

The impact of the refugee crisis on local public social services in Europe

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Introduction

“Europe and the countries in Syria’s neighbourhood are facing the biggest refugee crisis since the end of World War II, affecting all of us.” (Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations¹)

The European Social Network (ESN) has been observing through the lenses of its members the growing impact of the refugee crisis on public social services in their local communities and their organisations’ work. Yet, given the recent nature of these events, little research is available that would provide a comparative overview of how the refugee crisis has affected these services across Europe. Therefore, ESN decided to do some research by asking its members in a questionnaire about their experiences, devoting a session to this topic at the 24th European Social Services Conference, and addressing the support for unaccompanied children at the launch of our most recent publication ‘Investing in children’s services, improving outcomes’.

This paper assesses the responses to the questionnaire, contextualises them with research findings, official statistics and legislation, and describes some of the approaches and key issues in the work with refugees and asylum seekers highlighted at these meetings. The paper highlights the discrepancies between countries and areas in Europe regarding the extent to which the refugee crisis has affected them, the range and quality of services available to the newly arrived refugees, and how social services have responded to the increase in the number of newly arrived people in need of international protection.

Inevitably, this paper represents the views and experiences of a small, non-representative sample of ESN members. Its aim is to give the reader an idea of how the refugee crisis looks like at the frontline of public local social services and what the latter need to better respond to it in the near future.

Refugee? Asylum-seeker? Migrant?

- **Refugees** are persons fleeing armed conflict or prosecution. They are defined and protected in international law under the 1951 Refugee Convention.²
- **Migrants** choose to move not because of direct threat of persecution but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases education, family reunion, or other reasons.³
- An **asylum-seeker** is someone who has applied for international protection on the basis of the Refugee Convention or Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), but whose claim has not yet been definitely evaluated.⁴
- An **unaccompanied child** is someone under the age of 18 who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has the responsibility to do so.⁵

¹ European Commission (2015) Press release. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6212_en.htm (last accessed 29 July 2016)

² UNHCR, Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

³ UNHCR (2016) UNHCR viewpoint: ‘Refugee’ or ‘migrant’ – which is right?

<http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

⁴ Refugee Council, Terms and definitions. <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/glossary> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1997) Guidelines on policies and procedures in dealing with unaccompanied children seeking asylum. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Methodology

ESN conducted an online questionnaire on the impact of the refugee crisis on local public social services in Europe and invited all of its members to participate. The survey was open from mid-December 2015 to February 2016. We received 55 responses in total, 49 of which were valid. The responses came from 17 different countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The quality of the responses varied markedly. While some responses were very detailed, in other cases the respondents provided very little information. In particular, given the lack of responses from some of the biggest Member States, we contacted individual members from France, Italy and the UK subsequently but unfortunately none of them wanted to participate in the survey, either because their organisation had not dealt with many refugees or because they did not feel competent and/or comfortable to provide information on this matter.

Despite these difficulties, the answers to the questionnaire provided us with very valuable insights into the issues that had arisen for local public social services in Europe as a result of the refugee crisis. We then conducted desk research looking at official EU reports, statistics and legal documents to help us put the findings into context. Through this exercise, we were also able to identify examples of local practice, which were then further analysed at the European Social Services Conference in June. Finally, the issue of unaccompanied children emerged as key for public social services due to child protection concerns. This had also been identified in our project '[Investing in children's services](#)' and ESN organised a session on caring and protecting for unaccompanied children at the launch of the publication '[Investing in children's services, improving outcomes](#)', where the situation in the Swedish municipalities and in the French region of Calais were analysed.

Analysis

1. How many refugees came to Europe in 2015 and which countries did they go to?

In general, the results from the questionnaire reflect what we already know about the refugee crisis: It has been a crisis in certain countries and certain areas of Europe, but has only had a marginal effect on others. For instance, the responses from Romania, Slovenia and Latvia confirm that these countries have not been affected at all as they have barely taken any refugees in 2015. The fact that we did not get any responses from a number of other countries may be due to the same reason.

