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REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

REPORT

ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2021/1004 ESTABLISHING A EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE

FOR THE PERIOD MARCH 2024 – FEBRUARY 2026

Contents:

1. Context and main reforms	3
1.1. Current situation regarding child poverty and social exclusion	4
2. Enabling policy framework	5
3. Delivery of key services	8
3.1. Target groups	8
3.2. Access to early childhood education and care, inclusive education and school activities and healthy meal during each school day	9
3.3. Access to healthcare	18
3.4. Access to healthy nutrition	24
3.5. Access to housing	26
3.6. Other measures to overcome social exclusion and combat child poverty	29
3.7. Governance and reporting	36
4. Financing	38
5. Monitoring	41
6. Governance and involvement of stakeholders	49
7. Planned actions	51
8. Good practices	52
9. Conclusion	56
LIST OF ACRONYMS USED	58

1. Context and main reforms

Bulgaria has a well-developed legal and strategic framework, policies and measures targeted to the needs of children and their families. Guaranteed access to free health care for children, maternity protection policies and paid parental leave, developed preschool and school education and child protection systems are among the most significant achievements. Also, a significant resource is allocated annually from the state budget to support children and their families. Free social services are also provided for all children and the state budget resource for all social services in 2025 alone is over BGN 1 billion or over EUR 510 million, with further increases planned for 2026. A significant part of these funds is precisely to support children and their families. Services for parents, such as parenting skills formation, counselling and support for parents on early childhood development and childcare, prevention of abandonment and support for parents for reintegration, early disability intervention and others, are also completely free for them. The rights to tax relief for children and children with disabilities for all working parents, relief from interest-free loans for young families for the purchase of housing and others, provided by the Income Taxes on Natural Persons Act, are also an example of measures supporting children and families.

In recent years, our country has taken serious and targeted steps to improve the well-being of children through the implementation of an integrated approach and greater linkage of measures between different sectoral policies. Despite socio-economic challenges, a number of measures are being implemented to reduce child poverty and promote their well-being: expanding the network of services for early childhood development, improving the access and quality of pre-school and school education, improving maternal and child health, providing financial and material support to families with children, etc. From April 1, 2022, parents do not pay a fee for the use of kindergartens and nurseries, as well as a fee for nutrition in compulsory pre-school education. The measure contributes to improving access to early childhood education and care by reducing the financial burden on parents. In the context of the European Child Guarantee, this is a concrete example of an effective policy aimed at addressing inequalities in access to services. In order to reduce inequalities in access to healthcare, a regulatory measure was introduced as of 1 July 2025, for the payment of prescription medical products for home treatment of acute infectious diseases, including antibacterial medical products, on the territory of the country for children under the age of 7. The aim is to alleviate the financial burden on families and reduce hospitalizations of children caused by untreated infections.

The European Child Guarantee as a key initiative to reduce child poverty and promote child well-being complements and supports national efforts in a number of policy areas to support children and families – early childhood education and care; inclusive education and school activities; health; healthy nutrition; adequate housing. With the Action Plan adopted in 2022 to implement Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on establishing a European Child Guarantee (2030),¹ our efforts are focused on creating a comprehensive framework covering the leading measures and interventions to reduce child poverty and promote their social inclusion. The Action Plan is also closely linked to the ambitious targets that Bulgaria has set to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Action Plan for its implementation – reducing the number of children under 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 196,750 people by 2030 (25% of the overall national target). Performance review data shows a positive trend, with the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion decreasing by 62 thousand children in 2025, compared to the base year of 2019.²

¹ Decision of the Council of Ministers (Council of Ministers) No. 879 of 09.11.2022

² According to preliminary data from the NSI.

1.1. Current situation regarding child poverty and social exclusion

In Bulgaria live 1,103,110 children aged 0 to 17, or 17.1% of the total population, according to data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) as of 31.12.2024. This share is relatively low, reflecting the country's demographic challenges, including low birth rates and an ageing population. Bulgaria is among the countries where the share of children at risk of poverty is significantly higher than the average for the European Union (EU)-27. According to preliminary NSI data for 2025, the number of children at risk of poverty amounts to about 304 thousand, which represents 27% of all children. Compared to 2024, when the number was 317 thousand, and the relative share – 28.2%, there was a decrease in both absolute and relative value. In absolute terms, this means a decrease of approximately 13,000 children, and in relative terms – a decrease of 1.2 percentage points (pp). This dynamic can be interpreted as a moderate improvement in the situation of children related to reducing the risk of poverty. Despite this improvement, the share of children at risk of poverty continues to be higher than the overall share of the population at risk of poverty in the country as a whole – 21.2%.

The factors causing poverty among children are many and of different nature – low educational status and unemployment of parents, low income, household composition, etc. In 2025, seven out of ten children (73.3%) whose parents have primary or no education live in poverty. Approximately 11 times less, or 6.7%, are children whose parents have higher education and live at risk of poverty. Data on the share of poor households with children in terms of intensity of economic activity are also indicative, which clearly reveal the strong correlation between the employment of adults and the risk of poverty for children living in these households. According to Eurostat data in 2025, the risk of poverty among households with at least one child is significantly higher with a low intensity of economic activity – 84.3%, while for households with a high intensity of economic activity it is only 9.2%.

According to the data for 2025, if income from pensions is included in household income, but excluding other social transfers (benefits, social and family benefits and allowances), the poverty rate rises from 21.2% to 29.0% or by 7.8 pp. Accordingly, with the exclusion of pensions and other social transfers, the poverty rate increases to 45.4%, or by 24.2 pp. Social transfers to households reduce the risk of poverty among children by 13.4 pp. Although there has been an increase in their impact on poverty reduction, according to the social indicators put forward in support of the European Pillar of Social Rights, Bulgaria is one of the countries where social transfers still have a limited impact compared to the EU average. This underlines the need for more effective and targeted support policies, especially for low-income and large families.

In 2025, the positive trend related to a decrease in the share of children living with severe material and social deprivation continued. According to preliminary data, in 2025 the share of children living with severe material and social deprivation was 16.3% compared to 18.2% in 2024 (deprivation in terms of 7 out of 13 indicators, including access to appropriate clothing, regular meals, study materials, the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities, the availability of their own learning space and other basic conditions for full development).

Regarding the combined indicator – risk of poverty or social exclusion, which has registered constant improvements in recent years, in 2025 the decrease in the absolute number of children continued, reaching 372 thousand or 22 thousand less than in 2024. In relative terms, the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 33.1%, compared to 35.1% in 2024.

Poverty estimates depending on the type of household show that the highest is the relative share of poor among single-person households with a person aged 65 and over (39.7% in 2025 versus 40.4% in 2024), households of two adults with three or more children (52.03% in 2025 versus 47.0% in 2024) and one parent with children (40.4% in 2025 versus 40.0% in

2024).

According to NSI data, 238 children aged up to one year died in the country in 2024, and the infant mortality rate is 4.5‰³. In regional terms, in 2024, the infant mortality rate is the lowest in the districts of Smolyan and Veliko Tarnovo (2.1‰). The highest value of the infant mortality rate was registered in the Regions of Razgrad (10.9‰), Montana (10.3‰) and Dobrich (10.1‰).

The data shows that despite some positive trends (reduction of material deprivation and child mortality in some regions), child poverty and social exclusion remain a significant problem. Data analysis highlights the key relationship between child poverty and parental education, directly linked to opportunities on the labour market. In this context, a number of sectoral policies and measures, such as ensuring access to quality education and healthcare, employment and reconciliation of personal and professional life for parents, tax policy, housing, etc. have made a significant contribution to the reduction of child poverty.

2. Enabling policy framework

Since the establishment of the European Child Guarantee, a number of measures have been implemented to support children and families in Bulgaria, some of which were launched directly in response to the initiative, while others were implemented even before the adoption of the national plan and their implementation will continue in the future. The second group covers measures related to the provision of integrated services, early childhood development services, financial support to families with children, the implementation of the process of deinstitutionalization of child care, etc. During the period under review, the expansion of the network of early childhood development services continued, taking into account their key role in preventing and reducing intergenerational poverty. Another essential measure to support families with children is the provision of family allowances for children under the Family Allowances Act (FAA), for which significant funds are allocated annually from the state budget. On the other hand, a significant resource has been allocated from the European Social Fund + (ESF+) specifically for the implementation of measures under the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria by supplementing the two leading programs - the Human Resources Development Program (HRDP) and the Education Program for the period 2021-2027. Under the Human Resources Development Operational Program (HRD OP) 2014-2020 and HRDP 2021-2027, over 60,000 children are supported with various services.

In implementation of the long-term action plan, the development of two-year operational plans containing specific activities, indicators, responsible institutions, sources and amounts of funding has been adopted as national practice. The second Operational Plan for the period 2025-2026 is under implementation, which sets out more than 110 measures, the aggregate actions of which aim to contribute to the achievement of the set national targets for the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion.

A significant focus continues to be providing support for improving early childhood care through improving the qualifications of specialists working with children and families, developing comprehensive services aimed at early intervention for children and families, improving the interaction between the health, education and social systems, etc.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an established strategic priority in national policies aimed at ensuring an equal start for all children and overcoming social, regional and educational inequalities in the early stages of development. The policy framework in this area is based on an integrated approach that combines measures to expand access, enhance service quality, strengthen system inclusiveness and improve governance and

³ Number of deaths of children under the age of 1 year per 1000 live births.

coordination across education, health and social sectors. Among the highlights of ECEC policy are strengthening early prevention of learning difficulties, providing targeted support for children from vulnerable groups, developing human resources in kindergartens, actively involving parents and building a national quality system based on clear indicators, data and transparency.

In the field of school education, activities are implemented for general and additional support for personal development in school education of children/students with special educational needs and chronic diseases, ensuring access to the education system and an inclusive environment for children and students seeking or receiving international protection, and promoting intercultural education. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in funds for resource support, as well as in the number of resource teachers, psychologists, speech therapists and other specialists. In order to ensure more effective access to quality education for children and students with special educational needs, the focus of efforts is also on modernizing the model of assessment and differentiating support according to the degree of its intensity. Activities under national programs and projects for the provision of transport and support services, the provision of teaching aids and materials, as well as motivational activities related to overcoming the processes of desegregation and inclusion of children and students in the educational system are also being implemented. The Education Programme 2021-2027 also has a significant contribution, with activities in support of the European Child Guarantee aimed at ensuring access to quality education at all educational stages. In addition to the procedures for general and additional support for personal development in pre-school and school education, as well as for the promotion of intercultural education, the following grant procedures were announced in 2025: “Complex programs at the municipal level for school desegregation, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination (through selection)”, “Prevention of bullying and violence and reduction of aggression in schools” and “Access to education for every child”.

The envisaged measures under the Regional Development Program (RDP) 2021-2027 are aimed at ensuring equal access to quality and modern education for every child and student, as well as reducing the share of early school leavers. The main emphasis is placed on children and students from vulnerable groups, including the Roma community, while respecting the principle of desegregation. In this regard, where necessary, the programme supports investments to increase the capacity of mainstream schools. Investments under the RDP are implemented in coordination with appropriate ESF+ measures that respond to specific territorial needs – both to overcome local barriers to access to education and to promote partnership between educational institutions, social and economic partners and civil society organisations at local level.

Among the leading activities in the field of healthcare are the development of a model of patronage care for children at the national level based on an analysis of available services and programs, improving the mental health of children, expanding the scope and coordination of the activities of health mediators, developing health and integrated health and social services, and paying for prescription drugs for home treatment of acute infectious diseases, including antibacterial drugs, on the territory of the country, for children up to 7 years of age.

In the area of access to healthy nutrition, the activities and initiatives implemented can be divided into several areas: legislative measures for food safety and quality in kindergartens, school canteens and during organized events; educational and information activities; increasing the competencies of specialists; targeted support for children and families from vulnerable groups and ensuring access to nutrition and healthy foods for children at risk – with disabilities, from low-income households deprived of parental care or in poor housing conditions.

The review of the implementation of the activities highlights the provision of access to housing as a key challenge that requires deepening efforts and implementation of complex and

integrated measures. In this context, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) is in the process of developing a National Housing Strategy, which aims to outline the long-term vision, goals and priorities of state housing policy. A new National Program for Energy Efficiency of Multi-Family Residential Buildings is under development. Taking into account the serious challenges in the field of housing policy, among the eligible measures for financing through the new integrated territorial approach in the field of housing on the territory of urban municipalities are: ensuring modern and affordable housing, including vulnerable and other disadvantaged groups, supporting the implementation of innovative approaches to financing housing policy in municipalities, promoting architectural design and construction of housing applying environmental sustainability principles, with special attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Beyond the above-mentioned leading thematic areas for supporting children and families and given the multi-sectoral nature of child poverty, a significant contribution to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in a national context is made by a number of other measures aimed at improving access to social services for children and their families, improving the capacity of the child protection system, providing material and financial support for families with children from vulnerable groups, creating conditions for sports activities and promoting healthy physical activity through participation in organized sports activities for disadvantaged children, supporting unemployed parents with children, etc. Supporting parents with children, including creating opportunities for better reconciliation of parents' professional and private lives, is also part of the overall policy for supporting children and families and promoting child well-being. Under the Employment Promotion Act, measures aimed at the integration into employment of disadvantaged groups in the labor market, including unemployed people – single parents (adoptive parents) with children up to 4 years of age, are implemented. Although most of these measures have not been introduced in response to the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee and their implementation precedes the adoption of the national Action Plan, their implementation has added value in ensuring access for children from vulnerable groups to various services.

An important measure that supports the implementation of the plan is the Future for Children Operation under the HRDP 2021-2027, the activities of which fall within the scope of different areas of impact (early childhood development, education, health, etc.). The operation aims to reduce negative trends related to child poverty, improve their quality of life and support the upbringing of children in a family environment. The activities of the operation include health prevention and health prophylaxis, incl. prevention of early marriages and births, family planning, preparation for the educational system, etc. according to the identified needs, patronage care for children from 0 to 3 years of age, early childhood development services and health and social services for children and young people, including with disabilities, counselling and mediation for the labour market and training and supervision of employees. 108 contracts with a total value of BGN 37,693,037 or EUR 19,272,143.80 are executed under the procedure. Since the beginning of the implementation of the projects, more than 23,000 children have been involved, to whom various types of services have been provided. Given its horizontal nature, the implementation of the operation is key to achieving the objectives of the plan as a whole.

Despite the wide range of measures and activities implemented in different policy areas, further targeted action is still needed to address child poverty and social exclusion. The territorial dimension of poverty poses a particular challenge, as socio-economic inequality and access to basic services are not evenly distributed across the country. Data analysis shows that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion are more concentrated in rural areas, especially in remote and municipalities with low economic activity. In these territories, there is limited access to basic services, especially for disadvantaged children such as children in large families, children with disabilities and Roma children. There are pronounced differences between urban

areas (urban areas) and rural areas, as well as between the different regions of the country, which is explained by the economic structure and employment opportunities, which are significantly more developed in large cities and industrial centers, the level of infrastructure provision and the socio-demographic characteristics of the population.

According to preliminary NSI data, in 2025 the risk of poverty or social exclusion among children was lowest in the South-West region – 29.0% (including Sofia-city), followed by the North-Central region – 26.6%, which can be associated with higher incomes, better infrastructure and concentration of services and the North-East region – 30.6%. Significantly higher poverty rates were reported in the South-East region – 42.2% and the North-West region – 41.3%.

Considering the significant territorial and regional differences in terms of poverty levels among the population, including children, efforts are aimed at identifying and addressing child poverty at a low territorial level and more effective implementation of the European Child Guarantee at the local level. In this context, on 24.06.2025, a call for applications was announced for procedure BG05SFPR002-2.013 "Building and maintaining a mechanism for interaction in the implementation of all activities of the European Child Guarantee" under the HRDP 2021-2027. The procedure aims to build and maintain a mechanism for interaction in the implementation of activities at regional and local level for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The specific beneficiary is the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) and the NSI partner. Key project activities include defining the concept of “extreme poverty” and mapping children living in extreme poverty. The definition and subsequent mapping aim to cover the multidimensional aspects of poverty among children – not only economic, but also access to education, healthcare, housing, etc.

Applying such an approach would contribute to a fuller consideration of the different risks and specificities of individual vulnerable groups of children. It will also allow territory-oriented planning based on real data and local specifics. Its implementation will contribute to a more precise targeting of interventions towards regions with the highest levels of child poverty (for example, the North-West and South-East regions), as well as to improving coordination at local and regional level in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. In this context, the Child Guarantee is seen not only as a tool to support children and families from vulnerable groups, but also as a framework for territorially targeted policies to overcome existing inequalities.

3. Delivery of key services

3.1. Target groups

In the National Action Plan implementing Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on establishing a European Child Guarantee (2030), the target groups of children have been identified in a clear and concrete manner, in line with the Recommendation's framework and national policies to support children and families. The identification of target groups is based on a combination of socio-economic, demographic, territorial and other criteria, allowing for a more precise addressing of the risk of poverty or social exclusion. The identification of the target groups in the Action Plan is supported both by the report “Unequal childhood – A comprehensive analysis of the current situation and dimensions of child poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria, as well as the policies, programs, services, budgets and mechanisms for dealing with them” developed within the pilot project, as well as by the use of official statistics, mainly from the NSI, the competent institutions, European and international sources of information. The data cover key indicators in the respective thematic areas of the Guarantee such as risk of poverty or social exclusion, net enrolment rate of children in the education

system from 3 years until their entry into the first grade, share of early leavers from education and training, child mortality, immunization coverage, housing overcrowding, etc.

On this basis, the following target groups have been identified:

- ✓ Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation;
- ✓ Children with disabilities and children with mental health issues;
- ✓ Refugee and migrant children, with a focus on unaccompanied or ethnic minority children;
- ✓ Children in alternative care outside the family, especially those placed in social services for residential care, including children and young people leaving alternative care;
- ✓ Children from low-income families;
- ✓ Children in precarious family situations (children victims of violence, children raised by single parents, teenage mothers and their children, children of labour migrant parents, etc.).

The analysis shows that further improvement of the data collection and integration system is needed, including better coordination between institutions and a more detailed territorial distribution of information, in order to more accurately identify children in need and increase the effectiveness of policies and interventions.

