

Building brighter futures – Implementing the European Child Guarantee in Portugal

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Key messages

Portugal is reinforcing efforts to combat child poverty and social exclusion through implementing the European Child Guarantee (ECG). The country has developed a comprehensive national action plan to address the root causes of child poverty and social exclusion, and to guarantee access to key public services, while also responding to the specific needs of vulnerable groups of children. This cross-sectoral action plan is designed to enhance coordination across various policy initiatives and programmes that correspond with the objectives of the ECG. It also seeks to engage Local Child Guarantee Units, which are responsible for implementing measures on the ground and ensuring that support is tailored to the diverse needs of populations across the regions. To translate its efforts into success, Portugal should focus on:

- Reinforcing governance of child and youth policy at the national level by establishing an interministerial coordination body at the highest level with a clear mandate to ensure a shared understanding of key issues, drive high-level commitment and ensure coherent monitoring and policy alignment across the various child-related frameworks under the new Single Strategy for the Rights of Children and Young People. Streamlining child-related frameworks will be key to achieving an integrated and child-centred governance framework.
- Strengthening community-based management and peer-learning practices to nurture the fast-growing system of Local Child Guarantee Units and make it less resource intensive to coordinate. A first step could be establishing regional groups of Local Child Guarantee Units to facilitate more efficient coordination, followed by creating a National Network to broaden cooperation and knowledge exchange on implementing the ECG.
- Developing a robust monitoring and evaluation system for the ECG to assess policy effectiveness and generate evidence on policy outcomes. Part of this process involves simplifying the monitoring framework to more closely follow the structure of a results-based framework and aligning indicator selection and description of policy measures with those in connected national strategies, where it makes sense. The current indicator set could be strengthened to sharpen the focus on child poverty and children's access to services to more effectively support policy evaluation and decision-making

- Producing comparable information on children in need at the local level to effectively monitor local implementation. Currently, the Local Child Guarantee Units use indicators based on different definitions of the ECG target groups, lack access to data to identify children living in poverty, and lack experience of using relevant data and indicators for policy monitoring and service planning. To build capacity, existing knowledge should be leveraged, with an emphasis on fostering collaboration between the Local Child Guarantee Units and the national authorities.
- Strengthening child and youth participation in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the ECG national action plan, both at national and local levels. Clarifying roles and responsibilities of Local Units and reinforcing partnerships with youth workers and civil society organisations should be among the priorities. Efforts should be made to broaden participation initiatives beyond schools and strengthen participation opportunities for vulnerable and under-represented children and young people.

This brief summarises the main OECD recommendations and provides some insights from the assessment of the current monitoring system and governance arrangements (OECD, forthcoming^[1]).

What is the European Child Guarantee?

The European Commission adopted the European Child Guarantee (ECG) in 2021 to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have access to the most basic of rights, like healthcare and education. The ECG aims to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion across generations through ensuring **effective and free** access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal every school day, and healthcare, as well as **effective access** to healthy nutrition and adequate housing. The European Child Guarantee also goes beyond access, emphasising **high-quality and inclusiveness** by focusing on availability, affordability, timeliness, and public awareness of service rights

Making the ECG a reality requires countries to ensure coordinated access to a set of key services that are accessible, affordable, aligned with families' cultural and social needs – with availability that matches actual demand. Whole-of-government approaches, clear governance frameworks and strong collaboration between national and local authorities are critical, along with active engagement from other stakeholder to effectively reach children and address the specific barriers they face (Box 1).

Box 1. From strategy to implementation: Delivering the European Child Guarantee

To implement the European Child Guarantee, the European Commission asks Member States to undertake the following:

- appoint a **national Child Guarantee Coordinator** with a mandate and resources to effectively oversee and monitor the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. A key aspect of this role is to assess children in need and the barriers they face in accessing and utilising CG-covered services.
- develop a **national action plan** to implement the European Child Guarantee through to 2030. These plans should establish an integrated policy framework to effectively tackle child social exclusion. They should also address the geographic dimensions of child poverty and inequality by focusing on the specific needs of children in disadvantaged urban, rural, remote, and

segregated areas through a multidisciplinary, coordinated approach. To this end, the national action plans should:

- Ensure consistency with social, education, health, nutrition and housing policies
- Increase investment in children
- Set up support measures for parents or guardians and income support to families and households
- Address the geographical dimension of social exclusion
- Strengthen cooperation with and involvement of national, regional and local actors and with children themselves
- Dedicate adequate national resources and EU funds
- Take into account a gender perspective.
- develop a [national framework for data collection, monitoring, and evaluation](#) of the European Child Guarantee. Every two years, a **monitoring report**, which informs the Commission's oversight and discussions in the Social Protection Committee, should be submitted. To support this process, the European Commission has developed a common monitoring framework that leverages existing EU indicators to track key aspects of ECG implementation and enable cross-country comparisons. While this framework provides a broad overview of childhood socio-economic disadvantage and access to essential services, national monitoring frameworks must go a step further and address country-specific challenges and territorial disparities.
- ensure the **involvement of stakeholders**, such as regional/local authorities, civil society, non-governmental organisations and other child stakeholders throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the action plans.

