

8 More than spaces: Creating universal child care in Norway

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MOVING
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About the series

One aspect of Canadian child care provision is that the supply of child care services is too limited to meet demand, unevenly distributed and inequitable in terms of location. The primary reason for this is that “creating” child care services in Canada has mostly been treated as a private responsibility. This private approach is in contrast to public processes where governments take responsibility for ensuring that child care services are developed where and when they are needed.

As Canada begins to fulfill a historic commitment to build a universal early learning and child care system, the challenge of limited, uneven, inequitable child care availability must be tackled systemically—a more publicly managed, planned, intentional approach based on greater public responsibility for ensuring the availability and determining the characteristics and distribution of regulated child care.

This series of short, topical papers covers the importance of designing effective child care expansion strategies and some elements that can contribute to developing them. The series is based on a longer publication, [*Moving from private to public processes to create child care in Canada*](#) (2020), and has been revised and re-developed in this more accessible series format to reflect current Canada-wide policy developments.

More than spaces: creating universal child care in Norway

Norway is among the countries in the world in which early learning and child care (ELCC) has become a legal right. Today more than 90% of children 1-5 years attend full-time regardless of where they live, parental employment or financial circumstances. This case study examines the key levers, structures and policies used by the Norwegian national state to ensure that sufficient child care to achieve close to universal coverage was created and accessible to all. It pays special attention to the period of rapid expansion between 2003-2009, at the end of which ELCC became a legal entitlement. It emphasizes that it has been successful because Norway has done more than “create spaces” but has built an accessible, affordable, quality system for all children.

The case study includes:

- An overview of the context in which ELCC growth occurred;
- A chronology of key events and measures leading to ELCC becoming a statutory right;
- The levers used to reach the goals including:
 - A champion for ELCC within the national government, who achieved multi-party support for full provision and ensured support for allocation of necessary resources to achieve it;
 - Setting national goals to be met locally by municipal governments;
 - Significant national grants earmarked to child care;
 - Other financial measures to ensure municipalities had necessary resources to reach full affordable provision;
 - A strong regulatory framework to ensure equity of access and quality provision;
 - Ongoing data collection and analysis to monitor and assess progress, identify issues and adjust policies and regulations as necessary.
- Description of other measures aligned with ELCC or integral to its provision.

The case study does not address measures taken to support quality and development of the workforce but these have been important factors closely linked to ongoing demand for access and parental satisfaction.

The information in this paper comes from three main sources: documents related to the OECD Thematic Review of ECEC, including the Norway background reports from 1998 and 2015; statistics from the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training and Statistics Norway, and from key informant interviews conducted in October and November 2019 with officials from local and national governments, the Directorate of Education and Training, the unions representing ELCC staff and other key stakeholders.

About terminology

The term used in Norway for all forms of ELCC is *barnehager*, which translates to “kindergarten” in English. All English translations of Norwegian documents use the term kindergarten but to avoid confusion in the Canadian context, the terms *barnehager*, child care or ELCC are used in this chapter (except when “kindergarten” is used in titles of English translations of Norwegian documents). This chapter uses the Canadian term “early learning and child care” or ELCC rather than the more commonly used “early childhood education and care”, or ECEC.

In addition to “ordinary *barnehager*” (child care centres), where more than 98% of participating children are enrolled, there are also a small number of *familiebarnehager*, (family child care homes), in which approximately 1.5% of children are enrolled. Both forms of provision are covered by the same *Kindergarten Act* (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2005) and *Framework Plan* (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2017) but efforts for creating expansion have been focused on the ordinary *barnehager*. The term municipal *barnehager* is used to describe programs directly owned and operated by a local municipality. The term private *barnehager* is used in Norway to describe all other types of provision not run by the municipality or other public entities (e.g., the national state run University of Oslo child care centre), including parent co-ops, religious organizations, non-profit organizations and

foundations, individuals and corporations. In this report, “non-municipal *barnehager*” is used to describe all ELCC not operated directly by a municipality, consistent with most Norwegian usage.

What’s the Norwegian context?

Norway, like its Nordic neighbours of Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland, is a social democracy, and—like Denmark and Sweden—a constitutional monarchy. The Storting is the national parliament, elected every four years. Norway is geographically large relative to its population of 5.2 million, and has one of the lowest population densities in Europe. Norway has low levels of unemployment and child poverty, and high levels of maternal labour force participation, with more than 80% of mothers with children 0-6 years in the labour force.

