REPORT CARD 2013: WHAT IS THE AVERAGE GOVERNMENT SCORE FOR CHILDCARE?

Dear friends, colleagues and supporters,

This is the second edition of the annual report of the National Network for Children (NNC) published under the title “Report Card 2013: What is the average government score for childcare?” The report uses scores that are similar to those pupils receive in school to assess the manner in which the government and public administration fulfilled their commitments to children during the last calendar year. This is an alternative to the ordinary reports document intended for the public containing a critical and independent appraisal of child policies. It is the outcome of the efforts of many – professionals involved in the work of the National Network for Children and external parties alike. Amongst them, there are practitioners working with children and families on a daily basis as well as experts and tutors engaged in the implementation of academic approaches in real life, all of them driven by a mission to make a positive difference to children’s lives.

The aim of this document is to make a dispassionate assessment of the situation in which Bulgarian children live today. Each report card is important in itself, but the progress achieved in the fulfilment of promises made as compared to those achieved in the previous year is of much greater importance. Whilst in some areas progress has been achieved, in others there has been little or none. There are also areas in which the government has let up in its efforts and in which negative trends prevail.

We welcomed 2013 with passions running high amidst politicians and citizens. Despite having witnessed some extremes, a lesson has been learned, namely that politicians and the public administration must work more actively for, and alongside, citizens in order to achieve a better standard of living in Bulgaria. Children and their families are an intrinsic part of the fabric of society and the process currently under way in society and, equally, child welfare cannot be viewed in isolation from the problems affecting the family, employment, social services, education, healthcare, justice etc.

The 2013 Report Card amply demonstrates that children suffer! Whether we will achieve success in changing this reality by ensuring the well-being of Bulgarian children depends on both the personal and professional responsibility of politicians and public servants and the efforts of citizens. Today, we have a duty to build on what has already been achieved without being tempted to start from scratch as much meaningful progress has been made. There are studies, analyses and documents that clearly point the direction for continued reform of the systems and the areas in which efforts must be focused. This requires political will, responsible and proactive public administration and the consensus of citizens on key reforms to be undertaken for the benefit of children.

By way of conclusion, I would like to thank all who took part in the effort to compile this year’s Report Card. We would not been able to achieve neither the requisite quality nor level of detail without your valuable contribution. We would like to also thank the readers for taking the time to peruse the document. Above all, however, I would like to thank those who will find something to take away from the Report Card that they will be able to apply in their work dedicated to improving the lives of children.
Acknowledgments

The National Network for Children (NNC) would like to thank all people who contributed to preparation of the report “Report Card 2013: Assessment of the Implementation of State Commitments towards Children of Bulgaria”. We are grateful to the members of the network and for the efforts and the diligence of the colleagues who commented and edited separate parts of the report. Special thanks to the Irish organization Children’s Rights Alliance, whose “Report Card” inspired us for the current initiative.

Thanks also for the efforts of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Regional Development, Agency for Social Assistance and the State Agency for Child Protection staff who prepared the answers for the numerous requests for access to public information for the aims of the report.

We would like to express our special gratitude to the members of the external evaluation panel who defined the final scores and legitimized the report with their considerable expert contribution. The people who devoted their time, efforts and expertise and took part in the external evaluation panel are as follows:

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“Report Card 2013: What is the average government score for childcare?” is the second annual report published by the National Network for Children. It sets out an appraisal of the implementation of selected government commitments in the area of child and family policies in Bulgaria during the 2012 calendar year.

The main purpose for the development of the report card is to carry out annual, independent monitoring of children’s rights based on the commitments on behalf of the government and supported by facts and data. In addition, through the report card, we aim to suggest recommendations with which to support the decision-making process of the state administration.

When choosing the areas, we reviewed all national strategies, plans and programmes, which concern policies or measures related to children. We chose commitments which were envisaged to be implemented in 2011 or in a longer period. We kept mainly to two criteria about priority of the problems - significance and the possibility of finding solutions.

The commitments examined in this Notebook were selected in line with the principle of consistency. We have retained those whose period of implementation continued throughout 2012 and in lieu of those that have expired we have selected new ones that concern problems which are identical or virtually identical. This has allowed us to dynamically trace the manner in which the government is addressing certain challenges and whether action has been taken in order to address the problems identified in the previous year in line with the recommendations given.

„Report Card 2013” contains 5 areas (school subjects), 16 subareas and 40 commitments. Analysis includes: brief description of the commitment; description of facts and data from the experts assessment and the answers of the state institutions about the respective commitment; recommendations for urgent actions (concrete steps and possible directions of work).

In order to assess implementation correctly, we used facts and data provided by the relevant agencies under the Act for Access to Public Information. The other sources are reports of institutions, independent researchers and non-governmental organizations as well as publications in the media. As the report was compiled in 2012, it mostly sets out data relevant to the state-of-play in 2011. When no data was readily available, we have used the most recent relevant data indicating the general state-of-play in terms of policy implementation. In the report card, all data and sources of information are cited in support of the conclusions and assessment of the various commitments and, also, in order to demonstrate that the analysis is based on reliable sources and is not a subjective opinion of the NNC.

The ‘promises’ selected for analysis differ in nature. Some represent specific measures and sets of measures whilst others can be described as comprehensive policies. In some cases their implementation can be unambiguously evaluated whilst in other cases such the appraisal calls for an expert evaluation in the framework of the overall context for implementation.

Our task was to consider any changes that have occurred in terms of commitment implementation and to note the progress achieved. Where no progress has been achieved or no political action has been taken, implementation has been rated as poor and a longer period for fulfilment has been indicated. We have also tried to encourage all positive efforts and developments even where no tangible outcomes have resulted from the fulfilment of the commitments under consideration.

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1 The full text of the methodological notes could be seen at www.nmd.bg
The grades (scores) assigned are based on those used in the educational system. The initial grades were proposed by the experts who compiled the different analytical parts. These were subsequently confirmed by civil society organisations that are members of the NNC. The final scores have been coordinated with and validated by a group of external experts on evaluation all of whom are public figures and professionals with a wealth of experience in the problem areas concerned.
## GRADES

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<tr>
<th>AREA</th>
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## RATING SCALE

Excellent 6 – there’s significant, positive change in the lives of children  
Very good 5 – there are positive results for children  
Good 4 – satisfactory but insufficient development for children  
Average 3 – insufficient development, limited positive effect for children  
Poor 2 – unacceptable result, nothing has been done or the steps are in wrong direction
General principles under UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The grade assigned to the government and public administration for implementation of the commitments relating to the general principles laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (non-discrimination, children’s opinion, child poverty and welfare, safe and healthy environment) is 3.

