

National Child Strategy

Committee report

The parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee

PUBLICATIONS OF THE FINNISH GOVERNMENT 2022:16

vn.fi/en



FINNISH
GOVERNMENT

Publications of the Finnish Government 2022:16

National Child Strategy

Committee report

The parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee

Finnish Government Helsinki 2022

Publication sale

**Online bookstore
of the Finnish
Government**

vnjulkaisumyynti.fi

Publication distribution

**Institutional Repository
for the Government
of Finland Valto**

julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi

Finnish Government

Prime Minister's Office

This publication is copyrighted. You may download, display and print it for Your own personal use. Commercial use is prohibited.

ISBN pdf: 978-952-383-740-9

ISSN pdf: 2490-0966

Layout: Government Administration Department, Publications

Helsinki 2022

National Child Strategy Committee report

Publications of the Finnish Government 2022:16

Publisher	Finnish Government		
Group author	The parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee		
Language	English	Pages	36

Abstract

This publication contains the text of the National Child Strategy and the report of the parliamentary committee that prepared it.

On 5 March 2020, the Government appointed a parliamentary committee to prepare a National Child Strategy based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The strategy was to span several government terms and ensure cooperation between different administrative sectors. The committee completed its work on 31 December 2020.

The preparation of the strategy is based on the Child's Time 2040 project, which began in 2018. In keeping with the Government Programme, the strategy was prepared by a parliamentary committee, and several reports were produced to support it. The completed strategy consists of a short preamble, content sections covering different areas of life, and the policies regarding strategy implementation as outlined by the committee.

It is the committee's unanimous view that the National Child Strategy should create a Finland that respects the rights of the child and is child and family friendly. The strategy must be implemented and monitored systematically and effectively over the long term. The present National Child Strategy will ensure the goal-oriented and consistent implementation of fundamental and human rights obligations concerning children extending across government terms.

Keywords National Child Strategy, wellbeing, rights of the child, fundamental rights, human rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN, Council of Europe, Child's Time 2040, Finland for all children

ISBN PDF	978-952-383-740-9	ISSN PDF	2490-0966
-----------------	-------------------	-----------------	-----------

URN address <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-740-9>

Kansallinen lapsistrategia Komiteamietintö

Valtioneuvoston julkaisu 2022:16

Julkaisija Valtioneuvosto

Yhteisötekijä Kansallisen lapsistrategian parlamentaarinen komitea

Kieli englanti

Sivumäärä 36

Tiivistelmä

Tähän julkaisuun on koottu kansallisen lapsistrategian teksti sekä sen laatineen parlamentaarisen komitean mietintö.

Valtioneuvosto asetti 5.3.2020 parlamentaarisen komitean valmistelemaan YK:n lapsen oikeuksien sopimukseen perustuva hallituskaudet ylittävä ja eri hallinnon aloja yhdistävä kansallinen lapsistrategia. Komitea saattoi työnsä loppuun 31.12.2020.

Strategian valmistelu pohjautuu 2018 alkaneeseen Lapsen aika 2040 -työhön. Strategia laadittiin hallitusohjelman mukaisesti parlamentaarisessa komiteatyöskentelyssä ja sen tueksi valmisteltiin useita selvityksiä. Valmistunut strategia koostuu lyhyestä johdantoosiosta, eri elämänaalueet kattavista sisältöjakoista, sekä komitean linjauksista strategian toimeenpanoon.

Komitea katsoo yksimielisesti, että kansallisella lapsistrategialla tulee luoda lapsen oikeuksia kunnioittava, lapsi- ja perhemyönteinen Suomi. Lapsistrategian toimeenpanon ja seurannan tulee olla pitkäjänteistä, suunnitelmallista ja vaikutuksellista. Nyt tehdyllä lapsistrategialla turvataan lapsia koskevien perus- ja ihmisoikeusveloitteiden tavoitteellinen ja johdonmukainen toteuttaminen yli hallituskausien.

Asiasanat lapsistrategia, hyvinvointi, lapsen oikeudet, perusoikeudet, ihmisoikeudet, lapsen oikeuksien sopimus, YK, Euroopan neuvosto, Lapsen aika 2040, kaikkien lasten Suomi

ISBN PDF 978-952-383-740-9

ISSN PDF 2490-0966

Julkaisun osoite <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-740-9>

Den nationella barnstrategin Kommittébetänkande

Statsrådets publikationer 2022:16

Utgivare	Statsrådet		
Utarbetad av	Den parlamentariska kommittén för den nationella barnstrategin		
Språk	engelska	Sidantal	36

Referat

I denna publikation har man sammanställt texten för den nationella barnstrategin samt betänkandet av den parlamentariska kommitté som utarbetat strategin

Statsrådet tillsatte den 5 mars 2020 en parlamentarisk kommitté med uppgift att bereda en förvaltningsövergripande nationell barnstrategi som baserar sig på FN:s konvention om barnets rättigheter och som sträcker sig över flera regeringsperioder. Kommittén slutförde sitt arbete den 31 december 2020.

Beredningen av strategin baserar sig på arbetet Barnens tid 2040, som inleddes 2018. Strategin utarbetades i det parlamentariska kommittéarbetet i enlighet med regeringsprogrammet och till stöd för arbetet bereddes flera utredningar. Den färdiga strategin består av ett kort inledning, innehållsavsnitt som täcker olika livsområden samt kommitténs riktlinjer för genomförandet av strategin.

Kommittén anser enhälligt att man med hjälp av den nationella barnstrategin ska skapa ett barn- och familjevänligt Finland som respekterar barnets rättigheter. Genomförandet och uppföljningen av barnstrategin ska vara långsiktig, planerig och effektiv. Genom den barnstrategi som nu utarbetats tryggar man att grundrätts- och människorättsförpliktelserna som gäller barn genomförs på ett målinriktat och konsekvent sätt över flera regeringsperioder.

Nyckelord barnstrategi, välfärd, barnets rättigheter, grundrättigheter, mänskliga rättigheter, konventionen om barnets rättigheter, FN, Europarådet, Barnets tid 2040, Finland för alla barn

ISBN PDF 978-952-383-740-9 **ISSN PDF** 2490-0966

URN-adress <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-740-9>

TO THE GOVERNMENT

On 5 March 2020, the Government appointed a parliamentary committee to prepare a National Child Strategy based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that would span government terms and cross administrative boundaries. The committee was to complete its work by 31 December 2020.

