA fund is no longer applicable. Investment planned in DNA plan were partially reflected in the national RRF (Recovery and Resilience Facility) plan for Lithuania.¹⁵⁶

Another important document in this policy area is the Strategic Action Plan of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport for the year 2021-2023. In this plan, a number of priorities are set with regard to school education during the period 2021-2023:

TABLE 8. OBJECTIVES, TARGETS, EVALUATION CRITERIA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND SPORT FOR THE YEARS 2021-2023

GOAL	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (INDICATOR)	TARGETS		
		2021	2022	2023
To improve teacher's qualifications	The number of employees at educational institutions who have improved their competences through participation in ESF non-formal education activities.	517	250	120
To strengthen the assessment and monitoring of students' achievements, as well as schools and the education as a whole	The percentage of schools that use the online self-assessment programme.	94	95	96
	Lithuania's position among EBPO countries in the PISA results.	20	19	16 (2025)
	The percentage of state education monitoring indicators regularly approved by the Minister of Education and Science.	96	98	100
To develop the infrastructure of inclusive education	The number of students per school in rural areas.	206	206	206
	The number of school buses purchased.	21	22	22
	The percentage of schools supplied with laboratory equipment.	65	-	-
	The number of supported Lithuanian schools abroad.	14	14	14

¹⁵⁶ European Parliament. 2021. Recovery and resilience facility. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679088/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)679088_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679088/EPRS_BRI(2021)679088_EN.pdf).

To improve the inclusion of children with special educational needs	The percentage of students attending all-day schools, compared with the total number of students in school.	21	22	23
	The percentage of students and their parents who have received support, compared with the total number of students and parents in school.			
	The percentage of students who learn in special education schools compared with the total of all students.	30	30	30
		0.56	0.53	0.50
	The percentage change in the number of educational institutions in which foreign children under the age of 18 living Lithuania study, compared with the previous year.	33	33	0
To integrate formal and non-formal education	The percentage of children who have participated in non-formal education compared with the total of all children attending education.	62.3	63	65 (2025)
	The percentage of children who have participated in STE(A)M (science, technology, engineering (art) mathematics) non-formal education compared with the total of all children attending education.	6.7	7.5	10 (2025)
		21.3	21.7	23 (2025)
	The percentage of children who have participated in non-formal sports education.			135 000
	The number of children who have participated in non-formal education.	130 000	133 000	

Source: Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Strategic Action Plan For 2021-2023.

To achieve these goals, it is anticipated that education will be made more individualized; that discrimination, segregation and exclusion will be eliminated; and that a safe environment for all will be created in both formal and non-formal education. It is also foreseen that schools will be mobilized to ensure that students are sufficiently equally divided between schools in rural areas, as there are too many schools operating across Lithuania in comparison to the number of children in need of education. Moreover, improvements are foreseen in the integration of children who have arrived from other countries to live in Lithuania, including returnee Lithuanian children, by improving working methods and the use of technology. Improving the qualifications of teachers is also foreseen, as well as constant monitoring of the quality of education and promoting its improvement.

Additional financing has been allocated to fulfil these goals (see Table 9).

TABLE 9. FINANCIAL PROJECTIONS IN THE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN 2021-2023

GOAL	FINANCIAL ALLOCATIONS (EUR)		
	2021	2022	2023
To improve teachers' qualifications	1,700,000	970,000	-
To strengthen the assessment and monitoring of students' achievements, as well as schools and education as a whole	4,772,000	1,647,000	1,447,000
To develop infrastructure for inclusive education	22,538,000	15,207,000	10,473,000

To improve the inclusion of children with special educational needs	3,865,000	3,865,000	2,588,000

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2020. Strategic Action Plan for 2021-2023.

The improvement of teachers' qualifications includes the provision of training and attracting young people to teaching as a career. The strengthening of monitoring system includes organizing exams and introducing cumulative assessments, organizing educational research, and updating educational evaluation and monitoring tools. The tools used to develop the infrastructure of inclusive education include increasing the number of laboratories in schools (EUR 4,125,000), modernizing schools and their infrastructure (EUR 5,592,000), increasing the number of school buses (EUR 2,900,000), modernizing non-formal education facilities (EUR 2,526,000) and others. The tools used to improve the inclusion of children from various backgrounds include the implementation of various projects that improve learning opportunities for children with special educational needs and disabilities, the integration of children with migrant backgrounds (e.g. the organization of the Lithuanian song celebration festival, which involves children with a Lithuanian background from all over the world), and providing coordinated support to children who attend schools as well as their families.

The XVIII government of Lithuania has also set out its goals in the field of education in its political programme.¹⁵⁷ The main project in the relation to school education is "Access to good schools and a modern curriculum for everyone". This project seeks to reduce differences in academic achievements, especially those between schools in rural and city areas. It foresees the updating of school programmes, the improved inclusion of children with SEN, an increasingly individual approach to every student according to their needs, and an improved monitoring system to ensure the consistency of quality across schools. The main initiatives are:

- Setting a common quality standard for modern schools at a national level. The financing mechanism will be re-evaluated, and mobile teams will be introduced to provide schools with all the necessary support. The goal of the government is to not only to provide schools with guidance, but to implement actual mechanisms that will help them to improve the quality of their education.
- Introducing a new generation of schools - Millennial gymnasiums. These schools are targeted at reducing differences in academic achievements between children learning in schools in rural and city areas. Only those teachers with the highest qualifications will be employed in these schools, and the schools will be provided with all the necessary modern educational infrastructure (e.g. STE(A)M laboratories). The infrastructure and non-formal education activities can be accessed by all children within the school's region, and the school should become a mentorship centre for teachers from surrounding schools and new graduates.
- Updating the education curriculum to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. It is foreseen that realistic challenges from everyday life will be integrated into academic subjects. In addition to subjects such as languages, math, science, IT and finance, subjects will be introduced that will improve children's emotional, social, civil and cultural competences.

¹⁵⁷ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas. 2020. Dėl aštuonioliktosios Lietuvos Vyriausybės programos. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/973c87403bc311eb8c97e01ffe050e1c>.

Alongside the updated curricula, the child evaluation system will also be updated and directed more towards evaluating children's overall development and capacities.

- Providing inclusive education in every school. Greater concentration will be placed on the individual needs of pupils, with particular attention being given to immigrant and returnee children, children with SEN, and highly talented children. To achieve this, the sizes of children's groups will be reduced and additional financing will be allocated to employ learning support specialists (special pedagogues, psychologists, teachers' assistance etc.)
- Improving children's reading and maths skills. A multi-annual reading and maths programme will be introduced, covering ECEC, primary, principal and secondary education.
- Establishing Lithuanian schools abroad. More non-formal Lithuanian schools will be established in foreign countries with larger Lithuanian communities. In these schools, special attention will be paid to the improvement of Lithuanian language skills. Methodologies will be introduced for children of every age, as well as an advanced evaluation system.
- Improvements to the practice of educational institutions working on policy making and implementation. The responsibilities of all institutions will be clearly defined and the National Education Agency will play an expert role in improving and monitoring the quality of education in Lithuania.
- Improving the quality of education in minority schools. It is foreseen that the quality of Lithuanian language teaching will be enhanced, and up-to-date books will be published in Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Belarusian. A conceptual approach to bilingual or multilingual education will be implemented that helps children from national minorities to integrate into environments in which the Lithuanian language is used and *vice versa*. Students will also be provided with opportunities to become objectively acquainted with the history of the country, the contribution of national minorities to Lithuanian culture, history and other areas of public life. The availability of digital education content in foreign languages in minority schools will also be expanded. It will be made possible for schools to employ teachers from Poland, Ukraine and Belarus to work in minority schools in Lithuania. Moreover, ethnic minority communities will be involved in discussions regarding quality standards in education.¹⁵⁸

EU-funded measures and projects

To improve the quality of ECEC centres, the government has also allocated funds provided by the EU that are aligned with general national education plans. EU funding in relation to schools has been provided to improve the inclusion of children with SEN; to improve the monitoring of quality; to expand opportunities for formal and non-formal education; to improve access to formal education, networking between schools, and infrastructure for non-formal education; to improve access to and the diversity of non-formal education; to promote schools' progress; to improve the content of studies and methodology; to improve the quality of studies and provide support for children in learning in vocational schools; and to improve teachers' qualifications.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Dėl aštuonioliktosios Lietuvos Vyriausybės programos.

¹⁵⁹ ES investicijos. 2021. Švietimas ir mokslas. Available at: https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemonės.

TABLE 10. MEASURES AND SUPPORT PROVIDED BY EU FUNDS DURING THE 2014-2020 PROGRAMMING PERIOD

EU FUND	MEASURE	AMMOUNT OF SUPPORT (EUR)
ESF	9.2.2. To improve inclusion of children with SEN	11 335 603
ESF	9.3.2. To ensure monitoring of quality	12 657 453
ESF	9.4.2. To expand possibilities for formal and non-formal education	5 693 374
ERDF	9.1.3. To improve access to formal education	38 143 482
ESF	9.2.2. To promote schools' progress	1 116 752
ESF	9.2.1. To renew and improve methodology and content of studies	16 183 470
ERDF	9.1.3. To promote networking of schools	33 440 500
ERDF	9.1.3. To renew infrastructure of non-formal education	15 840 103
ESF	9.2.2. To improve access and diversity of non-formal education	61 043 425
ESF	9.2.1. To improve qualifications of teachers	7 476 676
ESF	9.4.1. To improve quality of studies in vocational schools	12 551 029
ESF	9.4.1. To increase support for children learning in vocational schools	4 196 922

Source: ES investicijos. 2021. Švietimas ir mokslas: https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemones.

The measures directly targeted towards vulnerable children are improving the inclusion of children with SEN, and support for socially vulnerable children (children with SEN, children from families at social risk, and children experiencing any kind of social exclusion) studying in vocational schools. The indicators used to assess measures to support children in vocational schools are provided in the table below.

TABLE 11. INDICATORS TO MONITOR SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN STUDYING IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

MONITORING INDICATOR	INTERMEDIATE VALUE (31 DECEMBER 2018)	TARGET VALUE BY 31 DECEMBER 2023
Percentage of socially vulnerable children who have received financial aid to improve their access to vocational education compared to all socially vulnerable children	0%	4%
Number of people who have attend ESF activities on career opportunities	0	40 000
Number of socially vulnerable children who have received aid to improve access to education	0	200

Source: ES investicijos. 2021. Paskatos ir pagalba besimokantiems: https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemones/paskatos-ir-pagalba-besimokantiems.

The table shows that the support is mostly directed towards improving children's career opportunities, while individual support for children in need is foreseen as reaching only 200 children across Lithuania. Meanwhile, a broad variety of indicators have been set to assess improvements in the inclusion of children with SEN.

TABLE 12. INDICATORS TO MONITOR THE IMPROVEMENT INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS OF CHILDREN WITH SEN

MONITORING INDICATOR	MILESTONE (31 DECEMBER 2018)	TARGET VALUE BY 31 DECEMBER 2023
Decrease in percentage of children not attending school	0%	2%
Percentage of children who have received ESF support and have been enrolled in a higher class or graduated from school	0	89.66%
Number of school staff who have attended ESF-funded programmes	76	2,723
Number of pupils who have received ESF-funded educational support	253	3,625
Number of children attending STE(A)M activities	0	600
Number of schools receiving ESF-funded educational support	0	34

Source: ES investicijos. 2021. Asmenų, turinčių specialiųjų ugdymosi poreikių, galimybių mokytis gerinimas.

The table shows that the inclusion of children with SEN is a highly complex issue requiring improvements in the system, in schools and in teacher qualifications, as well as providing a greater number of educational activities for the children themselves. A deeper analysis of the inclusion of children with SEN will be presented later in this chapter.

Another important programme funded by the EU relates to improving the quality of overall education in schools.¹⁶⁰ This programme introduces ‘quality baskets’ for schools, intended to help them improve the academic achievements of their pupils. This intervention is taking place between 2019 and 2023, and EUR 30,324,200.95 are allocated to the programme. Its aim is to provide support to 270 schools and to achieve the goal of improving pupils’ academic achievements in 70 per cent of these schools. The programme includes the evaluation of schools and the provision of improvement plans based on these evaluations, followed by financing being allocated to fulfil the goals, as well as monitoring schools’ success.

Measures to ensure the quality and accessibility of education

The Law Amending the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2011) is an important law supporting the inclusion of vulnerable children in Lithuania. This law foresees the coordinated provision of services to the child and his or her parents¹⁶¹. Municipal administrations are encouraged to work more effectively to ensure the well-being of the child, to remove interdepartmental barriers between forms of educational assistance, municipalities, state institutions and establishments, as well as other organizations and the non-governmental sector, to assure inter-institutional co-operation. Inter-institutional attention to vulnerable children and their parents is intended to reduce social exclusion and dropout from schools, as well as improving parental skills and involvement in children’s education, and improving children’s psycho-emotional well-being while in educational institutions. The law also

¹⁶⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2019. Available at: <https://www.nsa.smm.lt/svietimo-pagalbos-departamentas/projektai/kokybes-krepselis-nr-09-2-1-esfa-v-719-01-0001/>.

¹⁶¹ Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo Įstatymo Pakeitimo Įstatymas. 2011. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.395105>.

seeks to better include children with disabilities and children with migrant backgrounds into general education schools.

To improve the inclusion of children living in rural areas, children with various disabilities and children from low-income families, the Lithuanian government provides transportation services, free meals and support for the purchase of school supplies.¹⁶² According to the Law on Social Assistance for Pupils, school supplies means individual learning aids (exercise books, calculators, writing, drawing, painting and other learning aids used individually by a pupil); sports clothes and footwear; clothes and other supplies essential for the education of the pupil which are not supplied to pupils, following the procedure laid down by the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Education and by other legal acts.¹⁶³ Assistance is provided if the monthly income per member of the family (i.e. persons living together) is less than the amount of 1.5 state-supported income (EUR 192 per month). In this case, an allowance of **two** basic social benefits is provided once per calendar year for the purchase of basic school supplies. Free meals are provided not only on school days but also during school trips and other events. With regard to school transport, in 2021 there were 67,000 pupils using school bus services, 12,168 of whom had special educational needs.¹⁶⁴ The law regarding the approval of the description of the procedure for the organization of student transportation and the reimbursement of travel expenses provides for school shuttle services, as well as compensation for other transport, for children who have special educational needs, for those who live in institutions or socialization centres, or who live far away from schools when there are no schools available within the area in which the child lives.¹⁶⁵

Measures to ensure the quality and accessibility of education for children with SEN

In the National Education Development Plan for 2021-2030, it is anticipated that all children with SEN will be included in mainstream education by the year 2024. Children with disabilities and special educational needs will be given priority with regard to enrolment in those schools closest to their home, but their families are also given recommendations regarding what schools might best meet their individual needs, and can choose according to their preference.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it is expected that by 2024, all schools will have the same capacity to enrol children with special educational needs, and that all children with SEN will be able to attend the schools closest to their homes. Schools which enrol children with SEN will receive additional financing – 35 per cent larger ‘student basket’ compared with the usual amount of financing.

¹⁶² Lietuvos respublikos socialinės paramos mokiniams įstatymas. 2006. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.279123/asr>; Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo Ir Mokslo Ministras. 2016. Įsakymas Dėl Mokinių Vežimo Mokykliniu Autobusu Tvarkos Aprašo Patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/c35d5d703efe11e68f278e2f1841c088?jfwid=bkaxm69l>.

¹⁶³ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas. 2006. Lietuvos Respublikos paramos mokiniams įstatymas. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.279123>.

¹⁶⁴ Švietimo valdymo informacinė Sistema. 2021. Mokinių Vežiojimas (mokinių parvežimas iš mokyklos į namus). 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Vilniaus Miesto Savivaldybės Taryba. 2019. Sprendimas Dėl Mokinių Pavėžėjimo Organizavimo Ir Važiavimo Išlaidų Kompensavimo Tvarkos Aprašo Patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/0a3c2342d98211e9a85be81119c7a8fa?jfwid=-pdh4ouh0el>.

¹⁶⁶ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. Mokymasis ir švietimo pagalba specialiuju ugdomosi poreikiu turintiems mokiniams. Available at: <https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/smm-svietimas/specialiuju-ugdomosi-poreikiu-turintiems-mokiniams>.

The education of pupils with special educational needs is organized in accordance with the Description of the Procedure for Organizing the Education of Pupils with Special Educational Needs.¹⁶⁷ When assigning individual plans (a learning plan tailored according to an individual child's skills and learning needs) and self-care plans (a plan for children with health challenges, prepared individually according to a doctor's recommendations and parents' expectations to ensure self-care and health care needs are smoothly met)¹⁶⁸ for children with special educational needs, schools must evaluate each child's need for learning support specialists, adapting the content and duration of lessons where necessary, and providing special lessons (e.g. for children with hearing, sight, or mobility impairments). Adaptations might include children being given the chance to study just one foreign language and/or to begin learning a second foreign language later compared with their peers; being given integrated lessons; children with hearing impairments not receiving music lessons; crafts not being taught to children with mobility impairments; or refraining from teaching other subjects, depending on children's individual learning capacities. In cases where schools do not have learning support staff, children must be provided with 70 to 140 lessons per year of individual consultations within the school or in special education centres and other relevant institutions¹⁶⁹. Children with mobility or other issues are also provided with feeding and bathroom assistance and other necessary support.¹⁷⁰ Children with special educational needs and disabilities will also receive shuttle services, as well as having adapted grading systems and exams.

Nevertheless, according to interview data, the system is not efficient or appropriate for children with SEN. As a result, enrolling children with disabilities and special educational needs into general schools becomes a challenge for parents, teachers and the rest of school community. Even while children are in school, parents cannot enjoy full-time employment, as they may receive a call from the school at any time of the day, and may have to pick their children up at inconvenient times. In addition, because there are no suitable after-class activities for children with SEN, parents have to pick them up after school, which is usually around midday. As mentioned previously, the government recognizes the issue of limited access to non-formal education (including school-based activities) for children with SEN, and one of the National Plan's goals is to reduce this problem. Children with disabilities also experience stigmatization and discrimination within schools, especially from the parents of other children, who are worried about the quality of their children education. Teachers have to pay a great deal of individual attention to children with SEN, which may entail other children's learning processes being slowed down if there is insufficient support from teaching assistants and other support specialists. Due to experiences of stigmatization, parents of children with SEN tend to hide their children's disabilities and special needs. This reduces a child's chances of receiving all of the support they need within a school setting. All in all, it is obvious that the problem is very complex, and solving it will require an integrated solution that covers all aspects. Measures will need to be taken to meet the needs of children with SEN,

¹⁶⁷ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministerija. 2011. Dėl Mokinių, turinčių specialiųjų ugdymosi poreikių, ugdymo organizavimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.F0E90ABE387D>.

¹⁶⁸ Mokinių, sergančių lėtinėmis neinfekcinėmis ligomis, savirūpos organizavimo tvarkos aprašas. 2021. Available at: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.senojigimnazija.lt%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2021%2F02%2FSavir%25C5%25ABpos-proceso-organizavimo-tvarkos-apra%25C5%25A1as.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>.

¹⁶⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. Įsakymas dėl 2021-2022 ir 2022-2023 mokslo metų pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio ugdymo programų bendrųjų ugdymo planų patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/en/legalAct/f0828f70abe911eb8bc8b1cdd5d7f785>.

¹⁷⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2011. Dėl mokinių, turinčių specialiųjų ugdymosi poreikių, ugdymo organizavimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.F0E90ABE387D>.

as well as to reduce the burden experienced by their parents, teachers and the rest of the school community.

One such measures would be an increased number of learning support specialists and improved qualifications for all teachers. Learning support specialists include social pedagogues, psychologists, teaching assistants, speech therapists, sign language translators, tiflopedagogic educators and others. To increase the number of learning support specialists in schools, an increase is foreseen in their salaries, along with an improvement in working conditions. From 2021, support specialists should work for at least 28 hours a week instead of 23 hours, and receive a 20 per cent higher overall salary.¹⁷¹ To reduce the burden on class teachers, one child with special educational needs is registered as equivalent to two children without SEN, and therefore classes including children with SEN must be smaller. Moreover, all teachers must have obtained a higher education diploma and have attended courses in special education, Lithuanian language and culture, IT and psychology.¹⁷² As mentioned previously, funding is also provided to improve teacher's qualifications via various courses and seminars, as well as to increase their salaries and the prestige of the profession.¹⁷³ Through the use of such measures, it is expected that more newly graduated teachers will start to work in schools, and that more of them will have Master's degrees.

Measures to ensure the quality and accessibility of education for migrants

Another group of children whose needs are not properly met due to the insufficient preparation of schools and teachers, are immigrant and returnee children. Children from other countries are enrolled into Lithuanian schools according to the same requirements as other children. They are enrolled into a class of their own age or into equalization classes and receive an individual learning plan and various types of learning support.¹⁷⁴ Equalization classes are designed for children who are academically behind compared with their peers in Lithuania, and are aimed at closing this academic gap. These classes may include multiple subjects or just one (e.g. Lithuanian language). All of these children are given the opportunity to study Lithuanian, are informed about non-formal education opportunities, and are assigned a person to help them get involved with the school community.¹⁷⁵ To ensure the successful integration into society of children who are learning in non-Lithuanian language schools, children are provided with the same amount of Lithuanian language lessons as they receive lessons in their mother tongue.¹⁷⁶ The Lithuanian Education Law provides for mandatory bilingual education – in Russian,

¹⁷¹ Pogrupių dėl švietimo pagalbos specialistų funkcijų tobulinimo posėdžio protokolai Nr. 1. Available at: [https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/svietimas/svietimo_pagalba/tobulinimas_2021/Bendro%20pogrupi%C5%B3%20pos%C4%97d%C5%BEio%20protokolas%201\(2021-05-12\).pdf](https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/svietimas/svietimo_pagalba/tobulinimas_2021/Bendro%20pogrupi%C5%B3%20pos%C4%97d%C5%BEio%20protokolas%201(2021-05-12).pdf).

¹⁷² Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2014. Dėl reikalavimų mokytojų kvalifikacijai aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/7f45d9f02f7911e4a83cb4f588d2ac1a/asr>.

¹⁷³ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2016. Pedagoginių profesijų prestižo kėlimo programa. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.smm.lt%2Fuploads%2Fflawacts%2Fdocs%2F1357_b8cbc962f8e72d15a04be25d10a795d3.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK.

¹⁷⁴ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2018. Įsakymas dėl nuosekliojo mokymosi pagal bendrojo ugdymo programas tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.310753DF1036/asr>.

¹⁷⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. Įsakymas dėl 2021-2022 ir 2022-2023 mokslo metų pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio ugdymo programų bendrųjų ugdymo planų patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/en/legalAct/f0828f70abe911eb8bc8b1cdd5d7f785>.

¹⁷⁶ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. Tautinių mažumų švietimas. Available at: <https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/smm-svietimas/svietimas-pradinis-ugdymas/tautiniu-mazumu-svietimas>.

Polish, and schools in other languages, all children must learn Lithuanian as a second language.¹⁷⁷ In addition, a school network for migrant and returnee children exists that presently covers 10 municipalities and 22 schools, but seeks to cover all schools in the future. Schools in this network are experienced in working with children from abroad, and are able to provide them with all necessary support, including the aforementioned Lithuanian lessons, individual consultations, non-formal education about Lithuanian culture, and more.¹⁷⁸ Schools outside this network may hesitate to enrol children from other countries, as teachers feel insufficiently qualified to work with such children, and the schools lack learning support specialists such as special pedagogues and psychologists. It is hoped that improving teachers' qualifications and working conditions for learning support specialists may help to solve the problem of schools' reluctance to enrol immigrant and returnee children.

According to interview data, the reality for refugee children is somewhat different from that foreseen by these programmes. Refugee children are usually enrolled in schools alongside other children of the same age. Their competences and learning experiences are not assessed beforehand, as no consideration is given to whether these children understand the Lithuanian language, and the fact that they have come from different educational systems. Such children therefore receive a very poor-quality education and furthermore, experience extreme bullying and marginalization in school settings from other children and even their parents. The main barriers to access for these children include a lack of competences on the part of teachers, a shortage of learning support specialists, and the unwillingness of schools to provide individual learning plans for refugee children. The number of these children in Lithuania is so small that no schools invest in looking for a systematic way to improve the quality of their education. Although such children receive an additional 'financial basket' to cover Lithuanian lessons, this part of the system does not work efficiently either.¹⁷⁹ Refugee children should receive additional Lithuanian language lessons, especially during their first year in school, but interview data shows that schools lack the human resources and methodologies necessary to work with such children, with the result that these children do not receive all of the help and lessons they need. The greatest forms of support to these children come from day care centres and volunteers, who help them to learn the language, to understand the Lithuanian education system, to do their homework, and to study in general. Day care centres and volunteers have proved especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although children received computers and tablets, language barriers became even more challenging during online learning, with children facing difficulties in accessing various online programs and being unable to receive help from their parents, who themselves do not know Lithuanian sufficiently well and/or could not support their children due to their employment responsibilities. Schools lack a system of support and an integrated approach: in particular, there is a lack of methodology, of a systematic approach, and of human resources, especially with regard to learning support specialists and to a lack of intervention to reduce bullying.

Measures to ensure the quality and accessibility of non-formal education, including school-based activities

¹⁷⁷ Ugdymo Lietuvių Kalba Bendrojo Ugdymo Ir Neformaliojo Švietimo Mokykloje Tvarkos Aprašas. 2011. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Svietimas_pradinis_ugdymas/2011_30%20str%203d_aprasas_PATVIRTINTA.pdf.

¹⁷⁸ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2020. Mokyklos siekia geriau paruošti grįžtančių / atvykusių vaikų mokymui – kuriamas mokyklų tinklas. Available at: <https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/smm-svietimas/griztantiesiems-i-Lietuva/vaikas-lankys-mokykla/mokyklu-tinklas>.

¹⁷⁹ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2020. Migrančių integravimas bendrojo ugdymo mokyklose. Available at: <https://www.nsa.smm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Migrantu-integravimas.pdf>.

