



HANDBOOK FOR REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Design, management and development of early childhood intervention services –
Varna Municipality and Karin Dom Foundation

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The project, which has been implemented by the National Network for Children in partnership with NGOs and local governments for the past three years is supported by a grant from the Foundation Open Society Institute in cooperation with the Early Childhood Program of the Open Society Foundations.

The purpose of the project is to inform the general public, government institutions and local governments of the need for early intervention and a family-centred approach in support of young children with developmental difficulties and disabilities and their families, as well as to promote the existing good practices of social service providers in this field.

The end goal of the National Network for Children is to ensure the existence of a fully regulated and operational National System for Early Childhood Intervention, offering excellent personalised and intensive support services to parents and young children who are at risk, have developmental difficulties, disabilities or behavioural problems, or need mental health support. A publication of the National Network for Children.

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Purpose

This Handbook is designed for local government officials. Through the information provided, Varna Municipality and Karin Dom Foundation have shared their experience in launching, managing and developing early intervention services.

Local government officials will find this Handbook practically useful as it:

- ✓ Outlines a Bulgarian municipality's perspective on the reasons and benefits of launching early childhood intervention services; in other words, it specifies why and when such services should be identified and launched;
- ✓ Shares knowledge and practical advice on the launch, management and upkeep of early childhood intervention services;
- ✓ Specifies the major challenges faced by local governments during the launch and development of early childhood intervention services.

Why early childhood intervention services are important to local governments

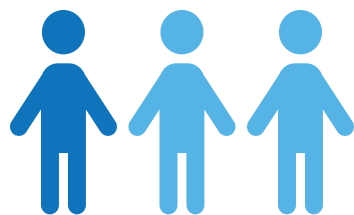
Early childhood intervention (ECI) is a practice focusing on the early development of children, which has been gaining increasing importance considering the ever-growing number of vulnerable children, such as premature babies, children born with disabilities, or children at risk of developmental delays due to family poverty or other socio-economic factors. The after-birth period until the age of three is essential for ECI, as it enables timely identification of developmental delays or disabilities so as to best meet the needs of the child and the family and maximise outcomes and successful participation in family and social life. This is an essential stage in children's development, as it marks the beginning of consciousness formation, body use capabilities, basic social capacities and various functional independence skills, and lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and critical thinking. Given the rapid development of the brain at this early stage of children's development, the benefits of ECI at this age are unmatched and often more impactful than others.

Early intervention has been shown to be very effective for children susceptible to biological and environmental risk, children with autistic spectrum disorders (Scheffer, Didden, Korzilius, 2011), and children with Down syndrome (Guralnick, 2005), in which cases evidence-based practice is applied (Guralnick, 2008, 2011). This includes the application of strict and experience-based findings to the design and modification of policies, procedures and practices, aiming to ensure staff-appropriate training and high-quality services.

ECI builds on the following internationally agreed fundamental principles (Guralnick, 2008, 2011):

- ✓ Adoption of a family-centred approach;
- ✓ Individualised intervention;
- ✓ Coordinated service delivery;
- ✓ Research-based methods.

Source data show that one in three children having used ECI services no longer needs special pre-school education or disability classification (Jones, L. 2009). Moreover, ECI facilitates the successful inclusion of children in formal education (Hodes, 2007).



One in three children
having used ECI services no longer
needs special pre-school education
or disability classification.

In Bulgaria, ECI services were first launched in 2010 by a number of civil society organisations in some of the country's major cities, together with the adoption of the national strategy Vision for Deinstitutionalisation of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria, whose main goals include a phased-out closure of all institutions for children, prevention of placement and upbringing of children aged 0-3 in residential care of any type, and developing family-centred and community-based services throughout the country.

The government has also been involved in ECI service delivery via the so-called *early childhood development centres*, which were first set up with a World Bank loan and have subsequently been funded through the Early Childhood Development project of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2014-2020 (HRDOP).

At present, in accordance with one of UNICEF's latest reports¹, ECI is considered a new practice for Bulgaria, developed by several organisations and spanning a history of about a decade. At the same time, and in spite of the need for such practice, its outreach is still limited nationwide, and the government continues to rely mainly on the initiative of individual organisations, European funds and local governments. The role of the latter in the entire process is crucial.

The significance and the benefits of launching ECI services should be considered within the context of the following concerning national-level statistics:

- ✓ The estimated total of children aged 0-7 in Bulgaria is 42.4%, and in 2018 the number of children with disabilities was 26,422².
- ✓ The number of children under the age of 16 with a recognised type and degree of disability is 4,070, or 3.8 per 1,000 children (as a share of the child population)³.
- ✓ The specific number of children with disabilities or developmental delays who were not registered as having a disability at birth or do not have a Territorial Expert Medical Board (TELK) assessment of the degree of disability is unclear, as there is no methodology for collecting such data. In this context, the number of premature babies, who run a higher risk of developmental issues, can be used as reference. Bulgaria has, in general, a high share of premature newborns – in 2017 it amounted to 9.9% of all live births (a total of 5,952), meaning that almost every tenth newborn was premature⁴. In 2018 the number rose to 6,608.
- ✓ The rates of the combined *risk of poverty and social exclusion* indicator are high. According to 2018 data, 33.7% of children aged 0-17 live with such a risk. In comparison, the risk of child poverty and social exclusion in Europe is around 21%⁵.
- ✓ Lack of consistent healthcare activities.

1. Situation Analysis of Services for Young Children with Developmental Difficulties and Disabilities in Bulgaria.

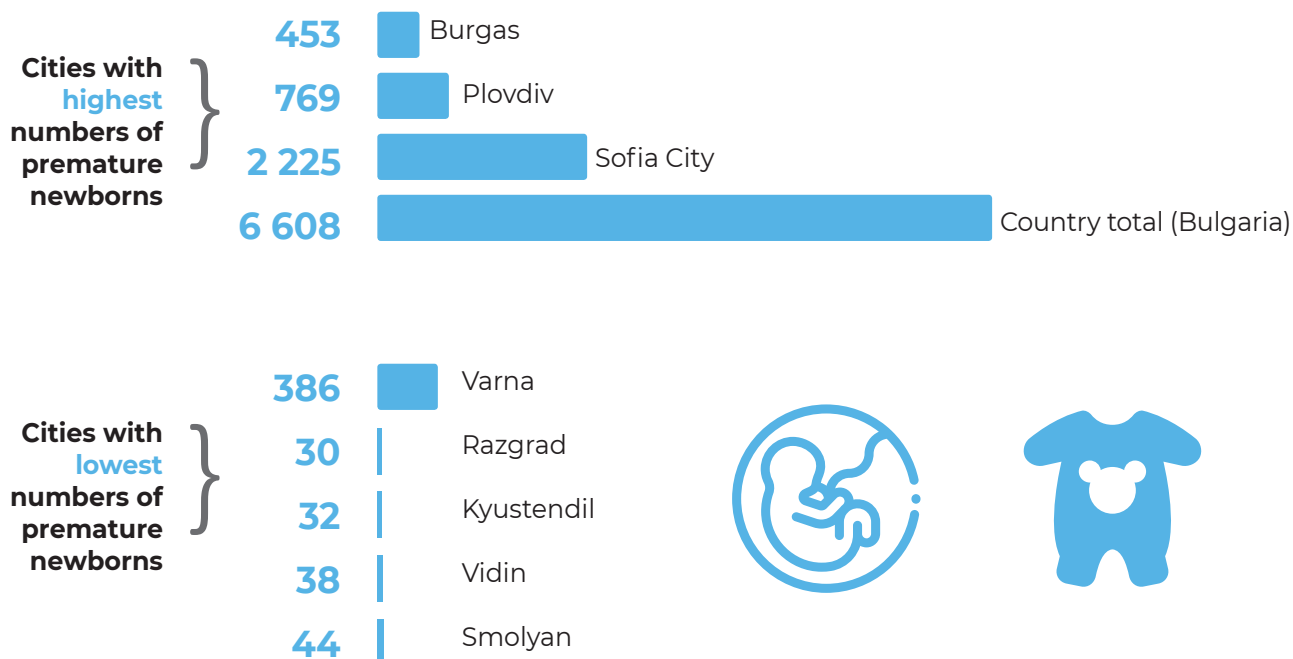
2. Data on children aged 0-16 provided by the Agency for People with Disabilities.

