

STAY & PLAY

The response of City & Childcare Committees to the early learning and care needs of
Ukrainian children and families

Compiled by Maria O'Dwyer, Framework Research

“The Ukrainian crisis was something we had never imagined. CCCs didn't have any real experience of delivering sessions like play and stay, we've had to learn on the job. I have found the Department to be very supportive they are willing to listen and have tried to ensure the CCCs get the support they need. They have provided the funding and we have all been working together to make sure the youngest children get opportunities to play”

4,869

Ukrainian children aged
0-5 under
Temporary Protective Directive in Ireland
December 4th 2022

66,368

Ukrainian refugees
welcomed to Ireland

In March 2022 the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth requested the engagement of the City and County Childcare Committees support with the response to the Ukrainian crisis

As part of the Department's response, the CCCs are being asked to respond urgently with 5 main actions:

- 1** Immediately make contact with each service and assess capacity using the template and feed this back nationally through CCI.
- 2** Hold a webinar with providers and ask for their support in providing places for Ukrainian children including potential to increase capacity, especially ECCE and SAC sessions.
- 3** Ask Parent and Toddler groups if they have capacity to include Ukrainian families or run additional sessions. Ask FRCs if they will provide a P&T session for Ukrainian families.
- 4** Join the co-ordination group (County Community Response Forum) being established by the Local Authority. This should be the CCC Co-ordinator/Manager.
- 5** Assess if individual CCCs have the capacity to deliver Stay and Play sessions in accommodation centres/hotels. Provision of Stay and Play sessions to Ukrainian families in hotels or group accommodation (facilitated parent and toddler). CCCs to coordinate and facilitate, if a CCC does not have the resources to both coordinate and facilitate they should inform the Department. CCCs to purchase play boxes/packs to facilitate each session (DCEDIY to fund). DCEDIY will provide guidance in relation to sample activities and resources to purchase.



Childcare Committees Ireland (CCI), the national body of 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) was established in 2012 and provides a valuable forum to support information sharing and dialogue between the CCCs and government and non-government departments with a remit for children and families. In addition, CCI has assisted the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) with the development and implementation of policy, projects and programmes within their remit.

In March 2022 the DCEDIY issued a pressing call to City and County Childcare Committees proposing action to be taken as part of the government's Ukrainian response. An official Liaison Group between the CCCs and the Department was established to facilitate two-way communication. This group, coordinated by the Department, meets on a monthly basis and has nominated CCI representatives and managers from counties that are hosting high levels of Ukrainian families. This Liaison Group is a core structure within the DCEDIY response to the needs of Ukrainian children and families as it operationalises requests from the DCEDIY, coordinates data collection and channels allocated funding. It is also the group where CCC's have been able to flag emerging themes and issues and seek, where necessary, further government support.

Under a rapidly-formed DCEDIY Temporary Working Group for Practice Guidance and Support Resources Ukrainian Response, representatives from CCCs also worked with colleagues from the Department and other relevant agencies such as Barnardos, the National Childhood Network, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Parent's Council (Early Years Services) and Better Start, to develop and promote agreed practice guidance and support resources for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) settings.

Sharing operational learning from those providing on-the-ground support is key to informing the strategic overview of the Temporary Working and Liaison groups. Subsequently, City and County Childcare Committees, chaired by Clare CCC, formed an informal internal Network to share information on issues, experiences and successes in meeting the play needs of Ukrainian children in accommodation centres.

The work of, and across, all three Groups is an integral part of the DCEDIY's response to the needs of Ukrainian refugees and is rooted firmly in the principle that

every child has a right to equality of participation and equality of outcome.



We know from international crisis response research that organisations with common objectives can only adequately address the crisis at hand when their efforts are co-ordinated. This report provides a snapshot of such a response.

Using data gathered by City and County Childcare Committees and drawing on the work of four CCCs as case studies of Stay and Play in action, it presents a sense of how children's needs were prioritised at a time of significant upheaval in their lives. It does that by capturing some of the key learning of the CCC's response to the needs of Ukrainian children and their families.

This report, commissioned by Childcare Committees Ireland, is not an evaluative research piece. Rather, by bringing the voice of parents and practitioners to the statistics presented, it describes a planned and collaborative response to a crisis that has seen Ireland welcome 66,368 Ukrainian refugees. For context - and in line with the remit of CCCs and First 5 as the umbrella national policy - as of the most recent Departmental figures (December 4th, 2022) there are 4,869 Ukrainian children aged 0-5 under Temporary Protective Directive in Ireland.



