



# Building Trust and Resilience: Child Protection Systems in the Baltic Sea Region

May 2023

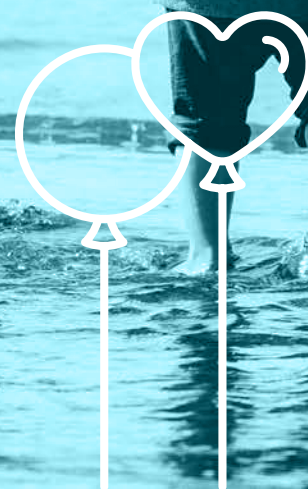


# Table of Contents

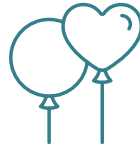
<b>List of Acronyms</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
1.1 Conceptual framework.....	4
1.2 Methodology.....	5
1.3 Limitations.....	5
<b>2. Background</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Key findings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
3.1 Summary of general reflections.....	7
3.2 Legislation, policy and reform.....	8
Legal frameworks.....	8
Care reforms.....	9
3.3 Governance and coordination.....	10
Governance.....	10
Coordination mechanisms.....	10
3.4 Child protection service models and frameworks.....	12
General reflections.....	12
Child participation.....	13
Multidisciplinarity.....	14
Diversity and inclusion.....	14
3.5 Social work.....	16
Social workforce.....	16
3.6 Monitoring & evaluation and accountability.....	18
General reflections.....	18
3.7 Adapting to crises.....	21
<b>References</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>25</b>

## List of Acronyms

CBSS	Council of the Baltic Sea States
CoE	Council of Europe
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EGCAR	Expert Group on Children at Risk
EU	European Union
FGM/C	Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
GSSWA	Global Social Service Workforce Association
KI	Key Informant
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNCRC	United Nations Convntion on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nation Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization



# 1. Introduction



This paper provides a concise overview of the results of a mapping of child protection systems in seven countries in the Baltic Sea Region (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Lithuania and Norway) carried out in 2021-22, under the leadership of the Norwegian Presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. [\[1\]](#)

The mapping was commissioned by the Council of Baltic Sea States Expert Group on Children at Risk to inform the implementation of its strategic priority [\[2\]](#) to strengthen national child protection systems, and to promote integrated strategies that have been demonstrated to contribute to positive change in the lives of children at risk of violence. The mapping was carried out by [Maestral International](#).

The overall objective of the mapping was to identify and document key elements and practices of well-functioning, accessible and resilient child protection systems that are adequately structured and equipped to protect children, including in periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine.



## 1.1 Conceptual framework

The mapping embraces a *system strengthening approach* to child protection and child welfare, recognising that various elements and components must work in tandem to address the complex and multiple risks that children may face in different contexts and at different stages of their life. It promotes a multidisciplinary response that enhances the capacities and coordination of institutions and elements that together form an integrated system. [3]

The mapping focused on six integrated elements drawing on evidence-based strategies to prevent and respond to violence against children [4], and globally recognised components of inclusive and resilient child protection systems [5]:

- Legislation, Policy, and Reform
- Governance and coordination
- Child protection service models and frameworks
- Social work
- Monitoring & evaluation and accountability
- Participation, including child participation

To ensure consistency, the mapping adopts common definitions of a few critical concepts, considering different definitions and approaches in the seven countries:

A *child protection system* consists of formal and informal structures, functions and capacities to prevent and respond to abuse, violence, neglect and exploitation of children and is comprised of human and financial resources, laws and policies, governance, monitoring and data collection, protection and response services and case management. [6]

Child protection operates within the context of broader *child welfare* and *social welfare systems* often based on a *continuum of services approach* such as prevention,

early intervention, response including statutory level and residential and alternative care level, rehabilitation, aftercare and reintegration. These services are designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children successfully. [7]

*Resilience* from a social work perspective is the ability to develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress/trauma/adversity and to manage adversity and change without jeopardising future well-being. Child protection and social welfare services should strive to build resilience in the children and families they serve.

*The resilience of a child protection system* is defined by its ability to protect and safeguard *all children, including in times of instability and crisis*. Instability and crisis may have a negative impact on the ability of the system to provide a continuum of care for all children. Furthermore, weakness in one element of the system can affect the resilience of other elements too.

The *social service workforce* is an inclusive concept referring to a broad range of governmental and non-governmental professionals who work with children, youth, adults, older persons, families and communities to ensure health, development and wellbeing. [8] Social service workers engage people, structures and organisations to facilitate access to services, engage in interaction and interventions with children and their caregivers, alleviate poverty, challenge and reduce discrimination, promote social justice, fundamental, civil and human rights, and prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation. [9]



## 1.2 Methodology

The mapping was carried out through desk review and interviews with key informants in the respective countries. The desk review involved an extensive review of existing literature and studies, policies, guidelines, standards, and regulations related to the child protection systems, practices, and service provision for vulnerable and children at risk.

A total of 58 key informant interviews were held online, in English, or with an interpreter, across the seven countries between January – September 2022, based on key informant interview questionnaires. Key informants were identified with the assistance of the country focal points and included for example civil servants, social workers, NGO officials and ombudspersons.

The researchers encountered several difficulties, including limited availability of key informants due to heavy workloads; ongoing internal processes and moving pieces, including reforms and adaptations to address COVID-19 and the influx of refugees as a result of the war in Ukraine; language barriers and the reliance on interpreters and in some cases online translators; and limited electronically accessible research and information.

## 1.3 Limitations

The findings in this report do not represent an exhaustive or detailed account of the respective child protection systems in the Baltic Sea Region. As noted above, it focuses on a few key elements and highlights a selection of notable findings that appear to contribute to well-functioning, accessible and resilient child protection systems.



## 2. Background

Population, government systems, administrative and territorial organisation, socio-economic situation, and legal and policy frameworks typically shape the approach and design of child protection and child welfare systems. The countries' geographical and geopolitical context and positioning also play a critical role in making the countries more prone to specific challenges to the system, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the recent influx of refugees as a result of the war against Ukraine.