3. *Healthcare 2018*, a publication of the National Statistical Institute and the National Centre of Public Health and Analyses.

4. Data provided by the Ministry of Health for National Network for Children's *Report Card 2019*.

5. From National Network for Children's annual report *Report Card 2020: What is the average government score for childcare?*

According to data of the National Centre of Public Health and Analyses, the totals of premature newborns in 2018 were as follows:



In this context, ECI services can assist local governments to:

- ✓ Contain and counteract various risk factors (biological, neurological or social) having a negative impact on children’s development. Early childhood intervention can minimise and, on many occasions, even prevent developmental delays, as well as other secondary complications, such as malnutrition and chronic diseases, in children with disabilities.
- ✓ Prevent the abandonment of children with disabilities aged 0-3 by using a new community-based mobile service aiming to:
 - Support and strengthen the parent-child interaction and relationship;
 - Maximise children’s development and strengthen parents’ confidence and skills to support their children;
 - Set up a health and social intervention approach.

ECI services are a powerful and innovative approach to children’s development and family support. They enable local governments to provide adequate support in the first three years of the lifetime of children at risk of developmental delay or abandonment. The timely support offered by these services is vital, as it ensures good health, physical and intellectual development, and better learning outcomes for children, all of which are prerequisites for a successful future life. These services are even more important in the case of children with disabilities. In sum, ECI services help children to reach their full potential, and local governments to develop adequate and all-encompassing social services in support of children and families.

How and why Varna Municipality decided to include ECI services into its social programme

In 2009 Karin Dom officially launched its Early Intervention Programme for children aged 0-4 in partnership with Varna Municipality, the local Child Protection Department, the maternity wards of two hospitals in the city of Varna (Sveta Anna Multi-Profile Hospital for Active Treatment and *Prof. Dr. Dimitar Stamatov* Specialised Gynaecology and Obstetrics Hospital for Active Treatment), and *Tsvetno Badeshte* Association. The programme was initially funded by Open Society London for support provision to families and children with or at risk of disabilities, so as to prevent abandonment in institutions as part of the deinstitutionalisation process that had begun in Bulgaria. In the course of the implementation, programme monitoring and evaluation were carried out, aiming to further strengthen the programme and better meet children's and families' needs, as well as to identify the results of its implementation.

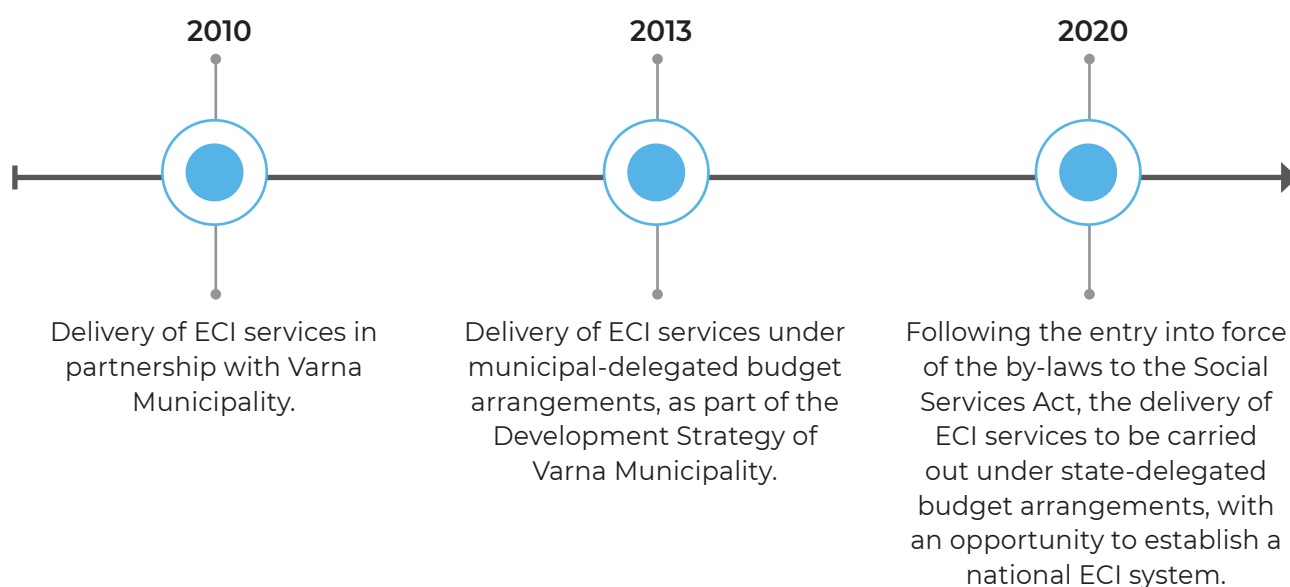
Varna Municipality was introduced to the programme concept at the very beginning, and, as a partner, had the opportunity to get to know the methodology by taking part in the induction training led by ECI lecturers, consultants and trainers from Vancouver, Canada. In the course of the programme launch and development, the Social Activities Directorate at Varna Municipality, as well as all other partners, were able to follow the implementation of the methodology and the achieved results through participation in regular seminars organised by Karin Dom, at which the results of the monitoring and evaluation of the programme were presented and discussed. This is how a good understanding of the nature and the benefits of this innovative programme was built.

The early intervention service was included in Varna Municipality's Municipal Strategy for Development of Social Services 2011-2015, Child Programme 2012, and Social Programme.

As the funding agreement for the Early Intervention Programme with Karin Dom was coming to an end, the organisation and its partners mobilised their efforts to ensure sustainability for the programme. The parental community in the city of Varna, brought together around the idea to support the continuation of the programme, submitted a petition to this effect to the Municipality.