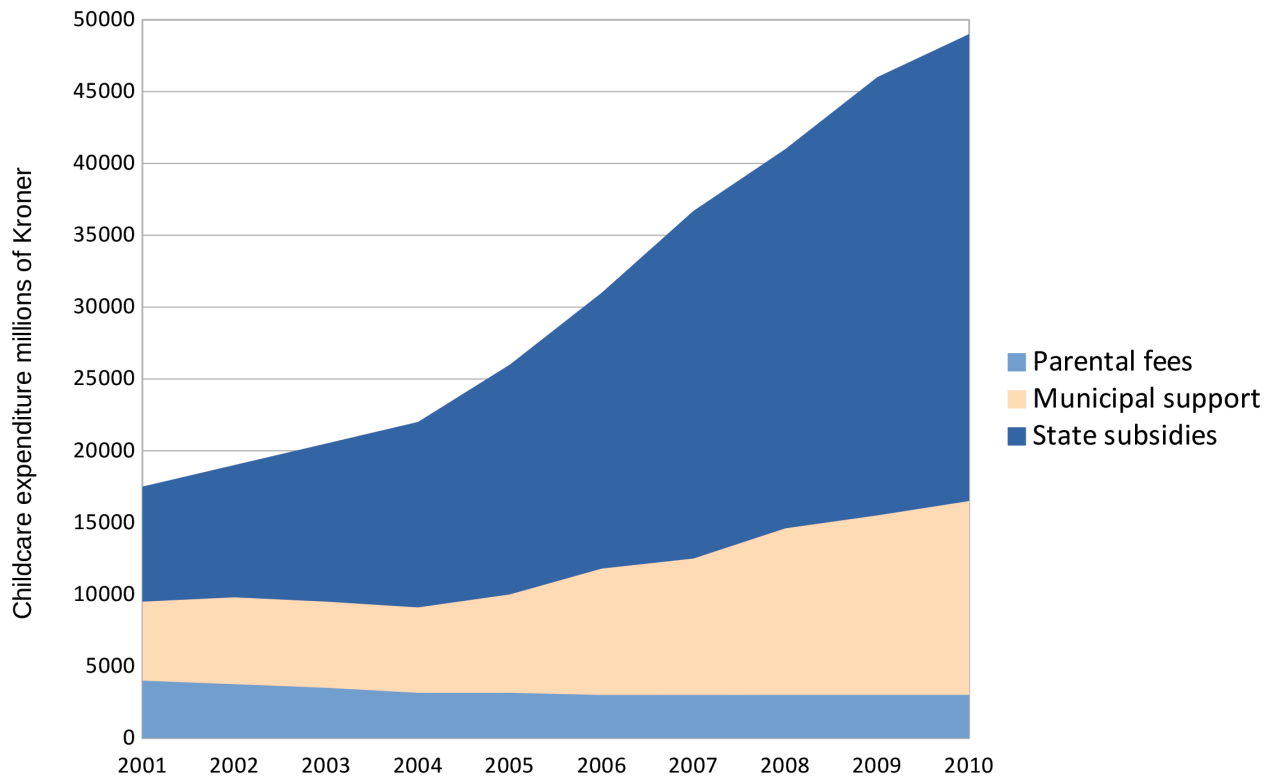
The national government is primarily responsible for funding and legislation and is directly responsible for public universities and university colleges. Public education, including primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, vocational training and university education is free. ELCC is the only part of the education system that charges parent fees. The national Ministry of Education and Research, and two subordinate agencies, have responsibilities for ELCC. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training is responsible for overseeing ELCC, and primary and secondary education. It is responsible for quality development in *barnehager*, supporting them to effectively implement the *Kindergarten Framework Plan*, analyzing all statistics related to child care and presenting the information, and financing and management of child care. The National Parents’ Committee for Kindergartens (FUB), was established in 2010 to ensure parents’ interests and concerns are considered, to strengthen cooperation between child care and home, and to keep parents informed about Ministry activities.

Two levels of local government have responsibilities specific to education, health and social programs. Municipalities have the main responsibility; they are responsible for delivery of ELCC, primary and lower secondary school, child welfare and primary health care. County authorities are directly responsible for upper secondary education and training

and for administrative oversight of municipalities to ensure they are operating and supervising *barnehager* in accordance with national regulations. The counties are the regional link between the national government and the *barnehager*. There are 11 counties and 356 municipalities.