The committee was chaired by Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services Krista Kiuru, with Minister of Education Li Andersson as its vice-chair. The committee had a total of nine members, each with a personal deputy, and four permanent experts.

The members of the committee were Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services Krista Kiuru (deputised by Member of Parliament Eeva-Johanna Eloranta), Member of Parliament Ari Koponen (deputised by Member of Parliament Lulu Ranne), Member of Parliament Heikki Autto (deputised by Member of Parliament Sanni Grahn-Laasonen), Member of Parliament Hilka Kemppe (deputised by Minister of Science and Culture Annika Saarikko), Member of Parliament Sofia Virta (deputised by Member of Parliament Mirka Soinikoski), Minister of Education Li Andersson (deputised by Member of Parliament Katja Hänninen), Member of Parliament Mikko Ollikainen (deputised by Member of Parliament Veronica Rehn-Kivi), Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen (deputised by Member of Parliament Sari Tanus) and Member of Parliament Harry Harkimo (no personal deputy). The permanent experts of the committee were Ombudsman for Children Elina Pekkarinen, Chief Executive Officer Hanna Heinonen, Director of Advocacy and Programmes Inka Hetemäki and University Lecturer Virve Toivonen.

The committee also had a secretariat consisting of public officials from the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture and representatives from civil society organisations. The secretariat was led by Johanna Laisaari, Secretary General for the National Child Strategy. The other members of the secretariat were Katja Bergbacka, Esa Iivonen, Taina Kulmala, Sanna Koulu, Kirsi Pollari and Laura Saarinen.

The committee notes that the National Child Strategy should create a child- and family-friendly Finland that respects the rights of the child. The Strategy must be implemented and monitored systematically and effectively over the long term.

The committee report includes the committee's unanimous proposal for the National Child Strategy, which will be submitted to the Government.

Helsinki, December 17 2020

Krista Kiuru

Li Andersson

Ari Koponen

Heikki Autto

Hilkka Kempfi

Sofia Virta

Mikko Ollikainen

Päivi Räsänen

Harry Harkimo

Elina Pekkarinen

Hanna Heinonen

Inka Hetemäki

Virve Toivonen

Johanna Laisaari

Katja Bergbacka

Esa Iivonen

Sanna Koulou

Taina Kulmala

Kirsi Pollari

Laura Saarinen

1 Background to the National Child Strategy

The National Child Strategy is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Finnish Treaty Series 59–60/1991) that is binding on Finland. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the implementation of the Convention, stressed in its concluding observations concerning Finland in 2011 that implementing the rights of the child requires a consistent child policy and the national coordination of issues relating to the rights of the child.

The preparation of the National Child Strategy started during the term of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government, with the formation of a shared vision, "Child's Time — Towards a National Strategy for Children 2040". The preparatory work continued during the term of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government, with the aim of creating a long-term Strategy that extends beyond government terms and crosses administrative boundaries.

2 Composition and work of the committee

On 5 March 2020, the Government appointed a parliamentary committee to prepare a National Child Strategy based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Strategy was to span government terms and cross administrative boundaries. The committee was composed of members representing all parliamentary groups and of permanent experts in children's rights. The committee was chaired by Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services Krista Kiuru, with Minister of Education Li Andersson as its vice-chair.

In addition to the chair and vice-chair, the committee included the following members: Member of Parliament Eeva-Johanna Eloranta (Social Democratic Parliamentary Group) serving as a deputy member for Minister Krista Kiuru, chair; Member of Parliament Ari Koponen and his personal deputy, Member of Parliament Lulu Ranne (Finns Party Parliamentary Group); Member of Parliament Heikki Autto and his personal deputy, Member of Parliament Sanni Grahn-Laasonen (National Coalition Party Parliamentary Group); Member of Parliament Hilikka Kemppe and her personal deputy Minister of Science and Culture Annika Saarikko (Centre Party Parliamentary Group); Member of Parliament Sofia Virta and her personal deputy, Member of Parliament Mirka Soinikoski (Green Parliamentary Group); Member of Parliament Katja Hänninen (Left Alliance Parliamentary Group) serving as a deputy member for Minister Li Andersson, vice-chair; Member of Parliament Mikko Ollikainen and his personal deputy, Member of Parliament Veronica Rehn-Kivi (Swedish Parliamentary Group); Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and her personal deputy, Member of Parliament Sari Tanus (Christian Democratic Party Parliamentary Group); and Member of Parliament Harry Harkimo (Liike Nyt Movement's Parliamentary Group, no personal deputy). The permanent experts of the committee were Ombudsman for Children Elina Pekkarinen from the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, Chief Executive Officer Hanna Heinonen from the Centre Union for Child Welfare, Director of Advocacy and Programmes Inka Hetemäki from UNICEF Finland and University Lecturer Virve Toivonen from Lapsioikeusjuristit ry (Child Rights Lawyers).

The committee also had a secretariat consisting of public officials from the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture and representatives from civil society organisations. The secretariat was led Johanna Laisaari, Secretary General for the National Child Strategy (Prime Minister's Office). The other members of the secretariat were Ministerial Adviser Katja Bergbacka (Ministry of Education and Culture), Chief Specialist Esa Iivonen (Mannerheim League for Child Welfare), Ministerial Adviser Taina Kulmala (Prime Minister's Office), Senior Specialist Sanna Koulu (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health), Senior Specialist Kirsi Pollari (Central Union for Child Welfare) and Project Secretary Laura Saarinen (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health). The term of the committee was from 1 March 2020 to 31 December 2020. The committee convened six times, and it also worked in a written procedure.

3 Material prepared for the committee and individual publications

The term of the committee was clearly defined, and for this reason, the material prepared for the committee together with individual publications played an important role in supporting the committee's work. The members of the committee also started to prepare the issues raised during the committee work as part of their official duties to support the implementation of the future Strategy.

In addition, an extensive survey for children, young people and adults was conducted in support of the committee's work. The observations made in the survey were utilised in the preparation of the Strategy. The survey was carried out online between 28 September and 12 October 2020. Nearly 3,000 responses to the survey were received in six different languages.