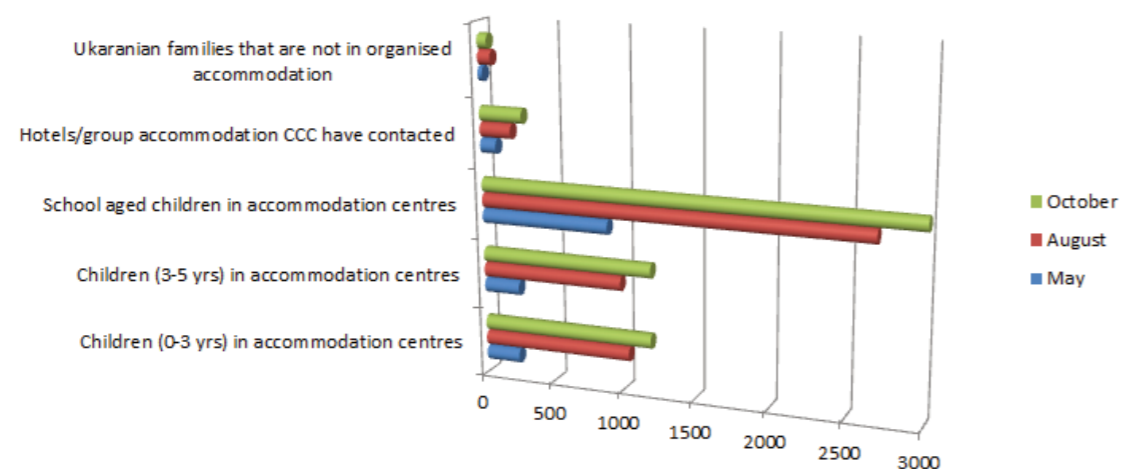
“Our county community response forum has been working really well. There has been real cooperation between the Council and the very wide range of statutory agencies and local community and voluntary groups”

A snapshot

The data gathered by the City and County Childcare Committees from May to October captures statistically the response to the needs of Ukrainian children and families since March 2022. At a glance, it presents a breakdown of:

- The approximate number of children (0-3 years, 3-5 years and school aged) living in accommodation centres, which maps current needs and acts as a forecast of demand for preschool and school places. In May, for example, there were 240 Ukrainian children aged 0-3 years living in accommodation centres. By October, this figure had risen to 1193 children, representing an almost 400% increase. As this is the age cohort with the most difficulty accessing childcare places (because of lack of availability), Stay and Play sessions are critical. Through play, those sessions support peer interaction, learning, oral language and motor development etc. Fundamentally, they provide children and parents with something to look forward to at a time of great flux in their lives.

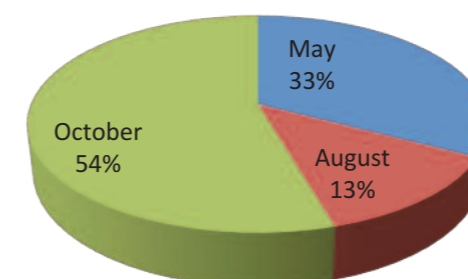
Increase in total numbers May - October



Age category	May	August	October	Total Increase May- October
0-3 years	240	1,039	1,193	397%
3-5 years	250	982	1,193	377%
School aged	895	2684	3.953	342%

- The number of hotels/group accommodation that CCCs have contacted. The trend for this data is in line with anticipated increases as a result of (a) the increasing number of children and families arriving from Ukraine and (b) the ongoing relationship and communication between agencies involved in supporting them. By October, a total of **632 contacts** were made.
- The number of parent queries. In the review period, there were a total of **1,053 parental queries** recorded, which averages around 52 per week. This highlights the critical role of the CCCs in both supporting Ukrainian parents and sign-posting them to other relevant supports and services. *'Once a parent got to know us and that relationship was established, I suppose it was only natural that we became a go-to for other things. If you land in a strange country and have no idea how things work, a call or chat with a familiar local can be the biggest form of support and we are only delighted to be able to offer it'* (CCC staff member).
- The number of Local Authority Response Group meetings attended by CCCs. In the period from May to October 2022, there was a **total number of 211** such meetings recorded. Reflective of implementation science theory, the number of inter-agency meetings (allowing for a natural dip during the summer break) has increased as collaborative working becomes more familiar and structures are in place to facilitate ongoing information-sharing and resource coordination.