Child care is publicly financed through a combination of national grants, parent fees and municipal funds; municipalities have considerable taxation power in Norway. Prior to 2009 when the target of universal provision was reached, national grants were earmarked specifically to child care. The system of earmarked grants was explicitly used to provide incentives to create new child care services, especially where coverage was low or uneven. The national funding earmarked to child care was a key lever for increasing coverage in a relatively short period of time. After full coverage was reached, the earmarked grants became part of the general purpose block funds transferred to municipalities. As Figure 1 shows, as funding increased over the years of rapid expansion of ELCC, the proportion paid by the national (state) government increased

FIGURE 1 The composition of financing in child care 2001 to 2010



Source: Andresen & Havnes 2018 (replicated by the author)

considerably more than municipal funding, while the parent fee portion was reduced.

Norway has a history of decentralization and local autonomy. Municipalities and counties are the key players in providing significant social and education programs including child care, education and health care. Responsibilities for delivering services require all municipalities to provide the same services regardless of size, revenues and expenditures. As a result, both expenditures and taxes are equalized.

The Indigenous peoples of Norway, the Sámi, have an independent Assembly, elected by the Sámi people and have special rights identified in the *Kindergarten Act*.

An important part of the Norwegian context in the development of ELCC is the emphasis placed on the intrinsic value of childhood and the rights of children in society. The principles of children's right to participate (right to be heard), and the principle of the best interest of the child are contained in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and are a fundamental part of the *Kindergarten Act* and the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*. In 2014, special provisions and protections for children treating the child as a rights holder were added to the Norway Constitution (Haugli, 2019).

Children have the right to be respected for their human value. They have the right to be heard in questions regarding themselves, and their opinion shall be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

In actions and decisions regarding a child, the best interests of the child shall be a fundamental concern.

Children have the right to protection of their personal integrity. The authorities of the State shall create conditions enabling the child's development, hereunder secure the necessary economic and social safety, as well as the necessary standard of health, for the child, preferably within its own family.

— *Constitution of Norway*

The road to universal child care

Child care in Norway is widely accepted as a public good and a public responsibility. It is considered beneficial for all children, for reducing social inequities and for ensuring equal opportunities. In addition to a child's right of access, *barnehager* are considered an important part of the government's health policies, and as well, must be taken into account in local and regional planning processes. Child care is one of several "provision rights" for parents and children; others are parental leave, family leave, cash benefits for families of children 1-2 years not attending child care, tax provisions, transfers and family allowances.

Norway's ELCC system has been built over many years, with growth in supply growing steadily for more than 40 years. However, before the period of rapid expansion, services were in short supply, unaffordable for many families, and access to child care varied considerably across municipalities despite provision of public funding. The period of rapid expansion was prompted by the Kindergarten Agreement of 2003. Between 2003-2009, substantially increased public funding improved availability of services and affordability for parents until full coverage was reached.

Following is an overview of the key milestones along the road to Norway's universal child care.

The very early days

1840s Norway's early ELCC history resembles Canada's in many ways. Norway's first children's facility was established in 1837. In the 1840s, crèches were established for children of poor, single working mothers, providing basic care. Parallel to these, the first Fröbel-inspired part-day kindergartens opened in the late 1840s, introducing play-based learning, recognition of the importance of childhood, and support for physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. Over time, asylums and crèches were converted to nurseries and kindergartens but remained few in number for more than 100 years.

By 1960, 2% of children participated in *barnehager*, rising to 7% by 1975, with much participation part-time. Between 1953 and 1975, *barnehager*

were regulated as a part of the *Child Welfare Act*. Centres had to meet strict national regulations and standards, with little flexibility to address local concerns.

1963 National funding began in 1963.

Period of uneven but continued growth: 1975 - 2003

1975 The first *Kindergarten Act* was enacted in 1975, and with it came a new national grant system. This *Act* gave local governments increased responsibility and ability to respond to local conditions. Both municipal and non-municipal *barnehager* could be funded but many municipalities supported only municipal *barnehager*. As a result, fees in non-municipal *barnehager* were often unaffordable for many families.

In 1993, parental leave was extended to one year. As a result, demand for *barnehager* places for the youngest children dropped.

In 1996, the first *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* (a regulation to the *Kindergarten Act*), came into force. It defined the goals and functions of *barnehager* and set guidelines for their responsibilities to provide care, play and development of social, cognitive and physical skills. Each *barnehager* had to establish an annual plan for pedagogical activities, and a plan to evaluate its program.

1997 By the end of 1997, 60% of children 1-5 years were enrolled in child care but coverage varied considerably across municipalities – from less than 30% up to 90%. Also in 1997, the age for compulsory school was lowered from seven to six years. With the removal of six year olds from *barnehager*, additional spaces for children under the age of three were created, increasing coverage for under threes by 30%. Also at this time, the national government determined that the operating costs of *barnehager* should be shared 40% by the national government, 30% by the municipality and 30% by parents. However, municipalities were covering an average of 27.9% of the costs in municipal centres but only 8.2% in non-municipal *barnehager*, with large fee discrepancies between municipal and non-municipal facilities (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 1998).