According to Eurostat, 1,321,600 persons claimed asylum in the EU28 in 2015.⁶ However, the figure of asylum applications vary significantly between countries. At the 24th European Social Services Conference, Xavier Alonso Calderón of the Catalan regional government explained that in 2015 Spain received 14,780 asylum applications (a low number in comparison to other Western European countries), of whom Catalonia welcomed 245. In 2016, the Catalan government announced its commitment to welcome 4,500 refugees in the next two years, though the asylum status is granted by the Spanish government.⁷

Meanwhile, the small city of Leiden (approximately 120,000 inhabitants) in The Netherlands welcomed in 2015 about the same number of asylum applicants as Catalonia. 44,970 people applied for asylum in 2015 in the entire country⁸. Refugees are distributed through a quota system across all Dutch municipalities.

Overall, France received 75,750 asylum applications in 2015, a modest number in comparison with other member states with similar characteristics in Western Europe.⁹ Meanwhile, Germany recorded 476,649 new asylum claims¹⁰, yet it has been reported that more than one million refugees came to Germany last year, many of whom are still waiting for the opportunity to apply for international protection.¹¹

⁶ Eurostat, Eurostat, Asylum and new asylum applicants – annual aggregated data <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00191&plugin=1> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

⁷ Generalitat de Catalunya (2016) Catalonia, ready to receive refugees <http://afersexteriors.gencat.cat/en/details/noticia/Catalonia-Ready-to-Receive-Refugees-00001> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

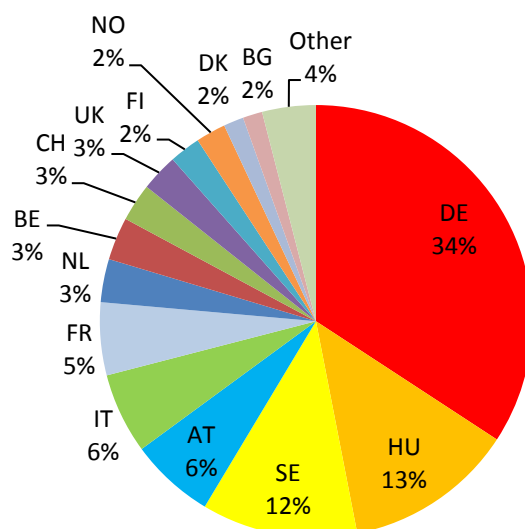
⁸ Eurostat, Eurostat, Asylum and new asylum applicants – annual aggregated data <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00191&plugin=1> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Statista (2016) Anzahl der Asylanträge (insgesamt) in Deutschland von 1995 bis 2016. <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/76095/umfrage/asylantraege-insgesamt-in-deutschland-seit-1995/> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

¹¹ Die Welt (2016) 1,1 Millionen Flüchtlinge kamen 2015 nach Deutschland. <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article150678614/1-1-Millionen-Fluechtlinge-kamen-2015-nach-Deutschland.html> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

Share of asylum applicants in the EEA per country in 2015¹²



Given the very different sizes of EU member states, it is important to consider these figures in relation to population size which reveals a clear picture. Sweden and Finland in the Nordic countries, Germany, Belgium and Austria in continental Europe, and the Czech Republic and Hungary in Central and Eastern Europe received the highest number of asylum applications with more than 2,000 per million inhabitants. Sweden received the most refugees per capita. Overall, 162,877 asylum applications were received in 2015, about 43% of which were children (more than half of whom were unaccompanied children).¹³

With the exception of Hungary, the number of asylum applications made in Central and Eastern European countries remains very low. In Slovenia, for instance, only 275 people requested international protection in 2015, but about 377,000 people entered the country in the same period - most of whom were transferred or continued their journey themselves to Austria.¹⁴

¹² Eurostat (2016), Asylum and first time asylum applicants – annual aggregated data (rounded).