Three separate reports were prepared in 2020 to support the committee's work: the report on the legal basis of the National Child Strategy prepared by Esa Iivonen and Kirsi Pollari, and the report entitled 'Inclusion and participation – Part 1: Starting points for inclusion in the National Child Strategy' and the summary analysing the results of the survey, entitled 'Inclusion of children and young people in the National Child Strategy – Part 2: Realisation of inclusion in the preparation of the Child Strategy', both prepared by Elina Stenvall. During the preparation of the Strategy, there was also a need to take account of the COVID-19 epidemic that started in spring 2020 and its impact on the rights of the child. For this reason, the committee made use of the report 'Wellbeing of children and young people in post-crisis measures related to COVID-19' that was prepared by a working group appointed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

4 Committee's key positions and proposals

The committee considers that the National Child Strategy should create a child- and family-friendly Finland that respects the rights of the child. The Child Strategy is closely linked to broader strategic forecasts and choices concerning the future of society. The committee therefore stressed in its work that it was also important to uphold the rights of the child from the perspective of the birth rate.

In the committee's view, the Child Strategy must be implemented and monitored systematically and effectively over the long term. The implementation of the Strategy must ensure that the rights of all children are realised as fully as possible, and it must support the inclusion of all children and their right to a future.

Therefore, the committee considers it important that the National Child Strategy be implemented systematically in a way that brings together various branches of government and sectors of society. When implementing the Strategy, it is necessary to ensure, particularly during the first implementation period, that the strategy work becomes an integral part of the central government's strategic planning and decision-making and that permanent structures are established for this work to support the implementation of the Strategy. The committee proposes that the National Child Strategy be adopted in accordance with the annex.

Annex

Proposal for a National Child Strategy

Contents

Strategy in brief	14
Key policies.....	14
Legal and social context of the strategy	15
Finland for all children	16
The vision: a Finland where the rights of the child are respected	16
Combating discrimination and inequality.....	17
Safeguarding the rights of children in a vulnerable position.....	19
Protecting children from violence	20
Thriving and competent children	22
Social welfare and healthcare services for children and families	22
Early childhood education and care and education.....	24
Adequate income for families and reconciliation of work and family life	26
Children’s relationships with family, friends and peers	28
Children’s leisure time and hobbies.....	29
Children as participants in society	32
Child impact assessment and child budgeting.....	32
Children’s right to be heard and informed	33
Implementation of the strategy	35
Strategy and implementation plan.....	35

Strategy in brief

Key policies

The National Child Strategy aims to create a child and family friendly Finland where the rights of the child are respected. In addition, the Child Strategy will ensure the goal-oriented and consistent fulfilment of Finland's fundamental and human rights obligations concerning children, in particular as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The need for a National Child Strategy has been brought up during the terms of office of several different governments.

Above all, a strategy is needed because 1) decisions and policies crucial for the rights of the child are often fragmented and not always consistently based on fulfilling Finland's fundamental and human rights obligations, and consequently, 2) the realisation of children's rights depends in practice largely on their backgrounds, families and other similar factors.

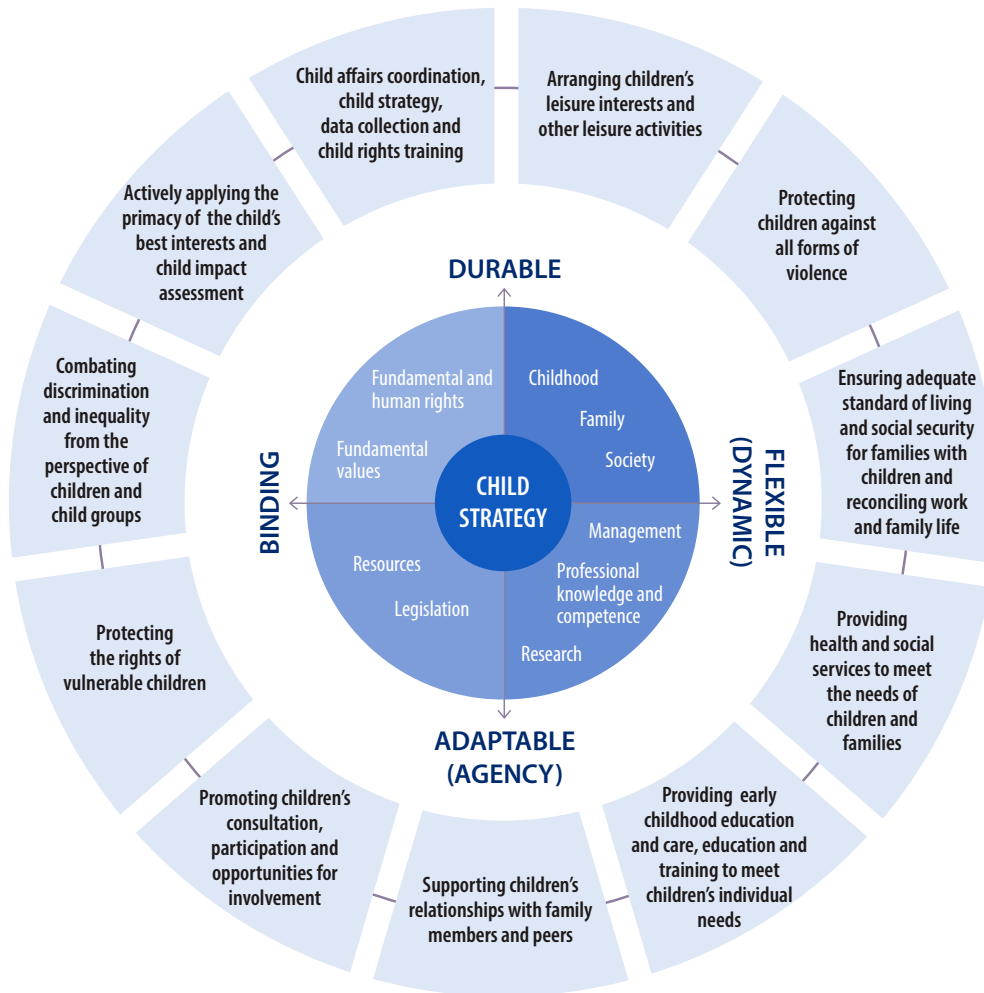
The key objective of this strategy is to lay a sustainable, consistent and lasting foundation for national child and family policies. The aim of the strategy is to develop decision-making, cooperation and practices related to children and families, ensuring that fundamental and human rights obligations are met comprehensively and systematically in all administrative branches and at every level.