Lithuania is trying to solve the problem of low attendance, not only in formal but also in non-formal education. In 2015, the Lithuanian government provided every child with a **'financial basket for non-formal education'**, which allocates a certain amount of money for every child to attend non-formal education activities of their preference.¹⁸⁰ This financing can be used both during the school year and during the summer holidays.¹⁸¹ Activities can take place either within or outside school. Experts who were interviewed identified this as one of the most successful measures. Currently, all children receive the same support of EUR 15 per month, regardless of their socio-economic situation. The financial basket needs to be increased to vulnerable children, who have a very limited choice of non-formal education as their parents are unable to cover the price difference themselves. From 2016, the basket was financed by EU (ESF) funds, and since 2020 by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport.

Another programme that could help to reduce inequalities in learning achievement and to better include children with special education needs, children living in families at social risk and other vulnerable children, are **'full-day' schools**. This type of school is currently not common in Lithuania, but their development is foreseen in the National Plan. Full-day schools are schools that organize additional activities for children outside the hours of official classes. Usually, these activities include help with homework, various educational games and field trips. Full-day schools generally end at around 6pm. The purpose of such schools is to help parents to balance work and family responsibilities, and at the same time keep children safe. These services are especially beneficial to single-parent families. In 2017, a study on demand for full-day schools showed that 50 per cent of parents would like to use such services for children in pre-primary and primary education; 35 per cent of parents would like to use such services for children with special educational needs at all ages; and 30 per cent of parents would like to use such services for children of all ages living in families at social risk.¹⁸² Full-day schools are recognized as an early intervention that can improve children's inclusion and grades.¹⁸³ In 2018-2019, a pilot full-day school project was carried out at 38 schools in Lithuania. Of the schools that participated in the pilot, 87.5 per cent reported it to have been successful or very successful, and noted that such services would indeed be very useful. Nevertheless, the schools involved faced certain challenges – some lacked suitable premises, methodology and tools (such as educational games, sports equipment and more) to effectively run full-day schools. Due to a lack of financing, as well as the mentioned previously reasons, full-day schools have not yet been developed in Lithuania, but the goal remains to expand such services.

After school care in day care centres

As noted by interviewees, the most important after school initiative operating across Lithuania is **day care centres**. These centres are run either by municipalities or by NGOs, and are part of a social security scheme. Although the primary goal of these centres is not education-related, they have nevertheless become very important in helping the most vulnerable children with their homework and helping them to keep up with school, reducing school dropouts and improving children's cultural, artistic and other

¹⁸⁰ Lietuvos tautinių mažumų švietimo būklės analizė.

¹⁸¹ Nutarimas Dėl Neformaliojo Vaikų Švietimo Krepšelio Finansavimo Tęstinumo Ir Plėtros. 2017. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalact/TAD/da127ce3a8d311e7a65c90dfe4655c64/>.

¹⁸² 2021-2030 m. švietimo plėtros programa.

¹⁸³ Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministras. 2018. Dėl Rekomendacijų dėl visos dienos mokyklos kūrimo ir veiklos organizavimo patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/128eb961797811e89188e16a6495e98c?jfwid=bkaxlhjs%20%20https://duomenys.ugdome.lt/?/tinklai/vdm/med=154>.

education. As mentioned previously, these centres are very important for Roma children, who can learn and spend their time safely in an environment that is friendly towards their culture. These centres are also important for children living in families at social risk.¹⁸⁴ The centres aim to help families not to lose custody of their children, and seek to build parents' capacities to take the best care of their children. Moreover, day care centres help children to enjoy their childhood, to develop social skills and to receive the help and support they need socially, psychologically and academically. Moreover, these centres provide children with daily meals. Thus, the scheme addresses two main purposes: daily services for children in the short term, and the long-term well-being of vulnerable families. From a wider perspective, these services help to fight exclusion, and enable the younger generation to grow more successfully, thus contributing to the social and economic well-being of society. In 2020, there were 426 day care centres operating across the country, attended in 2019 by 9,320 children. Unfortunately, only 357 of these day care centres have official accreditations. Moreover, the number of day care centres is insufficient. Estimates suggest that around 120 more day care centres are needed across Lithuania to meet the needs of all children.¹⁸⁵ Interviews have shown that the currently available day care centres are overcrowded, and that not all children who need such services are catered for. Transportation is also an issue, as children living in remote areas may have no means of getting home from such centres.

Policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic

According to interview data, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed more issues experienced by the most vulnerable children. Many children were unable to participate in online learning, despite the fact that the government had provided every child with the necessary IT equipment. At this time, the Lithuanian government provided 35,000 computers and tablets to disadvantaged families.¹⁸⁶ These children were living in families at social risk, large or otherwise vulnerable families, in which parents could not provide children with adequate learning settings and the necessary learning support. In such cases, the involvement of social workers and school staff was especially important. Where extreme cases of children being deprived of quality education were identified, these children were allowed to study in schools or day centres in order to reduce the negative impact of the home environment. Nevertheless, according to data from the interviews, this measure was not completely successful, as no transport was provided to children living in remote areas, and there was a lack of teachers who agreed to work under such circumstances during the pandemic.

Children with disabilities also experienced greater restrictions on their education compared with their peers. According to interview data, during the first quarantine, these children lacked appropriate IT equipment that suited their disabilities and allowed them to study individually. These children, as well as children with special educational needs, had to rely on their parents, who could not always help them due to employment commitments, exhaustion, and in some cases a lack of academic or/and parenting skills. According to the interview data, the government did not pay sufficient attention to such children, who consequently were insufficiently protected. Moreover, insufficient support was given to parents, who had to search for ways to solve this situation themselves and to manipulate such tools as sick leave.

¹⁸⁴ Study on the economic implementing framework of possible EU Child Guarantee Scheme including its financial foundation.

¹⁸⁵ NVO vaikams akreditacija. 2021. Vaikų dienos centrų žemėlapis, akreditacija. Available at: <http://www.nvovaiamskonfederacija.lt/2020/12/22/vaiku-dienos-centru-zemelapis-akreditacija/>.

¹⁸⁶ Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2021. Mokykla COVID-19 pandemijos sąlygomis: pamokos, sprendimai, perspektyvos. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/tyrimai_ir_analizes/2021/Mokykla-COVID-19-salygomis.pdf.

During the second quarantine, children with SEN and disabilities were given the opportunity to study in schools.

All in all, despite attempts to reduce educational inequalities among children in Lithuania, such inequalities still persist. Great improvements have been made with regard to certain groups of children, such those with special educational needs, children with migrant backgrounds, and children living in rural areas. Nevertheless, the issue of educational inequalities within and between schools still persists. Insufficient attention is paid to Roma children and to children from low-income families who are not yet below the poverty line, but who still experience great financial difficulties, such as single-parent families and large families. Moreover, issues still remain with regard to the adaptation of technology and premises for children with disabilities.

4.3. Recommendations for improving access to quality education

Making high-quality, inclusive and equitable school education a reality for all learners is a top priority that will influence the European Union's social progress and sustainable growth in the future¹⁸⁷. In 2019, the European Semester recommendations for Lithuania stated that the quality and efficiency of education should be improved at all levels of education¹⁸⁸. This section of the report therefore sets out key recommendations for education to be considered in relation to the development of the NAP for the implementation of the ECG in Lithuania. These recommendations draw on previously identified gaps in policy and the needs of the most vulnerable children that fail to be met in Lithuania, as well as recommendations for Lithuania provided by the EU and the OECD.

Universal and inclusive education for all children: addressing geographical and socio-economic disparities, differences in the levels of inclusion and quality in schools

As the research shows, socioeconomic status greatly affects a pupil's academic achievements and expectations. Universal policies that remove the effects of socio-economic differences in relation to the quality of education would be of great benefit. Universality and equality in the education system would improve academic achievements among vulnerable children and enhance Lithuania's overall PISA results. Universal education ensures equity in education, improved involvement in school, higher levels of attainment, and reduces intergenerational income disparities.

It is necessary to provide all children with school supplies, transport and meals, to reduce the burden of 'hidden' costs experienced by vulnerable families. Programmes based on a universal approach contribute to overall quality and equity in education, and reduce the risk of non-participation, stigmatization and bullying¹⁸⁹. Bullying lowers PISA results, and Lithuania is among most-affected

¹⁸⁷ Eur-Lex. 2017. Council Conclusions on school development and excellent teaching. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208(01)).

¹⁸⁸ European Commission. 2019. Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Lithuania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Lithuania. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1560258494533&uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0515>.

¹⁸⁹ European Commission. 2021. Study on the economic implementing framework of a possible EU Child Guarantee Scheme including its financial support. Final Report.

countries in Europe in this regard, ranking second after Cyprus¹⁹⁰. Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are often bullied. When pupils feel that they are a part of a school community, they are more motivated to learn. In Lithuania, 44.3% of pupils do not feel they 'belong' at their school.

The UN Sustainable Development Goal for quality education is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. One of the EU’s 2030 targets for this goal is to “build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all”.¹⁹¹ Underachievement is high in Lithuania, due to segregation in schools. As research shows, the quality of education differs significantly between rural areas and cities, as well as between elite schools and schools of lower quality.

Great inequality exists in education among schools in Lithuania, with the greatest disadvantage in rural and minority schools, where children also exhibit the lowest PISA scores. To address this issue, it is important to rectify such differences as the unequal distribution among schools of learning support specialists, laboratories and high-quality teachers. Children from low-income families are usually segregated into low-quality schools that are usually located in rural areas and poorer neighbourhoods in cities. Targeted interventions need to be carried out in rural schools.¹⁹² By promoting active anti-segregation policies and providing additional support to schools in disadvantaged areas or those with high numbers of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such schools can be helped to diversify their social composition and enhance their educational offering. This improves the educational achievements of pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and reduces their risk of early school leaving.

Moreover, it is important to address the issue of differing capacities between schools to include children with SEN and disabilities. By 2024, it is foreseen that all schools must ensure access to children with SEN and provide them with all the necessary support.¹⁹³ Municipalities are responsible for organizing all necessary assistance for disabled children and children with SEN to enable them to participate in integrated education. This assistance includes transport, equipment, tutoring in the classroom, and all the necessary learning support specialists.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, many municipalities have not yet arranged for proper access to schools, or educational services for children with SEN and disabilities. The interview data reveals that the practical realization of this goal is heavily affected by the available resources. Individual assessment is needed, as well as the allocation of finances for children with specific disabilities or higher support needs. It is also important to monitor the distribution of financial resources among schools, and to monitor the distribution of high-quality teachers and learning support specialists. In addition, schools should be provided with methodological tools for working with vulnerable children.¹⁹⁵ It is also important that schools effectively inform all of their parents about the

¹⁹⁰ European Commission. 2019. PISA 2018 and the EU. Striving for social fairness through education. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/pisa-2018-eu_1.pdf.

¹⁹¹ United Nations. 2021. Quality Education. Goal 4 Targets. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>.

¹⁹² OECD. 2017. Raising performance in Lithuanian Education. An International Perspective. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Kalbos-pranesimai/Andreas_Schleicher_1.pdf.

¹⁹³ European Commission. 2021. Education and Training Monitor 2021. Lithuania.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Eur-Lex. 2017. Council Conclusions on school development and excellent teaching. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208(01)).

importance of integrating children with disabilities and SEN, to reduce resistance on the part of some parents. Furthermore, it is important that such children are provided with all of the necessary support, to ensure that overall teaching quality in the classroom does not suffer.

Students' achievements are also affected by a background of migration, and children with such backgrounds often attain lower levels of academic achievement. A strategy for inclusive education should therefore also cover the needs of migrant and refugee children as well as Roma children.¹⁹⁶ The strategy should include the provision of accessible, adapted materials and curricula, and compulsory training for all teachers on inclusive education. Roma children should receive proper social, educational and financial support, and must be integrated into the general education system. Moreover, emphasising the value of linguistic diversity and supporting children with a different mother tongue to improve their proficiency in the language of instruction and, where appropriate, in the mother tongue – as well as supporting teachers to teach children with different levels of linguistic competence – can improve the educational achievements of children with migrant backgrounds and reduce their risk of early school leaving. Networking with parents and other actors outside school, such as local community services and organizations representing migrants or minorities, would allow for holistic solutions to help pupils. It is also important to ensure that children receive some information and Lithuanian language courses prior to their arrival in the country and the school. IT infrastructure and methodological tools should be provided to enable schools to equip their teachers to work with children under such circumstances. It is also necessary to ensure that all children are provided with as many Lithuanian lessons as necessary, whatever number of such children attend a particular schools. Teachers should also be provided with all of the necessary methodologies and tools, as well as training courses on how to work with children with different cultural backgrounds, ethnicities etc. These children should be introduced not only to the language, but also to Lithuanian culture and the culture of the particular school. All necessary assistance should be provided to close any academic gaps that may exist in comparison to their Lithuanian peers. As mentioned previously, while such programmes already exist in Lithuania, not all schools apply them due to a shortage of various resources. Monitoring and financing at municipality or national level is therefore important. Every school that integrates immigrant or returnee children should receive additional support.

Educational differences also exist between girls and boys, with boys performing poorly in comparison to girls (for example, girls' achievements are 3.6 points higher in Mathematics, and 5 points higher in Science).¹⁹⁷ Targeted interventions should take place to improve boys' academic achievements, particularly in reading^{198,199}. Targeted support for boys, as well as for rural schools, could reduce performance gaps.

¹⁹⁶ European Commission. 2019. Feasibility Study on Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania.

¹⁹⁷ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania. Highlights; European Commission. 2019. PISA 2018 and the EU. Striving for social fairness through education. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/pisa-2018-eu_1.pdf.

¹⁹⁸ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania. Highlights.

¹⁹⁹ OECD. 2017. Raising performance in Lithuanian Education. An International Perspective. Available at: https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Kalbos-pranesimai/Andreas_Schleicher_1.pdf.

Update curricula and provide flexibility in the selection and design of programmes

To improve Lithuania's PISA results, updates to school curricula are necessary.²⁰⁰ It is vital that the improved curriculum should be up to date and respond to the needs of modern world.²⁰¹ It is also necessary to improve the use of technology in schools. Although Lithuanian population's ICT skills are above the EU average, the use of computers and other technologies in schools is lower (21.9% of 4th grade pupils in LT, 60.7% in EU).²⁰² It is crucial to enrich children's learning experiences while supporting the effective use of digital technologies and encouraging activities that link learning with real-life experience, for instance through project-and problem-based learning, on-the-job experiences or involvement in local community activities.²⁰³ The Digital Education Action Plan foresees that all European countries should have well developed digital education systems, digitally well-qualified teachers, high-quality learning content and various e-platforms. It's also noted that digital skills and competences should be taught to pupils from an early age. These include data-intensive technologies, tackling disinformation, and ensuring that boys and girls are equally well represented in digital careers.²⁰⁴

It is also necessary to improve the curricula in vocational schools. In Lithuania, pupils with poorer academic performance tend to choose, or are streamed into, vocational programmes. Without a curriculum that effectively combines strong basic and job-related skills, VET programmes lose their main strength (bridging the gap between education and the job market). A curriculum that combines attention to basic skills development with additional adult training from a lifelong-learning perspective, will provide pupils and workers with the necessary set of tools to face challenges in the economy.

Flexibility in the selection and design of programmes allows interventions to be adapted to the realities of the school and its wider environment. This can be achieved by allowing regions, cities and schools to choose from a list of validated activities and programmes, as well as through monitoring and evaluation.

Increasing the flexibility and permeability of educational pathways – for example, by modularising courses or alternating school and work – provides support in particular to pupils with lower academic performance, and can motivate them to continue in education and training that is better adapted to their needs and abilities. It also helps to address gender-specific reasons for early school leaving, such as joining the labour market early or teenage pregnancy. In addition, limiting the repetition of school years and replacing this with flexible individual support has been associated with reductions in early school leaving.

Local bodies know the realities of local children the best. Therefore, along with taking into account the individual needs of children and their families, flexible programmes would provide an opportunity to better meet these needs and ensure that children receive the most up-to-date school curricula. School

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²⁰¹ OECD. 2020. OECD-Lithuania collaboration on the OECD Skills Strategy project. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/14deb088-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/14deb088-en>.

²⁰² EUR-Lex. 2012. COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Rethinking Education : Country Analysis Part I Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52012SC0377>.

²⁰³ Eur-Lex. 2017. Council Conclusions on school development and excellent teaching. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208(01)).

²⁰⁴ European Commission. 2021. Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027). Resetting education and training for the digital age. https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en.

curricula in Lithuania are currently very inflexible, and outdated books and other tools restrict teachers with regard to the provision of information that is more relevant to the current times.

Invest more in measures that will reduce early school leaving

Each year, some pupils end their basic schooling without a qualification, or drop out from other forms of education. This problem is particularly severe among Roma people. It is important to address this issue and to ensure that interdisciplinary communication takes place to identify and work with children who are not well integrated into schools in order to reduce the risk of them dropping out. It is also necessary to improve communication with the parents of these children, to ensure the parents receive all the necessary information, and that their individual needs and those of their children are met. Preventive and tailored interventions that involve multiple actors (such as families, schools and so on) are identified as being more likely to succeed. This is particularly important when involving the parents of children with SEN or disabilities, as well as immigrant children or those from a minority ethnicity such as Roma. Enhancing the involvement of parents, reinforcing their cooperation with the school and creating partnerships between schools and parents can increase learning motivation among pupils. Developing early-warning systems for pupils at risk can help schools to take effective measures before problems are manifested and pupils start to become alienated from school, play truant or drop out. Various routes back into mainstream education and training exist, the provision of which is important. Transition classes with a strong emphasis on guidance can help to bridge the gap between previous school failure and re-entering mainstream education. Recognising and validating prior learning, including competences achieved in non-formal and informal learning, can improve young people's confidence and self-esteem, and facilitate their re-entry into education. It can motivate them to continue in education and training, and help them to identify their talents and make better career choices.

Expand all-day schools and non-formal education opportunities across Lithuania

All-day schools have been identified as one of the most successful measures in terms of the inclusion of the most vulnerable children. Nevertheless, to ensure their quality it is important to take into account concerns such as a lack of teachers and other staff, additional transport costs, learning supplies, additional school meals and the necessity for adapted methodologies. All of these concerns must be addressed to enable the expansion and quality of all-day schools across Lithuania. All-day schools are not only an important tool for children's inclusion, but also reduce the burden of work-family imbalance on parents, particularly single parents and parents raising children with disabilities and SEN.

It is also important to address the issue of access to non-formal education for children living in rural areas and those with SEN and disabilities. Extra-curricular activities after and outside school, as well as artistic, cultural and sporting activities, can raise the self-esteem of pupils at risk and increase their resilience against difficulties in their learning. It is necessary to provide such children with more flexible school bus services, to ensure that even those children in the most remote areas can attend after-school activities and return home safely. Moreover, it is important to ensure that children living in rural areas and children with disabilities and SEN have a variety of after school activities' options available. Children should also be able to choose activities according to their individual interests and talents.

Strengthen teaching workforce

It is important to establish conditions for a high quality and attractive teaching profession.²⁰⁵ The successful integration of the most vulnerable children, such as refugee and Roma children, children with SEN and disabilities, requires higher-level competences from school staff. The competences required include intercultural competences and knowledge of specific communities, knowledge regarding children's development and the effects of various disabilities, as well as knowledge of how to approach and work with such children. Moreover, interview data show that, with regard to children with migrant backgrounds, it is of great benefit to have staff who represent the diversity of the target communities. This can help to better integrate children and reduce resistance from their parents by building mutual trust – especially with parents of Roma children. Meanwhile, the teaching workforce in Lithuania is substantially older and more predominantly female than either the OECD or the EU27 average.²⁰⁶

All teachers should have a BA degree, and at least some of them a Master's degree. In addition, initial teacher education should be improved, and there should be more flexibility with regard to acquiring a teaching degree. Using Recovery and Resilience Facility funds, 2,200 schoolteachers will receive training and 10,200 teachers will receive further training, including a Master's degree.²⁰⁷ It is also important to ensure that newly graduated teachers are enrolled into various schools, as they will have experience of more up-to-date methods and can become a great resource for their schools. It should be ensured that new teachers are able to work in a well-supported environment and receive frequent feedback and mentoring during the early years of their careers. In addition, all teachers should be provided with qualification courses, and teachers' networks and the exchange of knowledge and experience should be strengthened and improved during their work at the school. Teachers' career pathways should be more coherent, rewarding teaching excellence and allowing teachers to diversify their career paths.²⁰⁸ In-work teacher training is mostly covered by school budgets and the European Social Fund.²⁰⁹ The methods used to recruit teachers also require improvement (assessment of competences is of equal importance to academic achievements); initial teacher education must be improved; early-career support for teachers must be developed (e.g. the teaching community needs to be strengthened to reduce isolation, and school leaders should be equipped with tools to boost the motivation of new teachers).

Teacher salaries in Lithuania are considerably lower than those in West Europe, and teaching at lower levels of education means accepting a lower salary.²¹⁰ Reducing the share of low achievers in reading, mathematics and science requires serious policy efforts to be made to improve schools' capacity to support all learners, including those with special educational needs and learners from disadvantaged

²⁰⁵ OECD. 2017. Raising performance in Lithuanian Education. An International Perspective. https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Kalbos-pranesimai/Andreas_Schleicher_1.pdf; OECD. 2020. OECD-Lithuania collaboration on the OECD Skills Strategy project. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/14deb088-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/14deb088-en>.

²⁰⁶ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania. Highlights. <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/Education-in-Lithuania-2017-highlights.pdf>.

²⁰⁷ European Commission. 2021. Education and Training Monitor 2021. Lithuania.

²⁰⁸ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania. Highlights.

²⁰⁹ European Commission. 2021. Education and Training Monitor 2021. Lithuania.

²¹⁰ European Commission. 2019. Teachers' and school heads' salaries and allowances in Europe. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4bc4ecf6-d0f2-11e8-9424-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-78274729>.

backgrounds.²¹¹ Investment must be made in teachers and school leaders as powerful determinants of student achievement, and they must be supported in taking responsibility and achieving a better balance between professional autonomy and accountability.²¹²

Set national quality standards and monitoring

Every in-depth policy assessment demonstrates the importance of monitoring and evaluating policies in order to further improve policy implementation. Effective monitoring and evaluation arrangements, as well as legal requirements and quality standards, contribute to the quality of provision. Consequently, they result in the increased satisfaction of end recipients; greater efficiency in the delivery process; the increased take-up of targeted assistance; and reductions in administrative burden and stigmatization.

Education is part of an overall solution to social exclusion and poverty throughout the integration process.²¹³ As such, it must be prioritised at policy level. Any strategy should provide clear timelines, targets, baselines and indicators to monitor its progress, as well as adequate financial, material and human resources. Six strands of policy and practice on school quality assurance can be distinguished: self-evaluation by schools; external evaluation; national qualifications and exams during upper secondary stages; the assessment of students' progress at earlier stages; stakeholder engagement (including the involvement of students and their parents in the process of planning and implementing improvements); and the evaluation of teachers and school leaders. With regard to self-evaluation by schools, there is need to ensure a judicious balance between central guidance and support. While self-evaluation can and should incorporate attention to certain shared national/regional priorities, it is clear that schools need to 'own' the process, and thus they should be allowed plenty of flexibility to determine their own agenda. External reviews and the evaluation and appraisal of teachers and school leaders should also take place.

General quality criteria need to be set at the highest possible levels, and quality monitoring must be supported by data collection²¹⁴. The collection of data and relevant information would also help to identify and address shortcomings in learning based on socio-economic background. This is important for all children, but matters most for children in vulnerable situations. Minimum quality criteria are needed to avoid a lack of balance between regions and to avoid a situation in which the quality of education depends on the region in which a child is born. In particular, children born into poor areas should not receive lower-quality education. The minimum structural quality criteria need to encompass criteria concerning the quantity and quality of the workforce, as well as the curriculum and its monitoring. Quality assurance, school management and classroom practice should be improved through the enhanced use of assessments²¹⁵. Lithuania has established effective universal participation in a criterion-referenced national assessment at grades 4, 6, and 8. It should now conclude its use of the National Survey of Student Achievement, incorporating into its assessment system those components of the National Survey, such as teacher and student questionnaires, that provide information judged to

²¹¹ Eur-Lex. 2017. Council Conclusions on school development and excellent teaching. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1208(01)).

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ European Commission. 2019. Feasibility Study on Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania.

²¹⁴ European Commission. 2021. Education and Training monitor 2021. Lithuania.

²¹⁵ OECD. 2017. Raising performance in Lithuanian Education. An International Perspective. https://www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Kalbos-pranesimai/Andreas_Schleicher_1.pdf.

be valuable by teachers, school heads and other stakeholders. This would create a less burdensome and costly assessment framework, while preserving useful information.²¹⁶

Funding on a larger scale also helps to ensure consistency between richer and poorer regions, avoiding a situation in which municipalities with a higher prevalence of low-income families lack the means to serve those families' needs. Although Lithuanian spending on education is higher than the EU average, it is important to reconsider the distribution of these finances. It is also important to reassess the implementation of a universal class basket scheme. A universal class basket scheme could help smaller schools. Fiscal pressure on schools could be relieved by taking into account cost differences due to teacher composition. Cost differences could be smoothly incorporated into the funding formula by assigning different weights for categories of schools with a high, average or low salary cost index. Inequality of opportunity relating to social disadvantage appears to be overlooked in current funding policies. As one part of a more comprehensive approach, it could be a useful measure to improve the education of less socio-economically advantaged students, as well as students from language minorities. Consideration should be given to the possibility of assigning larger weights in the funding formula to socio-economically disadvantaged students. Greater attention should be devoted to improving efficiency in the allocation and use of school maintenance budgets. Regular evaluation of the use of resources and the promotion of best practices in allocating municipal funding would also be useful. More reliable and detailed evidence should be gathered regarding costs and the adequacy of funding in general, as well as in relation to specific topics, e.g. small schools, national minority schools, the education of students with special needs and equity problems relating to social disadvantages.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ OECD. 2017. Raising performance in Lithuanian Education. An International Perspective.