The diversity in population, governance and impact of migration between the countries is worth noting in this regard. The child population varies from approximately 80,000 children in Iceland [\[10\]](#) to 13.7 million in Germany [\[11\]](#). Government systems range from federal states to centralised, some with high levels of decentralisation.

In terms of migration, the seven countries are both transit and destination countries, or a mix of both. Historically some of the countries in the region have received substantially higher rates of migrants.

Child protection systems have in recent years been exposed to crises, both in terms of COVID-19 and more recently the war against Ukraine, which has led to the largest refugee movements in Europe since World War II. A large part of this group is children travelling with family members, unaccompanied, separated or within groups of children evacuated from institutional care in Ukraine, many of them to the countries covered by the mapping. [\[12\]](#)



## 3. Key findings

The reflections and findings presented in this chapter draw on the seven national reports and a consolidated report prepared by Maestral International, and the expert interventions and discussions at the Presidency launch conference “Resilient and inclusive child protection systems – building mutual trust and collaboration”.

### 3.1 Summary of general reflections [13]

A key conclusion of the mapping is that the seven countries have strong child protection systems which comprise legal and policy frameworks, governance structures, a plethora of programmes ranging from prevention to response, a professional workforce and decentralised service delivery. The countries furthermore share *a common foundation in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which to a large extent has been reflected in the national legislative, policy and strategic frameworks.

The approaches to child protection are similar across the countries but with some variations, depending on the national context. In terms of orientation, the countries generally adopt a *rights-based, child focussed approach*, where the system prioritises the rights of the individual child to protection and the importance of supporting parents and other carers to achieve this.

Most countries in the mapping can be described as taking a *family service oriented* approach, where prevention, support and protective responses to child abuse and neglect are seen as part of a broader and holistic system of family support services and programmes. Germany lies closer to a mix of a family service oriented and a *child protection oriented* system, which typically focuses on providing limited assistance to targeted individuals after problems arise. [14] Most systems are furthermore guided by the socioecological model, which considers the complex interaction between the individual child, family, community, and societal factors that influence both child protection risks and opportunities for prevention and targeted services.

*Emerging challenges and crises*, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine, have placed substantial pressure on the countries in the region to maintain achievements, while at the same time adapting to meet changing demands. *Regular evaluations and reforms* have contributed to more integrated, inclusive, and resilient approaches and practices. It has also had a positive impact on the ability of the system to adapt and respond to emerging challenges and crises.

*Involving diverse actors* in the review and reform contributes to innovation and trust, which is a key foundation for inclusive and participatory systems.

*Trust* is recognised as a key condition for successful systems. Trust between agencies and professionals, and trust between the system and children and their caregivers. Trust is co-produced. An important aspect of this process is to develop a *common language*, that forms the foundation for mutual understanding and pulling in the same direction towards a common goal. A common language enables professionals, children, and their caregivers, to fully capitalise on the functions of the system, and to maximise their own impact on a successful outcome.

*Practical approaches, multidisciplinary and interagency collaboration* were recognised as important cornerstones towards building trust and collaboration. The Barnahus model, discussed in more detail below, is recognised as a key good practice example emanating from the region.

Investing in a *committed, healthy, and professional workforce* is a foundation for a well-functioning and resilient system. Good practice includes researching the situation of professionals such as workload, work environment, health, and capacity and using this as a foundation for concrete action to address concerns.

*Participation of children and caregivers* is an important aspect of all systems, promoted by different means, including law reform and practical guidelines and tools for participatory case management. Experts at the launch conference emphasised efforts to define a common language and to ensure individual adaptations so that the path towards protection, recovery and justice becomes a joint venture, that everyone understands and signs up for, both at a system level and in individual cases.

## 3.2 Legislation, policy, and reform

The right of children to be protected from all forms of violence is recognised by international and regional instruments, most notably the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). State Parties to the UNCRC must ensure the prohibition of all forms of violence against children in all settings, and adopt all appropriate legislative measures, including implementation, enforcement and budgetary measures, to give full legal effect to the right of children to be protected from violence [15].

In Europe, important policy and legal frameworks include the CoE Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2010), the CoE Guidelines on child-friendly justice (2010), the CoE Recommendation for child-friendly social services (2011), the EU Directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography (2011) and the EU Directive on minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (2012).

Legislation can play a key role in positioning children as rightsholders and promoting a child rights approach to child protection. Laws that define and prohibit violence against children, and establish remedies and assistance for victims, provide an important framework for prevention, protection, response, support, and child-friendly justice, and a basis for system reform. Effective implementation and enforcement of laws support and strengthen all aspects of national child protection systems. [16]

This section introduces general reflections on the legal framework in the seven countries, with a specific emphasis on the domestication of the UNCRC. It provides a brief commentary on laws concerning the prohibition of all forms of violence against and child sexual violence. It furthermore briefly introduces examples of a national strategy and care reform that draw on international and national legal frameworks to ensure effective implementation and enforcement.

### Legal frameworks

All seven countries covered by the mapping are State Parties to the UNCRC and have national legislation in place that prohibit violent punishment of children. All countries have furthermore ratified the CoE Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention, 2010) and have national legislation in place that define and prohibit sexual violence against children.

The mapping in the seven countries reveals that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in general provides an important foundation for child protection in the seven countries. The countries have taken different approaches to domesticate the UNCRC and reflect its provisions in law, policy and practice concerning child protection. For example,

in Norway the UNCRC is incorporated into Norwegian law by the Human Rights Act, giving the UNCRC the same status as any other statutory regulation. In Finland, The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is in force at the level of a Parliamentary Act. Other approaches involve a stepwise implementation in legal, policy and practice.

All countries have carried out extensive and progressive child welfare and child protection care reforms to uphold children's rights and strengthen core principles such as the child's best interest, non-discrimination/inclusion, and child participation. Specific steps have been taken to address concerns expressed by the UNCRC committee, including the interpretation of the best interests of the child.