In 1998, the national government introduced the controversial Cash for Care benefit for parents with one year olds not enrolled in *barnehager*, somewhat reducing demand for *barnehager* for very young children. This was extended to include two year olds in 1999, and limited again to one year olds in 2012.

The national government set a goal of offering full or part-time access to child care by 2000 and made municipalities responsible for reaching the goal. They estimated demand would be met when 53% of children younger than three years and 80% of children over three years had a place in *barnehager*, anticipating that as access increased so would demand (Eknes, 2000).

By 2000 public funding covered 56% of operating costs, not the 70% called for. Thus, the goal of a place in *barnehager* for all parents who wanted it was not achieved by 2000. Inequities in funding and access were increasingly highlighted: many families still relied on private babysitters and family members and ELCC participation by low income and immigrant families was considerably lower than by more affluent families. Non-municipal *barnehager* played an important role in meeting increasing local need when municipalities did not increase public services to meet demand but due to lack of funding, had to charge higher fees.

By 2001 most political parties agreed that lack of equitable access to *barnehager* was a problem but no significant changes were made. However, a champion for change emerged. In 2002, Kristen Halvorsen¹, a member of the Socialist Left party, built an unlikely coalition of the Socialist Left Party, the Labour Party, the Centre Party, and the right wing Progress Party, and set out to reform the financing of *barnehager*. This coalition demanded increased national and local funding to cover 80% of costs together with establishment of a maximum parent fee.

¹ Kristin Halvorsen was Norway's first female Minister of Finance (2005 - 2009), then, Minister of Education and Research and deputy prime minister 2005 - 2012.

The period of rapid expansion: From the Kindergarten Agreement of 2003 to legal entitlement in 2009

In 2003, in response to Ms. Halvorsen's group in Parliament, the national coalition government—the Christian Democrats, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party— presented White Paper no. 24 *Kindergartens for all – economic diversity and freedom of choice* and a bill to amend the *Kindergarten Act*. Following parliamentary debate, broad political agreement was reached on the proposed financial and regulatory changes, with the goal of universal coverage with reduced parent fees.

Significantly, key levers for achieving this included both making municipalities responsible for fulfilling the national goal of universal child care and significantly increasing national funding through earmarked grants to enable municipalities to achieve the goal. Municipalities took different approaches to creating access; some focussed on building their own *barnehager*, some provided capital funding to non-municipal *barnehager*, some provide low-interest loans, others required *barnehager* to fund raise or provide their own capital and some municipalities put out calls for proposals for establishing new *barnehager* on publicly owned land. Operating funds to non-municipal *barnehager* were based on average operating costs of the municipality's public *barnehager*. With increased funding from the national government and strong demand, municipalities, for the most part, did what they could to facilitate the establishment of new *barnehager*. There was ongoing dialogue among all stakeholders to plan for full coverage. The national grants covered both operating costs and funds to create and expand the number of *barnehager*. Municipal and non-municipal *barnehager* were to receive equal funding.

In 2004, the national government introduced a regulated maximum parent fee for all *barnehager*, with a 30% reduction for a second child in *barnehager* and 50% for three or more children.

By 2005, municipalities were required to ensure an adequate supply of *barnehager* places although access did not become a statutory right until 2009.

In 2005 a centre-left coalition (red-green coalition) of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre party won the parliamentary election. It was the first time the Socialist Left was part of a government in power, and Kristin Halvorsen was appointed the first female Finance Minister. During the election campaign, she threatened to quit if the government was not able to provide access to *barnehager* for all families within four years.

The 2005 *Kindergarten Act* and 2006 *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* (regulation) legislated children's right to participate and provided clear roles for municipalities and counties, as well as *barnehager* operators. The framework was updated in 2011 and 2017.

In 2006, responsibility for *barnehager* was transferred from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research to recognize it as the first step in lifelong learning and to create better coherence between *barnehager* and primary school.

A 2008-2009 White Paper No 41 (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2009) on *Quality in ECEC* identified three goals for ELCC quality:

- Ensure equity and high quality in all *barnehager*;
- Strengthen the *barnehager* as a learning area;
- All children should participate in an inclusive community.

In 2009 access to *barnehager* became a statutory individual right for all children.