3.2. Access to early childhood education and care, inclusive education and school activities and healthy meal during each school day

Ensuring access to early childhood education and care is a key element in the process of promoting child well-being. It contributes not only to the development of children's cognitive, social and emotional skills, but also to reducing inequalities early in life. In this context, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) implements targeted policies and investments supported by the EU through the Education Programme 2021-2027 and the Technical Support Instrument. Bulgaria was provided with technical assistance by the European Commission to develop a tool for quality self-assessment at the level of an educational institution, as well as for monitoring the indicators at the municipal and national level. This project aims to improve the quality of ECEC for children from birth to school entry in Portugal and Bulgaria. It supports reforms in both countries by enabling institutions to take action to strengthen the governance of ECEC systems and to develop comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems to support high quality services. Within the project, two analytical reports were developed and published on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science: 1. Situational analysis of ECEC governance, monitoring and quality assessment to identify the strengths and weaknesses and needs of the sector and 2. Analysis and lessons learned from European good ECEC practices from other countries with relevant experience. The project is implemented with the support of an interinstitutional working group, which in addition to the responsible institutions, also includes representatives of the academic community, employers' and trade unions, the non-governmental sector, the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB). The Working Group has a role in discussing and building a common understanding of the importance of early childhood policies.

Financial barriers are among the key factors limiting access to ECEC. Given this, and as stated, an important measure to improve access to early childhood education and care was introduced in Bulgaria on 1 April 2022 – exempting parents from paying fees for the use of kindergartens and nurseries, as well as fees for feeding in the framework of compulsory pre-school education. The measure contributes to reducing the financial burden on households by removing one of the main barriers to the inclusion of children in education and care at an early age. In addition to the exemption from paying fees, there is the possibility of compensating the

parents of children who are not admitted to kindergarten or nursery due to lack of free places⁴. From March 2025, the maximum amount of the monthly compensation is up to BGN 580 or EUR 296.55 per child. The amount to be paid may not exceed the expenses actually incurred by the family for the respective month.

Table No. 1 Approved applications for compensation submitted by municipalities to the Ministry of Health for the preparation of the relevant decrees of the Council of Ministers for the approval of additional transfers to the budgets of municipalities to compensate for the expenses incurred by parents for the upbringing, education and training of children who are not accepted in municipal nurseries or nurseries groups in municipal or state kindergartens due to lack of free places, for 2024 and 2025

Year	Period	Number of applications for the period
2025	January – February	2840
	March – April	2946
	May – June	3154
	July – August	2989
2024	January – February	2468
	March – April	2680
	May – June	2913
	July – August	2810
	September – October	2398
	November – December	2653

The provisions of Ordinance No. 26 of 2008 regulate the structure and activity of nurseries and children's kitchens in Bulgaria and the health requirements for them⁵, in order to ensure safe, hygienic and developmentally appropriate care and nutrition for young children. Based on the information coming to the Ministry of Health (MoH) from the municipalities through the Regional Health Inspectorates (RHI), including as of January 2026, no shortage of medical staff was identified. The nursery groups of the independent nurseries are provided with medical personnel in accordance with the current Ordinance No. 26 of 18.11.2008.

In accordance with the country's current regulations and state policy of providing equal opportunities for education and development, general and additional support for personal development of children and students is provided. According to the Ordinance on Inclusive Education, general support for personal development in kindergarten and in compulsory pre-school education groups in the school aims to prevent learning difficulties, includes training through additional modules for children who do not speak Bulgarian. This training in the

⁴ Ordinance on the terms and conditions for the provision and payment of funds from the state budget to compensate for the costs incurred by parents for the upbringing, upbringing and training of children who are not admitted to municipal nurseries or nursery groups in municipal or state kindergartens due to lack of vacancies and Ordinance on the terms and conditions for the provision and payment of funds from the state budget to compensate for the costs incurred by parents for the upbringing and education of children who are not admitted to state or municipal kindergartens or schools due to lack of vacancies.

⁵ Due to a shortage of places in major cities, in 2020 changes were made to Ordinance No. 26, which provide for: increasing the number of children in a group to 20 for the settlements in which there is a lasting trend for a shortage of places for three years; the possibility of designing and building nurseries – regardless of ownership – in part of a newly designed building with another main purpose or in the reconstruction of part of an existing building with another purpose, subject to certain conditions.

educational field “Bulgarian Language” for children in the groups for compulsory pre-school education for which the Bulgarian language is not their mother tongue is mandatory and is carried out in pedagogical situations in accordance with the state educational standard for the acquisition of the Bulgarian literary language.

First of all, municipal and state kindergartens and schools receive budget funds for all children and students enrolled in a municipal or state kindergarten or school, including children and students with special educational needs, to support their upbringing and training activities. These funds guarantee the total costs of the institutions for the necessary staff and for the ongoing maintenance of children and students. For all children and students in daily form of education, kindergartens and schools receive complementary financial standards and norms. In addition, for each child and student of resource support, additional funds are provided under resource support norms and to create conditions for inclusive education, ensuring the necessary specialists and a supportive environment. The amount of the current regulations for resource⁶ support is as follows:

- norm for a child/student on resource support – BGN 7,191 or EUR 3,676.70;
- norm for creating conditions for inclusive education for a child/student on resource support – BGN 967 or EUR 494.42. The funds under this norm may be used: to pay for the costs of creating a supportive environment; for additional remuneration of staff engaged in working with the child/student with special educational needs, as well as for paying for the participation of external specialists in personal development support teams.

In dynamic terms, there has been a significant increase in financial support. The amount of the resource support norm set for 2025 represents an increase of 148.91% compared to 2019 (BGN 2,889 or EUR 1,477.12). Similarly, the norm for creating conditions for inclusive education increased by 138.77%. This sustainable growth ensures widening access to quality, inclusive education and supports the social integration of children and pupils with special educational needs. For 2025, the total amount of funds provided by the state budget for resource support for children and students amounts to BGN 222 million or EUR 113.51 million, which will provide additional support to 26,779 children and students on resource support.

In parallel with the growing financial support, measures are being taken to strengthen the personnel capacity of the system. This includes expanding professional profiles and refining individual needs assessment mechanisms. The approved new List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training (LPVET) includes the profession “teacher's assistant” – third degree of professional qualification.

According to the Ordinance on Inclusive Education, the assessment of individual needs for additional support for personal development of children and students is functional in accordance with the International Classification of Human Functioning, Disability and Health of the World Health Organization (WHO) and taking into account the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) – ICD 10 of the WHO. The assessment of these children and students is carried out in accordance with the Map for Functional Assessment of the Individual Needs of Children and Students with Special Educational Needs and Chronic Diseases, developed under the project “Support for Inclusive Education” under the Operational Program “Science and Education for Smart Growth” 2014-2020 (OP SESG). Functional assessment includes several basic principles – inclusion, individual approach, flexibility and cooperation, which are essential in determining the appropriate additional support for children and students with special educational needs. To ensure that support is tailored to the specific and actual needs of children and students, it is envisaged to differentiate the additional support according to the degree of its intensity. The application of this model will help to customize the type of additional support according to the specific difficulties of each child and student and will ensure greater

⁶ Determined by Council of Ministers Decree No. 93/25.02.2025 on the adoption of standards for state-delegated activities with natural and value indicators in 2025.

fairness in the allocation of resources, as well as lead to a more optimal workload of different pedagogical specialists.

Since the end of 2024, two schools in Sofia have been piloting the construction of spaces for intensive additional support for children and students with special educational needs as part of the activities for additional support for personal development of children and students with special educational needs and behavioural difficulties. Intensive support spaces allow for complementary activities, individual work and small group activities as an alternative to the classroom for some of the activities with children and students, according to their support plans. In this regard, a Guide for the functioning and management of spaces for intensive additional support has been developed.

In order to support teachers in the process of assessing and recognizing the condition of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a Mechanism for Inclusion And Support For Personal Development Of Children And Students With ADHD In Institutions In The System Of Preschool And School Education and a Methodology for Screening ADHD (7-11 years) has been developed and approved. Also, according to a national program of the Ministry of Education and Science, teaching aids with adapted learning content for the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary stages of education have been developed. Methodological guides have also been developed to adapt the learning content by subjects for students with special educational needs, who are trained in individual curricula or who are trained at the Center for Special Educational Support (CSES).

In the context of digitalization and access to free digital content, the platform for educational and therapeutic resources for children and students with special educational needs “Support Me” (podkrepime.mon.bg) was created in partnership between the Ministry of Education and Science, Regional Center for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education (RCSPIE) – Sofia City and UNICEF Bulgaria, launched in February 2022. It contains more than 700 copyrighted products in the form of video and text files, and the development of new resources is ongoing. It is also possible to provide technical tools and software for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), as well as supporting technical tools and software for children and students with specific learning disabilities – dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia.

The MES is a specific beneficiary of the project BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001 “Strong Start” funded under the Education Program 2021-2027, co-financed by the EU, with a total value of BGN 140,538,769 or EUR 71,856,331.58. The project activities provide general and additional support for personal development of children in pre-school and school education, qualification of pedagogical and non-pedagogical specialists, as well as intensive work with parents. Part of the overall support is the provision of additional Bulgarian language training for children for whom it is not their mother tongue. As of 31.12.2025, support has been provided to over 41,000 children and students, 3,014 of whom are children with special educational needs, at risk, with chronic diseases and gifted children, who have received additional support. For this purpose, 337 pedagogical specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, resource teachers) and 543 non-pedagogical specialists (educational mediators, teacher assistants, assistant educators, social workers) have been appointed.

In September 2025, an updated list of state, municipal and private kindergartens and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education was approved to participate in the technical and financial implementation of the project activities, their number being 1550. 1122 institutions have participated in the project activities. 663 pedagogical specialists were trained in two key topics for their direct work: “Adaptation of educational content for children with special educational needs and chronic diseases in preschool age” and “Implementation of the Map for functional assessment of the individual needs of children with special educational needs and chronic diseases in connection with the implementation of the “International

Classification of Human Functioning, Disability and Health of Children and Adolescents”. The project involved 14,517 parents in organized manner and conducted various activities. Forms of interaction with parents are held on a regular basis, aimed at building trust, partnership and open communication between the family and the kindergarten/school.

Under the procedure “General and additional support for personal development in school education” under the Education Program 2021-2027, a contract BG05SFPR001-1.001-0001 “Success for You” was concluded with the beneficiary of the Ministry of Education and Science, amounting to a total of BGN 201,496,877.24 or EUR 103,023,717.42. As of 31.12.2025, 121,931 students experiencing systemic learning difficulties in various subjects were involved in general support activities, and 13,272 students with special educational needs, at risk, with chronic diseases and gifted students were supported through additional activities to support their continued inclusion in school education. To this end, a total of 1,209 educational mediators and social workers have been appointed in 704 schools.

Under the procedure “Access to Education for Every Child” under the Education Program, aimed at reducing dropout and early leaving from the educational system and ensuring maximum coverage in pre-school and school education, 21 contracts were concluded with the Regional Departments of Education for a total amount of BGN 3,521,238.67 or EUR 1,800,380.74. Under these contracts, a total of 4,115 representatives of marginalized groups, including Roma, will be supported in the framework of activities covering 6,492 children and students included in the Mechanism for joint work of institutions, as well as 4,735 parents. Training of 2,138 pedagogical specialists and representatives of non-pedagogical staff is also envisaged.

In the context of expanding the inclusive educational environment, successive steps are also being taken to improve the material and technical base and architectural accessibility in kindergartens and schools. Although the responsibility for the financing and maintenance of the material and technical base of the municipal kindergartens and schools lies with the respective municipality, the state significantly increases the support through the module “Creating an accessible architectural environment”. In 2024, the total resource under the module amounts to BGN 900,000 or EUR 460,162.69, of which BGN 700,000 or EUR 306,775.13 are for state educational institutions and BGN 200,000 or EUR 102,258.38 – for municipal institutions. For 2025, the funds were more than doubled, reaching BGN 2,000,000 or EUR 1,022,583.76, distributed as follows: BGN 1,400,000 or EUR 715,808.63 for state and BGN 600,000 or EUR 306,775.13 for municipal institutions. This extension of funding allows for a significantly larger number of kindergartens and schools to be covered. Until 2023, only state educational institutions and second-level budget spenders to the Minister of Education and Science were funded under the module. Since 2024, the scope has been expanded to include municipal schools and CSES’s where at least one child with physical disabilities is educated. Although architectural accessibility is not yet fully ensured in all public schools, the budget for municipal institutions has tripled, while that for state institutions has doubled, indicating targeted efforts to balance access and support locally.

The results of the national review carried out in the 2024/2025 school year by experts from the Ministry of Education and Science and the Regional Directorate of Education (RDE) show that children and students with special educational needs, who are trained and receive additional support, represent 3.53% of all children and students in the system of pre-school and school education. In the last eight years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of supported children and students with special educational needs, and for children in kindergartens this growth is twofold. This is a result of both the introduction of a more precise functional assessment of individual needs and the successful implementation of the projects under the Education Program, funded by the European funds and co-financed by the Ministry of Education and Science. More than 600 pedagogical specialists – resource teachers,

psychologists and speech therapists, as well as more than 1,500 assistant teachers and educational mediators in kindergartens and schools across the country – have been appointed. This significant expansion of expert capacity increases early recognition of needs and the quality of support provided.

In 2025, 2,402 resource teachers were employed in the education system, compared to 2,009 in 2024, an increase of about 19.5 percent. This growth is a result of both the growing needs for additional support and the introduction of strengthened control mechanisms in the 2024/2025 school year. The National Electronic Information System for Pre-school and School Education (NEISPSE) monitors compliance with the normative requirement for the formation of resource support groups with up to 12 children and/or students with special educational needs.

Last but not least, the RCSPIEs play a key role in the system of inclusive education. Their functions include coordinating, advising and providing methodological support to institutions in the pre-school and school education system, with a particular focus on additional support for the personal development of children and students with special educational needs. Since the beginning of the 2025/2026 school year, the regional support teams at the RCSPIEs have implemented over 90 activities for methodological support of kindergartens and schools in the country. Only the RCSPIE – Sofia City has carried out 32 of them, which emphasizes both the scale of the work and the active role of the centers in supporting educational institutions.

Preventing segregation in schools is among the top priorities of inclusive education policies aimed at ensuring equal access to quality education for all children. In this regard, the regulatory measures in the Ordinance on the financing of institutions in the system of pre-school and school education also play a key role. Amendments to the Ordinance of 01.01.2018 provide additional funds from the state budget for educational institutions with concentration of vulnerable groups. Thus, in practice, additional funds are provided for kindergartens and schools located near separate Roma neighbourhoods. Funds for working with vulnerable groups can be used for various activities, including for additional remuneration of employees engaged in the teams for the inclusion and retention of children and students in the educational system, for additional classes in Bulgarian in schools and modules for children who do not speak Bulgarian in kindergartens. The funding also covers expenditure on staff engaged in measures to improve access to education and prevent the risk of dropping out, including the appointment of educational mediators. The 2023 amendments to the Ordinance introduced separate targeted funding for the appointment of educational mediators, social workers and/or teacher's assistants. This highlights the importance of activities carried out within individual communities, as well as the key role of these professionals in promoting regular kindergarten and school attendance and limiting early school leaving. In the 2023/2024 school year, a total of 1,184 educational mediators were appointed in the system of pre-school and school education, and BGN 36,078,916 or EUR 18,446,856.83 were provided to support vulnerable groups in 2023, and for 2025 the funds under this item increased to BGN 36,859,143 or EUR 18,845,780.56.

Amendments dated 16.05.2025 to the Ordinance on the Financing of Institutions in the System of Pre-school and School Education introduced changes to the rules for the allocation of funds for work with children and students from vulnerable groups. These amendments revised the funding of kindergartens and schools with a concentration of children and students from vulnerable groups. Additional funding is now allocated to institutions based on the number of children/students and the number of appointed educational mediators, social workers and/or teacher assistants as of January 1 of the respective calendar year. The implemented change aims to further support the financing of the smallest kindergartens and schools, which will have a more significant resource for the policies they apply.

In parallel with these legislative initiatives, procedure BG05SFPR001-1.006 “Complex programs at the municipal level for desegregation in schools, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination (by applying the ITI approach)” is implemented under the Education Program 2021-2027, with a budget of BGN 26,124,851 or EUR 13,357,424.21. Specific beneficiaries are municipalities and schools designated under the Concepts of Integrated Territorial Investment (CITI). In 2025, 14 contracts with a total value of BGN 6,273,628 or EUR 3,207,655.06 were signed with municipalities, schools with different concentrations of vulnerable groups and non-governmental organizations. The planned activities are aimed at desegregation, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination measures. The projects envisage support for: 1942 pupils from vulnerable groups; 2599 pupils and parents from marginalised communities, including Roma; training of 539 pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff, as well as representatives of municipal administration, municipal councils and other stakeholders, to develop competences for democratic culture, according to the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, implementation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and conducting mentoring activities. The projects took into account the participation of 53 children and students under the age of 18, as well as 27 pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff trained to work with children and students from vulnerable groups.

In March 2025, procedure BG05SFPR001-1.008 “Complex programs at municipal level for desegregation of schools, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination (by selection)” was announced under the Education Program 2021-2027 with a budget of BGN 28,624,214 or EUR 14,635,328.22. Some of the activities include the creation of school and local communities to support the process of desegregation of schools, training to work in a multicultural environment, mobility and exchange of experience initiatives, school activities to support desegregation. To date, 33 project proposals have been submitted for a total amount of BGN 19,133,192 or EUR 9,782,645.73. 27 grant projects have been approved for a total amount of BGN 15,810,742.57 or EUR 8,083,904.31.

According to data from the Institute of Education, as of November 2024, 1308 educational mediators have been appointed in kindergartens and schools with funds from the state budget, national programs of the Ministry of Education and Science and European projects with the Ministry as a specific beneficiary. The data shows a sustained trend towards an increase in the number of mediators, reflecting the expansion of support for vulnerable groups and the intensification of efforts to prevent educational segregation.

In addition, within the framework of the National Program “Assisting Municipalities for Educational Desegregation”, implemented by the Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (CEICSEM), a number of activities are carried out annually to provide transport and support services, provide teaching aids and materials, as well as motivational activities related to overcoming the processes of desegregation and inclusion of children and students in the educational system. In the 2023/2024 school year, the program provided free transport for 510 children and students from educational institutions with a concentration of vulnerable groups, as well as teaching aids for 1188 children of preschool and primary school age. 115 motivational activities and 63 initiatives have been implemented with the participation of parents, children, students and institutions. A total of 379 parents are involved in activities to increase motivation for regular attendance at educational institutions. 22 educational mediators and other non-pedagogical staff have been appointed. In 2024, projects of 11 municipalities were funded. Transportation for 525 children and pupils and study materials for 1,047 children are provided, as well as the appointment of 21 educational mediators and other staff. The budget of the program for 2024 is BGN 495,000 or EUR 253,089.48 (plus BGN 5,000 or EUR 2,556.46 for monitoring), and in 2025 it was increased to BGN 700,000 or EUR 357,904.32, with the number of approved municipalities increasing to

13.