²¹⁷ OECD. 2017. Education in Lithuania. Highlights. <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/Education-in-Lithuania-2017-highlights.pdf>

TABLE 13. PROPOSED INDICATORS FOR MONITORING FREE AND EFFECTIVE ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Nº	GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	SOURCE	PERIODICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET
	By 2030, fewer than 15% of eighth-graders should be underachievers in computer and IT literacy	Achievement in computer and information literacy	% of eighth-grade children underperforming in computer and IT literacy	ICILS	5 years	Primary	Monitoring / evaluation	Result	45% of underachievers in eighth-grade (2013)	15% of underachievers in eighth-grade
3	By 2030, ensure that no children in poverty are deprived of regular leisure and educational activities	Participate in leisure and educational activities, school trips and events by migrant background, by income quintiles, rural/urban, Roma, SEN	% of children receiving non-formal education and other school activities	ŠVIS	Annually	Secondary	Monitoring / evaluation	Result	93,948 children attended non-formal education (2019)	100%
4	By 2030, achieve universal coverage of educational allowances	Coverage of educational allowances	% of children benefitting from educational allowances (transportation, textbooks, school meals, other)	Eurostat	Annually	Secondary	Evaluation	Result	EUR 240-EUR 280 per year for school supplies (2020)	100%
5	By 2030, universalize the coverage of children with special educational needs	Children with special educational needs	% of children with SEN attending mainstream education	ŠVIS	Annually	Secondary	Monitoring and evaluation	Structural	98.3% of children with SEN enrolled to mainstream education (2020-2021)	100% receiving attention within 6 months
6	By 2030, halve underachievement, paying particular attention to children living in households below 60% median income and in rural	Underachievement in reading, maths and science	Share of 15-year-old students failing to reach level 2 ('basic skills level') on the PISA scale for the three	PISA	3 years	Secondary	Evaluation	Result	Reading (476), math (481), science (482) (PISA 2018)	Halve underachievement with particular attention to children living in households below

	areas. By 2030, no more than 15% of 15-year-olds should be under-achieving in reading, mathematics and science ²¹⁸ .		core school subjects of reading, mathematics and science.								60% median income and in rural areas
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Source: compiled by PPML.

²¹⁸ European Commission. 2019. PISA 2018 and the EU. https://ec.europa.eu/education/news/pisa-2018_en.

5. Free and effective access to health care

5.1. Facts and trends in access to free health care

- Although medical health care is free of charge and accessible to all children in Lithuania, socio-economic disadvantages negatively influence children's access to the health care system. Children's medical and dental needs may remain unmet for various reasons, such as an inability to afford treatment, long waiting lists, long travel times or no means of transport, as well as a lack of time due to caregivers' work commitments or the need to care for family members or others.
- Families raising children with disabilities report having limited access to certain treatments that their children need, as well as a lack of specialists, long waiting lists, etc.
- The successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee in this area requires improved access to health care services for the most disadvantaged groups; a greater focus on children with disabilities and special needs; and the development of mental health services for children and their families.

This chapter outlines the current situation and key challenges facing vulnerable children in Lithuania with regard to free and effective access to health care. It also provides a short overview of the unmet needs and barriers to access to health care faced by children in need and their families across the country.²¹⁹ The second part of the chapter focuses on describing and assessing current health-related policies with regard to children and families raising children, and provides recommendations for the improvement and/or introduction of new policies.

According to EU-SILC 2017 data, 4.2 per cent of children in families with below 60 per cent of the median equivalized income had unmet needs in terms of medical examination or treatment, compared with 1.7 per cent of children in families with income above 60 per cent of the equivalized median. The discrepancies are even greater among children in rural areas.

The prevalence of mental health issues is recorded as being higher in urban areas compared with rural areas in Lithuania. Data from 2019 show that 12.5 per cent of girls and boys aged between 10 and 19 (approximately 33,000) had mental disorders. That figure is less than the EU average of 16.3 per cent (9

²¹⁹ PPMI. "Undertaking a deep-dive analysis of policies, programmes, services, budgets and mechanisms addressing child poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania." Desk research report. 2021.

million adolescents).²²⁰ Children who belong to the 15-17-year-old age group report the greatest number of cases of psychological and behavioural issues due to alcohol (13.3 per cent) and intoxication from other psychotropic substances (13.7 per cent). Around 40 per cent of pupils in 5th, 7th and 9th grades report feeling apathy; almost a quarter of students report feeling anxiety, worry, anger or sadness; and a third of students reported their mood to be lower than average. These proportions were higher among girls than among boys.

Long queues exist for children to receive necessary mental health services in Lithuania, and families are compensated for only 30 psychoterapist consultations each year (10 extra consultations may be provided in cases where it is recommended by a doctor). The lack of availability and continuity of psychological counselling is especially problematic for children living in low-income families and single-parent households. Such parents often cannot afford the services of private psychologists for their children, and in cases where children require continuous and consistent counselling, they do not receive such treatment. In 2018, the Minister of Health signed an order implementing psychosocial rehabilitation services for children and expanding hospital day care services (Lithuanian: *dienos stacionaras*) across all municipalities in Lithuania. However, evidence is lacking with regard to the effect of these changes and progress towards their implementation.

In terms of vaccination rates, the number of children vaccinated is insufficient and fails to meet the 95 per cent vaccination target recommended by the WHO for the population to benefit from herd immunity. The reasons for an insufficient level of vaccination among children in Lithuania are unclear. Research only shows that there is no correlation in Lithuania between the level of parental education and income, and their refusal to vaccinate their children.²²¹ The numbers of Roma children vaccinated are much lower than those among all other children in Lithuania.

Roma children also often receive vaccines at an older age than is recommended. Since ECEC and school attendance rates are very low among Roma children, their health is not checked as often as that of other children in Lithuania, so it is harder to recognize their health conditions and identify unmet needs. Another vulnerable group of children with regard to vaccinations is refugee children. Due to the constant turnover of children at refugee centres in Lithuania, not all of them are vaccinated or fall under the official statistics for vaccination. It is therefore not possible to accurately assess the prevalence of vaccination among refugee children. The only data collected come from specific refugee centres, and are incomplete²²². These demonstrate that refugee children are attended and vaccinated, but not necessarily enough. Health care is generally less accessible to children with migrant backgrounds.

Issues also exist with regard to the lifestyles of children in Lithuania. According to data from 2020, the situation among children has worsened, with only 38.1 per cent of children spending at least 60 minutes per day exercising, including sports lessons at school.²²³ Lack of interest on the part of parents play an important role, as well as financial reasons (not all parents, especially single parents, can afford to enrol

²²⁰ UNICEF. The state of the world's children 2021. On my mind. Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/108121/file/SOWC-2021-Europe-regional-brief.pdf>.

²²¹ Urbonaitė, R. 'Tėvų atsisakymo skiepyti vaikus priežasčių analizė.' 2018. Available at: <https://www.lsmuni.lt/cris/bitstream/20.500.12512/105044/1/Skiepai%20BMD%20R%C5%ABta%20Urbonait%C4%97.pdf>.

²²² Užkrečiamųjų ligų ir AIDS centras. 2018. Tikslinės grupės vaikų skiepavimo apimčių tyrimo duomenų analizė. Available at: <http://skiepai.ulac.lt/upload/files/2019/05/06/skiepu-leidinys-5.pdf>.

²²³ Mokyklinio amžiaus vaikų gyvenamosios tyrimas. Rodiklių suvestinė-ataskaita. 2020. Available at: <https://sam.lrv.lt/uploads/sam/documents/files/HI-Vaik%C5%B3-2020.pdf>.

their children in after-school activities). In 2019, youth centres were attended by 10,158 young people in Lithuania. Unfortunately, like day care centres, these centres are usually only attended by children living in families at social risk, with a very low level of involvement from children from low-income families. Thus, most of the time, vulnerable children and non-vulnerable children are artificially separated. Huge discrepancies still exist across Lithuania and children's needs are not always met, as the aforementioned centres are not available across the whole country. Although all schools provide prevention programmes, not all students attend such programmes – and teachers do not feel adequately equipped to effectively implement preventive programmes.

Universal and free-of-charge early rehabilitation for children with developmental disorders should be available to all children in Lithuania. In 2016, there were 14,700 children in Lithuania with disabilities who needed complex social, medical and other help. In 2015, the above services were provided to just under 13,000 children. The waiting period for placement in rehabilitation institutions exceeds the norm, and while the average waiting time is 25 days, the longest recorded waiting time was 118 days. Waiting for early rehabilitation also takes around 150 days, as not all institutions provide such services. Moreover, there is a lack of specialists working in rehabilitation hospitals.

In Lithuania, children living in out-of-home institutional and/or alternative care placements are not specified as a separate group. They receive the same health care services as all other children, and go through the same processes to receive necessary services. Social workers working in out-of-home care placement facilities play the role of parents and monitor the health of such children who are not sufficiently supported at the state level. Separate out-of-home care placements providers might have their own psychologists, but this is not mandatory.

No data are available in Lithuania concerning homeless children, but a review by the European Commission²²⁴ in 2021 shows that there is a higher prevalence of physical and mental health issues among homeless children in Lithuania.

Overall, Lithuanian children have a lower rate of unmet medical needs compared with the European average²²⁵. However, although medical care is universal and free of charge, not all children receive the treatment they need. The main groups of children who experience challenges are those living in low-income families and precarious family situations, children with disabilities, Roma children, and children with migrant or refugee origins. There is still a serious lack of data regarding children's access to health care, the barriers to access they face, and their unmet needs. Although sufficient data are available on health indicators in general, they are often not connected to children's socio-economic background. It is therefore difficult to measure how prevalent the problem is.

²²⁴ European Commission. Homeless children and young people. A review of interventions supporting access to health care services. 2021. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8420&furtherPubs=yes>.

²²⁵ Children's unmet medical and dental needs. 2017. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20190215-1>.

5.2. Policies and programmes to ensure effective access to free health care for children in need

Access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment is a fundamental right recognized by the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as by the European Union.²²⁶ The WHO also aims to achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, as well as access to quality essential services, medicines and vaccines.²²⁷ This section reviews the relevant policies and programmes developed by Lithuania's public administrations with regard to effective access to free health care. This sub-chapter focuses on those policies intended to address the particular target groups of children and their families that have been identified as experiencing difficulties in obtaining effective access to free health care services, including children living in low-income families and precarious family situations, Roma children, refugees and children with migrant backgrounds.

Measuring the effectiveness of the policies and programmes in place

In the National Progress Programme 2021-2030²²⁸, social inclusion and health care are identified as key elements for the development of society. The Programme is financed from the state budget of the Republic of Lithuania in the corresponding year and from overall allocations to respective ministries, municipalities and institutions participating in the Programme, from EU financial assistance and other international financial assistance received from international programmes and other funds. The programme strategically aims to increase social well-being and inclusion among the population and to strengthen health. To achieve the aforementioned strategic goals, the following measures are planned²²⁹:

- **Increasing the well-being of the people with disabilities (including children) and their families** and other vulnerable and socially excluded groups. Providing social support located as close as possible to the people in order to best meet their needs.
- **Strengthening the psychological and emotional resilience** of society to reduce addiction and the number of suicides, **paying particular attention to the psychological state of children.** Improving public health by developing a responsible approach to health, **increasing children's physical activity** and their involvement in sporting activities.
- Improving the **quality of health care services.** It is planned to increase **health literacy** and patients' involvement in the treatment process.
- Ensuring and maintaining the **emotional well-being of children and their families** and developing **access to quality services for all families raising children.**
- Better **adapting the environment for people with disabilities (including children),** responding to their needs as well as ensuring the **accessibility of the physical environment,** transport, infrastructure, services and information.
- Increasing the efficiency of the health system on the basis of **stronger primary care, improved quality of services,** implementation of a **long-term care model and better access**

²²⁶ Official Journal of the European Union. Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union.

²²⁷ WHO. Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health. 2016-2030. Available at: <https://www.who.int/life-course/partners/global-strategy/globalstrategyreport2016-2030-lowres.pdf>.

²²⁸ National progress programme for 2021-2030. Available at: <https://lr.v.lt/lt/aktuali-informacija/xvii-vyriausybe/strateginis-valdymas/2021-2030-m-nacionalinis-pazangos-planas>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

to **outpatient care** and focusing on solving other issues – long queues for doctors, high drug costs, high levels of corruption.

TABLE 14. 2021-2030 NATIONAL PROGRESS PROGRAMME FOR LITHUANIA. STRATEGIC GOAL, TASK AND IMPACT INDICATORS FOR CHILDREN

STRATEGIC GOAL	TASK	ASSESSMENT CRITERION	VALUE			INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE FOR ACHIEVING THE ASSESSMENT CRITERION VALUE
			Status (year)	2025	2030	
Increase social well-being and inclusion of the population, strengthen health	Promote the maintenance of health and strengthen the psychological resilience of society	Coverage of children (2 years of age) vaccinated with a single dose of MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine	92% (2018)	95% cent	95% cent	Ministry of Social Security and Labour
		Proportion of students who participated in non-formal education in sports and other activities promoting physical activity	20% (2018)	23%	26%	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport
		Proportion of students with low levels of psychological well-being	31.3% (2018)	26%	22%	Ministry of Health

More indicators were identified when implementing 2014–2020 EU Funds Investment Operational Programme, in particular the measure ‘Prevention of diseases, injuries and accidents in children, improvement of access to and quality of health care for children’.²³⁰ This project is financed using EUR 5,569,501 from EU Structural Funds, - and EUR 982,854 the state budget.

TABLE 15. MONITORING INDICATORS FOR THE MEASURE ‘PREVENTION OF DISEASES, INJURIES AND ACCIDENTS IN CHILDREN, IMPROVEMENT OF ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE FOR CHILDREN’

ASSESSMENT CRITERION (INDICATOR)	VALUE (STATUS), 31 DECEMBER 2018	TARGET VALUE, 31 DECEMBER 2023
The proportion of target group (children) who have changed their lifestyle after the implementation of public information, education and training activities funded by the ESF (on the topics of a healthy lifestyle, maintenance and strengthening of health, disease prevention)	21%	26%
Health care and other professionals involved in training	200	1,500
Municipalities with innovative models for the provision of public personal and public health care services that improve the availability of health care services for target groups	6	30

²³⁰ Vaikų ligų, traumų ir nelaimingų atsitikimų profilaktika, sveikatos priežiūros paslaugų vaikams prieinamumo ir kokybės gerinimas. Available at: https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemones/vaiku-ligu-traumu-ir-nelaimingu-atsitikimu-profilaktika-sveikatos-prieziuros-paslaugu-vaikams-prieinamumo-ir-kokybes-gerinimas-1.

Source: EU investments website www.esinvesticijos.lt.

Improving the infrastructure for children's health care services is another project funded by EU Structural Funds (EUR 25,281,434), along with EUR 6,246,624 from the state budget.²³¹ Impact indicators are presented in the table below.

TABLE 16. MONITORING INDICATORS FOR THE MEASURE 'IMPROVING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH CARE SERVICES'

ASSESSMENT CRITERION (INDICATOR)	VALUE (STATUS), 31 DECEMBER 2018	TARGET VALUE 31 DECEMBER 2023
Patients with improved quality and accessibility of services	0	83 000
Difference in the number of visits to doctors per capita between the population of cities and district municipalities	4 (visits per capita)	3 (visits per capita)
Children with a confirmed diagnosis of a rare disease	0	200
Number of public health care institutions with improved service delivery infrastructure	0	10

Source: esinvesticijos.lt.

The programme of the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania²³² also prioritizes the development of children's physical activity. It includes the project 'Sports system for physical activity, inclusion and high performance', the main goal of which is to **review the sports system in Lithuania to encourage greater physical activity among younger age groups**. Specifically, it aims to: a) develop and approve criteria for public investment in sport so that sports infrastructure is evenly distributed across the regions; b) promote the equal distribution of qualified specialists across the cities and regions of the country; c) improve physical fitness in schools and attitudes towards a healthy lifestyle through the introduction, by 2025, of up to three weekly physical education lessons in all general education schools; d) update the physical education curriculum, expand the variety of activities, and ensure inclusive physical education; e) strengthen the availability and quality of non-formal physical education; f) strive to ensure awareness of a physically active lifestyle among children; g) develop an annual programme to provide primary school children with basic swimming skills and promote safe behaviour in and around water, following an approved methodology.²³³

Key initiatives regarding a healthy diet (creating the conditions for children to grow up healthy), physical activity, sex education and the prevention of stress are highlighted in the programme of the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania.²³⁴ A focus is also placed on mental health and reducing the country's suicide rate, as well as a plan to develop adequate high-quality health and social services

²³¹ Vaikų sveikatos priežiūros paslaugų infrastruktūros tobulinimas. Available at:

https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemones/vaiku-sveikatos-prieziuros-paslaugu-infrastrukturos-tobulinimas.

²³² Resolution No xiv-72 on the programme of the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Available at:

<https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/PROGRAMME%20OF%20THE%20EIGHTEENTH%20GOVERNMENT%20OF%20THE%20REPUBLIC%20OF%20LITHUANIA.pdf>.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

at community level, accessible across whole of Lithuania, and to organize the provision of services and offer them proactively to children, adults and families in crises and severe psychosocial difficulties.²³⁵

Children and their families are one of the major target groups of the National Public Healthcare Development Programme for 2016-2023.²³⁶ The strategic goals of the Programme are to promote physical and mental health, to encourage healthy living and culture, and to promote health literacy. The following tasks aim to achieve this goal²³⁷:

- To encourage more efficient **dental care**, and implement preventive measures to counteract tooth decay in children;
- To **increase the physical activity** of the population and to enable them to be physically active in all areas of life: a) to inform all population groups about the health benefits of physical activity – to provide scientifically based knowledge, and to raise awareness of physical activity that improves health; b) to encourage physical activity among children and teenagers, particularly during early childhood, as well as in pre-school education establishments and schools; c) to create, update and develop safe sports and physical activity infrastructure, to ensure universal access to it, and to locate it close to places of residence; d) to monitor the physical activity of various population groups to evaluate changes and the effectiveness of implemented instruments;
- Carrying out interventions that **improve mental health**, encourage positive changes and raise public awareness: a) to encourage the dissemination to the public of positive information regarding mental health services, to raise public awareness of opportunities for improving mental health and preventing mental illness; b) to develop activities that improve mental health, as well as preventive activities in educational establishments, paying particular attention to the development of life skills, teaching constructive behaviour in conflict situations, solving the problems of bullying and violence, and promoting a healthy lifestyle and social-emotional development.

TABLE 17. GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA, RESOLUTION NO. 1291 ON THE APPROVAL OF THE NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTHCARE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR 2016-2023 – INDICATORS FOR MONITORING CHILDREN'S HEALTH

STRATEGIC GOAL	TASK	ASSESSMENT CRITERION	VALUE			INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE FOR ACHIEVING THE ASSESSMENT CRITERION VALUE
			Status (year)	2019	2023	
To promote physical and mental health	To improve public mental health by carrying out interventions that improve mental health, encourage positive changes and raise public awareness	% of pupils who have not experienced bullying in the last 2 months	46.2% (2014)	60%	70%	Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania

²³⁵ Resolution No xiv-72 on the programme of the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Available at: <https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/PROGRAMME%20OF%20THE%20EIGHTEENTH%20GOVERNMENT%20OF%20THE%20REPUBLIC%20OF%20LITHUANIA.pdf>.

²³⁶ Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Resolution No. 1291 on the Approval of the National Public Healthcare Development Programme for 2016-2023. 2015. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a293cf12809f11e6a0f68fd135e6f40c?jfwid=mmceord44>.

²³⁷ Ibid.

To reduce the risk and negative impact on public health of environmental factors and unsafe products and services	To reduce the impact of hazardous chemical substances throughout the life cycle of those substances	Number of poisonings among children under 7 years of age (cases)	381 (2014)	360	340	The Ministry of Health
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Another goal of the Programme is to ensure the sustainability of the public health care system. Tasks to achieve this goal are as follows²³⁸:

- To increase the **availability of high-quality and acceptable public health care services**: a) to develop and implement models for integrated public health care services that include the provision of personal health care services and public health care services; b) to improve the implementation of delegated functions in municipalities, to improve the quality and availability of such functions; c) to ensure that the public, especially young people and other target groups, are properly informed, to improve the knowledge and competence of health care professionals and other specialists concerning the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, to foster tolerance towards people with HIV/AIDS and to reduce the stigma of HIV, to ensure comprehensive prophylactic activity among risk groups, especially young people and teenagers, as well as early diagnosis and treatment of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, to improve epidemiological surveillance, and to develop low-threshold services and services for young people;
- To **improve the management of the public health care system**: a) to implement the ‘health in all policies’ approach – to actively coordinate the implementation of public health policy at both national and local levels, to encourage comprehensive cooperation between state institutions, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, business, and the media; b) to develop the competence of municipal councils, municipal doctors, municipal community health councils, the primary health care level, and communities, with regard to the improvement and promotion of public health; c) to develop public health monitoring registers and information systems; d) to develop immunoprophylactic activity across the country in order to manage vaccine-preventable communicable diseases, to inform and raise awareness among the population with regard to vaccines and vaccine-preventable communicable diseases, to boost trust in vaccines, to prepare and implement a training programme for specialists, to ensure that communicable diseases (poliomyelitis, measles, rubella) are eliminated on time according to the requirements of the WHO, and that proper epidemiological surveillance is carried out during the elimination period, to evaluate the actual degree of herd immunity, to conduct seroepidemiological studies, and to promote the inclusion of new vaccines in the Lithuanian children’s immunization schedule.

Health and social affairs are among the key pillars that will be funded from the Economic Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) component in Lithuania. In the field of health, it is planned to modernize infectious diseases cluster centres in five major cities, which will ensure accessible, high-quality infectious disease diagnostic and treatment services as well as safe working conditions for personnel. The reception units for 10 health institutions at regional level will also be modernized. This will ensure the preparedness of major hospitals in the country to effectively provide emergency medical services

²³⁸ Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Resolution NO 1291 on Approval of the National Public Healthcare Development Programme for 2016-2023. 2015. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a293cf12809f11e6a0f68fd135e6f40c?fwid=mmceord44>.

for a large number of patients at once in the event of an emergency (chemical pollution, radioactive contamination, nuclear accident terrorism, epidemic of communicable diseases).²³⁹

EUR 30 million will be designated to improve municipal public services and their infrastructure.²⁴⁰

Annual medical check-ups

Medical health care is free and accessible to all children in Lithuania. The key mechanism to assist children in accessing health care is annual medical check-ups, including consultations with the family doctor and dentist, which is compulsory for all children attending pre-primary (see also Chapter 3) or general education.

A preventive consultation with a family doctor includes: measuring the child's height and weight; checking the child's vision and hearing; measuring blood pressure, evaluating circulatory, respiratory, digestive, skeletal and other systems; evaluating the child's social-emotional development. If necessary, referring the child to a specialist in the relevant field, and prescribing additional tests. **A preventive consultation with the dentist** includes a dental examination and treatment plan, if necessary; a free dental sealant service²⁴¹ to prevent tooth decay is available for children from 6 to 14 years.

A health certificate is defined as a school document that provides instructions on how to organize a child's educational process according to her/his health condition. However, a health certificate can also serve as a preventive measure for children's health (placing an obligation on parents to regularly check their children's health), as well as a monitoring tool for the assessment of children's health conditions in Lithuania. However, a gap exists in the data on the health condition of children younger than 6 years old who do not attend pre-school education, given that the health certificate is compulsory only for those attending educational institutions. The health of children not attending pre-school, and the regularity of their medical check-ups, are dependent solely on the decisions of their parents. At the moment, medical records are the only available method to monitor the current health situation of children younger than 6 who do not attend any educational institution in Lithuania. Medical records still do not reflect the health of those who do not attend regular medical check-ups. Moreover, little data can be found regarding the correlation between children's health conditions and their families socio-economic status.

Vaccination

The provision of immunization against major infectious diseases is part of the **National Immunization Programme 2019-2023**²⁴², which sets Lithuania's objectives with regard to the vaccination of its population. Vaccinations are not mandatory in Lithuania (parents' consent is required), but are strongly recommended. All recommended vaccinations included in the national immunization scheme are free of charge. The programme aims to maintain at least 90 per cent coverage for children's vaccinations (in

²³⁹ 'New Generation Lithuania' – the Government Plan to Ensure a Breakthrough. Available at:

<https://finmin.lrv.lt/en/news/new-generation-lithuania-the-government-plan-to-ensure-a-breakthrough>.

²⁴⁰ The Government Approved the Integrated Plan 'New Generation Lithuania'. Available at: <https://finmin.lrv.lt/en/news/the-government-approved-the-integrated-plan-new-generation-lithuania>.

²⁴¹ National Health Insurance Fund under the Ministry of Health. Services for children. 2021. Available at:

<https://ligoniukasa.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/gyventojams-1/gydymo-ir-sveikatos-prieziuros-paslaugos/odontologines-paslaugos/paslaugos-vaikams>.

²⁴² Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministro įsakymas dėl Nacionalinės imunoprofilaktikos 2019–2023 metų programos patvirtinimo. 2019. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalact/64b65e3023ca11e9bf1ef395f41d6fbc>.

the case of vaccinations against measles and rubella, not less than 95 per cent), both across the country as a whole, and in each municipality.²⁴³ As stated in the paediatric preventive vaccination calendar²⁴⁴, all children in Lithuania are eligible for 14 vaccines in total, starting from the day of their birth until the age of 15-16. Taking into account the epidemiological situation regarding communicable diseases it is planned to expand the calendar of preventive vaccinations for children by introducing new vaccines, such as the varicella vaccine.²⁴⁵

The number of children vaccinated in Lithuania is insufficient, and fails to meet the 95 per cent vaccination target recommended by the WHO for the population to benefit from herd immunity. Unfortunately, the reasons for insufficient levels of vaccination among children in Lithuania are unclear. Research shows no correlation in Lithuania between parental education and income, and the refusal of parents to vaccinate their children.²⁴⁶ The National Immunization Programme 2019-2023 identifies possible causes, such as declining confidence in vaccines, misunderstanding of vaccinations and their benefits, distrust of science, and fear of possible side effects. Factors promoting fear may include a lack of reliable information, distrust regarding existing information providers, insufficient understanding of the benefits of vaccination to individuals and to society, as well as misleading and provocative information in the media about the safety of vaccines.²⁴⁷

The vaccination of Roma children in particular is insufficient in Lithuania, and the proportion of Roma children vaccinated is significantly lower than that of the general population of children in the country.²⁴⁸ Due to the constant turnover of children at refugee centres in Lithuania, it is impossible to accurately assess the prevalence of vaccination among refugee children²⁴⁹; however, the rate of vaccination among refugee children is likely to be lower than among the general population of children.