### Human Rights impact on child protection in Norway

The European Court of Human Rights judgements concerning article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights has had an impact on law, policy and practice in Norway. [17]

The Court has established that decisions to take children into care must:

- a. Balance the rights and interests of children and their families with the principles of the best interest of the child, the right to family life and the right to be free from violence, abuse and neglect.
- b. Ensure that in depth and adequate risk assessment and assessments are done for children at risk, which is the basis for decision making.
- c. That all avenues have been explored before the decision on removal is made.
- d. That the workforce has the necessary skills and competence to undertake in depth assessment and case management and, where relevant, have the cultural competence to strengthen professional judgement for decision making.

The judgements establish the fundamental principle of ensuring that the decision to take a child into care must be made with the aim of family reunification or to reintegrate the child into alternative family care. It also has implications in terms of a need for increased investment in prevention and early intervention strategies with family strengthening programmes for vulnerable children and their families.

The judgements have relevance beyond Norway and serve as guidance for other countries.



## Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity in Iceland

In Iceland, the Minister of Social Affairs and Children renewed the focus on early intervention when organising a national conference in 2018. The conference led to a conversation between stakeholders, experts, politicians, families, parents, and children about creating the best possible system for children to ensure their rights and interests. These conversations resulted in an agreement that the systems that provide services to children – such as education, health systems and social services – must integrate their services to enable adequate cooperation and provide a better overview of the systems.

Eventually, the idea of integrating services resulted in a legal act and the division of children's services into three levels. The primary level encompasses basic services and early assistance, the secondary level covers more targeted assistance, and the tertiary level is concerned with even more specialised assistance. All children under the age of 18 have the right to a coordinator/case manager. The National Agency for Children and Families and the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare will ensure that the services at all levels are in the child's best interest.

An independent evaluation has measured the economic impact of the legal act. The evaluators concluded that the integration of services is cost-effective. [18]

## The National Child Strategy places children's rights at the centre in Finland

In Finland, the first National Child Strategy [19] was developed and launched in 2021. The strategy is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and was created with the recognition that important decisions and policies affecting children's rights are often fragmented and do not align with Finland's human rights commitments. The strategy acknowledges that children's rights must be seen in the context of the environment in which they live, their families and other factors that influence the realisation of their rights. [20]

The strategy is based on three key ideas:

1. The strategy will create a genuinely child and family friendly Finland where the rights of the child are respected.
2. Children's rights and status will be mainstreamed, ensuring that children are consistently taken into consideration in all policies and activities alongside with other members of society and that they are informed of their rights.
3. The status of children in a vulnerable position will be secured, and their needs will be recognised better. [21]

## Care reforms

The ongoing or recently implemented care reforms in the countries demonstrate a clear commitment by their governments to ensure robust and inclusive child protection systems, drawing on international and regional legal and policy frameworks. Central elements of the reforms include prevention and early intervention, shifting from family separation to family strengthening, child and caregiver participation, provision and strengthening of decentralised services, inclusion of marginalised and minority groups and making provision for children on the move and separated or unaccompanied children.

There are furthermore strong indications of a concerted shift towards a rights-based approach, which has reformed policy and practice. In several countries, national and child protection strategies and policy directives have reinforced fundamental principles such as the best interest of the child, non-discrimination, inclusivity, family preservation and family care.

## Reform in Norway brings prevention and early intervention close to children and families

To strengthen families and prevent violations against children, reforms in Norway aimed at strengthening prevention and early intervention, and for children and families to have access to quality services in their municipalities. Decentralisation puts the responsibility and management for child protection services at the municipality level, and municipal councils take on a greater role in oversight and monitoring. The care reforms included measures tailored for minority groups and municipalities in the country's Northern regions, and the reforms were grounded on evidence-based prevention and family-based interventions.

The process featured extensive consultations with key stakeholders. The extensive consultations are credited with building awareness and buy-in among professionals. A key outcome of the care reform was the improvement of the quality of the social service workforce, thus strengthening the overall child protection system. The process also resulted in legal changes, that are relevant for the reform such as children's participation, mandatory collaboration and coordination, monitoring and qualification requirements.

These outcomes will likely reduce the number of children overrepresented in the care system, notably those in alternative care.

## 3.3 Governance and coordination

Child protection systems involve a broad range of roles, responsibilities, functions, and capacities. Effective governance, coordination and clarity in roles and responsibilities are therefore essential to ensure functional systems. Inclusive child protection systems involve coordinated interactions between a wide range of different actors such as children, families, communities, and local, regional, or national level authorities, sometimes across borders.

This section provides a general reflection on the governance and coordination mechanisms identified in the seven countries.

### Governance

All countries have a central governing body, but the set up and authority vary significantly, from a Ministry, a department or directorate, a specific agency or a section of a body in charge of social welfare issues.

In Lithuania, the legal aspects of child protection are centralised to ensure standardisation and better oversight throughout the country. Service delivery is maintained as a local level responsibility. Centralisation has brought significant uniformity to the system and contributed to equity.

In Germany, the federal structures allow for each State to decide on its institutional structures to better align with local realities and needs, resulting in a variety of institutional arrangements at the state level across the country.

Some of the countries are utilising a decentralised approach with tenets of regionalisation to service delivery.

Most countries undertake decentralisation of child protection by devolving administration, finance and

implementation of social and child protection services to local authorities, such as counties, regions, municipalities and cities. The main objective is to improve access to services, and participation in service planning and decision-making.

Child protection system decentralisation and reforms often happen within larger local government reforms, such as reducing and streamlining local authorities, developing mechanisms for sharing services between several municipalities or creating larger uptake areas.

All countries experience challenges in providing equitable and standardised services while maintaining flexibility and adaptability to the local needs. Financial decentralisation was identified as a challenge where local governments are affected by a declining revenue base or a lack of political will to allocate funding for social services.

### Coordination mechanisms

The seven countries have a diverse range of formal and informal coordination structures, mechanisms and platforms at different levels. These include coordination at the interdepartmental level, coordination across sectors, coordination with civil society organisations and service providers, and with academia.

Interdisciplinary approaches aim to strengthen coordination and institute a shared responsibility for child protection among different professionals. Several countries have invested heavily, including through formal system reform, to ensure effective coordination mechanisms.

*In Iceland*, the role that child protection committees once had is being delegated to interdisciplinary and professional teams. The interdisciplinary teams will, for example, decide on child removals and other coercive measures. While prevention, early intervention, and rapid response were already well articulated in previous legislation, this reform categorises child welfare provision into primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Result: This professionalisation puts a shared responsibility on the interdisciplinary teams for each child's well-being.