All children and students seeking or receiving international or temporary protection are provided with free education and training in state and municipal kindergartens and schools. To facilitate the adaptation of children and persons seeking international protection in Bulgaria, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) at the Council of Ministers organizes courses in Bulgarian. In the period March-April 2024, the Bulgarian language courses were conducted under the project “Improving the conditions for accommodation and providing social activities for persons accommodated in the SAR centers at the Council of Ministers”, financed under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism. For the reporting period, a total of 241 children seeking international protection underwent Bulgarian language training. For the 2025-2026 school year, a total of 28 children seeking international protection were enrolled in educational institutions with the assistance of the Regional Departments of Education of the Ministry of Education and Science.

During the period under review, the implementation of various national programs continued, including “Work of the Police in Schools”, “Children's Police Department”, etc. Under the National Program “Work of the Police in Schools”, 1,570 lectures and talks were held in 150 schools. 2 closing events were held: “Hello, vacation! Let's play safely!” and 1224 meetings were held in schools, kindergartens and other educational institutions on the topics of the program. Under the “Children's Police Department” program, 154 children's police departments (CPD) have been opened at the regional offices of the regional directorates of the Ministry of Interior (MoI), in which 3,213 children aged 8 to 12 are trained. The training covers various modules, including first aid, children's police personal protection, road safety, health, ethics and law, social skills.

A key aspect of inclusive education policy is ensuring access for children in need to school activities, including excursions, sports, leisure and cultural initiatives. The national program “Together in the Arts and in Sport”, implemented for the first time in the 2022/2023 school year, aims to support the personal development of students by participating in collective sports and arts that stimulate their interests, abilities and competences. Beneficiaries are state and municipal schools and the National Palace of Children, and private schools can participate through a partnership with a state or municipal school. The program includes two modules – Module 1 “Arts” and Module 2 “Sport”, applied in the 2022/2023, 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 school years. Under the Arts module, participation expands steadily over the three school years: 2022/2023 – 1006 schools, 2080 groups and 24 639 pupils; 2023/2024 – 1235 schools, 2514 groups and 29 684 pupils; 2024/2025 – 1324 schools, 2720 groups and 30 860 pupils. Under the Sport module, participation also increased during the three school years: 2022/2023 – 994 schools, 1897 groups and 26 439 pupils; 2023/2024 – 1224 schools, 2377 groups and 32 329 pupils; 2024/2025 – 1270 schools, 2522 groups and 30 443 pupils.

In the 2025/2026 school year, a third module – “Arts and Sports for Students with Special Educational Needs” – was included for the first time under the National Program. The module covers adapted arts and sports activities aimed at developing the social, emotional and motor skills of students with special educational needs. It forms specialized groups or teams, according to the age and cognitive characteristics of the students, and allows the inclusion of children of different age groups according to their specific needs and strengths. The beneficiaries of the program “Together in the Arts and in Sport” define it as extremely useful, as it provides wide opportunities for participation and expression of students in various fields of arts and collective sports.

In January 2024, the procedure BG05SFPR001-1.004 “Establishing intercultural education through culture, science and sport” was announced under the Education Program 2021-2027, with a budget of BGN 31,123,577 or EUR 15,913,232.23. The planned support covers: 12,424 children and pupils from vulnerable groups; 21,270 children, pupils, parents and

other representatives of marginalised groups such as Roma; 3,318 pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff who will be trained to acquire, develop and apply competences and skills for a democratic culture. 3996 children and students from pre-school and school education from vulnerable groups received support under the procedure, 328 are pedagogical and non-pedagogical specialists trained to work with children and students from vulnerable groups.

Children in the pre-school system are provided with all knowledge books free of charge. The pre-school and school education system provides all children and all students from Ist to XIIth grade with free access to cognitive books, as well as textbooks and study kits and electronically readable textbooks. These resources are available under conditions and in the order determined by the Council of Ministers, for subjects of general education, for subjects Mother tongue, Religion and Choreography and for special subjects for students with sensory disabilities.

Funds from the state budget for transportation must be provided for children in compulsory pre-school age and for students from settlements where there is no kindergarten or school, funds from the state budget for transport to the nearest kindergarten or school, which conducts training in the respective group or class. State budget also provides funds for transportation for students who travel daily to school in another settlement in the same or neighbouring area, if they study a profession that is not offered in their settlement. The same rule is applied for studying a protected profession or one with an expected shortage of staff for which there is no organized professional training in their settlement.

As already stated, since April 2022, the fees for feeding children in kindergartens and nurseries have been abolished. This practically ensures free nutrition for all children from 3 months to 6 years of age in these institutions in Bulgaria. The children receive two main breakfasts – morning and afternoon, and lunch, in accordance with the regulatory requirements.

To support the nutrition of children in compulsory pre-school education and students from Ist to IVth grade in state and municipal kindergartens, schools and centers for special educational support, funds from the state budget are also provided. These funds are provided on the basis of a norm for a child or student determined by an act of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria. The funds provided shall be used to provide breakfast, milk, vegetables and/or fruits to the children and the students or to support the lunch meals of the students from Ist to IVth grade, as well as to supplement the lunch meals of the students from Ist to IVth grade in an all-day organization of the school day.

Decisions of the Council of Ministers to adopt the standards for state-delegated activities with natural and value indicators for the last three years set the norm for supporting the nutrition of children from preschool groups and students from Ist to IVth grade at BGN 207 or EUR 105.84. For the budget year 2026, a norm of EUR 106 per child/student is envisaged. The pedagogical council in each educational institution, after taking into account the opinion of the public council, determines the type of breakfast – basic or supportive – that will be provided in the kindergarten, school or special educational support center. Only one of the two types of snacks can be provided within an institution. In addition, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has developed and approved recipes and guides for healthy nutrition of children in different age groups, which are applied by kindergartens and schools.

The legal framework in Bulgaria, along with the relevant EU regulations, includes the Ordinance on the terms and conditions for the implementation of schemes for the provision of fruit and vegetables and milk and milk products in educational institutions – the “School Fruit” and “School Milk” schemes⁷. These schemes provide educational institutions with milk and dairy products, as well as fruits and vegetables financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund and the state budget. All primary school students (Ist-IVth grade) receive the

⁷ Council of Ministers Decree No. 251/27.09.2016

intended products free of charge.

3.3. Access to healthcare

Maternal and child health policy is a top priority and a number of sectoral strategic documents are being implemented to this end. The National Strategy for Child and Adolescent Health and Paediatric Care 2030, adopted in 2023, ensures the integrity of the measures implemented so far and the envisaged interventions. The priorities of the Strategy are to promote healthy lifestyles, effective prevention and prevention of diseases and disabilities, building an integrated system for complex paediatric care, as well as the development of human resources in the field of child health. In 2024, an Action Plan for the period 2024-2026 for the implementation of the National Program for Improvement of Maternal and Child Health (NPIMCH) 2021-2030 was also adopted. It provides for activities related to raising awareness on reproductive health and family planning, pregnancy, childbirth and childcare, increasing knowledge and skills for healthy lifestyles of adolescents and young people and prevention of risky behaviour.

The budget of the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) provides annually for the implementation of medical and health activities under the “Maternal Health” and “Child Health” programs, through which monitoring of the health status and development of children and pregnant women is carried out within the framework of the regulated preventive examinations.

Table No. 2 Scope of preventive examinations in the period 01.01.2024 – 30.09.2025

Period	Number of reviews under the Children's Health Program	Number of Maternal Health Program reviews
01.01. – 31.12.2024	1,717,608	297,193
01.01. – 30.09.2025	1,304,614	218,878

Source: NHIF

The Action Plan for the period 2024-2026 to the NPIMCH 2021-2030⁸ includes a number of measures and activities to improve the scope and access of children and pregnant women to healthcare and services, improve the mental health of children, improve the competencies of medical and non-medical specialists in the field of maternal and child health, as well as develop health and integrated health and social services.

Neonatal auditory screening in 2025 covered 47,032 children (47,125 in 2024), with the national average coverage amounting to 97.0% with a target of 95.0% for 2026. As part of biochemical screening in pregnant women to assess the risk of having a child with Down's disease, other aneuploidies, spina bifida, anencephaly and severe abdominal wall defects, 11,223 tests and consultations were conducted in 2025 (12,622 in 2024).

Consultations by medical and non-medical specialists (doctors, psychologists and social workers) are provided annually in the Health Counselling Centers (HCC), taking into account a growing need and a sustainable trend to increase the scope of services. In 2025, the commissions for complex interdisciplinary medical care and long-term health care for children with chronic diseases prepared 1552 individual medical and social plans for children with diabetes, congenital hematological, cardiac and neurological diseases, as well as for premature infants (1436 in 2024).

7079 assessments were prepared in 2025, to determine the need for early intervention

⁸ Council of Ministers Decision No. 262/04.04.2024

in risks and problems in children's health and development. This figure confirms a stable high level of activity compared to previous years (6672 in 2024 and 6658 in 2023). The data show sustainable growth and the maintenance of a high volume of consultative activity within the HCC. The total number of consultations in 2025 reached 17 998, compared to similar values in 2024 (17 873) and 2023 (17 886). In addition, 137 home visits were conducted for children with disabilities, chronic diseases and premature children up to 1 year of age, as part of the measures to ensure continuous and affordable care.

In 2024, 2 new centers for complex services for children with disabilities and chronic diseases (CCSCDCD) were created in Stara Zagora and Kardzhali, as well as the capacity of 5 CCSCDCDs in the cities of Blagoevgrad, Buzovgrad, Sliven, Silistra and Haskovo was expanded. In 2025, the capacity of 2 more CCSCDCDs was expanded, as CCSCDCD in Stara Zagora was additionally provided with the opportunity to provide inpatient long-term care for the rehabilitation of children for up to 6 months, as well as palliative care, and at the CCSCDCD in Vidin the capacity to provide outpatient medical and psychosocial rehabilitation was expanded. In 2024 and 2025, the 12 CCSCDCDs continued to provide universal access to quality health care and comprehensive prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation activities for children with disabilities and chronic diseases. There is a trend of sustainability in the growth of the activity of CCSCDCD. In 2025, 10% more children were covered. 3,519 children received health care and comprehensive prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation activities in the centres, compared to 3,154 children in 2024. The positive trend continues for an increase (by 8.4% compared to 2024) in the number of children with disabilities and severe chronic diseases who have undergone diagnostics and physical therapy and rehabilitation in the outpatient unit – 2,986 children in 2025. With mobile services for the provision of specialized medical care at home or in social services for residential care, 218 children are already covered, which is 79% more than in 2024.

The number of children passing through the inpatient unit has increased by 18%. In 2025, 130 children up to 1 year of age received special care – complex treatment of premature infants. 57 children underwent long-term inpatient treatment after active hospital treatment, and 70 children have undergone inpatient physical therapy and rehabilitation. Specialized palliative care was also provided to 14 children in terminal condition. 3,723 parents have gone through training to take care of children with disabilities and chronic diseases in a family environment, which is 18% more than in 2024. These facts confirm SCSCDCD's increased focus on strengthening parenting capacity. In 2025, children and parents who used the apartment block increased by 10%.

In order to improve access to health care for uninsured pregnant women and reduce child mortality through enhanced prevention, screening, prophylaxis and early diagnosis of preventable risks during pregnancy, in 2024, amendments were adopted to Ordinance No. 26 of 14 June 2007 on the provision of obstetric care to uninsured women and on the performance of tests outside the scope of compulsory health insurance for children and pregnant women. The amendments increased the number of prophylactic examinations, expanded the package of medical and diagnostic tests and created an opportunity for uninsured pregnant women to use twice during pregnancy health services for hospitalization if necessary on a clinical pathway (CP) "Inpatient care in pregnancy with increased risk".

According to the NHIF, in 2025 9,614 uninsured pregnant women gave birth, compared to 8,052 in 2024. The tendency to increase the volume of provided prophylactic examinations continues – 8,113 examinations were performed in 2025, compared to 7,395 examinations in 2024. The increase in the activities under Art. 82, para. 1, item 2 of the Health Act is directly related to the amendments to Ordinance No. 26, which from 2024 has expanded the scope of obstetric assistance for uninsured pregnant women. The changes include increasing the number of prophylactic examinations from 1 to 4 for the duration of pregnancy, expanding the package

of medical and diagnostic tests, as well as providing access to hospital medical care not only under the “Birth” CP but also up to twice under the “Inpatient Care in Pregnancy with an Increased Risk” CP.

With the Ordinance amending and supplementing Ordinance No. 26 of 2007⁹, the screening programs were expanded, with the aim of detecting more children with congenital rare diseases as early as possible, thus creating an opportunity for timely treatment and reducing the complications and disability of the affected children.

In order to improve the competencies of medical and non-medical specialists working in the field of maternal and child health, the following activities were carried out: a program and continuous training for improving the qualification of medical and non-medical specialists from the homes for medical and social care for children (HMSCC) and CCSCDCD have been developed to implement modern approaches for early intervention for children with disabilities; programs for training parents in the care of children with disabilities and chronic diseases have been developed; curricula and training materials on topics in the field of early childhood development, health promotion and prevention have been developed for conducting thematic courses for continuous training of specialists from nurseries, general practitioners and pediatricians from outpatient medical care, including for the purpose of early detection of mental development problems and referral for early intervention. In 2024 and 2025, two continuing education courses were held on “Early Childhood Development – Features, Early Detection and Prevention of Problems and Developmental Disorders”, with the participation of 60 medical and non-medical specialists from nurseries.

The NHIF continues to fund medicinal products for home treatment of persons up to 18 years of age, in accordance with the therapeutic indications and restrictions in Appendix No. 1 of the positive drug list. In 2024, BGN 112,435,930 or EUR 57,487,578.16 were paid for medicinal products for home treatment for 22,271 health insured persons (HIP) under the age of 18, of which 2,761 were with rare diseases. For the period January – September 2025, BGN 86,334,771.46 or EUR 44,142,267.71 were paid for home treatment of 19,848 HIP, of which 2,525 were with rare diseases. For Dietary Foods for Special Medical Purposes (DFSMP) in 2024 the NHIF has paid BGN 3,246,552.46 or EUR 1,659,935.91 for 2025 HIP, including 499 with rare diseases. For the first nine months of 2025, the amount was BGN 2,788,567.15 or EUR 1,425,771.74 for 1882 HIP of which 492 were with rare diseases. The data show a stable range of assisted persons and sustainable funding for the therapeutic and nutritional needs of children.

Treatment of rare diseases with medicinal products and DFSMP, started before the age of 18, continues to be paid after this age until the end of treatment. During the period 01.01.2024 – 31.12.2024, 1297 cases were approved and 1152 cases for the period 01.01.2025 – 30.09.2025. The data show a sustained high level of support for patients with rare diseases in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The focus of activities in this policy area is also the provision of patronage care for pregnant women and families with young children. In 2024, the NCPHA prepared and submitted to the Ministry of Health an analysis of the volume, type and manner of providing patronage care for pregnant women and young children. The analysis includes proposals for possible variants of a national model and a recommendation for the chosen model to be discussed and developed with the participation of a wide range of stakeholders, professional organizations, experts and specialists engaged in the provision of this type of services.

Within the framework of the activities for developing a national model for patronage care, with the expert support of NCPHA, an adapted version of the program “Together – Healthy Baby, Healthy Future” (THBHF) has been prepared and options for its implementation

⁹ Prom., SG No. 50 of 2024

in the Health and Counseling Centers for Maternal and Child Health, opened under the NPIMCH.

In 2025, with the technical support of UNICEF Bulgaria under a Partnership Agreement, teams were formed at NCPHA to discuss the recommended possible options and a framework of a national model for patronage care was developed. After expert discussion with stakeholders, a final version of the Patronage Care Model has been prepared by NCPHA. Within the project to develop a framework of a national model for patronage care, a team of experts at NCPHA (Medical University (MU) – Varna, MU – Sofia, MU – Pleven, NCPHA) made an expert review, adaptation and assessment of the applicability of a package of training modules for patronage care under an international program and developed a curriculum for specialists providing patronage care.

The protection of public health through health promotion and prevention, including the prevention of infectious diseases through immunization, is a major state policy pursued by the MoH. Compulsory immunizations and re-immunizations against 11 infectious diseases are carried out in the country in accordance with the recommendations of the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control and the WHO's Advanced Immunization Program. Vaccines for compulsory immunizations and reimmunizations are provided with public funds by the Ministry of Health to cover all eligible individuals, regardless of their health insurance status, religion, ethnicity, as well as persons who are allowed long-term or permanent residence in the Republic of Bulgaria, foreigners with refugee status, humanitarian status and the right to asylum. National immunization programs are also being implemented with recommended immunizations against rotavirus gastroenteritis and human papilloma viruses, and free vaccines are provided with public funds and their administration to persons from certain target groups at the request of a parent/guardian.

In order to promote vaccine prophylaxis, increase the knowledge of medical professionals, health mediators and parents, as well as increase the immunization coverage, the following activities are implemented:

- a specialized website of the MoH – “Plus Me – Site for Immunizations in Bulgaria” has been created and maintained, providing up-to-date and reliable information on mandatory and recommended immunizations¹⁰;
- online training on immunization and vaccines for medical specialists from neonatology and maternity wards, as well as for general practitioners;
- information and training materials for healthcare professionals, health mediators and parents are developed and disseminated, addressing the risks of vaccine-preventable diseases, possible complications and benefits of immunoprophylaxis;
- regional meetings are organized with general practitioners, neonatologists, medical specialists from health offices in schools and kindergartens, health mediators and health journalists on topics related to vaccine prophylaxis;
- with the assistance of the WHO for Bulgaria, the Medical University – Plovdiv, the Bulgarian Association of Innovative Medicine and the Ministry of Health, the “Handbook for Physicians – Vaccines: the Questions We Answer Every Day” has been developed and distributed;
- immunizations are provided with mobile teams, according to the National Immunization Calendar, for persons up to 18 years of age without a selected general practitioner, with gaps in immunizations or living in hard-to-reach areas.

In connection with ensuring the mental health of children, measures have been taken to develop child-adolescent psychiatry and expand the scope of day-to-day psychiatric care and community-based care for children and adolescents with mental disorders. In 2024, a new

¹⁰ <https://plusmen.bg/>

children's and adolescent day care facility with a capacity of 10 places was opened at the State Psychiatric Hospital (SPH) – Lovech. This broadens access to counselling and daily psychiatric care for children and adolescents, without detachment from their usual living environment, and the service becomes available in another area of the country. At the moment, daily child and adolescent inpatients are functioning in the city of Sofia (4 centers), as well as one each in the cities of Varna, Plovdiv, Ruse and Lovech. In addition, in 2024, specialized training was conducted for 36 healthcare professionals aimed at prevention and early intervention in adolescent psychosis prodromes, risk factors for suicidal behaviour, eating disorders, gender identity disorders, schizophrenia and affective disorders, and the application of a multidisciplinary approach to suicidal behaviour in adolescence.