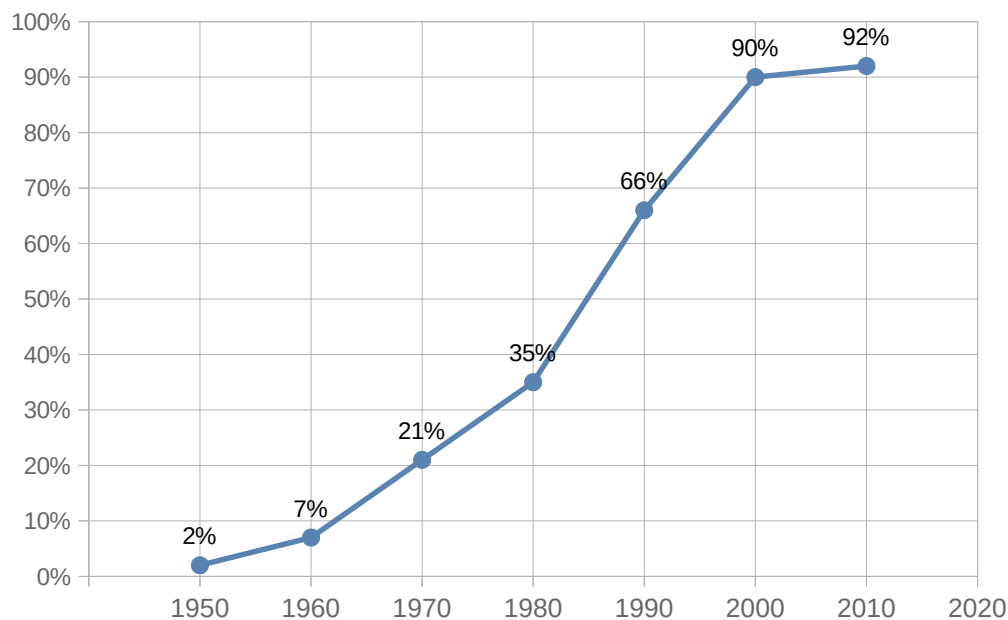
Through the period of rapid expansion, the government worked closely with the Norwegian State Housing Bank, Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (the employer association representing all municipalities and counties) and the Private Kindergarten Association (PBL), (the employer association representing non-municipal *barnehager*), to facilitate the development of new *barnehager*.

In the final push for universal coverage, a committee of state secretaries (deputy ministers) from all relevant ministries was struck, including the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, responsible

for housing and building policy, and municipal land use planning and county planning under the *Planning and Building Act*. For years the Ministry has required municipalities to include *barnehager* as part of long-term planning and land use planning. Child care is considered as part of the necessary community infrastructure and is included in Norway’s national *Planning and Building Act*. Zoning plans are required for major construction projects and the *Act* states that development of an area cannot take place “until technical installations and public services such as energy supply, transport and road networks, health and social services, child day care services, public outdoor recreation areas, schools etc., are adequately established” (Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, 2008, section 12-7 & 10).

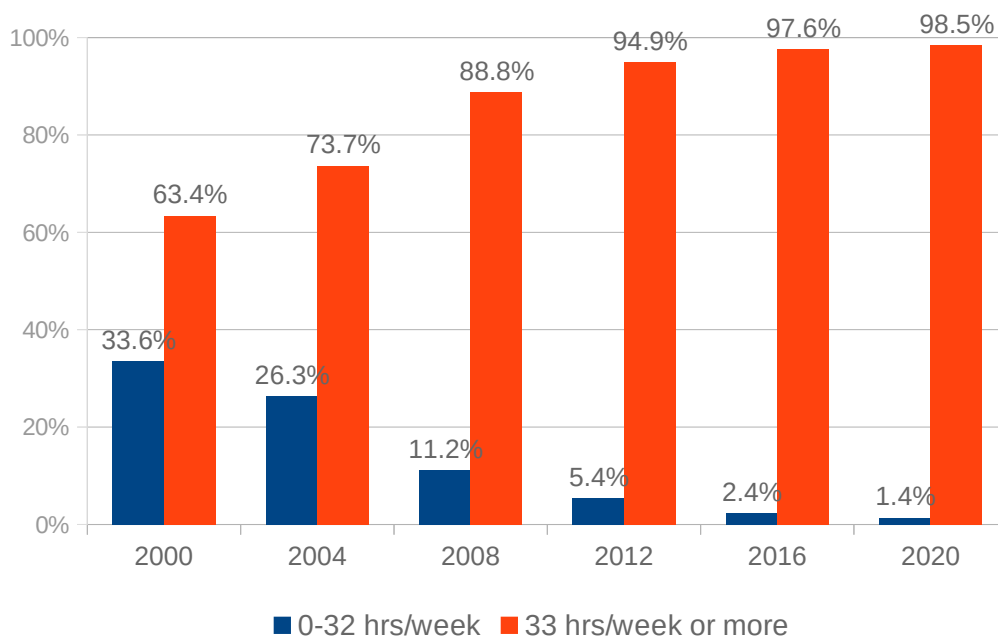
In 2009, the year access to *barnehager* became a statutory right, the “[red-green coalition](#)” won another term in government, and Kristin Halvorsen was appointed the Minister of Education and Research, responsible for *barnehager*.