Thus, in July 2013 Varna Municipality became the first Bulgarian municipality to recognise the *Early Intervention Service for Prevention of Abandonment of Children with Disabilities* as a municipal-delegated activity, and, subsequently, to conclude an agreement for its delivery with Karin Dom Foundation, with a monthly capacity of 40 places.

Schedule: The path of Karin Dom's ECI service



The perspective of Varna Municipality

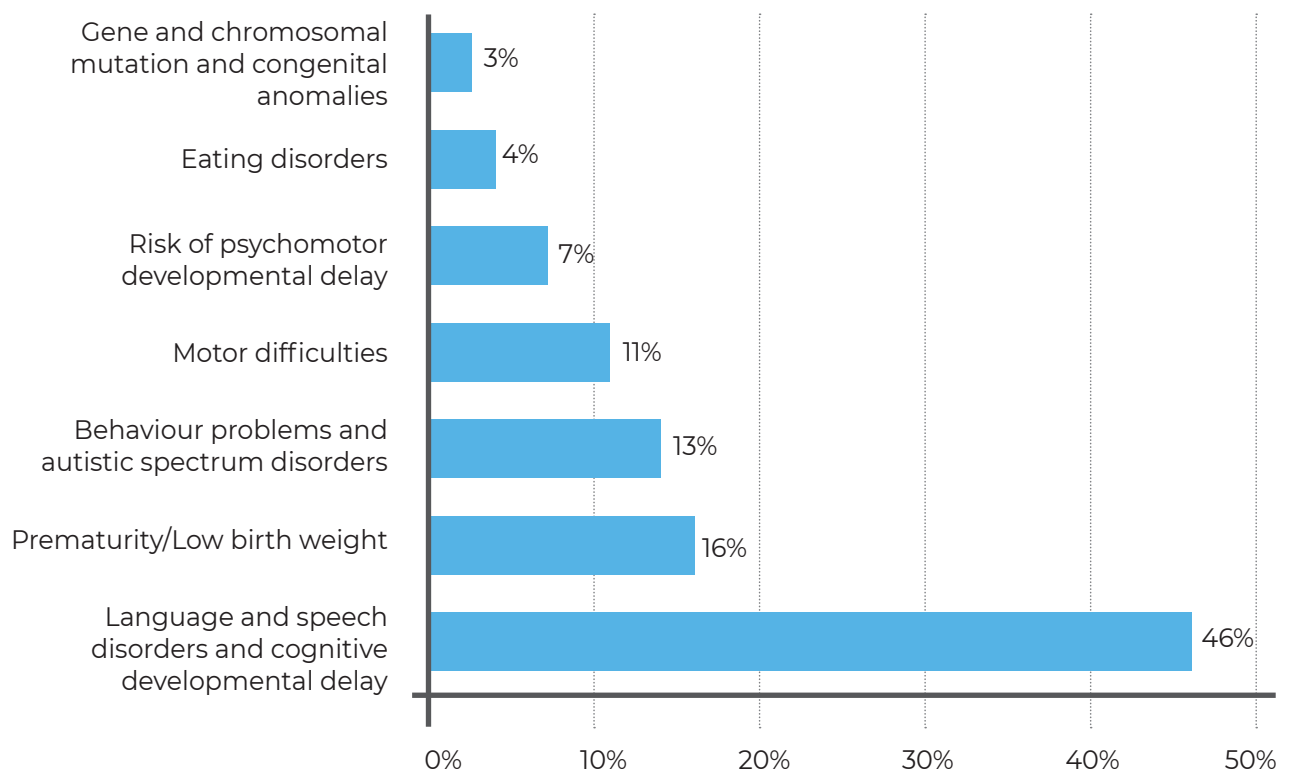
“Karin Dom’s proposal to launch an ECI service for children was motivated and backed by the experience of the whole programme team. At the same time, it was particularly relevant to the major priority of the local government to develop the health and social sectors, and it further opted for an integrated approach in support of children’s development in those two sectors. In the proposed services, we saw an innovative and effective approach to support children at risk and their parents in real family settings. Our desire to seek innovative services, to be close to families’ needs and to act as a role model in social service provision was also a decisive factor. The situation at the time – a growing percentage of premature newborns, risk processes staying out of reach, a need for new communal services in the early stages of the deinstitutionalisation process – was another factor for the Municipal Council’s decision.”

Interview with Dr. Lidia Marinova,
Head of the Social Activities and Hosing Committee at Varna Municipality, 2020.

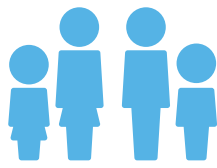
How Varna Municipality benefits from the launch of ECI services

Since its launch in 2010 and until 2019, the Early Intervention Programme reached out and offered support to a total of **897 children, of whom 558 under municipal-delegated activities**. The programme's effectiveness is evidenced by the fact that 52% of participating children do not need follow-up therapy, specialised services or resource support in kindergarten. Further proof of the programme's effectiveness can be found by juxtaposing users' concerns and needs upon admission into the programme with the progress made by each user group.

Breakdown of participants' conditions according to the concerns expressed by parents upon admission into the programme



A very important indicator of the success rate of the programme, both for the service provider and for the local government, is the feedback provided by parents whose children have benefited from the service.



- 93% > of parents are satisfied with the programme
- 97% > of parents have seen progress in their children's development
- 92% > of parents have acquired skills to work independently with their children

Another decisively positive sign of appreciation for Karin Dom's Early Intervention Programme, implemented with the support of Varna Municipality, was **its inclusion in a UNICEF publication on good practices supporting children under the age of 3 to grow up in a safe and nurturing family environment.**

Local governments can consider **early intervention in cases of children at risk and children with disabilities a good investment**, as it will spare both the family and the state additional costs later on in the life of the child.

The acknowledgement of ECI services by local governments and their inclusion in the municipal development strategy and the annual plan for development of social services will facilitate the expansion of children's potentials and their growth into mature citizens, taking an active part in their local communities.



Pre-launch analysis for early childhood intervention services

A municipality's decision to launch and finance new social services should be preceded by a situation **analysis of the region and an assessment of the needs of vulnerable groups and potential providers, as well as of the municipality's potential to plan for and allocate financial resources effectively.**

The decision made by Varna Municipal Council in 2013 to include ECI services in the category of municipal-delegated activities was the result of the following milestones:

- ✔ **Situation analysis and assessment of risk groups' needs in Varna Region, as part of the strategic planning of social services at regional level⁶;**
- ✔ **Detailed justification of the proposal for ECI services delivery by the potential provider;**
- ✔ **Financial analysis to establish the capacity for the new municipal-delegated activity.**

6. The approach was chosen in connection with the amendments to the Social Assistance Act, adopted by the National Assembly in January 2010, and the follow-up amendments to its Implementing Regulations, adopted by a Decree of the Council of Ministers.