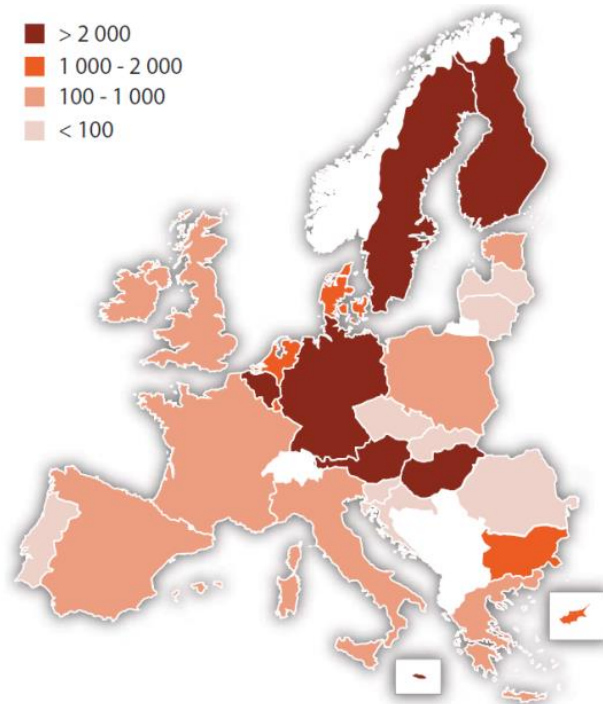
<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00191&plugin=1> (last accessed 22nd July 2016)

¹³ Migrationsverket, Statistics for 2015 – Asylum applications

<http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.7c00d8e6143101d166d1aab/1451894593595/Inkomna+ans%C3%B6kningar+om+asyl+2015+-+Applications+for+asylum+received+2015.pdf> (last accessed 29th January 2016)

¹⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, Monthly data collection on the current migration situation in the EU – December 2015 monthly report', p. 57, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-monthly-compile-com-update-1_en.pdf?_cldee=bWFvYWFubmUuZG95ZW5AZXNuLWV1Lm9yZw%3d%3d&urlid=0 (last accessed 2nd February 2016)

Asylum applications per million inhabitants, January –September 2015¹⁵



Data source: Eurostat.

Hence, social services providers in most parts of Europe have not been affected at all, while others, particularly in Sweden, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Hungary and Austria have struggled to provide for the sudden, unexpected rise in the number of people requiring services.

¹⁵ Poptcheva, E. and Stuchlik, A., 'Work and social welfare for asylum-seekers and refugees: Selected EU member states', European Parliamentary Research Service [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA\(2015\)572784_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA(2015)572784_EN.pdf) (last accessed 1st February 2016)

2. The role of dispersal policies

Many European countries have dispersal policies in place to distribute asylum seekers/refugees more evenly across the country and therefore distribute the increased workload better between local authorities.

Denmark, for instance, has had a dispersal policy since 1999 that obliges refugees to live in their assigned municipality for the first three years unless relocation is justified by an employment offer elsewhere.¹⁶

The Netherlands has a minimum housing quota for recognised refugees that every municipality has to fulfil (although in practice not all have done so in 2014 and 2015). The municipalities are also responsible for integrating refugees into the labour market.¹⁷

France operates a compulsory accommodation system in state-run reception centres for asylum-seekers and any accommodation facilities funded by the Ministry in charge of reception of asylum-seekers. Distribution of places across France is established in a national plan, but there are also guidelines for each region.¹⁸

In Sweden, unaccompanied children are distributed to municipalities by the Swedish Migration Agency in order to share the responsibility and costs.¹⁹ However, according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:

“Due to the Swedish Migration Agency’s backlog the children have had to remain in very temporary accommodations in arrival municipalities. Furthermore, the residence municipalities have had problems to accommodate the children assigned to them. The children are not supposed to spend more than 48 hours in the arrival municipalities but in practice stay much longer. They have nothing to do, no one to talk to, and very little information on what is happening. If any activities are provided, they are arranged by different civil society organisations. Consequently, many children are suffering emotionally.”²⁰

Despite dispersal policies, the reception conditions often vary significantly within countries. Germany’s northern states (Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Lower Saxony) have managed to accommodate all persons in need of international protection in decentralised private homes, while mass accommodation centres in Berlin often

¹⁶ Nusche, D., Wurzburg, G and Naughton, B. (2010) OECD reviews of migrant education – Denmark. Paris: OECD Publishing.

