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A framework for child and family support in Europe

Building comprehensive support systems

Policy brief

October 2022

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CONTENT

Section 1: Introduction: Aims and key messages

The European Family Support Network is dedicated to enhancing the role of Family support research, policy, and practice to promote parental support, children's rights and family welfare. Under the auspices of EurofamNet and funded by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) scheme, the Network is completing a four-year (2019-2023) programme of research and knowledge exchange activities. As a COST action, EurofamNet has wide membership among member states of the European Union (EU), and adjacent countries that have special relationships with the EU. EurofamNet research has included the publication of three major scoping studies which inform this policy briefing:

The conceptualisation and delivery of family support in Europe: A review of academic literature (Devaney, C. et al., 2021) considers research and theory regarding how formal family support is conceptualised, developed and delivered among the European contexts*.*

The conceptualisation and delivery of family policy and support in Europe: A review of international and European frameworks and standards (Churchill et al., 2021) provides a review of international and European policy and provision standards and frameworks adopted by the United Nations, Council of Europe and European Union concerned with rights to, and provision of, child, parental and family support among member states.

Child and family support policies across Europe: National reports from 27 countries (Abela, et al., 2021) contains a compendium of national reports from 27 European countries with representatives in EurofamNet. These reports capture trends and issues relating to the national context for children, parents and families; and national approaches to family support policy and provision.

Aim and scope of the briefing

This policy briefing argues that the development and sustainability of family support policies and provisions are priority issues for European countries. As European countries navigate major challenges in current times such as widening social inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery, and the impact of the war in Ukraine on the European economy, the improvement of social support provisions, services and systems for children, parents and families is more urgent and important than ever.

Drawing on the three reports listed above, this policy brief aims to inform pan-European debates and developments in family support by:

- Synthesising the key findings of the reports for policy and practice audiences. Drawing on these findings, the policy brief distills key learning about the significance of family support for children, parents and families; and the conceptualisation, development and delivery of family support among European countries.

- Setting out a multi-dimensional and multi-level conceptualisation of Family support. This approach provides a synthesis of emerging multi-level contextual and ecological frameworks for understanding and developing national reforms and systems. This approach highlights the value, diversity and complexity of family support as a concept, policy sub-field, domain of provision, and mode of practice.

- Conceptualising in children's, parents' and families' support needs in broad and dynamic terms as well as recognising the importance of the broader social and political context to Family support debates and developments. This approach recognises the value of prominent theories and frameworks for understanding and engaging with the social ecology of children's and families' lives; and the contexts within which family support develops and operates.

- Reviewing the benefits, risks and challenges for developing family support policy, provision and practice within and across European countries. Inter-disciplinary research, practice wisdom and service user perspectives highlight family support can provide a range of benefits for children, parents and families. However, the development and delivery of family support often entails navigating complexities and challenges at both the level of national systems and frontline practice. These complexities and challenges can also influence its' equity and cost effectiveness.

- Setting out a comprehensive, coordinated and collaborative approach to developing Family support policy, provision and practice for child welfare, parental/family welfare, gender equality and social justice. This approach proposes children's rights and human rights as key foundations for family support. The policy brief proposes recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners related to developing comprehensive national systems of support, and effective and enabling frontline practice in services that support children, parents and families.

This policy briefing however, is not intended to be a comprehensive mapping or review of current research and policies in Europe. Instead, the aim is to provide a

high-level briefing which summarises the *current knowledge and thinking* regarding the *concept of family support and its implementation in the European Context,* highlighting *issues that need to be considered* in future policy and practice development. The key messages of this briefing are presented below.

Key messages

Family Support is a **multi-level, multi-dimensional** mode of support, encompassing **policy, provision, & practice**, with roles for government agencies, service providers & communities.

Families are **diverse in form, and in circumstances**, and their experiences are shaped by cultural, economic and social contexts with **implications for provisions** .

Participation in decision-making processes is relevant at all levels, from policy, to decisions relating to the support received from professionals. This ensures supports are relevant to needs!

Families are **key to the wellbeing and flourishing** of their members, so the **provision of family support** is crucial to the **vindication of rights, social inclusion & progress**.

Section 2: The concept of family support: A multi-dimensional and multi-level framework

The concept of family support

There are pressing rationales for the development of Family support Provisions highlighted in research and literature to date (Devaney, 2017; Devaney et al, 2021). Social policies in European countries often emphasise that parents and families are primary sources of care, protection, support, and education for children. Dolan, Zegarac and Arsić's (2020) therefore assert that *the provision of family support is essential* to securing the *rights of children*. The provision of family support must

consider the social and economic status and circumstances of parents, families and communities as this also fundamentally influences outcomes for children and young people (Dobrotić & Baran, 2015; Sandbæk, 2017: Jones, Lowe & West, 2020). This means that Family support provisions must consider addressing gender and social inequalities related to parental and family roles as well as socio-economic disadvantage. These issues inform the position statement on Family support within the European Family support Network:

> *Families provide the primary site for caring for children, whom they raise not for their benefit alone but for the betterment of civic society. Not enough is known or being done to support families in carrying out the complex task of rearing children and young people. In an increasingly challenging and changing environment there is a need for the international practice, policy and academic community to respond. (European Family support Network, 2020).*

However, all *parents and families often face challenges in providing and caring for children* in this current context of societal change and uncertainty. This is a core rationale for Family support as at certain times and in certain circumstances, *parental and family capacity to provide for and care for their children can be reduced or compromised* (Devaney et al., 2021). This reduced or compromised capacity can be influenced by public institutions, and social, economic and cultural contexts, which all have an impact on family circumstances, welfare and functioning (Abela et al., 2021; Churchill et al., 2021; Devaney, 2017). Parents and families therefore *require support and assistance* in meeting the needs of their children for care, nurturing and development (Devaney, 2017).

Given the influence of the social, economic and political context on family life, the range and scope of support and assistance must be based on a full consideration of factors that affect family life (Herrera, Frost & Devaney, 2020). We further argue that consideration should be given to addressing the ways in which gender and social inequalities are related to the fulfilment of parental duties for children, the organisation of social care in society and wider social inclusion and justice concerns (Abela et al, 2021; Churchill et al, 2021; Devaney et al 2021).

Engaging with these issues, this Policy Brief proposes a multi-dimensional and multi-level conceptualisation of Family support:

> *Family support refers to social policies, services and activities which, separately and collectively, support and enhance family roles, relationships and welfare. Informed by EurofamNet's remit to optimise family support for children, parents and families; and in recognition of the range of their support needs and the diversity of children's and family lives - this conception of family support incorporates multiple types, approaches and levels of support and services which contribute to enhanced*

resources, capabilities and welfare. This conception of family support includes support and services:

- *targeted at children/young people and their parents, and/or their families and communities*

- *targeted at one or more family member, family households, wider family networks and one or more generations*

- *that provide a range of support and services to children, parents and families including economic, social, employment and professional support and services*

- *that provide universal, targeted and specialist support and services to children, parents and families*

- *that are orientated towards prevention, early intervention and remedial outcomes*

- *informal everyday social and community support for family members as well as formal family support which is funded, organised and delivered by the state, often in partnership with voluntary, charity and civil society organisations*

As a multi-dimensional and multi-level conceptualisation of family support, this approach draws on prominent literature and frameworks which promote holistic, systemic and multi-level understandings of family support needs and family support provisions (CoE CM, 2011; Bulling & Berg, 2018; Devaney et al. 2021; Join-Lambert, 2016). In addition, it draws on more focal service-specific literature and frameworks which consider and evaluate the specific aims and impacts of distinctive approaches to, and types of, support and services that seek to improve outcomes and prospects for children, parents and families (e.g., Álvarez et al, 2020; Butler et al., 2020; Connolly & Devaney, 2018; Darra et al., 2020; Roberts, 2015). By proposing a multi-dimensional and multi-level conceptualisation of family support, we aim to:

a) recognise family support is conceptualised in several ways relative to purpose, perspective and context.

b) develop inclusive conceptions of family support to capture the diversity of approaches and provisions within and across European countries.

c) promote inter-disciplinary dialogue and developments engaging with the inter-disciplinary knowledge-base about the distinctive and combined roles and impacts of specific approaches, supports and services for child welfare, parental support and family welfare.

d) promote comprehensive, holistic and collaborative developments in national systems of family support and services.

To better understand and develop family support in these terms, this briefing elaborates on this multi-dimensional and multi-level framework to emphasise the four P's of Family support: Policy, Provision, Practice and a Participatory ethos.

The Policy Briefing advocates for the consideration and optimisation of these four domains of Family support in the decision-making of policy makers, service providers and professionals. In reality, the four domains are highly inter-related and inter-linked. However, they also reflect distinct domains and influences which independently and collectively shape the nature, scope and quality of family support at local and national levels. Referred to as 'family support policy, provision and practice' in this Briefing, these domains are broadly defined in the following ways:

- Family support policy: The statutory, governmental, institutional and legal contexts, frameworks and governance of family support provision and practice.

- Family support provision: The range, types and systems of formal services and supports funded or provided by state and partner agencies to support children, parents and families (including formal family support initiatives which seek to build social capital and enhance informal everyday social support).