Situation analysis to assess the need for social services and their planning by the local government

The situation analysis carried out in 2010⁷ which coincided with the beginning of the deinstitutionalisation process, drew the attention of Varna Municipality to issues such as service provision for children, delivery method and new needs. After a critical but realistic review, the following conclusions were reached as the basis of the future municipal development strategy and of the design of social services:

- ✓ Compared to service provision for adults, social services for children are very limited;
- ✓ Despite the advance, albeit slow, of the deinstitutionalisation process, the share of institutional service provision exceeds that of community-based services;
- ✓ Community-based social service provision for children is concentrated in the regional centre;
- ✓ In terms of number, variety and capacity, service delivery is deficient, and it further does not meet the estimated needs of all identified target groups;
- ✓ Early intervention services and services for prevention of abandonment of children in institutions are highly insufficient, both in maternity wards and in the community;
- ✓ There is no stable set of prevention services to support parents and children in the process of children's upbringing and education, such as school for parents, school support, raising children's awareness about their rights and responsibilities, and leisure services for children;
- ✓ The current structure of social services is deficient in outreach services, and mobile services are underdeveloped. The integrated approach to the planning and provision of social services is poorly developed, and so is the cross-sectoral collaboration between social, health and educational services.

As a result of this analysis, Varna Municipality identified **the prevention of abandonment and the deinstitutionalisation of childcare** as an area for priority development, and specified the following priority **target groups** for the development of social services and social inclusion measures:

- ✓ Families with children at risk;
- ✓ Children at risk, including those outside the school system, having dropped out of school and at risk of dropping out of school;
- ✓ Children and other people with disabilities.

7. See Executive Summary of Situation Analysis of Varna Municipality 2010 – the analysis was provided by Karin Dom as a participant in the working group for developing a strategy for development of Varna Municipality. Karin Dom Foundation took part in the Children with Disabilities section.

A logical follow-up to the analysis was the launch of a procurement procedure to contract the running of those services and the inclusion of ECI services in the annual social programme.

Justification of the potential provider's proposal

Karin Dom's proposal to launch ECI services as part of the municipal social programme and strategy was backed by the experience of their team and the identified benefits and evidence of the outcomes of the programme implemented so far.

When assessing potential providers, local governments should look for clear and specific answers to the questions below.

Key questions for selection of ECI service providers

Overall goal and specific objectives, with either short-term or long-term achievement horizons, as regards the development of social services provided by the municipality

Response guidance (according to Karin Dom's ECI service model)

Overall goal: Provision of early support to families with children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delays aged 0-3.

Specific objectives:

- Strengthening the bond between parents and babies by supporting breastfeeding and raising awareness of children's needs and potentials as early as the maternity-ward stage. This will prevent a decision to leave the child in an institution.
- Developing specific parental capacity for care provision and encouraging the development of children with special needs in a family environment. This will maximise the sustainability of the outcomes regarding the development of the child and will reduce the family's dependence on institutional care.

Short-term and long-term goal setting: Inclusion of children in the mainstream educational environment in kindergarten or school to better enable their future employment and independent-life opportunities.

Assessment of the required resources for the delivery of the service in accordance with applicable good practice and effective provision

Detailed assessment of resources in terms of:

- The required specific facilities to support children's motor and sensory development and their positioning (when necessary), as well as toys, aids, books etc.;
- Travel and fuel costs for provision of outreach ECI services;
- Staff's capacity to provide and administer the services; availability of data on staff's skills and qualifications to carry out the activities; training costs for current team and new recruits.

Practical implementation issues

- Main activities through which the goals and objectives will be achieved.
- Timeframe.
- Manner and location of the implementation of the activities.
- Description of the methods used.
- Information on all key factors, such as collaboration/partnership, including with other providers, in relation to the target group etc.
- Description of the area/city/town where the practice has taken place.
- Target users.
- Admission to and exit from the service.
- Work methodology.

Evidence of the effectiveness of the service

Evidence based on research and/or the experience of the organisation:

- Impact on the family of the young child with special needs, as well as on the child's development;
- Evidence of the benefits of the application of the family-centred approach;
- Data on the outcomes of the service provision to date;
- Benefits for the local community: prevention of the institutionalisation of children; strengthening the ability of families to cope with life situations and improving the opportunities for the child later in life; economic and social benefits associated with the reduced impact of the child's disability condition, leading to a reduction in resource support costs at a later stage and better employment opportunities.

Human resources should be given special consideration in the assessment of potential providers of early intervention services. Specialists will need to have excellent knowledge and experience in the specifics of early childhood development, various conditions in children, methods to stimulate the development of children with special needs and approaches to family support. The service delivery team should include the following professionals, all of whom should have received relevant upskilling training: psychologist, rehabilitator, speech therapist, social worker, medical specialist (paediatrician/nurse/breastfeeding consultant).

When estimating the resources and the benefits, local governments should bear in mind that services will be provided primarily in the child's natural environment, most often at home, and that parent's (both the child's own and other parents in the community) resources will be used. Thus, in addition to reducing office maintenance costs, the mobile nature of the service will enable outreach to smaller towns or villages, from where parents may not be able to travel or use other services for their children.

The assessment of the delivery team's capacity should consider its members' experience and qualifications in ECI service delivery methods. The Early Intervention Programme was initially supported by experienced trainers in early childhood development and early intervention from Canada and the USA. The seminars built on the existing qualifications and experience of Karin Dom's professionals and gradually a mobile team was set up for provision of the core service – home visits, as well as a complementary team, for the remaining services. The focus of the training was the family-centred approach, which aims to support and strengthen parents' upbringing capacity, as well as their ability to enhance the child's welfare and development.

Transitioning from an expert-centred to a family-centred approach to support children with disabilities or at risk of abandonment

Expert-centred approach	Family-centred approach
Focusing on the child and the child's problems.	Focusing on the family and its strengths and resources.
Led by professionals/experts.	Active involvement of the family in determining the priorities and the goals for the development of the child and the creation of a supportive environment.
Child-centred therapy and impact.	Family-centred intervention, where the family is the one taking care of the child.
Siloed services that are hard to coordinate with other sectors related to children's health and development.	Building a network of community-based services functioning in collaboration with other sectors involved in children's health and development.

Estimation of the necessary financial resources and assessment of the financial capacity of the municipality to introduce and develop ECI services

The estimation of the required budget for the provision of ECI services and the assessment of the current and future financial capacity are the base for establishing **the capacity of the municipal-delegated ECI activity**. Local governments should also take into account expected project funding from European operational programmes, as well as changes related to the **transfer of some municipal-delegated activities to state-delegated budget arrangements** etc. A key principle for municipalities in determining the budget for early intervention services is to **ensure flexibility in accordance with the needs and resources of each local area**.

One possible example of financial planning can be found in the experience of the municipal authorities in Varna in the creation of municipal-funded ECI services in the city. Following consultations with Karin Dom, the municipal administration came up with the **budget below for provision of ECI services to 40 children and their families**.