¹⁷ Poptcheva, E. and Stuchlik, A., ‘Work and social welfare for asylum-seekers and refugees: Selected EU member states’, European Parliamentary Research Service, p. 22

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA\(2015\)572784_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA(2015)572784_EN.pdf) (last accessed 1st February 2016)

¹⁸ Poptcheva, E. and Stuchlik, A., ‘Work and social welfare for asylum-seekers and refugees: Selected EU member states’, European Parliamentary Research Service [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA\(2015\)572784_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA(2015)572784_EN.pdf) (last accessed 1st February 2016)

¹⁹ Myrberg, G. (2012) ‘Where are newcomers going to live? Perspectives on Swedish and Danish refugee settlement policies from Malmö and Århus’, Institute for Future Studies, Research Report 2012/13

²⁰ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, Monthly data collection on the current migration situation in the EU – December 2015 monthly report’, p. 75, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-monthly-compilation-com-update-1_en.pdf?_cldee=bWFYvWFubmUuZG95ZW5AZXNuLWV1Lm9yZw%3d%3d&urlid=0 (last accessed 2nd February 2016)

have poor sanitary and kitchen conditions, delayed access to emergency healthcare, and a lack of child-friendly spaces.²¹

Dispersal policies are not in place in other European countries, which means that refugees are free to go where they see the best opportunities for themselves, but this can also create great disparities between municipalities within countries regarding the number of newcomers they receive and hence the impact on public social services.

3. Which services do the newly arrived refugees have access to?

According to the answers to the questionnaire, emergency housing and healthcare are provided in virtually all EU countries, and refugee children are usually registered in schools. However, less than half of the surveyed countries provide access to care for people with disabilities, access to apprenticeships and work programmes, or full access to healthcare.

Our desk research confirms this picture of very different levels of access to social services in Europe. Poptcheva and Stuchlik assert that “*access to compulsory education and to healthcare, although recognised in ample terms by the law, are in practice prevented by lack of information, limited language skills, and delays in obtaining the necessary documents for enrolment*” in the eight member states they analysed (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden).

Access to the labour market is granted to asylum seekers nine months after the asylum application in France, six months in the Netherlands, Poland and Spain, three months in Bulgaria and Germany, two months in Italy and immediately upon registration of the asylum application in Sweden.²² However, asylum-seekers in Sweden cannot generally work in areas that require certified skills, hence labour market access is limited to the unskilled sector.²³

In practice, access to the labour market may still be extremely difficult due to language barriers, a lack of recognition of qualifications, an adverse economic situation, and insufficient integration opportunities, as is the case for instance in Bulgaria.²⁴ Other practical obstacles to the labour market can include the remote location of reception centres, discrimination, compulsory accommodation schemes (that forbid asylum-seekers to move within the country) or legal obligations to consider nationals, EU nationals and established third country nationals before giving a job to an asylum-seeker, as is the case in France.²⁵

The municipality of Östersund in Sweden told us about an initiative that they have started to attract refugees to the social care profession where the municipality has shortages. Many refugees are interested and some have already found training placements but the lack of Swedish language skills is a major obstacle and reason why many care providers might not offer refugees placements or jobs.

²¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, Monthly data collection on the current migration situation in the EU – December 2015 monthly report’, p. 29, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-monthly-compilation-com-update-1_en.pdf?cldee=bWFyaWFubmUuZG95ZW5AZXNuLWV1Lm9yZW%3d%3d&urlid=0 (last accessed 2nd February 2016)

²² Poptcheva, E. and Stuchlik, A., ‘Work and social welfare for asylum-seekers and refugees: Selected EU member states’, European Parliamentary Research Service [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA\(2015\)572784_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/572784/EPRS_IDA(2015)572784_EN.pdf) (last accessed 1st February 2016)

²³ Ibid., pp. 27-28

²⁴ Ibid., 10

²⁵ Ibid., p. 12

Child protection of unaccompanied children is insufficient in several countries, including the following:

- In Greece, due to the lack of appropriate shelters for children in almost all reception facilities on the Greek islands, children are kept in police custody before being transferred to open reception facilities on the mainland.²⁶
- In Bulgaria, asylum-seeking children do not attend school or language classes, except for activities organised by volunteers and NGOs.²⁷
- About 25% of the unaccompanied children in Sweden have disappeared from their accommodation centres. The Swedish Migration Agency identifies unaccompanied children as a group at risk of human trafficking.²⁸ Furthermore, social services do not have the capacity to follow up on suspicions of violence or distress at the private homes or social accommodation asylum-seeking children live in.²⁹

Countless initiatives and projects have emerged across Europe aimed at integrating the newly arrived refugees in a variety of ways, mostly through volunteers organising language classes and other activities. However, often public authorities, municipalities or other public bodies are involved in the organisation and administration of these projects and many have had to reject volunteers due to a lack of personnel and resources to coordinate the activities.