The strategy is based on three key ideas:

1. The strategy will create a genuinely child and family friendly Finland where the rights of the child are respected.
2. Children's rights and status will be mainstreamed, ensuring that children are consistently taken into consideration in all policies and activities alongside with other members of society and that they are informed of their rights.
3. The status of children in a vulnerable position will be secured, and their needs will be recognised better.

Under Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. The National Child Strategy thus applies to all children and young people aged under 18. Additionally, the families in which children live as well as young adults in the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood will be taken into consideration extensively in the strategy and its implementation.

Legal and social context of the strategy



The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Finnish Treaty Series 59–60/1991) is binding on Finland as a human rights treaty. It defines the rights of persons aged under 18 that the States Parties must respect in different areas of life and society.

This National Child Strategy is intended to fulfil Finland's obligations under the Convention. In addition to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the strategy is underpinned by Finland's other fundamental and human rights obligations and strong rule of law.

The four universal principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provide the backdrop for the strategy: non-discrimination; the child's best interests as the primary consideration; a child's right to life, survival and development; and the child's participation.

Finland for all children

The vision: a Finland where the rights of the child are respected

The National Child Strategy aims to create a child and family friendly Finland where the rights of the child are respected.

The vision of the strategy is a Finland where the rights of the child are fully and equally realised in all areas of society. In this vision, stakeholders in all sectors of society recognise the importance of the rights of the child and the value of a child and family friendly society. The Finland of the vision will be built together.

The child and family friendly Finland invests in the wellbeing of children and families. Wellbeing will be supported by means of securing an adequate income for families, effective reconciliation of work and family life, good public services and operating conditions at the local and regional level, and an active civil society. In the Finland of the vision, high-quality, equal and diverse early childhood education and care and education will help realise the child's right to growth, development and learning. Children's diverse life situations and needs will be identified, and the fight against violence, discrimination and inequality will be taken seriously. This Finland will be a good place for children to be born and grow up in.

The Finland that respects the rights of the child will listen to children's views and ensure that they have access to age-appropriate information, also on difficult topics. Children will express their opinions on their everyday environments and situations, and they will also be interested in the great, multi-generational questions of our society. Among other things, they will understand the central importance of climate change for their future, and the threats and opportunities created by digitalisation. Children's participation plays a key role in the Finland of the vision.

In the Finland that respects the rights of the child, activities which influence children and families will be underpinned by systematic child and family policies and the realisation of the rights of the child in all political activities. The society of the vision will ensure that the impacts of activities on children are assessed carefully and that decisions concerning children are based on high-quality information and due consideration. In this Finland, intergenerational justice and children's right to their share of society's resources will be realised.

The Finland that respects the rights of the child will be a democratic state where the rule of law is respected. It will prevent polarisation in society, manipulation by information and radicalisation of common issues; consequently, it will recognise the importance of democracy and human rights education. Supporting every child's right to a positive future and their participation in communities and society will be essential.

A strong and resilient society plays a central role in responding to changes, crises and emergency conditions. In the Finland that respects the rights of the child, the resources and crisis resilience of children, families and communities will be supported, and the rights of the child will also be safeguarded when the circumstances are extremely difficult. The Finland of the vision will also tackle future challenges expertly and respecting the rights of the child.

Combating discrimination and inequality

Current state and human rights context

The Finland that respects the rights of the child is a country for all children. In this Finland, children's rights will be realised regardless of their origin, family background or other characteristics. A society that genuinely respects the rights of the child addresses the diversity of children and their different situations and needs while safeguarding the right of each child to be treated as themselves and as befits their age and level of development.

Currently, children's wellbeing in Finland is polarised: while most children are doing well, some are not. The polarisation of wellbeing culminates in crises and emergency conditions, and the adverse consequences of crises accumulate on those who are the most vulnerable. Poverty erodes children's opportunities for equal and non-discriminating inclusion in society. Inequality or poverty experienced in childhood can affect a person well into adulthood, and the multi-generational effects of poverty in families with children are also a cause for concern.

Discrimination touches many children for different reasons. Children also experience discrimination related to such reasons as origin, skin colour, religion, language, disability or illness, gender or sexual orientation. While many of these issues are recognised in non-discrimination legislation, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination and improve equality in children's daily lives.

It is important to not only intervene in shortcomings but also take determined and proactive action to ensure that the inclusion of all children in society is realised as effectively as possible. If the real impacts on children in different positions are not taken into account when preparing decisions and planning activities, inequalities between children will be exacerbated. This is why both children as a specific target group and the diverse situations and needs of different children must be addressed in all drafting, planning and development.

Combating discrimination and inequality is one of the fundamental principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Under Article 2 of the Convention, States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind. They shall also take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members. A number of other human rights treaties also contain provisions on non-discrimination and equal treatment. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has additionally stressed the importance of an evidence-based approach to promoting the wellbeing and rights of children. At present, there are inconsistencies and gaps in the collection of data on the status of children, which undermines management by information in efforts to improve children's wellbeing.

Strategic policies

Children's equality will be promoted through systematic measures. Data on wellbeing gaps and their causes will be collected and utilised, and measures that are as effective as possible and respect the rights of the child will be taken to narrow these gaps.

Equal and non-discriminatory access to different services, forms of support and channels of participation will be ensured for all children. Accessibility and different forms of information society practices will be developed with a child-centred approach and taking the diversity of children into account.

Safeguarding the rights of children in a vulnerable position

Current state and human rights context

For various reasons, a child's position may be vulnerable in ways that require special attention from the authorities and other actors. This vulnerability may be related to long-term structural discrimination, for example because of a disability, illness or skin colour. On the other hand, it may be specific to a certain situation, for instance if the child is a client of child welfare services, a victim of an offence, or suspected or accused of an offence. It is thus essential that in all decision-making and activities relevant to children, the actual circumstances of the child are taken into account sensitively and as required by each situation.

Ensuring that most children do well is not enough to fulfil Finland's human rights obligations. Currently, children who are in a more vulnerable position for one reason or another do not at all times receive the support and assistance they need. Services intended for children are not always consistently available everywhere, and accessing them may in fact require more resources than what some children or families possess. Many children also face discriminatory structures or inflexible practices in situations where they need support or help the most.