*In Lithuania*, local governments created departments for interinstitutional coordination, while smaller municipalities hired at least one person to manage this task. Result: These departments address multidimensional challenges facing a vulnerable child or family. Local authorities are better able to intervene in a coordinated manner with other local stakeholders.

*In Norway*, inter-municipal learning networks and dialogue meetings strengthen capacity building, collaboration, and coordination. Result: The networks form communities of practice, initiate development projects, share human and technical resources, and strengthen local services and programs aimed at vulnerable children and families.

#### Integrated services for equity and quality in Finland

The health and social services reform (Sote reform) in Finland aims to create better integration between primary and specialised health care and stronger primary-level services. The responsibility of organising healthcare, rescue services and social welfare services was transferred from the municipal system to larger autonomous regions, counties. The goal is to safeguard equal and quality health and social services for all and reduce inequalities in health and well-being. The reform aims to create better integration between primary and specialised health care and social services as well as to integrate health and social services seamlessly with one another. Five collaborative areas for healthcare and social welfare are created to secure specialised services.

*In Germany*, professional interdisciplinary networks within local municipalities have been established. The National Center for Early Prevention is responsible for enabling interdisciplinary collaboration and research in the areas of prevention and early intervention in the health and welfare sectors. It provides technical advice to municipalities and networks and supports exchange and knowledge transfer within the federal states. A concrete example of this work is the Interprofessional Quality Circles, which offer a forum for exchange and networking for healthcare professionals and child and youth welfare professionals.

*In Germany*, there is healthy cooperation with civil society organisations and the multitude of service providers in the country. This contributes to innovation and flexible and specialised service provision. With funding from the Federal Ministry (BMFSFJ), ECPAT Germany has established state-level, multi-sectoral forums to enhance regional cooperation and coordinate efforts to tackle child trafficking. This approach effectively strengthens coordination and cooperation across sectors, and between professionals and political leadership at the State level. There is interest in replicating this initiative in other areas concerning child protection.



## 3.4 Child protection service models and frameworks

*Service delivery models* define the approach, core values and fundamental principles (e.g. inclusion, participation, empowerment, multidisciplinary, gender sensitivity) that underpin, and should be observed in providing child protection services.

*Services for children* who have been exposed to violence typically include protection and social welfare, physical and mental health care, victim support and justice. Services can play a role in preventing and reducing harmful effects of violence on physical and mental health, risk-taking behaviour, and future perpetration or victimisation as victims, witnesses, or alleged offenders [24].

This section provides general reflections on the child protection service delivery models, and the approaches identified in the seven countries. It furthermore looks at some of the services that have been established in the countries, guided by the general approach to child protection and its fundamental principles.

### General reflections

The approaches to child protection are similar across the countries but with some variations, depending on the national context. In terms of orientation, the countries generally adopt a *rights-based, child focused approach*, where the system prioritises the rights of the individual child to protection and the importance of supporting parents and other carers to achieve this.

Most systems are furthermore guided by the *socioecological model*, which considers the complex interaction between the individual child, family, community, and societal factors that influence both child protection risks and opportunities for prevention and targeted services. The continuum of care approach, ranging from prevention, early intervention and protection is a common characteristic of all the child protection systems in the region.

A majority of the countries can be described as taking a *family service oriented* approach, where prevention, support and protective responses to child abuse and neglect are seen as part of a broader and holistic system of family support services and programmes. These systems are typically characterised by substantial investment into universally available childcare, health care, and family support services.

Germany's model is a mix of a family service oriented and a *child protection oriented system*, which typically focuses on providing limited assistance to targeted individuals after problems arise. In Germany, when a child is reported to be at risk, a social service NGO assesses the family and provides needed assistance. If the family's problems cannot be remedied with the help of the NGO, the case is referred to the state, which investigates and decides whether the child should be removed.

### The National Child Strategy in Finland provides a framework and approach for inclusion and children's right to participate

In Finland, the Child Strategy makes every Government responsible for drawing up and executing a detailed Implementation plan for the Child Strategy policies during its term of office. [25] The first implementation plan [26] of the National Child Strategy [27] further outlines strategic policy approaches to ensure the inclusion of children's views and their participation. The implementation plan states that children's inclusion, right to be heard and access to information will be addressed systematically in decision-making and activities that affect them directly or indirectly and that the content and significance of children's views will be detailed in the justifications of decisions. It further states that efforts will be made to ensure that all adults working with children have sufficient understanding and competence related to supporting children's participation and agency. [28]

### Prevention and Early Intervention through legal and policy reform in Germany

Investing in prevention and early intervention strategies and programmes is a recognised and evidence-based approach to promote long-term equitable outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

*Germany* has in the past decade invested in comprehensive and integrated prevention and early intervention strategies, programmes and services through legal and policy reform, financing, research, and expertise. The legal framework made prevention and early intervention a provision and responsibility of child and youth welfare in 2012 with the Federal Child Protection Act. These services operate at the intersection between the health care system and the child and youth welfare system. A key component is the comprehensive, publicly funded early childhood education and care centres. Prevention and early intervention services focus on parents in the first months of pregnancy and during the first years of a child's life, with a special focus on the zero to three age group. [29] The services are focused on providing support to families and parents' needs through preventive programmes to identify risks at an early stage, reduce risks for children, encourage parent and child attachments and strengthen families. Primary prevention services offered are both universal and targeted programmes for vulnerable families.

## Action plan supports transition from institutional care services in Lithuania

All seven countries have made significant progress in the transition from institutional care to family and community services.

Lithuania's action plan for the transition from institutional care to family and community services for children with disabilities and children left without parental care [30] aimed to provide consistent and coordinated actions to promote the transition from institutional social care to family and community services. The strategic goal of the action plan was to develop a system of integrated service provision, including family and community support, which would enable every child without parental care and every child with disabilities or their family, guardians, or carers to receive individual services tailored to their needs.