Thousands of people in Germany, Sweden, and other countries have offered to host refugees in their own homes to avoid them having to stay in mass accommodation. For example, the City of Vienna has been actively looking for citizens who are willing to host refugees for six months or more, and until March 2016, 350 agreements had been signed with individual citizens.³⁰

4. What impact has the refugee crisis had on public social services and how can they deal with them?

In response to the question, ‘what do public social services need to respond effectively to the refugee crisis?’ most respondents highlighted that housing was the biggest problem they faced to be able to support the refugees adequately. Particularly those working in cities with already overstretched housing markets raised concerns about the availability of housing.

Several respondents were worried that by making a significant amount of affordable housing available to refugees, this would result in a lack of access to affordable housing for the local population. In countries where local authorities tend to rent private homes for the refugees, there were concerns that this would drive up rents in the local area. More than 70% of respondents highlighted the need that public social services receive specific financial support to address the increase in the demand for services. In fact, 47.5% reported financial constraints to face the new challenges that 57% of the respondents said that they had

²⁶ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, Monthly data collection on the current migration situation in the EU – December 2015 monthly report’, p. 36 http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-monthly-compile-com-update-1_en.pdf?_cldee=bWFyaWFubmUuZG95ZW5AZXNuLWV1Lm9yZw%3d%3d&urlid=0 (last accessed 2nd February 2016)

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17

²⁸ Ibid., p. 72

²⁹ Ibid., p. 75

³⁰ Stadt Wien, Hilfe für Flüchtlinge, <https://fluechtlinge.wien.gv.at/site/news/2015/12/15/privatunterkuenfte/> (last accessed 24th February 2016)

experienced. In addition, many request more information and adequate provision of training for social service staff as well as clarity about the rules and regulations concerning the legal framework that applies to the refugees.

Another new challenge that should be addressed is the language barrier, which 42.50% identified as an impact of the crisis. Municipalities and local social services providers said they did not have enough translators and medical staff who could speak Arabic and other languages spoken by the refugees. Furthermore, whilst access to integration classes was available in 61% of the countries covered in the questionnaire, several respondents said that there were not enough language teachers available to facilitate language training for all refugees. In order to address these language barriers, the City of Hafnarfjörður in Iceland has been implementing an online translation service, which enables them to translate immediately into various languages.³¹ This could be a solution for many municipalities for whom the costs as well as the lack of translators, especially in rural areas, have become a significant challenge.

The increase in the numbers of unaccompanied children arriving in Europe has represented a challenge for social services in several countries, particularly when it comes to finding foster families. For instance, earlier this year, the city of Hannover in Germany was 'urgently seeking' foster carers for 270 unaccompanied children, mainly boys between 13 and 17 years old.³² We have not found any data on the proportion of unaccompanied children for whom foster families have been found.

In 2015, 162,450 asylum applications were registered in Sweden.³³ Speaking at the launch of the publication 'Investing in children's services, improving outcomes', Graham Owen from the Swedish Association of Directors of Social Services, explained that Swedish municipalities were not ready to provide accommodation with foster families for all the unaccompanied children who arrived in just a few months. Likewise, the municipalities were lacking enough social workers who could formally investigate these cases. Consequently, staff either with very little or no experience of child protection have had to work in the process of assigning and approving existing resources to unaccompanied children. Schools and leisure centres also lacked adequate staff and facilities to welcome the enormous number of children. Furthermore, there were not enough interpreters to assist children in their language of origin, and healthcare and dental services were also overwhelmed by demand. It has been documented that the situation was particularly critical in Malmö where the majority of asylum seekers arrived. Many people there were accommodated in big halls not intended for living with insufficient sanitary facilities, poor healthcare and inadequate living conditions.³⁴

Graham Owen explained that social services were trying to catch up, for example by increasing the frequency of contact with unaccompanied children, the construction of residential centres and the search for additional foster families. In this process, the voice of

³¹ <http://www.languageline.com/> (last accessed 4 February 2016)

³² <http://www.hannover.de/Fl%C3%BChtlinge-in-Stadt-und-Region-Hannover/Meldungen/Gastfamilien-f%C3%BCr-junge-Fl%C3%BChtlinge-gesucht> (last accessed 29 July 2016)