Source: (European Commission, 2021^[2]) Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee.

Portugal's approach to implementing the ECG

Portugal has developed a national action plan containing a rich set of measures that not only addresses the drivers of child poverty and social exclusion but also aims to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups of children. These measures include promoting higher wages and initiatives to improve access to services for vulnerable children. As the momentum around implementing the ECG has grown, Portugal has added additional measures, most notably a new income support payment targeted at children and young people at risk of extreme poverty as well as launching and revising social programmes to prioritise the ECG's target groups of children (MLSSS, 2024^[3]).

Portugal aims to implement a local integrated approach to the ECG, building on the responsibilities that municipalities already carry for providing many of the ECG-related services. Part of this approach involves establishing Local Child Guarantee Units in every municipality within the framework of the existing Social Network, a national initiative launched back in 2006 to promote local, integrated responses to poverty and social exclusion. These Local Units are charged with integrating the ECG into local service planning, conducting social diagnoses, providing information for monitoring the ECG, and engaging child and youth stakeholders. They will act as vehicles for reinforcing the Social Network platform's focus on children. The Local Units require some centralisation and training opportunities to establish themselves and to operate effectively. A unit responsible for the National Coordination of the Child Guarantee, which sits in the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, is responsible for providing this support and finds itself under pressure to quickly develop relevant strategies and resources to support the fast-growing system of

Local Units; by the end of 2024 alone, 129 Local Units had been created. Meeting the supports needs of the Local Units sat centre stage in Portugal's request for technical assistance from the European Commission's Technical Support Instrument (TSI) (Box 2).

Box 2. Developing structural tools to implement the ECG in Portugal: Brief project overview

Portugal sought technical assistance from the OECD through the European Commission's Technical Support Instrument (TSI) to enhance capacity to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the country's national action plan to implement the European Child Guarantee (ECG). The TSI project focused on three key issues: i) strengthening coordination between national and local policies; ii) improving the monitoring system and data development; and iii) reinforcing capacities to engage children, young people, and other stakeholders throughout the policy cycle. Given Portugal's emphasis on local implementation of the ECG, much of this technical assistance was directed at supporting the newly created Local Units.

Upon the project's inception in 2023, Portugal had published a national action plan and were beginning to look at ways to strengthen data and monitoring capacities, child and youth participatory mechanisms, and to grow and nurture the capacities of the new Local Units. The TSI project resulted in a series of outputs, including tailored-made recommendations, the delivery of workshops and stakeholder consultations, and the creation of practical tools and guidance material. These outputs aim to strengthen the Portuguese authorities' capacity to successfully implement the ECG to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and to create lasting impact.

Over the course of the TSI project, the OECD worked closely with the Unit for the National Coordination of the Child Guarantee in the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security. The OECD also engaged other national authorities and in particular the new Local Units in the municipalities to understand and respond to their needs around capacity building. The project also benefited from guidance from the European Commission's SG Reform¹, which implements the TSI programme more broadly. The project benefitted from the expertise, good practices and legal standards of the OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equality of Opportunities, the OECD Directorate of Public Governance, and their respective committees, the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee and the Public Governance Committee.

Creating the conditions for successful implementation of the ECG

Portugal sees the need to focus efforts on strengthening the data and monitoring system and nurturing the capacities of the newly created Local Units. To this end, Portugal should prioritise making progress in the areas elaborated below.

Reinforcing national governance of child and youth policy

Portugal's strong commitment to addressing poverty and social exclusion among children and improving their outcomes is reflected in many relevant frameworks, national strategies and action plans. Despite the

¹ The Reform and Investment Task Force, also known as SG REFORM, is a department within the European Commission's Secretariat-General that supports EU Member States in designing and implementing structural reforms and investments – primarily through managing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) – and coordinates efforts across policy areas like public administration, the European Semester, green/digital transitions, and governance

wealth of strategic planning frameworks, there are important overlaps both in terms of the measures being implemented and monitored and the supporting coordination structures available (OECD, forthcoming^[1]).