## Research and guidance to strengthen the voices of children in Finland

To support the preparation and implementation of the National Children's strategy, a study was conducted on the realisation and monitoring of children's rights in child welfare. [31] This study focused on the Parliamentary Ombudsman's decisions concerning children's complaints in 2018–2020. The study examines how children understand their rights in the context of child welfare work and how they exercise their right to file a complaint about the shortcomings experienced in child welfare work. The study provides information on the recurring themes of the complaints filed by children and the related decisions. It also provides information on how many of the complaints filed by children lead the Parliamentary Ombudsman to take action and what the admonitions issued by the Parliamentary Ombudsman concerned. [32]

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare has developed a child welfare handbook for children and adolescents to better access information on their rights and the child welfare system. [33] The handbook was created in partnership with adolescents and young adults who have had personal experiences as clients in the child welfare system. They had input into the design, content and language of the handbook. A website and online service intended for children and adolescents in conjunction with the Handbook and online service was created and launched in the Autumn of 2022. [34]

## Child participation

*Child participation, both at an individual and at a collective level, is recognised as a fundamental principle in policy and legislation in all countries. In terms of children's collective participation, there are different bodies present in the countries that represent children, including for example youth councils, child fora and national children's councils and children's parliaments.*

In terms of individual participation, most countries are faced with challenges to give children voice, space, audience and influence in their own case management, case planning and decisions that concern them as individuals.

## Children provide advice at a collective level in Estonia, Iceland and Lithuania

*Estonia's advisory committee members are selected from children's and youth organisations: Children are part of the ombudsperson's advisory committee in Estonia. The children of the committee assist in discussions on important issues related to children. This institutional setting enables children under the age of 18 to express their opinions and raise issues. The members are selected from various children's and youth organisations, including the Assembly of Student Representations, Association of Estonian Scouts, Estonia 4H, Estonian Guide Association, Estonian National Youth Council, Estonian Union for Child Welfare, For a Joint Cause, Girls' corps of the Estonian Defence League, Union of Estonian School Students' Councils, Young Eagles (Boys' corps of the Estonian Defence League).*

*Iceland consults children nationally, locally, and as part of the ombudsperson's mandate: A 2018 revision of the legislation describing the role of ombudsperson for children enables child and family participation in the work. An advisory group of children aged 12-17 meets regularly and advise the Ombudsman.*

Municipalities also consult with children and their families, often with pupils' councils in schools, on any matter of concern for children.

At the national level, a Children's Forum is held every other year to discuss developments in the area of children's rights. The conclusions of this Forum are presented to the Government as a contribution to policymaking in all matters concerning children.

*Lithuania's children's council operates under the state child rights service: The Children's Council in Lithuania was launched in 2021 and operates under the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service. The council is made up of 15 children aged 7-16. The council's purpose is to strengthen children's participation in decision-making and to give a voice to children. The council delves into various topics including child rights protection policies, culture, education, health, environmental protection, and other relevant issues that are important for children.*

## Multidisciplinarity

There is a broad range of therapeutic, clinical, criminal justice and child protection services to prevent violence, and to reduce the health and social impacts of violence against children in the seven countries.

The Barnahus model is recognised as a leading child-friendly, multidisciplinary and interagency model responding to child victims and witnesses of violence. The purpose of Barnahus is to offer each child a coordinated and effective response and to prevent (re)traumatisation during investigation and court proceedings. One key role of the Barnahus is to help produce valid evidence for judicial proceedings by facilitating child investigative interviews. Barnahus offers coordinated interventions, including child protection, investigative interview, physical and mental health services and victim support in one child-friendly premise. Barnahus also plays an important role in enhancing awareness and knowledge of violence against children with key stakeholders. [35]

The fundamental principle behind Barnahus is to prevent subjecting the child to repeated interviews by many agencies in different locations. Research has shown that repeated interviews can be very traumatic for the child and may result in (re)traumatisation, or the amplification of harmful consequences that can be as severe as the abuse itself.

The Barnahus was first established in Iceland. Today, the model is present in different forms in all seven countries. The model has been adapted to the legal and socio-economic context alongside the fundamental principles for service delivery in the respective countries, placing collaboration, coordination, multidisciplinarity, inclusion and participation at the centre of its interventions.

The Barnahus model has been promoted transnationally by the countries in the region in the context of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Promise Barnahus Network as a standard practice for providing child victims and witnesses of violence rapid access to justice and care. [36]

## Diversity and inclusion

Minority rights are enshrined in the policy and legal frameworks of most countries, identifying who the national minorities are, ensuring cultural rights and affording extensive language rights. Most countries are signatories to the 2015 Council of Europe Framework Convention for the protection of national minorities. Some of the key minorities in the region include the Sámi/Sapmi indigenous communities across the Scandinavian countries, Greenlanders in Denmark, and the Roma/Romani across most of the countries and the largest European minority group. Minority groups also include immigrant communities and cultural and linguistic minorities.

The countries have taken a variety of measures to increase inclusion, equity, and participation of minority groups, including ensuring interpretation for social services and the use of link workers to liaise and facilitate access to the child welfare/child protection services and the minority communities. Other measures include promoting that foster families are culturally sensitive and efforts to recruit foster families from ethnically diverse groups. Special measures are introduced to ensure that children in care from minority groups can stay

connected with their culture and extended family networks. In general, there appears to be an increasing understanding and greater willingness to acknowledge and discuss power relations and cultural diversity and how this may influence the relationship between child protection and social welfare services and children and caregivers from minority groups. Challenges remain in building a child welfare/child protection system that inspires trust and where there is increased cultural sensitivity and awareness of issues affecting minority communities.

Most countries recognise the multiple layers of vulnerabilities of children with disabilities, and that social exclusion increases the risk of violence against children with disabilities. To address this, the countries have adopted different approaches. Some countries include the protection of children with disabilities in child protection policies and legislation while in others, child protection issues concerning children with disabilities are integrated into disability specific policies and legislation. Challenges remain across the countries to ensure that child protection and child welfare services are accessible and with competent staff that can respond to the needs of children with disabilities.

Whereas most countries experience substantial challenges in equal treatment of LGBTQI children and addressing the specific vulnerabilities of these children, the inclusion of LGBTQI in policy and legislative frameworks is extensive in most countries.

