

Strengthening social services in Central and Eastern European cities

Securing funding, improving accessibility,
and fostering cooperation

25–26 November 2025, Zagreb



Mutual Learning Event

Mutual Learning event on 'Strengthening social services in Central and Eastern European cities: securing funding, improving accessibility, and fostering cooperation'

25–26 November 2025

Zagreb

Background

The mutual learning event in Zagreb (25–26 November) will focus on reforming and strengthening social services in Central and Eastern European cities, with focusing on two objectives:

1. Securing more funding for social services: how cities can ensure greater investment in social provision, tackle underfunding, simplify administrative barriers, and involve diverse stakeholders in financing, and how city officials can effectively influence the annual city budgeting process to prioritise social spending, despite competing priorities across the municipality.
2. Affordable and accessible social services: how to make services more visible, equitable, and easier for citizens to access (e.g., through transport, better coordination among providers, and citizen outreach).

The event will also:

- Provide a platform for cities to exchange best practices and co-create action plans for local challenges.
- Open a frank discussion on the specific conditions facing Central and Eastern European cities in European cooperation – such as funding and staff shortages and fragmented governance.
- Include site visits in Zagreb to showcase local approaches to service provision.

Programme overview

Moderator: Dragana Knezić, Psychologist and solution-focused practitioner

DAY 1	morning	Opening session Introductory Session Panel discussion
	afternoon	Co-learning workshop Learning Lab Official dinner
DAY 2	morning	Site visits Learning Lab
	afternoon	Group discussion Closing session

Please note that all times are CET

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DAY 1 – Tuesday, 25 November 2025

Venue: Centre for Culture and Information Maksimir, Lavoslava Svarca 18, 10000, Zagreb

8.30 – 9.00	Registrations	
9.00 – 9.10	Opening Session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcoming words from Danijela Dolenc, Deputy Mayor of Zagreb 	
9.10 – 9.40	<p>Keynote Speech: The State of Social Services in Central & Eastern European Cities – Overview of current challenges and opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dr Ivana Dobrotić, Associate Professor of Comparative Social Policy at the University of Zagreb, Associate Member of the Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford <p>This keynote will set the stage for the event by examining the structural and institutional challenges shaping social service delivery in Central and Eastern European cities. Drawing on research and experience from Croatia, Professor Dobrotić will explore key issues such as the uneven availability, affordability, and quality of services, the fragmented competences and limited coordination between national and local systems, and the impact of partial decentralisation and fiscal constraints on municipal capacity. The address will also touch on workforce shortages and the pressures of developing new services with limited resources. Finally, it will open a broader reflection on how cities can move towards more sustainable, integrated, and people-centred social services.</p>	
9.40 – 10.00	Introductory presentation on the Social Affairs Forum of Eurocities	
10.00 - 11.00	Introductory Session An interactive opening to help participants connect, share their backgrounds, and exchange expectations for the event. Through a short icebreaker and group discussion, we will identify common challenges and learning goals to guide the discussions over the next two days.	
11.00 – 11.30	Coffee break	
11.30 – 12.45	<p>Panel discussion: How can cities secure strong budgets for social services?</p> <p>Cities face tough choices when competing priorities strain municipal budgets. This panel will explore how local policy makers can influence budget decisions, mobilise external funding from EU funds, foundations and national budgets, and spend limited resources more effectively. Speakers will share practical ways to make the case for social investment and strengthen partnerships that sustain inclusive social policies.</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marina Škrabalo, Member of the Social Welfare Council, Zagreb Orsolya Kisgyörgy, Project manager, Budapest 	

12.45 – 13.45	Lunch break	
13.45 – 15.15	Co-learning Workshop: EU Funding, Integrated Services, and Long-Term Sustainability – Lessons from Zagreb's Centre for Integration <p>This workshop presents Zagreb's Centre for Integration, an EU-funded initiative aimed at harmonising community-based social services and providing tailored, mentorship-based support for vulnerable groups. Zagreb will share practical challenges faced during implementation — including intersectoral coordination, cooperation between NGOs and institutions, addressing diverse user needs, and navigating national–local governance. The session will also raise broader questions about the long-term sustainability of EU-funded projects and explore how the model's key elements could be transferred to other cities.</p>	
15.15 – 15.45	Coffee break	