Monthly budget for provision of ECI services as a municipal-delegated activity by Varna Municipality, 2013 (in BGN)

No.	Type of expenditure	Monthly total	Share in total expenditure
I. Remunerations			
1.	Children's development consultants (for outreach work): rehabilitator, speech therapist, psychologist, social worker	2,400.00	42%
2.	Counselling for parents, parents' groups – 1 psychologist	480.00	8%
3.	Group settings – play therapy – 1 teacher, 1 speech therapist	360.00	6%
4.	Maternity ward counselling – 1 psychologist, 1 certified breastfeeding consultant	450.00	8%
5.	Transport – 1 driver	600.00	11%
6.	Accountant – 0.5 (part-time)	300.00	5%
7.	Technical secretary – 0.5 (part-time)	200.00	4%
II. Expenses for materials			
1.	Aids – technical, toys, books etc.	150.00	3%
2.	Stationery, copying etc.	35.00	1%
3.	Transport – fuel, maintenance	257.00	5%

III. Expenses for external services		0%
1. Telephone, electricity, water, consumables	208.00	4%
2. Information support	240.00	4%
TOTAL MONTHLY BUDGET	5,680.00	

According to the budget, the average **cost per child per year is BGN 1,704.**

The budget is based on calculations drawing on the management experience of Karin Dom Foundation with the Early Intervention for Children Programme. The amounts shown under remuneration costs are only those specified by the Municipality as experts' remuneration. **The budget does not include any additional costs for induction training, career development and supervision required for the implementation of the services.** These costs can add up to a substantial amount, as the education system in Bulgaria does not provide specialised training in early intervention for children. The higher education curricula for special-needs pedagogues, speech therapists and psychologists do not consider working with children aged 0-3 and their families a priority. The training provided by medical universities to physiotherapists and rehabilitators does include training for working with children aged 0-3; however, graduates need additional knowledge, skills and practical experience to gain competence in ECI service provision to children with special needs in that age group. **The budget further does not include infrastructure costs for the set-up and maintenance of the premises where some of the ECI service provision will take place (such as Parent-child playgroups).** Partnering with an NGO is crucial here, as these organisations can use flexible approaches to secure co-financing for services through various campaigns, as well as support from donors and other funding programmes.

Currently, the services provided by Karin Dom's Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities are listed in Varna Municipality's 2020 Social Programme with a capacity of 40 places and a standardised budget of BGN 3,000 per place, rendering an annual budget of BGN 120,000.

For the current year, the Municipality has secured the necessary **funding under Activity 589. ('Other social security, support and employment services and activities', which covers the planning and reporting of costs for canteens and other social services expenditure.)**

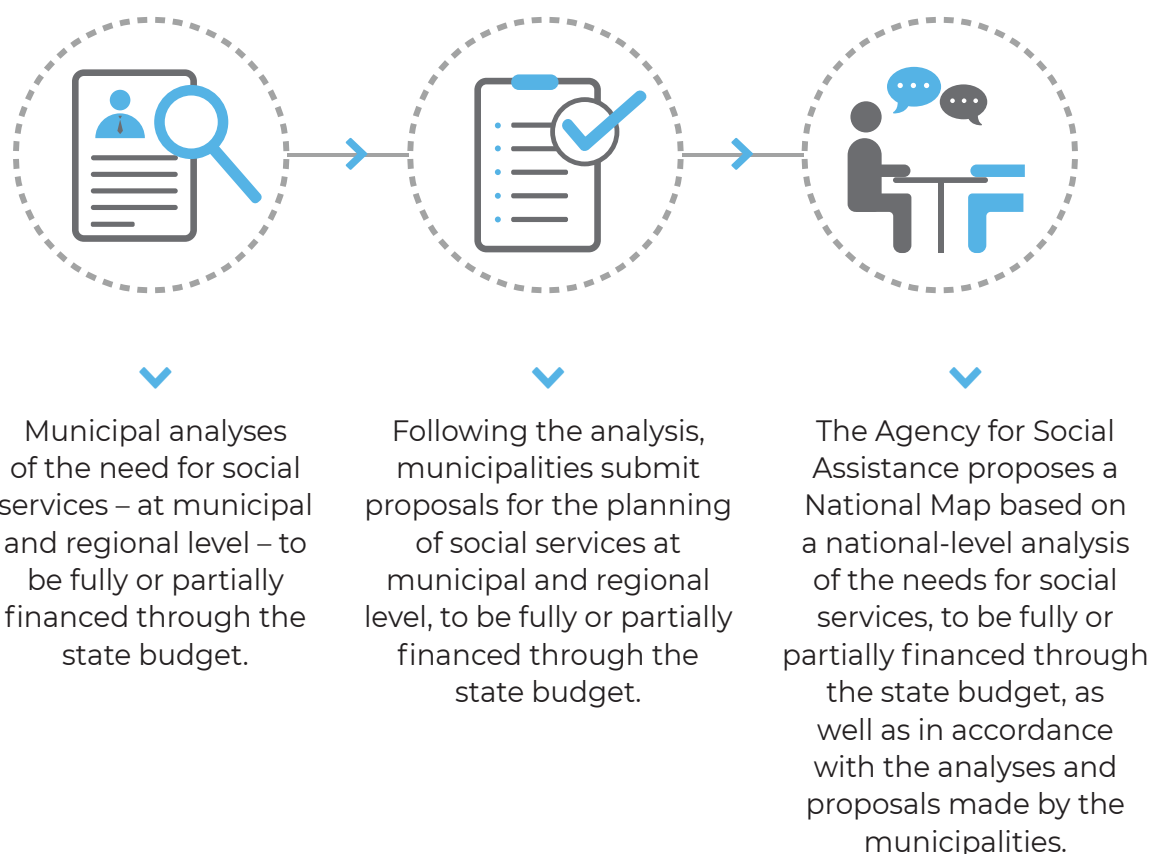
Expected changes in connection with the planning and financing of social services at local level

The sustainable planning and creation of new services necessitates proactive anticipation of regulatory changes. The government has, through the Social Services Act, reaffirmed the importance of the *Early Intervention Social Service for Children with Disabilities* by considering it specialised support for children with disabilities and children at risk of developmental delays up to 7 years of age and their families, which includes early identification of risks to children's health and development, implementation of early intervention measures to improve the condition and development of children and build skills for their upbringing.

The Social Services Act envisages a possibility to finance early intervention services from the state budget subject to their inclusion in a National Map of Social Services, to be adopted by the Council of Ministers following a proposal of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, in accordance with which municipalities will plan their social services.

The new planning and creation process for social services has been designed to be flexible and able to meet regional and municipal needs, as well as overarching national needs. This will be facilitated by the envisaged tool A National Map of Social Services, whose preparation is outlined below.

Stages in the development of a National Map of Social Services



The Social Services Act devolves greater flexibility to municipalities as regards the financial management of services, so as to better address the needs of the community. **Municipalities will be able to cooperate and will have more opportunities to launch needs-based services.** The goal is to improve the planning of social services significantly. In accordance with Article 42, the long-term financial planning of social services through the state budget will be based on the National Map of Social Services.