Child protection services for migrant children are organised in different ways in the countries. Some countries have opted to integrate services for unaccompanied and separated children in the child protection system. This is the case for example in Germany, where they are accommodated, cared for and assisted by the regular youth welfare system in the same way that other children are, regardless of their status. [37] In other countries, it is immigration authorities that have the primary responsibility. In Norway, unaccompanied children under the age of 15 are the responsibility of the The Ministry of Children and Families, while children aged between 15 and 18 years old, are the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

### Competence centre provides more culturally appropriate child protection services for indigenous people in Norway

In Norway, the Ministry of Children and Family has recently established a national Competence centre in Karashok – Finnmark, for and by the Sámi indigenous community, providing child welfare services, family counselling, and a crisis centre/shelter. It became fully operational in January 2022 and has six full-time employees. [38] These services are provided based on methods adapted to and taking into consideration Sámi culture and language. It is envisioned that these more culturally appropriate methods will be shared with other services as an example of how to work more culturally sensitively with both children and adults. The centre will provide in-service training for workers at municipal levels and in residential care facilities and undertake research. [39] Given its national mandate, the centre is looking at different forms of training and outreach through online platforms. [40]

## Barnahus provides child-friendly setting for unaccompanied and separated children in Iceland

In Iceland, unaccompanied children are interviewed by a specialist in child development in Barnahús in a child-friendly setting, while representatives from the Directorate of immigration, child protection services and the child's legal rights protector participate in an adjacent room. If a child is not legally domiciled in Iceland, or is living in Iceland without its guardians, the child protection service in the jurisdiction where the child is resident or located is responsible for taking care of the child and implementing all measures necessary to secure its best interests.

The National Agency for Children and Families shall ensure the safeguarding of the best interests of the child. This applies when the applicant is under the age of legal majority and resides in Iceland without parents or other guardians, when the parents or guardians cannot fulfil their obligations towards the child, or when a child protection service deems a child's guardianship to be unsatisfactory. This also applies to children who are presumed victims of human trafficking. The Agency also ensures that a child is provided with a foster home or other suitable placement, that the child's interests are given priority and that the child protection service fulfils the child's needs in an appropriate manner as provided in the Child Protection Act, for instance, regarding residence, healthcare services and educational opportunities.

## Letter of protection to prevent female genital mutilation in Germany

*"You should always carry this letter of protection with you when you travel abroad. This allows you to clearly show your family that in Germany female genital mutilation is a crime that can result in a multi-year prison sentence."*

The Letter of protection for girls at risk of FGM/C is a practical approach to prevent FGM/C of girls in, and outside Germany. The letter informs that performing female genital mutilation is a criminal offence that is punishable by imprisonment, even when undertaken abroad. In Germany, performing female genital mutilation is a criminal offence that is punishable with imprisonment of up to 15 years.

Signed by 5 Ministers, the letter is a strong political signal of Germany's commitment to prevent and prosecute the FGM/C and protect girls at risk.

The letter also contributes to awareness-raising among the public, including defining what FGM/C is, providing an extract from the Criminal Code and providing information on where to turn if there is a suspicion that FGM/C will be performed.

The letter has been translated into 16 languages.



## 3.5 Social work

Decisions of the ECHR have highlighted the importance of a social service workforce with the necessary skills, competencies, experience, and professional judgement to make sound assessments and decisions concerning the protection of children. It also illustrates the need for skills and competence in designing prevention and early intervention strategies and family strengthening programmes for a diverse set of vulnerable children and families. Furthermore, the ECHR ruling illustrates that in principle, the more invasive an intervention is (decision on care order, removal of parental responsibilities and adoption), the narrower the state's margin of discretion is [41], hence the need for more directive guidelines to support social workers to make such decisions.

This chapter introduces general reflections on the training, status, education, wellbeing, and licensing of the social workforce.

### Social workforce

The social service workforce across the countries is confronted by several issues that have implications for a coherent and well-functioning child protection system.

There is often a lack of qualified social workers. This is sometimes a result of the rapid expansion and increasing demand for social welfare and child protection services. In general, social workers across the countries have high caseloads. There are ongoing discussions across the countries on how to address this problem, including limiting the number of cases per social worker.

The status of social services/child welfare and protection work can be described as fairly low across the countries, and the perceived lack of conducive terms and conditions makes it a less attractive field of study and work.

Across the countries, there is a high turnover, sometimes caused by burnout, but also because there are diverse opportunities in other fields. In many countries, there is a generational gap in the social service workforce, with a smaller pool of senior level and experienced social workers and a much larger pool of younger and inexperienced social workers.

All countries have established and active social work associations and/or unions that advocate for the interests of their members.

Most countries have a licensing body to ensure quality and consistency in practice. In countries where there is no formal licencing body, there are nationally recognised licencing processes.

There is a range of social work related degree programs at bachelor's and master's levels in universities across the countries. In some countries, universities have ongoing discussions concerning emerging issues, competencies and research concerning child protection to keep their curricula up to date.

The majority of the countries have practice based social work education, with an emphasis on field practice as part of undergraduate degrees. All countries provide in-service training and opportunities for continuous professional development to keep their workforce up to date with emerging issues and practices. Frameworks for regular individual supervision exist in the countries. Supervisors are offered training to carry out their role. Some countries include social service workforce assessment and review as a critical contribution to care reform processes and system strengthening.

In some countries, there is a recognised need for increased cultural awareness [42] and sensitivity to adequately address the needs and issues faced by an increasingly diverse client system. It is also important that the workforce reflects the diversity of a society, especially in those areas where minorities may make up the majority of clients.





## **Improving service delivery through competence building, management, and workload monitoring**

To improve service delivery to children and families, several countries are taking steps to support the social service workforce to obtain the necessary knowledge, experience and support. They are also taking steps to monitor and improve the workload situation in child welfare services.

### **Finland's increased staffing and decreased workload limits**

The amendment of the Finnish Child Welfare Act (417/2007), which came into force 1st of January 2022, ensures increased staffing levels in child welfare social work. The limitation of caseload aims to strengthen the possibilities of social workers to familiarise themselves with each child's case and to provide services according to the best interests of the child. The caseload per social worker responsible for children's affairs has been limited to 35 for 2022-2023 and will decrease to 30 in 2024. This decrease aims to support a more comprehensive approach to caseload management.