- Family support practice: The decisions, interactions, collaborations and activities that frontline practitioners undertake within their roles to provide and deliver various types of family support to children, parents and families.

- A participatory ethos: An emphasis on ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in the development of family support policy, provision and practice; including policy agencies, researchers, community organisations, service providers, professionals, children and young people, and their parents, families and communities.

Family Support Policy:
Statutory frameworks and reforms for family support rights, provision and practice

Family Support Provision:
Family and Parenting services, Economic support, Employment support, ECEC,

Family Support Practice:
Practitioner providing tailored & multi-faceted child, parental and family support

Participatory Ethos
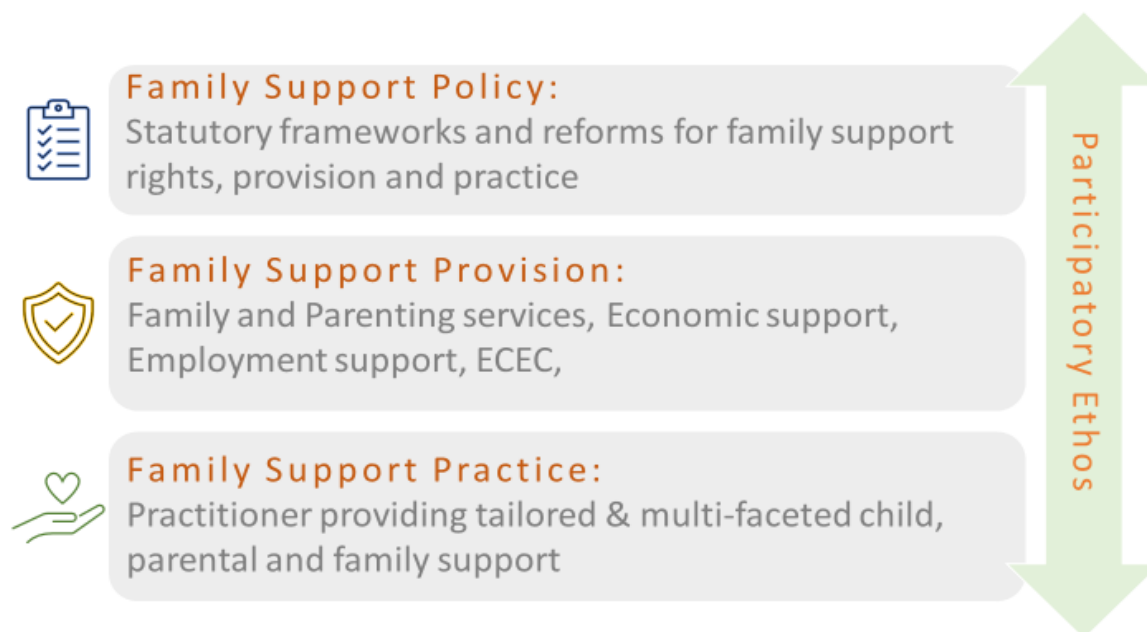
Figure 1 Influencing children and family's access to, experiences of and outcomes from family support

Informed by the synthesised findings of the WG2 scoping studies, in this Brief this framework is employed to:

a) Set out evidence-informed, comprehensive, holistic and collaborative agendas to support the development of family support policy, provision and practice for family welfare, children's rights, gender equality and social justice.

b) Recognise and examine the complex and contested nature of family support within and across European countries.

c) Promote analysis of the significance of these domains to families in context, that includes a focus on the interconnections (or disconnections) between all three domains in shaping access to, experiences of, and outcomes from, family support initiatives for children, parents and families.

d) Understand and examine family support practice, provision and policy in ways that are attentive to the role of broader social, political and institutional contexts.

The concept of family and parenting

Consideration of Family support cannot proceed without consideration of the concept of Family. As a fundamental social institution, 'families' are viewed as the primary environment for social care, belonging and inclusion. In all European countries there is a heavy reliance on family roles related to social care, parenthood and children, family relationships and resource provision. These family functions are crucial if the

developmental needs of children and young people are to be met. This is achieved through the; provision of care, nurture, and protection for their welfare, and the cultivation of social values that support their inclusion in society more widely (Churchill et al., 2021: 13).

However, as EurofamNet aims to promote advancements in family support for children, parents and families with children, the conceptualisation of childhood and parenthood must be recognised as shaped by context and change. This is a crucial consideration for the development for family support provision as the interaction between child development and the social ecology of the 'micro, meso and macro' social interactions, norms and contexts can influence the outcomes for their welfare (Churchill et al, 2021).

For example, there remains considerable emphasis on the idea that "the family" consists of a heterosexual nuclear couple-headed family household with dependent children. However, this normative position and assumption is inadequate given its limited, biased and partial conception of the complexities of, and changes in, family formations and social meanings (Ribbens-McCarthy et al, 2012). This has implications for the recognition of diverse family forms and networks of caring, and the allocation of resources and supports to these families. Key literature emphasises the fundamental importance of policy makers, service providers and practitioners engaging with the diversity of family formations and lives; and to recognise the full breadth of forms and relationships that might be referred to as 'a family' in any given instance. With greater recognition for same-sex marriage and parenthood rights alongside the diversity of family households and the significance of extended family networks, this allows for recognition of the diversity of identities, contexts, preferences and circumstances which inform and influence parenthood, childhood and family life. Points of discussion in this Briefing, however, are the potential challenges for family support and family welfare that arise from conflicts and tensions between institutional and social meanings and frameworks related to the concepts of 'family', 'parenthood' and 'childhood' (Ribbens-McCarthy et al, 2012; Churchill et al, 2021).

Beyond the many forms 'a family' may take in society, family life itself encompasses relational practices such as partnering and childrearing and other forms of care, which can interact with the demographics of the family, intergenerational and gendered relational dynamics (Ribbens-McCarthy et al, 2012). These in turn interact with broader cultural, economic, political and social systems. For example, a key learning from the EurofamNet project is that "the fragility and diversity of family relationships, individualization and shrinking size of households are seen both as a result of change in the system of values and the processes of economics" (Putniņa, 2020: 46). This is a crucial consideration for policy makers whose decisions in multiple domains impact on family lives and functioning.

The notion of parenthood also needs some critical elaboration. The following perspectives inform this briefing, firstly our conception of parents is broad and inclusive and reflected in McCarthy and Edwards (2011: 141) distinction:

> *"Parent refers to a particular status, or category of person, who is identified as standing in a special relationship with an individual child or related children. Parenthood refers to how this category or role is institutionalised as a social form. Parenting generally refers to a set of practices and activities and thus draws attention to what a person does as a parent in relation to their children."*

Given the significance of modern trends towards increasing family diversity, it is important to recognise those engaging in parental roles not only incorporate 'biological parents' but also many others including 'stepparents, foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents or other relatives' (Boddy et al 2009: 14). Furthermore, parenting also often conceived and experienced in gendered terms related to motherhood and fatherhood:

> *"[P]arenting is understood as the ongoing sets of relationships and activities that are involved for all of those who are parenting and raising children. Parenting is seen as a process involving a set of intellectual, emotional and material adjustments enabling adults to become parents, in other, to meet children's needs in the physical, emotional, intellectual and words social spheres […] it is also recognised parenting is a gendered activity in that the experiences and approaches of mothers and fathers often differ." (Daly, Abela et al. 2007: 11-12)*

The role of families, and family support provisions in attaining rights for children

Having examined the conceptualisation of families, and the role of parents, this Briefing affirms the role of families and family support provisions in vindicating rights for children. Informed by the 1989 UNCRC, this Briefing centres children's rights to 'protection, provision and participation' within their families and communities as well as society more widely. The UNCRC defines 'a child' as all aged under 18 years which likewise informs the age-range of concern in this Briefing. The UNCRC establishes civil, social, economic and political rights for children as independent citizens beyond their parents and families. It affords children special status and protections because 'societies depend on adequate child development and well-being' and because of their vulnerability and 'marginal social status'. Further, it stipulates higher risk groups require additional protections and provisions including children who are refugees and asylum seekers and children affected by disability, involved in the state care system and living in institutions. The rights for children specified in the UNCRC seek to

improve provisions for their welfare and raise their social status. They place 'protection, provision and participation' duties on deemed responsible for the care and welfare of children (e.g., parents and nation states) (Sandbæk 2017). Seeking to promote universal rights alongside recognition of cultural and social diversity, the UNCRC allows for children's rights to be pursued in diversity ways among nation states; and places emphasis on the participation of all groups in shaping national reforms and the rights of all to cultural heritage.

Informed by the children's rights approach, social policy and family support initiatives that promote 'positive parenting' perspectives is particularly of interest in this Briefing:

> *"Positive parenting refers to parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child."(Council of Europe, Rec 2006).*

Section 3: Child, parental and family welfare in context

In this section, consideration is given to the social trends and contexts which influence children's, parental and family welfare; and inform family support debates.

Social Trends

As Family support provision requires the attention of policy makers and diversion of state resources to ensure that the needs of families and children are met, it is important to consider social trends across the European context (Abela et al., 2021). The national compendium of reports provides an overview of these social trends in context which are presented below to demonstrate the breadth of social issues to which Family support provisions are relevant. These can include:

Changing Demographics: In recent years, many European countries have witnessed similar macro-social changes and challenges (e.g., changing family structures, falling fertility rates, increasing maternal employment, and increase in lone parent households) (Abela et al., 2021). Changes and developments in family demographics and dynamics is an area that needs attention in policy development.