In the same year, an Expert Council on Child Psychiatry was established with the participation of leading specialists in the field. A draft medical standard in the specialty “Pediatric Psychiatry” has been developed, which has been approved by Ordinance of 18.12.2025. This standard established a legal regulation of the principles, criteria for the performance of medical activities within the scope of the medical specialty “Child Psychiatry”, the requirements for structures, staff, equipment and activities to ensure children's access to psychiatric care in accordance with the requirements of modern medical practice and the development of the health system in the Republic of Bulgaria. Child psychiatry activities carried out by child psychiatrists are regulated, which include: planned consultations, emergency consultations, crisis interventions, appointment of additional tests and consultations, counselling of parents, psycho-training of parents and children, appointment and conduct of psychiatric drug therapy, referral for and/or conduct of psychotherapy, counselling (methodological assistance) of other medical specialists and expert activity.

The Medical Standard for “Child Psychiatry” outlines the scope of activities for prevention, early diagnosis, treatment and follow-up of patients from 0 to 18 years of age with mental disorders. Early diagnosis of mental disorders in childhood is of particular importance for therapeutic interventions and prognosis of their development. For this reason, the standard pays particular attention to screening and early diagnosis in order to prevent the late effects of mental disorders. In order to achieve comprehensive service to patients and their families, activities related to interdisciplinary cooperation between doctors with a recognized specialty in “Pediatric Psychiatry” and those with other medical specialties, such as “Psychiatry”, “Pediatrics”, “General Medicine”, “Pediatric Neurology”, etc. are described. The need for teamwork in order to effectively and fully serve patients is clearly and accurately noted in the standard, and it is explicitly stated that the teams include health care specialists, psychologists and other specialists who, at the discretion of the child psychiatrist, can participate in the healing process. The requirements for the implementation of child psychiatry activities in outpatient and inpatient medical care in terms of facilities and medical and non-medical personnel are specified in detail, and quantitative and qualitative criteria for evaluation of the activity are set out.

In 2025, the Center for Specialized Health- Social Care for Children with High Risk Behaviour and Need for Special Health Care in the city of Kyustendil started operating. This is an integrated health- social service that will provide advisory, therapeutic and other highly qualified support for children with high-risk behaviour and the need for special health care, as well as the opportunity to provide temporary residential care in case of a need for 24-hour continuous care and support. In 2025, the center provided specialized care for 14 children with high-risk behaviour and need for special health care. Of these, 4 children were provided with residential care, and 10 children from the community were provided with therapy and rehabilitation services. Five more such centers are to be built – two in Sofia, two in Varna and one in Ruse. Currently, a public procurement for engineering (design, construction and author's supervision) is being conducted, and the construction, equipment and furnishing will be

financed from the national budget.

The NCPHA has developed an algorithm for assessment, monitoring and screening of neuropsychiatric development disorders in early childhood and for early detection of autism in outpatient medical care. In 2024 and 2025, trainings were conducted within two scientific and applied conferences, in which more than 1200 general practitioners and paediatricians participated. In 2024, with the assistance of the National Association of General Practitioners in Bulgaria (NAGPB), the educational and methodological materials developed by NCPHA for early identification of problems in development and behaviour and guidance for early intervention were distributed among 54 general practitioners who underwent continuing education courses. 27 of them were supervised on specific clinical cases. To educators and nurses from three nurseries in Sofia, who underwent thematic continuing training at the NCPHA to identify difficulties and developmental disorders in children, a total of five supervisions were conducted.

In 2025, a legal framework was established for the payment with public funds of prescription medications for home treatment of acute infectious diseases, including antibacterial medicinal products, within the country for children up to 7 years of age. This measure aims to reduce direct payments to patients for medicinal products, as children under the age of 7 are most vulnerable to acute infectious diseases. From 01.07.2025 to 30.09.2025, 719 children received drug therapy with medicinal products worth BGN 14,309.62 or EUR 7,316.39.

Improving access to health care for children with disabilities is one of the key priorities in this area. In this regard, targeted rehabilitation and physiotherapy services are provided for all children with disabilities, through sixteen CPs performed under contract with the NHIF from 143 medical institutions (Specialized Hospitals for Rehabilitation, Multiprofile Hospitals for Active Treatment with Departments of Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation). Apart from the rehabilitation and physiotherapy services provided through the NHIF for all children, including children with disabilities, the Ministry of Health additionally ensures the sustainability of the CCSCDCDs discovered so far, as well as takes measures to create new centers.

In terms of providing better access to integrated health- social services, 6 new integrated health-social services for residential care for children with disabilities with a need for permanent medical care were created, and started in 2024. These services provide 24-hour medical care for children with severe disabilities who cannot be raised in a family environment. Additionally, as stated, a specialised centre has been set up for children with high-risk behaviour and special health needs, providing counselling, therapy and temporary residential care as needed. In 2025, 53 children were provided with integrated health-social services for residential care, with 50 of the children receiving care are with permanent disabilities and need for permanent medical care, and 3 of the children are with high-risk behaviour. 12 children from the community with high-risk behaviour were provided with consultative and therapeutic hourly services.

In order to improve the qualification of specialists providing health and integrated health and social services for children and families, NCPHA has developed information and training materials aimed at the implementation of effective practices and a family-oriented approach to early intervention. In this regard, NCPHA conducted a continuing education course on "Programs and Approaches for Early Childhood Intervention", in which 135 medical and non-medical specialists from 10 CCSCDCDs in the country, as well as from HMSCC – Kardzhali and Stara Zagora took participation. Information material has been prepared to raise awareness on the topic of general practitioners and pediatricians from outpatient medical care, medical and non-medical specialists from CCSCDCDs, HCC and nurseries. In order to further increase the professional competence for stress assessment and coping strategies for parents of children with disabilities, in 2024 a curriculum and materials were developed and certification training

was conducted for specialists from CCSCDCDs and HCCs to implement the Bulgarian version of the Parenting Stress Index™ – Fourth Edition (PSI-4) test, with the participation of 11 psychologists from CCSCDCD and a supervisor – clinical psychologist from NCPHA. NCPHA also developed educational material to increase the competence of CCSCDCD specialists in the field of prevention of the institutionalization of care for children at an early age, including children with disabilities and chronic diseases.

In order to increase the knowledge and skills for field work of health mediators, three online trainings on the topics of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections were conducted, in which 107 mediators from 78 municipalities participated. Within the framework of an information campaign through talks and dissemination of materials, Roma health mediators have reached over 600 people. During the reporting period, the implementation of the project BGLD-1.006-0001 “Health for All”, implemented under the “Local Development, Poverty Reduction and Improved Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups” Program, funded by the European Economic Area 2014-2021, was finalized. The project approved a model for the work of health mediators in medical institutions in order to support medical teams and mediate in the provision of health services. A total of 235 health mediators have undergone upgrading training under the specially developed module “Health mediators working in hospitals”, which from the academic year 2023/2024 is included in the mandatory initial training program for new health mediators at the Faculty of Public Health of the Medical University – Sofia. The model was tested with the participation of 27 health mediators in the maternity and children's wards of 13 medical institutions in 11 municipalities and was evaluated as good practice by medical teams and patients. In 2024, the number of health mediators funded through a delegated budget was 332, serving in 156 municipalities. In 2025, their number increased to 352, and they continue to be operational in the same number of municipalities – 156.

Regarding access to health services for children seeking international protection in Bulgaria, in 2025, for 573 unaccompanied children accommodated in the Safe Zones of the SAR at the Council of Ministers were assigned a general practitioner who monitors their health and, if necessary, refers them to specialists. In the registration and reception centers of the SAR at the Council of Ministers, there are health offices where medical specialists carry out initial examinations and tests of children seeking protection in the country. At the same time, there remains a significant challenge related to the lack of reliable data on the immunization status of children. A significant part of them come from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Morocco, where health systems and immunization calendars differ. This creates difficulties in planning and conducting subsequent immunizations and re-immunizations.

3.4. Access to healthy nutrition

In order to ensure the healthy nutrition of adolescents, in parallel with the introduced regulatory requirements, actions are taken to raise awareness of the problems of healthy nutrition of children and students (training seminars, health-educational materials on the implementation of the current regulatory framework and prescription books for individual age groups).

In 2024, amendments were promulgated to Ordinance No. 2 of 7 March 2013 on healthy nutrition of children aged 0 to 3 years in childcare facilities and children's kitchens¹¹, which guarantees the intake of a variety of food through the daily menu and the recommended values for an average daily intake of energy, total protein, fat and carbohydrates. Requirements are also introduced regarding the foods used in childcare facilities and providing an opportunity for dietary nutrition, according to the medical diagnosis and doctor's instructions for the diet.

¹¹ Prom., SG No. 28 of 2013, amended and supplemented, SG, issue 85 of 08 October 2024

Ordinance No. H-3 of 3 October 2025 on healthy nutrition of pupils was also promulgated¹², which regulates the requirements for healthy nutrition of pupils in school canteens, buffets, vending machines for food and beverages, as well as organized catering for pupils. The Ordinance introduces mandatory requirements for the completeness, diversity and nutritional value of the foods offered, with an emphasis on the daily inclusion of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, milk and dairy products and the restriction of foods high in salt, sugar and fat. The Ordinance provides for menus to be prepared with the participation of a medical specialist and/or nutrition technologist and lays the foundation for healthy nutrition of students as part of policies for the prevention and maintenance of public health.

It is evident from the above that the specific requirements for the safety and quality of food offered in kindergartens, school canteens and retail outlets on the territory of schools and kindergartens, as well as food offered at organized events for children and students, are regulated by law. This ensures that high-quality foods are offered in childcare facilities, which are produced in strict compliance with the requirements for their specification.

In 2025, the quality and safety of the food offered in the school canteens and buffets is a priority in the activities of the control bodies in the Republic of Bulgaria: Bulgarian Food Safety Agency (BFSA) and RHI. The control activity is aimed not only at preventing health risks, but also at ensuring a high quality of food tailored to students' ages and needs. Through the coordinated actions of the control authorities, the quality of school nutrition is seen as a key element of public health and prevention policies, with direct relevance for the formation of healthy nutrition habits and for the long-term health of pupils.

In parallel with the legislative measures, collections of recipes for the preparation of healthy foods for the three age groups have been developed and published, which ensure the application of the relevant regulations. By the end of 2025, three national cookbooks that promote healthy nutrition for children by age groups are available and affordable on the Bulgarian market : “Cookbook with Recipes and Guide to Healthy Nutrition for Children up to 3 Years of Age”, which contains scientifically sound guidelines, sample menus and recipes for infants and young children; “Cookbook with Recipes and Guide to Healthy Nutrition for Children from 3 to 7 Years of Age”, containing a guide, sample menus and recipes for preschool children; as well as “Cookbook with Recipes for School Canteens and Buffets”, aimed at the organized nutrition of students. The cited publications can be found through online bookstores, specialized professional literature sites, through distributors and in libraries, which guarantees real access of specialists, institutions and parents to scientific information on healthy nutrition for children.

Health-education activities in different forms are also carried out annually, within the framework of the National Program for the Prevention of Chronic Non-communicable Diseases (NPPCND) under the “Unhealthy Nutrition” factor. By region, RHIs are conducting a number of campaigns for healthy nutrition of children and prevention of chronic non-communicable diseases, the international days for combating obesity are marked.

In 2025, experts from NCPHA participated in the development of a Plan for Modern Health Education in the Bulgarian School, including the Nutrition module. The goal is that by building knowledge, students in grades Ist to XIIth will acquire skills and awareness to build a healthy food model that will ensure long-term good health, including the prevention and prevention of obesity and metabolic diseases.

In order to raise awareness of pregnant women, parents and families on the issues of healthy nutrition and breastfeeding, NCPHA held a thematic course for continuing education of medical and non-medical professionals on "Roles and interactions in the protection, support and promotion of breastfeeding". In 2024 and 2025 NCPHA participates expertly in trainings

¹² Prom., SG No. 85 of 2025

for specialists in breastfeeding support, organized by the National Association "Support for Breastfeeding", with module "Fundamentals of Communication and Consultative Skills". In implementation of the National Programmes for the Prevention of Chronic Non-communicable Diseases (2021-2025) and for the improvement of maternal and child health (2021-2030), NCPHA has implemented a number of activities related to the support and promotion of breastfeeding. An information poster "Breastfeeding – the best start for your baby" has also been developed, intended for distribution in the offices of general practitioners, paediatricians, OG specialists and maternity wards in order to improve the awareness of future and current parents about breastfeeding.

In order to ensure healthy nutrition of children from 10 months to 3 years, vouchers are provided against which children from vulnerable groups receive lunch from children's kitchens under procedure BG05SFPR003-1.006 "Children's Kitchen" under the Food and Basic Material Assistance Program 2021-2027. The focus is on children who are subject to social assistance - children from low-income households, children with disabilities, children deprived of parental care, children who live in poor housing conditions, at risk of abandonment, and others for whom nutrition is not provided in any other way. The procedure is implemented by the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA) in partnership with municipalities and regions of municipalities on the territory of the country. The budget of the operation amounts to BGN 7,152,828.54 or EUR 3,657,183.16, and the deadline for its implementation has been extended to the end of 2027. Initially, agreements were signed with 40 municipalities that declared their intention to participate in the project. By the end of 2025, additional agreements had been signed with 24 municipalities, 22 of which were actually implementing project activities. From the launch of the project until the end of 2025, 170,098 vouchers were issued for 1,262 children.

In addition, from 12.12.2024 under the Food and Basic Material Assistance Program 2021-2027, a project BG05SFPR003-1.007-0001-C02 "Support for the youngest" is being implemented, under which persons and families with material difficulties expecting a child are supported with goods and belongings to provide for the basic needs of children. The amount of funding provided for the purchase of children's products and articles amounts to BGN 1,818,000 or EUR 929,528.64. For the distribution of packages for newborns, the budget amounts to BGN 254,520 or EUR 130,134. The packages are conditionally divided into two parts – a first part for children aged from 0 to 6 months and a second part for children aged from 6 months to 1 year. According to ASA data, at the end of 2025, packages were distributed to 5,000 children aged from 0 to 6 months and 2,432 children aged from 6 months to 1 year.

Together with the provision of material assistance under the Food and Basic Material Assistance Program, accompanying support is provided to the final recipients, tailored to their individual needs and aimed at long-term overcoming of social exclusion and poverty. In the framework of the implementation of the "Children's kitchen" procedure and the "Support for the youngest" project, a wide range of accompanying measures in support of the final recipients were implemented by the end of 2025 – a total of 14,303 accompanying measures aimed at meeting the specific needs of children and their families.

3.5. Access to housing

As indicated, the review of the implementation of activities highlights the provision of access to housing as an area of impact where efforts need to be deepened and additional actions should be taken. There is a need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to respond both to the accumulated problems in this area and to emerging economic, demographic and social trends. In this context, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) is in the process of developing a National Housing Strategy. It will be a founding framework document for the development of the housing sector in Bulgaria, which will outline the long-

term vision and priorities in the field of housing policy. The strategy will include a comprehensive set of state housing policy goals, the necessary tools to achieve them, as well as a clear distribution of responsibilities between all stakeholders – state institutions, municipalities, private business, the non-governmental sector and citizens. In this direction, the project “Creating a network and tools for communication and interaction between the administration and citizens for responsible housing solutions” was implemented, in partnership between the MRDPW and the Shelter for Humanity Foundation (Habitat Bulgaria). In parallel, the ministry plans to implement measures aimed at improving the housing conditions of vulnerable families. These include the creation and national introduction of the “housing mediator” service, as well as the provision of interest-free financing for housing improvements for low-income families with children – through a phased implementation, including pilot projects, by 2030, subject to available budgetary resources.

The Law on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2025 provides for a financial resource for energy renovation of multi-family residential buildings amounting to BGN 2.5 billion. A new National Program for Energy Efficiency of Multi-Family Residential Buildings is under development and is scheduled to start in 2026.

A procedure “Support for sustainable energy renovation of the residential building stock – Stage I” under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria is under implementation. The number of project proposals approved so far under Stage I is 762. The procedure was available for application by associations of owners of multi-family residential buildings throughout the country – in 28 districts and 265 municipalities, through partnership with the municipal administration. With Council of Ministers Decree No. 22 of 29 January 2026, part of the approved project proposals under Stage I and all project proposals under Stage II are transferred to Bulgarian Development Bank EAD (BDB). A peculiarity of the Stage II procedure is that the approved buildings had to receive up to 80% grants, and the owners' associations had to provide their own financial resources in the amount of 20% of the value of the eligible costs of the project, but after negotiations with the EC, it was agreed to provide 100% funding to the citizens and thus the funds provided for self-participation will remain in the households. It is important to note that the unused funds under Stage II will be redirected to part of the reserve project proposals of Stage I, thus preventing the loss of financial resources and creating an opportunity to finance additional buildings and improve the quality of life of more Bulgarian citizens.

The individual sites being renovated under Procedure BG-RRP-4.023 “Support for sustainable energy renovation of the residential building stock – Stage I” and Procedure BG-RRP-4.024 “Support for sustainable energy renovation of the residential building stock – Stage II,” are as follows:

Procedure BG-RRP-4.023 “Support for sustainable energy renovation of the residential building stock – Stage I” – 44,516 individual sites;

Procedure BG-RRP-4.024 “Support for sustainable energy renovation of the residential building stock – Stage II” – 4,575 individual sites;

Total under both procedures: 49,091 individual sites.

As a concrete example of good practice, it is important to highlight the final energy renovation of an eight-storey residential building in Haskovo Municipality, completed in November 2025. The building was constructed in 1980 and the implementation of energy efficiency improvement measures began in 2023. As a result of the implemented interventions, the building has achieved energy efficiency class “B” and according to the data from the energy audit, is expected to achieve at least 30% primary energy savings following the renovation. The total investment amounts to EUR 2,508,912.50 (incl. VAT), fully financed from the state budget, representing 100% grant funding benefiting the owners of the residential building. The building is inhabited mainly by Bulgarian citizens of Roma origin, many of whom live in large

households. Out of a total of 120 dwellings, 31 are municipally owned and designated for use by vulnerable households.

Taking into account the serious challenges in the field of housing policy, among the eligible measures for financing through the new integrated territorial approach in the field of housing on the territory of urban municipalities are: ensuring modern and affordable housing, including vulnerable and other disadvantaged groups, supporting the implementation of innovative approaches to financing housing policy in municipalities, promoting architectural design and construction of housing applying environmental sustainability principles, with special attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

The measures planned for implementation under the 2021-2027 RDP build on the results achieved under OPRD 2014-2020, but by 31.12.2025 no specific results can be reported on the proposed indicators for the implementation of the measures due to the complex two-phase implementation mechanism of the program and the set targets for 2024 and 2029, respectively.