Assistance for families raising children with disabilities

In Lithuania, children with disabilities are entitled to a **social assistance pension**. For those with a severe disability, an amount equivalent to two times the social assistance pensions base is paid; for those with moderate disability, 1.5. For those with a mild disability, a benefit in the amount of the social assistance pension bases.²⁵⁰ The amount of the social assistance pension base is EUR 143.²⁵¹

²⁴³ Center of communicable diseases and AIDS. The national immunoprophylaxis programme for 2019-2023 has been approved. 2019. Available at: <http://www.ulac.lt/naujienos/pranesimai-spaudai/patvirtinta-nacionaline-20192023-metu-imunoprofilaktikos-programa>.

²⁴⁴ Pediatric preventive vaccination calendar. Available at: http://www.ulac.lt/uploads/downloads/lr_vaik%C5%B3%20profilaktini%C5%B3%20skiepijim%C5%B3%20kalendorius.pdf.

²⁴⁵ The national immunoprophylaxis programme for 2019-2023 has been approved.

²⁴⁶ Urbonaitė, R. 2018. "Tėvų atsisakymo skiepyti vaikus priežasčių analizė." Available at: <https://www.lsmuni.lt/cris/bitstream/20.500.12512/105044/1/Skiepai%20BMD%20R%C5%ABta%20Urbonait%C4%97.pdf>.

²⁴⁷ Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministro įsakymas dėl Nacionalinės imunoprofilaktikos 2019–2023 metų programos patvirtinimo.

²⁴⁸ Daiva Razmuvienė. Romų vaikų skiepų aprėpčių tyrimo rezultatai. 2018. National Conference on Communicable Diseases; Tikslinės grupės vaikų skiepavimo apimčių tyrimo duomenų analizė. 2018. Available at: <http://skiepai.ulac.lt/upload/files/2019/05/06/skiepu-leidinys-5.pdf>.

²⁴⁹ Tikslinės grupės vaikų skiepavimo apimčių tyrimo duomenų analizė. 2018. Available at: <http://skiepai.ulac.lt/upload/files/2019/05/06/skiepu-leidinys-5.pdf>.

²⁵⁰ „Neįgalaus vaiko teisių užtikrinimo ir pagalbos šeimai tyrimas, įvertinant Jungtinių Tautų Neįgaliųjų teisių konvencijos nuostatų įgyvendinimo efektyvumą Lietuvoje.“ Apklauso rezultatai ataskaita. 2019. Available at: <http://www.ndt.lt/wp-content/uploads/2019.12.20-Galutin%C4%97-ataskaita-Pateikta-NRD.pdf>.

²⁵¹ Legislative guide. The social assistance pension base. Available at: <https://www.tagidas.lt/savadai/9030/>.

Targeted compensation for the costs of assistance for children with disabilities was approved in 2019 in Lithuania. The amount of compensation depends on the specific diagnosis of the child with disabilities: children with severe disabilities receive a benefit equal to the amount of one targeted compensation base, children with a moderate disability, 0.5 targeted compensation base. The size of the targeted compensation base is EUR 120.²⁵² Targeted compensation for nursing and care costs are granted and paid for by municipal administrations.

In 2017, the **‘Description²⁵³ of the procedure for the coordinated provision of educational assistance, social and health care services for children** from birth to 18 years of age and persons with special educational needs’ was approved. In the aforementioned document, certain key principles were emphasized: the individualization of health services; the priority of a child’s well-being; equality and non-discrimination; complexity; the compatibility of actions and accessibility. In addition, a position of inter-institutional cooperation coordinator has been created.

Universal and free early rehabilitation for children with developmental disorders is available to all children in Lithuania. Many Lithuanian clinics provide these services, which allow the early detection of developmental disorders in children, and hence the early start of comprehensive assistance to children and their integration into society and the education system.²⁵⁴ Inpatient rehabilitation services provide uninterrupted rehabilitation treatment courses, as children arrive at the treatment facility and stay for the duration of the treatment. Access to outpatient medical rehabilitation services for children, especially for those with disabilities, is more complex and less appropriate for socio-economic reasons: parents accompanying a child up to the age of 7 may receive incapacity benefit only if the child has an illness or injury included in the list of severe conditions. This may have a huge impact on the family budget.²⁵⁵ In practice, most parents are forced to combine their child’s rehabilitation with a vacation, which most families typically take only in the summer. Consequent delays in treatment may yield poorer results.²⁵⁶ Children’s rehabilitation is a complex service that includes the education of children, as inpatient rehabilitation institutions ensure the continuity of the learning process in general education schools near to the rehabilitation institution.²⁵⁷ Funding for these measures of technical assistance is provided to children in Lithuania with disabilities.²⁵⁸

Research carried out in 2019 shows that most **medical services, as well as medical and technical aids**, are assessed relatively favourably by parents raising children with disabilities – even though around 30 per cent of respondents do not receive them promptly and/or the services and technical aids received are not those that are most needed. Outpatient and inpatient early rehabilitation for children under 7 years of age with disabilities, as well as medical rehabilitation services for children with disabilities from the age of 7 upwards were rated more poorly – respondents reported being deprived of necessary services.²⁵⁹ Parents raising children with disabilities belong to a group most in need of financial assistance and shuttle services, housing adaptation services and legal services, as well as experiencing

²⁵² „Neįgalaus vaiko teisių užtikrinimo ir pagalbos šeimai tyrimas, įvertinant Jungtinių Tautų Neįgaliųjų teisių konvencijos nuostatų įgyvendinimo efektyvumą Lietuvoje.“

²⁵³ Įsakymas dėl koordinuotai teikiamų švietimo pagalbos, socialinių ir sveikatos priežiūros paslaugų tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. 2017. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a3d680508cc11e7a5e2b345b086d377?jfwl->

²⁵⁴ „Neįgalaus vaiko teisių užtikrinimo ir pagalbos šeimai tyrimas, įvertinant Jungtinių Tautų Neįgaliųjų teisių konvencijos nuostatų įgyvendinimo efektyvumą Lietuvoje.“

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

the lack of social workers. Financial services are most necessary in the following areas: treatment and rehabilitation, consultations, transport, the purchase of necessary equipment, housing, compensation for heating and water and an assistant or nurse.²⁶⁰ The aforementioned research confirms a lack of counselling for families who have children with disabilities.

There is a **lack of adapted services for children with disabilities**, which often results in parents being unable to work full-time or obtain adequate income.²⁶¹ As several interviewees pointed out, many parents (often single mothers) who have to provide regular care for their children are forced to remain out of work and live under difficult socio-economic conditions. This also leads to a stressful psychological atmosphere at home, and a negative impact on children and their potential to get better. In some cases where parents are unable to provide permanent care for their children and municipalities cannot offer the help needed, children are placed into institutional care for children with special needs. However, as interviewees highlighted, more attention should be paid to the improvement of services for disabled children and their families, as institutional care should only be a last resort.²⁶²

Interview participants also emphasized that not all disabilities are treated equally in Lithuania. In many cases, the parents themselves have to represent and defend the best interests of children in order to ensure they receive the attention and services they need. A more flexible, complex and person-oriented approach is needed in the process of service provision for children.²⁶³

Children's access to mental health services

The Ministry of Health is directly in charge of the legal framework for arranging the provision of mental health services for children and families in need. The social care sector (under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour) is responsible for the development of social care services/programmes for children and families facing mental health problems. The education sector, in the form of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, takes responsibility for ensuring the education of children with special needs, as well as the general assurance of good mental health in pre-school and school institutions. Mental health care depends heavily on mutual intersectoral collaboration, in particular between three key institutions: the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.²⁶⁴

In response to the need for counselling for children and their families, consultations with psychologists have become a part of **Integrated Family Services** (funded by the ESF) across municipalities in Lithuania. This measure aims to enable families to receive integrated services, ensuring the accessibility of services near to the family's place of residence.²⁶⁵ Free individual or group consultations with psychologists and psychotherapists are provided to children from the age of 7. Municipalities, together

²⁶⁰ „Neįgalaus vaiko teisių užtikrinimo ir pagalbos šeimai tyrimas, įvertinant Jungtinių Tautų Neįgaliųjų teisių konvencijos nuostatų įgyvendinimo efektyvumą Lietuvoje.“

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Information gathered from interview.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Europe: Infrastructures, Policy and Programmes. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/camhee_infrastructures.pdf.

²⁶⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministro įsakymas dėl asmeninio asistento paslaugų organizavimo ir teikimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo. 2018. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/1dceb4f0eefe11e88568e724760eeafa/asr>; Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Comprehensive family services. 2020. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/seima-ir-vaikai/seimos-politika/kompleksines-paslaugos-seimai>.

with partners (NGOs and other institutions), are responsible for the provision of services. Each municipality chooses, according to its needs, what services are provided within its territory. A municipal body or NGO that coordinates and organizes services is called a Community Family Home, which families and or children should approach to receive services.²⁶⁶

However, children's access to consultations with psychologists depends on various factors including their parents' habits and health literacy, teachers' ability to identify a child's needs, the differing abilities of municipalities to attract specialists and provide necessary services, and so on. According to one interviewee, children often face long queues before they receive the necessary help, and families are compensated for only 30 psychotherapist consultations each year (10 additional consultations may be provided in cases where it is recommended by a doctor). The number of consultations with psychologists is not restricted.

The lack of availability and continuity in psychological counselling is especially problematic for children living in low-income families, including single-parent families. Research shows that parents on low incomes cannot afford the services of private psychologists for their children. In cases where children require continuous and consistent counselling, they simply do not receive such treatment.²⁶⁷

Health services for children with migrant or refugee backgrounds

Even though under Lithuanian law, medical health care is free of charge and accessible to all children in Lithuania, children with migrant backgrounds whose parents are not asylum seekers (and are not insured) often face barriers to their access to health care. However, in 2021, a new wave of migrants (refugees) who have crossed the border illegally and arrived in Lithuania via Belarus has stimulated **new amendments** to be drafted in the Lithuanian legal system with regard to the provision of health services. According to these legal amendments, all children of migrant origin, regardless of their parents' decision whether or not to seek asylum, fall under the arrangements for **free health services**, which will be **provided** to them **in full**. Due to these changes, the overall situation of health care for children of migrant origin should improve significantly.²⁶⁸

In terms of the current provision of health services to refugee families who have reached Lithuania illegally via Belarus, the situation is as follows²⁶⁹:

- Camps are visited by mobile medical teams that assess a person's health status. If a doctor prescribes medication, it is delivered to that person.
- In cases of an acute deterioration in health, an ambulance is called.
- Larger accommodation facilities have medical facilities staffed by a family doctor and nurse.
- Psychologists work at Refugee Reception and Foreigners' Registration Centres. At other accommodation establishments, mobile teams of specialists identify the needs of migrants, as well as assessing the emotional state, the need for a doctor, and are consulted by psychologists in situations of particularly critical need.

²⁶⁶ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministro įsakymas dėl asmeninio asistento paslaugų organizavimo ir teikimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo; Comprehensive family services.

²⁶⁷ Skubiejūtė, G. 2020. Vienų motinų šeimos Lietuvos šeimos įstatymų kontekste.

²⁶⁸ 15min.lt. Lietuvoje bus gydomi ir migrantai: prieinama taps ne tik pirmoji pagalba. 2021.

<https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/lietuvoje-bus-gydomi-ir-migrantai-prieinama-taps-ne-tik-pirmoji-pagalba-56-1576982>.

²⁶⁹ Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Migrants in Lithuania. Frequently Asked Questions. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/duk/migrantai-lietuvoje>.

Overall, children's health and social well-being are an important part of the national health system in Lithuania. The quality of and access to health services, health literacy, mental and physical health and sex education are at the centre of the National Progress Programme 2021-2030, XVIII Government Programme and Public Health Care Development Programme. This focuses on spreading awareness of the importance of mental and physical health, increasing access to sporting activities, and monitoring. One of its national goals is to also ensure the sustainability of the public health care system by providing integrated services, creating infrastructure for health care services in the regions, and improving the management of the public health care system. Children and their families, and children with disabilities, are mentioned as separate target groups.

Health programmes and services for children in Lithuania include preventive consultations with family doctors and dentists once a year; free vaccination programmes; a project aimed at integrating family services (including consultations with psychologists); social assistance pensions and targeted compensation for assistance costs in relation to children with disabilities and their families; and universal and free early rehabilitation programmes. Although programmes are beneficial for vulnerable children and their families in Lithuania, barriers still exist. These include long queues, lack of transport, work-related time constraints for parents (especially single parents), lack of services, services that are too expensive, and a lack of specialists (psychologists, specialists for children with disabilities). Disparities in access also exist between rural and urban areas across the country. These barriers lead to a high prevalence of children's mental health issues (particularly in urban areas), an insufficient rate of vaccination (especially among children of migrant origin and Roma children), physical inactivity among children, a lack of access to specific services for children with disabilities. In addition, the health condition of children under the age of 6 years who do not attend pre-primary education is not monitored. The monitoring system for children in Lithuania should include more socio-economic factors to measure the health condition of children from vulnerable families. Lastly, no specific programmes exist for the improvement of access to health services among children with migrant backgrounds and Roma children.

5.3. Recommendations for improving access to effective health care

Although health-related programmes and services are free for all children in Lithuania, there is a need for a more comprehensive and strategic approach and greater institutional support (financial, material, trained human resources). In 2018, the Lithuanian government adopted a set of legislative acts to implement a comprehensive package of six structural reforms, including in the area of health. However, health care and access to health care remain a challenge.²⁷⁰

A more complex, flexible and people-oriented approach is still needed, and would help in achieving a higher rate of access to health services, especially for children with disabilities and their families, low-income families, Roma children, and children of migrant origin. The National Action Plan should focus on targeted categories of children in need, taking into account regional and local disparities. Social support should be provided as close as possible to people's place of living to best meet their needs. To ensure better monitoring of children's health conditions, a greater number child-focused indicators should be included (see Table 18). A comprehensive national children's health policy could have an

²⁷⁰ Council Recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Lithuania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Lithuania.

impact on reducing disparities across the country, improving the condition of children's health and establishing a helpful monitoring system. Based on current children's health policies and programmes, information regarding the barriers faced by vulnerable children and their families in Lithuania, as well as guidance provided at EU level, key recommendations have been formulated.

Consistent coordination between central and local institutions

To reduce the existing discrepancies and assure access to health care for all children across the country, as well as the ability to provide necessary health services based on individual needs, it is essential to better coordinate actions between central and local levels. It is recommended to ensure **effective collaboration between the persons responsible in each municipality's health department and representatives** at national level. Both parties should continuously share ongoing information regarding the demand for and challenges to health assistance for children in particular municipalities. Mutual discussion and joint efforts should follow, to make common decisions to address children's unmet needs, and address a lack of specialists or other issues (e.g. reaching out to vulnerable groups of Roma children and children of migrant origin). Training could be organized to improve the competencies of the persons responsible. Descriptions as to the provision of services and activities, as well as **recommendations**, should be provided **at the national level**. Evaluation should be carried out to ensure the proper planning of necessary resources (human and financial) and the performance of functions. **Approaches and suggestions from local professionals** should be taken into account when improving the national political agenda. Private initiatives should be encouraged and supported.

Good coordination between national and local representatives is expected to significantly improve children's access to health care services in the regions, which is one of the goals of the National Progress Programme 2021-2030. Increasing the accessibility of children's health care also strengthens the country's overall health care system, making it more resilient – an aim the European Commission recommends should be at the centre of the country's health policy. Part of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funding is already intended to strengthen the resilience of the health system and accessibility to health services in Lithuania.²⁷¹

Collaboration between different sectors including social affairs, education and health divisions

Collaboration between different sectors **at the national level is vital when developing policies and programmes** (involvement of representatives from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Security and Labour and Ministry of Education, Science and Sport). This particular proposal reflects the National Public Healthcare Development Programme and its goal to improve the management of public health care system by implementing the **'health in all policies' approach**. **Collaboration between doctors, social workers in municipality divisions, NGOs and teachers** should be encouraged **at municipal level**. Regular health monitoring (general health, dental care, screening of vision and hearing) could be organized in schools or other settings for children from low-income families. Attention to efficient dental care and the implementation of preventive measures to counteract tooth decay in children is emphasized in the National Public Healthcare Development Programme. A well-functioning collaborative system could successfully assist in reaching out to more vulnerable children as well as informing them and their families more quickly about existing health care programmes, the importance

²⁷¹ Council Implementing Decision on the approval of the assessment of the recovery and resilience plan for Lithuania. 2021. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10477-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

of children's health and physical activity, etc. Such a system would be likely to make information much more easily available to the most vulnerable groups of children. This could be seen as a practical example of a comprehensive approach towards children's access to health care that is applicable across different sectors and has an impact on the resilience of the health system (intended funding in RRF) for children in Lithuania in the long term. These recommendations reinforce the national goal of developing the partnership and competence of municipal councils, municipal doctors and the primary health care level. Furthermore, collaboration between different sectors could offer more possibilities for funding allocation in the area of children's health care, which is in line with the recommendation of the European Commission²⁷² to mobilize adequate funding for the health system.

Greater involvement of NGOs, business organizations and volunteers

In striving to better assist children in need in the area of health, the **involvement of NGOs, business organizations and volunteers is important**. Additional support is needed to reach out to more vulnerable children and more quickly reduce discrepancies across the country. Collaboration between different bodies can also ensure a more stable funding scheme. The creation of partnerships could also be promoted with other types of stakeholders, such as NGOs, pedagogical experts and academics. In general, all private initiatives should be encouraged and supported at state level.

Quality health services

As highlighted by the European Commission's country report on Lithuania, progress towards improving the quality of the country's health care system remains limited.²⁷³ The quality of health services has therefore been addressed in all of the latest national documents including the National Progress Programme 2021-2030, programme of the XVIII Government and National Public Healthcare Development Programme. In addition, Lithuania is implementing an EU-funded measure that directly focuses on the improvement of quality health care for children. Nevertheless, there remains a need for Lithuania to **focus more heavily on the improvement of primary health care and the quality of health services** for children. Targeted investments, including those funded from the RRF, should be used to strengthen the aforementioned areas. As specified in ECG, every child in the country should be provided with free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment.²⁷⁴ Regional disparities in access to quality health care should be reduced by investing in the more **even distribution of health care professionals** and nurses, and even the **use of telecommunications technology to diagnose and treat patients at a distance**, provide access to mental and dental care, and enable more integrated care.²⁷⁵ The lack of high-quality specialists could be addressed by introducing **e-health services in** (using anticipated funding from the RRF) in **rural areas**, as well as establishing **benefits packages for specialists in the countryside**. The RRF instrument also aims to finance the establishment of the health

²⁷² Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Lithuania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Stability Programme of Lithuania. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0515&from=EN>.

²⁷³ European Semester. Country Report for Lithuania. 2020. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0514&from=EN>.

²⁷⁴ Study on the economic implementing framework of a possible EU child guarantee scheme including its financial foundation. Final report.

²⁷⁵ Country Report for Lithuania.

professionals competency platform.²⁷⁶ The latest recommendations from the European Commission²⁷⁷ focus also on **addressing shortages in the health care workforce** (using anticipated funding from the RRF), many of which lead to health inequalities and geographical mismatches between services and the needs of children. Depending on the particular children's health issues in regional municipalities (e.g. limited access to certain treatments for children with disabilities, shortages in the health care workforce, low take-up of health programmes and services, lack of mental health services, etc.), optimization could be carried out in terms of the scale on which these services are organized, and **collaboration between municipalities could be established** to solve common challenges.²⁷⁸ Following the example of Finland, municipalities could receive funding from the government for cooperation between themselves in setting up shared mechanisms for administering and providing certain services, in order to improve the quality of the most-needed health and care services.²⁷⁹

Better-integrated systems and mechanisms

To ensure the consistency of the aforementioned health services for children, a holistic approach is recommended. An example to follow is that of the project 'Integrated family services; (funded by the ESF), **creating better-integrated systems and mechanisms** to ensure the **accessibility of health services** near to the place of residence of children and their families, and to outreach for children in need (making it easier to obtain all the information needed). As mentioned in the previous recommendation, the European Commission²⁸⁰ emphasizes the provision of more integrated care as an important aspect of quality health services, and strongly encourages the development of such a system in Lithuania. Every municipality, in collaboration with NGOs, could choose, what services are provided in its territory, according to local needs. **Integrated services** could better **ensure children's access to necessary health services and continuity with regard to their use** (from preventative health care services to follow-up treatment). This recommendation falls under one of the goals of the National Public Healthcare Development Programme, which also emphasizes the importance of implementing models of integrated public health care services under the National Progress Programme 2021-2030 goal to improve quality services for children. Thus, municipalities should be given greater encouragement to develop and implement **pilot versions** of projects oriented towards children's health, and to share their results with other municipal bodies in order to reduce inequalities in access across the country (e.g. the measure 'Development of a Model for the Provision of Youth-Friendly Health Care Services'²⁸¹), or even collaborate in solving common issues (see the recommendation on quality health services).

Accessible mental health services

As shown by the current data and recommended by the European Commission²⁸², a **focus** should also be placed **on mental health services** for children in need. **Quality mental health services should be accessible to all children** and all families raising children across the country. This recommendation

²⁷⁶ Council Implementing Decision on the approval of the assessment of the recovery and resilience plan for Lithuania. 2021.

²⁷⁷ Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Lithuania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Stability Programme of Lithuania.

²⁷⁸ Eurofound. Access to care services: Early childhood education and care, healthcare and long-term care. Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20015en.pdf.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Country Report for Lithuania.

²⁸¹ Priemonė „Jaunimui palankių sveikatos priežiūros paslaugų teikimo modelio sukūrimas“. Available at: http://www.smlpc.lt/lt/renginiai/ivyke_renginiai/savivaldybems_pristatytas_jaunimui_palankiu_sveikatos_prieziuros_paslau_gu_teikimo_modelio_koregavima.html.

²⁸² Country Report for Lithuania.

reflects the goal proposed in the main national documents. Specifically, the National Progress Programme 2021-2030 emphasizes the need to pay specific attention to children's psychological state. Meanwhile, the programme of the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania highlights the importance of preventing children's stress and being attentive to mental health issues (with a focus on reducing the suicide rate among children). Lastly, the Public Healthcare Development Programme highlights improving children's mental health in Lithuania and raising public awareness on this issue. Although mental health services are integrated into strategic health policy documents, however, regional disparities exist in terms of the numbers as well as the workload of child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists.²⁸³ A lack of specialists in this area could be solved **using remote services** if necessary. In addition, services should be **provided free of charge and without any restriction on the number of consultations**, to ensure children's access to long-term counselling and the treatment of more complex mental health disorders.

Pro-active campaign on the importance of children's health and healthy lifestyles

Health literacy is one of the key aspects mentioned in the ECG.²⁸⁴ In line with the measure in the National Progress Programme 2021-2030 to increase health literacy and the goal of the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania to pro-actively organize the provision of health care services at community level, **promoting the importance of children's health improvement** should be a priority for all municipalities. Parents and children should receive as much information as possible regarding the topics of physical and mental health and healthy lifestyles, as well as the **main existing services that can best meet their needs** at a given time. **Proactively reaching out to all children could help to ensure accessibility and actual coverage.** A binding system of invitation, registration and reminders with a competent authority at local level should be created. This could include awareness-raising sessions, flyers and home visits. Health services could be delivered through home visits by competent social workers, or via family support centres or other community-based organizations. Consideration should also be given to organizing home visits by doctors²⁸⁵ for regular examinations during the first years of life.

According to the recommendations of the European Commission²⁸⁶, the future resilience of Lithuania's health care system requires the enhancement of the system's ability to remedy unhealthy lifestyles (one of the other important factors underlying poor health outcomes in Lithuania). Collaboration with schools could have a significant impact on spreading information, as would involving more volunteers who could partially compensate for assistance services. More physical activities should be organized for children as part of the school curriculum and during after-school activities. At present, public health professionals (in the public health bureaus of municipalities) are already responsible for maintaining constant contact with schools and teachers which should be further developed. In addition, a network of health-promoting schools²⁸⁷ aims to strengthen the physical and mental health of students, improve health literacy and develop healthy lifestyle skills. More efforts should be made to improve current collaboration practices and create a highly integrated and comprehensive health promotion system

²⁸³ Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania. 2019.

²⁸⁴ Study on the economic implementing framework of a possible EU child guarantee scheme including its financial foundation. Final report.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Lithuania and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Stability Programme of Lithuania.

²⁸⁷ Sveikatos mokymo ir ligų prevencijos centras. Sveikatą stiprinančių mokyklų tinklas. Available at: <http://www.smlpc.lt/index.php?lang=1&sid=111>.

through the joint efforts of teachers, physicians, family and society. It is crucial to **improve the qualifications of specialists** working with children in need by undertaking awareness-raising initiatives. Stronger actions to promote good health and prevent bad health would relieve pressure on health care systems in the long term.²⁸⁸

Child-oriented health care services for children with disabilities

Elaborating on the goal to improve the **well-being of people with disabilities (including children), as well as children's access to services** in the National Progress Programme 2021-2030, policies and programmes for children with disabilities and their families should be **more child-oriented, more flexible, and should focus on the individual needs of each child**. The development and **accessibility of services across the country** is important, as is the provision of **supportive measures for households** (financial benefits; the provision of transport; free services and the provision of services that are most needed at the given time; provision of respite care). Information about the services provided should also be more accessible. **Compensation for nursing care services at home (respite care)** for families, especially single parents raising children with disabilities, could assist in helping parents remain in the job market, increase family incomes and help to raise them out of poverty. In 2019, Lithuania adopted new legislation that formally recognizes the status of informal carers and outlines their rights and access to services such as respite care; however, this initiative remains in the early stages of development. EU-supported, project-based funding has been made available to support trials of respite care services in a limited number of municipalities.²⁸⁹ It is therefore recommended to **invest more in respite care services at national level** in order to provide them to the families raising children with disabilities, and to ensure their accessibility in all municipalities.