A child's circumstances may simultaneously involve a number of factors that exacerbate the vulnerability of their position in different ways. This challenges the authorities and other actors to weigh the child's best interests sensitively, to engage in multiprofessional cooperation and to improve the accessibility of services. At the same time, it must be ensured that the child is encountered in all activities as an agent rather than just a victim of their circumstances.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child draws particular attention to the status of vulnerable children, among other things in Article 20 on the status of children deprived of their family environment, Article 23 on the rights of children with disabilities, and Article 30 on the rights of children belonging to minorities. The status of vulnerable children is also safeguarded under numerous other human rights treaties and in monitoring bodies' practices.

Strategic policies

Vulnerability will be addressed comprehensively in preventive work, corrective measures and services, and legal protection systems. Preventive work will be stepped up, and more early support and interventions will be offered.

More measures aiming to realise the rights of children who are in a particularly vulnerable position will be put in place. Methods of multiprofessional work and cooperation structures will be reinforced, addressing children's and families' individual needs. When supporting families, the status and rights of children who live in these families or are close to them will be taken into consideration more systematically.

Ways of recognising and addressing both the impacts of structural discrimination and situation-specific vulnerability in the status of children will be developed. Different factors in a child's circumstances that exacerbate vulnerability and the accumulation of such factors will be recognised.

Protecting children from violence

Current state and human rights context

Solid development work has been done in Finland to protect children from violence. The harmful effects of violence are recognised better, and attitudes towards violence against children have become stricter.

The fact that violence and abuse in a child's family and peer relationships is too often invisible remains a challenge. The service system is not always able to respond to support needs efficiently enough. Physical, mental or sexual violence experienced as a child is a significant risk factor for wellbeing in later life, and not only being a victim of violence but also observing it in close relationships is harmful for children.

While attitudes towards violence against children have become stricter, many children still face violence, harassment, exploitation or abuse in their daily lives. Children also encounter violence outside the family circle, for example at school, in hobbies or in the digital environment, and the seriousness of children's experiences is not sufficiently recognised. Self-harming behaviour may also put a child's wellbeing at risk. Children who have experienced violence cannot access timely and effective assistance; what is more, sufficient help is not available for children who are guilty of using violence. Interventions in violent behaviour between children, or violence used by children, are not effective enough.

While the digital environment plays an important part in children's daily lives, it is also a channel for harassment and bullying. It is relatively common for children to experience sexual harassment online. Strengthening children's safety awareness skills and their digital interaction skills helps prevent some of the harassment, and access to low-threshold help should also be secured for them. Intervention in sexual harassment and exploitation experienced by children must be immediate.

Protecting children from all forms of violence is one of the keynotes of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the right to life is also safeguarded under other human rights treaties. Under Article 19 of the Convention, States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation. Combating violence against children is also at the centre of the Optional Protocols to the Convention and many other human rights treaties, including the Lanzarote Convention and Istanbul Convention.

Strategic policies

Every child has an unalienable right to life and protection from all forms of violence.

The work to combat violence against children will be continued. Parenting skills and support for parenting will be strengthened to find genuine alternatives that respect children's rights and special status to methods of upbringing that harm the child.

Work methods for the prevention of and early intervention in violence and harassment will be mainstreamed. Special attention will be paid to violence and harassment in the digital environment and to violent material spreading in it. Models of upbringing and instruction that reinforce safety awareness and digital skills will be developed.

Systematic measures will be taken to improve services for children who have experienced violence or harassment, and efforts to combat child trafficking and other forms of human trafficking will be stepped up across different administrative branches.

Methods for recognising violence and abuse as early as possible will be developed, ensuring that the child can access support services as soon as a need for them arises. The threat of violence against children will be combated, and capabilities for intervening in different situations involving violence and abuse will be developed.

Effective, multiprofessional and interdisciplinary methods will be sought for preventing violent behaviour in children. Child welfare services' possibilities of delivering challenging substitute care will be secured, and families will be involved and supported in the work to help children.

Thriving and competent children

Social welfare and healthcare services for children and families

Current state and human rights context

The main objective of the strategy is to secure a good life for children with the support of a well-functioning service system for children and families. The organisation of the social welfare and healthcare service system consists of three levels: the first level combats health and social problems by means of preventive methods; the second level strives to prevent the deterioration of illnesses or social problems that have already been identified; and at the third level, efforts are made to correct and mitigate the adverse effects of an illness or social problem that has already become serious.

The system is currently fragmented and siloed and, in particular, children and families who need many different services may in fact be left without assistance and support. For example, problems in the co-ordination of services have been identified between primary and special level services on the one hand, and mental health and other social and health services on the other. Coordination of services provided for children with disabilities and their families is inadequate, which makes supporting children's growth significantly more difficult. The challenges of the service system are also apparent in child welfare.

The foundation of good mental health is laid in childhood, which is why services that support mental health and treat its disorders play an essential role in children's wellbeing. Mental health disorders are a major public health challenge, and currently, mental health services are not delivered to the same standard as other social and health services. In order to treat mental health disorders and strengthen good mental health, effective services and multidisciplinary measures to prevent social exclusion and accumulation of problems are required.

Working skilfully and consistently, highly trained and competent personnel with a good level of wellbeing at work can help safeguard the rights and welfare of the child. Reducing the turnover of social welfare and healthcare personnel contributes to securing the good quality and continuity of the services, as a child who uses the services can rely on having a permanent, safe adult as their contact. These objectives are currently not fully achieved, as the personnel in many services are stressed and the turnover is high.

The service system should be based on the child and family centred approach, quality, adequacy and accessibility of the services. Support provided in a sufficiently early stage and the promotion of wellbeing and health are apt to prevent the need for more intensive services and to improve the quality of life and daily lives of children and families over the long term. To improve the effectiveness of social welfare and healthcare services, cooperation with education, leisure services and various organisations will be strengthened.

Social welfare and healthcare services have an essential role in fulfilling a number of human rights obligations. Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child confirms the right of the child to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and health services, and under section 19, subsection 3 of the Finnish Constitution, the public authorities shall guarantee for everyone, as provided in more detail by an Act, adequate social, health and medical services and promote the health of the population. Health and social services are also at the centre of many Articles of the revised European Social Charter.