Grade 3 has been assigned for the following reasons:

There is no special body in Bulgaria with special responsibility for monitoring compliance with and respect for children’s rights. Similarly, neither has a special anti-discrimination department been set up at the Commission for Protection from Discrimination nor has an Ombudsman for Children been created. Nevertheless, in 2012 the functions of the Ombudsman of the Republic were expanded in scope by incorporating a special provision into the body of national law on ‘the protection of children’s rights’. However, this does not fully implement the recommendations Bulgaria has received from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The social equality of girls and women is practically excluded from the priorities of public institutions. No action has been taken to alter stereotypical attitudes towards the role of girls and women in society. To date, no map of the areas and groups where the problem is most prevalent has been drawn up.

The right of children to express an opinion remains confusing and a right that neither children nor professionals are sufficiently aware of. The specific steps taken in 2012 to make provisions for child participation are valuable and merit greater publicity and positive recognition by society.

No progress has been achieved with regard to reaching the targets for lowering poverty in households with children. On the contrary, a negative trend prevails. Child poverty in Bulgaria is the highest in Europe and instead of recognisable action that meaningfully addresses the problem, we see continuous deterioration. More than half of all children in Bulgaria live at a risk of poverty and the number of poor children is equal to the entire population of the province of Stara Zagora. Child poverty in households with three or more children is staggering.

There are no standards for social work with children and for the workload and number of active cases social workers handle. The employees of the Child Protection Departments (CPDs) work under enormous pressure and are at risk of ‘overheating’ despite the appointment of new social workers, an increase in salaries in the sector and the career development policy introduced during the year. Both old and new CPD workers remain inadequately paid, receive no training or mentoring (despite the new policy) and all aspects of their work are underfunded.

The facts in 2012:

Children are still regarded as individuals that are not sufficiently developed but merely en route to adulthood without the right to express an opinion or participation.

Many children have been deprived of early child development services and the possibility to attend nursery schools due to a lack of such services or family poverty.
The children involved in legal proceedings continue to be manipulated and subjected to multiple interviews in an inadequate environment without any meaningful preparation, which equally applies to the experts that handle proceedings.

The number of community-based services available to children with disabilities remains inadequate; the architectural environment does not meet the requisite standard; and the system of education is ill-equipped and equal access is denied to many.

Children in institutions become victims of different forms of discrimination, primarily on the basis of social status.

The non-governmental organisations participating in the NNC have tabled a proposal that a new position be established within the administration of the Ombudsman of the Republic with special responsibility for the rights of the child (Child Rights Ombudsman). The proposal was examined by the competent parliamentary committees and turned down.

In the last 5 years, unlike the aggregate data for the EU, the number of girls who drop out of school in Bulgaria is higher than that of boys (16 and respectively 14 percent).

Giving birth under the age of 20 has been on the decrease but remains relatively high (7,799 children in 2011) with attendant health and social consequences for the mothers and their children. The number of abortions amongst girls up to the age of 19 years remains sustainably high².

The incidence of alimentary disorders in children is on the increase. According to the latest survey 20% of children are at risk of anorexia (20.4% of girls aged 14 to 19 years and 8% of the boys in the same age group have dysfunctional eating habits).

The number of attempted and actual suicides in children is another reason for concern. In 2011, 449 children have attempted to commit suicide of which 394 were girls.

The number of child victims of crimes remains substantially the same with a marked trend of more girls becoming victims than boys.

Albeit with a twelve-month delay, in 2012 both a charter and mechanism for child participation were developed and a model for their formal approval became operational. Although valuable per se, the documents contain certain aspects that need rethinking with a view to achieving accessible, comprehensive and authentic child participation.

The indicator ‘risk of poverty and social exclusion’ for children in Bulgaria is 51.8% as compared to the EU average of 27.0 percent.

In Bulgaria 28.9% of all children are poor, which represents an increase by 2.2 percentage points as compared to the previous year.

In 2009 65.2% of all households with three or more children were poor as compared to 78.2% in 2010.

In 2012, CPDs recruited 220 new social workers whose salaries are lower than those of their colleagues (a situation that will remain unchanged in the next 3 years). New recruits did not receive

² According to statistical data published by the National Public health Protection Centre there were 2 042 abortions in the first nine months of 2012.
any induction training or mentoring; they are not provided with computers and do not have their travel expenses reimbursed. Predictably, staff turnover rates are high.

On average, a social worker is assigned at least 85 new cases each year, excluding those carried over from previous years (according to good practice a social worker should handle a maximum of 35 cases per annum).

There is a National Environment and Health Programme and an action plan for its implementation comprising a special section entitled ‘Child Health - Environment’. There is also a measure for assessment of water quality in view of the risk it presents for the health of children. However, the expected outcome from the implementation of this measure is the compilation of a Report on the quality of bottled water on the market vis-à-vis the requirements for children...

**Recommendations:**

- take specific action to ensure that an ombudsman for children is established as an independent body in line with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and enact the necessary amendments to the Ombudsman Act;
- make a special effort to raise public awareness, including the awareness of children, of child rights and the specific aspects of unequal treatment;
- make provisions for the collection of accurate and reliable gender-specific data, which ensures that gender-specific analyses, impact assessments etc. can be conducted; commence work on mapping the problem, taking into account the different dimensions of the violation of the rights of girls and women;
- involve children in different extra-curricular activities, *inter alia*, individual tuition for school drop-outs at risk, for example through the system of the Social Assistance Agency and/or day care community centres;
- develop forms and ensure the availability of funds for the inclusion of parents in the child participation model;
- Introduce tax incentives and waive certain fees for parents, including by means of meaningful family allowance taxation, which takes into account the number of family members;
- eliminate discrimination of children depending on the sequence in which they were born to the family (at present the one-off benefit paid upon birth has a progressively lower amount for a third and any subsequent child born);
- introduce indexation to the pensions paid to mothers (or both parents) depending on the number of children and the level of their education – creating citizens is as important as creating GDP;
- ensure accessible childcare services that are adequate in form and number (kindergartens, parent cooperatives and other forms of childcare facilities) and develop and introduce specialist programmes and measures for the protection of single parents and families with many children throughout the country;
- create a link between social assistance payments and social work;
- develop, on the basis of broad consultations, and introduce standards for social work with children, particularly in terms of workload and number of active cases per social worker;
- raise the capacity of CPDs by ensuring adequate pay for staff, induction and on-the-job training and mentoring;
- ensure greater transparency and broader consultations in the context of the activities carried out under the project for strengthening of the capacity of the Social Assistance Agency (SAA);

