



Cities social trends paper: Childcare provision in cities

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Across Europe, cities play a central role in providing early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The level of municipal responsibility varies depending on the organisation of the ECEC system and governance structure. In some cases, national and local authorities share responsibility for ECEC provision. In others the responsibility of ECEC is transferred to the local level with minimal national coordination (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden). Most cities implement childcare services by direct management or via an integrated private public system.

Many factors play a role in childcare participation: the length of family leave, availability of services, cost of ECEC, legal entitlements, family employment situation, as well as the sociocultural context of each city. These differences are most significant for children under 3 and gradually decrease until they reach compulsory school age, e.g. 5% of all children were covered by formal childcare services in 2018 in Brno, while the figure is over 70% in Stockholm.

Municipal responsibilities in childcare

The **organisation of high quality and inclusive ECEC** is the most common responsibility cited by cities. Beyond operationally running and maintaining ECEC facilities, cities undertake a multitude of measures and run special programmes to give all children a good start in life (see further on page 8 on city measures).

Cities also **invest in social infrastructure**. In Ghent, the city gives funding (pre-financing) for extra childcare for children under three years old until the Flemish government takes over. Ljubljana has renovated or constructed six public kindergartens over the past decade and has earmarked an additional €28.2 million to rehabilitate and adapt kindergartens and primary schools in 2019.

Childcare participation challenges in cities

European cities face a series of challenges concerning accessibility, availability, affordability and quality of ECEC:

- Lack of legal entitlement to ECEC in some countries
- Unequal distribution of childcare places in the city
- Insufficient government co-funding
- Increasing demand for ECEC in cities
- Staff shortages

The **lack of legal entitlement to ECEC** is a problem in some cities. The issue affects the availability and affordability of ECEC and can lead to a limited number of subsidised places and long waiting lists. In Riga, Latvian legislation guarantees a place for every child from 18 months old. However, if there is a

shortage of places, the municipality covers the part of the fee which corresponds to public ECEC service, and parents need to pay the remaining daycare tuition fee.

Unequal distribution of childcare places in the city is another key impediment to accessible ECEC. The lack of affordable places in areas with a higher concentration of vulnerable families tends to exacerbate inequalities in ECEC access. Cities that receive ECEC funding from national levels rely on that financing to support children with special needs, purchase pedagogical equipment, maintain infrastructure and pay staff salaries. Insufficient government co-funding, reported by nearly half of the cities, is an additional barrier, which prevents cities from guaranteeing accessible and affordable ECEC. In cities like Amsterdam, for instance, national level budget cuts make running a successful ECEC programme a challenge. When cities cannot fund enough ECEC places to meet the demand, parents often rely on private and non-subsidised centres.

All cities report challenges around **the availability of ECEC**, driven by two dominant factors. First, the **demand for ECEC is higher than the available offer**. Cities like Amsterdam, Ghent, Grand Paris Sud, Leipzig, Porto, Riga and Warsaw cited this issue as critical. This gap strongly correlates with changing demographics in cities like Berlin, Leipzig and Warsaw where there is a higher concentration of young families with children. The second key factor is **staff shortages**. Shortages in pedagogical staff also affect caregiver ratios and thus the quality of ECEC. For children under three, the average ratio is between 1:5 and 1:6 in Stockholm, 1:8 in Ghent and 1:15 in Bilbao. In settings with children with special needs or at high risk of social exclusion, such high ratios are considered especially problematic. Some cities report also challenges in **workforce qualifications**, starting with the initial recruitment of staff and extending to their continuing professional development. Staff qualification is a key factor in children's wellbeing and cognitive development. Pedagogical quality, curricular reforms and continued professional development for preschool teachers are necessary investments for providing quality ECEC

City measures

At the **child level**, cities provide extra support for active social inclusion of disadvantaged children, such as those with disabilities and special needs, as well as migrants and non-native speakers.

At the **parental and family level**, cities introduce special subsidies, provide family counselling and family assistance services in addition to encouraging active parent participation in cultural and other activities.

At the **team and staff level**, cities offer training programmes and work to improve the skills of pedagogical staff, managing education centres and ensuring quality control in ECEC facilities.

The most frequent measures that cities employ to ensure quality ECEC are:

- **specific strategies for increasing the number of public childcare places.** The approach undertaken by cities includes both the provision and expansion of childcare facilities in public as well as non-public settings, together with targeted investments to increase the number of places and building new facilities.
- **targeted measures to provide vulnerable children access to ECEC.** As a centrepiece of an active children policy, cities implement specific measures for children with special needs or at risk of social exclusion. Those measures most commonly include family assistance services, free meals, subsidised short-term camps in winter and summer, specialist services such as speech therapy, as well as more extensive measures such as health promotion and prevention services.
- **measures to adapt childcare provision to the needs of families.** Cities employ municipal consultants, social workers, translation support and cultural mediators. These workers offer specific family assistance services such as counselling, language classes and income support information. Several cities take a proactive approach by adapting their services to the needs of parents. For instance, in Ljubljana, every kindergarten adapts opening hours based on the parent's needs, and Porto offers a free extension for all preschool and primary school students between 15:30 and 17:30.