Strategic policies

The child and family centredness and accessibility of services and low-threshold operating methods will be developed, for example based on the family centre model. The possibilities of developing proactive and preventive operating forms will be identified, and services will be strengthened relying on evidence, needs and individual service paths. The competence, wellbeing and low turnover of personnel will be supported.

A safe growth environment and other prerequisites for good mental health will be secured for each child. Mental health services and, in a broader sense, work methods and practices that promote good mental health will be developed.

Social welfare and healthcare services will be extensively linked to education services and different services, activities and communities that promote wellbeing and health. The prerequisites of the third sector to support children and families, complementing the service system, will be improved.

The service needs of vulnerable persons, including children in need of special support, will be addressed. The quality of child welfare and the capacity of the stakeholders to fully realise the rights of the child will be improved. The development of good practices in different operating environments of child welfare will be supported.

In services provided to adults, the status and rights of the children close to them will be observed more systematically. Children's different family situations will be recognised, and the diversity of families and family forms will be understood better.

Early childhood education and care and education

Current state and human rights context

Finland's strengths include early childhood education and care and education that are equal and of a high quality. They have contributed to Finland's evolution into a society based on expertise, innovations and technology, and in the next few decades, education will have an essential role in responding to the transformation of work. Finland has well-educated workers, highly trained teachers and an excellent education system that produces a high standard of knowledge and skills and promotes children's holistic wellbeing.

Early childhood education and care, preprimary education and education that are equal and high in quality even out wellbeing differences and inequalities arising from children's backgrounds. Studies have found that participation in high-quality early childhood education and care is important for later learning. While high-quality early childhood education and care benefit the child's holistic development over the long term, the participation rate in early childhood education is low in Finland compared to many other countries. The participation rate in pre-primary education is high, comprising almost the entire cohort. If a child drops out of school or their learning outcomes are poor even before they complete basic education, their risk of exclusion increases significantly.

Early childhood education and care and pre-primary and basic education are cultural and education services and key everyday environments in which children's agency and participation are realised. In early childhood education and care and education, it is essential to address children's different individual needs and life situations as well as any structures relevant to their vulnerable position. Effective multidisciplinary cooperation supports the wellbeing and learning of children and families. Sufficient support for learning must be available. Differences in learning outcomes grow during basic education, and the most significant differences between groups are found as the cohorts near the final stage of their basic education. Learning differences between boys and girls, which are already the largest in the OECD countries and still growing, are also a cause for concern.

At best, early childhood education and care and education not only safeguard a child's right to learning but also provide a backdrop for peer relationships, togetherness and long-term wellbeing. Wellbeing should consequently be addressed in parallel to learning, and a high level of support for children and student welfare must be maintained. Learning and wellbeing support and promote each other. Learning creates wellbeing, and wellbeing supports learning. Effective practices and resources are needed to combat bullying and violence. In addition to expertise and resources, it must be ensured that children are heard and that their participation is realised consistently and comprehensively in early childhood education and care and at school.

Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child lays down the right of every child to education, and Article 29 defines the objectives of education. Under Article 28 of the Convention, States Parties agree to take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. Article 16 of the Finnish Constitution safeguards rights to education and provides for everyone's right to basic education free of charge. Early childhood education and care and education also play an essential part in implementing other human rights obligations.

Strategic policies

The downward trend in learning outcomes will be turned, and inequalities will be reduced through systematic and goal-oriented measures. Sufficient resources will be provided for early childhood education and care and education. For each child, opportunities for education and training that meet their individual needs as well as for holistic learning and competence development will be guaranteed. The status of different groups of children will be safeguarded, and vulnerabilities will be taken into account by reinforcing a communal and participatory operating culture as well as by ensuring effective inclusion and individual learning paths.

The importance of early childhood education and care as part of the education system will be recognised. The participation rate in early childhood education and care will be increased by highlighting more extensively its significance for the individual and society, by systematically reducing client fees, and by expanding free early childhood education and care. The long-term goal is free early childhood education and care. The quality of early childhood education and care will be improved, among other things by securing the availability of adequate and highly trained personnel and by evaluating and developing the activities diversely. Early learning of basic skills and the stability of interactive relationships will be promoted by developing preprimary education and the initial stage of basic education as a whole. Morning and afternoon activities and club activities will be integrated more closely into the school day, and the quality of the activities will be invested in.

The preconditions for children’s learning and development as well as support for school attendance, the work of educational and teaching staff, and pupil and student welfare services will be secured. The realisation of multidisciplinary cooperation must be ensured in order to provide adequate holistic support for children and families. Existing means will be used, and new ones will be sought with a multidisciplinary approach, to prevent dropping out and social exclusion. Particular attention will be paid to the transition stages of education. The possibility of completing at least a secondary level qualification following basic education will be secured for each child.

Expertise will be developed and resources will be increased to support children’s wellbeing in early childhood education and care, at school and in other everyday communities. Prevention of bullying and efforts to promote a peaceful working atmosphere must be systematic and consist of continuous everyday activities. Emotional and interaction skills will be strengthened in early childhood education and care and at schools. The effectiveness of operating models for intervening in bullying and preventing violence will be evaluated, proven practices will be disseminated, and new ones will be created to meet the identified needs.

Adequate income for families and reconciliation of work and family life

Current state and human rights context

The family’s adequate income is an important factor in children’s wellbeing. It is up to the public authorities to support families and others caring for children and enable them to safeguard children’s wellbeing and individual development. Finland’s national economy is burdened by a deteriorating dependency ratio and low birth rate, and obstacles to starting a family and the reduced birth rate are also a problem from the human perspective. A higher employment rate and well-functioning labour market and business life lay the foundation for a sustainable national economy.

A stronger safety net for families is a precondition for realising the rights of the child, so that strain experienced by families and poverty of families with children will no longer be detrimental to children’s wellbeing. It is a well-known fact that a family’s low income level and a low employment rate erode children’s position in many respects, and this risk has also been identified in Finland, particularly in single-parent families. Poverty in families with children is not always associated with unemployment, and as many as one half of poor families have a working parent.

To improve families' wellbeing, flexible possibilities and choice in how to reconcile work with family life at different ages of their children are needed. Family-friendly working life concerns society as a whole: at best, opportunities for flexible or part-time work help to not only realise the rights of the child but also meet the needs of both families and business life. In the current situation, however, there are many bottlenecks in taking family situations into account and reconciling work and family life.