The Social Services Act envisages development of standards to finance **social services through the state budget**. Each social service listed in the National Map of Social Services will be financed through the state budget in accordance with a state-delegated activity standard, intended to cover any delivery and referral costs for the use of the service when this has been initiated by the municipality (**Article 45 (1)**). The state-delegated activity standard for each social service to be financed through the state budget will be determined in accordance with: the type of social service in accordance with Article 15; the method of use of the social service; the medium in which the social service is provided; the user group of the social service; the duration of the provision of the social service; the quality standards of the social service; and the requirements for the professionals needed.

The Social Services Act further introduces the possibility for **intermunicipal cooperation in the provision of social services**. Hence, if a municipality does not have the necessary resources and capacity to offer early intervention services, it can provide them in partnership with another municipality. Municipalities will be able to conclude agreements with each other, allowing one municipality to provide services to the residents of another. Furthermore, subject to intermunicipal agreement, it will also be possible to provide services at regional level.

The possibility for municipalities to provide services in partnership will allow early intervention services to reach even the smallest villages and thus to offer quality and timely support to children and families in need.



Specifications of Varna Municipality's early childhood intervention service model

In Varna Municipality, the Early Intervention Programme is implemented in partnership with the Child Protection Department, Directorate for Social Assistance – Varna, Varna Municipality, the maternity and neonatology wards at the *Prof. Dr. Dimitar Stamatov* Specialised Gynaecology and Obstetrics Hospital for Active Treatment – Varna, *Sveta Anna* Multi-Profile Hospital for Active Treatment – Varna, and *Tsvetno Badeshte* Association (partner for the breastfeeding support activities).

Karin Dom's Early Intervention for Children Programme is offered to families on a voluntary basis and is free of charge. It ensures easy access for both parents and children. **Prior to enrolment, a family needs assessment and child screening are performed. The service is flexible and easily adaptable to families' needs.**

The programme includes the following services:

- ✓ **Home visits made by a mobile (outreach) therapy team**, which include an on-site demonstration, explanation and training on care provision and skills development for coping with everyday situations and activities for the child, provided by a specialist at the family's home;
- ✓ **Early stage visits at the maternity ward;**
- ✓ Psychologist-facilitated **parents' groups for mutual assistance and support**, where parents receive emotional support, information on topics related to children's conditions and development, and exchange experience;
- ✓ **Maintaining an informal parental network** as an opportunity to have friendly chats and get together around common ideas and activities in support of children;
- ✓ **Individual counselling for parents by a psychologist**, aiming to:
 - Improve understanding of specific children's behaviours and identify causes and coping options;
 - Improve understanding of age-specific characteristics or manifestations connected with the health status and mental health condition of the child and identify ways to meet needs;
 - motivate parents to cooperate better with the therapeutic process;
 - Offer support to families during life crises through assessment of their potential and activation of coping resources;
 - Guidance and support for coping with challenges in children's upbringing, education and therapy.
- ✓ **Resource library of books and toys**, where parents can borrow specialised books and toys to help them with the upbringing of their children;
- ✓ **Group form: play therapy** – children and parents, facilitated by a professional in a pre-set environment and involving children and parents. These create the following opportunities for parents:
 - Preparing children for the social environment through development of relevant skills;
 - Allowing children to play and explore the world together with their parents;
 - Exchange information, experience and ideas, and make acquaintances and friendships;
 - Foster social contact and acquire skills to facilitate children's transition to kindergarten;
- ✓ **Breastfeeding support** provided by a certified breastfeeding consultant in the maternity ward;
- ✓ **Information activities** – raising public awareness of the service through publications, meetings, initiatives and distribution of information materials;
- ✓ **Training activities** for both parents and the programme team, involving annual upskilling seminars with international and local lecturers on topics related to the specifics of various conditions in children and the provision of early intervention services. A long-term consultant for the Early Intervention Programme is Judith Newman, Founder and Director of the Early Childhood CARES program in the University of Oregon, USA.

Who are the target users

A user of the services is any child and his/her parents/legal guardians with whom the ECI service provider has signed a service contract. This includes self-referred users, who have agreed directly with the service provider, without having to declare their need to the Child Protection Department.

The ECI social service for prevention of developmental delays in children with disabilities refers to children aged 0 to 3 who have a disability or are at risk of developing one, or have another special need affecting their development. Early intervention covers the period from birth until the first few years, and it is extremely important to start as early as possible. ECI is aimed at the following target groups:

- ✓ Families with children aged 0 to 3 who are at risk of developmental delay or disorder, including low birth weight infants and/or premature infants;
- ✓ Families with children aged 0 to 3 with delays in one or more developmental domains (physical, social, emotional and cognitive);
- ✓ Families with children aged 0 to 3 who have a disability.

ECI services: admission and exit

A good starting point for local governments when defining the admission criteria for the service can be good practice, which recommends screening and two development assessments to verify the need for admission, as well as the preparation of an adequate support programme.

Families can use the municipal-delegated service of Karin Dom's Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities voluntarily. The admission procedure for early intervention services is as follows:

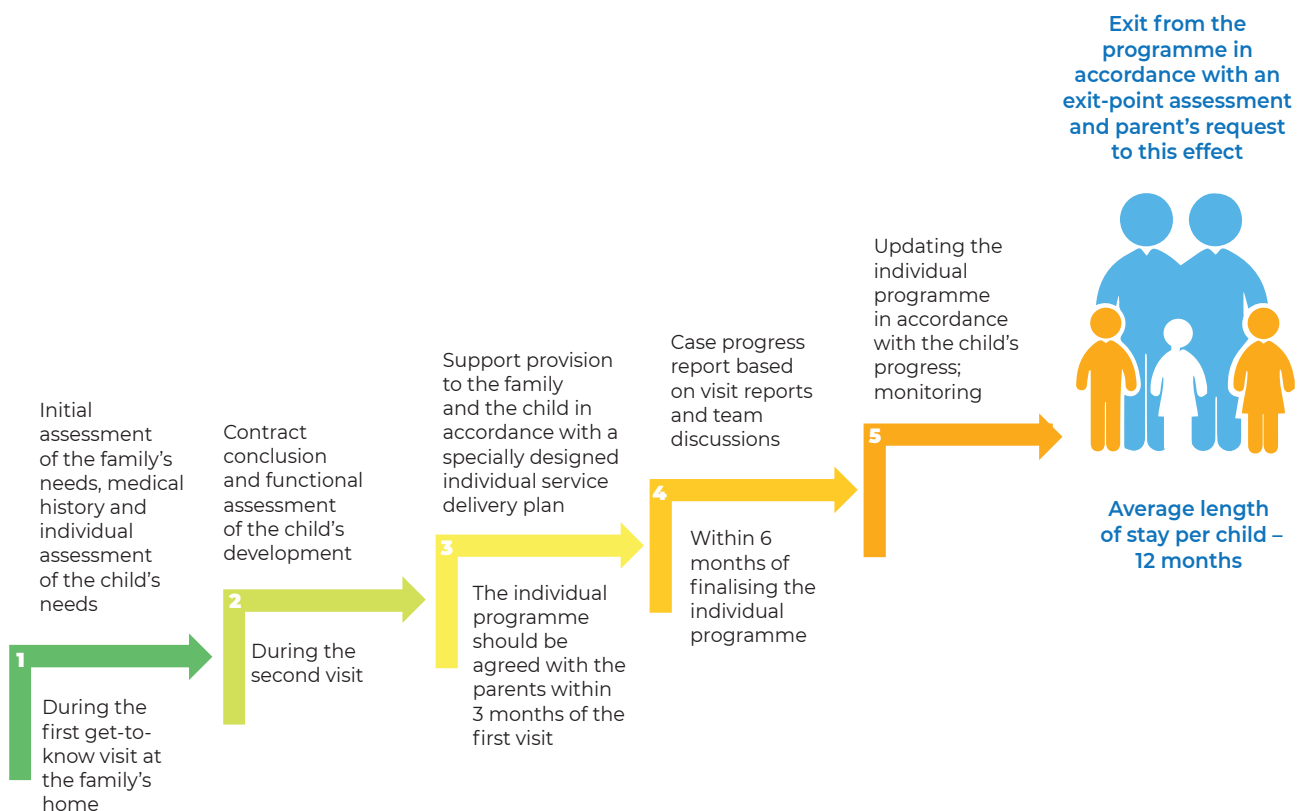
- ✓ The child's parents individually declare to the service provider that they wish to use the service *Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities*;
- ✓ The Centre's professionals conduct a specialised assessment of the user's needs and prepare a schedule for the provision of the service;
- ✓ The user starts to receive support from the programme after concluding a contract with the provider.