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3 Full House – Multiple Children Parents Club to the Parents Association, 2009; *Proposal for amendment of the government policy for children and families.*
identify the problem of ensuring constant access to water that conforms to the requisite standard for quality and develop a map of the most vulnerable groups in terms of agglomerations and environmental factors that present a higher risk for heath; develop a dedicated national programme setting out specific measures and indicators that take into account the actual state-of-play in terms of access to water for all children.

Family Environment and Alternative Care

In 2012 the government and public administration receive grade 3 for the fulfilment of their commitments to children in the area of the right of children to live in a family environment and deinstitutionalization policy implementation.

Grade 3 has been assigned for the following reasons:

No social or psychological support is available in the area of prevention of abandonment in maternity wards. Social workers provide support to young mothers at risk only in the maternity wards of provincial hospitals and the Ministry of Health (MH) has abdicated from its responsibility to develop and introduce both hospital procedures for notifying families of children diagnosed with disabilities at the time of birth and early consultations.

In 2012, no minimum package of guaranteed family support services was available. There is a lack of understanding of the need for parenthood support policies and the introduction of universal, integrated and accessible services aimed at halting the deterioration of problems and their escalation into family crises. The linking of newly introduced community-based services to municipal and provincial strategies for social services is seen as a positive development.

A special project focused on the development of the social services planning system is under implementation but the constituent project activities centre solely on persons who leave institutions for children deprived of parental care (ICDPC) and persons with disabilities who await institutionalization. All other groups of children and families at risk remain excluded. Progress has been observed solely in terms of planning, with the level of services introduced to date being unable to match demand.

No mechanism for social services funding has been developed and introduced that is matched to quality and the needs of clients. Capacity-based financing, i.e. paying the same amount of money per child each year, remains the norm, which does not take into consideration the individual needs of clients.

From a statistical standpoint, in 2012 the placement of children in foster care has increased by 30 percent.4 Despite the efforts of the government to develop foster care through the “I Have a Family Too” project, this area has proved problematic and has failed to live up to the expectations of evolving into a successful process due to gaps in the planning of activities and expected outcomes.

The reform of the eight pilot homes for medical and social care for children5 (HMSCC) has been unreasonably delayed. The planning of new health and social services also lags behind and slows down reforms in putting the necessary infrastructure in place.

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4 As at September 2011, 800 children were placed in foster families and in September 2012 their number stood at 1027.
5 Homes for medical and social care for children aged 0 to 3 (infant homes)
In general terms, adoption has low priority in the context of deinstitutionalization policy and the number of parents using post-adoption support services remains unclear. Nevertheless, there has been some progress towards an alignment of foster care and adoption procedures.

The facts in 2012:

In 2011, the Ministry of Health responded that the development of procedures for all neonatology wards for notifying diagnosed disabilities and the available possibilities to receive consultations was forthcoming. In 2012, it delegated this responsibility to the ‘institutions concerned in the development of child abandonment prevention services (SAA, MLSP).’

Access to abandonment prevention social workers is available solely through the maternity wards of provincial hospitals.

Social services development strategies at municipal and provincial level have been drawn up on the basis of analyses of community needs. Yet there is no mechanism enabling the introduction of services. The decisions about the services to be developed in a municipality during the year depend on the funds available under national projects financed from the European Funds.

Strategies are focused exclusively towards children at risk and there is a lack of understanding of the need to follow an integrated approach with regard to social, health, educational, housing, transport and other issues at the same time.

Several projects for the deinstitutionalization of children placed in different types of homes are being implemented which entail planning packages of family support services. However, these initiatives remain uncoordinated. Furthermore, they are not linked to municipal and provincial strategies.

The lack of a clearly defined minimum package of guaranteed family support services and the haphazard planning approach based primarily on projects financed by the Structural Funds generate an uneven distribution of services.

The Support project, which aims to improve the interaction and coordination between deinstitutionalization projects, is an encouraging initiative in this regard.

The analyses assessing the needs of children placed in Institutions for children deprived of parental care (ICDPC) and of disabled persons awaiting placement in specialist institutions is seen as a positive development in the context of the social services planning system in 2012.

The approved financial standards for community-based social services are inadequate and incapable of ensuring the development and management of human resources. Hence they have a detrimental impact on the quality of available services.

The Family Type Placement Centres (FTPC) are regarded as the main alternative of Institutions for children with intellectual disabilities (ICID). The annual amount of 7,255 BGN per child is critically low and barely covers the basic needs of children. There is no mechanism for differentiating the annual allowance depending on the individual needs of children.

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6 Information received from the MH by Letter No 93-00-38 of 19 July 2011 under an application for access to public information.
7 Information received from the MH under an application for access to public information pursuant to Order No РД 28-179 by letter No 93-00-37 of 19 October 2012.
8 or Small Group Homes
As at 30 September 2011, when the implementation of the foster care development project commenced, the total number of approved foster families was 935 and the number of children placed in foster care was 792. A year later, as at 30 September 2012, the total number of approved foster families was 1,291 (356 more) and the number of children placed in foster families stood at 1,027 (an increase of 235).9

The government project aims to develop foster care and deinstitutionalize at least 600 children over a period of 2 years. However, in 2011 alone, the number of children institutionalized in specialist medical care homes is 2,508.

The measures taken by the SAA to provide additional support to municipal foster care teams, which in 2013 will be working with external consultants, is seen as a positive development in the context of the project.

The eight homes for medical and social care for children (HMSCC) being piloted will undergo restructuring during the stages of services planning – building infrastructure; removal of children from the homes; and ensuring the necessary funds are available for service delivery. In 2012, under the infrastructure building project work has focused on the preparation of public procurement calls.