At the moment, the announced first call for submission of Concepts for Integrated Territorial Investments (CITI¹³) has been completed and a procedure for direct award of grants for the key investments included in the respective concepts is underway. Following an analysis of the results of the presented concepts, a second call for submission of CITI was announced, which focuses on health, education, social infrastructure (including social housing) and housing. The second selection procedure of CITI was published on 07.05.2025 with an application deadline of 08.07.2025 and with an indicative budget of BGN 880 021 197.19 or EUR 449 947 693.40 under the RDP 2021-2027.

The total agreed grants for direct and indirect costs under Priority 1 and Priority 2 of the RDP 2021-2027 for funding in the field of health infrastructure and health and social support amount to EUR 88,720,148.18. In terms of support for educational infrastructure and equipment, EUR 150,234,944.76 was agreed. For the support in the field of housing, the agreed funds amount to EUR 8,504,930.01 in grants and are allocated to “Providing modern and affordable housing in “Hristo Botev”, Slatina Region with beneficiary Sofia Municipality – Slatina Region and EUR 1,275,262.81 for “Overcoming inequalities in the Southern Central Region in peripheral municipalities in the direction of Haskovo-Harmanli-Svilengrad for transition to carbon neutral, climate resilient and socially inclusive cities”, Harmanli Municipality beneficiary.

Of the concepts submitted under the second procedure (CITI-2), the evaluated and passed “Administrative Compliance and Eligibility” stage by the Pre-selection Unit (ACA) amount to a total of BGN 125,089,574.00 or EUR 63,957,283.61 in requested funding, of which BGN 19,635,000.00 or EUR 10,039,216.09 are for social housing activities.

In implementation of the Asylum and Refugees Act, the SAR at the Council of Ministers provides the necessary reception conditions for minors and foreign nationals seeking international protection through designated Safe Zones. In May 2024, within the framework of a jointly implemented project with UNICEF and with support from the Swiss Department of Migration, a third Safe Zone for unaccompanied children-foreigners, with a capacity of 98 accommodation places, was built and equipped at the Registration and Reception Center (RRC) – Harmanli of the SAR at the CM. Currently, the three Safe Zones for Unaccompanied Children (RRC – Sofia, Voenna Rampa with a capacity of 100 places, Ovcha Kupel with a capacity of 138 places and Harmanli RRC with a capacity of 98 places) operate, where children receive 24 hours of care, access to health, educational and other services and are accommodated in a protected environment. In addition, the SAR successfully launched the implementation of the

¹³ A project idea for one or several activities/investments that, in combination with each other or with other already implemented or upcoming investments in a given territory with common characteristics and/or development potentials, serve to achieve a specific objective or priority of the integrated territorial development strategy of the respective level 2 planning region.

project “Creation of alternative social services for unaccompanied refugee children in Bulgaria”. Activities have been launched in order to build 6 new social services for residential care for unaccompanied refugee children in certain municipalities. In June 2025, a contract for the provision of grants under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2021-2027 was concluded. Within the framework of the implementation, partnership agreements have been signed with the municipalities of Malko Tarnovo, Tundzha, Burgas and Ivaylovgrad, as well as with UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

As part of efforts to improve the living conditions of families and children from vulnerable groups and ensure access to housing and basic services, the government adopted an Ordinance on the criteria, conditions and procedures for determining the status of a household in a situation of energy poverty and the status of a vulnerable customer for electricity supply. The Ordinance regulates the way to identify households that fall into a state of energy poverty. According to the Ordinance, households in a state of energy poverty are determined on the basis of the available funds per household member, reduced by the cost of type-consumption of energy according to the energy characteristics of the dwelling. The resulting value is compared to the officially declared poverty threshold. The status of a vulnerable customer is determined by criteria related to age, health status, disposable income reduced by energy costs, need for assistive devices or life support medical devices functioning on electricity, as well as receipt of social benefits and other factors.

As a result of these changes, energy-poor families with children will fall within the scope of households to which support measures will apply, including: price compensations for household consumers who cannot benefit from better price conditions in the future liberalization of the electricity market; financial assistance to cope with increased energy costs; energy efficiency and renovation programs; as well as direct support through social programs to provide access to energy. The draft Social Climate Plan sets out measures aimed specifically at supporting energy-poor households, including families with children.

Families raising children whose average monthly income for the 6 months preceding the month in which the application-declaration was submitted is lower than or equal to the differentiated heating income and who meet the conditions (under Articles 10 and 11 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Social Assistance Act) shall be provided with targeted heating assistance pursuant to the Ordinance No. RD-07-5/2008. . Differentiated heating income is determined by the support base, the monthly amount of which is 30 percent of the poverty threshold for the relevant year, adjusted by the relevant percentage for the group to which the person belongs. When making an assessment regarding the right to support with targeted heating benefit, children are included in the family. In cases where the child is placed under the Child Protection Act or is raised by a guardian, he/she shall be assisted on an independent legal basis, taking into account only his/her income. In 2024, targeted heating benefit was provided to 46,748 families with children. For the heating season 2025/2026, targeted heating benefit was provided to 45,653 families with children.

3.6. Other measures to overcome social exclusion and combat child poverty

In addition to the identified leading thematic areas for supporting children and families, and in view of the multi-sectoral nature of child poverty, a number of complementary policies and measures have a significant contribution to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in a national context. These are: improving access to social services for children and their families, improving the capacity of the child protection system, providing material and financial support to families with children from vulnerable groups, creating conditions for sports activities and promoting healthy physical activity by participating in organized sports activities of disadvantaged children, supporting unemployed parents with children, etc.

Although a significant part of these measures have not been introduced directly in response to the Council Recommendation on the establishment of the European Child Guarantee and their implementation precedes the adoption of the national Action Plan, their implementation has made a significant contribution to improving the access of children from vulnerable groups to key services and to achieving the objectives of the Guarantee in a wider political and institutional context.

The measures and activities implemented in the context of the childcare reform and the deinstitutionalisation process, which are based on a stable legislative framework, consistent political engagement and financial security, take an essential place in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The principle of the best interests of the child is key to Bulgaria's specialized legislation in the field of child protection. Child protection measures are based on a stable and consistently developed legislative framework that clearly regulates the responsibilities of institutions and ensures the protection of the rights and best interests of the child. According to the basic normative document for the protection of children's rights – the Child Protection Act (CPA), priority is given to measures for protection in a family environment, the main of which are related to the provision of pedagogical, psychological and legal assistance to parents or persons entrusted with parental functions, on problems related to the upbringing and education of children; counselling and information of the child in accordance with his age and the degree of his development, etc. Referral to appropriate social services is also part of family protection measures. The law explicitly regulates that the placement of a child outside the family is imposed as a last resort (by a court decision) after all options for protection in the family have been exhausted, except in cases where urgent removal of the child is necessary.

The principle that the family is the best environment for the raising and development of each child is also leading in the implementation of the largest reform in the social sphere, related to the deinstitutionalization of child care, which is in its final stage. Bulgaria's progress in implementing this reform is internationally recognized and our country is an example of good practice in its implementation and shares its experience with other countries that are implementing or planning to implement reform in this area. Bulgaria is one of the few countries with adopted strategic documents for the transition from institutional care to family care and community support. The most important result of the reform is the predominance of care in a family environment. Compared to 2010, many more children in public care are currently being raised in a family environment (in families of relatives or close friends and in foster families), comparing them with children in residential care services. According to data from the Agency for Social Protection, as of the end of December 2025, there were 3,814 children placed in families of relatives or close friends, 1,518 children placed in foster families, and 2,967 children/youth placed in residential care services (in family-type accommodation centers and transitional housing).

In August 2024, the HMSCC was closed in Kardzhali¹⁴, and in September 2025 – the HMSCC in Stara Zagora¹⁵. As of the end of 2025, the last 2 HMSCCs – in Varna and Pleven – operate, which are managed by the Ministry of Health and are also to be closed. In recent years, there has also been a serious increase in the number of social services for children and families – 776 at the end of December 2025, supporting 22,491 children and families. The number of social services for children and families in the community is 469, with 17,175 places. The number of social services for residential care is 307, which can support 3,646 users. For comparison, as of 31.12.2024, social services in the community for children were 451, with 16,523 places. Within the framework of a consistent state policy to ensure the best interests of

¹⁴ By Decree of the Council of Ministers No. 250/18.07.2024

¹⁵ By Decree of the Council of Ministers No. 182/11.09.2025

the child, measures for prevention of abandonment, reintegration into a family environment, adoption and foster care have significantly improved.

To achieve these sustainable results, serious investments have been made in financing the reform. The state budget allocates the most funds, including for financing social services to support children and families, which are state delegated activities. Significant financial support has been provided by the European Union and European funds and our country is an example of good and effective use of these funds. State budget funds also ensure the sustainability of all social services created with European funding.

The process of deinstitutionalization of childcare is also supported by the Social Services Act (SSA), which laid the foundation for the reform in the field of social services. The law introduced additional guarantees to limit entry into residential care and change the model of childcare. The provision of residential care to children up to 3 years of age is not allowed. The law stipulates that for children up to 18 years of age, the period for using residential care as a child protection measure cannot be longer than two years, and it is mandatory to review it every 6 months.

The SSA also places special emphasis on the quality of social services. The adopted in 2022 Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services introduced detailed requirements for quality and effective provision of all types of social services in the country, including services for children. The focus is on the rights and protection of users and the need for all employees to know the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (when the social service is provided for children). The social service provider applies formal and informal approaches to involve the parents/legal representatives of children in the provision of the service with clear rules for interaction and sharing of opinion regarding the support provided.

With a view to creating a complete network of social services throughout the country in the long term, a National Map of Social Services was adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 574 of 08.08.2024. The map is based on the analyses carried out by the municipalities on the needs for social services at municipal and regional level and on the proposals developed on their basis for the planning of social services. National planning is of particular importance, as it is the basis for defining the package of social services at the level of the municipality and the district, for which funding from the state budget should be provided. In accordance with the reform in the field of social services, standards for financing social services from the state budget are developed in accordance with Art. 45 of the SSA.

Among the priority measures during the period under review is the further development of foster care and the expansion of its scope. In order to improve the processes related to planning, management and provision of activities in support of foster care at the regional level by concluding agreements between municipalities, changes were made to the Ordinance on the terms and conditions for application, selection and approval of foster families and placement of children in them¹⁶. The changes also regulate requirements for the care of a child placed in a foster family, the term for long-term accommodation, the types of social services to support foster families and children, as well as the conditions and procedures for providing respite care in different cases.

In 2025, ASA continued the implementation of the project “Enhancing the capacity of the employees of the Agency for Social Assistance” in connection with the modernization of social protection systems, Component 1, with funding from the HRDP 2021-2027. The project activities started on 01.01.2024 with the participation of 170 partner municipalities from 28 districts of the country, and as of 31.12.2025 their number is 181. The project complements and builds on “Accept Me 2015”, ensuring the sustainability of foster care and expanding the opportunities for its development, by improving and expanding the scope of foster care and

¹⁶ Prom., SG No. 64 of 30 July 2024

consolidating its provision at the local level as an alternative form of raising children at risk in a family environment. Among the objectives of the project is also to increase the capacity of the municipalities and the structures of the ASA, as well as to support the engaged specialists and foster families through training and supervision. A Methodology for assessing candidates for a foster family has also been developed, which introduces clear and objective criteria for assessing the opportunities, motivation and attitudes of candidates. Regular information campaigns to promote foster care are carried out within the project, including a national campaign together with the Bulgarian National Television.

As of 31.12.2024, 1,721 families were entered in the Register of Approved Foster Families, of which 6 were voluntary and 1,715 were professional. The total number of approved new foster families since the beginning of 2024 is 110 professional foster families. As of December 2025, 1,629 families were entered in the Register of Approved Foster Families, of which 4 were voluntary and 1,625 were professional. The total number of approved new foster families from the beginning of 2025 to December 2025 is 73 professional foster families. Despite the actions taken to promote foster care, the data shows that further efforts are needed, including campaigning and other initiatives on the role and importance of the foster family. This would contribute to an increase in the number of foster family applicants and, respectively, to an increase in the number of approved foster families.

Children and young people leaving the public care system need additional support for their active social inclusion and creating conditions for full participation in public life. The aim is to ensure equal access of young people from vulnerable groups to services in all spheres of life – health, education, housing, employment, culture, sports, etc. With regard to the social system, a part of the support is aimed at preparing children and young people to leave the care system and to acquire skills for independent life. A number of measures are implemented in the field of employment and vocational training, including to promote youth employment. The provision of social assistance is also a tool to support individuals. To cover the initial needs of young people from 18 to 21 years of age who have used a social or integrated health and social service for residential care until that age and leave it for the first time, a monthly targeted benefit is provided in the amount of the poverty threshold for the respective year.

Advisory social services that are appropriate and provided to support young people leaving the care system are information and counselling services, advocacy and mediation, therapy, as well as skills training, etc. They are aimed at providing specialized support, including research and understanding along with the person of problems and difficulties he or she encounters in achieving the main goals in his or her life. At the same time, the social service “skills training” is aimed precisely at acquiring skills for independent living, self-management of problems and difficulties, etc. The SSA explicitly stipulates that the use of social services, which are financed from the state budget, are not paid by young people from 18 to 21 years of age, who until the age of majority have used residential care under the CPA. In the quality standards of all residential care services for children and young people, set out in the Regulation on the Quality of Social Services, there is Standard 15 concerning “Vital Skills for Independent Living, Recreation and Leisure”. Among the criteria for achieving this standard is a commitment of the provider to develop and implement a Program for the Development of Life Skills of Children/Young People depending on their age and capabilities. For each young person over the age of 16, a Preparation Plan for leading an independent life is prepared, which takes into account their age, individuality and the forthcoming new way of life. Regarding the social service “Resident care for young people up to 25 years”, the Standard 15 and the criterion for its implementation are related to creating conditions and support for young people to acquire knowledge, develop and upgrade skills and readiness to lead an independent life in terms of practical life skills, social and communication skills, budgeting, etc.

The amendments to the Ordinance on the Terms and Conditions for Application, Selection and Approval of Foster Families and Placement of Children in Them from July 2024 explicitly stipulate that the plan for the care of the child placed in a foster family also include activities for “support for the acquisition of skills for independent living and decision-making”. Also, the requirements for the care of a child placed in a foster family specifically regulate a requirement related to “Life skills for autonomy, recreation and leisure”. The preparation of the child, who has reached the age of 16, to lead an independent life in connection with the forthcoming adulthood, according to his individual needs, personal and professional development interests, is also among the commitments of the foster family.

Within the project “Enhancing the capacity of the employees of the Social Assistance Agency” in connection with the modernization of social protection systems, Component 2 provides for the development and pilot introduction of mentoring support for young people leaving alternative care. The service will be introduced in regions of the country with the largest number of social services for residential care for children and young people over 14 years of age. It is envisaged that mentoring support will be provided by a social worker, starting no later than 6 months before leaving the residential care service and lasting at least one year. Support will include information and counselling, career guidance, advocacy, practical skills training and psychosocial support. The pilot model of mentoring support will serve as a basis for the development of a comprehensive support mechanism through services for independent living for young people leaving residential and foster care.

In addition, in 2025, meetings were held at the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy with representatives of the National Foster Care Association and other non-governmental organizations, in which representatives of the ASA and the SACP also participated. The meetings discussed the need to improve the measures implemented at the local level to support young people leaving the public care system (placed in foster families and residential care services), aimed at improving their skills and readiness for independent living. Specific measures have been identified to improve coordination and interaction between the territorial structures of ASA and the Employment Agency (EA). ASA paid special attention to the Regional Directorates for Social Assistance in the country and focused on the role of social workers in providing the necessary support (by developing targeted action plans and working in a multidisciplinary team at local level) to young people leaving foster and residential care. Regional Directorates for Social Assistance have been informed about the need for children placed in foster and residential care to be covered from the age of 16 in order to ensure timely preparation for independent living. The leading role of the resources of social service providers, which should provide this targeted support to young people leaving residential and foster care, is also emphasized. Special emphasis is placed on the need to improve coordination and interaction between the territorial structures of ASA and EA.

Children and their families have access to various forms of financial support through the special legislation in this area. The provision of financial support is an important part of the policies for children and families in Bulgaria and contributes to the implementation of the objectives of the European Child Guarantee. Family benefits for children provided under the Family Allowances Act aim to support families in raising children in a family environment, while promoting their pre-school and school education, access to health care, etc. Pursuant to the CPA and the Regulations for its implementation, financial benefits are provided to support children at risk and their parents or carers, including benefits for prevention and reintegration, for raising a child from a family of relatives or close friends and foster families, remuneration of professional foster families and supplement for children with disabilities. The benefits under

the Family Allowances Act and the Child Protection Act are financed only with funds from the state budget under the budget program “Support for Children and Families”¹⁷.

In addition to the Family Allowances Act, financial support is also provided under the Social Assistance Act, which is a general law governing social assistance to which persons in need are entitled, including families with children. According to information provided by the ASA, in 2024, an average of 29,844 individuals and families were assisted on a monthly basis in the country with monthly benefits under Article 9 of the Social Assistance Act. The amount paid is BGN 99,798,989 or EUR 51,026,412.83. During the period from 01.01.2025 to 31.12.2025, 35,987 individuals and families were assisted with monthly benefits on a monthly basis under Art. 9 of the RISAA. The amount paid is BGN 144,984,544 or EUR 74,129.42.

Also, under the Employment Promotion Act (EPA), measures are implemented aimed at the integration into employment of disadvantaged groups in the labour market, including unemployed people – single parents (adoptive parents) with children up to 4 years of age.

Table No. 3: Number of persons included in employment under an incentive measure under Art. 36 of the Employment Promotion Act

Incentive measure under Art. 36 of the EPA for unemployed persons from disadvantaged groups on the labour market, incl. for unemployed persons – parents (adoptive parents) with children up to 4 years of age	03.2024 – 12.2024 (Number)	2025 (Number)
Job openings	1326	1791
Persons employed, of whom:	1326	1659
- Single parents (adoptive parents) with children up to 4 years of age	58	89

Source: Employment Agency

Under the subsidized employment measure under Art. 36 of the EPA, employers are encouraged to create jobs for up to 9 months to hire unemployed persons from disadvantaged groups on the labour market, including unemployed single parents (adoptive parents) with children under the age of 4, by providing funds from the state budget for salaries, social security and health insurance. Important support for unemployed persons, including unemployed single parents (adoptive parents) with children up to 4 years of age, employed under the measure is the provision of a mentor, worker or employee to assist the employees to acquire/restore work habits and adapt to the labour process.