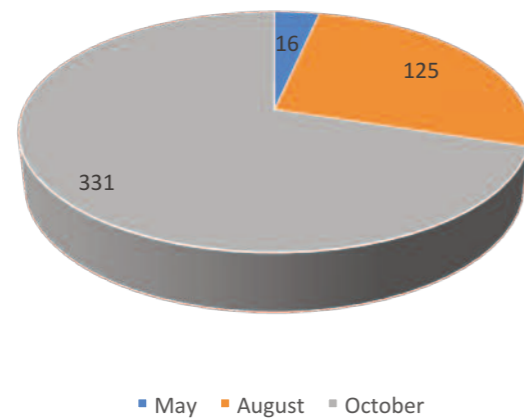
Attendance at LA response group meetings



- The prevalent issues being observed and recorded by CCCs and actions being taken to address such blocks and barriers. The most common issues encountered by the CCCs in supporting Ukrainian children and families include:
 - Initial delays in NCS (National Childcare Scheme) sponsor referral process
 - Language barriers and limited access to translators/interpreters
 - Difficulties accessing accurate data regarding the age profile of children
 - Delays with Garda vetting for staff
 - Lack of local transport
 - Unplanned movement of families between accommodation centres and/or counties
 - Geographical isolation/remoteness of some accommodation centres
 - Lack of childcare places for 0-3 and full day care places as parents begin to take up work
 - Lack of space in many accommodation centres for hosting Stay and Play
 - Difficulties recruiting staff and facilitators.

- The total number of Stay and Play sessions.
During the review period (May to October 2022), a total of 472 Stay and Play sessions were delivered either directly by CCCs or coordinated by them. What is remarkable to note is how quickly the number of sessions increased.

Total number of Stay & Play sessions



The increase in the number of sessions correlates to the increase in the number of hotels/accommodations centres where Stay and Play is held. A total number of 116 centres, as of the end of October, are Stay and Play sites representing 13 times the number at the starting point back in May.

472

Stay & Play sessions were delivered May-October 2022

116

Total number of centres as of end of October 2022

13

times the number at the starting point back in May

R

Anna and Ksenia, thank you very much for the time you spend with us. Most of all, they like to play with colored cereal.

M

Hello. I want to give you feedback, you and your colleague are doing a wonderful job, my children look forward every Wednesday to meet you all, thank you for that.

R

On behalf of our family, I would like to thank you, Aoife and Miranda, for being my children's first Irish friends. Now they already go to school and kindergarten, but every Wednesday they ask me to stay at hotel to meet with you. We are very grateful for the attention, warmth and sincerity to all our kids. And also for new toys, elements for drawing and interesting time at classes. Thank you! With love, Roma and Toma)



Data storytelling unites accurate data and emotional human communication, enabling the combination of both head and heart. This report seeks to do that by giving voice to the City and County Childcare Committees responding to the needs of Ukrainian children and their families, using Stay and Play sessions as the focal point. In doing so, it draws on four small case studies, to illustrate how that work was planned and delivered on the ground. CCC staff and facilitators in four counties - Clare, Cork, Donegal and Kerry - took part in interviews and provided accompanying paperwork, to illustrate how Stay and Play sessions are operationalised in their area.

While the logistics of Stay and Play sessions vary, the core concept is the same across all CCCs. A weekly or fortnightly facilitated play session is run for an average of one hour for children from 0 to 3 years, or up to school age where the child is not attending preschool (due to lack of daily transport in geographically isolated areas, waiting for a place, accessing afternoon preschool etc.). Parents/carers attend the session with their child, where they can engage in play and learning activities and access peer support. Babies and young children have an opportunity to play, meet new people and make new friends in a relaxed, child-focused environment.

From the perspective of the DCEDIY, implementing Stay and Play sessions to support Ukrainian children who are not accessing ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) and NCS places, was a key ask in the call to action issued to the CCCs. As guidance was not provided on what those sessions should look like, approaches to issues such as recruitment, delivery, frequency and content varied across counties.