The hiring of experts to assess children and their families was delayed. Assessment work commenced at the end of 2012 and will continue into 2013.

During the year the MH and SAA took on board a proposal for the introduction of new services that will replace the functions of the existing HMSCC but the call for financing of substitute services failed to be launched due to the delay in child assessment work and infrastructure reform.

Besides the government-implemented projects for the pilot closure of 8 HMSCC, another positive development has been the willingness of the MH to increase the number of homes scheduled for closure. With the assistance of non-governmental organisations 5 more HMSCC will be closed.

There is a mandatory requirement that prospective adoptive parents follow an approved training programme. However, no specific methodology for the training has been developed and it is inadequately funded.

In 2012, the commitments relating to the development and support of adoption were dropped as an item to be reported in the Deinstitutionalization Action Plan and adoption is no longer regarded as a priority within the context of the foster care development policy.

In practice the adoption process in Bulgaria continues to be fragmented between different bodies and can be described as confusing rather than supportive and encouraging. There is no standard for the training of prospective parents; there are no rules for the venue and the participants in the meeting and this frequently frustrates either the child or the prospective adoptive parents. Supervision is highly formalistic.

The unprecedented practice of the so called ‘disadoption’ has continued to exist10 as does the practice relating to confidentiality of the adoption record whereby the origin and kinship details of the child are erased or removed.

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9 Statistical data of the SAA. Foster care development as at 30 September 2011 and 30 September 2012.
10 Family Code, in force from 1 October 2009, amended SG No 100 of 21 December 2010, Article 106(1)(2).
The efforts of the inter-institutional working group on alignment of foster care and adoption procedures are seen as progress and a demonstration of political will for improvement of existing procedures.

Recommendations:

- develop uniform standards for prevention of abandonment which are to be observed by CPDs and all maternity and paediatric wards; ensure that social and psychological support is available in all maternity wards and paediatric clinics in the country;
- introduce training on prevention of abandonment and the problems of institutionalization at all educational institutions and in practice with a view to bringing about a change in the attitudes of healthcare professionals;
- accelerate the process of rolling out new services and applying in-depth approaches capable of reaching the most remote areas and the most vulnerable groups;
- develop a set of statutory rules, a financial standard and methodology for a guaranteed minimum package of services for children and families at provincial level;
- create a link between cash benefits for parents, child protection measures and family support services;
- develop a map of the available child and family services with a view to overcoming their uneven spread through more efficient and effective planning; develop and introduce a quality monitoring system;
- align the planning of community-based services for children and families under the projects for deinstitutionalization, the social inclusion project and the municipal and provincial social services development strategies;
- introduce a financial standard allowing the money to follow the child into the current FTPCs for children with disabilities and approve the creation of a network of FTPCs for children and sheltered homes under deinstitutionalization projects;
- raise the awareness of municipal administrations and the local departments of the SAA of minimum and higher standards for the delivery of foster care;
- ensure teams working on the government project for the closure of HMSCC interact proactively with all other stakeholders with a view to pooling their efforts and launching new services so as to minimise the institutionalisation of new children;
- the MH should streamline project implementation by drawing on the good practices implemented at the HMSCC by different non-government organisations;
- invest savings from optimisation and closure of special medical care homes for children in programmes and activities for children instead of financing other activities;
- create a form for more active participation of civil organisations in the project for pilot closure of special medical care homes for children;
- the training of prospective adoptive parents should be fully delegated to licensed NGOs; develop training packages and adopt interactive training approaches under the Prospective parents training programme;
- develop rules, including a financial standard, support and accompanying services for children and adoptive parents in the post-adoPTION adjustment period; collect statistical data about their users;
- protect the best interest of the child within the process of adoption, including adequate preparation, particularly during the adjustment period;
- remove the provision that currently allows disadoption by adoptive parents from the Family Code as well as the practice of adoption confidentiality.
In 2012 the government and public administration receive grade 2+ for the fulfilment of their commitments to children in the area of healthcare (inpatient and outpatient care, mental health, combating infant and child mortality).

**Grade 2+ has been assigned for the following reasons:**

No mechanisms have been set in place for comprehensive and early coverage of all women for the purposes of monitoring pregnancy and motherhood and ensuring sufficient health and social services that promote specialist check-ups.

Within the framework of a project funded by UNICEF Bulgaria, an innovative model for community reach health services in support of families with newly-born and young children has been developed. Steps have been taken to ensure its implementation but no activities have yet commenced. No tangible project has been achieved in providing health services at schools. Similarly, there are no health awareness classes.

Those who live in remote areas have difficulty accessing medical assistance.

There are no signs of improved psychological and pedagogical support for children in the community or at school.

There is no developed network for child psychiatric support in Bulgaria.

Indeed, there are no child mental health programmes at any level. Existing prevention programmes are severely limited in terms of type and health programmes for children with mental disorders are operated in only five cities.

Infant mortality rate\(^{11}\) continues to be high despite a positive downward trend. The remaining indicators relating to child mortality remain unchanged – far removed from targets and significantly lagging behind EU average.

**The facts in 2012:**

The principle mechanism for awareness raising and promoting check-ups by physicians, prevention of diseases and pregnancy supervision is the work carried out by health mediators whose focus is on Roma communities.

The work of health mediators is financed by the government as a delegated activity. However, there are only 109 health mediators. The service falls short of expectations in terms of achievement of the goal of improving material and child health.

Pregnant women without health insurance coverage are practically excluded from the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) programme, which lays down the rules for pregnancy supervision by general practitioners and gynaecologists and obstetricians.

The operational government standard for paediatrics does not entail a working mechanism for comprehensive healthcare for infants and their families living in remote areas, small towns and areas with a predominantly Roma population where there are no surgeries and specialists and access to health services is severely hampered.

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\(^{11}\) Infant mortality rate – the ratio of the number of deaths of children under one year of age to the number of live births in the reference year; the value is expressed per 1000 live births.
Within the framework of the UNICEF-funded project for the closure of the HMSCC-Shumen\textsuperscript{12} a new model for community reach health services has been developed. The model is called Maternal and Child Health Centre.

The model will be rolled out at provincial level. It will target pregnant women, women who have given birth recently and children aged up to three years and their families as well as groups at a higher risk.