- **increase the capacity of pedagogical staff.** Cities provide and implement training programmes to improve staff knowledge and skills required in early childhood pedagogy. For this purpose, some cities like Lisbon create and implement tailored training programmes. Ljubljana and Netwerkstad Twente manage dedicated training centres. Other cities like Leipzig offer training opportunities in vocational schools, and Malmo appointed a special educational development team to support preschool teachers.
- **public subsidies for private and third sector providers.** Cities give local subsidies to private ECEC providers that follow different pedagogical principles like Montessori, Waldorf and other recognised programmes.
- **ensuring the quality monitoring of daycare centres.** Their national ministries establish quality frameworks, and the municipal level ensures quality control through the implementation and monitoring of ECEC programmes. In Ghent, the implementation, monitoring, evaluation and improvements only apply to the municipal daycare centres. In Netwerkstad Twente, local subsidies are given to third party organisations only if they meet strict quality requirements, and an external organisation does the quality assessment. In Ljubljana, many kindergartens have ISO certificates, and ISO surveyors monitor the facilities' compliance and implementation of the standards.

City investments in childcare

Municipal authorities recognise the key role that early childhood education and care plays in tackling inequalities and place it at the core of their cities' agendas. Hence, many cities are prioritising investing in childcare infrastructure and services:

- **Warsaw** rebuilt its childcare system in 2019-2020 to provide all willing parents a free place in nursery for their child. In just two years, the city doubled the number of places in nursery by building new public nurseries and purchasing many places in private nurseries.
- **Madrid** created its own network of municipal nurseries, in addition to the regionally funded nurseries, to meet the increasing need for places and provide a service that was more affordable. Since 2017, the city has created 70 municipal nursery schools, which added 8,000 new childcare places, fully financed from the municipal budget with an annual allocation of €35.2 million. This is an increase of 10% in the number of childcare places in just three years.
- **Ghent** piloted new ways to make childcare more accessible and more inclusive. This includes situating childcare centres closer to home, reserving places for disadvantaged families, linking childcare services and welfare organisations, and improving quality of services through staff training. Moreover, the city developed a Childcare Point in order to create a more inclusive city-wide system of enrolment into ECEC.
- **Ljubljana** has increased capacity in childcare by 3,000 places, a 30% increase over the past 14 years, achieving a 95.5% participation rate in 2019. The city has reinforced inclusion programmes for children with special needs (e.g. autism). Ljubljana allocates a third of its city budget to childcare and education, which amounted to €1.1 billion 2006-2020.

Cities are committed to do even more. As part of the Eurocities initiative 'Inclusive Cities for All', 19 cities signed pledges to the European Pillar of Social Rights and committed together over €6 billion to reinforce childcare services and provide specific support for children in need. All pledges are available at www.inclusivecities4all.eu

Policy recommendations from cities to feed the Commission's proposal:

1. **Add specific provisions for childcare in urban areas to reflect the increasing demand in cities.** Cities have seen growing demand for childcare services as population continues to move to cities while at the same time we are dealing with high influx of refugees and migrants, many of whom are children or families with children. Cities are doing what they can to expand the network of ECEC services and to make them available throughout all neighbourhoods in the cities, but there

is a need for further investment in social infrastructure and social services to respond to the growing demand for ECEC and ensure its accessibility and quality as well as affordability.

2. **Participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds should be prioritised through inclusive ECEC enrolment systems to ensure social mix.** The EU Child Guarantee provides a guarantee for all children in need to have free and effective access to early childhood education and care services. The EU and member states need to address the gaps in national legislations and ensure its provisions are applicable not just to residents or nationals of EU member states, but also to children who are refugees or asylum seekers and children who are citizens of one EU country but living in another EU country (intra-EU mobile citizens), such as children of Roma families, who are often not participating in ECEC, but who would be benefiting the most.
3. **Ensure EU funding** (ESF, ERDF, InvestEU) can be blended and be easily accessible by local authorities for investing in childcare. Stable public funding is required to support and develop ECEC systems and tackle child poverty. Funding from EU budget (2021-2027) should also go to support the social inclusion of children and further develop quality ECEC in active partnership with local authorities. Social innovation for ECEC should be promoted at local level and supported through ESF+ social inclusion and education strands. Additionally, local authorities should have full access to the “social investment and skills” policy window under the InvestEU Programme. Cities can use such funds to finance critical infrastructure, including energy efficient renovations of facilities.
4. **Engage cities in EU policymaking on childcare.** In addition to national government expertise, it is important to have expertise from city governments, which are directly responsible to organise childcare services. Therefore, it is important to involve cities as key partners in defining the targets for childcare provision and in monitoring them. To make this possible, it is vital to ensure multilevel governance of the upcoming Recommendation, including coordination with local authorities.
5. **Improve monitoring of ECEC participation via data collection from local level.** The EU and its member states should expand support to research and mutual learning in the area of childhood development. Such initiatives should give particular attention to innovation for integrated service provision, preschool teachers’ professional development and poverty reduction strategies. They should also reinforce capacity building in the area of data collection and support the development of relevant local tools and instruments to assess and tackle child poverty

Response based on two Eurocities reports (also attached to the response to the EU call for evidence):

- Eurocities report on cities and early childhood education and care (2019): [Eurocities report EPSR Early childhood education and child welfare.pdf](#) and
- Eurocities report on child poverty in cities (2020): [Eurocities-report-on-fighting-child-poverty-in-European-cities Dec-2020.pdf](#)



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