CCC	Format	Recruitment of parents/carers	Facilitator	Main focus
Clare	13 play spaces established, with weekly sessions running for 60-90 minutes	Translated posters, What's App & Telegram, parent champions (peer translation)	CCC team	Free play experiences: sensory play, construction, small world, imaginary and quiet play etc.
Cork	19 x 1 hour sessions across 11 sites	Posters, What's App group & translated information into Ukrainian and Russian	CCC Coordinator, Development Workers & externally recruited facilitators	Sensory exploration, messy play
Donegal	42 x 1-hour sessions operating weekly	Posters, social media & via partner agencies (i.e. libraries)	Externally recruited facilitators ('play workers')	Sensory play, music and rhyme
Kerry	Weekly 1 hour sessions offered in 6 week blocks across 11 locations	Translated posters into Russian & Ukrainian and linked with Early Years services, ETB (Education & Training Board) etc.	External play facilitators	Sensory play, music, small world play, construction, imaginary and messy play

Preparation

The preparatory work for the commencement of Stay and Play sessions as an ongoing support for children and families and the set up for weekly/fortnightly sessions require significant time and resources on the part of the CCCs. From the Department's perspective, ongoing communication through the Liaison Group meant that those resources, where possible, are made available.

All four CCCs in the case study either directly organised donation drives for toys and equipment or linked in with local charities/services who were already coordinating such drives. Budget allocations from the Department are generally used for art and craft supplies, books, jigsaws etc., catering supplies for snacks and beverages, cleaning materials, translation services and small toys that the children can take away with them.

Interestingly, three of the four CCCs noted the unexpected physical component of setting up and cleaning up after Stay and Play sessions: 'We had worked in an office, sitting at desks. All of a sudden we are loading and unloading cars, pulling trolleys in and out of accommodation centres and jumping around with children. While really rewarding, Stay and Plays are also really exhausting!'

Parental engagement

There was consensus across all four CCCs that establishing relationships with Ukrainian parents takes time. The concept of Stay and Play was new to many parents so their initial concept of it fell between two camps – those who considered it a childminding service and could not understand why they had to stay and those who were reluctant to engage because they were unsure what it entailed.

Each CCC found their own creative way of building those relationships.

In Clare, for example, initial contact with parents was through the provision of a general childcare information session, with one key person (a resident in the accommodation centre) as the translator. Following up with parents looking for childcare places allowed the CCC team to build up connections with parents through e-mails and text messages.

Cork CCC, conscious that families were encountering a number of services as part of their Temporary Protective Directive status, used visual cues to establish their identity and role with parents. This included e-mails with clear CCC logos and branding and the use of ID cards when meeting families.

Once parents attended Stay and Play sessions, they began to look forward to them. They often help to set up and tidy away after sessions, and some parents have volunteered to continue running sessions where there is a planned break or where there is uncertainty as to how long the current sessions can be sustained.

Many parents use the Stay and Play sessions to show family members back in Ukraine what their child is doing in Ireland. They create videos, take photos or video chat live from sessions, 'eager to demonstrate that their child is happy, safe and making friends. I think it can be a morale boost for families in the middle of awful circumstances' (Stay and Play facilitator). Parents in Clare, for example, created and shared a Tik Tok video with family members and CCC staff, showing a typical Stay and Play session:

Девочки открыли садик в нашем отеле S очень понравилось TikTok

Relationship building remains an ongoing process and learning curve for all agencies involved in supporting Ukrainian families. Often, what begins as a crisis response means that parents have little choice in what is offered. One CCC reported the impact of such learning: 'When we started, we were so obsessed with messy and child-led play that we never thought to ask the parents what they would like to do in the Stay and Plays. When we eventually took a breath and asked them, they were delighted. They told us 'everyone in Ireland is so lovely but nobody ever asks us what we want'. We know now that we need to call a meeting with parents before the first session and get their ideas'.

One of the most palpable characteristics of CCC engagement with parents engaged in Stay and Play sessions is empathy. Acutely aware of the traumatic circumstances that has brought families to Ireland, CCCs are going to great lengths to ensure that sessions give them an opportunity to enjoy both their child and their peer interactions. Whether that means changing Stay and Play sessions to mornings so that afternoon nap times are uninterrupted or using networks and contacts for finding children's books that also subtly support parental language development, there were many examples in the case study interviews that highlight the empathetic and mutually respectful relationship between CCCs and parents.