Political attention to children of migrant origin, Roma children and the homeless

Groups such as **children of migrant origin and Roma children**, as well as **homeless children** (those in street situations) remain outside the scope of intense political attention, and are still insufficiently included in strategic documents in Lithuania. It is therefore highly recommended to address their health needs by distinguishing them as **separate target groups in policies and programmes**. Additional measures (part of national strategies oriented towards Roma children and children of migrant origin) should be developed specifically for these groups in order to help them better access health services (including gender-related health care needs²⁹⁰), improve their current habits regarding health care, and strengthen their awareness of the health care services available. It is essential to apply pro-active policies and **increase awareness among Roma parents and parents with migrant backgrounds regarding the importance of vaccinating their children, as well as improving the vaccination rate** of Roma children and children of migrant origin. Because **no national strategy** (or representative data) exists with regard to homeless people and **children in street situations** in Lithuania, it is essential to focus more on this particular group of children by **strengthening the NGO sector** (which already has professional experience of working with homeless children), **adopting a national strategic document** relating to children in street situations, and providing assistance for health care interventions that focus directly on the most common issues faced by homeless children. For example, the pro-active promotion of

²⁸⁸ European Commission. Improving access to healthcare through more powerful measurement tools. 2021. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/default/files/systems_performance_assessment/docs/measuring_access-to-healthcare_en.pdf.

²⁸⁹ Access to care services: Early childhood education and care, healthcare and long-term care. Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20015en.pdf.

²⁹⁰ Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania. 2019.

physical and mental health, directly approaching children regarding the provision of services; reducing substance misuse, etc.²⁹¹ should be initiated, encouraged and supported at national level. Training is also needed for health specialists on how to communicate using simple and informal language and actively listening, as well as on promoting the importance of health.²⁹² Services should also be flexible and prompt, offered in a single location, and accessible without the need to provide a registered address.

More disaggregated data on children's health

A WHO resolution committing the organization to the implementation of its Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health emphasizes the importance of accountability through the monitoring of national progress and increasing capacity building for good-quality data collection and analysis.²⁹³ Given the lack of monitoring indicators concerning children's health in Lithuania, it is recommended to introduce **further indicators on children's health conditions** (see Table 18). Better data could motivate decisions on improving the adequacy of children's health care coverage and provide more powerful policy feedback, helping to determine a more decisive reorientation of the children's health care system towards health promotion and the prevention of health risks, with a view to tackling health inequalities.²⁹⁴ It is also recommended to **include more socio-economic aspects (disaggregated data)** such as household type, family income, parents' employment status, degree of urbanization (rural/urban), migratory status, ethnicity (where appropriate), disability status, and to measure their **correlation with children's health indicators**. Collecting disaggregated data would help to better capture the characteristics of children in need and their risks at a geographical level in order to evaluate regional disparities, identify the most vulnerable groups of children, and show how to reform systems and means of providing health care services to better address the needs of target groups.²⁹⁵ The health care system may currently be failing to cover services essential to certain marginalized populations²⁹⁶ - in the case of Lithuania, **specific focus should be given to Roma children, children of migrant origin, and children in street situations**. Access to health care services for these groups is not reflected in national statistics.

Consistent monitoring practice, established at national level, could help to identify the most vulnerable groups of children and measure the level of children's access to health care, as well as improving child-focused policies in the future. To better evaluate the accessibility of health-related services for children in need, it may be necessary to develop qualitative sources of data.²⁹⁷ Cooperation with scientists and investment in thematic research should be also considered.

²⁹¹ European Commission. Access to healthcare for homeless children and families. 2021. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8420&furtherPubs=yes>.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ WHO. Committing to implementation of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health. Resolution. 2016. Available at: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/252782/A69_R2-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

²⁹⁴ Improving access to healthcare through more powerful measurement tools.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

TABLE 18. PROPOSED INDICATORS FOR MONITORING FREE AND EFFECTIVE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

N°	GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	DISAGGRE- GATION	SOURCE	PERIO- DICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET	SOURCE OF FUNDING
1	By 2030, to have zero children with unmet medical needs	Children's unmet medical needs (in comparison with an existing indicator at EU level)	% of households with children with unmet needs for medical coverage, treatment and access to medicines	Socio-demographic variables: household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status	EU-SILC (2017)	Ad-hoc module - Irregular	Primary	Evaluation	Structural	4.2% of children from low-income ²⁹⁸ families 2.3% of children in total No national data on children	0% (2030) The goal is to make health services accessible for every child	Ministry of Health RRF ERDF ESF+
2	By 2030, to have a higher proportion of children under the age of 7 benefitting from preventive medical consultations	% of children benefitting from free preventive consultations with family doctors and dentists (new indicator suggested by PPMI in order to	% of all Lithuanian children have who participated in preventive consultations with family doctors and dentists	Socio-demographic variables: age; household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status/ethnicity (focus on Roma children and children of	Hygiene Institute (medical records)	Each year	Primary	Monitoring	Process	None	-	Ministry of Health

²⁹⁸ Below 60% of median equivalized income.

		measure the percentage of children (especially those under the age of 7) benefitting from the existing preventive programme for monitoring children's health)		migrant origin), disability status								
3	By 2030, to have a higher proportion of children benefitting from appropriate follow-up treatment	% of children benefitting from appropriate follow-up treatment (e.g. quality, waiting time, specialized examinations) (new indicator suggested by PPMI in order to measure the actual situation of children's access to follow-up treatment within the country)	% of all Lithuanian children who participated in follow-up treatment after a primary consultation	Socio-demographic variables: age; household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status/ethnicity (focus on Roma children and children of migrant origin), disability status	Hygiene Institute (medical records)	Each year	Primary	Monitoring	Process	None	-	Ministry of Health
4	By 2030, to have	Children's unmet	% of households	Socio-demographic	EU-SILC (2017)	Ad-hoc module	Primary	Evaluation	Structural	1.1% of children from	0%	Ministry of Health

	zero children with unmet dental needs	dental care needs (in comparison with an existing indicator at the EU level)	with children with unmet need for dental care	variables: Household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status		- Irregular					low-income families 3.6% of children in total No national data on children	(2030) The goal is to make health services accessible for every child	RRF ESF+
5	By 2030, to reach a higher percentage of children resilient to communicable diseases	Children's vaccination rate (indicator used in the National Progress Programme 2021-2030)	Coverage of children (2 years of age) vaccinated with a single dose of MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine	Migratory status; ethnicity (focus on the vaccination rates of Roma children and children of migrant origin)	Statistics Lithuania	5 years	Primary	Monitoring	Process	92% (2018)	95% (2030) According to the recommendation by the WHO	Ministry of Health RRF ESF+	
6	By 2030, to improve children's mental health	Children's unmet mental health needs (in comparison with the existing indicator at EU level)	% of children with unmet mental health needs. Unmet needs are defined as the inaccessibility of mental health care due to distance, lack of transportation or financial resources	Socio-demographic variables: household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status	Hygiene Institute	3-5 years	Primary	Evaluation	Structural	-	-	Ministry of Health RRF ESF+	
7	By 2030, to improve children's	% of students with low	% of children with unmet mental	Socio-demographic variables:	Hygiene Institute	3-5 years	Primary	Monitoring and evaluation	Process	31.3% (2018)	22% (2030)	Ministry of Health	

	mental health	levels of psychological well-being (indicator used in the National Progress Programme 2021-2030)	health needs. Unmet needs are defined as the inaccessibility of mental health care due to distance, lack of transportation or financial reasons	household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status							Selected at the national level	
8	By 2030, to improve children's mental health	% of students who have not experienced bullying in the previous 2 months (indicator used in the National Public Healthcare Development programme for 2016-2023)		Socio-demographic variables: household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status	Hygiene Institute	3-5 years	Secondary	Monitoring and evaluation	Process	46.2% (2014) 60% (2019)	70% (2023) Selected at the national level 80% (2030) Selected by PPMI	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport
9	By 2030, to increase healthy lifestyle and promote the importance of	Physical inactivity (indicator used in the National Progress Programme 2021-2030)	% of students who have participated in non-formal education in sports and other activities promoting	Household type; family income; parents' employment status; living area (rural/urban); belonging to groups of migrants, Roma	Statistics Lithuania HBSC	3-5 years	Secondary	Monitoring	Process	20% (2018)	26% (2030) Selected at the national level	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport

	children's health		physical activity	children, children with disabilities								
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Source: compiled by PPMI.

6. Effective access to healthy nutrition

6.1. Facts and trends in effective access to healthy nutrition

- In 2020, only 37.8 per cent of mothers exclusively breastfed their children during their first six months. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months is crucial to an infant's adequate nutrition, but is highly dependent on the mother's age, educational attainment level, and socio-economic status.²⁹⁹
- Children in Lithuania persistently do not consume enough fruits and vegetables, with only 34.4 per cent eating fruit and 31.7 per cent eating vegetables at least once every day in 2020. Regular consumption of fruit and vegetables is one of the main indicators of nutrition quality.³⁰⁰
- Enforced lack of proteins for reasons of affordability is higher among lower-income households with dependent children. In 2020, the risk of enforced lack of proteins in households with dependent children was 9.1 per cent. For low-income households with dependent children, the risk was 20.6 per cent. The risk was particularly high among low-income single parents (26.1 per cent) and low-income households with three or more children (42.3 per cent).³⁰¹

This chapter describes and assesses the policies aimed at addressing the main challenges faced by vulnerable children in Lithuania in accessing healthy nutrition, and provides further policy recommendations. Effective access to adequate nutrition is vital for children's development from infancy throughout adolescence. The lack of proper nutrition during infancy contributes to a range of poor health outcomes in the future, while a lack thereof among children and adolescents impacts physical and mental well-being and cognitive functioning, and contributes to lower learning outcomes. Children from vulnerable groups face a particularly high risk of not accessing regular and healthy nutrition throughout their childhood. The most vulnerable groups are **children from low-income households, as well as those experiencing social risks** such as precarious family situations. **Infants and children aged 0-2** are particularly vulnerable, as their access to adequate nutrition largely depends on their parents' habits. **Children who do not attend any formal educational institutions**, who also

²⁹⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija. 2021. Vaikų Mityba. Available at: <https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/visuomenes-sveikatos-prieziura/mityba-ir-fizinis-aktyvumas-2/vaiku>.

³⁰⁰ Data provided by Hygiene Institute (2020).

³⁰¹ Eurostat. <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

tend to come from income-poor families that experience social risk, are also highly vulnerable, due to the fact that the key policies aimed at improving access to nutrition are delivered through educational institutions.

Low rate of breastfeeding during the first six months

Birth weight and **exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months** are the key indicators for an infant's access to adequate nutrition. A mother's poor nutrition both before and during pregnancy may lead to low birth weight, which, in turn, may result in adverse future health outcomes for infants.³⁰² Although Lithuania has one of the lowest rates of low birthweight in the EU, accounted for just 4.6 per cent of all births in 2019, these data are not disaggregated, making it difficult to determine the relevance of this issue among various vulnerable groups.³⁰³ **Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months** is crucial for the health and development of newborns.³⁰⁴ The Hygiene Institute of Lithuania reports that, overall, **only 37.8 per cent of mothers exclusively breastfed** their infants for the first six months, although this marks an increase from 32 per cent in 2015. The persistently high number of children who are breastfed for less than six months indicate an unmet need for healthy nutrition at infancy.³⁰⁵

Increasing use of artificial breast milk substitutes has tended to replace exclusive natural breastfeeding;³⁰⁶ however, data on this are not collected in Lithuania. Furthermore, various socio-economic factors influence the duration of breastfeeding. The decision to breastfeed and the duration of breastfeeding is determined by a **woman's age** (older women tend to breastfeed for longer), **education** (women with a university degree tend to breastfeed longer).³⁰⁷ In 2018, women with higher education (Bachelor's degree, ISCED level 5A) (75.1 per cent) and employed³⁰⁸ (69.6 per cent) had more knowledge about the breastfeeding process and its benefits and a more positive attitude towards it than those with lower education and who were not in employment.³⁰⁹ Therefore, **less educated and unemployed mothers** are more likely not to breastfeed their children or to stop breastfeeding earlier. Other significant factors include **living conditions** (women with higher incomes tend to breastfeed for longer), **place of residence** (women living in urban areas tend to breastfeed for longer).³¹⁰ Also, **the need to return to work** is often one of the reasons for the early termination of breastfeeding.³¹¹

Children and adolescents

³⁰² OECD. 2020. Infant health. Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/ea7e9e6a-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/ea7e9e6a-en>.

³⁰³ OECD. 2020. Infant Health. Available at: <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=30118>.

³⁰⁴ World Health Organization. 2020. Breastfeeding. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_1.

³⁰⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija. 2021. Vaikų Mityba. Available at: <https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/visuomenes-sveikatos-prieziura/mityba-ir-fizinis-aktyvumas-2/vaiku>.

³⁰⁶ World Health Organization. 2020. Breastfeeding. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/breastfeeding#tab=tab_1.

³⁰⁷ Baltranaitė, N. 2019. Veiksnių, susijusių su pagimdžiusių moterų žiniomis apie žindymą, požiūriu į jį ir ketinimu žindyti, vertinimas. Available at: https://www.lsmuni.lt/cris/bitstream/20.500.12512/101962/1/Magistrinis_2019%20DONE.pdf.

³⁰⁸ In this particular case, employed women are those women who have a job and a constant income.

³⁰⁹ Baltranaitė, N. 2019.

³¹⁰ Levinienė, G., Tamulevičienė, E. Kudzytė, J. Petrauskienė, A. & Zaborskis, A. et al. 2013. Factors associated with breastfeeding duration. *Medicine (Kaunas)*, 49(9):415-21; Vingraitė, J., Bartkevičiūtė, R. & Michaelsen, K.F. 2013. A cohort study of term infants from Vilnius, Lithuania: feeding patterns. *Acta Paediatr.* 93:1349-1355.

³¹¹ Stundžienė, R., Kalibatienė, D. & Vingras A. 2010. Kūdikų mitybos ypatumai pirmaisiais gyvenimo metais. *Medicines teorija ir praktika*.

BMI is a measure for indicating nutritional status (underweight, normal weight, overweight, obese) and can serve as a risk indicator for diseases, especially those related to being overweight or obese.³¹² In Lithuania, the annual health check examinations required for attendance at formal educational institutions include the recording of body mass index (BMI) in the Electronic Student Health Certificate.

³¹³ From May 1, 2020, **specific BMI thresholds for children aged 2-18** came into effect in Lithuania, taking into consideration age and sex.³¹⁴

For the academic year 2020-2021, the Hygiene Institute reported BMI for children and youth attending formal educational institutions **aged 2–18+**. In previous years, BMI was reported only for children aged 7–17. The inclusion of information on children aged 2–6 is particularly important, as these children have been identified as particularly vulnerable due to their dependence on their parents. However, these data only relate to those who attend formal nursery schools. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 63.7 per cent of children and youth attending formal educational institutions had a normal BMI. 14.6 per cent were underweight. The remaining 21.7 per cent were overweight, out of whom 6.9 per cent were obese. **25.6 per cent of children aged 2-6 were underweight**, which is substantially higher than in other age groups, with 11.1 per cent among those aged 7-17 and 12.7 per cent among those aged over 18. The share of children with normal weight among those aged 2–6 and 7–17 is quite similar – 63.6 per cent and 63.3 per cent, respectively. 67.3 per cent of those over 18 had normal weight. **Most overweight children are among those aged 7-17 (25.7 per cent)**, which is higher than the 10.8 per cent among 2–6-year-olds, and the 20 per cent of those aged over 18.³¹⁵ Data from the Hygiene Institute reveals that since 2016 the share of children (aged 7–17)³¹⁶ with normal body weight has decreased substantially (by 4.5 p.p.), **while the share of overweight children (overweight and obese) has increased from 21.3 in 2016³¹⁷ to 25.7 per cent in 2020.**³¹⁸

Determinants of access to regular healthy nutrition

BMI is an indicator that is closely related to eating habits and the quality of food. Regular and balanced nutrition is important for children and adolescents' development and health outcomes. Inadequate nutrition that lacks fruit, vegetables, proteins, and includes the excessive consumption of processed food, contributes to the development of chronic illnesses and disorders at various stages of life. Conducted in 2018, the study on Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) showed that **sex, age, and socio-economic status strongly impact eating patterns and habits.**³¹⁹ In 2020, children in Lithuania still do not consume enough fruits and vegetables. Only 34.4 per cent eat fruit and 31.7 per

³¹² WHO. 2021. BMI. Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease-prevention/nutrition/a-healthy-lifestyle/body-mass-index-bmi>

³¹³ Dėl Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministro 2004 m. gruodžio 24 d. įsakymo Nr. V-951 „Dėl statistinės apskaitos formos Nr. 027-1/a „Vaiko sveikatos pažymėjimas“ patvirtinimo“ pakeitimo: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a667901076f911e99ceae2890faa4193>.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Vaikų sveikatos stebėsenos informacinė sistema. 2021. KMI įvertinimo duomenys. Available at: <http://vssis.hi.lt/Naujienos/Naujiena?NewsId=1384>

³¹⁶ Other age groups are not comparable, as it is the first time the Institute reports BMI for other age groups.

³¹⁷ Gadžijeva U., and I. Židonienė. 2019. Vaikų sveikata. Available at: https://hi.lt/uploads/pdf/leidiniai/Statistikos/Vaiku_sveikata/Vaik%C5%B3%20sveikata%202019.pdf

³¹⁸ Vaikų sveikatos stebėsenos informacinė sistema. 2021. KMI įvertinimo duomenys. Available at: <http://vssis.hi.lt/Naujienos/Naujiena?NewsId=1384>

³¹⁹ HBSC (2018). Lietuvos moksleivių gyvensena ir sveikata: 2018 m. situacija ir tendencijos. Available at: <http://hbcs.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2018reportLT.pdf>

cent eat vegetables at least once every day.³²⁰ Recent studies³²¹ and data from the Hygiene Institute (2020) confirm that the consumption of these items also decreases with age, and is more common among girls than boys, and that the lack of these items was more pronounced among children living in families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, 46.7 per cent of children **do not eat breakfast** every working day, out of which 19.9 per cent do not eat breakfast at all on working days. At weekends, 27.1 per cent do not eat breakfast every day, out of which 11.1 per cent do not eat breakfast at weekends at all.³²² Again, older children and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to have regular breakfasts. Many children also frequently consume foods of low nutritional value such as sweets, snacks and sugary drinks (SBBs). In 2020, 17.1 per cent of children consumed sweets at least once per day, and 32 per cent, 2-4 days per week. 10.5 per cent drank carbonated drinks at least once per day, and 48.2 per cent at least once per week.³²³ Children in grades 5-8 were found to consume sweets and carbonated drinks most frequently, despite existing regulations restricting the provision of such items at educational institutions.³²⁴

Main barriers to regular and healthy nutrition

Income poverty, high prices of healthy food, household composition, and residing in rural areas largely contribute to the lack of effective access to adequate nutrition. **Income poverty** is one of the key drivers behind an enforced lack of nutrients for affordability reasons. Income-poor households often cannot afford enough vegetables, fruits, and adequate protein sources. According to EU-SILC (2019), 7 per cent of all children live in households where at least one child lacks fruit and vegetables daily due to affordability. This share of children is substantially higher (19 per cent) among low-income households whose income is 60 per cent or less of median equalized income. Income poverty is often higher among certain types of **household composition**, creating further barriers to access. For example, among **households with dependent children, low-income households** were at a significantly higher risk of enforced lack of proteins (20.6 per cent) than is generally estimated for all households with dependent children (9.1 per cent). The risk is particularly high among **low-income households with many children** (38.7 per cent) and **low-income single-parent households** (26.1 per cent).³²⁵ In 2019, the lowest equalized disposable income was in households composed of one adult with dependent children.³²⁶ Since income poverty is higher in rural areas than in urban areas,³²⁷ **children living in single-parent families, especially in rural areas**, are more likely to experience poverty, and thus not be able afford adequate nutrition. Interviews with experts working in child poverty reduction also revealed that

³²⁰ Data received from the Hygiene Institute (2020)

³²¹ Bartkevičiūtė, R., Barzda, A., Bulotaitė, G., Miliauskė, R. & Drungilas, V. 2020. *Mokyklinio Amžiaus Vaikų Mitybos Įpročių, Faktinės Mitybos Ir Fizinio Aktyvumo Įpročių Tyrimo (2019–2020) Ataskaita*. Vilnius. Available at: smlpc.lt/media/image/Naujienuoms/2017%20metai/Mityba%20ir%20fizinis%20aktyvumas/Mokiniu_MI_FM_FA_ATASKAITA_galut.pdf

³²² Data received from the Hygiene Institute (2020)

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Bartkevičiūtė, R., Barzda, A., Bulotaitė, G., Miliauskė, R. & Drungilas, V. 2020. *Mokyklinio Amžiaus Vaikų Mitybos Įpročių, Faktinės Mitybos Ir Fizinio Aktyvumo Įpročių Tyrimo (2019–2020) Ataskaita*. Vilnius. Available at: smlpc.lt/media/image/Naujienuoms/2017%20metai/Mityba%20ir%20fizinis%20aktyvumas/Mokiniu_MI_FM_FA_ATASKAITA_galut.pdf

³²⁵ EU-SILC SURVEY. 2019. Living conditions in Europe – material deprivation and economic strain. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_material_deprivation_and_economic_strain&oldid=484559

³²⁶ Lietuvos Statistikos Departamentas. 2020. Income and living conditions of the population of Lithuania. Available at: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en/lietuvos-gyventoju-pajamos-ir-gyvenimo-salygos-2020/namu-ukiu-pajamos/disponuojamosios-pajamos>

³²⁷ Ibid.

children from families experiencing income poverty and social risk in remote rural areas often also lack means of transportation to reach even basic services, which are often primarily organized, distributed and delivered in larger towns within a municipality.³²⁸ A lack of transport may limit access to services such as health care, education and social protection, as well as access to supermarkets, markets or food bank distribution points.³²⁹

6.2. Policies and programmes to promote effective access to healthy nutrition for children in need

Lithuania's Health Strategy 2014-2025³³⁰ and the National Public Health Care Development Programme 2016-2023 acknowledge access to healthy nutrition as a key determinant of health outcomes.³³¹ The latter includes specific goals to increase healthy eating habits, access, and public awareness regarding healthy nutrition. However, the document does not include specific goals or targets aimed at children or vulnerable groups. Despite a lack of strategy in this area, the key instruments for increasing access to healthy nutrition among vulnerable children are: 1) **the provision of free meals at formal educational institutions;** and 2) **the provision of food and basic material items to the most deprived through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD),** used until 2020 and replaced with the material assistance programme under ESF+ since 2021.³³² The first of these provisions focuses on reaching the children directly through formal educational institutions, while the latter reaches vulnerable children by providing food support to households. While some non-binding initiatives have been developed to improve access to adequate nutrition for infants, Lithuania lacks early preventive measures in this area.

Free meals for children at formal educational institutions

The Law on Social Assistance for Pupils (2006)³³³ foresees the provision of free meals to pupils in the public education system if the average monthly income of family members is less than 1.5 of the state-supported income (SSI) (the amount of the SSI in 2019 was EUR 122; in 2020, it was EUR 125; in 2021, EUR 128). The provision of free meals at schools has repeatedly been named as one of the most successful initiatives to improve effective access to healthy nutrition and promote healthy eating habits.

In 2020, a pilot project tested the provision of free meals unconditionally to all pre-schoolers regardless of family income. Since September 2020, all children in pre-primary education and Grade 1 of primary education have been entitled to free lunches. Starting September 2021, free lunches are also provided to all pupils in Grade 2, regardless of family income. This laudable expansion has increased access to

³²⁸ Information obtained via the interview programme and consultations.

³²⁹ Information obtained via the interview programme and consultations.

³³⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas. 2019. Nutarimas Dėl Lietuvos Sveikatos 2014–2025 Metų Strategijos Patvirtinimo“ Pakeitimo. Available at: <https://e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/36382830f4c711e99681cd81dcdca52c>

³³¹ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. 2015. Dėl Nacionalinės Visuomenės Sveikatos Priežiūros 2016–2023 Metų Plėtros Programos Patvirtinimo. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/35c41ab0a3c411e59010bea026bdb259>

³³² For the 2021-2027 period, FEAD was merged with the ESF under the ESF+ Regulation to better combine the provision of food or material assistance with social inclusion measures. More information available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1089&langId=en>

³³³ Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinės Paramos Mokiniams Įstatymas. 2006. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.279123>

healthy and regular nutrition, especially among the younger children, by removing financial and administrative barriers to access. **Free meals for children in pre-primary and first and second graders ensure better access to healthy nutrition early on.**

The share of children receiving free school meals has increased significantly since 2019. In that year, 13.7 per cent of all children attending school received free meals; in 2020, the figure rose to 26.4 per cent of all schoolchildren, and in 2021 to 27.3 per cent.³³⁴ More children from low-income families received free lunches in smaller municipalities than in major cities in Lithuania in 2019-2020. The lowest rates were in the major cities such as Vilnius (2.7 per cent), Klaipėda (3.4 per cent), Palanga (4.3 per cent) and Kaunas (4.4 per cent). In smaller and rural counties, the rate was substantially higher, with 20.5 per cent of children receiving free meals in Joniškis district, 29.8 per cent in Pakruojis district, 30.7 per cent in Ignalina district and 38.2 per cent in Alytus district. These differences correspond to existing socio-economic inequalities between urban and rural areas, with the former having lower unemployment rates, higher incomes, and fewer households with more than three children, etc.³³⁵

Despite the increasing coverage of the free meal programme, **certain groups of vulnerable children and youth are still excluded from the programme.** Not all children aged 2-6 attend those institutions, and thus not all of them can benefit. Furthermore, those who do not attend schools regularly, or who drop out of the educational system early on, are also excluded. These children and youth often come from low-income families that also face social risk, including income-poor families in rural areas, as well as Roma families.³³⁶ Furthermore, teenagers (aged 15-18) who attend vocational training schools and who receive school allowance for their studies are not eligible to receive free lunches. For youth from socio-economically disadvantaged families, this creates a substantial barrier to accessing healthy nutrition.³³⁷

While the provision of free meals and its more recent expansion has been considered successful, some concerns have emerged in the past regarding limited options in terms of dishes and the **segregation** of students from low-income families who receive the free meals. A study conducted in 2016 showed that children receiving free meals were asked to queue separately, which separated them from their cash-paying peers and perpetuated stigmatization and isolation. Singling out students receiving free meals may lead them to avoid eating lunch at all, thus countering the goals of the programme in the first place.³³⁸

Quality standards with regard to free meals are relatively high in Lithuania. Free meals at formal educational institutions entail full meals consisting of a main dish and a soup. Those receiving free meals due to low-income are entitled to free breakfast, lunch, later afternoon meals at schools, and free catering at summer camps organized by educational institutions.³³⁹ In Lithuania, detailed guidelines are provided by the Ministry of Health regarding the content and balance of meals, food preparation and hygiene, and quality standards. Starting in 2021, the guidelines also include information on the

³³⁴ Data received from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

³³⁵ Higienos Instituto Sveikatos Informacijos Centras. 2020. Lietuvos vaikų sveikatos būklės pokyčiai ir netolygumai https://hi.lt/uploads/pdf/leidiniai/Informaciniai/Vaiku-sveikatos-leidinys_2020.pdf

³³⁶ Information obtained through interview program and consultations.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Kairienė, D., et al. 2016. 'Social Equality as Groundwork for Sustainable Schooling: The Free Lunch Issue' Available at: <https://sciendo.com/abstract/journals/jtes/18/1/article-p127.xml>.

