

# Financing early childhood education and care in Norway <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf <sup>[2]</sup>

## Excerpts:

The number of day-care centres, which represents the cornerstone of the Norwegian system of Early Childhood Education and Care, ECEC, has been massively expanded over the past couple of decades. In 1980, 78 000 children attended ECEC institutions. In 1999 the number had increased to 193 000 children. Similarly, major efforts have been made to develop various aspects of the quality and content of the ECEC system. It is therefore initially important to stress that despite these efforts, it might still be too early to draw any final conclusions on the workings of the system. The government still does not regard the ECEC sector as fully developed, as there still exists large differences locally with regard to what a child might meet of ECEC.

In addition to variations caused by these unfinished aspects of the system, two other factors must be mentioned; Geography and administrative structures: First, Norway is a geographically large country with a small population of some 4,4 million people. In fact, the population density is among the lowest in the OECD-area. It is therefore difficult to ensure the same standard and access of services within sectors such as ECEC when there are such large local variations in population-basis, employment-structure and infrastructure. Second, Norway is divided into three levels of government. Their relative importance varies from one policy area to the other. When it comes to ECEC, the central government in Oslo is primarily involved in funding and legal/regulatory aspects. The level below, Norway's 19 counties, are primarily responsible for specialised services such as hospitals and secondary education and does not have any role within the ECEC sector. The smallest administrative unit, the municipalities of which there are 434, are in charge of primary schools, services for the elderly, primary health care, child welfare and early childhood education and care. But as the municipalities vary in size, wealth, number of inhabitants - and political control - differences are often seen in priorities and standard between the municipalities within many policy-areas.

These differences are not necessarily controversial. In fact, there is a strong tradition in Norway for decentralisation. It is an overall aim that services should be produced close to where the users live. Consequently, the central government has gradually made the municipalities take over many welfare services, including ECEC. This process of decentralisation has gradually given municipalities more power and more room for financial manoeuvring.

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ECEC in Norway has long been regarded as part of the general family policy, and establishing ECEC institutions was seen as an important tool in order to enable women to participate in the work force. Provision of ECEC have therefore been crucial for varying government's efforts in order to achieve gender equality. Despite this, parallel to the rapid expansion of the ECEC sector, there has been a debate on "what is best for the child", either staying at home with one of the parents, or attending ECEC institutions. The introduction of the cash benefit scheme in 1998 highlighted this debate.

This debate has in particular focused on the youngest pre-school children. There is more or less consensus however, that ECEC attendance is desirable for children 3-6 years old. The OECD country note finds it "striking" that this has not led to reduced fees for this age group in order to encourage more children to attend. The report points to the contrast to other European countries where services for this age group are free.

It is not until very recently that public documents have stated that ECEC is important as part of lifelong learning. The White Paper on ECEC presented to Parliament in 1999, did not use such terms. The importance of ECEC was pointed to, but any connection to life-long learning was not made. The government's budget proposal for 2001 represents a change in this respect, since it clearly states that ECEC is important for children as part of a life-long learning system.

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[4]</sup>

maternity and parental leave <sup>[5]</sup>

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