Child interaction

'Just as birds fly and fish swim, children play'. One CCC quoted the play therapist Dr. Landreth when describing the children's reaction to Stay and Play sessions. The content of Stay and Play sessions across all four case study counties was child focused, and designed to facilitate sensory and exploratory play: 'We tried to use open-ended materials as much as possible to allow freedom of expression.....Messy as it might get at times, it allows the children to explore the world with their senses and sets them on a better foot to deal with the challenges they are currently facing'.

Children's reaction to Stay and Play is a litmus test of their experience. From initial reluctance to leave a parent's side to hugging and kissing CCC staff and facilitators, the sessions give children something to look forward to during a time of significant upheaval in their lives. As one CCC team member noted, 'play and hugs are universal languages'. DCEDIY staff observed the same during reception services at City West, where Better Start had set up play areas. Ukrainian families would arrive during the night and although tired and in unfamiliar surroundings children would instantly kick off their shoes and run to the play areas.

During the case study interviews, one of the most poignant themes that arose was the acknowledgment that children deserve to be children, regardless of whatever circumstances they find themselves in at any particular time. One of the CCCs recognised that school aged children received school bags and supplies from the Red Cross but the 0-3s have nothing similar. Cognisant of the generous toy donations, they also recognised that for young children, the joy of opening something new is universal. Subsequently, the CCC tries to ensure that some budget is used to buy a small, inexpensive but new toy for every child in Stay and Play sessions. Similarly, two CCCs noted that the ability to give a play pack to each child would be on their wish list.

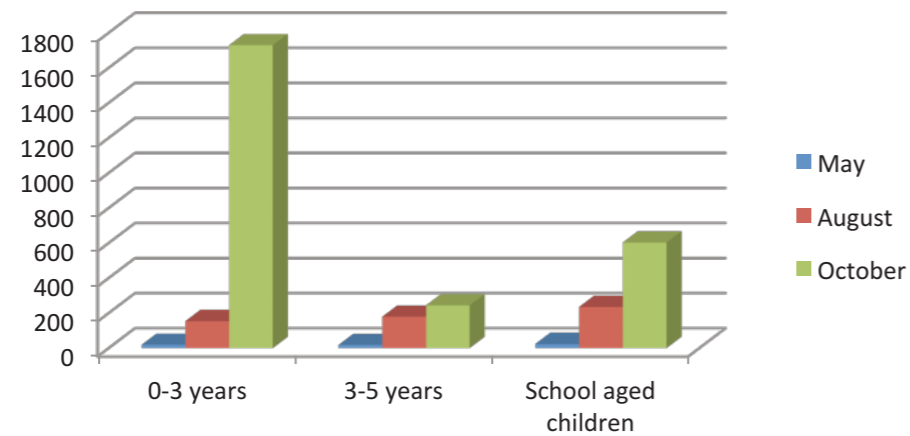
Perhaps the best endorsement for Stay and Play sessions comes directly from children who attended them. In two counties, CCCs spoke about children who had asked for and/or been given days off preschool or school to attend sessions. Having attended Stay and Play while waiting for their places, they were reluctant to miss out on the fun and familiarity the sessions provided.



Meeting needs

As the number of 0-5 year old Ukrainian children in Ireland increases, the number of Stay and Play sessions offered across all CCCs has increased proportionately.

Attendance at Stay and Play sessions



It is inarguable that Stay and Play sessions provide something that is every child's right- an opportunity to play. Living in hotels and accommodation centres in a foreign country, having left behind family members and familiar surroundings, Stay and Play offers young Ukrainian children time and space that is dedicated to their learning, development and well-being. Simultaneously, parents have an opportunity to be part of their child's new experiences and develop and expand their own networks.

The gentle approach and overall success of Stay and Play also needs to be counter-balanced with its limitations. One hour every week or fortnight leaves a lot of unoccupied and unstructured hours for young children. Furthermore, the limited duration and structure of sessions does not support the identification of any particular or additional needs that a child may have. Access to AIM support in preschool is a long way off for many children, meaning that the window for prevention and early identification narrows. For children experiencing trauma, that is a particularly critical window.