³³⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2021. Socialinė Parama Vaikams. <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/seima-ir-vaikai/socialine-parama-seimoms-ir-vaikams/socialine-parama-mokiniams>

preparation of food for children with special needs. The quality requirements for free meals were first established in 2011, and have been updated regularly since, also prohibiting the distribution of unhealthy foods and drinks.³⁴⁰ In 2018, the Ministry of Health adopted new mandatory quality requirements for the provision of meals for children in educational institutions and residential children's homes. The new requirements aim to ensure that children receive fresh same-day food that provides all of the necessary nutrients.

Furthermore, to promote healthy nutrition and increase the variety of options, **various methodological guidelines and recommendations had been prepared for educational institutions** and their members of staff. Examples include methodological guidelines on healthy nutrition and physical activities at schools;³⁴¹ **informational material for public health specialists on healthy food product choices** for school-aged children;³⁴² **sample meal plans for formal educational institutions** working with children, which also include **sample vegetarian meals and meals adapted for children with special dietary needs**. Furthermore, since 2019, the government has confirmed EU-funded **training for cooks** at formal educational institutions on the preparation of healthy food to ensure that the dishes prepared are not only healthy but also appropriate for children.³⁴³ Implementation and compliance with the required standards and recommendations are monitored by the state's food and veterinary service. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, the service has established a mobile team of experts to control the quality of nutrition in educational institutions.³⁴⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent school closures have challenged the provision of free meals to vulnerable children. The government issued requirements for catering organizations during emergencies to ensure the continuity of free meals for pupils during emergencies and quarantine.³⁴⁵ During quarantine, pupils in all 60 municipalities received food items or prepared meals (if necessary) to their homes.³⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the delivery of the meals required civil society actors, such as food banks or other NGOs, to step in to assist with delivery, especially in remote locations.

FEAD assistance to the most deprived households

³⁴⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2021. Mityba. <https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/visuomenes-sveikatos-prieziura/mityba-ir-fizinis-aktyvumas-2/mityba>

³⁴¹ Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija. 2009. Metodines rekomendacijos mokytojams. Available at: www.ssus.lt/ssusadmin/kiti/limitcedit/uploads/files/Sveikatos%20mitybos%20ir%20fizinio%20aktyvumo%20ugdymas%20mokykloje.pdf

³⁴² Sveikatos Mokymo Ir Ligų Prevencijos Centras. 2020. Apie Mokyklinio Amžiaus Vaikų Sveikatai Palankių Maisto Produktų Pasirinkimą. Available at: http://www.smlpc.lt/media/image/Naujienuoms/2017%20metai/Mityba%20ir%20fizinis%20aktyvumas/Mokiniu_maisto_PASIRINKIMAS_metod_me.pdf

³⁴³ Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija. 2021. Mityba.

³⁴⁴ Guio, A.-C., Frazer, H. & Marlier, E. (eds) (2021). 'Study on the economic implementing framework of a possible EU Child Guarantee scheme including its financial foundation', Second phase of the Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee (FSCG2): Final Report, Brussels: European Commission.

³⁴⁵ LR Socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, LR Švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija. 2020. Dėl mokinių nemokamo maitinimo organizavimo ekstremaliosios situacijos, ekstremaliojo įvykio ir (ar) karantino metu metodinių rekomendacijų papildymo: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/seima/pinigine-parama/Rekomendacijos%20d%20C4%97%20nemokamo%20maitinimo%20galutinis.docx>

³⁴⁶ Ministry of Social Security and Labour. 2021. Socialinė parama vaikams. <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/seima-ir-vaikai/socialine-parama-seimoms-ir-vaikams/socialine-parama-mokiniams>.

Since 2014, FEAD has provided food assistance and, since 2019, basic material assistance to the most deprived in Lithuania, to reduce poverty and social exclusion.³⁴⁷ For the period 2021-2027, FEAD has been merged with the European Structural Funds (ESF) to create the ESF+³⁴⁸, which aims to better combine the provision of food and material assistance with broader social inclusion measures such as active labour market policies and social innovation. The ESF+ Regulation requires EU member states to allocate at least 3% of their ESF+ resources to promoting the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived persons and children; as well as addressing material deprivation through food and/or basic material assistance to the most deprived persons, including children, and providing accompanying measures to support their social inclusion.³⁴⁹

FEAD, and the subsequent provisions under ESF+, target disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals defined by criteria set out under the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Low-income Residents. Thus, **the eligible individuals are those whose mean monthly income is less than or equal to 1.5** of the state-supported income (SSI) (the amount of the SSI in 2019 was EUR 122 per month; in 2020, it was EUR 125 per month; and EUR 128 per month in 2021). In exceptional cases, municipalities may consider extending support to those with slightly higher income.

Between 2014-2020, the total programme budget was EUR 90.8 million, with EUR 77.2 million coming from FEAD funds and EUR 13.6 million from national funds. The cumulative expenditure on operations between 2012-2018 was EUR 39.6 million (43 per cent of budget allocation).³⁵⁰ Since the beginning of the programme, 27 million tons of food have been distributed in Lithuania. In 2018, a total of 197,196 persons received food and material assistance. The largest share of recipients by age in the households receiving assistance **were children under 17 years of (35 per cent)** and adults aged 25-49 (32 per cent). 23 per cent of recipients were single-person households; **17 per cent were single adults with one or more dependent children**, and **14 per cent were households with three or more adults with children**.³⁵¹

Ex-ante (2014)³⁵² and mid-term (2018) evaluations, as well as *ex-ante* evaluation of the programming period 2021-2027,³⁵³ have been carried out to assess the effectiveness of the FEAD-funded programme. The mid-term evaluation revealed that the overall impact of the programme has been found to make a difference to the most vulnerable households.³⁵⁴ 87 per cent of partner organizations and 56 per cent of

³⁴⁷ European Commission. 2018. Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived: Lithuania Country Fiche. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1239&langId=en&intPageId=3619>

³⁴⁸ European Commission. 2018. Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) COM/2018/382 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018PC0382>

³⁴⁹ European Commission. 2018. Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) COM/2018/382 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018PC0382>

³⁵⁰ European Commission. 2018. Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived: Lithuania Country Fiche. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1239&langId=en&intPageId=3619>

³⁵¹ PPMI. 2018. Europos Pagalbos Labiausiai Skurstantiems Asmenims Fondo Struktūrinio Galutinių Paramos Gavėjų Vertinimo Ataskaita. Available at: <https://www.priimk.lt/lt/apie-fonda/vertinimai/127>

³⁵² PPMI. 2014. Ex Ante Evaluation Of The Operational Programme Of The Fund For European Aid To The Most Deprived. Evaluation Report. Available at: <https://www.priimk.lt/lt/apie-fonda/vertinimai/127>

³⁵³ PPMI. 2020. Paramos materialiniam nepritekliui mažinti 2021–2027 m. programavimo laikotarpio galimų finansuotųjų veiklų išankstinis vertinimas. Available at: <https://www.priimk.lt/lt/apie-fonda/vertinimai/127>

³⁵⁴ PPMI. 2018.

recipients of support stated that the programme is very useful for the target group. 58 per cent of recipients reported that the programme had a positive impact on their household situation.

Few respondents claimed that FEAD did not change their situation, or did so only partially. The main reasons given for this were **inadequate food quality, insufficient frequency of product distribution, insufficient quantity of products, or the need for another type of assistance**. The evaluation also revealed certain barriers to accessing FEAD assistance. The key barriers faced by recipients were the provision of necessary documentation to **prove eligibility (73.3 per cent), distance and arrival at the distribution point (15.6 per cent), psychological barriers (8.9 per cent)**, and other difficulties such as a waiting period until income level did not exceed the threshold for eligibility (6.7 per cent). These barriers were more common among people living in rural areas, with the most substantial difference being in relation to arrival at the distribution point, where 18.5 per cent faced problems.³⁵⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the delivery of support packages. During the pandemic, the food and basic hygiene items would be pre-packed and ready for recipients to pick up. While FEAD in Lithuania reported delivering packages to people's homes when needed before and during the pandemic, no data are available on how many home deliveries have been made. Furthermore, to ensure effective access to support, the application process has been simplified. Those who received support in 2020, did not have to submit new documents for the next year in order to have their support extended. New applicants are able to obtain and submit the necessary documents online.³⁵⁶ In 2020, 183,411 people, or 6.6 per cent of all Lithuanian residents, received FEAD support, which is less than in 2019 (191,783 or 6.9 per cent). The pandemic also exposed the problem of stigmatization as a barrier to accessing support. Some people who had never previously encountered economic problems, but did so during the pandemic, refused any social assistance – despite having become eligible to receive it.³⁵⁷

Following the integration of FEAD into the ESF+ programme, it is important to take advantage of opportunities to integrate material assistance with accompanying measures, as well as with broader social integration programmes to reduce poverty and social exclusion among the most deprived groups. It is also important to address barriers to implementation, such as the issue of stigmatization, problems of accessibility in the rural areas, and eligibility requirements.

Adequate nutrition for infants

Efforts to promote adequate nutrition for infants rest on voluntary programmes and awareness-raising efforts. Several initiatives have been developed to promote the exclusive breastfeeding of infants up to six months, as outlined in the National Public Healthcare Development Programme (2016-2023).³⁵⁸ The key tool is the **Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI)**, established by the WHO and UNICEF, which aims to encourage health care facilities providing maternity and newborn services to implement the 'Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding'. The Ten Steps includes a package of policies and procedures

³⁵⁵ PPMI. 2018.

³⁵⁶ EPLSAF.2021. COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.priimk.lt/lt/covid-19/197>

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Government of the Republic of Lithuania (2015. Resolution No 1291 On Approval Of The National Public Healthcare Development Programme For 2016–2023. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/a293cf12809f11e6a0f68fd135e6f40c?jfwid=-fxdp7coh>

that support breastfeeding.³⁵⁹ However, currently, only **17 facilities** in Lithuania have BFHI status.³⁶⁰ In 2020, the evaluation of programmes to improve the qualifications of health care professionals working in the fields of lactation and breastfeeding showed that such programmes did not include the most recent scientific literature on the topic, and did not comply with the key WHO recommendations. Some awareness-raising tools have been developed, however. In 2020, formal letters were sent to all public institutions and relevant businesses regarding the harm of misleading information on breastfeeding. In 2020, **the Committee for the Promotion of Breastfeeding** updated **informational leaflets ‘Successful Breastfeeding Steps’** based on the most frequently asked questions by breastfeeding mothers, and proposed to distribute these leaflets to new mothers leaving maternity hospitals. The Committee also **prepared an informational leaflet on ‘Breastfeeding and COVID-19’**, to be distributed to pregnant women or new mothers leaving maternity hospitals.³⁶¹ However, there are **no early-intervention preventive programmes** aimed at pregnant women, especially those living at risk of poverty and social exclusion,³⁶² that help them to access healthy nutrition, acquire healthy eating habits, reduce harmful and risky behaviours, or reduce anaemia, etc. Such early interventions would help to address the issues that contribute to low birth weights in infants and to subsequent problems.

6.3. Recommendations for improving access to healthy nutrition

This section provides recommendations on improving effective access to healthy nutrition, in line with the Council Conclusions to Contribute Towards Halting the Rise in Childhood Overweight and Obesity,³⁶³ as well as global goals set out in Agenda 2030 and Global Nutrition Goals 2025.³⁶⁴ Lithuania should develop a comprehensive intersectoral strategy to address children’s access to adequate nutrition. The strategy should cover various aspects of nutrition relevant to children from infancy and throughout adolescence. The strategy should focus on two key dimensions: 1) addressing the determinants of food insecurity by ensuring the accessibility and affordability of healthy food; 2) addressing the determinants of food consumption patterns that contribute to malnutrition and obesity. To address these dimensions, the strategy should include specific goals and targets aimed at reducing the share of children in food-insecure households; increasing consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables; encouraging daily breakfast consumption; and discouraging routine consumption of nutrient-poor foods high in sugars, saturated fats, trans fats and salt (see Table 19.).³⁶⁵ Existing policies, such as free meals at schools, FEAD and later material assistance through ESF+, and Baby-Friendly

³⁵⁹ WHO. 2018. Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding. Available at: <https://www.tensteps.org/>

³⁶⁰ LR Ministry of Health of The Republic of Lithuania. 2020. Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative. Available at: <https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/nuorodos/naujagimiams-palankios-ligonines>

³⁶¹ LR Ministry of Health of The Republic of Lithuania. 2020. Žindymo Skatinimo Komiteto Veiklos Ataskaita 2020. Available at: <https://sam.lrv.lt/lt/nuorodos/naujagimiams-palankios-ligonines>

³⁶² Information obtained through interview program and consultations.

³⁶³ WHO. 2014. Global nutrition targets 2025. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-NMH-NHD-14.2>

³⁶⁴ Council conclusions to contribute towards halting the rise in childhood overweight and obesity. 2017. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/06/16/epsco-childhood-overweight/>

³⁶⁵ WHO. 2021. Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative. Eating habits of children in 23 European countries. Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease-prevention/nutrition/activities/who-european-childhood-obesity-surveillance-initiative-cosi/cosi-publications/factsheet-childhood-obesity-surveillance-initiative-cosi-eating-habits-of-children-in-23-european-countries-2021>

initiative, contribute to the overarching objectives of reducing food insecurity and addressing unhealthy eating patterns. However, these policy instruments could be further improved to enable better access to healthy nutrition for children in need.

Free meals at school

The European Commission recognizes school meals as a vital investment in human capital, and therefore foresees that school meals should be free to all³⁶⁶. School meals are regarded as playing an important role in national development, while also providing a crucial means to support and provide protection to children during times of crisis. It is therefore recommended to:

- Further expand the coverage of the free meals programme by allowing those teenagers at vocational training schools who receive the government allowance to receive free meals.
- Expand the coverage of the provision of free meals to the most vulnerable children also at weekends and during holidays.
- Develop a system to reach out to children in need who are outside of the formal educational system.
- Establish a regular monitoring and evaluation system to assess uptake, quality, and outreach.
- Ensure that free school meals are not taken for granted, and that children eat the full school meal every day³⁶⁷.

FEAD

UN Sustainable Development Goal 1 (no poverty) and Goal 2 (zero hunger) are at the heart of the EU's commitment to addressing under-nutrition, a major global challenge that traps individuals and society in the vicious circle of poverty.³⁶⁸ The provision under the ESF+ programme of food and material assistance to the most deprived, including the most deprived children, is a particularly important measure for achieving these goals. Lithuania could further improve this by:

- Ensuring that ESF+ support addressing material deprivation respects the dignity and prevents the stigmatization of the most deprived persons, e.g. through the use of vouchers rather than food and material packages.
- Increasing the use of accompanying measures, as well as other social inclusion programmes, specifically targeting the most deprived households and children.
- Taking into account potential barriers to accessibility in rural areas, from households to distribution points, when planning distribution operations.

Infants' nutrition

Malnutrition causes infant mortality and long-term negative health outcomes³⁶⁹. Thus, ensuring healthy maternal and child nutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child's life is critical to preventing

³⁶⁶ European Commission. 2020. School Meals for All.

https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/um_casestudyfinland_schoolfeeding_june2019_netti.pdf

³⁶⁷ European Commission. 2020. School Meals for All.

³⁶⁸ European Union. 2020. Capacity4Dev. Nutrition. <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/results-and-indicators/nutrition>

³⁶⁹ European Union. 2020. Capacity4Dev. Nutrition. <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/results-and-indicators/nutrition>

malnutrition and its consequences. In line with the WHO and UNICEF's Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding,³⁷⁰ the WHO's European Food and Nutrition Action Plan,³⁷¹ and the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, Lithuania should first address maternal and infant malnutrition by:

- Expanding the network of the Baby-Friendly Hospitals Initiative, developing binding measures to facilitate the implementation of the initiative.
- Developing preventative measures aimed at pregnant women experiencing social risk, to provide the necessary assistance in accessing healthy nutrition, improving eating habits, and developing specific nutrition-related skills. It is important to develop the knowledge of pregnant women concerning the benefits and importance of nutrition.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ WHO. 2003. Global strategy for infant and young child feeding. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241562218>

³⁷¹ WHO. 2014. European Food and Nutrition Action Plan. Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/european-food-and-nutrition-action-plan-20152020-2014>

³⁷² European Union. 2020. Capacity4Dev. Nutrition.

TABLE 19. PROPOSED INDICATORS FOR MONITORING EFFECTIVE ACCESS TO HEALTHY NUTRITION

Nº		GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	SOURCE	CURRENT PERIODICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET
1		By 2030, to increase the number of children and adolescents in poverty who eat fresh fruit and vegetables at least once a day to the EU (2017) average for all the population (64%)	Fresh fruit and vegetable intake ³⁷³	% of children and adolescents in households with the lowest 20% of income who eat fresh fruit and vegetables at least once per day	Hygiene Institute EU-SILC	Annual Irregular	Primary	Evaluation	Process	Total: Fruit: 34.4% Vegetables: 31.7% (2020) Lower for children from low-income households	64%
2		By 2030, to reduce the percentage of children who are overweight to 10.85%, paying special attention to	BMI Index (overweight and obese children)	% of children and adolescents with excess body fat above the 85th percentile	Annual Health Check Data HBSC	Annual 5 years	Primary	Monitoring and Evaluation	Result	Total: 21.7% (2020) 2-6 years: 10.8% 7-17 years: 25.7%	10.85%

		children and adolescents at risk of poverty									
3		By 2030, to reduce the percentage of households with children in poverty who cannot afford to eat a meal of meat, poultry, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day to the national average (9.1%)	Protein intake	% of households with children and adolescents in monetary poverty who cannot afford to eat a meal of meat, poultry, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day	EU-SILC	Annually	Primary	Evaluation	Process	National average 9.1% (2020) Poor households: 20.6% Large poor households: 42.3%	9.1%
5		By 2030, to reduce the average rate of SSB intake in low-income households to, at most, the national average (13%)	SSB intake	% of children who drink one or more SSBs every day (11-18 years)	HBSC Hygiene Institute	5 years	Secondary	Monitoring and evaluation	Process	Total: 13% (2018) Low-income children: 16%	13%

7. Effective access to adequate housing

7.1. Facts and trends in access to adequate housing

- Children living in low-income families are much more likely to suffer from housing deprivation compared with children in Lithuania overall. In comparison to all types of households with children, households composed of single parents (often working part-time or not working) with dependent children are also at higher risk.
- Housing costs, including heating costs and other housing expenses, are likely to place a higher burden on households in urban areas. Children with migrant backgrounds also remain one of the groups of children in need.
- The successful implementation of ECG in the area of housing requires improved access to housing support services for the most disadvantaged groups: low-income children, children from single-parent households, children from large families, children with disabilities, Roma children and children of migrant origin, with a greater focus on the improvement of families' income situation in Lithuania.

The first part of this chapter provides a short overview of the current situation regarding effective access to adequate housing in Lithuania for children and households with children. It presents the unmet needs and barriers to accessing adequate housing that face households with children in need across the country.³⁷⁴ In the second part, we focus on the description and assessment of current housing-related policies for families raising children, and provide recommendations for their improvement and/or the introduction of new policies.

The housing cost overburden rate for all Lithuanian children, as well as that for low-income children and children living in single-parent households, or large families of two adults with three or more dependent children, has decreased over the last five years; however, the difference between rates among children in high-income and low-income households in Lithuania remains high (0.1 per cent and 10.4 per cent, respectively in 2020).

Lithuania has one of the largest shares of children in the EU suffering from an inadequately warm home, particularly among those living in single-parent households (30.1 per cent) and in low-income families (31 per cent) in 2020. The percentage is even higher for single-parent families with low incomes (40.9 per cent in 2020). The proportion of low-income households in Lithuania facing energy poverty remained high over the decade 2010-2020. Significantly fewer families complained of being unable to

³⁷⁴ PPMI. Undertaking a deep-dive analysis of policies, programmes, services, budgets and mechanisms addressing child poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania. Desk research report. 2021.

keep their home adequately warm among the rural population, compared with those in urban areas; likewise, slightly fewer reported being unable to pay their mortgage, rent or utility bills (electricity, water, gas).

Low-income households in Lithuania consisting of two parents with three or more children, as well as low-income households of two parents with two children (below 60 per cent of median equivalized income), often cannot afford a property with a separate room for each person. Single-parent households with dependent children, and families with three and more children, also suffered the highest rates of overcrowding, at 48.4 per cent and 46.7 per cent of children, respectively, in 2020. The rate of overcrowding among Lithuanian children in high-income families is significantly lower (30.4 per cent in 2020) compared with children in low-income families (43.7 per cent in 2020). There has been only a small decrease in the overcrowding rate over the past five years, with constant fluctuations upwards and downwards.

A significant difference exists with regard to housing issues such as a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundations or rot in the windows or floor, suffered by 19.4 per cent of children in low-income families in 2020, compared with only 7.4 per cent of children in high-income families, revealing an unequal situation among children within the country. The percentage of all children who do not have an indoor flushing toilet or neither a bath nor a shower in their dwelling is also higher (4.3 per cent in 2020) than the EU27 average (1.7 per cent in 2020). In addition, single-parent families are more likely to suffer a lack of such amenities compared with couples raising children.

A higher percentage of children from low-income families and households with dependent children suffered severe housing deprivation (13.8 per cent and 7.2 per cent, respectively, in 2020). The rate was especially high in households of parents with three or more dependent children (16.7 per cent in 2020) and single parents with dependent children (14.3 per cent in 2020).

High financial costs for families raising children with disabilities (need for medicines, technical tools, lack of services for children with disabilities), or for children living with parents who have disabilities, leads to a lower family income that can be used to cover housing costs. There is also a lack of adapted housing for families raising children with disabilities.

Although housing conditions for children in residential care usually meet the relevant quality requirements, a lack of sufficient personal space, a safe and caring environment and home-like living conditions are frequently missing.

In most EU member states, Roma neighbourhoods often overcrowded and affected by a lack of water, gas, electricity and public services. Roma people also face segregation and discrimination in access to housing.³⁷⁵ However, insufficient information is available on the housing situation of Roma children in Lithuania.

The children of recent migrants and refugees also face general risks relating to affordability and the lack of adequate affordable housing stock. However, they are disproportionately affected by specific risks pertaining to the private rental market, where they often face discrimination regarding access to housing. No relevant data are available on the challenges faced by migrants in obtaining adequate

³⁷⁵ European Commission. 'Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee. Final Report'. 2020. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c312c468-c7e0-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

housing in Lithuania (particularly with regard to the latest wave of migration via the border with Belarus during the second half of 2021).

Lithuania is one of the few EU countries without a specific integrated homelessness strategy of any type. Insufficient data are available on homeless families with children, and no data exist regarding the homelessness of ‘children in street situations’. Also, people living outdoors or in uninhabitable buildings do not fall within the statistics for homelessness. People who use the services of homeless shelters (hostels for homeless people, temporary accommodation, crisis centres and institutions for mothers and children) are often mothers and children, children after leaving alternative care, and Roma families.

7.2. Policies and programmes to promote effective access to adequate housing for children in need

This section reviews relevant policies and programmes developed by Lithuania’s public administrations to improve access to adequate housing. The section focuses on policies aimed at particular target groups of children and their families that have been identified as not having effective access to adequate housing. These include children in low-income households, children living in single-parent families or large families, children with disabilities, children of migrant origin, Roma children, and children living in institutions and alternative care.

Measuring the effectiveness of the policies and programmes in place

Income inequality in Lithuania is found to be among the highest in the EU.³⁷⁶ The most vulnerable groups include families at social risk, usually single-parent or large families, unemployed people and their families, children with disabilities or children who have parents with a disability.³⁷⁷ Income inequality leads to families’ deprivation in terms of their access to adequate housing. This is also revealed in this study, which identifies children from low-income households as the most vulnerable group in Lithuania. Two key financial policies that are directly oriented towards assisting children and their families are universal child benefits and social benefits. These policies are intended to increase families’ financial income, and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

In the National Progress Programme 2021-2030³⁷⁸, housing is indicated as one of the key factors in families’ quality of life. Improvement in the effective access of children and their families to adequate housing is covered under one of the strategic goals of the programme, which focuses on social well-being and inclusion. To achieve the aforementioned strategic goal, the following measures are planned³⁷⁹:

³⁷⁶ Nerijus Černiauskas and Andrius Čiginas. ‘Measurement and decomposition of Lithuania’s income inequality’. 2019. Available at: https://www.lb.lt/uploads/publications/docs/22983_d5f9235730a54ddfd43af64d137b27f7.pdf.