The approval of the Single Strategy for the Rights of Children and Young People early in 2025 represents a key step towards promoting an integrated view of child-related issues at national level and will require a multilevel governance model. The regulations defining the structure and responsibilities of this governance model are still pending. Portugal should consider establishing a single coordination platform, preferably interministerial, to support the implementation and monitoring of the Single Strategy, as well as the related frameworks, including the Child Guarantee national action plan. This single coordination platform should be given a clear mandate to coordinate across sectors and levels of government related to the Single Strategy taking a whole-of-government approach. A unified coordination platform would help avoid duplication of efforts from national stakeholders who currently participate in different but related coordination platforms.

Portugal should consider ways to ensure that this coordination platform, acts as a formal space for establishing effective coordination mechanisms and incentives for horizontal and vertical co-ordination. This coordination body could focus on:

- Facilitating a common understanding of priorities across sectors and stakeholders;
- Ensuring high-level commitment from all relevant ministries, including those not traditionally focused on child well-being;
- Encouraging child-sensitive policymaking across all areas of government;
- Acting as a central hub for monitoring national-level strategies and action plans;
- Promoting vertical coordination with subnational entities (e.g., through the participation of bodies for regional coordination) to align policies with regional and local needs;
- And, approving updates to policy frameworks to ensure that they remain relevant and responsive to the ECG target groups.

In parallel, it is also important that Portugal revisit and streamline the existing child-related frameworks that fall under the umbrella of the Single Strategy. The goal here should be to ensure that these frameworks are harmonised, complementary and any duplication of effort is eliminated, in order to enable a more coherent and efficient policy environment.

Strengthening community-based management and peer learning practice

Since the system of Local Units is growing rapidly, it would be beneficial to nurture community-based management structures, including some communities of practice (CoP). There is growing consensus that valuing local knowledge, experience and capacities is pivotal for local actor agency in framing, designing, delivering, learning and accountability (OECD, 2024^[4]). Community-based management could also satisfy the demand from the Local Units to interact regularly and to share best practices. The Local Units have highlighted the importance of learning from each other, exchanging experiences and methodologies to improve communication and engagement with children, young people, and related stakeholders as part of the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee (OECD, forthcoming^[1]).

To begin, Portugal should explore establishing regional groups of Local Units within each of the country's 23 Intermunicipal Communities (CIMs) which are established to promote intermunicipal cooperation in many domains by managing tasks that benefit areas beyond individual municipalities. Regional groupings hold the potential to facilitate regular peer-learning opportunities and more efficient coordination across neighbouring Local Units while also reducing the resources demands associated with individually coordinating the many Local Units. These regional groups would help to facilitate interactions by serving as primary contact points for the National Coordination.

A second step would be to create a National Network of Local Units to help broaden cooperation and knowledge exchange on implementing the CG. It is suggested that this network comes under the leadership of the National Coordination. This Network would serve as a structured platform to improve vertical and horizontal coordination, bringing all Local Units together with relevant national stakeholders to discuss relevant issues. It would provide a direct line of communication between the Local Units to facilitate knowledge-sharing beyond regional connections and foster a sense of inclusion and ownership, which is critical for sustaining engagement and building capacity over time. In the absence of a connection between the Local Units, there is a risk of fragmentation and inconsistent implementation.

It is recommended to establish some CoPs within the National Network. Some OECD countries successfully use CoPs within their community-based platforms for child service cooperation and exchanges. In terms of the ECG in Portugal, the CoPs could take on different forms, such as:

- Helping Communities – Forums for members to support each other with daily implementation challenges.
- Best Practice Communities – Groups focused on developing, sharing, and refining guidance, strategies, or protocols.
- Knowledge Stewarding Communities – Dedicated to organising and curating knowledge for broader dissemination across the Network.
- Innovation Communities – Spaces to co-create new approaches, tools, or interventions that respond to emerging needs.

Developing a robust monitoring and evaluation system

Implementing the ECG creates the need for Portugal to develop a robust M&E system to assess policy effectiveness and generate evidence on policy outcomes. A key part of this process is developing a results-based monitoring framework. A results-based monitoring framework helps track policy impact and effectiveness and determine whether the national action plan's measures are achieving their intended impact and, if not, why. Specific to the ECG, the monitoring framework should clearly outline: i) cross-government measures to be monitored; ii) target groups of children receiving support; iii) quantitative and qualitative targets to measure progress;² and iv) implementing actors responsible for policy delivery.