In order to ensure a better work-life balance for single parents, large families and those with young children, by providing childcare opportunities and services to facilitate access to employment, the "Parents in Employment" project under HRDP 2021-2027 is being implemented. The project activities started on 01.01.2023 and will be implemented until 31.12.2026. In the period 2023-2024, 4,105 applications were submitted by parents and 3,253 applications by unemployed persons (childminders).

The focus of the actions taken is also on creating conditions for exercising the right of children to express their opinions and attitudes on issues that concern them. During the period under review, the Children's Council as an advisory body to the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) continued to actively participate in various activities and events, expressing opinions on documents and topics related to children's rights. A total of 6 sessions of the Children's Council were held. During the meetings, topics related to the current

¹⁷ Information on the financial resources of the program is presented in Section 4 “Financing”.

and planned policies for young people in the field of sport, the prevention of the use of vapes, laughing gas and designer drugs, the dangers of many psychoactive substances, their supply and use, as well as specific proposals from children, were discussed.

Two of the meetings are dedicated to the participation of the Children's Council in interactive trainings on topics: "Child and Youth Participation" and "The Voice of Youth: Present Confidently, Defend Reasonably". In addition, in the period 20.10.2025 – 24.10.2025, at the initiative of the President of the Children's Council, five focus groups were held online with the members of the Council on the following topics: "Health and Mental Health", "Culture and Sports", "Road Traffic Safety", "Combating Antisocial Actions", "Education", with an opinion on each topic with specific proposals and problems.

Project "Effective policies for all children" under procedure BG05SFPR002-2.004 "Upgrading the capacity of child protection systems" under HRDP 2021-2027, launched the first initiative with children under Activity 4 "Guaranteeing the right of every child to freely express their opinion and views on all issues that affect them by creating, organizing and conducting various initiatives at the local level to improve the effectiveness of the child participation process" in the city of Varna.

An important element of policies to protect children's rights is the establishment of accessible and reliable mechanisms to provide information, advice and support in crisis situations. One example is the functioning National Child Helpline (NCH), which provides children and their families with the opportunity for anonymous and timely assistance, including psychological and legal counselling. According to information provided by the SACP, in the period 01.03.2024 – 31.10.2025 at NCH 116 111, a total of 45,534 calls were received. Of these, 21,525 consultations were conducted for support, and the total number of alerts was 3,921, respectively. From February 2025 SACP has implemented the campaign "You are not alone". The initiative includes presentations and demonstrations in schools across the country aimed at preventing drug addiction, the use of vapes, laughing gas and various designer drugs, as well as the possibility of using NCH 116 111 and the Chat application, in which children can receive advice, support and when a risk to life and health is detected, a signal can be formed. Since the beginning of the Campaign until 18.11.2025, about 5,000 students from all over the country have taken part.

Ensuring children's online safety is increasingly established as a priority strand of child protection and support policies, given the growing digital threats and the need for more effective protection on the Internet. Employees of the Cybercrime Directorate at the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime at the Ministry of Interior perform the function of a national expert for Bulgaria under the European Multidisciplinary Platform against Crime Threats for Europol in the sub-priority area "Online Sexual Exploitation of Children", maintaining and operating the spasidete.bg website. The page filters pages on the Internet distributing materials on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria with child sexual exploitation, included in Interpol's "Worst of" list. It also interacts with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the United States (NCMEC), state and non-governmental organizations (SACP, UNICEF, National Center for Safer Internet, etc.), exchanges and analyses information on reports received from Internet service providers related to child sexual abuse. In the context of the growing number of cases of sexual abuse of children and as a good practice, the National Programme for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children (2023-2026) has been developed¹⁸, which is a kind of framework for coordination of the actions of the parties involved in the work on the prevention of violence and abuse of children.

The focus of the efforts is also to create conditions for sports activities and encourage healthy physical activity by participating in organized sports activities for children from

¹⁸ Adopted by Council of Ministers Decree No. 51 of 23.01.2023

vulnerable groups. In this regard, programs such as “Sports for Children at Risk” are implemented annually to implement free sports activities for children at risk, “Sports for Children in Their Free Time” with a view to improving their health, physical ability and sports development, as well as student games for students with hearing impairments, impaired vision, physical disabilities and central nervous system disabilities. Under the “Sports for Children in Their Free Time” Program of the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) which provides financial support for organizing and conducting free sports activities for children, a total of 142 projects across 36 types of sports are being implemented in 2025 in 52 settlements, involving 5413 participants, under the guidance of 245 sports specialists/coaches. The MYS finances the implementation of the Program with funds amounting to BGN 1,184,200 or EUR 605,471.85. In 2025, under the “Sport for Children at Risk” program, 8 projects of sports clubs funded by the MYS were implemented, with a total amount of BGN 54,600 or EUR 27,916.54. Through the implementation of the program, conditions and opportunities have been created for the participation of 174 children, of whom 126 children at risk in 1,160 free sports activities. A total of 215 participants participated in the final competitions of the Student Games for students from special schools in the 2024/2025 school year.

3.7. Governance and reporting

In the framework of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, targeted and complementary measures have been implemented to inform and reach out to target groups aimed at raising awareness and facilitating access to support and services for children in need and their families. Key measures include information campaigns at national and local level, dissemination of information materials through institutional channels, as well as systematic fieldwork carried out by specialists from the health, education and social systems.

For example, in the field of education, a wide range of information campaigns and communication initiatives are conducted aimed at raising awareness, promoting inclusive education and preventing dropping out of the education system. Among the main directions are: campaigns for the coverage and retention of children in education, including initiatives implemented within the framework of the Mechanism for joint work of institutions on the coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropout from the education system of children and students of compulsory preschool and school age (the Mechanism), with the active participation of schools, kindergartens, Social Assistance Directorates and local authorities; information campaigns on the importance of early childhood development and participation in preschool education, aimed at parents and families from vulnerable groups, including through field work and partnership with mediators and non-governmental organizations; campaigns for inclusive education that promote the right to equal access to education, support for children with special educational needs, chronic diseases and children at risk, as well as the role of additional support for personal development; information and prevention campaigns related to a safe school environment, prevention of aggression, bullying and early school leaving, including through digital channels and educational materials. The current Mechanism for joint work of institutions has shown high efficiency in ensuring the coverage and inclusion of children and pupils of compulsory pre-school and school age. Through coordination between schools, kindergartens, municipal administrations, Social Assistance Directorates and other key institutions, the Mechanism ensures timely identification of children and students at risk of dropping out and takes concrete support measures. As a result of its functioning, there has been an increase in the number of children and students covered, improving their regular visit and strengthening the interaction between institutions. As of November 2025, the enrolment rate of children aged 5–16 in pre-school and school education was 94.48%, calculated as the share of enrolled children relative to the population of the respective age, excluding children with “abroad” status (as of

15.09.2024, it was 94.38%). This shows a slight increase in enrolment compared to the beginning of the 2024/2025 school year. In the second term of the 2024/2025 school year, the outreach teams returned to the education system 9197 children and pupils who had previously been out of school (as of 15.09.2024, the number was 9912). Most are 5-year-old children – 2,931, followed by compulsory school age students – 4,682, and 6-year-olds – 1,584. In addition, 5,903 children and pupils who have never been enrolled in pre-school or school education are enrolled in the system thanks to the active work of the outreach teams.

In addition to national initiatives, the Education Programme 2021-2027 implements a number of activities to raise awareness in the field of early childhood development, inclusive education, reducing school dropout, reducing aggression among students, etc. For example, in October 2025, within the direct grant award procedure BG05SFPR001-1.010 “Prevention of bullying and violence and reduction of aggression in schools” announced on 15.09.2025, three information days were held: online information day with the participation of over 500 representatives of schools and Regional Departments of Education, two information days – one in Northern and one in Southern Bulgaria, with the participation of over 300 participants.

In the field of healthcare, the measures are aimed at conducting campaigns and activities to overcome stigma and to increase the knowledge and skills of children and adolescents, parents and professionals in the field of mental health. Health mediators, who through direct fieldwork, support family outreach, promote the use of health and social services and facilitate communication between institutions and communities, including in remote and marginalized areas, make an important contribution to reaching vulnerable communities. Their work contributes to the earlier identification of risks for children and to overcoming barriers related to mistrust, linguistic and cultural differences.

Various outreach measures have been implemented to effectively reach the target groups, including through the services for children and families provided in Community Centres and mobile services. Thanks to Roma mediators, services reach representatives of marginalized communities and some municipalities have set up “mobile offices” in which different types of services are provided to the local community, such as information, consultation, advocacy, etc. A good example of a mobile service is “Patronage Care” for children from 0 to 3 years of age, which is provided in the homes of young parents and is funded under the measure “Future for the Children” under the HRDP 2021-2027.

In order to raise public awareness and carry out preventive activities aimed at children and adolescents, the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (DGCO) – Ministry of Interior has implemented a number of initiatives within the framework of the measures to inform and reach the target groups aimed at children, parents and pedagogical specialists. Active communication channels in social networks are maintained, as well as opportunities for reporting through the official websites of the institution. Information campaigns are implemented in the school environment in the form of lectures, presentations and multimedia trainings aimed at safe behaviour on the Internet and the prevention of cyberbullying. The National Preventive Program “Prevention of Young People from Crime” is implemented throughout the country, and in the 2024/2025 school year more than 2,000 children were covered through trainings and meetings in schools. In parallel, DGCO participates in national and international initiatives, forums and partnerships with organizations from the public and non-governmental sectors aimed at increasing digital literacy and protecting children from online violence. In addition, digital tools are being developed to support children and young people, including participation in European initiatives to provide accessible information, guidance and connection to professional help in case of online threats and sexual violence. Such an initiative is the digital platform – Help4U by Europol and CENTRIC, which offers a clear and consistent guide to reliable advice, legal information and contacts with professionals who can help. The content is adapted for children and young people under the age of 18 and is

written in understandable and age-appropriate language.

The identification of children in need and the difficulties in their effective access to services is carried out through a coordinated and multidisciplinary approach involving a wide range of stakeholders. The process involves competent state institutions, local authorities, as well as non-governmental organizations and service providers with experience in working with vulnerable groups. The Action Plan implementing Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 on establishing a European Child Guarantee (2030) identified specific target groups of children based on the in-depth analysis of child poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria, developed within the framework of the pilot project “European Child Guarantee”. In this way, the approach combines cross-sectoral cooperation, fieldwork and an analytical approach, allowing for the timely identification of vulnerable children and the effective targeting of services and support to them and their families.

Despite the progress made, it can be reported that the effectiveness of some of the measures to inform and reach the target groups remains uneven, especially in remote and sparsely populated areas. This underlines the need to further strengthen the territorially oriented approach, more systematic engagement of local communities and more targeted outreach to children living in remote, sparsely populated or marginalised territories. As stated in the previous sections, the results of the implementation of the project “Establishing and maintaining a mechanism for interaction in the implementation of all activities of the European Child Guarantee” and, in particular, the definition of extreme poverty and the subsequent mapping of children living in extreme poverty will be essential for the identification of children in need and difficulties for their effective access to services.

4. Financing

The implementation of the measures in the national action plan is mainly funded by the state budget and the European funds through the Education Program 2021-2027, the HRDP 2021-2027, the RDP 2021-2027, the Food and Basic Material Assistance Program 2021-2027, as well as other sources.

Funds are planned from the European funds specifically for the purpose of implementing the Guarantee in Bulgaria as follows:

- Education Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 198,829,711 or EUR 101,660,016.97;
- Human Resources Development Program 2021-2027 – BGN 81,281,936 or EUR 41,558,793.96;
- 2021-2027 Regional Development Programme – BGN 897,517,471.79 or EUR 458,893,396.56: general budget for measures related to educational, health, social infrastructure and to improve the housing conditions of marginalized groups, including Roma, some of which are relevant to the objectives of the implementation of the Child Guarantee in Bulgaria. A total of EUR 247,460,022.95 has been agreed out of the planned funds under the listed strands.
- Food and Basic Material Assistance Program 2021-2027 – EUR 10,784,454.10 or EUR 5,514,003.80.

The state budget finances all types of activities related to free healthcare, pre-school and school education, early childhood care, provision of social services to children and their families, various types of social and family support, tax benefits, pensions and benefits, etc. For example, a significant resource is allocated annually from the state budget for financial support of children and their families, and the funds spent under the “Support for Children and Families” program are as follows: for 2023 – BGN 589,698,596 or EUR 301,508,104.49, for 2024 – BGN 674,730,335 or EUR 344,984,142.28. For 2025, the funds amount to BGN 694,990,000 or EUR

355,342,744.51, of which BGN 641,328,000 or EUR 327,905,799.58 are for the payment of all types of family benefits for children. There is also an annual increase in the funds for financing social services, which are state-delegated activities. The funds provided by the state budget in 2023 to finance social services, activities delegated by the state (total for children and adults) amount to BGN 644,784.7 thousand or EUR 329,673.18, and for 2024 they have been increased to BGN 902,666.2 thousand. EUR 461,525.90 thousand or the increase is BGN 257,881.5 thousand or EUR 131,852.72 thousand (an increase of 40%). The funds provided by the budget in 2025 for all social services delegated by the state amount to BGN 1,051,667.4 or EUR 537,709.00.

The estimated funds from the state budget for the system of pre-school and school education for 2024 are BGN 6,570.0 million or EUR 3,359.2 million, and for 2025 – BGN 7,317.7 million or EUR 3,741.5 million. Within the allocated funds for school and pre-school education, the following main activities were financed:

1. Maintenance of the upbringing and training of children and students. The total amount of the estimated funds that provide for the costs of remuneration and maintenance of the educational process in kindergartens and schools is as follows: for 2024 – BGN 4,520.4 million or EUR 2,311.2 million, and for 2025 – BGN 5,159.0 million or EUR 2,637.8 million.

2. Support equal access and support for personal development of children and students. The total amount of the funds estimated for 2024 is BGN 1,336.6 million or EUR 683.4 million, and for 2025 – BGN 1,393.5 million or EUR 712.5 million. These funds also include measures for inclusive education of children and pupils with special educational needs. For 2024 they amount to BGN 192.9 million or EUR 98.6 million, and for 2025 – BGN 238.3 million or EUR 121.9 million; as well as funds for schools and kindergartens with a concentration of children from vulnerable groups – for 2024 – BGN 54.1 million or EUR 27.7 million, and for 2025 – BGN 58.4 million or EUR 29.9 million. These funds are aimed at providing additional staff and/or additional activities, as well as supporting access to education and preventing the risk of dropping out of the system of pre-school and school education of children and pupils from vulnerable groups. Resources for equal access also include funds for student scholarships, student dormitories, cognitive books, textbooks and study kits for free use by students in grades I to VII and children in preparatory groups, support for the feeding of children in preparatory groups and students in grades I to IV. The main directions are for the transport of children in compulsory pre-school age and for students from settlements where there is no kindergarten or school, activities for the development of interests, abilities, competences and expression in the field of science, technology, arts and sports of children and students, as well as for career guidance carried out by personal development support centers.

Annually, the state budget provides a significant resource for improving maternal and child health and the funds spent under the budget program “Medico-social care for disadvantaged children, maternal and child health” for 2024 amount to BGN 69,033.3 thousand or EUR 35,296.2 thousand, and for 2025 amount to BGN 76,478.3 thousand or EUR 39,102.7 thousand. The funds are aimed at providing activities in support of families of children with disabilities and chronic diseases for appointment and conduct of early diagnosis, diagnostics, treatment and medical and psychosocial rehabilitation; long-term treatment and rehabilitation of children with disabilities and severe chronic diseases and training of their parents to take care of them in a family environment; ensuring mandatory mass screening of all newborn children for phenylketonuria, congenital adrenal hyperplasia and congenital hypothyroidism; prenatal diagnosis of pregnant women for early detection of congenital anomalies (Down syndrome, neural tube defects and other anomalies) and conducting genetic tests at high risk of giving birth to a child with a genetic disease through biochemical and DNA analysis; financing of all activities included in the National Program for Improving Maternal and Child Health 2021-2030 for organizational and financial support to Bulgarian citizens for carrying out

assisted reproduction activities in persons with infertility, treatable primarily with the methods of assisted reproductive techniques.

Funding is provided from the state budget to compensate for the costs incurred by parents for the upbringing and training of children who are not admitted to municipal nurseries or nursery groups in municipal or state kindergartens, due to the lack of vacancies, as follows: for 2024 – BGN 13,911.5 thousand or EUR 7,112.8 thousand and for 2025 – BGN 17,254.4 thousand or EUR 8,822.1 thousand.

In implementation of the European Child Guarantee, the HRDP 2021-2027 includes BGN 81,281,936 or EUR 41,558,793.96, which are programmed under Operation Future for the Children. Future for the Children is the first measure that launches the implementation of the national action plan implementing the initiative. Given its horizontal nature, the implementation of the operation is key to achieving the objectives of the plan as a whole.

The 2021-2027 HRDP mainly finances measures to provide support for improving care for children in early childhood, development of health and integrated health and social services to prevent complications in children with disabilities, developmental difficulties and chronic diseases, measures to prevent early marriages and births and individual support for underage mothers/pregnant women and their children, support for young people leaving alternative care, etc. At the same time, other investments under the programme also contribute to achieving the objectives of the Guarantee, such as measures to improve the capacity of the social system, measures to support human resources in the healthcare sector, measures for employment, qualification and training of parents, measures to support the combination of professional and family life, and others.

Under the Education Program 2021-2027, measures to support personal development in pre-school and school education, prevention of bullying and violence and reduction of aggression in schools, creation of conditions for access to education by overcoming demographic, social and cultural barriers, measures at the municipal level for desegregation of schools, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination, measures to promote intercultural education through culture, science and sports, etc., are mainly funded.

Under the procedure “General and additional support for personal development in pre-school education”, a contract BG05SFPR001-1.003-0001 "Strong start" was signed with beneficiary MES for a total amount of BGN 140,538,769 or EUR 71,856,331.58. Of the funds planned under the project for the European Child Guarantee, amounting to BGN 39,533,970.42 or EUR 20,213,398.11, BGN 20,038,197.22 or EUR 10,245,367.55 were verified as of 31.12.2025.

Under the procedure “General and additional support for personal development in school education”, a contract BG05SFPR001-1.001-0001 “Success for you” was concluded with beneficiary MES for a total amount of BGN 201,496,877.24 or EUR 103,023,717.42. Of the funds planned under the project for the European Child Guarantee, amounting to BGN 131,153,586.24 or EUR 78,527.40, as of 31.12.2025, BGN 64,652,742.44 or EUR 33,056,422.31 from the ESF+ were verified (BGN 50,047,764.25 or EUR 25,589,015.53 for general support for personal development and BGN 10,00,407.09 or EUR 5,115,172.12 for additional support).