Social Exclusion: Abela and colleagues (2021) examined a large set of indicators to provide both a country level and a comparative overview in the field of social exclusion and welfare. These included: at-risk-of-poverty rate both for the overal population and children (0-17); severe material deprivation rate for the overall

population and children. This analysis revealed that while some regions struggle with high poverty rates (e.g., Western Balkan Group followed by the Eastern European Group & Southern Group) a key trend is that across Europe (including in the Scandinavian, Central Western groups), is that the at risk of poverty rates tend to be higher for children indicating a need to attend to the circumstances of families to address this issue. This analysis also revealed that certain social groups, such as people with disabilities, lone parents, and in particular Roma have a higher risk of social exclusion (Abela et al., 2021).

Social Issues: Differential treatment of marginalised groups is also a concern as Slovenia reports unequal access to rights for immigrant, Roma, poor and LGBT groups, and Malta notes that the percentage of persons with disability who have a job is still very low when compared to that of the general population. Gender equality remains an issue in many countries (Lithuania, Malta, Croatia, Sweden) while domestic violence is also an area of concern (Poland, UK, Malta) (Abela et al., 2021).

Educational outcomes: European countries can also vary in terms of equitable educational outcomes. Early school leaving rates are high in the Southern countries and are above the EU target, with the exception of Portugal. Early school leaving is also an important problem in Bulgaria and Romania (14-15%) in the Eastern Group, and Hungary (12%) in the central group, but rates are below 10% in all the other countries in these regions.

Adequate Housing: is also a key provision for healthy child development. Overcrowding rates are also very high in Eastern Central countries exceeding 20% (with the exception of Czechia), and also 35% in Poland and Croatia. In the Balkans, the overcrowding rate exceeds 40%, and even 60% in Albania and Montenegro. In the Southern countries, overcrowding rates are low, also compared to Scandinavian countries. An important exception is Italy, where the overcrowding rate is 28% (Abela et al., 2021).

These *social and demographic trends can present challenges for policy*, particularly if entrenched poverty and social exclusion are to be addressed (Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia), social assistance infrastructure needs to be developed (Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia) or income inequality persists due to a failure to consider low-income families (Hungary, France, Norway). Attention needs to be paid to emerging family forms given the rise of lone parent families (Malta and Czechia) as this has relevance for policy measures designed to combat social exclusion. However, addressing these policy challenges requires adequate resources to be directed towards social provision, and a lack of adequate resources has been cited as an issue in many countries across the European context (Albania, Lithuania, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia Herzegovina, Ireland & the UK).

This can also have implications for service sustainability (Serbia and Bulgaria) (Abela et al., 2021). The global COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery, and the impact of the war in Ukraine continues to impact negatively on the European economy. Ensuring the increasing number of involuntarily displaced children, parents and family members receive the supports required and deserved presents an added challenge for European countries.

Digitalisation of Society: Our contemporary times incorporate rapid digitalisation of all aspects of society. This presents new opportunities but also new risks. There is a need to safeguard children's rights and welfare adequately on digital platforms and in the online environment which presents risks for their welfare and mental health. On the other hand, we have new opportunities to harness opportunities arising from new forms of 'digital and virtual' family support (Livingstone et al., 2020; Canário et al., 2022).

Section 4: Family support policy, provision and practice

The disussion so far highlights the importance of a multi-dimensional and multi-level conceptualisation of family support as set out in the introduction to this Briefing. To support this development in practice an overview of the broader policy context within which family support provision is conceptualised and delivered below. This overview will include an account of provisions at from the level of policy to the different types of family support at a practice level, and signpost how these provisions can reach different target groups and levels of support. Lastly, this section emphasises the importance of frontline practice whereby the delivery of family support is constituted through interactions and relationships with children and/or parents, and/or their families and communities.

Family support Policy

Family support provision and practice are located within a broader and complex 'policy field' (Daly et al, 2015). This wider policy field can include:

- *Legislation* about the *rights and responsibilities of parents and families* vis-à-vis children and young people; the scope of children's rights to 'protection, provision and participation' (1989 UNCRC); and the scope of social rights to social protection and social services. These shape *entitlements and approaches to formal family support*.

- Government, state departments and agencies *roles and responsibilities* for child welfare, family support and social welfare.

- *Statutory frameworks* that govern how *family support* is *developed, provided, organised and funded*. These include qualifications and standards for professionals and services; statutory guidance and frameworks for the delivery of family and parenting support (Churchill et al, 2021).

The policy field of a given context is not homogenous across Europe. European countries have *different public policy traditions* and *orientations* (Eydal and Rostgaard, 2018; Daly, 2015; Thevenon, 2011). Critical points of difference, for example, can relate to the conceptions of parental roles and social citizenship; the role of the state versus civil society and the private sector in provision; conceptions of gender roles in relation to parenthood and families; and the configuration of centralised versus decentralised government structures. Moreover, cross-national policy studies have often found that in many European countries statutory remits for family policy or child well-being, and therefore family support, can be highly dispersed across government departments based on an implicit and fragmented family policy approach; while in others more explicit and coordinated approaches to family policy or child well-being, and therefore family support, with one government department holding wide-ranging duties for family policy or child well-being (Abela et al., 2020; Churchill et al., 2021).

Within and across European countries, multiple orientations to family policy, parental rights and duties, and children's policy inform this policy field:

- Policy debates and reforms can be orientated towards a '*Social Structural'* approach, concerned to address the problems of social exclusion, inequality and poverty. They can also be informed by '*Psycho-Social'* theories about the micro-macro dimensions of social welfare and social problems, such as domestic abuse, substance abuse and family conflict (Bywaters, 2013; Herrera, Frost & Devaney, 2020). Both approaches are relevant due to the consequences of social inequality, poverty, and disadvantage for child, parental and family welfare (Bywaters et al. 2018; Morris et al. 2018); and the psycho-social aspects of individual and relational resources and stresses (Devaney & McGregor, 2020).

- *Policy orientations to Gender Roles* influence family policy. For example, these can favour more traditional expectations regarding distinctive parental gender roles in relation to childcare and work or promote more egalitarian parental roles promoting genuine choice for parents across the diversity of partnership and family formations, and more opportunities and support for 'dual earner and dual carer' arrangements (Gornick & Meyers 2008).

- *Policy orientations to 'family' versus 'individuals' are also significant.* These policy orientations have been described as 'policies based on familialism versus policies informed by individualisation' (Saraceno 2016; Leitner 2003). Familialism can lead to significant emphasis on support for family units and parental duties (See Littmarck et al., 2018). There are criticisms of neglect of individual rights and identities within families within and across the generations. More individualistic approaches place more emphasis on individual rights and interests but may be criticised for neglecting family units (Ivan et al., 2015). However, supporting individual rights on the basis of children's rights, social rights and anti-discrimination frameworks, are key in arguments promoting egalitarianism and democratic families (Williams, 2004).

Even though there is considerable diversity, the policy context for family support among European countries has pan-European and global dimensions and levels. These spheres incorporate international and European '*inter-governmental organisations'* (IGOs) including the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU). These IGOs have wide-ranging human rights and public policy mandates based on inter-governmental agreements and international treaties. Their mandates encompass: (a) establishing international *standards and regulations* including those concerned with *human rights*; and (b) *legislation, policies and ideas* which inform and influence national *social and family policies*. Further, *international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), interest groups and service providers* can influence all aspects and levels of policy debates and developments related to family support. Their activities incorporate research, advocacy, advisory and provision roles (Churchill et al., 2021: 5).

Since 2013 the EU has actively endorsed the development of a children's rights and a social rights agenda, along with the promotion of social investment, social inclusion and gender equality policy goals and reforms. This has been driven by the evolution of UN, CoE and EU approaches to children's rights and family policy. A growing interest in childhood issues, family policies and family welfare concerns among these organisations; and the expanding scope and reach of their instruments and policies in the areas of family support, parenting support and child welfare has led to this evolution. The CoE and EU encourage their member states to develop more ambitious, comprehensive and coherent portfolios and approaches to family and parenting support (Churchill et al., 2021).

- As the foremost European human rights body, the CoE has focused on a children's rights agenda and directly engages with children to promote awareness of, and implementation of their rights. The CoE also endorses support for parents through the dissemination of 'positive parenting' theories and measures to member states as a basis for the development of policy, support and services for children, parents and families.