The model has been developed in the context of the policy of deinstitutionalization but at the end of 2012 it had not been rolled out hence it is difficult to judge its efficiency.

Health specialists in surgeries are neither allowed to issue referrals for consultations and tests nor prescribe medication. Given the current statutory framework their functions are extremely limited.

During 2012, specialist health awareness classes at schools were available only on an extra-curricular basis which placed constraints on the health education of children.

Many children fail to attend the requisite number of preventive check-ups envisaged by law.

There are women who give birth without having attended any preventive check-ups during the pregnancy and people from small towns, villages and remote areas cannot rely on prompt, high-quality medical assistance.

The economic crisis has further deteriorated the access of large groups of families to medical services and medication which are not reimbursed by the NHIF.

Although the Ministry of Health is able to disburse subsidies for clinics and hospitals under the Health Establishments Act, no subsidies have been disbursed in the period between 2010 and 2012 in deprived and/or remote areas.

Within the system of education there are no trained experts with the necessary skills to implement comprehensive mental health programmes.

No official statistical data is available about children with problems, which places a constraint on the sound adequate planning of measures to help them overcome such problems. Similarly, there are no trained teams with the necessary skills to conduct an active monitoring of children with special needs.

There are 11 child psychiatric surgeries, which is significantly less than the minimum requirement for at least 28. Similarly psychiatric departments fall short of the requisite standard by 1/3 and there are only 15 specialists countrywide (less than half of the requisite minimum).

There are no specialist surgeries for children and teenagers in almost 2/3 of provincial centres and the requirement for the minimum number of child psychiatrists is covered at less than 50 percent. There are psychiatric wards in only 5 towns.

\textsuperscript{12} The “A Family for Each Child project” (closure of HMSCC Shumen) is implemented by UNICEF Bulgaria in partnership with the MH. Project activities are implemented jointly with non-governmental organizations such as the Social Activities and Practices Institute and the Child and Space Association. Under the project a pilot network of services and measures for support of the parents and families of infants aged (0-3 years) has been created with the ultimate goal of closing HMSCC Shumen.
Specialist psychiatric care for children and teenagers is, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible for the great majority of Bulgarian children.

No comprehensive child mental health programmes have been introduced. There are neither preventive programmes nor ones catering for the needs of children with mental disorders and their families.

According to the latest available statistical data, the infant mortality rate has decreased from 9.4 in 2010 to 8.5% in 2011 – the lowest in the history of demographic statistics in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, infant mortality remains twice as high as the EU average rate of 4.18 per thousand.

There are marked differences in infant mortality in the different provinces. The highest mortality rate has been registered in Sliven Province (17% for the province and 21.1% for the rural areas) and Pazardzhik (14.6%). The lowest infant mortality rate has been registered in Sofia (4.2%).

Overall, infant mortality dropped in 2011 only with all other indicators remaining at the same level – approximately twice as high as EU average rates.

No analysis has been conducted of the reasons for the persistently high infant mortality and why it is double the average rates in other EU member states.

**Recommendations:**

- update Regulation No 26 on obstetric care to women without valid health insurance and performing tests outside the scope of mandatory health insurance with a view to introducing a minimum package of services that are available free of charge – check-ups, consultations and tests during the pregnancy;
- introduce incentives for the opening of surgeries and raising the awareness of the residents of remote or small towns and villages and expand the scope of work of health mediators;
- ensure adequate funds are available for the set up and functioning of mobile units to adjacent, occupied practices, which can deliver services to the population on a roster basis;
- set up centres for maternal and child health in all provinces and ensure that mobile health and social services are available in areas where there is a shortage of medical doctors or GP surgeries so as to cater for the needs of families experiencing hardship and ensure service delivery in areas with a prevalent Roma population;
- ensure adequate conditions for timely emergency assistance and psychological support at all schools; introduce a form of health awareness education which covers all schoolchildren;
- give priority to psychological and pedagogic support to children at school; develop and implement professional, comprehensive programmes and services geared to detect and overcome different forms and manifestations of challenging behaviour among children; train teams to work under the programmes concerned and create conditions that facilitate access to all kindergartens and schools;
- enact legislation and provide the necessary funds for the training of pedagogic experts and develop a strategy to incentivize young people to specialise in child psychology;
- develop a strategy and an action plan for the development of a nationwide psychiatric assistance for children;
- urgently open at least another 17 surgeries for children and teenagers (at least one per provincial centre), additional hospital beds for children and teenagers (in at least ten hospital wards);

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14 The statistical data for 2012 will be published in June 2013 at the earliest.
align the work of specialists with a view to achieving the target infant and child mortality rates, including the relevant documents, and ensure adequate funding and stringent control of implementation;

- take urgent measure to reduce infant mortality in the provinces where its levels are currently the highest such as Sliven and Pazardzhik where the mortality among children up to 1 year is 4 times higher than in Sofia;

- give priority to measures for lowering of the impact of risk factors for health such as overcoming poverty.

**Education**

In 2012 the government and public administration receive grade 3 for the fulfilment of their commitments to children in the area of education (early education and care, school education, inclusive education, health and civil education).

**Grade 3 has been assigned for the following reasons:**

No early child development standard has been introduced in Bulgaria to date.

Some progress has been achieved in the efforts to ensure that all children attend school. Since 2008, there has been the trend of decrease school coverage. This trend has been reversed in 2012. However, no clear mechanisms have been set in place for coordination among the different sectors with a view to boosting school coverage.

Certain progress has been registered with regard to the monitoring of school drop-out rates, i.e. the adopted strategy for lowering early school leaving, which contains elements of an analysis and appraisal of the phenomenon. No information system or centres for work with children at risk of dropping out of school have been set up yet.

New national educational requirements (standards) for the system of general and vocational education are being developed but the draft has not been presented yet because the Parliament is still expected to vote on the Pre-school and School Education Act – the most important statute in terms of hierarchy.

During the year, the single standard for the disbursement of funds for the support of children/students with special educational needs failed to be differentiated depending on the severity of the disorder/disability.

Some partial progress has been observed in the improvement of the accessibility of the architectural environment for children with special educational needs which still falls short of ensuring unhampered access.

No services in support of inclusive education of children and school children with special educational needs are available. Individual activities have been planned but no feedback is available about their implementation. No systematic solutions have been identified.