A procedure for selection of project proposals BG05SFPR001-1.004 “Promoting intercultural education through culture, science and sport”, which is entirely aimed at the European Child Guarantee, was announced in January 2024 with a budget of BGN 31,123,577 or EUR 15,913,232.23. Within the three application deadlines, 113 project proposals were submitted for a total amount of BGN 41,760,000 or EUR 21,351,548.96. As of December 31, 2025, 79 grant contracts were signed for a total amount of BGN 30,273,514.58 or EUR 15,478,602.36.

The measures financed under the 2021-2027 RDP are mainly aimed at improving

infrastructure. Some of them, related to the modernization of the educational infrastructure, are directly aimed at children. Others, such as investments in housing, health and cultural infrastructure, make an indirect contribution to improving children's living conditions and development. Funds of EUR 158,739,874.77 were agreed for the reporting period, broken down by measure as follows:

- under the measure “Support for educational infrastructure and equipment” – generally agreed grant funds: EUR 150,234,944.76.
- under the measure “Community-based early childhood development centers to support children and their parents and families (providing mainly counselling, training and therapy activities, as well as community work, advocacy and mediation) there are currently no agreed funds.
- with regard to the Housing Support measure, the agreed grant funds (under Priority 1) amount to EUR 8,504,930.01.

Under the Food and Basic Material Assistance Program 2021-2027, measures are mainly financed to provide access to full nutrition to all children in need and to provide material and financial support to families with children from vulnerable groups. In order to ensure healthy and complete nutrition under procedure BG05SFPR003-1.006 “Children's Kitchen”, the Program provides vouchers to children from 10 months to 3 years from vulnerable groups, against which they receive lunch meals from children's kitchens. The planned funds for providing a voucher/card amount to BGN 7,152,828.54 or EUR 3,657,183.16. By order of the Head of the Managing Authority, the deadline for the implementation of the procedure was extended to the end of 2027. The amount of funding provided to provide support by purchasing packages of necessary basic products for newborn children from poor and at-risk families, identified by the social assistance authorities, is BGN 1,818,000 or EUR 929,528.64 by 2025. For the distribution of packages for newborns, the budget amounts to BGN 254,520 or EUR 130,134, and the implementation of the “Support for the youngest” project has been extended until 30.09.2026.

5. Monitoring

The national framework for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria has been established as an effective tool to track progress under the European Child Guarantee. It includes 14 specific objectives supported by more than 20 indicators to all thematic areas of the National Action Plan. Each of the indicators sets intermediate (by 2025) and target values (by 2030) to be achieved. The main data sources are NSI, Eurostat, ASA, NCPHA, PISA, WHO and administrative registers, which provide reliable, comparable and regularly updated monitoring information. Most data are collected annually, allowing trends to be tracked. Some indicators (for example, from the PISA study) are updated every 3-5 years.

In the period 2021-2025, there was an increase in the share of children at risk of poverty – from 24.2% to 27.0%. There was also a slight increase in the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion – from 33% to 33.1%. This adverse development should be seen in the context of a series of crises and their consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic led to loss of income and social instability, and the energy and economic crisis, exacerbated by geopolitical upheavals, caused a sharp increase in food and energy prices.. These negative socio-economic processes have particularly affected households with children from vulnerable groups. At the same time, preliminary data for 2025 show an improvement in the situation related to child poverty and social exclusion compared to 2024. Regarding the share of children living in severe material and social deprivation (defined as restrictions on 7 out of 13 indicators), there is a sustained positive trend towards a decrease in recent years.

Other leading indicators related to child well-being also note positive developments: reducing child mortality, increasing the coverage of immunizations, expanding the coverage of children from 0 to 7 years in early childhood education and care and reducing the share of early leavers from education and training. Compared to 2021, when the infant mortality rate in Bulgaria was about 5.6 per 1,000 live births – significantly above the European Union average (3.3 per 1,000) – in 2024 it decreased to 4.5‰. In absolute terms, the infant mortality rate decreases by 1.1 per 1000 live births, and in relative terms the decline compared to the 2021 level is about 19.6%. This reduction, achieved only within three years, can be defined as significant and indicates a tangible improvement and progress in the maternal and child health system. Infant mortality is one of sensitive indicators of the effectiveness of the maternal and child health system, as well as of the socio-economic conditions in the country. It reflects not only the quality of and access to medical services, but also factors such as educational level, household income and regional disparities in health infrastructure. In this regard, the regional data are indicative – according to NSI data in 2024, the infant mortality rate is highest in the Regions of Razgrad (10.9‰), Montana (10.3‰) and Dobrich (10.1‰). What these regions have in common is an unfavourable demographic structure characterised by low birth rates and an ageing population. Additionally, socio-economic conditions – high unemployment, low incomes and limited access to quality health services, create prerequisites for a higher risk of child mortality.

A positive trend is also observed in terms of immunization coverage in the period 2021-2024. There is an increase in the implementation of the immunization calendar and higher levels of vaccine coverage among children. The immunization coverage with the main immunizations in 2024 reaches 94.5%, approaching the set target of at least 95%.

There is also an expansion of the scope of children from 0 to 7 years in early childhood education and care as a result of the measures taken, including the abolition of kindergarten fees. In recent years, Bulgaria has seen a steady decrease in the share of early leavers from the education and training system among people aged between 18 and 24 years old. According to the NSI, Labour Force Survey, in 2024 the share of early leavers from the education and training system among persons between the ages of 18 and 24 decreased to 8.2 percent, compared to 12.0 percent in 2021. This share is below the EU average (9.5%) and below the EU level target of 9.0% by 2030. The interim target for 2025 (10.2%) has already been exceeded, and while the current positive trend remains, the achievement of the 7% target in 2030 seems completely realistic.

The data from the PISA survey show that although Bulgaria has made progress in increasing participation in early childhood education and care and in reducing early school leaving, educational outcomes at all levels still need to improve. Socio-economic factors continue to largely determine educational outcomes and achievements in terms of basic skills.

In recent years, social services for children have also been intensively developed, including social services for early childhood development. The SSA explicitly regulates that social services for the formation of parenting skills, counselling of parents on issues of early childhood development and childcare, early intervention of disabilities for children and others are not paid. In line with the ongoing reform in the field of social services, there has been a sustained increase in the number of social services financed from the state budget¹⁹.

The share of children at risk of poverty living in households with an excessive housing cost burden decreased from 29.5% in 2021 to 26.5% in 2025, or a decrease of 3.0 pp. Despite the reported improvement, the share of children at risk of poverty living in households for which housing costs represent an excessive financial burden remains high.

¹⁹ Information on the dynamics in their number during the period under review is contained in Section 3, item 3.6.

Data on housing overcrowding among children at risk of poverty also show a clear trend of gradual improvement in the period 2021-2025. In 2024, the indicator decreased to 66.7%, which is a decrease of 9.2 percentage points compared to 2021 (75.9%). In 2025, there was an additional decrease to 63.7%, or a decrease of another 3.0 percentage points compared to 2024. Despite the reported improvement in these indicators, the data highlight the need for sustainable and long-term policies in the field of housing, energy efficiency and income support, with a focus on households with children and territories with a concentration of poverty.

The Action Plan notes the lack of official statistics or the fragmentation of the available data for individual groups of children in the analysis of the target groups, their profile and the barriers they face in terms of access to basic services. In view of this, it outlines the need for the availability and functioning of a reliable database on the number and profile of individual groups of disadvantaged children, taking into account the various factors and risks they face. In this regard, and as already mentioned, one of the leading activities at the national level in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee is the mapping of children living in extreme poverty in Bulgaria. This process will allow better identification of the most vulnerable groups of children and, accordingly, will support the planning and monitoring process with up-to-date, reliable and comparable data. Since the planned mapping will be carried out at the level of municipalities, it will provide detailed and territorially specific information that will allow the development of targeted policies and interventions tailored to the specificities of the municipality.

Table No. 4 National Framework for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria and for Data Collection (latest up-to-date data)

Targets	Indicators	Source of Information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current Value (latest available data)	Interim value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Reducing the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	Share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	33.0% (2021)	33.1% (2025)	26.0%	21.0%
	Share of children at risk of poverty	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	24.2% (2021)	27.0% (2025)	22.0%	18.0%
	Share of children experiencing severe material and social deprivation (7 out of 13 indicators)	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	20.0% (2021)	16.3% (2025)	17.0%	15.5%
Reducing the share of the poor among households with three or more children	Share of the poor among households with three or more children	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	49.3% (2021)	52.3% (2025)	45.3%	37.5%
Reducing the share of the poor among single parents with children	Share of poor among single parents with children	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	35.7% (2021)	40.4% (2025)	31.0%	25.0%
Expanding the coverage of children from 0 to	Share of children aged 0-2 enrolled in ECEC ²⁰	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/Bulgaria	20.6% (2021)	22.2% (2025)	22.0%	25.0%

²⁰ All children up to the age of 3 years are included in the age range from 0 to 2 years.

Targets	Indicators	Source of Information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current Value (latest available data)	Interim value by 2025	Target value by 2030
7 years in early childhood education and care	Net enrolment ratio of children in the education system from 3 years until they enter the first grade ²¹	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	80.4% (2021/2022)	88.6% ²² (2024/2025)	84.3%	86.3%
Reducing the share of early leavers from education and training	Share of early leavers from education and training	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	12.0% (2021)	8.2% (2024)	10.2%	7%
Reducing the share of students with scores lower than critical (average for the three PISA areas – Reading, Mathematics and Science)	% 15-year-olds with poor results on average for the three areas: reading, mathematics, natural sciences	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	Every three years/EU-27	46.0% (2018): 7.1% for reading; 4.4% for mathematics; 46.5% for natural sciences.	51.5% (2022): 2.9% for reading; 3.6% for mathematics; 8.0% for natural sciences.	36.0%	25.0%
Reducing the number of children in residential care	Number of children placed in residential care services	ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	3022 (2021)	2967 (2025)	2,600	2,000

²¹ The calculation of the coefficients also includes children aged 6 years who are enrolled in the first grade.

²² The target value has been reached. The result is obtained due to the use of revised population data based on the results of the 2021 Census in the calculation of the coefficient for 2022/2023. There is an interruption of the time series.

Targets	Indicators	Source of Information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current Value (latest available data)	Interim value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Increasing the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information and counselling, therapy and rehabilitation, training and other community services	Number of users of social services for children and families (consultative, prevention and early intervention, day care), financed by the state budget	ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	11,795 (2021)	19,419 (2025)	14,000	20,000
Reducing child mortality	Infant mortality by new-borns	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	5.6/1000 (2021)	4.5/1000 (2024)	4.8/1000	3.1/1000
Expanding the coverage of children with compulsory immunizations	Immunization coverage with basic immunizations	NCPHA/WHO	Annually/EU-27	90.0% (2021)	94.5% (2024)	minimum 93.0%	minimum 95.0%
Reducing the number of births of girls under the age of 19 years	Number of births by girls under the age of 19 years	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	4,408 (2021)	4,186 (2024)	2,100	1,100

Targets	Indicators	Source of Information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current Value (latest available data)	Interim value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Expanding the coverage of children with disabilities using health, social and integrated health and social services	Number of children with disabilities using social, health and integrated health and social services	MH, ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	7,587 (2021)	12,777 (2025)	9,000	10,000
Reducing the percentage of overweight and obese children²³	% of children born with low birth weight	NCPHA	Annually/Bulgaria	9.7% (2020)	11.5% (2024)	9.7%	9.2%
	% of children from 1 to 4 years of age who are overweight (overweight + obesity)	NCPHA	Every five years/Bulgaria	12.0% (2020)	-	12.0%	11.4%
	% of children from 5 to 19 years of age who are overweight (overweight + obesity)	NCPHA	Every five years/Bulgaria	32.0% (2020)	-	32.0%	30.4%
	% children from 1 to 4 years of age with obesity	NCPHA	Every five years/Bulgaria	2.1% (2020)	-	2.1%	2.0%
	% children from 5 to 19 years of age with obesity	NCPHA	Every five years/Bulgaria	12.8% (2020)	-	12.8%	12.2%

²³ The last national representative survey was conducted in 2020. A new study is forthcoming.

Targets	Indicators	Source of Information	Frequency and geographical scope of data collection	Base value	Current Value (latest available data)	Interim value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Reducing housing overcrowding	Housing cost overburden rate among children at risk of poverty	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	29.5% (2021)	26.5% (2025)	27.5%	25.5%
	Overcrowding rate among children at risk of poverty	NSI, EUROSTAT	Annually/EU-27	75.9% (2021)	63.7% (2025)	70.0%	65.0%

** The framework presents up-to-date data on the individual indicators in order to track their dynamics and compare them with their baseline values.*

6. Governance and involvement of stakeholders

Pursuant to the Council Recommendation and in order to ensure effective coordination at national level, a National Coordinator of the Republic of Bulgaria on the European Child Guarantee was appointed at the level of the Deputy Minister (by order of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy). The higher level of representativeness of the National Coordinator meets the requirements set out in the Council Recommendation, namely the availability of relevant resources and mandate allowing effective coordination and monitoring. The functions of the National Coordinator are also related to the implementation of active communication and dialogue with all stakeholders in the national context, as well as with the European Commission and the national coordinators of other Member States. Since 2021, the functions of the National Coordinator have been performed by deputy ministers and executives at the MLSP, with significant experience in communication and coordination with stakeholders and the European Commission, as well as in terms of leading policies within the scope of the Guarantee, planning and management of operational programmes under the European Funds. This achieves continuity and consistency in the work on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. In the period 01.09.2023 – 17.04.2024, the functions of national coordinator were performed by the Deputy Director General of the General Directorate for European Funds, International Programmes and Projects at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, who as of 18.04.2024 was appointed Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy. The current national coordinator has been actively involved in the overall process at the stage of planning the measures and activities under the national plan, has significant experience in communicating and coordinating with stakeholders in the national context and with the European Commission, as well as in the planning and management of ESF programmes. To assist the coordinator in the operational implementation of its tasks, a responsible unit has been designated by the specialized administration of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy – the Social Inclusion Directorate.

For the implementation of the Council Recommendation, a mechanism for coordination and management of the process has been introduced at national level, actively involving all stakeholders. A high-level Inter-institutional Working Group (IWG) was established to manage and coordinate the process of implementing the Plan (by order of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria). It includes all responsible institutions at the level of ministers and heads, and the group is chaired by the Minister of Labor and Social Policy. This high-level working group not only ensures consistent cross-sectoral coordination but also provides the necessary political authority to mobilise institutions and improve strategic policy planning.

A Permanent Expert Working Group (PEWG) was established to support the coordination and monitoring of the process of implementation of the plan (by order of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy). It includes representatives of all involved institutions and organizations, including the civil sector and academia, and is chaired by the National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee. This broad representativeness reflects the complex and horizontal nature of child and family policies.

PEWG is mandated with the following tasks:

- to ensure coordination between state institutions and other organizations engaged in activities of the Action Plan to implement the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee;
- to monitor the implementation of the measures and activities set out in the Action Plan;
- to develop two-year operational plans for the implementation of this Action Plan;
- to prepare biennial reports on the progress and results of the implementation of the Council Recommendation.

As stated, among the leading commitments of PEWG is the development of two-year

operational plans for the implementation of the Action Plan, which contain specific activities with indicators, deadlines, amount and sources of funding and responsible institutions in all impact areas. In the period since the adoption of the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee, two operational plans have been adopted so far for the periods 2023-2024 and 2025-2026. The measures of the second Operational Plan for the period 2025-2026 are currently being implemented. Regarding the involvement of stakeholders in the various stages of the process, it is important to note that NGO representatives, in addition to supporting the preparation of the biennial operational plans and progress reports in the implementation of the Council Recommendation, are also involved as partners in the implementation of part of the planned measures.

Based on the experience gained so far, it can be concluded that the national coordination mechanism for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee has contributed to strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation, improving strategic planning and reporting processes, as well as building a sustainable and structured governance model.

Encouraging children's participation is an important element of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The National Action Plan was discussed with the members of the Children' Council as a consultative body to the Chairperson of the SACP before its adoption, and in the course of its implementation the Council continued to actively participate in various activities, initiatives and events at national and international level, expressing views and opinions on documents and topics related to children's rights. The focus of the actions taken is to create conditions for the exercise of the right of children to express their opinion and attitude on the issues that concern them. Their involvement is ensured primarily through structured national consultations, focus groups, surveys and local initiatives conducted both in the development process and in the implementation of the Action Plan and the biennial operational plans. Among the leading activities under the project "Effective policies for all children", under the direct award procedure BG05SFPR002-2.004 "Upgrading the capacity of child protection systems", under the HRDP 2021-2027 is the implementation of initiatives at the local level to improve the effectiveness of the child participation process. In this regard, consultations with children are planned on current topics (education, digital literacy, health, leisure, sports, culture, social inclusion, etc.) related to the development, rights and interests of children²⁴.

Regarding the monitoring of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, in parallel with the functions of the PEWG in this direction, the implementation of the social inclusion policy is monitored by the National Council on Social Inclusion (NCSI) to the Council of Ministers, as a body for coordination, cooperation and consultation in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the state policy in the field of social inclusion. Since its establishment, it serves as a platform for effective interaction between state authorities, social partners, local authorities and non-governmental organizations. The Council includes representatives of all stakeholders – ministries, agencies, representatives of the NSI and the National Social Security Institute, social partners, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, including organizations actively working on children and families, representatives of academia. Its broad representativeness reflects the complex and horizontal nature of this policy. The main functions of the Council include preparing opinions on draft strategic documents in the field of social inclusion; supporting cooperation and consultation with non-profit legal entities for the development, implementation and monitoring of the state policy on social inclusion; developing, discussing and approving reports, analyses and evaluations of the implementation of the state policy on social inclusion; providing assistance in monitoring the implementation of the state policy on social inclusion. The aim is to monitor

²⁴ Detailed information on initiatives to encourage the participation of children is contained in Section 3, i. 3.6.

the achievement of results of activities on the implementation of the priorities in the field of social inclusion, as well as to actively involve stakeholders in the implementation of the evaluation and monitoring.

7. Planned actions

The analysis of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee to date shows that despite the progress made, challenges remain regarding the identification of children in vulnerable situations and the need to strengthen interinstitutional cooperation and coordination. Among the main gaps in identifying children in need, the limited territorial detail of the available data can be highlighted, especially with regard to certain target groups. In most cases, data is collected and analysed at district or statistical region level (NUTS 2 and NUTS 3), making it difficult to identify vulnerable children at municipality or settlement level. This leads to situations where real needs remain hidden behind aggregated indicators and interventions do not reach those most in need.