The eligibility criteria for using the service *Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities* are as follows:

- ✓ Child's age: 0-3 years;
- ✓ The child is at risk of developmental delay, is premature, or had a low weight at birth;
- ✓ The delay is any of: cognitive development; motor development; speech development; social development; emotional development;
- ✓ There is a risk of abandonment and placement in an institution;
- ✓ Residence: the family resides in Varna Municipality, where it is possible to make regular home visits.

The average length of stay in the programme is about one year, and the process can be visualised as follows:

Roadmap for families and parents using Karin Dom's municipal-delegated early intervention service



The first home visit should take place within 2 weeks of the declaration of desire to use the early intervention service. The purpose of the home visits is to get to know each other, to exchange information and to build trust with the family.

- ✓ The consultant completes the social situation questionnaire, the personal data consent declaration, and the declaration of refusal/consent of photography.
- ✓ The consultant provides a questionnaire about the child and the parents in order to conduct a specialised assessment of the child's needs. The questionnaire stays with the family and the information provided is discussed with the consultant during the next home visit.
- ✓ The consultant provides the parents with an Ages & Stages questionnaire for initial screening of the child's development, which is left with the family for completion, but which also allows them to try out the activities outlined in the questionnaire with the child. The results are discussed during the next visit.
- ✓ The parents fill out a service use application and sign a contract with the service provider.
- ✓ The consultant completes the home visit form, leaving one copy with the family.
- ✓ If possible, a date and time for the next visit or a timeframe is agreed.
- ✓ An information pack is left with the parents, including brochures about the other activities provided as part of the social service.
- ✓ A social report on the user's needs is prepared.

The frequency of the follow-up home visits is customised in accordance with the child's and family's specific skills and interests, resources, priorities and needs, including the need for family guidance in connection with the development of the child and their long-term family goals. The usual frequency is one or two visits per month, or more if necessary.

Exiting the programme is done on the basis of a parent's request to terminate the use of the service and an exit-point assessment of the child's development.

Work standards

Work standards should be specified in the selected provider's methodology for ECI service provision. Potential providers whose proposed standards are based on proven good practice and methods and who respect local governments' expectations for an integrated approach to early intervention in children have a definite advantage in the final selection.

Basic work principles according to the methodology of Karin Dom's Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities



Family-centred approach



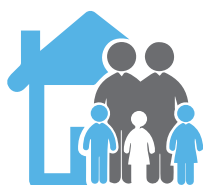
Early intervention services focus on strengthening the family's potential and resources to stimulate the development of the young child. In the whole process parents and family, including the extended family, play an active and leading role, and are equal partners to the experts from the provider's team.



Interdisciplinary approach



Early intervention means involvement of various professionals, working in an interdisciplinary team and coordinating their efforts to meet the complex needs of the child and the family in accordance with the individual programme. In an interdisciplinary approach, parents and team members with different professional backgrounds work together, beyond the confines of their concrete specialities and traditional professional roles.



Mobility and accessibility of services



Early intervention services try, as much as possible, to reach out to families and children, and are delivered exclusively in natural environments. Mobility is a leading principle, which allows for a personalised approach to each child and family, taking his/her specific needs and resources into account.



Flexibility



Adaptation of the service depending on children's and families' individual needs.



Key partners for successful early childhood intervention services

Partners' awareness of the progress of early intervention service delivery and the existence of understanding and cooperation are crucial for the successful provision of ECI services at municipal level.

The need for **cross-sectoral cooperation for quality and timely provision of ECI services**, which is a key underlying factor for the successful inclusion of children, poses a requirement for full knowledge of all key partners from the sectors related to children's health, development and education, as well as all the representatives of the local or central government, acting as decision-makers in these areas.

The perspective of Varna Municipality

“The good results of the municipal-delegated ECI activity would not have been possible without the involvement and productive cooperation with:

- ✓ Varna Medical University;
- ✓ GP-paediatricians;
- ✓ Paediatric and neonatology wards in hospitals;
- ✓ Maternity wards;
- ✓ Municipal Health Committee;
- ✓ Municipal Education Committee and many more.

“What helped us as a municipality was that we managed to build very strong communication and cooperation between the academic community, the NGO sector, and the local and national government.

“A valuable tool for attracting maternity and neonatal wards as partners was the work of our breastfeeding consultants – midwives who were specifically trained and who further helped wards to improve breastfeeding support. Given the high proportion of babies ending in institutions straight from the maternity ward, these partnerships were extremely valuable to guarantee consistency in the activities of the Child Protection Department, the maternity ward staff, and the professionals from the Early Intervention Programme.”

Interview with Dr. Lidia Marinova,
Head of Social Activities and Hosing Committee at Varna Municipality, 2020.

Any municipality wishing to develop ECI services should **keep its key partners regularly informed of the results of the services and the new challenges**. Looking for effective and sustainable solutions to new challenges and adverse trends means **involvement of all stakeholders and partners in early childhood intervention**. The municipality should work together with the main service provider to promote ECI services so as to encourage families to get involved as early as possible and to reach out to families in need who do not use any other services for their children. Key partners and their communication channels, as well as the trust and respect they enjoy in the local community, are a valuable resource for this.



Monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of municipal-delegated ECI services

Understanding *effectiveness* and its measurement in the social sector has its own set of specifics, which the local government should take into account. Varna Municipality's monitoring of the effectiveness of ECI services as a municipal-delegated activity is guided by the following principles:

- ✓ The effectiveness of social services, including ECI services, refers to the effect that a given service has on its user, his/her social inclusion, and improved quality of life. **The goal is to ensure positive development in terms of the level of social inclusion and independence of vulnerable people/children as a result of the support they have received in the form of social services.** Effectiveness can also be linked to the level of social security provided by the community-based service. The evaluation of the effectiveness of social services cannot be compared with that of manufacturing and other business processes. Where production systems consider effectiveness as performance of work or activities with the least expenditure of resources, social work measures end results through the long-term welfare of the client (Pusa, Piirainen & Kettunen 2004).