- The EU in comparison has primarily sought to address socio-economic disadvantages for children, parents and families, and cross-national vulnerabilities and risks for children and youth. The former concerns have prompted a range of social protection, gender equality and the reconciliation of work-family life, active labour market and childcare support policies (Churchill et al, 2020)

Important CoE & EU instruments advocate for the importance of combining:

- *Universal policies and measures serving all children, parents and families* with target policies and measures for those at risk, disadvantagea and with addtional needs such as related to poverty, discrimination and migration
- *Public transfers*, work-family policy, childcare and social services infrastructure
- *Access to work and access to resources*
- *Expertise* and involvement of professionals and *youth/parents* in *decision-making*

States have engaged with significant international and European developments (OECD, 2009, 2011; Putnina, 2020). There is widespread evidence of greater *interest in, and adoption of, similar family policies and family support reforms* (Churchill et al., 2021). This can be seen in the Compendium of National Reports, which provides a snapshot of the policy priorities that demonstrate that countries across the European Context are moving towards the goal of positive child development and welfare, and enhanced family functioning (Abela et al., 2021). This can be seen in the number of states that have prioritised child welfare and family policy (Malta, Moldova, Hungary, Latvia, Serbia, Romania, North Macedonia, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, and Ireland), legislative and systemic reform, and development (Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Albania) and other provision relevant to the functioning of families in their child rearing role. The following presents an overview of the range of policy priorities identified by respondents across the European context to illustrate this point.[1]

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[1]This chart is not a conclusive account of priorities across Europe, but rather consists of available data within the compendium of reports (Abela et al., 2021).
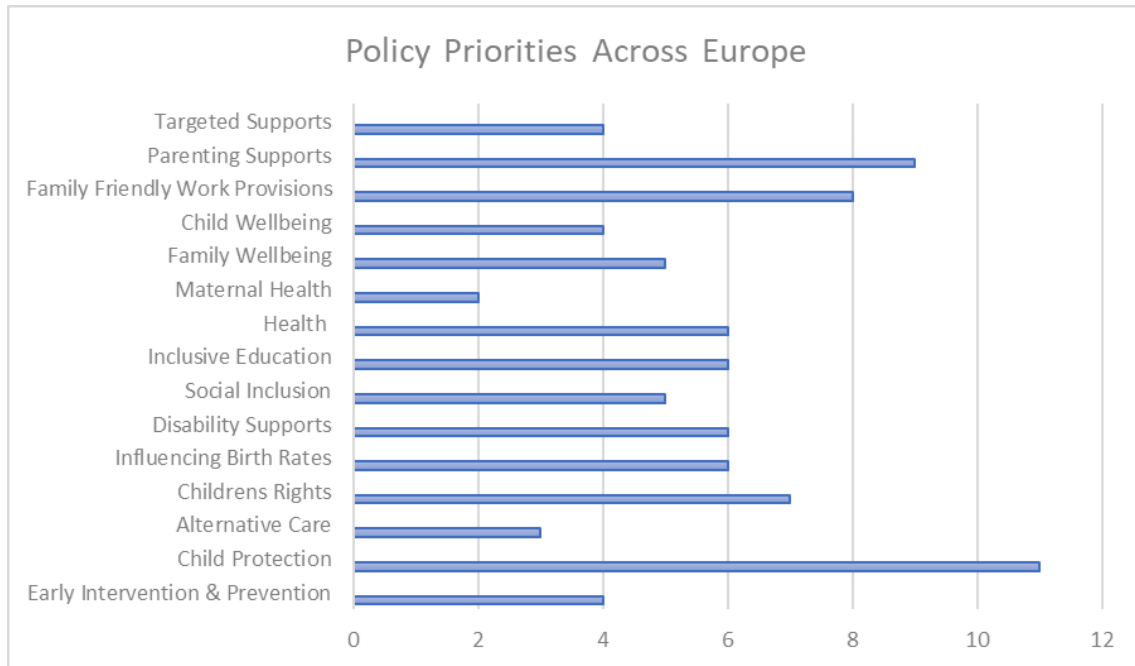
Figure 2 Policy Priorities Across Europe

Family support provision

Informed by EurofamNet's remit to optimise family support for children, parents and families; and in recognition of the range of their support needs and the diversity of children's and family lives, family support provision is recognised to incorporate multiple types, approaches and levels of support and services. It is proposed the full range of provisions should be developed and sustained in order to enhanced resources, capabilities and welfare for children, parents and families. As set out in the introduction to this Briefing, this conception of family support provisions incorporates a number of key aspects including:

A *targeted response* to the support of children/young people and their parents, and/or their families and communities, *depending on their circumstances* (Daly et al 2015; Williams & Segrott, 2018 in Devaney et al., 2021). This can mean that support is aimed at a focal child with parental support, parenting support in general, or encompasses a wider 'whole family support' as needed (Daly et al 2015).

Provisions must span a range of supports and services to children, parents and families including economic, social, employment and professional support and services (Churchill et al, 2021). Furthermore, these supports must include universal*, targeted and specialist options* to meet the diverse needs of families in different circumstances (Devaney et al, 2021; Rodrigo, 2015 cited in Herrera et al., 2020; McGregor & Devaney, 2020). This can include supports that are orientated towards prevention, early intervention and remedial/child protection outcomes (Devaney, 2017; Gilbert et al 2011; 2012).

These supports *can incorporate both informal everyday social and community support* for family members *as well as formal family support* which is funded, organised and delivered by the state, often in partnership with voluntary, charity and civil society organisations (Melo & Alarcão, 2015 cited in Devaney et al., 2021). More formal supports can be provided by state agencies or by voluntary sector agencies or private market providers in partnership with state agencies (Abela et al., 2021).

> **Key Types of Provision (Churchill et al., 2021)**
>
> - Financial and Material Supports (Birth Grants, Income Supplement, Social Security, Taxation measures)
> - Formal Support through Service provision (can include generic family support services, community-based open access services, statutory protective support services, parenting support services, parenting education initiatives and remedial therapeutic interventions etc.)
> - Informal Support or Semi-formal Support characterised by community or familial assistance
> - Family Friendly Employment Legislation
> - Early Childcare and Education Provision
> - Health Care & Early Years Programmes
> - Housing Support and Social Welfare support schemes
>
> These provisions provide the vital resources of 'time, cash, information, professional expertise, and in-kind services' that assist parental and family roles, promote family welfare, promote child welfare, and ensure children's rights (Canavan et al., 2016; COFACE, 2019).

An additional practical consideration relates the level of support that a family may need at a particular time, and in particular circumstances. Mc Gregor and Devaney (2020; 2020a) highlight the complex relationship between family support and child protection as delivered by state child and family agency services and the requirement to balance between responding to needs for prevention and early intervention and needs for protection and legal intervention. They also emphasise that is it essential that those who have responsibility to deliver support and protection to children and families have the capacity to work in a manner that puts the child at the centre and the skills and values to engage effectively in protective support work and supportive child protection. McGregor and Devaney present a model which emphasises the fluidity needed in a system of 'protective support and supportive protection', which has to respond to the complexities and changing levels of need and risk in families' lives over time. The model adds value in two key areas: it usefully focuses attention on 'families in the middle' and their fluctuating need for supportive as well as protective responses and it brings 'informal support networks' (Level 1a) into the frame of analysis, acknowledging the role of family, wider

kin and community in preventative support (Mc Gregor and Devaney, 2020:28) (see Figure 3 below).
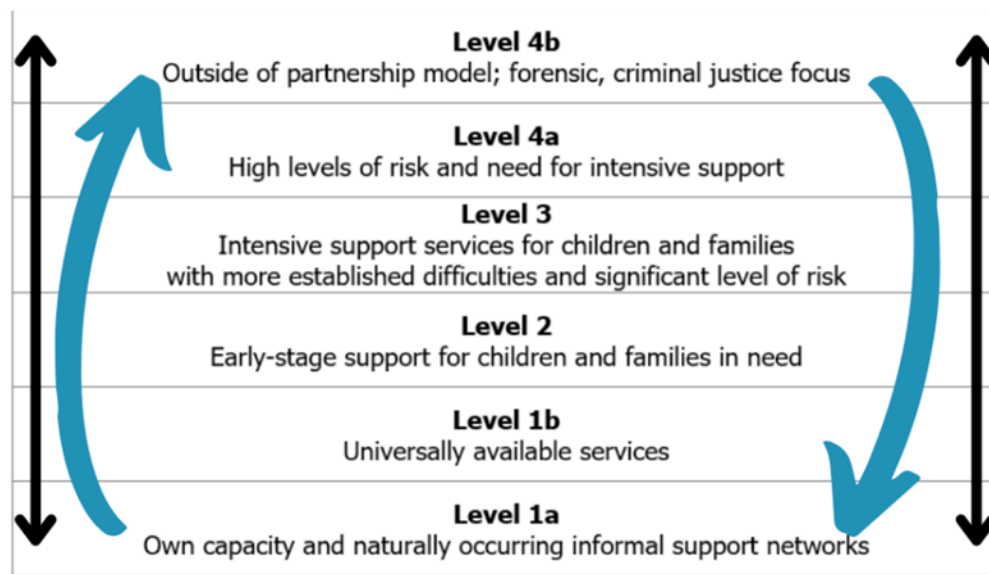
Figure 3 A fluid and open model of supportive and protective service provision

Additional key concerns within prominent literature and policy debates have been orientated towards ensuring local and national systems of family support are well coordinated and connected (Devaney et al, 2021). This is vital to ensure effective and equitable responses to the range and diversity of family support needs. Prominent literature therefore promotes a holistic and comprehensive family support provision paradigm (Devaney et al, 2021). There are a number of different principles for practice of relevance to the provision of coordinated, connected provision that integrates key aspects of support provisions. These are:

- That practice is *inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary,* encompassing professionals, practices and knowledge from different areas, theories and approaches (Herrera-Pastor, Frost & Devaney, 2020). This builds on the

- That practice *integrates informal*, community, voluntary sector (*semi-formal*) and statutory/professional (*formal*) networks of support (Herrera-Pastor, Frost & Devaney, 2020).

