

# Strengthening early childhood education and care (ECEC) services at the local level

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Lessons learnt from the Ukrainian refugee crisis

October 2023

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## WHY STRENGTHEN THE ECEC SERVICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS?



Local authorities and their partners are key contact points between refugee families and host societies. As most ECEC services fall under their direct responsibility, local authorities are at the forefront of ensuring that the rights and entitlements of refugee children are upheld.



Local authorities have on the ground insights to local conditions and their ongoing and rapid evolution, particularly in humanitarian contexts. Evolving situations compel local authorities to offer services that are adaptive and responsive to the needs of Ukrainian refugee children and their families.



Local authorities are key stakeholders in promoting and facilitating integration and social cohesion among host communities and refugee families. They can facilitate access to shared services, and facilitate intercultural dialogue and understanding.

## HOW CAN STRENGTHENING ECEC SERVICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL BE ACHIEVED?



Boosting capacity for ECEC services at the local level by strengthening collaboration between national, subregional and local authorities.



Establishing cooperation mechanisms at the sub-national level to strengthen ECEC services.



Capitalizing on existing ECEC human resources from both host and refugee communities.



Responding to local ECEC needs through fiscal decentralization and flexibilities.



Creating integrated services and information access points for refugees, to facilitate access to information on ECEC.



Cooperating with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

## BACKGROUND

In May 2022, UNICEF commissioned Ecorys to carry out a “Situation Analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU member states and Moldova.” It aimed to provide insights to country level responses to supporting Ukrainian families and children and to inform ongoing actions regarding access to and quality of ECEC for Ukrainian refugee children. This brief on lessons learnt is part of a two-brief series. Its suggested recommendations build on the data collection and analysis carried out between May 2022-January 2023, as well as the findings, conclusions and recommendations presented in the two earlier publications.

The war in Ukraine represents a refugee crisis of a scale unseen in Europe since the second World War. From the start of the conflict on 24 February 2022, 5.3 million Ukrainian refugees have been recorded across Europe,<sup>1</sup> and 5.1 million have registered for temporary protection.<sup>2</sup>

Around 20% of the Ukrainian refugee children arriving in the EU since the start of the war are estimated to be under the age of 6.<sup>3</sup> This stage of childhood is foundational to everything that follows later in later life, and to healthy growth and development. Investment in high quality ECEC services is of the greatest importance to take advantage of this short but critical window of opportunity.

Local authorities have been responsible for implementing ECEC programmes and policies originating at the national level and, where decentralisation allows, initiating their own at a local level. In the context of the current research, the term ‘local authorities’ is used to describe all types of public administration whose responsibility covers only a local part of the economic territory (e.g. municipalities, regions, counties, or cities).

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## WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES RELATED TO STRENGTHENING ECEC SERVICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS?

- **Capacity shortages in both human resources and infrastructure** can present significant challenges for local authorities to secure an adequate supply of high-quality ECEC services for young children (0-6 years), in addition to providing housing, healthcare, financial support and integration services. These shortages are often the most acute in municipalities with high numbers of Ukrainian refugees. Staff shortages can also include a shortage of auxiliary ECEC professionals (e.g. psychologists, doctors).
- **Administrative complexity arising from the distribution of responsibilities across and between administrative levels** creates challenges in providing a swift response in many countries. In Belgium,<sup>4</sup> for instance, the matter of integration of Ukrainian refugee children into ECEC and other social services is the responsibility of regions rather than the Federal government. Each region (Flemish community, German-speaking community, and Wallonia-Brussels Federation) has issued its own legal and policy response, presenting challenges for coordination between regions.

1 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

2 <https://cream-migration.org/ukraine-detail.htm?article=3573>

3 ECEC WG – Special meeting for Ukraine – 5 April 2022

4 UNICEF (2022). Situation analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU member states. First Synthesis Report. Available online: <https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Ecorys%20cycle%201%20synthesis%20report%20-%20ECEC%20situation%20analysis.pdf>