As it stands, Portugal's monitoring framework follows the logic of a results-based framework but is overly complex and does not articulate the policy logic clearly enough. Portugal should consider simplifying the monitoring framework and reorganising the structure to represent a causal sequence of components with each component contributing to the next. For example, the monitoring framework currently contains 35 goals. The overall number should be reduced to no more than five and their content reframed around the long-term, transversal results of successfully implementing the Child Guarantee. The high number of operational objectives could also be reduced since they make the national action plan hard to operationalise and to monitor. These operational objectives should indicate concrete and desirable outcomes in well-delimited policy areas. Their scope could be widened by identifying close interactions across operational objectives and their accompanying policy measures.

Portugal could also ensure that the monitoring framework – as much as is relevant – uses the same description of policy measures and the same choice of indicators as connected national strategies. Ensuring so would provide consistent information on policy implementation and minimise the reporting

² Measuring progress requires a mix of quantitative and qualitative targets connected to the outputs from policy implementation. Targets should be defined in a clear, precise and understandable manner and if possible, broken down into smaller milestones, in order to assess execution during the lifetime of the plan and avoid relying on a single point to determine success. Often, measuring progress requires defining a numerical, qualitative target. Other times, a qualitative target is required to confirm whether a specific output has been generated or not (OECD, forthcoming^[1]).

burden. It involves working with data producers to explore the possibility of collecting information more relevant to the needs of the ECG.

Portugal also has options to consider for strengthening the indicator set to draw on more relevant information for monitoring the national action plan. Portugal should sharpen the focus on child poverty and access to services to ensure that the indicator set can effectively support policy evaluation and decision-making. For example, prioritising the child as the measurement unit across indicators would improve indicator comparability and better capture children's circumstances. Selecting child poverty indicators that are policy amenable would provide policy makers with information on factors that policies directly influence. An example of such an indicator is the child poverty rate before and after housing cost. In countries like Portugal, where housing costs are high, the child poverty rate after housing costs gives a more accurate picture of how many children are at risk and how well housing support helps reduce child poverty.

Producing comparable information on children in need at the local level

Effective monitoring of the ECG requires accurate and consistent data to identify and characterise children in need. Portugal has a general lack of data on children in need. One reason for this lack of information is that children in need are harder to reach – meaning it is more difficult to capture them in data collections, and they are often missing from traditional household surveys because they are not easy to identify and may not be residing in private households (OECD, 2021^[5]). The cross-sectorial nature of the ECG means that data come from multiple data sources, that use varying definitions of children in need, which leads to inconsistencies in reporting.

Producing information on children in need's access to key services and the barriers they face is a challenge that is not unique to any one country (Baptista et al., 2023^[6]). Many sources of information are needed. Assessing accessibility barriers requires information on both financial and non-financial barriers such as the high costs faced by low-income families, limited availability and long waiting lists for services, regional disparities, as well as cultural and personal perceptions and attitudes. In addition, different types of information are needed to capture accessibility barriers related to each of the key services as well as to the different target groups of children.

Portugal has sought to improve data on children in need collected by the new Local Units based in the municipalities who are responsible for providing many of the ECG-related services. The Local Units face many concrete difficulties. One major difficulty is the use of inconsistent definitions of "children in need" which leads to variations in the data and limits comparability. The Local Units also do not have access to data for identifying children at risk of poverty and social exclusion at the municipal level, as defined by the indicator used in the European-wide common monitoring framework for the ECG. The Local Units instead rely on proxy indicators, which are often based on children's eligibility for specific programmes, or only capture the poorest children and exclude many children living in poverty.

The Local Units also vary widely in their capacity to use relevant data and indicators for policy monitoring and service planning. For some Local Units, using data on children in need is entirely new endeavour. Therefore, as expected, the Local Units need a lot of support to build data competencies and to establish local monitoring systems.

Portugal should foster collaboration between the Local Units and the National Coordination around building capacity to develop comparable indicators on children in need. A cornerstone to this collaboration is the National Coordination supporting the Local Units to build a common understanding of children in need and of the barriers to accessing services to produce comparable information. The National Coordination should organise a number of workshops with the Local Units to facilitate the Local Units to learn from one another's approaches to data collection and indicator development and to work towards the goal of producing comparable indicators that reflect a common understanding of children in need and the ECG. During the project, the OECD implemented the first of these workshops where the Local Units and the National

Coordination developed an action plan to structure collaboration to address common obstacles to comparable data collection and identify solutions, with an emphasis on peer support (Box 3).

Box 3. Capacity building workshop

Over the course of two days in June 2025, the OECD delivered capacity building workshops utilising the methodologies and tools developed throughout the TSI project to ensure their practical application and lasting impact. The workshops addressed two themes: data and participation. They were attended primarily by the Local Units and some representatives from national statistical institutes and government ministries.