³⁷⁷ ‘Measurement and decomposition of Lithuania’s income inequality’; Rasa Urbanavičiūtė. Socialinės nelygybės mažinimas Lietuvoje viešojo administravimo požiūriu: socialinių paslaugų aspektas. Magistro darbas. 2017; II-6 Labiausiai pažeidžiamų gyventojų grupių socialinės atskirties sprendimo galimybių tyrimas. Available at: <http://www.socmodelis.lt/wp-content/uploads/II-61.pdf>.

³⁷⁸ National progress programme for 2021-2030.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

- **Addressing the issue of housing** (housing adaptation, access to housing, etc.) for people with disabilities (including children) and their families. To better meet the needs of this group, an individualized approach will be used. This measure aims to ensure the accessibility of the physical environment (public spaces, housing), transport, infrastructure, services and information for people with disabilities;
- **Reducing energy poverty**, which is high in Lithuania due to relatively expensive energy resources, inefficient energy consumption, and a relatively lower level of income compared with other EU member states.

TABLE 20. NATIONAL PROGRESS PROGRAMME FOR LITHUANIA 2021-2030: STRATEGIC GOALS, TASKS AND IMPACT INDICATORS FOR CHILDREN

STRATEGIC GOAL	TASK	ASSESSMENT CRITERION	VALUE			INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE FOR ACHIEVING THE ASSESSMENT CRITERION VALUE
			Status (year)	2025	2030	
To increase social well-being and inclusion of the population	To reduce the energy poverty of the population.	% of households that spend a large part of their income on energy	17.1% (2016)	15.0%	8.6%	Ministry of Energy
	To increase the well-being of people with disabilities and their families, the elderly and other vulnerable and socially excluded groups	% of people (families) whose needs for social housing are met	7.9% (2020)	42.0%	88.0%	Ministry of Social Security and Labour

Source: National Progress Programme for Lithuania 2021-2030.

Based on the strategic goal of the National Progress Programme 2021-2030 – to increase the social well-being and inclusion of the population of Lithuania – five development programmes were introduced by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour in 2021.³⁸⁰ These emphasize the following key aspects of the housing situation for children and their families:

- Limited opportunities to find affordable housing. To date, Lithuania has not carried out a detailed analysis of housing affordability (e.g. housing acquisition, rental opportunities, municipal housing and social housing fund development needs), which would help to identify problems in housing policy formation and plan the direction of the development of housing accessibility. Governments should also not only subsidize low-income households or reduce indirect housing costs (reducing and compensating utility bills), but also set up fair housing rental schemes or create access to housing credit for vulnerable groups.³⁸¹

³⁸⁰ 2021–2030 m. Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos šeimos politikos stiprinimo plėtros programos pagrindimas. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/administracine-informacija/planavimo-dokumentai/pletros-programos>; 2021–2030 m. Plėtros programos valdytojos Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos sutelkties plėtros programos pagrindimas. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/administracine-informacija/planavimo-dokumentai/pletros-programos>.

³⁸¹ 2021–2030 m. Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos šeimos politikos stiprinimo plėtros programos pagrindimas. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/administracine-informacija/planavimo-dokumentai/pletros-programos>.

- No preventive mechanisms are in place to counter the threat of eviction for various reasons (e.g. late payments on loans, utilities).³⁸²
- The biggest need for social housing remains that of large families (families with three or more children) and people with disabilities, as there is insufficient supply of affordable housing in the market for these target groups. The housing rental market in many municipalities is not adapted for renting to people with disabilities (due to inadequate housing that is not adapted to their needs) or large families (insufficient amounts of space). Due to the insufficient supply of housing for rent, partial compensation for the housing rent is rarely used – in 2019, 2,325 persons received compensation for a share of the total housing rent, which is around 10 per cent of all people waiting to rent social housing. Recent data show that housing prices continue to rise in Lithuania, which may create even more difficulties to provide housing to low-income families.³⁸³
- The key reasons for the lack of effective access to adequate housing, and barriers to accessing such housing, are as follows: a) there is no detailed analysis of housing accessibility or long-term vision for increased housing affordability; b) even after social housing refurbishments, the need remains high; c) inefficient and insufficient use has been made of funds received from the sale of municipal housing for the development of the social housing fund; d) municipalities, when planning the development of the social housing fund, underestimate its adaptation to the needs of large families and people with disabilities; e) inefficient implementation of housing support schemes, due to the lack of comprehensive policies to increase the income of families; f) an under-developed housing rental market; g) insufficient subsidies provided under the state partially reimbursed housing loan.³⁸⁴

Support for the purchase or rent of housing

The Ministry of Social Security and Labour has the main responsibility for issues relating to homelessness, as well as for coordinating government policies regarding state assistance for housing acquisition or rent. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour designs the housing support policy and organizes, coordinates and controls its implementation. It also assigns funding for current social support programmes to the municipalities.³⁸⁵ The municipalities provide individuals and families with social housing, or with partial assistance with costs relating to the rent or purchase of housing, and other social services. Under the Constitution, municipalities are autonomous with respect to the development of local policy and service provision. Hence, regional disparities exist in the quality and infrastructure of social services and housing support.³⁸⁶ Other social providers exist, including NGOs, charities and other civil society organizations.³⁸⁷

³⁸² 2021–2030 m. Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos šeimos politikos stiprinimo plėtros programos pagrindimas. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/administracine-informacija/planavimo-dokumentai/pletros-programos>.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ European Social Policy Network (ESPN). 'National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania.' 2019.

³⁸⁶ 'National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania.'

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

Currently, **two types of housing³⁸⁸ support are provided in Lithuania:**

- 1) Housing acquisition: a) by providing subsidies from the state to pay part of a partially reimbursed housing loan; b) by paying compensation for the leasing part of the housing rent;
- 2) Housing rent: a) by renting social housing; b) by paying compensation for part of the rent.

Under this model, state support is provided only to households that cannot meet their need for quality housing in the housing market at an affordable price.³⁸⁹ In other words, the aforementioned types of housing support are intended to assist low-income families. In 2019 (first semester), 744 households in Lithuania received support in the form of the partial compensation of housing rent or leasing, while 150 households received subsidies from the state for a partially reimbursed housing loan.³⁹⁰

This targeted model of state support for housing provision by granting the right to partial compensation for housing rent (including social housing rent and compensation for part of the rent) or acquisition (including a partially reimbursed housing loan and compensation for part of the rent) is applied if families are eligible under the **housing support requirements** specified by law: 1) the value of and income from their declared assets do not exceed amounts³⁹¹ set by the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Support for the Acquisition or Rental of Housing³⁹²; 2) the families do not own housing in the territory of the Republic of Lithuania; 3) if the owned dwelling provide less than 14 m² per person or family member, or offer very poor living conditions and are worn-out by 60 per cent; 3) if there is a person in the family with disabilities, and the dwelling is not adapted to his/her needs.³⁹³

In 2021, an *ex-ante* evaluation of financial instruments for housing affordability³⁹⁴ was conducted by the Ministry of Finance. According to participants in the focus groups, compensatory mechanisms for housing and rents are currently available and assessed positively. According to the participants of a focus group discussion (representatives of municipalities) organized as part of this deep dive, the proposed funding measures for housing accessibility are sufficient, but the use of state aid remains relatively low.³⁹⁵ Low housing supply, or the supply of poor-quality housing and the high cost of administrative fees, had an impact on the insufficient take-up of state support. New amendments to the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Support for the Acquisition or Rental of Housing (2020) regarding

³⁸⁸ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Asmenų (šeimų), kuriems skirtos būsto nuomos ar išperkamosios būsto nuomos mokesčių dalies kompensacijos, skaičius. 2019. Available at: [https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Socialine%20statistika/2019%20m_%20I%20pusmetis%20Apie%20gaunan%C4%8Dius%20kompensacijas%20\(pagal%20s%C4%85ra%C5%A1us\).pdf](https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Socialine%20statistika/2019%20m_%20I%20pusmetis%20Apie%20gaunan%C4%8Dius%20kompensacijas%20(pagal%20s%C4%85ra%C5%A1us).pdf); Asmenų (šeimų), kuriems suteiktos subsidijos valstybės iš dalies kompensuojamo būsto kredito daliai arba kredito likučiui apmokėti, skaičius. 2019. Available at: https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Socialine%20statistika/2019%20m_%20I%20pusmetis%20Apie%20gavusius%20subsidijas.pdf.

³⁹¹ The right to housing support in Lithuania covers families of two or three persons whose net annual income does not exceed 123 times the state-subsidized income (SSI) (128 EUR), and who do not exceed wealth thresholds of 262 SSI. For families of four or five persons, the respective thresholds are 148 SSI and 349 SSI; for families of six or more persons, 25 SSI and 83 SSI.

³⁹² Lietuvos Respublikos paramos būstui įsigyti ar išsinuomoti įstatymas Nr. XII-1215. 2014. Available at: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/en/legalAct/e944ee0060011e4bad5c03f56793630>.

³⁹³ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas; Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. I want to purchase or rent a dwelling. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-parama-kas-man-priklauso/noriu-isigyti-ar-issinuomoti-busta>.

³⁹⁴ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

the partial compensation of rent (financial support from the national budget)³⁹⁶ are likely to reduce the number of families waiting for housing support.³⁹⁷

As the *ex-ante* evaluation shows, between 2014 and 2020, investment in intermediate housing development across various municipalities was not implemented. The municipal housing fund aims to privatize at market prices, as provided by the Law on Housing Assistance, and to use the proceeds to carry out development of the social housing stock.³⁹⁸ Compensation for the rent or lease of housing from 2018 to 2020 third quarter amounted to EUR 3.6 million. With the help of compensation mechanisms, 4,336 persons (families) had the opportunity to reduce the cost of purchasing housing, and 6,375 people to reduce the cost of renting housing.³⁹⁹

Between 2015 and 2020, EUR 49.9 million of EU structural funds (in particular, the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF) were allocated for the development of social housing in Lithuania, including its construction, acquisition and reconstruction. Municipalities had to cover at least 15 per cent of project costs, however, the latter was allocated by the state to municipalities as a targeted grant.⁴⁰⁰ The activities funded were intended to develop local housing stocks by building new or reconstructing and adapting existing buildings for social housing, or purchasing residential houses or apartments. Effective from January 2019, an amendment allowed municipalities to rent housing from private or legal persons and then sublet them to people who were in need of social housing support. This amendment came in response to the issue of people illegally renting houses, which prevented tenants from receiving rent assistance. Amendment addressed the stigma associated with poor and homeless people in the rental market.⁴⁰¹

When implementing the project, 'Development of the social housing fund mentioned above, a total of 7,143 dwellings were newly built or purchased, which exceeded the original target.⁴⁰² However, as yet it has not been possible to meet the needs of all households due to the extremely high demand for social housing in the country.

TABLE 20. MONITORING INDICATORS FOR THE MEASURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL HOUSING FUND'.

ASSESSMENT CRITERION (INDICATOR)	VALUE (STATUS), 31 DECEMBER 2018	VALUE, 31 DECEMBER 2023	VALUE ACHIEVED
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³⁹⁶ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Lietuvos ūkio sektorių finansavimo po 2020 m. vertinimas: Būsto prieinamumo gerinimo socialiai pažeidžiamiems gyventojams po 2020 m. Atvejo studija. Available at: <https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/dokumentai/lietuvos-ukio-sektoriu-finansavimo-po-2020-metu-vertinimas/busto-prieinamumo-gerinimo-socialiai-pazeidziamiems-gyventojams-po-2020-m-atvejo-studija-17-priedas?type=versions>.

⁴⁰¹ The Borgen project. The process of reducing homelessness in Lithuania. Available at: <https://borgenproject.org/homelessness-in-lithuania/>.

⁴⁰² Socialinio būsto fondo plėtra. Available at: https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/finansavimas/patvirtintos_priemones/socialinio-busto-fondo-pletra.

Share of persons (families) to whom municipal social housing has been rented, out of all persons (families) waiting to rent social housing	3.9%	14%	-
Newly built or purchased social housing	100	2,117	7,143

Source: esinvesticijos.lt

In terms of **social housing**, both the post-Soviet privatization and the negative approach of the private housing rental sector towards tenants has had an impact on the decline in the supply of social housing for rent. People waiting for social housing have been seen as too risky and unreliable by private landlords.⁴⁰³ During the EU investment programming period 2014-2020, the development of social housing stock was encouraged; however, the problem of access to social housing remains: estimates put the supply of new social housing that is expected to be built within five years at more than five times less than current demand.⁴⁰⁴ According to data from 2019, 10,550 households in Lithuania were on waiting lists to rent social housing.⁴⁰⁵ At the same time, 11,140 households lived in the social housing.⁴⁰⁶ For the period 2014–2020, EUR 58.7 million was set aside for projects to expand social housing, of which EUR 49.9 million came from the ERDF and EUR 8.8 million from municipalities' resources.⁴⁰⁷

As mentioned by one interviewee, social housing may sometimes be overcrowded and/or offer poor living conditions. In addition, families with children who live in social housing often suffer energy poverty. Families in Lithuania who live in social housing are also stigmatized, which remains an important issue not only due to the negative psychological damage caused to families with children, but also impact it has on plans for the purchase and allocation of social housing. According to the latest survey by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, residents with lower incomes and those living in smaller towns are more tolerant of having social housing in their area.⁴⁰⁸

In most cases, families with dependent children who lack good living conditions can apply for financial assistance at municipality level. However, according to representatives of NGOs in Lithuania, financial support from municipalities is usually not sufficient. **NGOs⁴⁰⁹ play an important role in assisting families** with children in need. They provide help in purchasing the basic amenities that families lack, as well as financially assisting with other housing maintenance work such as water facilities and/or heating systems.

As pointed out in the *ex-ante* evaluation of financial instruments for housing affordability, one of the main reasons why families cannot make more active use of rent compensation is a **lack of legal renting** (to avoid paying taxes, a large proportion of the housing rental market is still not officially declared). Also, some affordable housing is not attractive (except for Vilnius, Klaipėda and Kaunas municipalities) due to various reasons – worn-out engineering systems, old construction, underdeveloped

⁴⁰³ Būsto prieinamumo sritys planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Asmenų (šeimų), įrašytų į laukiančių paramos būstui išsinuomoti sąrašus, skaičius. 2019. Available at: https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Socialine%20statistika/2019%20m_%20I%20pusmetis%20Apie%20laukian%C4%8Dius%20paramos%20b%C5%ABstui%20i%C5%A1sinuomoti.pdf.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ 'National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania.'

⁴⁰⁸ ES investicijos. Ką daryti su socialinių būstų gyventojais: išstumti į užribį ar priimti į bendruomenę? 2020. Available at: <https://www.esinvesticijos.lt/lt/naujienos-1/naujienos/ka-daryti-su-socialiniu-bustu-gyventojais-istumti-i-uzribi-ar-priimti-i-bendruomene>.

⁴⁰⁹ Information gathered from interview.

infrastructure, etc. The **unattractiveness of the housing market in the regions** is partly due to the low supply of quality housing. The evaluation found that the majority of intermediate housing is currently occupied, and 8.3 per cent of it is in an emergency condition. Without additional investment, housing supply in the regions is likely to decrease over time.⁴¹⁰ As national data from 2019 show, 1,375 dwellings across the municipalities (intermediate housing) and 231 social housing dwellings provided uninhabitable living conditions.⁴¹¹ Overall, one of the key bottlenecks to the use of state assistance in housing and achieving effective access to adequate housing is low supply of housing or the supply of poor-quality housing, and the high cost of administrative fees.⁴¹²

Data show that families make little use of available compensation for housing rents and leases due to the aforementioned reasons such as the unofficial rental market and insufficient supply of leasing and rentals.⁴¹³ The National Audit Office of Lithuania emphasizes the importance of **collaboration that is currently missing between governmental institutions, municipalities and business representatives**, which could offer housing rental or leasing for families in need. Various promotional activities should also be used to inform families, who are not always aware of the existing opportunities.⁴¹⁴

According to the information provided in the Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee (Country Report for Lithuania), the existing system of social housing provision often traps families into a circle of dependence on social support. Recipients of social housing are not encouraged to increase their income or to purchase or rent apartments in the free market. They also lack incentives to seek employment: exceeding the set annual income and asset limits by more than 25 per cent results in losing their social housing. Therefore, there is a need for intermediate housing solutions for people who do not qualify for social housing, or no longer qualify, but are locked out of the home ownership market. The Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee recommended identifying this group and providing them with affordable housing.⁴¹⁵

According to the researchers, examples from other countries show that **intermediate housing** whose price is higher than that of social housing but lower in comparison to the market price **might offer a promising opportunity** to reduce the problem of access to housing. The development of intermediate housing could also help to address regional challenges, as investing in quality housing may help to solve such problems as migration, staff shortages and others. It is recommended to begin gathering more accurate data regarding the number of families waiting for intermediate housing and, after assessing the benefits offered by intermediate housing, **to invest in the development of quality housing**.⁴¹⁶

According to an evaluation of housing affordability (2020)⁴¹⁷, current financial **interventions in the development of social housing in Lithuania are insufficient**, as the supply of new social housing

⁴¹⁰ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

⁴¹¹ Duomenys apie savivaldybės būstų fondą. 2019. Available at: https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Socialine%20statistika/2019%20m_%20I%20pusmetis%20Duomenys%20apie%20savivaldyb%C4%97s%20b%C5%ABst%C5%B3%20fond%C4%85.pdf.

⁴¹² Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

⁴¹³ Audit Office of Lithuania. Ar užtikrinamas būsto prieinamumas mažas pajamas gaunantiems gyventojams? 2017.

⁴¹⁴ Ar užtikrinamas būsto prieinamumas mažas pajamas gaunantiems gyventojams?

⁴¹⁵ Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania. 2019.

⁴¹⁶ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

⁴¹⁷ Lietuvos ūkio sektorių finansavimo po 2020 m. vertinimas: Būsto prieinamumo gerinimo socialiai pažeidžiamiems gyventojams po 2020 m.

planned over the next five years was five times lower than the current need. To make housing more accessible for children and families in Lithuania, the experts suggested implementing the following changes⁴¹⁸:

- Providing sufficient funding for housing support;
- Priority should be given to the purchase of dwellings, and not for the construction of new dwellings. As the National Audit Office of Lithuania⁴¹⁹ highlights, municipalities in Lithuania often choose the most expensive alternative - constructing new housing and reconstructing unused buildings, thus providing fewer families with social housing than they could if they used the same financial resources differently;
- Expand funding for the compensation of housing rent in the official renting market. In regions where the unofficial rent market (illegal, undeclared renting) dominates, municipalities should formulate orders for real estate developers to increase the supply of housing for rent;
- Consideration should be given to creating a separate financial instrument (FI) for the development of the housing fund, which could mobilize the state budget (funded by the EU) and international investors.
- Shorten the process necessary to acquire housing for social housing;
- Higher rental prices for municipal housing (not social housing) would create an additional flow of funds for the development of social housing, or encourage current tenants to buy out their homes;
- Limiting the length of time for which people can live in social housing, and encouraging families to take responsibility for their financial situations;
- Increasing overall employment and using interventions to reduce social exclusion may help to reduce the size of the target group of social housing recipients.

The National Audit Office of Lithuania also emphasizes the issue of a lack of **social housing** that leads to long waiting lists (sometimes up to 30 years) and limits families' chances of receiving effective access to adequate housing.⁴²⁰ With a wider range of housing support measures, more vulnerable groups including families (especially low-income families, Roma and families of migrant origin) may be able to access adequate housing in less time.⁴²¹ Also, young low-income families that are provided with social housing are not incentivized to earn more income and own real estate. Therefore, applying a wider range of support measures to low-income families would address housing problems more quickly.⁴²² In addition, a **control mechanism** is needed to avoid social housing being available to people who should not be eligible for it (e.g. they do not declare all their income or wealth, or have departed to another country, etc.).⁴²³

No strategic planning is evident in the area of housing support at national level.⁴²⁴ Without concrete objectives being applied to particular municipalities, the ambitious goal of ensuring access to housing

⁴¹⁸ Lietuvos ūkio sektorių finansavimo po 2020 m. vertinimas: Būsto prieinamumo gerinimo socialiai pažeidžiamiems gyventojams po 2020 m.

⁴¹⁹ Ar užtikrinamas būsto prieinamumas mažas pajamas gaunantiems gyventojams?

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

for as many people as possible is formulated by only 32 per cent of municipalities. Without specific targets, objectives and indicators, the municipalities do not usually monitor or take the necessary decisions regarding support arrangements, and do not provide information to the target groups in time for them to make use of existing financial mechanisms.⁴²⁵ Differing competences and opportunities between municipalities also create more inequality between families. However, the XVIII Government of the Republic of Lithuania aims to define a long-term vision for the development of housing affordability, taking into account the results of the planned evaluation by the OECD in 2021-2022.⁴²⁶

New national initiatives for housing support

In 2021, some planned amendments regarding housing support were announced by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. These amendments are intended to provide greater assistance for the most vulnerable groups, including families with children. Plans have also been announced to provide complex support to families and children living in state-reimbursed housing or social housing. The amendments are as follows:

- 1) Single-parent families may claim for social housing rent without a queue;
- 2) Current annual income and wealth thresholds will be increased, which would allow families to retain the right to social housing;
- 3) Social housing will be rented to people with disabilities even if they exceed the thresholds for annual income and wealth assets, as long as this is by no more than 50 per cent;
- 4) The rental price for intermediate/municipal housing will be less than or equal to 20 per cent of the market rent price of social housing. This is applied to the most vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, single-parent families, and families raising three or more children;
- 5) In the event of the announcement of an emergency or quarantine, increased annual income and wealth for families will not have any impact on the conditions for receiving social housing;
- 6) Additional support at municipality level will be provided to families who are on waiting lists for social housing or renting social housing. This assistance will help to integrate family members into the labour market and improve their family financial situation;
- 7) Municipalities will assist families in the process of receiving partial compensation for their rent while they wait for social housing;
- 8) Subsidy amounts will increase from 15 per cent to 30 per cent for the partially reimbursed housing loan.⁴²⁷

Waiting times for social housing in Lithuania will be shortened to five years by 2024, and three years by 2026.⁴²⁸ If, by the end of this period, a municipality has not been able to provide social housing for an individual or family, it will have to compensate them for the actual rental price of suitable housing in

⁴²⁵ Ar užtikrinamas būsto prieinamumas mažas pajamas gaunantiems gyventojams?

⁴²⁶ XVIII Lietuvos Respublikos vyriausybės programos nuostatų įgyvendinimo planas. Available at: <https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/VPN%C4%AE%20projektas.pdf>.

⁴²⁷ Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Siūlomi pokyčiai padės lengviau įsigyti būstą ir pagerins socialinio ar savivaldybės būsto nuomos sąlygas. 2021. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/siulomi-pokyciai-pades-lengviau-isigyti-busta-ir-pagerins-socialinio-ar-savivaldybes-busto-nuomos-salygas>.

⁴²⁸ Lietuvos Respublikos paramos būstui įsigyti ar išsinuomoti įstatymo Nr. XII-1215 2, 5, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18 ir 29 straipsnių pakeitimo įstatymas. 2020. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/2ac91672935b11eaa51db668f0092944>; Socialinių reikalų ir darbo komitetas pritarė įstatymo pataisoms, didinančioms socialinio būsto prieinamumą mažas pajamas gaunantiems asmenims. Pranešimas žiniasklaidai. Available at: https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=35436&p_k=1&p_t=270908.

the market. Also, social housing may be rented out of order to young people after they leave alternative care facilities.⁴²⁹

Compensation for heating and water costs

Given the definition of affordable housing, it is likely that deprived households (often low-income families) spend more than 40 per cent of their disposable income on housing, which limits their ability to meet their children's needs.⁴³⁰ Where housing costs are high, a compensation mechanism for heating and water costs is in place. According to the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Poor Residents,⁴³¹ families who are unable to provide themselves with sufficient funds for living shall be entitled to the following financial social assistance: social benefit (see Chapter 1): compensations for the costs of household heating, hot water and drinking water. Both benefits are means-tested, and depend on family income and assets.

When granting cash social assistance, the property of a family (persons living together) shall include property possessed by right of ownership by members of this family. However, from May 2021 the owned property is temporarily not evaluated when granting cash social assistance to poor residents.⁴³²

Families (persons living together) who own a dwelling in a multi-dwelling building are entitled to support towards the cost of a loan taken out to finance the renovation of the building, provided they participate in the modernization project and they are entitled to compensation for heating expenses.⁴³³

Compensation for the costs of household heating, hot water and drinking water are paid in the following cases:

- a family (persons living together) shall pay for the heating of the accommodation not more than 10 per cent of the difference between their received income and one SSI (EUR 128 per family member per month), provided to the family.
- the compensation covers the part of the cost of drinking water exceeding 2 per cent of the income gained by the family;
- the compensation covers the part of the cost of hot water exceeding 5 per cent of the income gained by a family.⁴³⁴

Families (persons living together) are entitled to social benefits and compensation for the costs of house heating, hot water and drinking water if the single resident or at least one of the persons living together works or does not work because they are:

⁴²⁹ Lietuvos Respublikos paramos būstui įsigyti ar išsinuomoti įstatymo Nr. Xii-1215 2, 5, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18 ir 29 straipsnių pakeitimo įstatymas. 2020.

⁴³⁰ Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.

⁴³¹ Republic of Lithuania. Law Amending the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Poor Families and Single Residents. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalActPrint/lt?jfwid=rivwzvvpvg&documentId=TAIS.418219&category=TAD>; Ministry of Social Security and Labour. Support to low-income families and single persons. 2021. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/en/activities/family-and-children/social-assistance-to-families-and-children/support-to-low-income-families-and-single-persons>.

⁴³² Support for low-income families and single persons. At the end of the temporary provision, a permanent provision will enter into force according to which the property will not be valued for 3 months for those people who apply for the social benefit for the first time or 2 years after receiving the last support.

