



Overview of city measures to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children

Policy note

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the functioning of childcare and education systems, as well as on the emotional and psychological health and well-being of children. This paper gives an overview of the policy measures put in place by cities to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children. The overview brings together the information provided by cities during the EUROCITIES Working Group Children and Young People online meeting on 10 July 2020, attended by 40 participants from 27 cities¹.

Common city policies to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people include:

- Provision of digital devices
- Food distribution
- Leisure activities
- Outreach and cooperation
- Online counselling
- Day care facilities
- Needs assessment



Provision of digital devices

Many cities recognised the need to reduce educational inequalities by making sure that children from low-income families have access to digital devices, equipment and internet to follow lessons online during school closure (in Leeds, Bruges, Oulo, Amsterdam, Ghent).

Amsterdam: Provided 6,300 chrome books and 800 Wi-Fi-hotspots, which were distributed among schools. Students could borrow these devices while the schools were closed. There was one laptop available per family.

Ghent: Collected and donated refurbished laptops, tablets and smart phones to vulnerable children and young people. The city also opened new Wi-Fi hotspots for families to access.

¹ Brussels, Ghent, Kortrijk, Bruges, Vienna, Nicosia, Brno, Tallinn, Oulu, Toulouse, Pau, Munich, Karlsruhe, Milan, Amsterdam, Porto, Guimaraes, Timisoara, Barcelona, Madrid, Terrassa, Malmo, Stockholm, Lausanne, Leeds, Bristol, Glasgow and Kharkiv.



Food distribution

Another priority for cities was to provide food to children in need (Leeds, Oulo, Glasgow, Malmo, Milan, Tampere). This was done either through food vouchers (Leeds), distribution of food packages (Glasgow and Milan) or pickup lunch services (Malmo and Oulu).

Leeds: Set up a food distribution network with the help of many volunteers. Sanitary products were also distributed.

Oulo: Since 1948, free school lunches are guaranteed by law in Finland. Oulo managed to continue this service during the pandemic by offering meal packages that parents could pick up and warm at home.



Leisure activities

Many cities offered pedagogical and play resources for children during the lockdown. Some cities chose to distribute physical leisure packages (playboxes delivered at home in Leeds and Ghent) while others focused on online leisure resources (Rotterdam, Tampere, Madrid, online programmes for sports or visits to museums in Amsterdam and Glasgow). Other cities reinforced considerably their offer of leisure activities after the lockdown ended (Bruges, Ghent, Malmo).

Madrid: Had great success in proposing online leisure activities. The city saw over 1,2 million connections to these services.

Bruges: Opened up the public green spaces this summer in the most vulnerable districts where citizens and organisations can carry out activities with particular attention to children. By doing so, the city wants to break through the social isolation of children and enable them to have a nice summer.

Rotterdam: Supporting the release of an app (“Grow-It”) with the Erasmus Medical Centre in order to (1) let children and young people play a game designed to strengthen resilience strategies and cope with stress and (2) monitor their mental health and situation at home during the corona crisis.



Outreach and cooperation

Since many children had difficulty accessing services, some cities (Ghent, Milan) actively sought to outreach to vulnerable children. Like other cities (Tampere, Oulo) this was achieved by cooperating with local church and civil society NGOs. Outreach to families proved to be key to offer emotional support and monitor children’s needs, either physically through door-to-door distribution of food or playboxes or via helplines online or phone. In this way, cities have identified new families in need, not previously known to city services.

Ghent: Installed youth reception desks in different neighbourhoods. The city cooperated with NGOs that went from door-to-door to ask about the well-being of families and inform them about upcoming summer projects for children. Ghent also cooperated with Repair cafe, the Public Centre for Social Welfare, Ghent’s Solidarity Fund, Ghent’s IT agency Digipolis and Youth department to provide children with digital devices.

Oulo: Worked closely with UNICEF Finland to establish a list of good practices in many areas (early education, student counselling, youth work, services for disabled children).



Online counselling

Some cities set up online services to provide free-of-charge counselling to children and their families and help improve their mental and emotional health (Leeds, Milan, Oulu, Kortrijk).

Milan: Works a lot to provide early childhood services (serving 33.000 children). The city created 70 digital platforms for personal support, with individual link and password to provide tailor made suggestions for each child by their educator or teacher.

Leeds: Set up an online service for children to receive counselling or to just have a conversation with someone.

Kortrijk: Set up an online portal with overview of all possible support for children and parents.



Childcare

Cities also made sure that children in need, especially children of workers in essential professions, could benefit from daycare facilities and study spaces (Amsterdam, Ghent, Brno). Many cities have also provided financial relief for families that could not use childcare during the lockdown, such as by freezing childcare and school fees during the lockdown and offering financial and debt counselling for families (at risk) in poverty (Oulu).

Amsterdam: Cooperated with schools to make day-care available for children who were in an unsafe family situation. For children who had difficulties to study at home, it was possible to go to school a certain number of hours per week.

Brno: Provided day care facilities in the local Waldorf primary and nursery school. Moreover, volunteers helped with baby-sitting for parents in essential professions. Students from the Masaryk University also helped teaching children at home.



Needs assessment

Cities like Madrid, Tampere and Ghent are carrying out studies and longitudinal surveys to closely monitor the (income) situation of families to know how to respond to their needs, laying the ground for evidence-based policy-making.

Tampere: Conducted a survey on families to figure out the concrete impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children. The survey will be repeated in autumn and the results will be taken into account for the planning of the next city budget.

Ghent: Reaches out to vulnerable families and NGOs working in the sector to detect bottlenecks. Both governmental and civil society social welfare organisations discuss together how to find solutions to these issues.



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