### **Iceland's workload measuring and monitoring**

Iceland has adapted a Swedish model for measuring the workload of child welfare workers in child protection. This method helps supervisors to monitor the work situation of each individual child protection case. The method measures workload but is not a measure of the quality of work. The adaptation of the Swedish model to Iceland was conducted in collaboration with child welfare workers throughout the country and is currently under independent academic assessment.

### **Icelandic code of ethics highlights cultural competence and sensitivity**

In Iceland, all social workers who graduate from University formally sign the Icelandic social work association code of ethics as they join the union. The ethics code emphasises the role of social workers to defend minority groups, ensure inclusion and equity and fight against discrimination and prejudices.

### **Norway's funding for study leave**

Norway's Competency Strategy, 2014-2024, has implemented several measures, such as the financing of generous study leave allowance and the payment of substitute workers.

### **Norway's programmes for management and ongoing support**

The Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families has identified several programmes to strengthen technical and management competencies and to improve the quality of services available to vulnerable children and families. This includes, among other things, programmes focused on child welfare workforce development, child welfare management, and municipal management. Additional features include the availability of supervision teams, support teams, and funding of a national course on professional guidance for child welfare professionals. The support teams complement formal supervision frameworks and support new employees in their first year to prepare them for various work situations and prevent burnout.

## 3.6 Monitoring & evaluation and accountability

Systematic monitoring and evaluation support planning and can help improve child protection interventions. It is an important foundation for informed decisions and reforms of policy, law, strategies, interventions, and systems as a whole.

Licensing and accreditation of service providers, both public and private, ensure that services are provided in line with the national child protection service model, to safeguard children and to ensure quality and equity.

Accountability is a key foundation for the transparency and effectiveness of child protection systems. Accountability mechanisms should be integrated across systems. Ombudspersons play a crucial role in ensuring accountability of different levels of governments and agencies concerned with child protection and promoting necessary reform. They can also play an important role in working with Governments to strengthen aspects of the national child protection systems.

This chapter introduces general reflections on research, data and mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability.

### General reflections

A key principle in the seven countries is that child protection systems and service models are informed by *data and research*. This also applies to policymaking, interventions and reform concerning child protection. For example, in Norway, the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) states that policy development should be guided by evidence as a rule.

Ministries and agencies responsible for child protection in all countries often commission research and surveys on child protection, violence against children and in emerging areas of concern. There is an active collaboration with universities, research institutions and specialised organisations. In some countries, active academic communities conduct research and studies in the area of child protection and child welfare independently. For example, Germany and Norway, have an active academic community that conduct a broad range of research studies in child protection and child welfare. A large part of this research is available in English. Research and surveys sometimes involve children to increase the understanding of children's experiences of violence and neglect, and child protection interventions.

There are extensive *data management systems* in place in the countries, in general with a high level of transparency and accessibility. These are in most cases relatively updated, often providing data online. Most countries have a national central body or board, which undertakes regular monitoring and evaluation based on nationally established indicators. Monitoring and evaluation can also concern an annual thematic focus or similar, sometimes informed by the ombudsperson's reports.

Most countries also have a clear *framework for reporting* between different levels of government. In some countries, it is a challenge to ensure interoperability between national and local information management systems, in particular where

### Estonia's STAR system implements and monitors case management methodologies

To support data collection, monitoring, and evaluation of their social welfare services, Estonia established a national software system - "STAR" - for exchanging information between social service providers and local governments.

STAR is a central database for social service providers to implement case management methodology. It applies a client-centred approach which centralises information intending to provide high-quality services and equal treatment nationally. Social workers can receive information on individuals and forward reports on the provision of services to local governments.

Compliance with database maintenance and data processing requirements is another characteristic of STAR.

In addition to being an implementation tool, STAR is a tool for monitoring the performance of social service providers. It has provided the preconditions for more efficient and high-quality official statistics in the social field, which supports improvements in handling social work cases. A shared national system has contributed to developing terminology, classification systems, and work processes.

there are high levels of decentralisation. In countries with a level of autonomy and local data management systems, it can be challenging to provide comprehensive national level data. Another challenge concerns ensuring adequately differentiated data on children, including aspects such as ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The level of *digitalisation* varies between and within the countries, however, all countries have expressed a commitment to increase efforts towards the implementation of an e-government framework or similar.

In terms of *accountability and quality assurance*, most countries have a robust system in place for licensing and accreditation of service providers.

The majority of the countries have some form of *ombudsperson* in place to ensure government accountability to children, raise awareness and highlight shortcomings concerning national and international commitments and legal frameworks for children. The ombudspersons often play an important role in providing information and evidence for policy, law and system reform that strengthen child protection. In some countries, an ombudsperson can have the mandate to consider individual complaints about how the state has responded to a child protection case. In others, such as in Norway, the ombudsperson's role is to support the necessary policy changes to strengthen systems and institutions that deliver child welfare and child protection services.

## Germany's commissioner, inquiry, and fund supports responses to child sexual abuse

### An independent commissioner to support survivors, practice, and policy

The German Government established the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues in 2010/2011 to provide support to survivors and their families, to practitioners and researchers, and to politicians and civil society who are engaged in the protection of children and adolescents from sexual violence.

### The role and resources of the independent commissioner

The Commissioner is independent and not obliged to follow instructions from a higher level. The main activities of the Commissioner include:

- explain, inform and raise awareness of sexualised violence against children and adolescents,
- develop and support sustainable concepts for improving protection against sexualised violence against children and adolescents and to better help survivors,
- identify the need for legal action and research gaps in the field of sexualised violence against children and adolescents,
- attend to the concerns of people who were exposed to sexualised violence during their childhood or adolescence,
- ensure systematic and independent inquiries into child sexual abuse in Germany.

The staff of the Office of the Commissioner includes individuals with diverse professional backgrounds, including education, law, psychology, politics, history, communications, and administration.