FIGURE 2 Percent of children 1-5 years enrolled in barnehager 1960-2020



Source: Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2015; Haug & Storø, 2013; Statistics Norway 2019, 2020.

FIGURE 3 Percent of children enrolled in barnehager full- and part-time, 2000-2020



Source: Statistics Norway 2019, 2020

Figures 2 and 3 show the increase in ELCC provision² before and after the rapid expansion including the shift by parents from part-time to full-time use as access grew. As Figure 3 shows, full-time enrolment increased from 63.4% in 2000 to 98.5% in 2020.

In 2011 funding was devolved to the municipalities, moving from earmarked state funding specific to kindergarten to block funding. Municipalities must fund all non-municipal *barnehager* that were approved when block funding was introduced. They can still choose to approve and fund non-municipal *barnehager* developed after this time, but now decisions about whether to provide new municipal or non-municipal *barnehager* rests more heavily on the municipality.

² Even though the percentage of children attending *barnehager* almost doubled between 1990 and 2000, many children were enrolled part-time. By 2000, when 66% of children between 1-5 years were enrolled in kindergarten, more than one-third were enrolled on a part-time basis. At that time, fees were not regulated and were unaffordable for many. As availability increased and fees reduced, full-time enrolment increased considerably.

Early learning and child care in Norway: The current state

The maximum parent fee is established annually in the national budget. *Barnehager* cannot charge above this fee, except for the cost of food. In 2019 the maximum monthly fee, which is geared to income, was NOK 2,990 (CAD \$445); fees are the same for children aged 0-2 and 3-5 years. As of 2015, parents pay no more than 6% of household income, up to the maximum ceiling. In 2015, free core hours were introduced, initially for four and five year olds, extended to three year olds in 2016 and two year olds in 2019. Families with annual household income below a certain threshold are entitled to 20 hours per week of free provision; in 2019, the annual income threshold was NOK 548,500 (CAD \$82,000). Families pay the cost of additional hours beyond the free entitlement.

In 2018, national and municipal grants for ELCC totalled NOK 46.4 billion (CAD \$6.9 billion), which accounted for 14.4% of all municipal spending.³ The average expenditure per child was NOK 124,000 (approximately CAD \$18,000) (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2019). Parents (collectively) pay 14% of the total cost; public funds cover 86%.

The main entry point to kindergarten is in August, as for primary schools. Children who turn one before the end of August are entitled to a place in kindergarten that August. Children born in September, October and November are entitled to a space by the end of the month in which they turn one. Children born after November are entitled to a space when their child turns one but have no statutory right until the following August. If no space is available, they may receive the Cash for Care benefit until they have a place. Families who move during the year may have to go on a waiting list in their new community until a place becomes available.

Parents are entitled to a place in the community in which they live. While there are slight variations across municipalities, parents submit an application to their municipality with a list of (typically) five preferred programs in March. Priority is given to children with additional support

³ Norway has a population of 5.2 million people.

needs and those involved with child welfare services. If parents do not receive their first choice, they may remain on a waiting list for their preferred placement and take a place in their second choice in the meantime.

Municipalities post a list of all *barnehagers* on their websites, with information about location, size, hours of operation, public or private operation, facility type, percentage of trained staff, results of parent satisfaction surveys and any additional costs for food.

The *Kindergarten Act* stipulates that children with additional support needs are entitled to special educational assistance as needed, including transportation, sign language education, alternative and supplementary communication. Municipalities must ensure this right to special assistance is provided.

The *Kindergarten Act* and regulation states that Norway has a responsibility to safeguard the interest of Sámi⁴ children by supporting preservation of language, knowledge and culture, regardless of where they live. The Act also stipulates that municipalities are responsible to ensure that “kindergartens for Sámi children in Sámi districts are based on the Sámi language and culture. In other municipalities, steps shall be taken to enable Sámi children to secure and develop their language and their culture” (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2005).