- And *incorporates universal and targeted levels of need* (Canavan, Dolan and Pinkerton, 2016; Devaney and Dolan, 2017; Frost et al., 2015; Churchill and Fawcett, 2016)

- *Promote positive parenting* orientations (Churchill et al, 2021)

Studies and reports have indicated a range of strategies and mechanisms that can assist services and professionals to deliver coordinated and holistic family and parenting support on these terms. These include ensuring accessible and up-to-date information about available services and supports; developing open-access services and generic roles that operate as gateways to support and services (e.g. community-based children and family centres which combine universal and targeted services; online signposting services, generic family support roles); employing common approaches to needs assessment and service referrals across local services; and embedding effective systems for understanding local and national support needs (Devaney et al, 2021). Further, approaches found to promote improvements in inter-disciplinary and cross-sector understanding and working also include multi-professional and multi-agency training, joint-working and joint-funded initiatives (Canavan et al 2016). These features of comprehensive and coordinated systems of provision highlight the importance of systemic planning, coordination and development (Canavan et al, 2016).

Family support practice

The introduction to this Briefing made a distinction between family support provision and practice. In reality, family support provision and practice are highly intertwined for children, parents and families. However, an important element of the framework developed here is to recognise the distinctive realm of decision-making, interactions, relationships and activities that constitute frontline practice and delivery in family support. The term frontline practice is employed here and in family support literature, to denote the importance of the interactions between practitioners (or administrative mechanisms utilised for accessing family support) and children, parents and families as service users and clients. These practices, relationships and interactions fundamentally shape and influence access to, experiences of and outcomes in family support for children, parents and families (Canavan et al, 2016; Devaney et al, 2021).

The following practice principles and approaches are often cited as promoting effective, responsive, enabling and empowering family support practice:

Relationship-based Practice: The importance of valuing human relationships is a central premise in Family support (Mason, 2012; Ruch, 2009) as these relationships are the foundation of providing effective and responsive support for children, parents and families. The quality of this relationship, and approach of the practitioner, are crucial in determining the experience of the family engaging with services and supports. Positive relationships promote effective engagement with practitioners and services which in turn can result in better outcomes (Abela, 2009, Broadhurst & Holt, 2009). This is due to the generation of a partnership approach and

shared understanding of the needs of families which in turn skilled practitioners utilise to children, parents and families effectively (Spratt and Callan, 2004).

Partnership/Co-production: This involves working collaboratively with family members and networks to whatever extent possible. This is based on the understanding that children, parents and families can be viewed as the partner for change rather than the subject of the intervention (Devaney, 2008), and that the involvement of family members in decisions about their interests is a more ethical and effective way of proceeding reducing barriers to engagement (Katz, La Placa, & Hunter, 2007).

A Strengths-based Perspective: A strengths-based approach refers to a philosophy of practice that builds on family members' competencies and strengths, supports families to make decisions for themselves, as opposed to approaches centred on fixing deficits. Services delivered in a manner consistent with this philosophy are thought to be more effective and empowering to families, leading to better long-term outcomes (Herrera, Frost & Devaney, 2020).

Holistic Practice: Holistic practice is particularly important for practitioner roles that entail direct work and casework with children, parents and families. It entails appreciated the inter-connected support needs of children and parents as well as the inter-connected range of support needs individuals and families such as practical, financial, advisory or therapeutic needs. The cost-effectiveness of parenting and family support roles and services can be enhanced by understanding and responding to children's, parental and family support needs in holistic and integrated ways. Given the specific nature of these roles and services (for example, they may have early childhood, parental support, health and well-being, educational support or family welfare foci), there are strong associations between holistic practice, relationship-based practice and collaborative practice.

Reflective Practice: It is generally accepted that working with children and families is complex, with each set of circumstances and family unique. Reflective practice is increasingly viewed as a central component of a Family support approach and seen as essential for delivering high-quality practice and services. Reflective Practice emphasises the need for practitioners to consider, to challenge, and to explore alternatives in an effort to avoid standardised responses to the needs of children, parents and families. Reflective practice has been described as a complex and deliberate process of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from it and part of the process of developing best practice in Family support. Reflective practice involves practitioners being able to relate theory to the real world of practice, ensuring that practitioners are able to consider all aspects of family's circumstances, their role and their agencies responsibility in a effort to provide responsive, supportive and effective help.

The importance of participation

Promoting participation among children and young people, parents and families, and communities, have particularly been key developments in family support in the European context in recent years. In contrast to top-down policies that frame child and family support as a social investment, several discussions in literature emphasise the value of listening to parents' and children's voices to identify relevant aspects of service provision that will strengthen the potential benefits of family support (Connolly and Devaney, 2017). Seeking service users input into decision-making is a valuable tool for ensuring that supports offered are appropriate to their needs (Champine et al., 2018; Moriarty et al., 2007; Mossberg, 2020; Muench et al., 2017) improving engagement with services, and so delivering better outcomes (Connolly & Devaney, 2016). Participation of service users also supports the positive development of youth (Gallagher et al., 2012; Forde & Martin, 2016; Hedberg et al., 2017; Ramey et al., 2017; Schoenfeld et al., 2019), while empowering, and enhancing the skills of adults (Muurinen, 2019; Slettebø, 2013). It may also support access to social justice by raising awareness of lived experiences (Bunting et al., 2017; Carr, 2004; Ginwright & James, 2007; Lansdown, 2020).   Goossen and Austin (2017:37) further maintain that service user involvement has an important role to play in the realm of knowledge creation for health and social care through the engagement of "experts in their own experience".

However, supporting service user participation can be difficult to implement, due to a lack of trust in service providers (Hedberg et al., 2017; Moriarty et al., 2007; Gal,2017; Gazit & Perry Hazan, 2020; Schoenfeld et al., 2019), the need for capacity development to participate in decision making at all levels of provisions relevant to their decision-making (Schoenfeld et al., 2019; Connolly & Devaney 2017) or organisational barriers such as a lack of professional skills (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Hill et al.,2004; Hinton, 2008) , or the provision of inappropriate formal processes (Carr, 2004; Moriarty et al., 2007; Horgan, 2017). If participatory opportunities are to be successful attention must be given to the development of trusting relationships (Carr, 2004; Gal, 2017; Gallagher et al., 2012; Hedberg et al., 2017), accessible formats (Moriarty et al., 2007), capacity building activities (Schoenfeld et al., 2019; Gazit & Perry Hazan, 2020; Connolly & Devaney 2017), and responsive decision-making structures (Larkins et al., 2014; Ramey et al., 2017). For those working in contexts of diversity, cultural competence is another key skill for practice (Carr, 2004; Goosen & Austin, 2017; Connolly & Devaney, 2017).

Some European countries have developed a substantive approach to participation. In Norway, service user participation is embedded practice and is part of the culture of service provision, while Sweden promotes public participation in local government. In the UK, the Children's Commissioners and key NGOs promote children's participation and rights in policy

processes. In other countries efforts are made to support both expert, and service user stakeholders in legislative processes (Germany, Romania, Ireland), and service development (Germany, Ireland, UK), or policy development (Bulgaria, Spain, Malta, Romania, Albania, Ireland). However, this form of partnership is not universally evident across sampled national contexts. The engagement of professionals and experts is the sole form of stakeholder engagement is some countries (Austria, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina) (Abela et al. 2021).

KEY POINTS:

It is of utmost importance to signpost the fact that children have a right to participation in matters that affect them under Article 12 of the UNCRC and this includes policy and service planning. Examples include:

- In *Germany* children and young people have the right to contact youth welfare on all matters of education and development and the right to be involved in all public youth welfare decisions that affect them).
- In *Sweden*, it is mentioned in the Government Report on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Swedish law.
- In *Czechia*, the strategy on the protection of children's rights, aims to increase awareness of children's rights and their participation.
- In *Ireland* children participate in policy and planning processes within the national Child and Family agency (Abela et al., 2021).

Parents also have a right to participate in decisions in matters relating to their children under Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life) of the European Convention on Human Rights. Examples include:

- *Bulgaria* and *Malta* seek the greater participation of parents in educational contexts
- *Latvia* seeks to empower parents as key agents in problem solving in the family
- The *UK* and *Norway* supports Family Participation in service planning and welfare contexts
- *Malta* and *Ireland* support citizens to participate in the development of legislation (Abela et al., 2021).

Section 5: Benefits, risks and challenges in practice

The argument presented thus far is that Family support Provisions can support the rights, welfare and development of children by supporting families which is particularly important in a context of changing family dynamics and challenging social and economic circumstances. This is affirmed by emerging international evaluation research and literature which indicates that high quality Family support results in a number of key outcomes through its activities and provisions (Churchill et al., 2020). Examples include:

- Child and family benefits, targeted income support and tax measures contributing to the costs of raising children which reduce the risk of poverty and financial strain in families (Churchill et al., 2021; Abela et al, 2021).

- Work family balance policies and investment in affordable high-quality childcare which helps to promote mothers and fathers' employment opportunities and enables parents to balance work and family roles and duties (Abela et al., 2021).