The first workshop “Building Capacity to Develop Comparable Indicators on Children in Need” was aimed at identifying and addressing the challenges of producing consistent and comparable data on children in need at the local level. Participants engaged with findings from an OECD questionnaire sent to Local Units regarding data accessibility. The participants - through hands-on-activities- developed an action plan to foster collaboration for producing comparable indicators on children in need and identified the first steps for implementation. Participants voted to determine the prioritisation of these actions. Among the top actions were providing a glossary of ECG concepts and definitions and measures to improve data sharing.

The second workshop “Bring Them In: Strengthening Child and Youth Participation” was aimed at raising awareness and enhancing capacity to ensure meaningful participation of children and young people in the implementation of the national Child Guarantee Action Plan in Portugal. Through hands-on activities, participants gained awareness about the concept and benefits of child and youth participation, learned about the conditions necessary for impactful participation and discussed possible actions and strategies to strengthen child and youth participation in their mandate. The session helped to build capacities of the Local Units for child and youth participation and ensured the uptake and dissemination of a supporting manual that was designed as a project output.

Meaningful child and youth participation

The ECG places an emphasis on enhancing the involvement of stakeholders, such as regional/local authorities, civil society, non-governmental organisations and other child and youth stakeholders throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the action plans. Promoting the participation of children and young people can help inform policymaking processes and mainstream their needs and expectations across policy and service areas. The OECD Youth Policy Toolkit offers strategic guidance and practical examples from across OECD countries in these areas (OECD, 2024^[7]).

The OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People underlines the importance of strengthening the participation of children and young people, especially those from marginalised and underrepresented groups. Making efforts to actively involve marginalised and underrepresented children and young people helps ensure that their specific and often complex needs are properly understood and addressed, and that services are effectively accessible and tailored to their needs (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023^[8]). Moreover, it can strengthen their relationship with public decision-making and foster greater trust in public institutions (OECD, 2022^[9]).

The Local Units face particular challenges preventing them from meaningfully engaging children and youth in the implementation of the national action plan. These challenges include a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities for consulting children and youth, less developed practices of working with child and youth organisations, and a shortage of targeted initiatives to reach vulnerable youth. In particular, rural Local Units face greater difficulties in engaging and communicating with children and young people due to limited

resources and tools, which contributes to lower confidence in their ability to facilitate meaningful participation.

Portugal should provide the Local Units with more opportunities for capacity-building and peer-learning as well as concrete guidance material. Among the priority actions could be delivering training activities and a competency framework to support of recruitment of dedicated staff at the local level. To assist in this direction, the OECD produced a tailored-made manual on child and youth participation containing good practice examples, practical guidance and methodological tools (Box 3).

Responsibilities for child and youth participation need to be further clarified. Only a minority of Local Units think that their responsibilities around child and youth participation are clear to them.³ Most Local Units co-operate with youth workers on communication, outreach or participation activities targeting children and young people, although collaboration is limited in smaller municipalities. NGOs are considered valued partners, yet youth and children organisations are less often considered key stakeholders compared to other types of organisations, despite their direct connection to the target population. Capacity, financial and institutional challenges risk hampering collaboration. There is the potential for Portugal to strengthen partnerships with youth workers and youth and children's organisations by promoting the development of the youth work sector, building the capacities of these organisations, strengthening awareness among public officials and ensuring adequate resources in municipalities for participatory activities.

Adapting existing public communication strategies and tools to children and young people's interests, concerns and channels is a key factor for success. Most Local Units usually develop initiatives with schools and use social media for outreach. Fewer use other mechanisms, such as surveys and questionnaires or youth and children participatory budgeting programmes. The Local units could explore innovative methods to involve children and young people. In particular, there is a significant gap in targeted initiatives to engage vulnerable and under-represented children and young people. Portugal should use targeted outreach programmes, dedicated training activities for public officials and partnerships with trusted intermediaries to reach these children and young people. Finally, to address the important gap in capacities exist between rural and urban Local Units, Portugal could develop tailored methodological support and tools, provide targeted training and capacity-building and promote peer-learning opportunities for rural local units.

Further information

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<https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/implementing-the-european-child-guarantee-in-portugal.html>.

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³ The OECD conducted a survey between 1 April 2024 and 22 April 2024 with Local Child Guarantee Units to establish their capacities, capabilities, and confidence in fostering child and youth participation. 40 out of the 60 units that were in existence at the time responded to the survey.

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