- › **Limitations to local authorities' fiscal and budgetary oversight** can hinder the pace of implementation and response to changes in local conditions, particularly in countries with highly centralised systems. In many cases, local authorities are restricted in their abilities to rapidly mobilise and allocate funds, placing a greater reliance on the non-profit sector to establish non-formal ECEC services.
- › **Limited cooperation among ECEC services within and between local authorities** presents challenges in monitoring, coordinating and responding to demand for ECEC places. This can be a particular issue in countries with decentralised systems, where national coordination is more limited. One example is Denmark<sup>5</sup> where some municipalities have ECEC places but lack qualified staff, others have the necessary staff but would not have the space, where possible staff could be redistributed to allow for more enrolment.
- › **Lack of disaggregated data across many countries, in particular for the 0 to 6 age group**, is a barrier to useful needs assessments that can suitably inform the design, planning and scaling of ECEC services at the local level. Host countries employ a diverse range of approaches to calculate the number of Ukrainian refugees currently in the country, but these estimates are rarely disaggregated by age. Examples of proxy measures include using the number of residency permits, national identification numbers, asylum certifications, or temporary protection statuses granted to Ukrainian beneficiaries as a basis of estimating demand for ECEC places.

## HOW CAN STRENGTHENING OF ECEC SERVICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL BE ACHIEVED?

### 1. Boosting capacity for ECEC services at the local level by strengthening collaboration between national, subnational and local authorities.

Efficient collaboration can ensure that local authorities are granted permission to open new ECEC facilities or create new units in the existing facilities in a timely manner (Moldova, Romania, Slovenia). Experience from municipalities in supporting young Ukrainian children's early learning demonstrates that municipalities also opted for providing a large array of support services, such as providing free meals and free transportation as integrated within ECEC services (Italy, Spain, Sweden). One example can be found in Latvia.<sup>6</sup> In summer 2022, the National Centre for Education, in cooperation with local authorities, organized summer camps for Ukrainian children where they had the opportunity to learn Latvian, engage in other forms of inclusive activities, and form new friendships with local children.

### 2. Establishing cooperation mechanisms at the sub-national level to strengthen ECEC services.

In most countries, all relevant regional bodies (representing sectors such as: housing, healthcare, education, protection, legal support) were involved in the crisis response through coordination units or multi-professional and multi-agency teams for the refugee response. In Finland,<sup>7</sup> the Mayors of the six largest cities<sup>8</sup> convened monthly meetings to monitor the capacity of services in responding to the evolving situation. This collaboration covers different levels of education including ECEC, but also immigration, security, social and health affairs ensuring that families can access a package of key services to better support their young children's early learning and development.

5 UNICEF (2022), *op. cit.*

6 UNICEF (2023) Situation analysis of early childhood education and care services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU Member States Second Synthesis Report. Available online: [https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/Ecorys\\_synthesis\\_Cycle\\_2\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/Ecorys_synthesis_Cycle_2_Final.pdf)

7 HEL (2022c). Kuntamallin mukainen palvelu käyttöön tilapäistä suojelua hakeneiden ja saavien majoituksessa. Helsingin kaupunki. Retrieved 22.6.2022 at <https://www.hel.fi/uutiset/fi/kaupunginkanslia/kuntamallin-mukainen-palvelu-kayttoon-tilapaista-suojelua-hakeneilla>

8 Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere, Turku, and Oulu



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### **3. Capitalizing on existing ECEC human resources at the local level from both host and refugee communities.**

Some countries have entrusted the development of the methodological support and guidance for ECEC educators to the local level, strengthening the role of local authorities to extend support to ECEC educators that is responsive and relevant to evolving and emerging needs on the ground (Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Spain). Examples include settings where municipalities have offered language courses to Ukrainian teachers and educators to integrate them in the national system (Austria, Germany, Italy). In Vienna,<sup>9</sup> the municipality provides a combined language and comprehensive information course about the Austrian education system, informing teachers and educators about the needed credentials. It also offers internships and employment opportunities after successful completion.

### **4. Responding to local ECEC needs through fiscal decentralization and flexibilities.**

Municipalities across Europe invariably allocated additional local level financial resources to cover ECEC costs., Fiscal decentralization has allowed local authorities to devise ECEC solutions independently from state provision and has assisted local authorities to provide grants and allocate funds to initiatives, critical services and programmes that provide refugee families and young children with immediate support. For example, this might involve granting additional small benefits and allowances for refugee families to cover education related costs (Spain, Slovenia).