The survivors' board at the Commissioner's Office ensures that the concerns of survivors of sexual violence suffered during childhood and adolescence are heard at the highest political level in Germany. The survivors' board consists of 16 survivors, and the members provide advice to the commissioner and the commissioner's staff. The members of the survivor's board are furthermore a voice for all survivors.

The Independent Commissioner is also a survivor.

### The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

Based on a decision by the German Parliament, the Independent Inquiry for Child Sexual Abuse issues was established in 2016 to investigate child sexual abuse in family environments and institutions.

The Inquiry investigates the scale, nature, causes, and consequences of sexual abuse in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1949 to the present day. In particular, the Inquiry seeks to provide spaces, either in private sessions or public hearings, where the voices of victims, survivors and contemporary witnesses can be heard and thereby also to enable the reporting of time-barred offences. [46] The Inquiry publishes case studies and regular reports based on their findings from over 2,200 testimonies. In 2022, the website [www.geschichten-die-zaehlen.de](http://www.geschichten-die-zaehlen.de), with more than 100 survivor stories was launched. The work of the Inquiry has been extended until the end of 2023. The inquiry is regarded as an important mechanism for redress and justice and for providing a voice for survivors of sexual abuse.

### The Fund for Sexual Abuse in the Family

The federal government's *Fonds Sexueller Missbrauch im familiären Bereich* (Sexual Abuse in the Family Fund) supports individuals who were sexually abused as children or adolescents in overcoming their experience. This includes, for example, covering the costs of therapy. Benefits from this fund are provided when victims are not entitled to statutory benefits, when the statutory benefits are insufficient, or when the statutory benefits have been refused. The fund also accepts applications concerning non-family related cases, such as sexual abuse in sports clubs or churches, provided that the institution participates in the fund.

## **Finland unites IT services to reduce fragmentation and improve data collection**

Finland conducted a mapping in 2017 of the information systems the municipalities were using. The investigation found that the municipalities used 1902 different services.

Reforms are underway to streamline and standardise forms, documentation, and management data. It also aims to increase documentation quality, leading to improved identification of trends and challenges, and an evidence base for improving practices. This work is also supporting a common language across social services and improving the visibility of social services to policymakers.

An example of a system that aims to unite fragmented systems is “Kanta”. Kanta is a centralised database for social welfare and healthcare data. It is run by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland. Authorised social and health care service providers can use Kanta to access up-to-date information about their patient’s health, well-being, and history.

Kanta serves as a data mediator between organisations, decreasing the need for local archiving and providing a foundation for statistics, reports, research, and other secondary use.

The Act on the Electronic Processing of Client Data in Healthcare and Social Welfare came into force in November 2021. It obliges social welfare services to join Kanta. The Act also makes it possible to disclose data on social welfare clients to other social welfare services. The authorisation to disclose client data is in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. The Act enables clients to save well-being data in their personal health records. Healthcare and social welfare professionals have access to this data and can use it if clients consent.

By March 2026, all service providers are obliged to use more standardised forms, while allowing for regional adaptations.

## 3.7 Adapting to crises

The child protection systems across the seven countries have developed quickly, with a wide and varied offering of services, while striving to maintain quality and equity in access. Emerging challenges and crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine, have placed substantial pressure on the countries in the region to maintain achievements, while at the same time adapting to meet changing demands.

The willingness to continuously assess the efficiency, structure and impact of the systems and to participate in regular evaluations has incrementally nudged the systems forward towards more integrated, inclusive, and resilient approaches and practices. Regular internal and external evaluations have also contributed to the flexibility and responsiveness of the systems, which is crucial for the system's ability to adapt and respond to emerging challenges and crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the ability of child protection systems to prevent and address child protection concerns across the region in different ways and to varying degrees. The pandemic has put pressure on services, including early intervention and prevention and impacted negatively on coordination mechanisms and opportunities for children to be heard. Restrictions also had a negative impact on access to services, in particular for vulnerable children.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of child protection and social welfare as essential services during crises and provided opportunities to learn about gaps and increase the resilience and inclusiveness of child protection systems. The importance of undertaking children's rights impact assessments of new policies and measures was highlighted. Further digitalisation of the child protection and social welfare systems was also highlighted as an important need to support the child protection workforce.

A key conclusion from the countries is that the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected already vulnerable children, both in terms of increased exposure to poverty and violence and restrictions in access to education and child protection services. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted discrepancies in marginalised communities' ability to access services and to adapt to the lockdown and other measures imposed. Gaps in the digital infrastructure were exposed, highlighting inequalities in access to technical equipment, online services, and digital skills.

In order to prevent and mitigate the negative impact, the countries adopted a series of measures quickly, including for example information campaigns, family support schemes, increased collaboration and multidisciplinary structures, law and policy, home visits, support to foster families, training of staff, extraordinary grants for protection and other forms of support, recommendations and guidelines for staff and national action plans.

Continuing hostilities and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have led to the largest refugee movements

in Europe since World War II. A large part of this group is children travelling with family members, unaccompanied, separated or within groups of children evacuated from institutional care in Ukraine. [47] In some cases, they may be travelling with adults who are not involved in care arrangements for them and in some cases, children may be travelling with adults who intend to exploit them or do them harm. [48] Parents who cannot leave themselves may send their children out of the country on their own or seek temporary guardians for them abroad. There are also children who have been left with relatives or other caregivers in Ukraine while their parents were working in other EU countries.

Drawing on the findings of the mapping, it appears that the child protection and immigration systems have learned from the 2015 migration crisis in Europe that when there is considerable political will, the child protection system can react swiftly, put measures in place and financial resources made available at national and municipal levels.

The countries have been working to put in place registration systems, appropriate guardianship arrangements, and measures to support access to education and the labour market. Substantial efforts were made to find safe environments and provide access to health care, education, and protection. This can involve changes to existing laws or the creation of new legislation, to allow for more flexibility in finding appropriate accommodation and to provide child welfare and protection services for the children arriving from Ukraine. Many countries assisted in the evacuation of children and took special measures to prevent separation, illegal placement and adoption, and trafficking. The best interests of the child remain central in identifying durable solutions.



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## Endnotes

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