15.45 – 17.15	<p>Learning Lab A: People-Centric by Design: Rethinking City Services Together with the European Urban Initiative, Tallinn and Prague</p> <p>This workshop invites participants to explore how cities can design and deliver public services that truly reflect the needs of the people who use them. Drawing on insights from the recent City-to-City exchange between Tallinn and Prague, the session will highlight practical methods for integrating user-centric design, cross-department collaboration, and innovative participatory approaches into everyday municipal work. Participants will take part in an interactive boardgame exercise that helps translate these principles into concrete steps adapted to their own city contexts. The workshop will also introduce the EUI City-to-City Exchange funding opportunity, which can support cities in developing and financing their own peer-learning activities and collaborative projects.</p> <p>Learning Labs are designed to equip city officials with practical skills, new insights, and actionable strategies to tackle urban challenges. These sessions provide a collaborative space where participants can exchange ideas, explore best practices, and engage with experts in key policy areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zrinka Sajn, Financial Officer, European Urban Initiative • Ott Oja, Child mental health expert, Tallinn • Mariliis Niinemägi, Project manager, Tallinn • Anna Wehrenberg, Senior specialist, Prague
17.15 - 17.25	Family Photo
18.15 - 19.30	<p>Optional guided sightseeing tour in Zagreb</p> <p>The 1-hour optional walking tour through the historic center of Zagreb starting at Ban Jelačić Square, including Radićeva Street, Gornji grad, Donji grad, St Mark's Church, the Zagreb City Council, the Croatian Parliament.</p>
19.30 -	<p>Official dinner (hosted by the City of Zagreb)</p> <p>At Vinodol, Teslina 10, 10000 Zagreb</p> 

DAY 2 – Wednesday, 26 November 2025

Venue: Centre for Culture and Information Maksimir, Lavoslava Svarca 18, 10000, Zagreb

8.30 – 11.00	<p>Site Visits</p> <p>Site visit 1: Community Service Centre for Supporting Children with Disabilities - <i>Mali dom</i></p> <p>Mali dom Zagreb is a day care centre that provides highly specialised and comprehensive services to children with visual impairments and multiple disabilities in a stimulating and positive environment. The centre aims to encourage each child to develop their potential</p>
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fully, achieve greater independence, and build a sense of self-realisation. Around one hundred children with visual impairments and additional developmental difficulties take part in Mali dom's regular programmes and activities, while a further 300 children participate annually in the institution's transdisciplinary assessment and counselling programme.

Meeting point (8.30): Centre for Culture and Information Maksimir, Lavoslava Svarca 18, 10000, Zagreb. You will be transported to the site visit from there.

Site visit 2: Awareness-raising tour on homelessness in Zagreb

This tour is led by Mile Mrvalj, a former homeless person and activist, together with the NGO Fajter, which supports people experiencing homelessness through a street magazine and socially beneficial projects. Based on Mrvalj's awareness-raising initiative Invisible Zagreb, the tour offers an honest look at life on the streets and helps make the city's "invisible" homeless population seen and understood. At the start of the guided tour, we will also visit one of the three soup kitchens operated by the Dobri dom Institution of the City of Zagreb. These kitchens provide homeless individuals and other socially vulnerable citizens with access to their right to food. Following the tour, the City of Zagreb will give a brief presentation on its services and support systems for people experiencing homelessness.

Meeting point (8.45): tram station at the entrance of the Branimir Mingle Mall (Ulica kneza Branimira 29)

11.00 – 11.30	Coffee break	
11.30 – 13.00	Learning Lab B: Making Social Services Accessible and Affordable with 8th District of Budapest This session will focus on improving equitable access to social services for all citizens, regardless of income, location, or background. Participants will exchange experiences on how cities can enhance outreach and visibility of services – including the use of digital tools, communication campaigns, and local community networks. The discussion will also cover removing practical barriers to access, such as mobility challenges, administrative complexity, or limited awareness, and explore how cross-departmental coordination and user-friendly service design can make support easier to reach and navigate.	
13.00 – 14.15	Lunch	
14.15 – 15.30	Focus group on Understanding the Central and Eastern European City Experience A Eurocities-led discussion on the distinct political, socio-economic, and financial context of Central and Eastern European cities, exploring how these factors shape their participation in EU-level advocacy and knowledge exchange.	

15.30 – 16.00	Coffee break
16.00 – 17.30	Closing session Reflections and key takeaways from the event, followed by closing remarks from <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lora Vidović, Head of the Office for Social Protection, Health, Veterans and Persons with Disabilities, City of Zagreb.

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