There has been a certain expansion of the scope and encouragement of different forms of education aiming to instill a spirit of democratic citizenship and patriotism, health and environmental awareness, consumer culture, physical activity and sport in children but no systematic and sustainable results have been achieved.
The foundations of building a system for prevention of violence and aggression among children and schoolchildren have been laid but it currently exists as a model and not a good practice in Bulgarian schools.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Science has not been making dedicated efforts to prevent drug abuse, AIDS/HIV and bullying.

The facts in 2012:

The standards for early child development were not introduced and public institutions excluded the relevant activities from the 2012 National Child Protection Programme.

Only UNICEF Bulgaria is making systemic efforts and these have been the main rationale for the early child development projects developed.

One of the tasks of a social inclusion project implemented by the MLSP is to test and approve models and standards for early child development. However, there is no clear timeframe for the achievement of this task and no concerted efforts are being made by the responsible institutions.

There has been a reversal in the negative trend of a continual decrease of the net enrolment ratio (NER)\(^{15}\) – a net indicator for child coverage by the mandatory schooling system.

Within a twelve-month period, an increase has been registered in the coverage of 5 year olds in 66% of municipalities which have introduced the measure. In 6 years olds the coverage is more than 97 percent. The net ratio for children enrolled in kindergartens during the 2011/2012 school year is 81.5 percent, which represents an increase of 6.6 percent as compared to the 2010/2011 school year.

According to statistical data of the National Statistical Institute (NSI) in 2012 the NER increases by 4.3% in primary and by 1% in the junior high and high school, respectively. However, this is insufficient to make up for the decrease by 7 and 5 percent for basic and junior high school, respectively, despite being the first positive change in the last five years.

A comprehensive Strategy for reduction of early school leaving for the period 2012-2020 has been developed.

The strategy is a serious contribution on the part of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (MEYS) to the policy designed to guarantee children’s access to education. However, it does not contain an estimate of the necessary resources and the potential sources of funding which, given the broad scope of the intervention, jeopardizes its implementation in practice.

The institutions responsible for ensuring access to education continued to function without being able to rely on up-to-date information and/or relied on information that differed significantly due to the different methods of collection used by different providers.

Unresolved problems with the coverage of children with disabilities continue to persist. Children with special educational needs are taught at less than half of the schools in Bulgaria and observations reveal that the educational process can be described as inefficient. In essence, children with disabilities continue to be excluded from the educational system.

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\(^{15}\) Definition: the ratio is calculated as a percentage, i.e. as a ratio of the number of pupils attending school in the different age groups 7 - 10, 11 – 14 and 15 - 18 years as compared to the total population in the same age groups. The number of school children and of the population is calculated as at 31 December each year.
The results of the work done on the development of general school educational standards to date have not been released hence no assessment can be made of the changes in the schoolwork pupils are required to handle.

The MEYS has continued its efforts to improve assessment policies so as to take a further step in developing the capacity to assess skills and knowledge alike. The actual outcomes will become known in December 2012 when the PISA 2012 survey will be published.

The Pre-school and School Education Act failed to be adopted by the end of 2012. This brings the whole process of education modernisation back to square one.

The MEYS has continued to determine the single standards for the upkeep of children/pupils with special educational needs without taking into account the individual needs of children/pupils solely depending on the type of school attended and the form of tuition.

According to information received from the MEYS, the single standard for pupil support in a secondary comprehensive school is 1 350 BGN on average.

In 2012, the supplement for schoolchildren who need additional resources has increased by 51% and currently stands at 293 BGN per annum. Considering inflation, this represents minimum progress. There is still little incentive for admission of children with special educational needs in general schools.

Forty percent of the supplement (i.e. 117 BGN) must be disbursed on building a supportive environment that facilitates the teaching process. However, it has not been specified what a supportive environment entails – whether it covers physical accessibility in the environment or includes other inclusion measures for children with special educational needs.

Several projects for optimisation of the network of schools for special needs children are under way and the number of their pupils decreased by 3.2% as compared to the previous year. It is to be hoped that that the improvement of the conditions in specialist schools is progressing in parallel and not at the expense of improvement in mainstream schools.

The supportive environment for children with special educational needs is still wrongly understood as building only an accessible physical environment (ramps, platforms, other technical facilities and adapted restrooms).

According to information received from the Centre for Independent Life only 4 out of 250 schools in Sofia are accessible.

The list of technical aids available to disabled children and schoolchildren free of charge do not include any learning aids.

Twenty-eight resource centres throughout Bulgaria are working together with mainstream schools in support of the achievement of the individual tuition plans of pupils with special educational needs.

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16 Information released by the MEYS pursuant to the Access to Public Information Act, Decision N 18-425/16. 08. 2012.
17 The sum is disbursed to schools and kindergartens into which children and school children with special educational needs are integrated.
Other alternative services, such as adapted after-school classes for children and pupils, resource points, guaranteed transport to and from school, exercises with physical therapists and sessions with psychological and speech therapy are difficult to come by and there is a pronounced lack of awareness in respect of their use.

Despite the presence of children with disabilities in schools the outcomes of the teaching process remain questionable due to the failure to alter and adapt teaching methods and practices and to change the system of sitting tests and the school environment in general.

No strategy for the introduction of civil education has been developed despite the commitments undertaken in the programme for the development of education, science and youth policies in Bulgaria for the period 2009-2013.

In 2012 the Pre-school and School Education Act was passed by Parliament at first hearing. The draft law sets out the national educational standard for civil, health and intercultural education. However, Parliament failed to enact the law by the end of the year and the working group responsible for the development of the standard failed to be officially constituted by an order of the responsible deputy minister and has not completed its work.

The proposed standard for health education set out in the national educational standard does not guarantee the access of all children and young people to systematic health education at school. The current general school curriculum does not provide any training which can ensure the achievement of the goals envisaged in the national educational standard.

Concerning health education, the MEYS has reported some extra-curricular activities dedicated to a healthy lifestyle which have covered 23 600 pupils i.e. less than 4% of their total number18.

A mechanism against bullying among children in the community and at school has been approved. It has been piloted under a UNICEF project and its efficiency has been proven. However, it remains unclear what the implementation capacity of the schools is and whether there is a community of trained experts.