- ✓ The regular evaluation of the effectiveness of ECI services is a starting point for improving their quality, implementation method and financing mechanisms.
- ✓ Effective social services mean that there should be consistency between end results and invested resources. This is linked to the positive outcomes obtained, which may include aspects such as relatively high degree of social inclusion, overcoming social isolation, formation of individual skills and habits for independent living, etc. To a large extent effectiveness can be considered subjectively, e.g. through a change in attitudes, motivation or activation of life forces.
- ✓ At the same time, the juxtaposition of state/municipal expenditure with the results of social services can provide information about the effectiveness of social services on an annual or monthly basis, as well as at user level.

In effect, **monitoring the effectiveness of ECI services in Varna Municipality is a systematic process of evaluation, carried out on a monthly and annual basis.** The evaluation process is regulated in this case between Varna Municipality and Karin Dom Foundation.

The service provider submits monthly technical and financial reports on the provision of Karin Dom's social service *Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities* to the Social Activities Directorate at Varna Municipality. At the same time, the chosen ECI service provider is required to specify mechanisms for control and monitoring of the quality of the social service in the implementation methodology. This is a guarantee for the municipality that the provider is committed to monitoring the quality of the services, and, in the event of a problem, can respond in a timely manner.

For example, Karin Dom's proposed methodology for the Centre for Early Intervention for Prevention of Developmental Delays in Children with Disabilities includes the following forms of control:

- ✓ Internal control: carried out by the team leader and centre's director in accordance with the requirements set out in the Ordinance on the Criteria and Standards for Provision of Community-based Social Services;
- ✓ External control: carried out by the Social Activities Directorate at Varna Municipality and the relevant specialised unit;
- ✓ Special control: carried out by external professionals to prevent internal control bias.

The methodology further envisages a monitoring and quality enhancement system, which includes systematic monitoring by a specialised municipal administration unit. The management ensures quality enhancement through scheduling in-house training for the ECI consultants. At the beginning of each year, based on staff appraisals and their declared training needs, an annual upskilling programme is drawn, which includes courses, seminars and training delivered by Bulgarian and international professionals.

Another of Varna Municipality's good practices for building a good rapport with social service providers is conducting municipal committee meetings in the centres, as well as the NGO sector representatives taking part in the municipal committee meetings.



Main challenges for Municipalities in the creation and development of ECI services

- ✓ Convincing the Municipal Council to allocate funding for ECI as a municipal-delegated activity;
- ✓ Ensuring good communication between the separate sectors in Varna Municipality that are related to ECI services;
- ✓ Improving the communication with maternity and paediatric wards, nurseries and kindergartens in the region for timely referrals to early intervention services and ensuring access for ECI consultants;
- ✓ Convincing the central government to list ECI in the catalogue of social services;
- ✓ The ongoing process of convincing the central and local government of the need to allocate funds for training – induction and upskilling – for the early intervention teams;
- ✓ Mainstreaming the established local model of cooperation between Health, Social Activities and Education for timely provision of early intervention services at national level.

Recommendations to Municipalities choosing to develop ECI services

Key recommendations

- ✓ Plan ECI services on the basis of current information about the needs of the local population for such services. To this end, each municipality should plan for regular collection of information in a single information register, including data on premature newborns, newborns with disabilities, young children (aged 0 to 3) at risk due to other economic and social reasons, number of abandoned children under 3. Juxtaposing of the data in the register to the provided monthly and annual data on the number of ECI service users can be a good starting point for the municipality to update its approved capacity, service development and financial planning.
- ✓ Match the capacity of services to the needs of the local population and ensure easy access to them, but also with clear and concrete admission criteria, based on an assessment of users' needs (children and families).
- ✓ Partner not only with the ECI service provider but also with all stakeholders to try to overcome parents' and specialists' attitudes 'to wait for the child to outgrow the developmental delay', so as to ensure timely intervention.
- ✓ Build a network of paediatricians, general practitioners, maternity and neonatology wards, nurseries and kindergartens, Child Protection Department, Mother and Baby Unit, and other community-based services working with young children and families to ensure referrals to early intervention programmes. It is important to track back referral sources in order to be able to plan for identification and inclusion of children in need of ECI services.
- ✓ Take active part in the introduction and use of universal screening of children's development for early identification of children at risk or with developmental delays, based on a uniform methodology, and referral for further assessment. The results of this universal screening can be summarised at municipal and national level, so that needs trends can be monitored, priority groups can be identified, and support can be channelled.
- ✓ Encourage cooperation between social and academic communities with a focus on ECI to ensure the inclusion of ECI in university programmes, either as a post-graduate qualification or a master's degree programme, for training of early childhood intervention specialists.
- ✓ Develop the capacity of both the municipal control team and ECI service providers, as well as of all other key players from the health and education sectors through projects for induction training, upskilling and supervision for ECI professionals and other specialists working in interdisciplinary teams.
- ✓ Build competences in experts performing controlling functions to monitor the quality of ECI services not only by desk checks, but also via the direct work with children and families.

- ✓ Make consistent effort to ensure training for medical staff, in particular midwives, to improve their skills and experience to support successful breastfeeding.

Last but not least, each municipality that has launched ECI services should regularly announce the benefits of this municipal activity in order to maintain the trust of the local community and to change the communal perceptions **about vulnerable children**, as well as the latter's perceptions about support and timely intervention.

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About Social Activities Directorate, Varna Municipality

The Social Activities Directorate works to ensure the right of children to live in a family environment and to have access to quality care and services according to their individual needs. The Directorate is further responsible for the integration of vulnerable communities and the improvement of the quality of life of elderly people and people with disabilities.

www.socialnideinosti-varna.com



Karin Dom

About Karin Dom Foundation

Karin Dom is a non-governmental organisation founded in 1996 by the hereditary diplomat and philanthropist Ivan Stancioff. It is one of the first centres in Bulgaria providing services for children with special needs using an entirely new model. The foundation is a dream come true both for its founder and for parents, children and professionals, who, in the course of time, have been joining forces for the benefit of children. Karin Dom not only offers therapy services, but it also provides an environment for the development, training and emotional growth of children, all of which based on the family-centred approach. The organisation advocates for changes in policies for children at local and national level, and is a member of prestigious national and international organisations.

Further information about our activities, services and resources can be found at

www.karindom.org



NATIONAL NETWORK FOR CHILDREN

About the National Network for Children

The National Network for Children is an alliance of civil society organisation and like-minded individuals working with and for children and families throughout the country. Promoting, protecting and respecting children's rights are some of the key principles that bring us together. Each year, our member organisations provide support to over 110,000 children, over 26,000 families and around 5,000 professionals.

www.nmd.bg