- Dedicated services to support men in their role as fathers, and that strengthen both parents' capacities (Abela et al., 2021), improving relationships within families (Churchill et al., 2020) while safeguarding and promoting the welfare of family members, especially vulnerable adults, and children/young people (Churchill et al., 2020).

- Early intervention and prevention models and approaches to respond to the needs of children, parents and families, reducing the impact of disadvantage and adversity on their development and wellbeing (Devaney et al., 2021; Churchill et al., 2021).

- Community based support hubs to help reduce social isolation and enhance social networks and social capital (Churchill et al., 2020; Herrera, Frost & Devaney, 2020).

However, attaining these benefits for families entails addressing challenges that manifest at the level of policy, provision and practice. If these benefits are to be realised it is crucially important that policymakers, practitioners and researchers engage with critical issues and challenges which inhibit the scope of Family support in practice and implicate Family support in the reproduction of the social order, social hierarchies and power relations that may be disadvantageous. These issues may include:

The privacy of family life. Balancing the privacy of family life with human rights may present tensions. The 'family' is conceived of as a 'private sphere' separate from public life. Questions have been raised about the degree to which intimate, household and familial relations should be shielded from 'excessive state intervention and regulation'. However, the 'private nature' of family life and relations, and of domestic household domains, can generate welfare

risks for family members if this privacy is privilege over safeguarding vulnerable members. Nonetheless, European countries are signatories of human rights treaties and the UNCRC which require that nation-states should safeguard human rights to welfare and equality within as well as beyond the family. The national case study reports highlight how issues such as social policy regimes and concerns about 'intrusion into the private sphere of the family' can lead to debates about Family support (Abela et al., 2021).

Institutional versus everyday Family Norms. Some paradigms about 'the family' can privilege specific family formations and relations while devaluing others. For example, 'desired and normal' family forms can be viewed as based on marriage, heterosexuality, genetic ties and two generation households. In response, aspects of Family support can seek to uphold institutional notions of family which are in conflict with the diverse reality (for e.g., cash benefits and/ or tax relief tied to marital status). This can generate stigma and barriers in gaining social recognition and accessing support for some children, parents and families. The imposition of family norms is often driven by middle class aspirations towards child rearing, and if this is highlighted in service provision to the neglect of parents' personal needs this means that the supports offered may not attain their stated goals (Devaney et al., 2021). Progressive approaches to Family support, therefore, promote recognition of family diversity and are committed to supporting all children, parents and families.

Gendered Family Roles. Aligned to the issues above, dispositions towards more traditional gender roles can inform the aims and activities of Family support. Family support here can risk a maternalism bias whereby Family support may in theory be targeted to 'parents' but in practice be orientated to mothers and female carers. This not only leads to a lack of tailored and meaningful support for fathers and male carers; but also reinforces care for children as a women's / material issue and duty. Progressive approaches must therefore promote Family support for all family members and across generations based on principles of gender equality and also 'care' as a collective duty and social good.

The Political Landscapes: Policy development and implementation are affected by political agendas. The ideological context in any given jurisdiction impacts on the priorities for, and orientation to Family support. At times these can emphasise parental and family responsibilities for children rather than a comprehensive role for the State (Abela et al., 2021). A lack of agreement on family policy results in major challenges at the pan-European level in promoting common standards and children's rights (Churchill et al., 2021).

Rhetoric-policy gaps. Policymakers can employ a rhetoric of supporting families and children, but their policy initiatives can be limited and fragmented as discussed in the National case study report findings (Abela et al., 2021). When the lead roles for government policies related to Family support are dispersed across government departments and lack clarity – this

problem is exacerbated. When there are gaps in accountability structures for Family support policies and provisions – this problem is exacerbated. The dynamics between national and sub-national levels of policy and their duties for Family support can also be an issue here, as can a lack of definition for Family support principles and adjacent issues in policies and strategies.

Policy-implementation gaps. There is often a gap between policy goals and strategies and their full implementation and realisation. At the national level this can be due to inadequate funding, short-term policy-making and inadequate attention to implementations issues such as workforce development, research and evaluation, performance monitoring. Moreover, challenges with coordination of services can also have implications for the translation of policy into practice. At the EU, CoE and UN level there are limited competencies to steer and direct national-level family and social policies. This can lead to implementation problems and challenges.

Knowledge-based gaps. There are significant research gaps in the area of Family support for children, parents and families. For example, research is required on specific issues and needs, outcomes and impact, types of policies, provisions and approaches. These gaps can reflect insufficient investment at the policy level for research, evaluation and continuous system improvement. It can also include new emerging and under-researched issues and developments (e.g. frontline practice related to the delivery of digital and virtual family support services; evaluations of new innovative approaches and collaborations) as well as the methodological challenges related to research in some areas (e.g. the impact of European-level social and family policy initiatives and recommendations; the impact of community child and family services which incorporate universal and targeted services).

It has also been suggested in the literature that supports and services are not often reflective of family realities (McGregor and Devaney, 2020). This can lead to a disjuncture between desirable programme outcomes, and the experience of families who may not accept these programmes as appropriate (McGregor, Canavan and Gabhainn, 2020). Furthermore, there are gaps in available data regarding family demographics, so it is difficult to build an accurate picture regarding the needs or status of children and their families (Abela et al., 2021).

Lack of a systemic approach to policy and provision development. Research evidence also suggests limited and fragmented policies and systems for safeguarding child and family welfare via social support and services can increase welfare risks for family members. This is an issue where services are separated into child-protection and family support silos (Devaney et al., 2021a). In the literature, issues related to the development of Family support provisions has focused on a variety of topics. Working in partnership with all stakeholders, including cooperation between service providers to ensure the integrated provision of support, is key in Irish literature (Connolly and Devaney, 2017: 25). It can also pose challenges in areas where

social support services are decentralised and rely on diverse local services to provide supports to families (Abela et al., 2021).

Section 6: Taking us forward… A comprehensive and collaborative family support framework

Commentators have called for clarity regarding the concept of family support so that it can be used as an organising paradigm for social and public policy, to ensure the goal of human flourishing and societal wellbeing through the support of families in their care-giving roles (McGregor, Canavan & Gabhainn, 2020; European Family support Network, Collective, 2020). This briefing intends to move towards clarity in this regard by drawing on the learning derived from the diverse provisions and experiences across the European context (Abela et al., 2021), the conceptual knowledge and debates within literature to date (Devaney et al., 2021), and the agenda of social progress espoused by the Council of Europe and the European Union (Churchill et al., 2021). The findings of these three reports have demonstrated that Family support as a concept and a practice is a dynamic and contextually variable form of social service provision. If this form of support is to achieve the flourishing of future citizens who are the foundation of the state, policy makers, service providers and practitioners must give careful consideration to a number of key issues. These include the ecology of provisions, and the diversity of families as a target of policy and practice, and key considerations for practitioners before presenting a conceptual framework that marries these considerations into a map for provisions that will support cohesive, effective developments in the area of family support.

The ecology of family support provisions

Given the multi-dimensional and multi-level provision of family support, an outline of the ecology of provisions is presented here as an aid to policymakers in order to draw attention to the many dimensions of the political, and economic and social context as sources of support and protection. This is intended to support the development of comprehensive, systematic infrastructures of family support provisions. A recognition of the importance of the family unit to the development of future healthy, productive citizens is fundamental. While the role of societal norms and interests in policy formation is acknowledged, the recommendation here is to integrate the rights and standards frameworks of the EU and the CoE into National policies and provisions in order to pursue the goals of child and family wellbeing. This must be supported by the dedication of adequate resources to ensure the provision of material supports, and service infrastructures that can meet the diversity of needs that a family may face over the life course.

This includes universally accessible services, that enhance communities' wellbeing, such as childcare, education, parental leave, and health services. In supporting the wellbeing of communities, the capacity of families to provide informal support to each other is enhanced. It is also important that attention should be given to the development of targeted supports, education programmes and welfare interventions that can address the particular challenges faced by families in difficulties who require focused support.
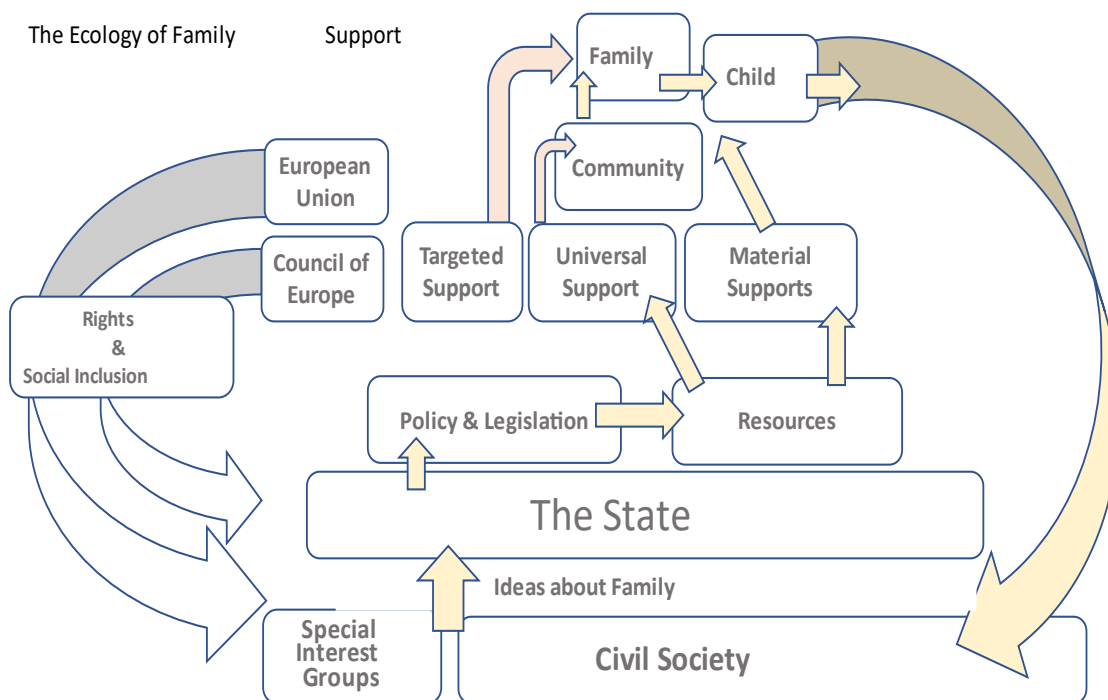