Key Learning

Logistical

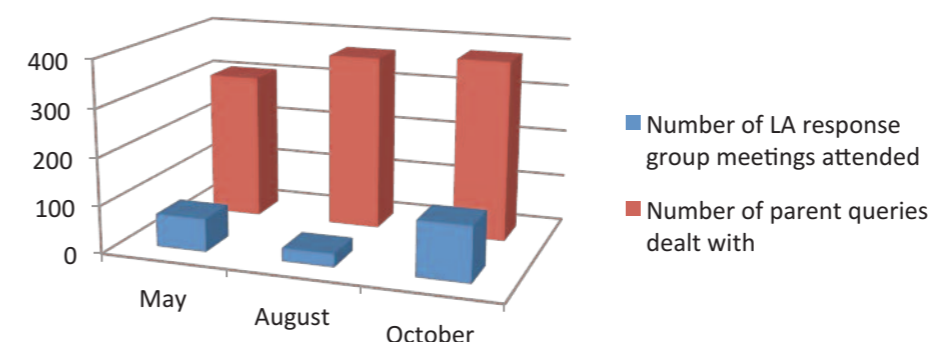
- The experience of rapid mobilisation during the recent pandemic was reflected in the DCEDIY's response to the needs of Ukrainian children and families arriving to Ireland. The DCEDIY / CCC collaborative and coordinated approach ensured dual prioritisation: Meeting the needs of Ukrainian children and their families, and resourcing Early Years and School Aged Childcare practitioners to support those families during an exceptional and challenging situation.
- The delivery of Stay and Play sessions need to be balanced with competing resources, such as the availability of staff and materials (toys, books etc.). Some CCCs for example, reported pausing sessions to focus on the coordination of Christmas activities. In light of the benefits of Stay and Play for both children and parents, sustained funding needs to be available in 2023 to ensure that the sessions continue, in parallel with other seasonal priorities and activities such as mid-term and summer camps etc.

Resources

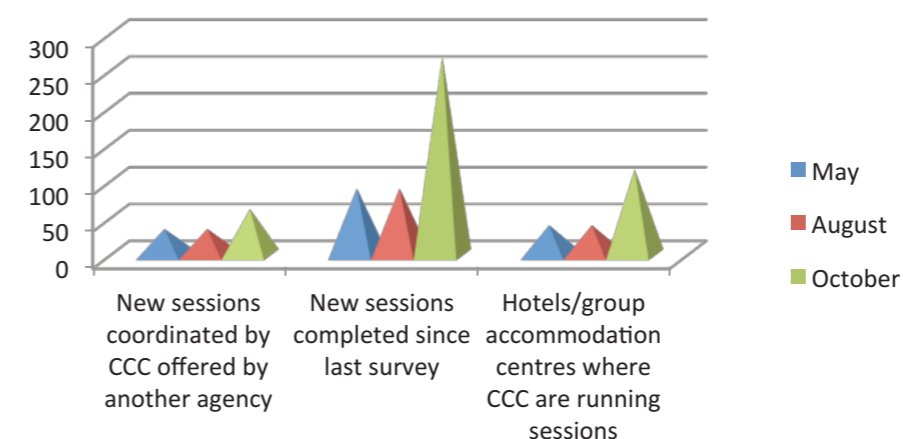
- The ground work under national policy for children has proven to be very effective in terms of supporting the government's response to the needs of Ukrainian children and families. First 5 provides the structure and principles for how that work is implemented, while initiatives such as Better Start have ensured high quality play experiences. Systems and pathways developed for ECCE and NCS have enabled the mobilisation of Early Years places across all counties, and the establishment of CCI ten years ago has provided a mechanism for reaching into the collective Early Years sector.
- Structured and regular communication between the DCEDIY and CCCs has enabled the provision of support to Ukrainian children under emergency circumstances. Making preschool places available as a priority has been something that all CCCs have done, through their relationships with Early Years providers. This means that almost 2,500 Ukrainian children are currently enrolled in preschools in Ireland.
- The resources allocated for the call to action, while responsive, would benefit from a comprehensive review process. In order to support children and families experiencing trauma, CCCs themselves needs to be recipients of psychological first aid. While supports are currently available through Employment Assistance Programmes, links to Tusla and HSE resources etc., prioritisation and access vary considerably across CCCs. While the socio-emotional insights of CCC staff and facilitators shared during interviews speak to energy, dedication and compassion, they also raise a flag to the risk of psychological burn out.
- The work load of City and County Childcare Committees has increased substantially in response to the Department's call to action. Outside of the coordination and delivery outlined above for Stay and Play, CCCs are now attending more multiagency meetings, recording more data and responding to parental queries. The figure below highlights just some of that increased workload:
- The uncertainty generated by the war in Ukraine means that families living in Ireland have no idea how long they will be here and the Irish government has no idea how far and for how long resources have to extend to support these families. This ambiguity is reflected in Stay and Play sessions with some families reluctant to engage because they don't believe they will be here for long, while others with children under 3 are asking how to book primary school places for 2024. It is imperative that resources continue to be made available to CCCs to provide Stay and Play sessions, as these sessions are proving to be a lifeline for the many children and families accessing them. The increasing number of Stay and Play sessions is – and needs to remain – relative to the increasing numbers of Ukrainian children aged 0-5 years arriving to Ireland:

May - October 2022

Increase in CCC workload

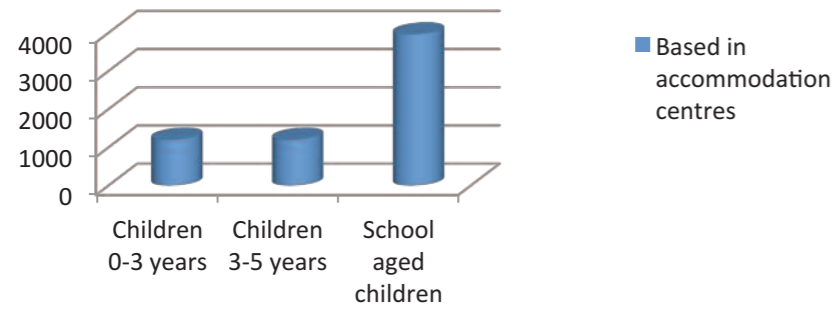


Increase in 'Stay & Play' sessions

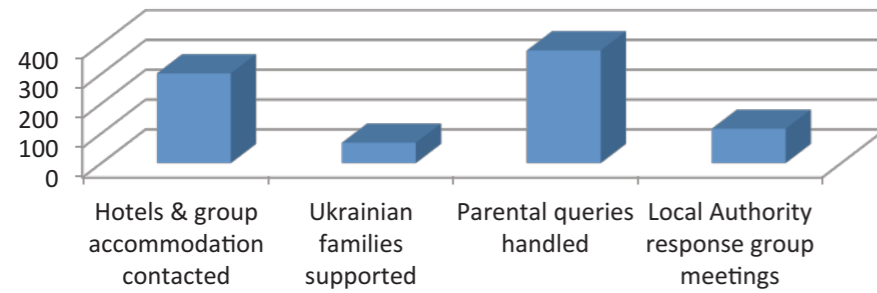


By September – October 2022

Ukrainian Community Demographics/Needs



Support work undertaken by CCCs in addition to Stay & Play



Sample of supports provided by City and County Childcare Committees to Ukrainian families

- Facilitation of meetings and introductions
- Collaboration with other local services (i.e. libraries, Baby & Toddler groups etc.)
- Supporting access to childcare
- National Childcare Scheme (NCS) sponsorship
- Information sessions
- Sign-posting to relevant supports and services
- Development of parent guides
- Translation of information materials
- Provision and distribution of play packs
- Participation in relevant fora
- Organisation of seasonal events (i.e. summer, Halloween etc.)
- Workshops for preschool and school-aged children (i.e. music)
- Highlighting transport issues, particularly in rural areas

Final Thoughts

We have all witnessed the devastating impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the unfolding humanitarian crisis as more and more people are forced to flee their homes. We all want to do what we can to help those in need. At both local and national government level in Ireland provisions are being made available to give Ukrainians fleeing the conflict a warm welcome.'

(First 5, Ukraine Response and Supports)

This report provides a snapshot of how the City and county Childcare committees have responded to, and worked with the DCEDIY, to ensure that every child arriving from Ukraine, like every child in Ireland, has a right to equality of participation and equality of outcome. The inclusion of four CCCs as case studies does not in any way undervalue the work of the other twenty-six. It simply attempts to capture, at a moment in time, the extent of the work undertaken by City and County Childcare Committees across the country in meeting the needs of displaced children and families.





myccc.ie