The MEYS also reports those programmes developed and training events conducted on the prevention of aggression and violence in schools but the number of trained teachers and pupils has not been specified.

The Ministry of Education does not approbated programmes for the prevention of drug abuse and contracting HIV.

Bulgaria has the highest number of births and abortions by girls aged 15 to 19 years in Europe along with Russia and the Ukraine19.

More than 50% of newly registered persons infected with HIV are aged 15 to 29 years20.

Bulgaria ranks fourth in Europe in terms of prevalence of smoking amongst teenagers21.

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18 According to NSI data for 2010/2011 there were 615.6 thousand pupils in all types of general secondary schools; http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ism06_eng.pdf
One in five pupils aged 16 years has consumed alcohol 20 and more than twenty times during the last year and 64% of pupils in the last month\textsuperscript{22}.

Twenty-six percent of 16 years old pupils have tried some form of narcotic at least once\textsuperscript{23} and the average age of first use of heroin is 18 years\textsuperscript{24}.

**Recommendations:**

- define clear steps and leadership in the development and approval of early child development standards; use existing good practices in the area of early child development in the context of a dialogue and consultations with experts and professionals from a large number of organisations;
- make arrangements for the delivery of different early education and childcare services and setting in place adequate facilities, educational technologies, teaching methodologies and staff qualifications;
- develop an Educational Map of Bulgaria by cross-referencing available NSI statistical data, the MEYS information system, the Civil Register information system, the Residency and Information System of the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the systems operated by the SAA and the State Agency for Child Protection with a view to creating an efficient tool for problem identification and ensuring children are fully covered by the system of mandatory education;
- conduct a review of the statutory documents that set out the responsibilities for child coverage by the system of mandatory education of the local authorities and other child and parent institutions with a view to developing a clear procedure for implementation in this area;
- continue the efforts to modernise school education by enacting a new law on education;
- conduct independent monitoring on the implementation of the strategy for the lowering of the early school leaving rate;
- publish the optimised parts of the curriculum so that teachers, parents and pupils have an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the changes within a reasonable period;
- launch the gradual introduction of the new educational standards into the levels of education, which will not be restructured and will remain largely unaffected by the entry into force of the new planned legislation;
- ensure an inclusive environment not only in terms of physical access but also resources available to the teaching community, for example special teaching and technical aids and equipment, appropriate learning aids and materials, and educational technologies;
- develop a single set of criteria and a methodology for assessment of school environment accessibility;
- develop teaching methodologies and introduce new, innovative solutions and electronic learning content; build a calm, tolerance environment that helps each child develop his or her potential;
- appoint assistant teachers and other specialists to capable of addressing child needs at all times for the purposes of facilitating the work process;
- involve civil and educational organisations in the delivery of educational services for children and school institutions and non-governmental organisations developing joint programmes;
- make efforts to create an institutional and public attitude, which regards inclusion as more than a formalistic placement of children in kindergartens and general schools;
- ensure that each regional inspection service responsible for education are staffed with experts and/or inspectors on inclusive education whose responsibilities include the monitoring of inclusive education;

\textsuperscript{22} See source above
\textsuperscript{23} See source above
\textsuperscript{24} National Centre for Narcotic Dependence; National Focus Point for Narcotics and Narcotic Dependence.
• ensure that the working group responsible for the development of the National Educational Standard for civil, health and intercultural education continues its work; the necessary results under the different topics and areas are to be integrated into general subjects taught; the National Education Standard for general schools and teacher training programmes to be updated with the involvement of experts on health, civil and intercultural education;
• ensure that teachers receive systematic training in interactive teaching of civil, health and intercultural subjects that is methodologically consistent and aligned to modern education requirements in the thematic areas concerned in terms of content;
• establish communication lines with national and local institutions in connection to the mechanism for prevention of school bullying of children and pupils;
• design professional and comprehensive programmes capable of identifying and addressing the different forms and degrees of challenging behaviour in children; create networks of experts and services that enable consultations and support for kindergartens in their efforts dedicated to programme implementation and making them truly accessible.

**Child justice**

In 2012 the government and public administration receive grade 3+ for the fulfilment of their commitments to children in the area of child justice.

**Grade 3+ has been assigned for the following reasons:**

No progress has been achieved in fitting out special waiting rooms and premises on for conducting hearings and interviews involving children, including those with disabilities, in the framework of proceedings that concern them. Some premises exist but they have been built primarily with the efforts of NGOs with the government providing only verbal support.

There has been an unreasonable delay in widening the use of the procedures for conducting hearings involving children laid down in the Criminal Procedure Code. The introduction of new standards for interviewing children has encountered difficulties due to the need to reform the social sector and the inland security services. Nevertheless, willingness for change was demonstrated during the year.

Insufficient progress has been achieved in terms of developing the specialist skills of judges, prosecutors and investigating magistrates and of public servants in government administrations to work with children. Special skills training has commenced in the ranks of prosecutors only.

Some initial exploratory steps have been taken by institutions with respect to the ratification of the third Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, notably the procedure for reviewing applications, but efforts have been slow and formalistic.

Serious efforts have been made to develop an action plan and a schedule for implementation of the activities set out in the Concept for national policy in the area of child justice but the plan failed to be approved by the end of 2012.

There has been some progress in conducting training events at provincial level with a view to ensuring the efficient implementation of the coordination mechanism for the handling of child victims, children at a risk of violence and in crisis situations but further efforts are necessary.

No change in the status and activities of schools for children with deviant behaviour were made during the year.
The activities aimed to raise awareness of the safe use of the Internet in the National Child Protection Programme for 2012 are considered a positive development but planned measures are limited in scope and do not ensure an effective solution to the problem.

**The facts in 2012:**

As at December 2012, there were six specially adapted child interview rooms and five more were under construction under an NGO project. Standards for interviewing minors and underage children have been developed by a working group comprising judges, prosecutors, investigating magistrates, social workers, psychologists and child police officers working with children with anti-social behaviour within the framework of a pilot project implemented by the Social Activities and Practices Institute.

The working group comprising experts from the State Agency for Child Protection, the Supreme Prosecution Service of Cassation, the Ministry of Justice and the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs as well as NGO experts was familiarised with the draft standards as early as the beginning of 2012. To date, the standards have not been adopted and implemented efforts are primarily kept up by the State Agency for Child Protection.