Special efforts have been made to increase the participation of minority-language children⁵ and children from low income households, who tend to have lower than average enrollment rates in *barnehager*. Multi-language information videos have been produced, health clinics promote the benefits of *barnehager* and, in some cases, door-to-door outreach provides opportunities for all families to learn about the availability and benefits of *barnehager*.

4 The Sámi are the Indigenous people of Norway, as well as Sweden and Finland. Most Sámi live in the northern part of the country but they also live in cities, primarily Oslo.

5 The definition of minority language children in Norway excludes those whose mother tongue is Sami, Swedish, Danish or English.

ELCC within the context of broader family policies

ELCC in Norway is well-supported by a solid infrastructure of predictable and generous public funding, ongoing workforce development, well defined quality measures, clearly articulated roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders, and ongoing data collection and analysis to assess the impact of policies and other measures. ELCC fits within a larger system of family supports that help families balance work and family life, and provide a range of options and programs to accommodate different family situations.

Maternity and parental benefits

Women who have been employed for at least six of the previous 10 months prior to taking leave, and who are members of the National Insurance Scheme are eligible for benefits. Some benefit periods are specific to each parent and some may be shared. Benefits may be taken for 49 weeks at 100% of regular salary (to a ceiling of six times the basic amount in the National Insurance Scheme – NOK 599,148 – approximately CAD \$87,685) or 59 weeks at 80%.⁶

- Three weeks must be taken by the mother before the due date. Beyond the three weeks, 15/19 weeks are allocated to the mother, 15/19 weeks are allocated to the father (or co-mother) and the remaining 16/18 weeks can be shared between them.
- Additional benefits and leaves apply in the case of multiple births (e.g. 66/80 weeks in the case of twins).
- Parental leave can be combined with work to extend the overall benefit period. Partial return to work, combined with leave must be agreed upon with the employer.
- Parents may take a combined three years of unpaid leave at any period before the child turns 12.
- Mothers whose income does not qualify for parental benefits are eligible for a lump-sum payment of NOK 84,720 (approximately CAD \$12,390), providing they are a member of the National Insurance Scheme.

⁶ Parental benefits and family leaves are included in the *Working Environment Act*.

Family leaves

In addition to parental benefits related to the birth of a child, there are a number of other leave entitlements. Each parent is entitled to a leave of absence to care for a sick child under 12, to accompany a child to a medical appointment, or if the person usually responsible for the child is ill. Employees with one or two children are entitled to a maximum of 10 days leave, and up to 15 if they have three or more. Parents with sole responsibility for a child are entitled to twice the number of days. Parents are also entitled to three days paid leave to support their child's transition from home to *barnehager*. Finally, all employees are entitled to 25 days paid vacation after one year of full employment.

Cash for Care benefit

The tax-free Cash for Care benefit is available to parents who have been a member of the National Insurance Scheme for at least five years, whose children are between ages one and two, and who are not enrolled in full-time *barnehager*. As of 2018, the full monthly benefit was NOK 7,500 (approximately \$1,100). Partial benefits are available for children who attend *barnehager* on a part-time basis. The benefit can be received for a maximum of 11 months, starting in the month the child turns 13 months. Eligibility is not related to employment.

Not just “creating spaces”

Norway has done more than “create spaces”. It has built an accessible, affordable, quality system for all children. Elements of that system include:

- An overall plan, framed by articulated values and principles to guide development;
- Political support across all parties to facilitate implementation over time;
- Adequate resources to ensure viability for programs and affordability for parents;
- A well-qualified, fairly compensated, engaged and supported workforce;

- A quality framework and measures to ensure equitable access to quality programs for all children and families;
- Regular consultation and engagement with all key stakeholders;
- Ongoing data collection, monitoring and assessment to determine if goals are being met, and to inform ongoing quality improvement.

Meeting every child's need for care, security, belongingness and respect and enabling the children to participate in and contribute to the community are important values that shall be reflected in

kindergarten. Kindergartens shall promote democracy, diversity and mutual respect, equality, sustainable development, life skills and good health.