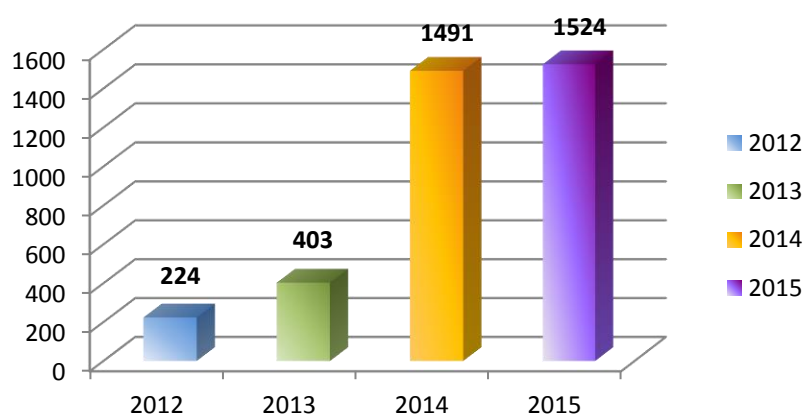
³³ Eurostat (2016), Asylum and first time asylum applicants – annual aggregated data (rounded). <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00191&plugin=1> (last accessed 22nd July 2016)

³⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, Monthly data collection on the current migration situation in the EU – December 2015 monthly report', p. 71, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-monthly-Compilation-com-update-1_en.pdf?_cldee=bWFvYWVubmUuZG95ZW5AZXNuLWV1Lm9yZw%3d%3d&urlid=0 (last accessed 2 February 2016)

the child is very important. This is why the Children’s Council was set up. The Council consists of representatives of associations of unaccompanied children and the General Directorate for Migration. With the Council, it is expected that by listening to children actively, it will be possible to improve the integration process of unaccompanied children.

Pas-de-Calais county council in the north-eastern part of France finds itself in an exceptional situation because of its proximity to the UK. Many asylum-seeking young people and migrants try to reach the UK through the Eurotunnel, but due to strict border controls, many end up being trapped in Calais unable to reach their desired destination. Speaking at the 24th European Social Services Conference, Fanny Bertrand, responsible for care and protection of unaccompanied children in Pas-de-Calais county council, highlighted that in May 2016, 343 or 10 to 20% of migrants in the refugee camp (also known as ‘the jungle’) were unaccompanied children. Most came from Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sudan and were fleeing war, persecution or poverty. In 2015, the county council supported 1,524 unaccompanied children in its emergency shelters.

Development of the emergency reception of foreign unaccompanied children 2012-2015 in Pas-de-Calais³⁵



Unaccompanied children require special support from social services. In close cooperation with the NGO France Terre d’Asile, Pas-de-Calais county council initially supports young people in 55 emergency shelters before housing them subsequently in one of its 68 flats or with one of their 72 foster families.

Bertrand emphasised that the support for unaccompanied children requires joint work with the district judge, children’s courts, national ministry of education, the police and local partners such as sport clubs, schools and theatre companies. The county council tries to get refugee children to go to public schools as soon as possible and with the support from tutors. In order to make this work, there needs to be close cooperation between the city council, the NGO France Terre d’Asile and local schools.

The answers to the questionnaire and the presentations at the European Social Services Conference reveal a much greater challenge than the lack of resources, that is to say the lack of a coherent and coordinated strategy in every public policy area and an integrated services approach to address the arrival and integration of the refugees. In this vein, had an

³⁵ Département Pas-de-Calais, 2016

EU-wide commitment of sharing the responsibility of welcoming and integrating the refugees been applied, social services might have felt more supported.