The key role of families in realising the rights of the child is recognised in several Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as in human rights treaties on economic, social and cultural rights. Article 26 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child contains a specific provision on the right of every child to benefit from social security. Section 19.3 of the Constitution of Finland supplements the fundamental rights to social security by stating that the public authorities shall support families and others responsible for providing for children so that they have the ability to ensure the wellbeing and personal development of the children.

Strategic policies

Poverty among families with children will be reduced through determined measures taken across society. Ensuring an adequate income for families with children and reducing poverty among them will be highlighted as a priority in the development of social security.

The family friendliness of working life will be improved in cooperation, and different modes of working will be identified. In the reconciliation of work, studies and family life, the diversity of families and family forms and the entire childhood period will be taken into consideration better. More flexible opportunities will be provided for families to share care responsibilities between parents and with other persons close to the family, such as grandparents. Families' possibilities to choose to care for their children at home, especially when they are young, will be safeguarded.

The diversity of families and family forms will be addressed in different support forms directly or indirectly intended for families. Support for families will be developed, not only addressing the needs of young children but also paying more attention to the entire period of childhood.

Children's relationships with family, friends and peers

Current state and human rights context

Relationships with family, friends and peers are highly important for both children and adults. Close interpersonal relationships enhance wellbeing and give protection against the impacts of setbacks. Studies have found that a large proportion of children enjoy a good relationship with their parents and have close friends, and the indicator values have even improved slightly in recent years. Good relationships with grandparents, too, help support children's holistic development.

Not all children are supported by relationships with family, friends and peers that enhance their wellbeing, however, and many face loneliness, abuse, violence or difficult family situations. The impacts of this on their wellbeing are significant and often continue far into the future.

Loneliness often accumulates on children who are already in a disadvantaged position. In particular, children in foster care or living outside their homes for some other reason may have little contact with their family members, and families' financial difficulties increase the risk of loneliness and exclusion experienced by children. The child's viewpoint and the importance of promoting close relationships are also sometimes overlooked in acrimonious divorces.

The digital environment is increasingly important for the child's close and peer relationships. Communication with friends and loved ones often takes place online, and remote connections allow children flexibility in keeping in touch, whatever the circumstances. The digital environment also emphasises the need for new means of intervening in bullying, harassment and other forms of violence, as it also offers new channels for harmful behaviour.

The importance of a child's close and peer relationships has been recognised in several human rights treaties and the recommendations of their monitoring bodies. Under Article 9 (3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests. Section 10 of the Finnish Constitution contains a provision on the protection of private life and also covers respect for family life as set out in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Strategic policies

A child's right to keep in touch with their parents, siblings and other persons close to them will be safeguarded in different life situations. In keeping with the best interests of the child, the importance of adults close to a child who care for them in daily life, including the mother, the father and grandparents, will be taken into consideration.

Goal-oriented efforts will be made to develop measures which prevent children's loneliness and encourage their peer relationships. Togetherness and interaction will be supported in children's everyday life, in early childhood education and care and at school, and in leisure time and recreational activities.

The importance of the digital environment for children's close and peer relationships will be recognised, and children's media and interaction skills will be built up, also in relation to electronic communication.

Children's leisure time and hobbies

Current state and human rights context

Children have a right to safe leisure time, play and unrushed time for themselves. This right can be realised in many ways, both at home and in the child's other everyday environments. Leisure time and recreational activities are important for children's peer relationships and for preventing exclusion. Leisure activities also bring more adults who can notice children's concerns into the child's life. Hobbies help children develop their skills and competence as indicated by their personal inclinations and preferences. In addition to hobbies and leisure activities, the prerequisites for a physically active lifestyle and holistic wellbeing can also be supported in early childhood education and care, at schools and at educational institutions as part of educational work. Leisure time and recreational communities also help support inclusion in society.

Many recreational activities are available in Finland, and children take part in them actively. If hobbies are excessively goal-oriented and focus on high performance, they may be less child-centred and put pressure on children. This viewpoint should be taken into account, particularly in competitive sports and hobbies that children start at a young age. Many children give up their hobbies when aged between 12 and 15. This could partly be avoided if children had more opportunities for participation and expressing their needs and preferences at this age, and if organisers of leisure activities had more knowledge about the changes brought about by puberty, especially in the areas of physical and emotional development. Having several hobbies could also be a way of avoiding a situation where the child gives up hobbies at puberty and helping the child to find their personal strengths.

The possibilities of having hobbies vary depending on such factors as where the child lives, how wealthy their family is and who their friends are, and not all children have access to safe hobbies and leisure activities.

The family's socio-economic status influences children's choices of hobbies in Finland, which results in wellbeing and health gaps that continue well into adulthood. While not all hobbies are expensive, the family's low income level tends to limit the child's possibilities of choosing hobbies that match their inclinations and maintaining peer relationships in leisure activities. In practice, the child's socio-economic background also affects the accessibility of cultural and artistic interests. Transport to hobbies may also be difficult or even impossible for many families to organise. Hobbies organised in connection with the school day or close by the school would help ameliorate this problem.

The right of the child to play and leisure is safeguarded under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, under which the States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Strategic policies

The capacity of stakeholders in children's leisure and recreational activities to realise children's rights in their work will be improved, and the development of good practices will be supported. The pedagogical competence and knowledge of stakeholders in recreational activities related to children's development and different ages as well as the changes brought about by puberty will be built up, especially in the areas of physical and emotional development.

In leisure activities and hobbies, a stronger child-centred approach will be adopted in a cross-cutting manner. Attention will be paid to ensuring that the hobby does not have a narrow focus on high performance or set excessive demands, expectations or pressures on the child. The significance of basic education in the arts will be recognised as part of the education system and strengthened, making participation possible for an increasing number of children in different parts of the country. Children's opportunities for pursuing hobbies in the long term will be safeguarded.

Children's wellbeing will be improved by ensuring that every child has an opportunity to engage in hobbies that interest them and meaningful and diverse leisure activities. More equal and non-discriminatory opportunities for free leisure activities that children enjoy will be provided in connection with the school day. This will also make it possible for all children to have several hobbies. The importance of physical and cultural education as well as the role of voluntary work and club activities in supporting children's holistic wellbeing and development will be recognised.