— *Framework Plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens 2017*

The challenge of for-profit ownership

One concern about ELCC in Norway is the recent growth of large for-profit chains. The role of the for-profit sector in the delivery of child care continues to be a topic of considerable political debate, along the traditional left-right divide. In a 2020 interview, Øystein Djupedal, one of the architects of the 2003 Kindergarten Agreement and the then deputy leader of the of the Socialist Left Party, stated that:

At the time, non-profit foundations and organizations ran the existing private kindergartens, and I did not have the imagination to understand that the kindergarten field would be taken over to such an extent by commercial providers (Mejlbo, 2020, cited in Trætteberg et al. 2021)

Quality seems to be less a concern than in other countries that have experienced similar growth, attributed both to Norway's "provision of kindergarten services [never having been] a typical economic activity" and to strong regulations and accountability measures (Jacobsen & Vollset, 2012). Affordability is not an issue as maximum fees apply to all municipal and non-municipal facilities, while wages and working

conditions are very similar across all types of programs as a result of central bargaining and high rates of unionization. However, since all non-municipal *barnehager* are funded at the average rate of municipal centres, some amount of profit can be made by hiring less experienced staff who are lower on the pay scale, and by serving fewer children with additional support needs.

It also would appear that considerable profit can be made through property development and the value of real estate. For example, TryggeBarnhager (Safe Kindergarten) is a construction company that has established 501 *barnehager* for municipalities, non-profit organizations, private individuals and companies. (See [TryggeBarnhager website](#)). A separate arm of the company, [FUS](#), owns and operates 180 centres in 82 municipalities. The Læringsverkstedet chain, opened its first centre in 2003 and now operates more than 200. In recent years a number of small non-municipal *barnehager* have sold their centres to the larger chains.

In 2007 the six largest chains operated about 5% of all private (for-profit and non profit) child care centres. By 2016, this had risen to 17%. Their total share of the pre tax profit in 2016 was almost 60% of the total pre tax profit in the overall private sector. The larger chains continue to buy smaller chains, and if the same rate of growth continues, it is estimated that they will own half of all the private centres by 2029. (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020).

The two main unions representing the child care workforce have taken strong stands against the growth of for-profit child care and the concern that public funds are being used to generate private profit.

Since the late 1990s, Fagforbundet (The Norwegian Union for Municipal and General Employees), the largest trade union in Norway, which represents the assistants in child care, has resisted privatization. The union's position is that public services, especially those involve the care professions, should remain in public hands (Pettersen & Monsen, 2017).

At its National Congress in 2015, Utdanningsforbundet (the Union of Education Norway), which represents “kindergarten teachers” (i.e., the

child care workforce) took a position against the increased privatization of child care. They indicated that power was shifting from national authorities toward commercial players whose primary goal is profit. They view this shift as a threat to equitable education and governance by elected institutions. The union believes that public spending on education should not be commercialized, that all public spending should benefit children and not generate profit for commercial enterprises, and that employees in private child care institutions should receive the same terms of pay and employment as those in public sector programs. A 2017 strategy paper outlines the union's goals and lobbying strategies to achieve them (Utdanningsforbundet (2017).

In 2012, the Norwegian parliament amended the *Kindergarten Act* to ensure that public funds are used to benefit the children in the *barnehager* and meet a number of accountability measures. All non-municipal *barnehager* must report on the use of public funds and parent fees in a standardized format established by the Ministry of Education and Research. The reporting also includes a requirement for information on the total number of person-years and the number of qualified degree-level staff in the centre. The Ministry has also proposed legislation that will require each private child care centre to be registered as a separate legal entity, rather than being treated as a subsidiary operation of a larger corporation. As a separate legal entity, each centre would have to provide separate annual reports, which would provide information on assets, equity, debt and provision for dividends for each centre. These details would be publicly available. (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020).

Thus, in spite of all the checks and balances in place, there is concern about public funds ending up as private profit. While child care is one of the sectors that has been prone to competitive tendering, a number of steps at both municipal and national levels have been undertaken in an attempt to limit the growth and control of the for-profit sector.

The local elections of 2015 saw a change in political leadership in several municipalities, and a number of centres have been de-privatized and returned to public operation. The municipalities of Oslo and Trondheim

passed local resolutions that all future child care centres should be operated by the municipality or by a non-profit organization (Pettersen & Monsen, 2017).

In 2018, a new regulation on child to staff ratios was implemented. This was viewed as one strategy to control the profits in for-profit child care programs, as they previously operated with lower ratios than the non-profit and public centres.

As of 2021, the national government is in the process of transferring the responsibility for financial oversight of private child care centres from municipalities to a new national supervisory body. It has also adopted new requirements to ensure that the public funding actually goes to its intended purpose.

Conclusion

While challenges remain, Norway has spent many years creating a high quality ELCC system that has broad public support and support across all political parties — a system where all children are valued for who they are today as well as for who they will become, a system that allows women to full participate in the labour force, and a system that is aligned with other social and educational programs and supports.

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