5. What support have public social services received from the state and the community?

About 70% of the questionnaire's respondents said that they had received financial support from the central or regional government in response to the refugee crisis. The German federal government decided in September 2015 to give municipalities €670 per refugee each month from registration to the conclusion of the asylum process. In addition, it committed to invest €500 million in the construction of new affordable homes and support local authorities dealing with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children with €350 million.³⁶

According to the Swedish Migration Agency, asylum-seeking children are entitled to the same health and education services as Swedish nationals, including child protection services for unaccompanied children. The steep increase in the number of refugees including unaccompanied children from July 2015 onwards posed a major challenge to Swedish municipalities and providers of child protection, health, education and housing services as highlighted above. In recognition of the exceptional rise in the number of people seeking international protection in Sweden, the European Commission awarded the country €35 million in emergency funding in December 2015, and proposed to suspend Sweden's obligation in the EU relocation mechanism for one year, as the Swedish Government had requested in November.³⁷

Sixty-two per cent of respondents said they were supported by volunteers and several described the important role charitable organisations were playing in providing support and services that local authorities were unable to provide themselves. The Social Services Administration in Copenhagen mentioned that thanks to the work of local charities, it has been possible to organise the provision of furniture, clothes, food, legal and medical counsel, as well as day-care for children while their parents attend Danish classes.

6. How did local communities respond?

Most responses to the question 'Can you describe and provide examples of how your local community has responded to the arrival of the newcomers?' described positive developments particularly voluntary support and initiatives. Responses from the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and Hungary described a sense of solidarity and various volunteer activities such as language classes, collection of clothes and food, and the provision of advice to support integration into the labour market. Whilst these voluntary actions were seen very positively, several members from Germany also commented that organising these voluntary activities was in itself a new challenge that had to be addressed, not least by employing new supervisors.

³⁶ Die Bundesregierung, 2015, Bund-Länder Treffen zu Flüchtlingen – Merkel: "Ein guter Tag für Kommunen", <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Artikel/2015/09/2015-09-24-fluechtlinge-kanzleramt.html> (last accessed 4th February 2016)

³⁷ European Commission, EMN Bulletin Edition 13 http://emn.ie/files/p_20160129121155emn_bulletin_13th_edition_oct_dec_2015.pdf

There was also a clear fear amongst members about what was going to come in the future if the refugee crisis continued its trend from 2015. This includes from countries that have so far hardly been impacted by the crisis at all, such as Slovenia, to countries that had a large influx, such as Sweden. On both ends of the scale, respondents worried about capacity issues (especially regarding affordable housing), but also about integration in the medium to long-term. However, some described new activities that aimed to address these worries, including joint efforts by local communities, public organisations, third sector organisations, individuals and private companies to help the newcomers integrate as quickly as possible into the labour market.

The public library in Hultsfred in Sweden organised the ‘Borrow a Swede’ initiative over several weeks in 2015 that paired refugees with locals to meet in the refugee’s home and talk about life in Sweden. In its answer to the questionnaire, the Directorate General for Immigration (Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs and Families) in the regional government of Catalonia also told us about an awareness raising campaign they were about to launch. The objective of this campaign, which has been the result of a long work process to arrive at a consensus with all relevant stakeholders, is to inform the population about the refugee crisis, the realities of the refugees as well as the moral obligation to provide effective responses and guide local authorities in their implementation.

These examples and others that we have seen in the press confirm the continuing support from local communities and voluntary activities, which are often vital to the refugees’ wellbeing. However, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) describes in a recent report³⁸ decreasing acceptance of refugees among the population in Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary and Sweden, and a rise in racist incidents and hate crimes in Germany and Sweden. Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office registered 906 offences against accommodation centres for refugees in 2015 including 154 violent attacks.³⁹

7. How can social services empower the refugees?

On the basis that every refugee dreams of a better life, Marleen Damen from the city of Leiden in The Netherlands emphasised at ESN’s 24th European Social Services Conference that social services should support them so that their dreams become opportunities. Also at the conference, Fanny

In 2009, A survey by the city of Barcelona revealed that half of respondents said what made it difficult for the city’s culturally diverse residents to live together were a “*lack of knowledge of the other as well as current rumours, stereotypes and prejudices about the other unknown person.*” In response, the city started its ‘anti-rumour strategy’ consisting of: identifying major rumours existing in the city; collecting objective data and arguments to dismantle false rumours; creating an anti-rumour network of local actors from civil society; empowering and training “*anti-rumour agents*”; and designing and implementing anti-rumour campaigns to raise awareness. (Council of Europe, [City free of rumours](#))

³⁸ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, Monthly data collection on the current migration situation in the EU – December 2015 monthly report’, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-monthly-compilation-com-update-1_en.pdf?_cldee=bWFYWFubmUuZG95ZW5AZXNuLWV1Lm9yZWw%3d%3d&urlid=0 (last accessed 2nd February 2016)

³⁹ Ibid., 30

Bertrand from Calais county council in France spoke of the resilience, courage and autonomy of unaccompanied children in Calais, who often undertake a long and difficult journey by themselves.