⁴³³ Support to low-income families and single persons.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

- nursing a person with disabilities or sick family member;
- registered as unemployed with the local office of the Lithuanian labour exchange or another member state's employment service, and receiving unemployment benefit; or
- taking care of a child under the age of 3 years, or under the age of 8 years if the child does not have the opportunity to attend a pre-school educational institution, etc.⁴³⁵

Social benefits and compensation are granted to divorced or separated persons raising children under 18 if they have entered into an agreement for child maintenance certified by the court or where support for a child has been awarded by a court.⁴³⁶ Compensation for the cost of household heating, hot water and drinking water is granted for three months from the date of entitlement. The compensations are granted retroactively up to two months preceding the month of submission of the application, provided the family is still entitled at the time of application.⁴³⁷

Furthermore, municipalities may, following their own procedure, allocate cash social assistance from the municipal budgetary resources in other cases not provided for by the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Poor Residents (to award a one-time conditional, periodical, targeted allowance or social benefit; to compensate dwelling maintenance expenses that are not specified in the Law; to compensate expenses for heating a larger usable floor than the ration fixed by the Law; to cover dwelling indebtedness, etc.).⁴³⁸

According to data from 2020, an average of 93,700 people (3.3 per cent of the national population) received compensation for heating and water costs per month. Compared with 2019, the number of beneficiaries had decreased from 120,520 to 93,700 persons. EUR 13 million from the national budget was spent on compensation mechanisms in 2020; compared with 2019, these expenses decreased almost threefold. However, during the 2021-2022 heating season, an increase is expected due to large increases in heating prices.⁴³⁹

Temporary housing

Homeless people are among the most stigmatized groups in Lithuania, facing a high level of discrimination in the rental and labour markets, as well as in other spheres of life and in access to essential services.⁴⁴⁰ However, there is no specific strategy in Lithuania that aims to prevent and tackle homelessness in an integrated manner, i.e. one that addresses the complex interplay of the underlying causes of homelessness mentioned in the previous section.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁵ Support to low-income families and single persons.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Siūloni pokyčiai padės lengviau įsigyti būstą ir pagerins socialinio ar savivaldybės būsto nuomos sąlygas. 2021. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/siulomi-pokyciai-pades-lengviau-isigyti-busta-ir-pagerins-socialinio-ar-savivaldybes-busto-nuomos-salygas>.

⁴³⁸ Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Siūloni pokyčiai padės lengviau įsigyti būstą ir pagerins socialinio ar savivaldybės būsto nuomos sąlygas. 2021. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/siulomi-pokyciai-pades-lengviau-isigyti-busta-ir-pagerins-socialinio-ar-savivaldybes-busto-nuomos-salygas>.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ 'National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania.'

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

According to the European Social Policy Network, the Lithuanian government has put legislation and policies in place to help people experiencing homelessness in the following ways⁴⁴²:

- **Shelters and crisis centres for homeless people.** Provisions are made for shelter in two forms: short-term temporary housing, and crisis centres. Short-term temporary housing is for homeless people and people with addictions or other critical situations that threaten a person's health or life. Services include information, medication and representation, access to basic facilities for personal hygiene and access to health care. The duration of these services can be up to three nights. Crisis centres are for homeless people and victims of violence (often mothers with children). Services include social and psychological support, employment consultations, skills building, access to health care and more. Crisis centre services aim to restore independent living and social connections and to help people to reintegrate into society. The duration of these services may be up to six months, and may be extended. Lithuania's national statistical agency (Statistics Lithuania) counts the number of people who use the services of homeless shelters and **emergency shelters for mothers and children** each year. In 2019, a total of 4,015 homeless people were counted, a decrease of 16 per cent compared with 2018. Some 1,858 people were living in emergency/temporary accommodation, and 2,157 people were accommodated in emergency reception centres for mothers and children.
- In some municipalities, there are also day centres for homeless people, where they can stay during the day, make food, attend courses, and receive other social services.⁴⁴³ In the city of Vilnius, a municipality programme has established **transitional supported accommodation** for people moving from homeless shelters to independent living. Such accommodation is supported by social workers, who manage recipients' finances and debt. They also offer counselling services to help people adjust.
- Recent legislation allows municipalities to provide housing for those in need by **renting housing from private or legal persons and then sub-letting it** to people in need of housing support.
- Although few **housing-led services** in Lithuania are developed, one example of a housing-led service is the support provided to **young people leaving foster institutions**, who are guaranteed a lump-sum benefit of around EUR 2,800 for housing, and the support of a social worker to help with buying or renting housing.⁴⁴⁴

According to the Department of Statistics, in 2020 most people entering shelters did so due to a lack of their own housing. The total number of people using such shelters was 1,300.⁴⁴⁵ Among the shelter residents were 24 people who had experienced domestic violence. This was almost three times fewer than in 2019, when 66 victims of domestic violence were seeking shelter. However, experts fear that this decline could be deceptive. The Department of Statistics is currently conducting a statistical survey on the personal safety of the population, which aims to uncover the true extent of violence in Lithuania. It will collect information on violations of the personal safety of the population at work, the prevalence

⁴⁴² The process of reducing homelessness in Lithuania.

⁴⁴³ 'National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania.'

⁴⁴⁴ 'National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania.'; Lietuvos Respublikos išmokų vaikams įstatymas 1994 m. lapkričio 3 d. Nr. I-621 [The Law on Child Benefits of the Republic of Lithuania, 3 November 1994, No. I-621].

⁴⁴⁵ Official Statistics Portal. Nakvynės namus paveikė pandemija. 2021. Available at: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/straipsnis-nakvynes-namus-paveike-pandemija>.

and nature of violence in the local environment and beyond, and the provision of assistance to victims.⁴⁴⁶

Services in Lithuania relating to the prevention of homelessness and to housing exclusion are of limited scope (FEANTSA, 2016). One measure aimed at preventing home evictions and indebtedness is the provision of financial compensation to help with the cost of utilities for low-income citizens. It is also envisaged by law that municipalities have the discretion to provide debt relief to recipients of social assistance. Nevertheless, analysis of the situation in various municipalities reveals that the number of evictions from social housing is on the rise. At municipal level, the provision of counselling services for people in debt is under-developed or non-existent. Moreover, the financial indebtedness of homeless people encourages them to remain outside the legal labour market, since wages and income other than social assistance are subject to heavy deductions for debt repayment.⁴⁴⁷

Children in alternative care

The quality of housing conditions for children in institutional care depends directly on the implementation of the policy of deinstitutionalization. Residential care is acknowledged as harmful to children's development, as well as their physical and mental health and future life perspectives. Overall responsibility for the deinstitutionalization process, such as setting the legal framework, lies with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Municipalities bear responsibility for finding local solutions for particular children and institutions, such as transferring children from childcare homes to a family-type environment. These political developments are observed and endorsed by international organizations and experts. The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe emphasized that: "Authorities both at the national and at local levels are urged to speed up the deinstitutionalization process by adopting more ambitious national strategies and policies and locally-tailored programmes to support them" (Muižnieks 2017: 21).

Physical housing conditions are improving significantly for those children transferred to family-type care. Nevertheless, the Child Rights Ombudswoman and child rights NGOs are concerned about the risk of institutional culture that might persist in the new types of care arrangements. For instance, certain municipalities prefer developing a network of community care homes for children as a compromise to actual deinstitutionalization.

Housing adaptation for families raising children with disabilities

In Lithuania, adaptations of housing for children with disabilities were carried out by 50 municipalities in 2020. Overall, 135 dwellings were adapted for children with severe disabilities, and technical assistance measures were implemented for 110 children with severe disabilities.⁴⁴⁸ It is possible to adapt housing that is owned by a child with disabilities, by his or her close relatives, or by the municipality. The actual place of residence of the child with disabilities must be stated.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Official Statistics Portal. Nakvynės namus paveikė pandemija. 2021.

⁴⁴⁷ Indriliūnaitė, 2013. "National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion Lithuania."

⁴⁴⁸ Neigaliųjų reikalų departamentas prie Socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos. 2020 metų veiklos ataskaita. Available at: <http://www.ndt.lt/wp-content/uploads/Veiklos-ataskaitas-uz-2020-final.pdf>.

⁴⁴⁹ Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Vaikams su sunkia negalia – daugiau galimybių pritaikyti būstą ir aplinką. 2019. Available at: <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/vaikams-su-sunkia-negalia-daugiau-galimybiu-pritaikyti-busta-ir-aplinka>.

However, the **lack of adapted housing** for children with disabilities remains an issue in Lithuania – overall **needs for such housing adaptation were not met**, as only 58.4 per cent of requests were executed in 2020.⁴⁵⁰ Survey data show that half of the respondents – parents raising children with disabilities – complained about a lack of access to housing adaptation services.⁴⁵¹

Unequal opportunities for children and their families to receive the compensation for housing adaptations or technical assistance measures due some maximum amounts being applied at national level. Additional funding depends on the decisions and resources of individual municipalities.⁴⁵² The arranged amendment to increase annual income and wealth thresholds that would allow families to retain the right to social housing could have a positive impact on families' access to social housing.

Roma children and children with migrant backgrounds

Insufficient political attention has so far been given to the improvement of Roma children's access to adequate housing in Lithuania. As mentioned in the Feasibility Study for the Child Guarantee (Country Report for Lithuania), the first document, the 'Action Plan for 2012-2014' was adopted as a response to the Communication from the European Commission on National Roma Integration Strategies. This document was later built upon by the 2015-2020 Action Plan for the Integration of Roma into Lithuanian Society⁴⁵³, coordinated by the Department for National Minorities of the Republic of Lithuania. With regard to housing, the Action Plan stipulates improvements to housing conditions for Roma people – to strengthen the implementation of the right of Roma people to housing. The only housing-related financial measures introduced during the period 2016-2020 are the annual amount of EUR 15,000 allocated for legal consultations on housing issues. Funding to increase the accessibility of housing for Roma is not foreseen in the Action Plan.⁴⁵⁴ The only indicator mentioned was the number of illegal buildings inhabited by Roma in the Kirtimai district in Vilnius (after the legalization of illegal buildings or the provision of social housing).⁴⁵⁵

In the context of the new wave of migrants who have reached Lithuania via the Belarusian border, the issue of housing for families with migrant origins becomes an even greater challenge. Housing conditions in the Foreigners' Registration Centre of the State Border Guard Service under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania are rather poor. In her yearly report (2018, p. 67), the Child rights ombudswoman indicated the following problems in relation to living conditions: living areas are narrow and overcrowded (e.g., two women with their children are accommodated in one room), residents lack privacy, children have no space to play or spend time according to the needs of their age). The Centre was intended to accommodate those persons who had tried to cross the border illegally. However, Lithuania has never experienced illegal migration on such a large scale before. From 2015, Lithuania fully implemented the common European asylum system, under which foreigners may be detained for no longer than 48 hours. Lithuania provided alternatives to detention without any restriction on movement. In 2017, the country began to accommodate asylum seekers in alternative

⁴⁵⁰ Neįgalųjų reikalų departamento 2020 m. veiklos ataskaita.

⁴⁵¹ Neįgalaus vaiko teisių užtikrinimo ir pagalbos šeimai tyrimas, įvertinant Jungtinių Tautų Neįgalųjų teisių konvencijos nuostatų įgyvendinimo efektyvumą Lietuvoje."

⁴⁵² Vaikams su sunkia negalia – daugiau galimybių pritaikyti būstą ir aplinką.

⁴⁵³ Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ministro įsakymas dėl romų integracijos į Lietuvos visuomenę 2015–2020 metų veiksmų plano patvirtinimo 2015 m. sausio 29 d. Nr. IV-48 Vilnius.

⁴⁵⁴ Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee. Country Report – Lithuania. 2019.

⁴⁵⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ministro įsakymas dėl romų integracijos į Lietuvos visuomenę 2015–2020 metų veiksmų plano patvirtinimo 2015 m. sausio 29 d. Nr. IV-48 Vilnius.

premises in municipalities where families with migrant origins might experience stigmatization by local people, especially in the context of this new wave of migration in Lithuania. There is a lack of data on the current living conditions of families with migrant origins. Unaccompanied migrant children are accommodated in social care institutions and granted guardianship.

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are accommodated with their relatives, representatives or in the Foreigners' Registration Centre. The decision over housing is made with reference to his/her opinion, age and level of maturity. Where possible, siblings are not to be separated. There is also a requirement to refrain as far as possible from moving unaccompanied minor asylum seekers from one place of accommodation to another.

All in all, households with children – in particular, single-parent families and families raising three and more children, low-income families, families raising children with disabilities, and Roma families – often face housing-related issues. These include housing cost overburden, the inability to adequately heat a home, or to provide children with personal space and appropriate living conditions. Approaches to housing as an essential part of children's well-being and socialization are formulated in the main national documents; however, no strategic planning has been developed or implemented. Housing affordability, the reduction of energy poverty, adapted housing for people with disabilities (including children) are the key goals at national level.

Currently, support for housing provision is delivered by granting low-income families' the right to compensation for housing rent by renting social housing or paying compensation for part of the rent and compensation for housing acquisition by providing subsidies from the state to pay the part of the partially reimbursed housing loan or paying compensation for the leasing part of the housing rent.

Compensation for heating and water costs (in relation to families' income), temporary housing in crisis centres and housing adaptation services for children with disabilities are provided in Lithuania. No strategy exists with regard to homeless people – in particular, children in street situations – and housing adaptations do not meet the needs of families raising children with disabilities. No particular plan has yet been developed to solve housing problems for Roma and children of migrant origin.

In general, the use of state aid remains low, due to low housing supply (especially in rural areas) and the poor quality of housing, as well as the illegal rental market. Significant regional disparities are noted in the quality and infrastructure for social services and housing support. The development of municipal housing is not encouraged. Long waiting lists are the main barrier to social housing for families in Lithuania. In response to this challenge, it was decided to legally shorten the maximum waiting time for social housing – in 2024, to a maximum of 5 years, and to 3 years since 2026.

The latest amendments in the area of housing support also include an additional focus on single-parent families, who are given the right to receive housing without queuing; better housing support conditions for people with disabilities; increased subsidy amounts; a lower than market rent price for municipal housing; and additional social support to enable families to live a more independent life, financially and socially.

7.3. Recommendations for improving access to adequate housing

To combat social exclusion and poverty, the European Union recognizes and respects the right to social and housing assistance to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources.⁴⁵⁶ It is also emphasized by the European Commission that having a decent home environment is an essential need.⁴⁵⁷ Housing deprivation in Lithuania is determined mostly by families' income, and is frequently affected by existing income inequality. Studies showed that single-parent or large families, families with unemployed parents and low-income families, as well as children with disabilities or children who have parents with disabilities, Roma children, children of migrant origin and children leaving alternative care are the main target groups in Lithuania that are most in need of housing support. Based on the current system of housing support in Lithuania and the challenges facing households with children, a number of key recommendations have been formulated.

A 'housing first' approach

First, there is a need for a comprehensive housing support strategy with a **'housing first' approach** that can stimulate the process of implementing housing support in Lithuania. The aforementioned approach focuses on a dwelling being a precondition for solving other problems – hence, housing is always the top priority. After the approach is adopted, permanent and affordable **housing is provided as quickly as possible for families experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness**, together with support services to help them maintain their housing and avoid returning to homelessness. A comprehensive national housing support policy could make an impact on reducing disparities across the country, improving children's housing conditions, providing access to housing and preventing families from homelessness. There is also a need for a detailed analysis of housing affordability and a vision for the development of housing affordability.⁴⁵⁸ Currently, a lack of social housing, an insufficient supply of housing for rent and the common practice of illegal renting in Lithuania often reduce the state's opportunities to effectively assist families in need of housing support, and often diminish families' opportunities to use compensation mechanisms for housing acquisition or rent. All of these issues require appropriate solution(s), necessary funding and willingness to take action – all of which lead to the following recommendations. The 'housing first' approach allows the issue of housing to be better addressed, ensuring access to housing for families in need in line with the strategic goal of the 2021-2030 national strategic programme.⁴⁵⁹

Developing quality housing and increasing housing supply

Because low housing supply or the supply of poor-quality housing often result in the insufficient take-up of state support, there is a need for **additional investment** (ERDF and national and/or municipal budget) **in housing support**, with a **focus on the regions**. Investments should be made in the

⁴⁵⁶ Official Journal of the European Union. Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union.

⁴⁵⁷ Commission Staff Working Document. Accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee. 2021. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9968&furtherNews=yes#navItem-1>.

⁴⁵⁸ 2021–2030 m. Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos šeimos politikos stiprinimo plėtros programos pagrindimas.

⁴⁵⁹ National Progress Programme for 2021-2030.

development of quality housing and its supply across Lithuania by purchasing new properties for vulnerable families and adapting them to the needs of families raising children with disabilities, in addition to **setting up fair housing rental schemes** (currently, there is a lack of legal renting). Also, **preventive mechanisms** (enabling the late payment of loans and utilities, assuming rent arrears, preventive advice) should be introduced. **Separate financial instruments** for housing support and the development of housing stocks should be considered. These particular recommendations directly reflect and also complement one of the strategic goals of the National Programme 2021-2030 - that of addressing the issue of housing and the access of people (including children) to adequate housing.

Expansion of social housing

As the European Commission has noted, the availability of social housing remains scarce in Lithuania.⁴⁶⁰ Extremely high demand for social housing in Lithuania leads to the necessity of **social housing expansion** (financed by the ERDF and national and/or municipal budget). Priority should be given to the purchase of dwellings.⁴⁶¹ Rapid rehousing should be applied, with quicker access to communal flats via the social housing allocation system (following the example of Austria).⁴⁶² Intermediate (municipal) housing could offer a promising opportunity to also help reduce housing deprivation. The latter recommendation is based on the *ex-ante* evaluation of financial instruments for housing affordability.⁴⁶³ The **development of intermediate housing across municipalities** should therefore be considered. Intermediate housing could be a good option for the particular group of families who do not qualify for social housing (or no longer do so), encouraging them to get out of the circle of poverty faster and reintegrate into normal living conditions. The additional flow of funds from intermediate housing could be used for the development of social housing.

Consistent strategy across municipalities

Due to financial limitations, consideration should be given to identifying the most vulnerable target groups in various **municipalities** (using indicators and disaggregated data) and developing a **consistent strategy** for them in particular. Consistent funding (from the ERDF and national and/or municipal budgets) should be allocated to solving the housing-related problems of these groups. At first, an experimental intervention could be carried out at the level of the municipality. If successful, this could be expanded.

Development of housing adaptation services for children with disabilities

As the data show, **housing adaptation for families raising children with disabilities** should receive more funding (from the ERDF, national and/or municipal budget) and be **expanded across the country**. In 2020, 135 dwellings were adapted for children with severe disabilities, and technical assistance

⁴⁶⁰ Country Report for Lithuania.

⁴⁶¹ Lietuvos ūkio sektorių finansavimo po 2020 m. vertinimas: Būsto prieinamumo gerinimo socialiai pažeidžiamiesiems gyventojams po 2020 m.

⁴⁶² Study on the economic implementing framework for a possible child guarantee scheme, including its financial foundation.

⁴⁶³ Asmenų (šeimų), kuriems suteiktos subsidijos valstybės iš dalies kompensuojamo būsto kredito daliai ar kredito likučiai apmokėti, skaičius. 2019. Available at: https://socmin.lrv.lt/uploads/socmin/documents/files/veiklos-sritys/Socialine%20statistika/2019%20m_%20I%20pusmetis%20Apie%20gavusius%20subsidijas.pdf.

⁴⁶³ 'Būsto prieinamumo srities planuojamų finansinių priemonių išankstinis vertinimas.'

measures were implemented for 110 children with severe disabilities; however, only 58.4 per cent of requests were carried out.⁴⁶⁴ Therefore, a more efficient allocation of financial resources is necessary.

Housing support combined with social support services

In line with the recommendations of the Council of the European Union, active inclusion strategies are more effective when they combine financial benefits, labour market activation and the enhanced provision of social services including social housing. Therefore, while providing housing support, **additional social assistance** (funded by the ERDF and national and/or municipal budgets) should be given to all families with children who are in receipt of housing assistance (e.g. help to participate in the labour market and thus improve the financial situation of the family; financial management advice; social work assistance; help in raising awareness of existing public services that could be used, etc.) **More comprehensive policies** that focus on different aspects of social assistance could lead to the more efficient use of housing support schemes, and significantly improve the lives of families in Lithuania.

Political attention to children living in Roma families and families with migrant origins

Extra attention is recommended to be paid to **children living in Roma families and families with migrant origins**. A consistent strategy is needed for the improvement of Roma families' access to adequate housing, and for housing conditions over the coming decade (funded by the ERDF). However, a lack of policy-based strategic attention to Roma families was also noted in all other areas. So far, Lithuania's approach towards Roma families and children has been more reactive to EU policies and recommendations, with no significant decisions being made. The overall strategy of housing support in Lithuania is not comprehensive enough and requires development. Roma families, meanwhile, has thus far received even less attention. When introducing a housing support strategy for Roma families, disaggregated data for various housing-related indicators may help to measure the impact of the assistance provided.

In the context of the new wave of migrants arriving in Lithuania via the Belarusian border, it is essential to review the existing plan regarding the integration of foreigners into society by anticipating the provision of primary assistance in terms of housing after their arrival. Conditions and opportunities for receiving temporary housing, assistance in the search for permanent housing, social housing provision and other types of housing support should be anticipated strategically. Finding housing in Lithuania is still a problem for families with migrant origins, due to high rent prices and intolerance of landlords and neighbours.

Strategy to fight homelessness among children

A strategy should be developed **to fight the homelessness among children** in Lithuania. Such a strategy should enable reaching out to children experiencing homelessness (or who are at risk of it), and ensure their access to comprehensive and good-quality support. To successfully achieve this goal **requires the involvement of NGOs working with homeless youth** and/or homeless families or families at risk of losing their homes. The professional opinions of NGOs and other social workers should be taken into consideration when establishing a strategy. In addition, appropriate and adequate funding (including partners' inputs, national, municipal, ERDF resources) should be provided to ensure access to adequate housing for vulnerable groups, with a focus on – and proportionate distribution of finances

⁴⁶⁴ Neįgalųjų reikalų departamentas prie Socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerijos. 2020 metų veiklos ataskaita.

to – social housing demand in each municipality. **High-quality social assistance** (the involvement of professionals in social areas, volunteers) must also be part of housing support, in particular at regional and local level. Clear limits need to be established regarding the maximum length of time families with children should remain in emergency/temporary accommodation. Following the example of Vilnius municipality, the model of transitional supported accommodation could be invoked by other municipalities. As emphasized in the Council Recommendations, effective outreach measures towards children in need, including homeless children and their families and those at risk of homelessness, should be implemented through trained social workers (especially with regard to making successful connections with homeless youth living on the street), family-support services, civil society and social economy organizations.

Recommendations for young people living in socialization centres, special schools and foster institutions

It is recommended that the government prioritize the transformation/closure of institutions and **develop a deinstitutionalization support programme targeting children and young people from socialization centres and special schools**. In addition to preparing them for reintegration into families and communities, including into mainstream education and the labour market, as part of the deinstitutionalization process, these young people should **receive targeted leaving care services**. These services would include social assistance, professional counselling and housing arrangements to help them to transition into adulthood and integrate into education and the labour market.

TABLE 20. PROPOSED INDICATORS FOR MONITORING EFFECTIVE ACCESS TO ADEQUATE HOUSING

Nº	GOAL	INDICATOR	DEFINITION	DISAGGRE-GATION	SOURCE	PERIO-DICITY	IMPORTANCE OF INDICATOR	USE OF INDICATOR	TYPE OF INDICATOR	LITHUANIA (LATEST DATA)	TARGET	SOURCE OF FUNDING
1	By 2030, to reduce the percentage of children living in households with severe housing deprivation	Severe housing deprivation	Percentage of households with children who reside in an overcrowded household and also suffer deprivation in at least one of the following areas: leaky roof, no bathtub/shower and no indoor toilet, or a dwelling that is considered too dark	Socio-demographic variables: Household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status	Statistics Lithuania EU-SILC	Annually Ad-hoc module - Irregular	Primary	Monitoring and evaluation	Process	24.6% of low-income children (2019) 138% (2020)	10% by 2030 Suggested by PPMI	Ministry of Social Security and Labour ERDF
2	By 2030, to reduce the percentage of children in households unable to maintain an adequate temperature	Energy poverty	Percentage of households with children that are unable to maintain an adequate temperature	Socio-demographic variables: Household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory	Statistics Lithuania EU-SILC	Annually Ad-hoc module - Irregular	Primary	Monitoring and evaluation	Process	31% (2020)	21% by 2030 Suggested by PPMI	Ministry of Social Security and Labour ERDF

				status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status								
3	By 2030, to reduce the percentage of children in households overburdene d by housing costs	Housing cost overburden	% of households with children in which total housing costs account for more than 40% of total disposable household income	Socio- demographic variables: Household type; family income; parents' employment status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status	Statistics Lithuania EU-SILC	Annually Ad-hoc module - Irregular	Primary	Monitoring and evaluation	Result	14.4% of all households (2019) 23.4% of single-parent families (2019)	10% of all househol ds by 2030 Suggeste d by PPM I	Ministry of Social Security and Labour ERDF
4	By 2030, to reduce the percentage of children with disabilities living in not adapted housing	Unmet needs of children with disabilities for housing support and adaptation	Percentage of children with disabilities living in non- adapted housing	-	Statistics Lithuania	2-3 years	Primary	Monitoring and evaluation	Process	41.6% of requests with unmet adaptation needs	30% by 2030 Suggeste d by PPMI	Ministry of Social Security and Labour
5	By 2030, to improve housing affordability and support	Unmet needs for affordable housing	% of families on the waiting list for the rent of social housing	Socio- demographic variables: Household type; family income; parents' employment	Statistics Lithuania	Annually	Primary	Monitoring and evaluation	Structural	96.1% (2018)	58% by 2025 12% by 2030 Selected at	Ministry of Social Security and Labour

				status; degree of urbanization (rural/urban); migratory status; ethnicity (where appropriate); disability status							national level	
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Source: compiled by PPML.