Figure 4 The Ecology of Family support

Families as a target of policy provision and practice

As the learning from the social trends across Europe, and reflections on challenges in practice demonstrates, policy makers and service providers must pay attention to the diversity of family forms if social inclusion, and child and family welfare is to be achieved. This includes the networked constellations of care and support, and the varied gendered, and generational relational dynamics that can arise within them. This will ensure that policies and practices do not reproduce harmful social norms and practices or ignore the needs of families who do not fit into the traditional paradigm of two parent nuclear household. It must be noted that there are families who will need targeted supports to help them deal with challenges that they face across the life course, but also that universal provisions can help move towards the goal of positive child

development by supporting parents to balance their responsibilities when in the child rearing phase.
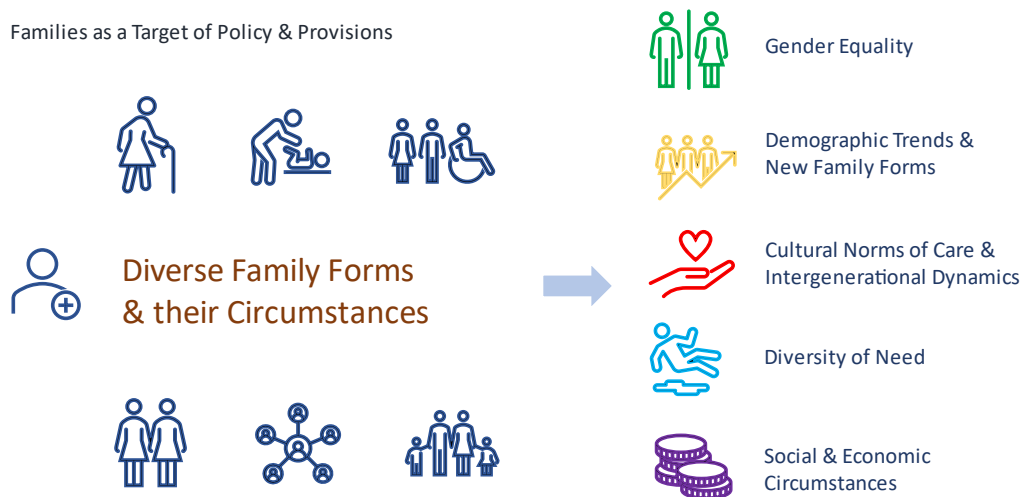

Figure 5 Families as a Target of Policy, Provision and Practice

A comprehensive and collaborative framework for policy, provision & practice

In this concluding section, we present our comprehensive and collaborative framework for Family support policy, provision and practice informed by multi-dimensional multi-level conceptualisation of Family support. It sets out a way forward to develop family support policy, provision and practice within a participatory approach for family welfare, children's rights, gender equality and social justice. At an overall level Family support service provision must be supported by a well-developed infrastructure of policy that supports a comprehensive suite of provisions and practices that can meet the diverse needs of families and address any deficit in their circumstances spanning the full range of social and economic domains that define their experiences.

Informed by developments in family support literature and policies, all three domains and levels of family support must be considered when formulating a comprehensive, coherent and collaborative reform agenda for child and family support. This formulation should further incorporate a participatory ethos to ensure that that supports provided are appropriate to the needs of diverse families in various circumstances, while respecting the agency of family members in determining their own lives. The Framework presented below will be followed by

an in-depth discussion of key factors for the development of family support in each domain to aid the development of each form, or aspect of support.

Family Support Policy

Statutory frameworks and reforms for family support rights, provision and practice

Social justice, children's rights, gender equality, high quality services, adequate funding, collaborative decision-making, professional development

Family Support Provisions

Family and parenting services, Economic support, Employment support, ECEC,

Needs-based planning, Outcomes based evaluation, Recognising diversity, Promoting equality,

Family Support Practice

Practitioner providing tailored and multi-faceted child, parental and family support

Relationship-based practice, Strengths-based practice, Collaboration-based practice, Reflective practice

Participatory Ethos

Parents

Children

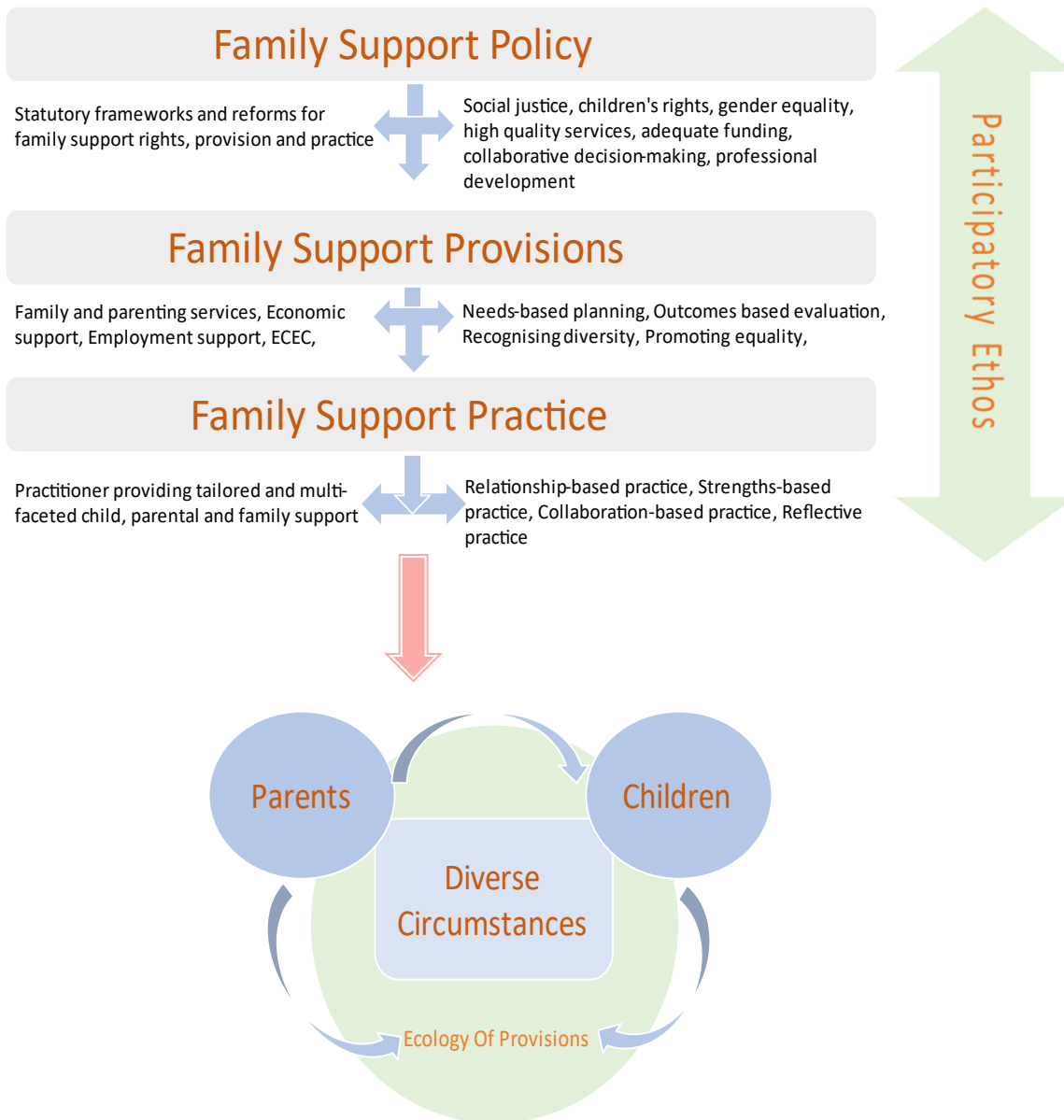Diverse Circumstances

Ecology Of Provisions

Figure 6 A comprehensive and collaborative framework for policy, provision & practice

A comprehensive and collaborative approach to policy

At the level of social and family policy, a rights-based and holistic framework for family support is advocated. Informed by the 1989 UNCRC, social policies should recognise and promote the roles that family support can play in safeguarding and promoting children's rights to 'protection, provision and participation' (1989 UNCRC). In upholding these rights, the diversity of children's and young people's identities and heritage should be respected; the support needs of all children and their families should be recognised; and dedicated measures are needed for vulnerable groups including children in state care systems, disabled children, asylum seekers and refugees, and children affected by war and armed conflicts. In addition, to promote gender equality, rights to family support need to recognise and address support for mothers and fathers, girls and boys; and attend to the ways in which gender inequalities relate to social norms and structural disadvantages. Promoting social rights and social justice, policy frameworks should promote social rights to decent living standards, equal opportunities, and health and welfare.