Therefore, the speakers' message was that we should not see refugees as passive and vulnerable people who need help – instead we should support them to be able to use their skills and abilities, so that their hopes become opportunities and they build a better life by themselves in the countries where they settle.

Autonomy is the main objective of the integration plan in Leiden, where they try to make sure that refugees are welcome from day one and emphasise that the refugees have the same rights and responsibilities as Dutch citizens. Leiden's 24x24 approach includes 24 hours of language and social integration support per week for 24 months. Social services assign refugees a 'buddy', a Dutch volunteer who supports them in their daily activities. Social services also facilitate access to vitality workshops to promote physical exercise and community activities among the refugees. The main objective is that refugees younger than 30 years old access education and those older than 30 have access to the labour market so that they can be financially independent as quickly as possible.

Autonomy was also identified as an essential element of the refugee plan of Catalonia, which has become the first region in Spain to have a plan for refugee protection and integration.⁴⁰ The plan includes improvement to the legal system, training for public civil servants, resources for asylum applicants and public campaigns to raise awareness among the population. The plan has as its objective involving the refugees in the administrative structures that concern them. For instance, the Reception committee for refugees promotes the participation of the refugees in its working groups. The participating refugees are often people who contacted the NGO when they were refugees and now work for these organisations. The committee is responsible for coordinating relations between private and public organisations involved in welcoming and integrating refugees. Moreover, it advises the Catalan government, monitors the implementation of the asylum plans and makes proposals and recommendations to improve the asylum process.

⁴⁰ Generalitat de Catalunya (2014) Plan for International Protection in Catalonia.
http://treballiaferssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits_tematics/05immigracio/proteccio_internacional/angles.pdf

Looking ahead

This paper has described the impact of the refugee crisis in countries and communities across Europe throughout 2015 and in the beginning of 2016, as well as the differences between the regions. While some regions have hardly been affected at all, others have seen an unprecedented challenge for their local social services provision.

The main challenges that public social services have had to face include:

- **Housing:** Most asylum-seekers and refugees are provided with housing in most countries, making it the most comprehensive service provided by local authorities to the newcomers. Particularly in cities and municipalities with already overstretched housing markets, there are serious shortages of affordable housing and accommodation for the refugees.
- **Language:** the lack of knowledge of the respective language of the receiving country is a major obstacle to accessing the services that public bodies provide, particularly education for children, training and employment, and healthcare. Investing in language immersion courses and supporting voluntary language support activities is crucial.
- **Information and training:** Across the continent, there is a perceived and a real need to train staff in local authorities and social services in dealing with the refugees, including information about the asylum process. For managers of social services, it is also important to be better informed about national strategies and plans.
- **Specialist services for refugees and unaccompanied children:** Many municipalities struggle to provide adequate services for asylum-seeking children (child protection, education, care) as well as specialist services such as trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment services.

The impact of the refugee crisis will not lessen in 2016, not just because the number of refugees who will be seeking refuge in Europe is expected to rise further⁴¹ but also because the refugees who arrived in 2015 will continue to need housing, education, language classes, healthcare, and child protection. Moreover, in many countries volunteers and charities have provided essential support, often filling gaps in the local public services provision, but it cannot be assumed that this level of support will continue over the coming years.

For further research, it may be interesting to follow some local organisations over the next year in different locations to document how their public social services respond to the newcomers. Municipalities in Sweden and Germany would be particularly interesting giving the high number of refugees in both countries as well as both countries' high level of social services provision for refugees. It would also be interesting to look at localities in countries like Slovenia and Latvia where local authorities have very little experience in providing

⁴¹ Reuters, 2015, EU executive sees three million migrants by 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-migrants-costs-idUKKCN0SU1BL20151105> (last accessed 5th February 2016)

services for refugees but will probably increasingly have to do so in 2016 and beyond as they start receiving refugees from the EU relocation scheme. Finally, it would also be important to follow up on countries with a high number of refugees but relatively low social services provision and/or little structural support to respond to the crisis, such as Greece.

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