In this regard, one of the main planned directions is the improvement of the mechanisms for identifying children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. As already noted in the previous sections, one of the leading initiatives in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee is the forthcoming definition of extreme poverty and the subsequent mapping of children living in extreme poverty at a low territorial level. This approach is key to the effective implementation of the European Child Guarantee at local level, as it allows for more precise targeting of resources, better coordination between institutions and greater engagement of local authorities and communities. Mapping children living in extreme poverty at a low territorial level is not just a technical tool, but will serve as a strategic basis for developing targeted, sustainable and effective policies to support children in need.

Among the weaknesses identified is the lack of an integrated mechanism for the exchange of information between the respective systems, which leads to gaps in the identification of children in need and in the coordination of support to them. The functioning of a single information platform is essential to provide quality support to children with complex needs through coordinated planning of services from different systems. In this regard, the targeted training of specialists from the education, health and social system to work with common indicators and develop coordinated support plans is essential.

In this context, the adopted by Council of Ministers Decree No. 181 of 18.03.2024 of the National Strategy for e-Health and Digitization of the Health System to 2030 can be considered as a good example. The strategy focuses on interoperability and secure data exchange between the health, social and education systems. In this regard, it is envisaged: creating a single space of health data accessible to authorized specialists from different institutions; connecting the National Health Information System (NHIS) with other public registers and platforms, including those of the NSSI, NHIF, MES and ASA; improving coordination in the provision of services, especially for children with complex needs and chronic diseases. Since September 2025, medical professionals in schools and kindergartens have been able to access children's electronic health files through a specialized platform (edu.his.bg).

Within the project "Effective policies for all children" under procedure BG05SFPR002-2.004 "Upgrading the capacity of child protection systems" under the HRDP 2021-2027, it is envisaged to develop and implement a National Information System, which is regulated in the Child Protection Act. The goal is to fully structure and integrate in one place data and information relating to all spheres of life relevant to the care and development of children. Among the planned actions is the establishment of a Methodological Center for Analyses and Research at the SACP. The Centre will serve as a tool for collecting, processing and evaluating

data needed to strengthen protection and monitoring systems for children at risk; preparing analyses with a view to achieving coordinated work on legal and other issues; developing methodological resources to support the work of professionals working with children. By implementing these planned actions, prerequisites are created for a more holistic, coordinated and data-driven approach to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

Considering the key role of early childhood education and care in the prevention of intergenerational poverty, investment in early childhood will continue to be the focus of priority actions, including in the context of the European Child Guarantee. In the coming years, ECEC policies will focus on the sustainable continuation and deepening of the activities under the Strong Start project under the Education 2021-2027 Program. The implementation of the project will continue to cover both general support for all pre-school children, as well as additional support for children with special educational needs, children at risk, children with chronic diseases and gifted children. The emphasis will remain on the prevention of learning difficulties through targeted programs for psychomotor, cognitive and linguistic development, as well as the provision of psychological support and training in Bulgarian for children for whom it is not their mother tongue. It is also planned to further strengthen the capacity of kindergartens by investing in human resources and the professional development of pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff, as well as deepening cross-sectoral cooperation.

Working with parents will continue to be a key element of the project implementation, with a particular focus on families from vulnerable groups. The upcoming activities will build on the already established mechanisms for parental inclusion through joint initiatives, trainings and targeted support aimed at overcoming barriers to access and sustainable participation of children in ECEC services. In parallel, in the period 2025-2026, the project funded under the Technical Support Instrument aimed at the implementation of the National Quality Framework in ECEC will be finalized. After the completion of the situational analysis and the analysis of good European practices, as indicated, a tool for quality self-assessment at the level of the institution will be developed and piloted, as well as tools for monitoring and evaluation at the municipal and national level. The establishment of an integrated quality monitoring and evaluation system is expected to create a sustainable basis for data-driven decision-making and systematic improvement of the quality of early childhood services. The project will end in July 2026 with a ready-made and tested toolkit, supported by a communication strategy to raise public awareness of the importance of quality in ECEC.

It should be noted that the National Action Plan on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee is a long-term strategic document that outlines the vision and priorities for 2030. As stated, biennial operational plans are being developed for its implementation, containing specific measures, activities, indicators and responsible institutions. These operational plans perform the function of a dynamic update tool that reflects changes in the environment, new data, progress in implementation, etc. Thus, the implementation of the long-term plan is adapted and upgraded through successive operational frameworks that provide flexibility and sustainability of implementation by addressing emerging challenges in a timely manner.

8. Good practices

Since the adoption of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, a number of effective practices have been developed and implemented aimed at improving the access of disadvantaged children to basic services in the field of early childhood development, education, health, healthy nutrition, etc. At the local level, many municipalities implement various initiatives to engage children and young people through sports, cultural and civic activities, as well as to encourage their participation in the

decision-making processes (in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo, Sofia Municipality, Kozloduy, Gabrovo, Dobrich, etc.). In parallel, a widespread practice is the provision of financial support – in the form of one-off childbirth benefits and support for couples with reproductive problems, financed entirely by municipal funds (in the municipalities of Sevlievo, Montana, Gabrovo, Dobrich, Silistra, Troyan, etc.). Although some of these practices are not directly implemented within the framework of the European Child Guarantee, they contribute significantly to the achievement of its objectives and have the potential to be applied in other countries.

An example of an effective integrated approach to support children and families is project BG05SFPR002-2.003-0053-C01 “Future for the Children” in Novi Pazar Municipality under HRDP 2021-2027, implemented in the period 18.10.2023 – 17.10.2025. The following activities have been implemented within the project: integrated support for children and young people from vulnerable groups and families at risk, work in kindergartens and schools, tracking development in a family environment, psychological support for underage parents, support for secondary education and career guidance. Information campaigns on health prevention, prevention of early marriages and family planning have also been implemented. 223 children and youth from minority and vulnerable communities were covered. The project results are related to improved immunization coverage, increased health culture, active work with parents and children, developed educational booklet “I, the child” for parents and specialists.

Another initiative to support children and parents in early childhood is the Community Center for Children and Families (CCCF) in Veliko Tarnovo, which provides hourly services to prepare children up to 3 years of age for admission to kindergarten through socialization and adaptation programs in outside of the family environment. The service supports both children and parents, as well as nursery staff, facilitating the transition to an organized form of care and early education. Within the “Hand in Hand – Mutual Assistance for Children, Parents and Specialists” practice, a multidisciplinary team conducts individual and group activities with children and parents, as well as joint activities with nursery staff. Through observation and early assessment, needs in speech, emotional and motor development are identified and, if necessary, timely support is provided. For the period July 2023 – November 2025, 127 children passed through the CCCF’s adaptation and socialization programs, and 292 children from nurseries were included in group classes with specialists. Children who have undergone the service show easier adaptation when entering a nursery, lower levels of anxiety and better skills for communicating and following a daily regimen. Positive feedback from all sides demonstrates the effectiveness of the practice as a model for early prevention and support of children's development.

“Houses of Families”, based on the “Safe Start” model, are a preventive health and social service in the community to support families with children in early childhood. The service is developed on the territory of the municipality of Kazanlak through four social health centers (“Houses of Families”), and the initiative is part of projects to support families and children, implemented with the participation of the Future for Children Association and the municipality of Kazanlak. These centres provide a safe and accessible space for children and parents to play and communicate; support and counselling for parents on parenting, health, development and secure parental care, including monitoring and early detection of difficulties; opportunities to socialise and build community connections between families; referral to other services in the field of health, social services and education. The main target groups are pregnant women, families in small and remote settlements, families from vulnerable groups, young parents and single mothers, children at risk of developmental delays. A collaborator and a community mediator work in each of the houses. Once a week, the centres are visited by specialists such as social workers, psychologists, health professionals. 153 families from vulnerable communities were mapped in four settlements; intensive work was carried out with

80 families; the housing conditions of over 90 children were improved; psychosocial support was provided to over 200 families; programmes for the prevention of early marriages were developed and carried out.

Starting in 2021, the municipality of Haskovo, with the support of UNICEF, is introducing a systematic, family-oriented model for early disability intervention. The model aims to overcome challenges such as late recognition of developmental difficulties in young children and insufficient, often fragmented, support for their families. At the Community Center for Children and Families – Haskovo has established and trained a specialized team that provides a family-oriented early disability intervention service aimed at working in the child's natural environment. The guiding principle of the model is the active participation of parents, and an individual plan tailored to their specific needs and everyday life is developed for each family. Since the service began in 2021, it has provided support to more than 180 children with disabilities or developmental difficulties at an early age have been covered in the municipality of Haskovo. Since 2024, the good practice developed as a project initiative has been functioning as a state-delegated activity, which ensures its sustainability and long-term development.

The Municipal Program “Academy for Parents”, implemented by the Municipality of Ruse, encompassing the activity “Municipal School for Parents”, can be mentioned as a good practice for providing support and raising the awareness of future and current parents of children up to 3 years of age. Within the framework of the program, free monthly meetings are held with an obstetrician-gynecologist, neonatologist, pediatrician, breastfeeding consultant, midwife and other early childhood development specialists on topics of maternity and childcare using modern methods, good practices and who-approved methods. The results obtained include: increased awareness of the risk factors associated with the health of the parents covered by the program and their children. For the period from July 2024 to October 2025, 12 cycles of free lectures were held on the topics of motherhood, parenting, early childhood development, maternal and child health. The program was attended by over 100 parents who were given the opportunity to consult with various specialists.

Among the good practices in the field of school education aimed at modernizing the learning environment and increasing student engagement stands out the initiative Interactive Humanitarian Center with VR training for active and inclusive education in 121 secondary school “Georgi Izmirliiev” on the territory of Sofia Municipality. This initiative involves creating and implementating modern humanitarian center with history and philosophy cabinets equipped with digital and VR technologies, interactive resources and modern teaching materials. It introduces innovative teaching methods – virtual visits, visualized historical and philosophical topics, project-based learning, debates and cross-subject activities. The centre is used for both in the learning process and in club and extracurricular forms, supporting the development of critical thinking, civic culture and active student participation. The target group is 734 students from Vth to XIIth grade, including students with high motivation, with Sen and at risk of dropping out, students participating in educational and extracurricular humanitarian activities. The initiative is funded by the Ministry of Education and Science under the National Program “Providing a modern, safe and accessible educational environment”. The practice is integrated into the long-term development strategy of the school and is applied sustainably in all included classes.

A good example in the field of health care is the Municipal Solidarity Fund for support of the treatment of citizens from the municipality of Sevlievo, established by Decision No. 049/30.01.2024 of the Sevlievo Municipal Council. The Solidarity Fund is a mechanism for financial support for residents of the municipality who cannot cover their costs for medical treatment, diagnosis, rehabilitation or other necessary health services that are not funded by state or other sources. The target groups are persons with low incomes, large families, unemployed, pensioners, persons with disabilities. Since its launch, the program has

contributed to overcoming existing barriers to accessing healthcare, reducing inequalities and ensuring a better quality of life for vulnerable groups on the territory of the municipality.

At the local level, a number of good practices in the field of healthy nutrition are also being implemented, which contribute to improving the eating habits and well-being of children and families on the territory of the respective municipality. One such example is Troyan Municipality's own model for fruit and vegetable production on municipal agricultural land in order to provide quality, ecologically produced food for both children in kindergartens and vulnerable groups in the community. The practice was implemented within the framework of a project with the French municipality of Moan-Sartoux, leading in the provision of organic products for children, and Rossignano Marittimo (Italy) to exchange experience in the field of municipal agriculture and healthy nutrition for children. In 2020, a greenhouse complex was built on the site of a closed school, including four greenhouses, two arable fields and a service building. Since 2023, the municipality has been registered as a farmer and holds a certificate for a registered livestock holding (own production of honey). The finished product is used for the needs of unified child nutrition in kindergartens, it is also provided to kindergartens outside the system of unified nutrition, as well as to the Home Social Patronage and the Home for Elderly People. Currently, the main source of funding is the budget of the municipality of Troyan and 600 children from kindergartens on the territory of the municipality are covered. As a result of the long-standing and consistent policy in the field of healthy nutrition, according to the annual analyses of the Regional Health Inspectorate, in recent years there has been a sharp decrease in obesity among children in the municipality. The data show that in the municipality of Troyan the share of children with obesity is three times lower compared to the average for the region.

The initiatives implemented by Varna Municipality in the field of healthy nutrition are related to the provision of dietary/specialized nutrition to students in the initial stage of education with special nutritional needs, as well as to the implementation of the project "Introduction of healthy nutrition for all", funded by the Erasmus+ program of the EU. The project aims to contribute to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee by providing effective and free access to at least one healthy meal per day at school for all children, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The consortium includes 11 organizations from 8 European cities in the Netherlands, Romania, Latvia, Portugal, Italy, Sweden, Belgium and Bulgaria. The main target groups are pre-school children (3-6 years old) and primary and lower secondary school pupils (6-14 years old). The expected results of the project are mainly related to improving the awareness regarding healthy nutrition of children; creating a network of stakeholders and exchanging experiences in the field of healthy nutrition in school for the implementation of sustainable practices; developing a handbook with good examples.

In addition to the practices implemented at the municipal level, Bulgaria has a number of successful national initiatives and programs that support policies in the field of early childhood development and access to basic services, which complement and strengthen local efforts. The Strong Start project under the Education Programme 2021-2027 has established itself as a good national practice in the field of ECEC due to its scale, integrated approach and strong focus on inclusion. With a significant financial resource and a long-term implementation horizon, the project combines early prevention, targeted support for the individual development of the child and systematic work with parents as key partners in the educational process. The practice is distinguished by bringing together educational, psychological, linguistic, health and social interventions within and outside kindergarten, while actually strengthening the capacity of institutions through additional specialists and mediators. Active involvement of parents and targeted work with families from vulnerable groups contribute to overcome barriers to participation in pre-school education and to build a better understanding of the importance of early learning and development.

More broadly, Strong Start functions as an operational model for the implementation of national ECEC policy and creates a direct link between targeted investment at child and family level and systemic quality and governance reforms. In this way, the project contributes to building a more inclusive, effective and sustainable early childhood education and care system in Bulgaria and provides a basis for future upgrading and transfer of good practices.

9. Conclusion

The European Child Guarantee is a key initiative to reduce child poverty and promote their social inclusion, and its implementation is closely linked to the ambitious goals that Bulgaria sets itself to meet the European commitments in the field of policies for children and families. During the period under review, a number of measures have been taken in the area of each sectoral policy to support children and families, which complement each other and comprehensively contribute to the promotion of child well-being.

As stated, the implementation of the national Action Plan in progress is the second operational plan for the period 2025-2026, which sets out more than 110 measures whose combined actions aim to contribute to the achievement of the set national goals in the field of child poverty and social exclusion. The state budget has a major share in financing the implementation of the measures, i.e. most measures are implemented as part of national policies. Also, the ESF+ funds exactly 5% of the funds allocated to Bulgaria or EUR 136 million through the Education and Human Resources Development Program, which have already programmed and deployed their measures in accordance with the directions of the Guarantee.

As a result of the measures taken to support children and families, progress and improvements have been achieved in several key areas, including expanding the coverage of children from 0 to 7 years in early childhood education and care, reducing the share of early leavers from education and training, reducing child mortality, increasing the coverage of immunizations. Actions taken contribute to improving access to basic services such as education, healthcare, healthy nutrition, etc.

Despite the positive development in key indicators related to child well-being, the data show that the share of children at risk of poverty is traditionally higher than the total share of the population at risk of poverty in the country. According to the analysis, the risk of child poverty is particularly manifested among certain vulnerable groups, including children living in households with low employment intensity, children from large families, children in single-parent families, as well as children from marginalized communities. In addition, territorial disparities and unequal distribution of services have a significant impact on child well-being. In some regions and settlements, access to quality educational, health and social services remains limited, exacerbating inequalities and increasing the likelihood of children falling into persistent poverty and social exclusion. This underlines the need for targeted, integrated and territorially adapted policies specifically targeting children and their families, which is among the current policy priorities.

In addition, with a view to providing comprehensive and targeted support to children and their families, including in the context of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, the following challenges underpin the planning of future measures:

- mapping of children living in extreme poverty, which will allow territorial-specific planning based on real data and local specifics;
- implementation of integrated measures to support children and families and strengthen interinstitutional cooperation – clear definition of the roles of stakeholders and recognition of the commitments of the responsible institutions;

- strengthening the role of local authorities in the process of planning and implementation of measures;
- increasing the capacity of both systems and professionals working directly with children and families;
- the successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee requires broad public support, which requires raising public awareness and involving local communities to support the process. It is essential to promote the European Child Guarantee as a tool to support children in need in various sectoral policies, as it is not yet sufficiently recognised by society as a national commitment, but rather as an external European initiative.

LIST OF ACRONYMS USED

AAC – Augmentative and Alternative Communication
ACA – Administrative Compliance and Admissibility
ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AGA – Administrative Grant Agreement
ASA – Agency for Social Assistance
BDB – Bulgarian Development Bank
CCSCDCD – Center for Complex Services for Children with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases
CEICSEM – Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities
CITI – Concepts of Integrated Territorial Investment
CM – Council of Ministers
CP – Clinical Pathway
CPA – Child Protection Act
CSES – Center for Special Educational Support
DFSMF – Dietary foods for special medical purposes
EC – European Commission
ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care
EPA – Employment Promotion Act
ESF+ – European Social Fund +
EU – European Union
FAA – Family Allowances Act
HCC – Health Consultative Centre
HMSCC – Home for Medical and Social Care for Children
HRD OP – Human Resources Development Operational Program
HRDP – Human Resources Development Program
ICD – International Classification of Diseases
IWG – Interdepartmental Working Group
LPVET – List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training
Medical University – Medical University
MEFSMA – Management of European Funds under Shared Management Act
MES – Ministry of Education and Science
MH – Ministry of Health
MLSP – Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
MRDPW – Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works
NAGPB – National Association of General Practitioners in Bulgaria
NCH – National Child Helpline
NCPHA – National Centre for Public Health and Analyses
NCSI – National Council on Social Inclusion
NEISPSE – National Electronic Information System for Pre-school and School Education
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
NHIF – National Health Insurance Fund
NHIS – National Health Information System
NPIMCH – National Program for Improvement of Maternal and Child Health
NPPCND – National Program for Prevention of Chronic Non-communicable Diseases
NSI – National Statistical Institute
OECD – Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
OP SESG – Operational Program “Science and Education for Smart Growth”
PEWG – Permanent Expert Working Group

pp – percentage points
PSEA – Pre-school and School Education Act
RCSPIE – Regional Center for Support of the Process of Inclusive Education
RDP – Regional Development Program
RED – Regional Education Department
RRC – Registration Reception Center
SACP – State Agency for Child Protection
SAR – State Agency for Refugees
SPH – State Psychiatric Hospital
SSA – Social Services Act
WHO – World Health Organization