In May 2012, the Supreme Prosecution Service of Cassation adopted a categorical course towards developing the specialist skills of prosecutors at local level and published a list of prosecutors who will be handling cases involving minors and underage children as a matter of priority. At regional and provincial prosecution services prosecutors responsible for handling cases involving children were designated.

At local level judges responsible for hearing cases involving children as a matter of priority have been designated by special order of the administrative managers of courts. However, there has been no progress to alter police procedures and the work of police investigators and investigating magistrates.

The Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs acting jointly with NGO experts has launched a pilot programme for the training of investigating police officers in child-friendly justice and specialist child interviewing techniques. The course is not mandatory for all staff of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the number of staff to complete the training event and gain additional skills has not been specified.

In 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent an enquiry to the State Agency for Child Protection concerning the actions taken by Bulgaria with a view to acceding to the third Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The State Agency for Child Protection requested opinions from the members of the National Council on Child Protection concerning the need for signature and ratification of the protocol. The majority of the opinions received were in favour of the country acceding to the protocol.

There are no internal mechanisms and procedures for filing reports in respect of violations of children’s rights in Bulgaria and the country needs to develop such mechanisms prior to the signature and ratification of the protocol.

By the end of the year no further actions have been taken to further the ratification of the protocol.

25 Hear the Child project implemented by the Institute for Social Activities and Practices.
At the end of October 2012, the Ministry of Justice launched public consultations in respect of the Action Plan to the Concept for national policy in the area of juvenile justice.

The proposed plan envisaged a comprehensive and large-scale approach to conducting meaningful reform of juvenile justice. Serious expert analytical effort has resulted in specific proposals for actions and measures to be taken with a view to ensuring the Implementation of the Concept for national policy in the area of juvenile justice.

The analysis conducted by the State Agency for Child Protection on the implementation of the coordination mechanism for child victims of violence or children at risk has identified discrepancies in the interpretation and application of the statutory document.

The State Child Agency for Protection has conducted checks and assessments and issued specific guidelines for the implementation of the mechanism at local level.

Weekend and after-hour shifts for the social workers from the Child Protection Departments were introduced with the assistance of the SAA in order to ensure the service is capable of responding in cases of children at risk of violence.

According to information available to NGOs, which have conducted police training, the mechanism is not yet sufficiently disseminated and there are no good practices relating to its implementation.

Within the framework of the public consultations relating to the draft Pre-school and School Education Act, no substantial proposals were made with regard to the optimization and restructuring of the system of special schools. Measures have been proposed in this area, which are set out in the draft Action Plan for implementation of the Concept for a national policy for juvenile justice. However, the concept failed to be adopted last year.

In 2012, the activities relating to reporting harmful online content (as an element of a broad range of online security measures) remained limited to individual classes in several schools.

Government institutions failed to take specific steps to implement the Safer Internet Programme of the European Commission.

No national co-financing was earmarked for the functioning of the National Safe Internet Centre.

Within the system of school education no programmes designed to raise awareness of the safe and responsible use of the Internet and mobile technologies have been introduced.

Bulgaria does not have a register of the perpetrators of sexual offences against minors and underage children and there is no requirement for employers, as an element of the recruitment process, to conduct checks on applicants into such a register.

The law enforcement system and the judiciary continue to have low awareness of a new type criminal offence that became a lot more frequent with the advent of the Internet (grooming of a minor or an underage child). In many cases the prosecution service refuses to bring charges against the perpetrators with the motive that no criminal offense has been committed.

Recommendations:
specific measures to be planned by the competent institutions that will allow the use of available resources at local level and putting in place appropriate facilities for interviewing children in all 28 provinces;
• make use of the good model for the implementation of the Coordination mechanism for interaction in cases of violence against children to ensure that all competent ministries join efforts for the introduction of existing approved standards for interviewing children so that an agreement on the application of the standards at national level be signed;
• continue the process of magistrate training in specialist skills by means of covering all branches of the judiciary as well as the police and the investigation service; the acquisition of specialist skills should be accompanied by further training on the international standards for child-friendly justice, positive experience and good practices from Bulgaria, other countries etc;
• identify a mechanism for involvement of experts from the non-governmental sector into the efforts of the working group responsible for planning the implementation of the Concept for reform in the area of juvenile justice;
• develop a specific description of prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration services for children who have come into contact with the criminal justice system;
• draw up descriptions of the individual projects implemented in the area of juvenile justice, which are linked to specific activities to be conducted in the context of the legislative and administrative reform and the development of a system of services to be provided in the family and the community. Specific timeframes for implementation should be indicated;
• the monitoring of the implementation of the new national policy for juvenile justice should provide information about the implementation of the action plan considered in a broad aspect and take into account the interaction between the different projects and the outcomes resulting from the links and dependencies between the different aspects of the reform;
• introduce separate indicators that enable the efficient monitoring of the interaction relating to the Coordination mechanism for work with child victims of violence or children at risk and in crisis situations outside working hours, i.e. the response of child protection departments and seeking police assistance in cases of violence against children reported to police departments;
• ensure ongoing training under the coordination mechanism with a view to minimising the negative impact of staff turnover in the system, which is a serious challenge both within child protection departments and the police service;
• draw up specific rules (outline steps/develop a plan) for the closure of correctional boarding schools and undertaking a reform of borstals and developing a plan for the provision of specialist services for children with deviant behaviour by drawing on the experience and know-how of NGOs;
• in the framework of planning measures and activities designed to ensure a safe online environment, rely on an integrated approach that involves all competent institutions as envisaged in the Safer Internet Programme, including the possibilities available to the National safe Internet Centre;
• conduct training on the safe and responsible use of the Internet and mobile technologies in the system of education, which covers all children from nursery school upwards;
• introduce a register of the perpetrators of sexual offences against children and minors and a requirement for employers to carry out checks in that register, as an element of the recruitment process, on prospective employees whose work will bring them in contact with underage children;
• optimise the sanctions envisaged in the Electronic Communications Act with a view to facilitating the process of acquisition of traffic data by investigating bodies in cases of online offences against children;
• make efforts to raise public awareness of the danger of the sexual offences against minors\(^\text{26}\), including the awareness and understanding of the judiciary, and imposing adequate sanctions on the perpetrators.

\(^{26}\text{Grooming}\)