> *THE UNCRC (1989) emphasises children and parents rights to provision and family support (esp. Art 27, 26, 18)*
>
> *The family, as the fundamental group of society and environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibility within the community … The child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.*
>
> - **Children's rights to a standard of living, adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development**
> - **Children's rights to protection, provision and participation**
> - **Parents have primary responsibilities 'within their ability and financial capacities'**
> - **States must take measures to support and assist parents to uphold children's rights; and must ensure support for vulnerable groups**

A comprehensive and collaborative approach to provision

At the level of family support provisions and services, an evolving array of supports and services is needed. European countries need to develop comprehensive, multi-dimensional and multi-level supports and services in order to respond to the depth and breadth of needs among children, parents and families; to recognise the role of wider socio-economic circumstances on social welfare; and to recognise the diversity of social and family lives. European countries are encouraged to develop national systems of support that include: economic support, social welfare schemes, family-friendly employment measures, positive parenting initiatives, universal and targeted social services, educational support services, therapeutic and health services; and community-orientated services and resources. National developments in these regards will reflect national-level contexts and priorities as the specific nature of social provisions will reflect the rich diversity of traditions and

A comprehensive and collaborative approach to provision

At the level of family support provisions and services, an evolving array of supports and services is needed. European countries need to develop comprehensive, multi-dimensional and multi-level supports and services in order to respond to the depth and breadth of needs among children, parents and families; to recognise the role of wider socio-economic circumstances on social welfare; and to recognise the diversity of social and family lives. European countries are encouraged to develop national systems of support that include; economic support, social welfare schemes, family-friendly employment measures, positive parenting initiatives, universal and targeted social services, educational support services, therapeutic and health services; and community-orientated services and resources. National developments in these regards will reflect national-level contexts and priorities as the specific nature of social provisions will reflect the rich diversity of traditions and approaches within and across European countries.

In developing family support provision and practice, local and national policy frameworks must draw on the emerging knowledge base and undertake extensive collaboration with all stakeholders, including children and parents, to develop an adequate and coordinated range of supports and services. Family support provision and practice needs to be well-resourced, developed, coordinated and evaluated. In these ways, the broader policy frameworks can strengthen the potential for family support provision and practice to enhance welfare, resources, relationships and capabilities among children, parents, families, and communities. In order to achieve these outcomes policy agencies must respond to the significant research gaps in the area of parenting and family support investing in research and evaluation to inform evidence-based practice.

It is important to highlight the key role that Policy makers play in developing national systems of Family support based on holistic, multi-dimensional and comprehensive understandings of family support needs. Policy agencies must develop a range of adequate national strategies and mechanisms to assist service providers in these tasks and promote these orientations. These could include: maintaining local and national directories and information portals about available services and supports; developing key services and roles that provide gateways and access to a range of support and services (e.g. community-based children and family centres which combine universal and targeted services; online signposting services, generic family support roles); employing common approaches to needs assessment and service referrals across local services; and undertaking comprehensive checklists of support needs in collaboration with children, parents and families as well as other services and practitioners

Specific providers of family support provisions and services need resources, skills and mechanisms to enable them to deliver support and services in holistic, collaborative, coordinated and cost-effective ways. These approaches are critical to serving children, parents and families in enabling and cost-effective ways. Approaches found to promote improvements in inter-disciplinary and cross-sector understanding and working also include multi-professional and multi-agency training, joint-working and joint-funded initiatives. These features of local and national provision and services highlight the benefits of effective and wide-ranging local and national family support strategies, planning, coordination and development.

A comprehensive and collaborative approach to practice

Family support is practiced by a range of professionals and disciplines all of whom require a high level of professional skill, knowledge and expertise with attention to ongoing professional development. Practitioners working in the area of Family support require competencies in the areas of strengths-based practice, relationship-based practice, cultural sensitivity, anti-discrimination practice, critical and reflective practice, and collaborative practice. A collaborative approach is fundamental to Family support practice and practitioners need to recognise the value of this and ensure they practice in a comprehensive way including all relevant stakeholders in the process. Of note, Family support practices also apply administrative offices providing for example, welfare benefits who may require specific training in this approach.

Devaney et al. (2021) highlight a number of *key features* that should be present in Family support services if they are to be effective. These include:

- A holistic and flexible approach, engaging with the complex circumstances of families

- Informality – trust, partnership working and shared dialogue between parent and practitioner are crucial for effective relationship-based working

- Needs-Led Support – responsive, respectful support that builds capacities

- Professionalism – competent practitioners to ensure a skilled family support workforce

- Modes that increase *accessibility*, facilitate networks, *collaboration* and *social cohesion*.

The following diagram presents the key learning for practitioners and service providers to integrate into their services in order to align practice with family support orientations based on learning from the literature.
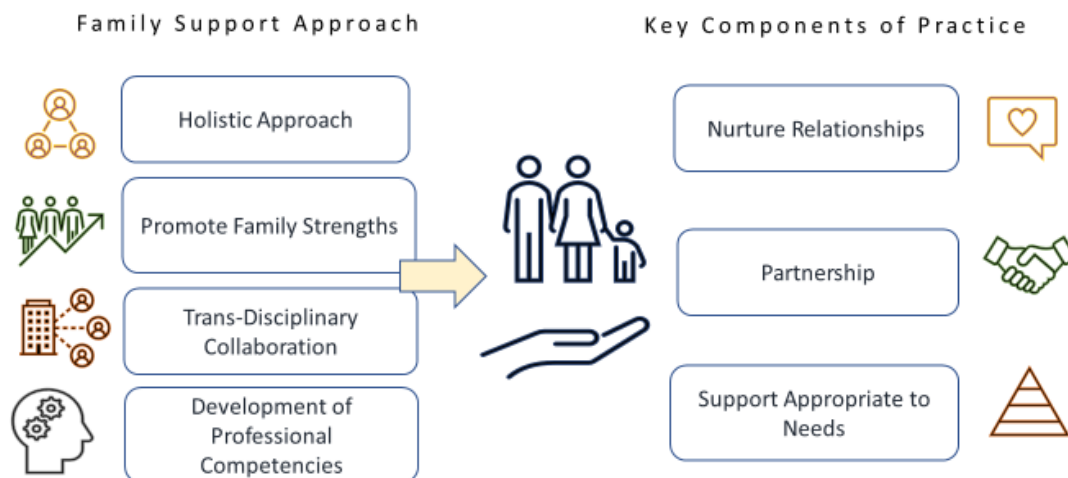

Figure 7 Key Considerations for Service Provision and Practitioners

A comprehensive and collaborative approach to participation

A participatory approach with children, parents and families and partnership between key agencies has become the advocated approach in high quality Family support. Participation is often used interchangeably in the literature with other terms such as 'consultation' 'partnership', 'empowerment', 'involvement', 'engagement' and 'co-production' with a common acceptance that there is there is some form of particular inclusive and respectful relationship between the service user and the service provider that supports their participation.

Participation with all stakeholders (inclusive of children, parents, extended family members, communities, practitioners) (Malone and Canavan, 2021) is argued to be a more ethical way of proceeding, as it is rights respecting, makes engagement with interventions more likely and increases the chance that the supports offered will be relevant to their needs (Connolly and Devaney, 2016). Furthermore, working in a collaborative way promotes the opportunity for

individuals to be co-producers of services and support rather than solely consumers of those services (Morgan & Ziglio, 2007).

Promotion of children's well-being at every level of service delivery also requires working collaboratively and in partnership with the appropriate agencies. Participation in Family support services can range from individual level participation relating to personal decisions and more collective forms that aim to address issues that affect a group, or input into institutional or organizational decision making (Moriarty et al., 2007). As the purpose of participation may vary there is a need for a range of models of involvement appropriate to the context, the issues, the target group and stage of the intervention (Carr, 2004).

In order to consider the meaningfulness of participation for service users and the practitioners that support them it is important to be mindful that the majority of children, parents and families involved in Family support experience multiple chronic stressors (Slettebø, 2013) and may need support and assistance to address and remove practical or perceived barriers to participation.

Summary

This Briefing has presented a comprehensive multi-dimensional and multi-level framework to aid future developments in practice, including the four P's of Family support: Policy, Provision, Practice and a Participatory ethos. In addition to a consideration of the ecology of family support, this Briefing has emphasised the importance of attending to the *diversity in modern family forms*, and hence needs in order to ensure that *support offered is appropriate to need*. Participation and Partnership working have been presented as a way to ensure this is achieved in practice. The provision of family support has been linked to the vindication of rights, ensuring social inclusion while promoting the flourishing and development of all family members.

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