9 UNICEF (2022), *op. cit.*

### **5. Creating integrated services and information access points for refugees, to facilitate access to information on ECEC.**

Integrated services can be provided by bringing together a mix of expertise and resources in one place, at a physical location (a 'one stop shop'). It can also incorporate online services and information. The examples include one-stop shops Belgium, orientation centres in France, and community response forums and language teams in Ireland. Many municipalities also provide information packages, hot-lines, webpages, orientation classes, and guidance materials. In Belgium, for example, the regional government of Wallonia<sup>10</sup> has updated its webpage, giving comprehensive guidance for Ukrainian refugees and local stakeholders, and providing local authorities with a dedicated guidance document, explaining how they should access ECEC services among others.

### **6. Cooperating with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).**

With the support of NGOs, civil society partners and community organisations, municipalities in European Countries have often developed high quality alternatives and/or complementary services to formal ECEC, such as care and learning services, child group houses, adaptation services, parent-led day care supervised by professionals (Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova).

10 *Ibid.* [https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Ecorys\\_cycle\\_1\\_synthesis\\_report\\_-\\_ECEC\\_situation\\_analysis.pdf](https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Ecorys_cycle_1_synthesis_report_-_ECEC_situation_analysis.pdf)

## CASE STUDY EXAMPLES



### CASE STUDY 1 SECTORAL COMMUNITY RESPONSE FORUMS ORGANIZED BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES ACROSS IRELAND<sup>11</sup>

Community Response Forums have been established in every local authority in Ireland. These coordinate the community and voluntary response, including established NGOs in their local area and ensure effective communication and information sharing. This support spans employment and health, housing, child protection, and education.

The Forums build on structures and relationships which were highly effective during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Community Response Forums build a collaborative team around Ukrainian refugee families that helps with all their needs without duplicating efforts or creating gaps in the support offered. The Forum also harnesses the goodwill and assistance available within communities, including the resources of the community and voluntary sector, to manage offers of assistance to ensure that the complex needs of those arriving are met.

For children between 0-6 years of age, city/county childcare committees support all families in accessing ECEC offers and schemes at a local level. In the case of 4-6-year-olds, Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) have been set up across Ireland to support families in finding places at schools. The Forums also coordinate initiatives that provide family leisure time, excursions, and music and art therapy courses. The Forums are supported by funding at national level from the Ministry for Rural and Community Development. There have been several local news articles published attesting to the positive reception of these Forums.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/77715-ukraine-crisis-community-response-forum-in-each-area-to-coordinate-local-measures-welcoming-ukrainians/](https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/77715-ukraine-crisis-community-response-forum-in-each-area-to-coordinate-local-measures-welcoming-ukrainians/)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.fingal.ie/news/budding-ukrainian-entrepreneurs-complete-business-start-programme>; <https://www.galwaydaily.com/news/initiatives-to-support-health-and-wellbeing-of-ukrainian-refugees/>



### CASE STUDY 2 PLAY AND LEARNING HUBS (PLHS)<sup>13</sup>

In response to the war in Ukraine, UNICEF supported the establishment of 154 Play and Learning Hubs (PLHs) across six refugee hosting countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The PLHs provide young children (including those with disabilities) with play, care, and early learning opportunities. They establish a sense of routine, stability, and normalcy for both children and parents. The PLHs also serve as parenting support centres, and enhance the capacities of the ECEC professionals to provide quality early learning opportunities to young children.

Children can receive counselling and psychological first aid (PFA) to respond to any trauma they might have experienced as a result of war and conflict. Children can also engage in play and learning activities that stimulate creativity and the development of language, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills. Among the integration activities provided are also host-country language classes, visits to tourist sites, and play and interaction with children from the host community attending the PLHs.

One of the success factors of the PLHs is the cross-sectoral collaboration with municipalities, who have proven to be key allies. Municipalities have offered physical spaces for the hubs, refurbishing where necessary, providing personnel and capacity-building for ECEC staff where necessary, and covering the running costs of PLHs to enable their eventual sustainability. The project has also considered efficiency in deploying and organizing locally existing resources.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/eca/introducing-play-and-learning-hubs>

## FURTHER RESOURCES

On early childhood education and care and refugee response can be found [here](#).



**For more information please contact:**

United Nations Children's Fund  
UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office  
Route des Morillons 4, CH-1211 Geneva  
Switzerland

[www.unicef.org/eca](http://www.unicef.org/eca)