



## Media Release

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### **Focus on early years is the way to reduce poverty New European findings show the need for a strong lead on early years services**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can play a major role in reducing child poverty and inequality – if they are universally accessible, multi-dimensional and staffed by a well educated workforce, child policy experts will tell the European Commission in Brussels on 9 December.

Families with young children are most at risk of poverty across Europe: in Scotland a quarter of households with children aged 5 and under live in poverty, or one household in five with children aged 6 and over.

Where responsibility for ECEC services is split – as in the UK and the Netherlands – there is a marked inequality in access to services, with children from advantaged families more than three times as likely to attend formal services as children from disadvantaged families. Countries where systems are fully integrated – as in Norway – have a more equal experience.

The new findings come from the final report of the 2-year cross-European programme *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion*, led by Children in Scotland. The report will be presented at the European Parliament as the European Year for Combating Poverty comes to an end. Speakers at the seminar include Belgian Community Minister Jean-Marc Nollet; Polish Undersecretary of State for Social Affairs Irena Woycicka; *Working for Inclusion* programme director Bronwen Cohen; Secretary General of Eurochild Jana Hainsworth; Stig Lund, of the European Trade Union Committee for Education; and *Working for Inclusion* researchers Peter Moss and John Bennett.

#### **Minister for Children and Early Years Adam Ingram said:**

"The early years lay the foundations for children's lives and life chances. That's why we

are working with our partners to implement the Early Years Framework, as well as our frameworks for tackling health inequalities and poverty – Equally Well and Achieving our Potential.

"It is clearly better to provide children and families with the best possible integrated support we can, than deal with the costly consequences of inaction later on – costly for the child in terms of poor attainment, ill health and criminal activity, but costly too in terms of the potential burden on the public purse."

**Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland and programme director for *Working for Inclusion*, said:**

"The *Working for Inclusion* programme has shown that fully integrated early childhood education and care systems associated with high levels of universal entitlement and a high quality well paid workforce are a key indicator in tackling child poverty and overcoming inequalities, offering particularly big gains for children under 3. Working for Inclusion offers important lessons for governments at national and local level seeking to maximise investment in the early years and also highlights the value of the Structural Funds in helping member states to explore new models for services."

**Des McNulty, Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, said:**

"It is well-established that children's life chances are most affected by the support and encouragement they get in the early years, up to age 5 or 6. Those whose life chances are blighted by poverty deserve special consideration but we need to do what is best for all children."

**Notes to Editors**

1. *Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion* is funded by the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity, with the support of the Scottish Government. *Working for Inclusion* began in February 2009 and has considered Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems, particularly the ECEC workforce, at local, national and European levels. Each partner in the programme (Scotland, Norway, Poland and Italy) has hosted a study visit and national conference on one of the programme's themes and a wider network of organisations in Slovenia, France, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary have participated as project associates. Research has taken place across 28 European nations to provide a clear picture of qualifications and skills levels in early years services across the EU, and how these relate to levels of poverty and social inclusion.
2. The programme's final report, *Working for Inclusion: how early childhood education and care (ECEC) and its workforce can help Europe's youngest citizens*, is available from Children in Scotland.
3. Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Slovenia and Latvia have fully integrated early childhood education and care systems. Germany, Austria, Spain and the UK have partially integrated systems which retain a division between education and care, particularly within the workforce.
4. **Children in Scotland** is the longstanding national agency for the whole of the children's sector in Scotland, and the English language publisher for Children in Europe magazine, published in 15 languages by a network of magazines across Europe. For further information visit [www.childreninScotland.org.uk](http://www.childreninScotland.org.uk).
5. **NB** Quotes from Children in Scotland's partner organisations for *Working for Inclusion*, the Nordland Research Institute (Norway), La Bottega di Geppetto (Italy)

and Comenius Foundation for Child Development (Poland) are given below. Further quotes and images from the project's study visits are also available.

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**Teresa Ogrodzińska, president of the board, Comenius Foundation for Child Development**

“For countries like Poland, where a lot of work has to be done to improve the learning environment for the youngest children, the Open Method of Coordination has been a perfect tool to introduce changes in the early childhood education and care system. Thanks to adapting good practices from other EU countries and to the support from Structural Funds, we significantly improved the preschool situation in Poland.”

**Aldo Fortunati, president of La Bottega di Geppetto**

“Economists agree early investment is the best way to guarantee economic returns that are profitable for society, and we know the very early years are those in which it is possible to break the chains of continuing inequality.

“*Working for Inclusion* has been of value in three ways. First, it has focused on early childhood education and care services as elements that can guarantee social inclusion and the prevention of poverty. Second, it has promoted the exchange of experiences among countries, which is fundamental for good practice development. And last but not least, it has recognised the rights of children as active protagonists of their own growth and their own experiences: something which is overdue, and essential to viewing the future with optimism, confidence and responsibility.”

**Wenche Rønning, Nordland Research Institute**

“We have learned a great deal through *Working for Inclusion*. Through studying other situations and solutions we see our own practice from a different perspective. The project has helped make clear which debates and discussions we need to promote to develop our own systems. We cannot expect everybody to be aware of the values that are the foundation of our services – we need to work to ensure everybody understands why they underpin our system, or they can be very easily thrown away. The welfare state will always be under pressure if it is taken for granted.”