Measures will be developed to safeguard children's coping, sufficient rest and free time.

Children as participants in society

Child impact assessment and child budgeting

Current state and human rights context

The realisation of children's rights will remain haphazard and fragmented if the impacts on children of legislation, political decision-making and resource allocation are not consistently assessed. Currently, the scope of impact assessments varies depending on how directly the decision or activity targets children. In practice, the child impact assessment may remain half-hearted even if the decision or the action might have highly significant impacts on the status of children.

The strong local government autonomy in Finland means that children's status may depend on the municipality in which they live. Many municipalities have introduced good practices, especially in relation to child impact assessment and promoting children's wellbeing in the context of decision-making. More tools are needed, however, to harmonise such good practices across the nation.

While human impact assessment has been developed as part of decision-making and action, impacts on children are not assessed systematically and comprehensively. The share of budgets dedicated to children is rarely monitored. While efforts have been made in Finland to develop indicators of children's wellbeing, the knowledge base has shortcomings, especially from the perspective of equality. Gaps in data collection on children's wellbeing and shortcomings in multidisciplinary and up-to-date use of data undermine the effectiveness and appropriateness of decision-making concerning children.

Under Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in all actions concerning children undertaken by administrative authorities, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Children are the only group of people to whom this obligation applies. Child impact assessment and child budgeting are key tools for ensuring that the child's best interests are a primary consideration and for monitoring the fulfilment of Finland's fundamental and human rights obligations.

Strategic policies

The assessment of impacts on children and families will be adopted as a systematic part of decision-making and activities at all levels of administration, and they will be supported in introducing and carrying out child impact assessments. This is particularly important in municipalities.

The contents and significance of the impact assessments will be specified in the justifications of decisions. Impact assessment will also be extended to the drafting and monitoring of budget decisions.

Procedures and expertise related to child impact assessment and child budgeting will be developed extensively through measures that span several government terms.

Data on children will be collected consistently, and gaps in the data collection will be identified and filled in. The use and analysis of the data will be developed consistently, and the data will be exploited in decision-making and activities.

Children's right to be heard and informed

Current state and human rights context

The child's right to participation is an important fundamental and human right. Whereas the under-18s do not have full political rights because of their age, they are equal and important members of society. Children's participation, and democracy and human rights education that support it, are essential in terms of children's development and growth into active citizenship and full agency in society.

Children's age-appropriate opportunities to participate, be heard, be informed and become active and competent members of society must be safeguarded across the board. Currently, children's participation and opportunities for being heard are fragmented and not implemented in all decision-making concerning children. The fact that some children are repeatedly overlooked and not heard is another problem. Selective implementation of children's participation may lead to accumulated social exclusion, which is likely to undermine the sustainability of societal decision-making and activities.

Under Article 12(1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child. The views of the child shall be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Under section 6 (3) of the Constitution of Finland, children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development. Children's right to be heard and informed is also safeguarded under other human rights treaties, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Strategic policies

Children's participation, right to be heard and access to information will be addressed systematically in decision-making and activities that affect them directly or indirectly. The content and significance of children's views will be detailed in the justifications of decisions.

Efforts will be made to ensure that all adults working with children have sufficient understanding and competence related to supporting children's participation and agency.

Children's participation, right to be heard and access to information will be further improved through cross-administrative work and by strengthening good practices in structures and as part of children's everyday lives. Special attention will be paid to those children whose views are currently overlooked.

Implementation of the strategy

Strategy and implementation plan

The work based on the strategy must be far-reaching and effective across a broad front. A precondition for implementing the National Child Strategy is its integration into existing decision-making and operational structures. Above all, the strategy must find its natural place as part of central, regional and local government activities. The contents of the National Child Strategy touch upon all aspects of life in Finnish society, and broad-based involvement of different stakeholders in society in its implementation must be ensured.

The purpose of the National Child Strategy is to direct the preparation of an implementation plan for each government term. The implementation plan will be prepared by public servants from all administrative branches and approved by the government plenary session. The implementation plan will detail the measures selected to promote the strategic policies during each government term. However, the National Child Strategy must support each government's implementation plan and parliamentary cooperation related to it, and strengthen cooperation and the coordination of expertise between the authorities and experts representing different sectors of society.

The preparation, execution and monitoring of each Child Strategy implementation plan must be linked to carefully selected indicators used to monitor the effectiveness of the policies laid down in the strategy on the one hand, and the measures implemented during each government term on the other. The progress of strategy implementation must also be monitored regularly, and reports must be prepared on its effectiveness during each government term.

The implementation of the strategy must be based on sufficient evidence and goal-oriented efforts to promote the rights of the child in changing circumstances. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently stressed the importance of data collection, child impact assessment and child budgeting as well as the coordination of action plans concerning the rights of the child. They are an elemental part of the Child Strategy and its implementation. Methods must also be devised by which the Child Strategy can optimally support the fulfilment of Finland's obligations under international treaties regarding periodic reporting on the rights of the child.

Effective implementation of the strategy will require sufficient resources and expertise. It must be implemented in cross-administrative collaboration and involve a wide range of stakeholders in society, the civil society as well as children and adults of different ages and representing a variety of population groups.

Permanent structures and close links between strategy work and strategic planning and decision-making in central, regional and local government will be required to implement the strategy effectively. In efforts to develop structures, the mandates of other stakeholders tasked to promote the rights of the child, including the Ombudsman for Children and the Parliamentary Ombudsman, must be taken into account. The practical preconditions for implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child include centralised, coherent and permanent coordination and monitoring of the Child Strategy as well as adequate powers.

The preparation of the National Child Strategy was launched in Prime Minister Sipilä's government term with a report titled *Child's Time 2040*. This work has continued during Prime Minister Marin's term of office in parliamentary committees and through public servants' efforts that support them.

The parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee adopted this strategy as part of its report published in December 2020 (Publication series of the Prime Minister's Office 2021:8). For more information on the Committee's composition, the report, statements of the parliamentary groups and separate publications that support the strategy, visit the dedicated website of the strategy at <http://www.lapsistrategia.fi/>.

SNELLMANINKATU 1, HELSINKI
PO BOX 23, 00023 GOVERNMENT, FINLAND
valtioneuvosto.fi/en/
julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi

ISBN: 978-952-383-740-9 PDF

ISSN: 2490-0966 PDF