

BUILDING RESILIENT CITY RESPONSE TO POPULATION CHANGE

A Policy Brief by MigrationWork,
in collaboration with the European Network of Migrant Women & Eurocities



OCTOBER 2026

INTRODUCTION

European cities have always been dependent upon migration. In recent times, however, many are experiencing particularly rapid change driven mostly by international migration. This phenomenon can be seen across Europe and beyond, and is not confined to only a small number of destination countries.

In 2024, the EU saw a record inflow of almost 6 million people. Every member state, except Latvia, had a net population gain (Eurostat 2026). In spite of a natural population decline, with deaths outweighing births, the European Union's population has been¹growing by close to two million annually in recent years (Eurostat 2024).

International migration, displacement caused by conflict and climate pressures, economic mobility, geopolitical instability, and demographic ageing make high levels of migration seem the new norm rather than an exceptional event. This is illustrated by the succession of refugee arrival peaks in 2015 and, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in 2022. But economic migration is also playing an increasingly important role. Across the EU, businesses and public services are finding it hard to fill vacancies, and member states are recruiting migrants through specific schemes for skilled migrants, work search visas, and bilateral migration agreements with countries across the globe.

Migration is helping to boost the working age population at a time when Europe is ageing rapidly: the proportion of people aged 65 and over has increased from 16% in 2003 to more than 21% in 2023.

Cities are at the forefront of these changes, with migrants continuing to settle predominantly in urban areas.¹ Together, these migration flows are reshaping urban communities at a pace that challenges traditional models of local governance. Rather than being exceptional events, periods of increased migration and a high turnover of population have become a recurring feature of urban life.

Cities are the places where newcomers find housing, access education and healthcare, enter the labour market, and begin participating in community life. At the same time, rapid arrivals can place significant demands on local infrastructure and community cohesion. Municipal governments therefore experience both the immediate pressures and the long-term opportunities that population change creates. This is why cities need to be proactive rather than reactive to migration and understand migration as a key component of city development.

¹ Metropolitan areas in OECD countries grew by 15% between 2001 and 2021, compared with just 6% outside metropolitan areas, according to OECD (2024).

GLASGOW: A LONGSTANDING COMMITMENT AS A CITY OF WELCOME

Glasgow provides a useful example of why cities need to move beyond short-term responses to migration and towards long-term resilience. As one of the UK's longest-standing asylum dispersal cities – cities volunteering to provide housing to asylum seekers – Glasgow has spent more than 25 years developing systems, partnerships and political consensus to support newcomers.

This long-term commitment has enabled the city to respond to successive periods of increased migration, including the arrival of refugees from Kosovo, Syria and Ukraine. This has helped to grow the working-age population of the City, and has also enabled Glasgow to remain a city of welcome despite a national government that has been restrictive in its approach to immigration, and at times, openly hostile.

Yet Glasgow's experience also demonstrates that even cities with well-established integration systems face new challenges. Increasing pressure on housing and homelessness services, growing political polarisation, and attempts by organised far-right groups to exploit local concerns have tested the city's approach. Rather than abandoning its commitment to inclusion, Glasgow has responded by strengthening cross-sector partnerships, investing in neighbourhoods experiencing the greatest pressures, engaging communities through hyper-local dialogue, and building what it describes as "democratic resilience."

This included working through trusted local institutions – schools, community organisations and neighbourhood leaders – to address concerns before they could be exploited by organised extremist groups and recognising that resilience depends as much on public trust as on service capacity.

Glasgow also used data from its Community Planning Partnerships to identify neighbourhoods under the greatest pressure from rapid population change and targeted investment accordingly, recognising that supporting existing residents and newcomers together was essential for maintaining social cohesion.

Glasgow's experience highlights that resilience is not about eliminating pressures, but about developing the governance, relationships, and public trust needed to continuously adapt to population change.

INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING FOR LONG-TERM SOCIAL INCLUSION

When cities see migration as a succession of emergencies, and react to migrant arrivals in a permanent “firefighting mode,” they are unlikely to find sustainable solutions on how to incorporate newcomers. This is why the capacity of city administrations and partners to learn from experiences of migrant arrival, and adapt their strategies accordingly, is a crucial part of a proactive approach to migration

MUNICH: LEARNING FROM PAST ARRIVAL PEAKS

Munich is a rapidly growing city with an extremely tense housing market. Since 2000, Munich’s population has increased by 30%, from 1.2 to 1.6m inhabitants. The city was a main point of arrival for refugees coming through the Balkan route in 2015, when 67,000 arrived over only ten days. It has also seen close to 100,000 refugees from Ukraine arrive since 2022. This experience has led Munich to adapt its policies to be better prepared for future arrivals.

Munich’s institutional learning encompasses six interconnected areas: strategic planning of refugee shelters; a local integration model; communication and information; cooperation; participation of civil society and refugees; and crisis management. These are not separate workstreams but mutually reinforcing elements of a resilient city response. Integration cannot sit within one department. Munich's size (43,000 staff across 15 departments) means resilience depends on regular coordination across departments and municipal companies.

In the area of refugee accommodation, the situation in 2015 led the city to set up an interdepartmental task force to better coordinate accommodation for refugees and homeless people. This innovation has proven so useful that the group continues to meet on a biweekly basis today. The city also created a database of about 1,000 potentially suitable locations for the construction of new accommodation facilities. It is testing new modular construction models and the conversion of office spaces to increase its capacity to rapidly produce new emergency housing.

From the background of political mobilisations against new refugee shelters, the city stepped up its communication efforts. Open house events are organised in neighbourhoods before a new shelter is opened. The city also distributes information leaflets and has learnt to react faster to citizen requests, enquiries and concerns, and to fight the spread of misinformation.

Munich's refugee integration strategy from 2018 streamlines its integration model through local integration support, including language courses, from day 1. This is important for the group of refugees who often find themselves in a support gap during their procedure. The city has also strengthened cooperation with civil society in neighbourhood-level networks and redesigned the former "Foreigners Office" into a Welcome Centre.

Munich has reviewed its responses to previous arrival peaks and to the pandemic through dedicated research projects and international networking with other cities. For future arrivals, clear cooperation structures between departments and with external partners have been defined, and roles were created inside all relevant city departments.

The city demonstrates that a pro-active approach to migration is primarily about long-term **institutional preparedness and partnerships rather than emergency capacity.**

PRAGUE: FROM CRISIS RESPONSE TO STRATEGY

After Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, Prague, a city-region of 1.4m, saw more than 1 million Ukrainian refugees passing through the city. Of these, today still more than 100,000 live in Prague. Unlike Munich, for Prague this was the first major arrival of refugees in modern times, which triggered the city to transition from a first "crisis" response to a long-term approach to migration.

The city's first response was heavily relying on collaboration with NGOs, volunteers, city districts and international organisations, such as UNICEF, UNHCR, WHO, and IOM that brought along extra funding.

In a second step, the city introduced grants to fund pilot integration projects and created preparatory classes for newcomers in the education system. Prague also increased its own staff capacity: 32 staff were hired to deal with the arrival peak, and, importantly, 6 of these were kept to strengthen Prague's capacity in the long-term.

In 2025, Prague definitely moved to a long-term strategic approach: a regional coordination structure and a new integration strategy mainstream integration through dedicated integration specialists and measures in the most relevant city departments. Another key element has been to get Prague's 22 districts on board, despite their high degree of autonomy and often different political affiliations. In the absence of a national law on migrant integration, municipalities are not legally required to address the issue, which makes it particularly challenging to build a common approach. The city now works more closely with migrant communities, exchanges with other cities and is also making advocacy efforts towards a national government that is less accepting of migration.

Prague can be seen as an example of **institutional maturation** following its first large-scale refugee arrival. It shows how municipalities can use the crisis momentum to build their own internal expertise and staffing.

The experiences of Munich and Prague demonstrate that resilient cities do not simply recover from migration crises – they institutionalise what they learn. Both cities transformed emergency responses by embedding coordination across departments, retaining knowledge and staff developed during crises, and mainstreaming integration into everyday municipal structures. Their experience also highlights that institutional learning requires continuous adaptation: reviewing previous responses, investing in preparedness before new arrivals occur, engaging local communities, and strengthening coordination with other levels of government and civil society. In this way, arrival peaks, while challenging, also become opportunities to build more capable, inclusive and responsive city institutions for the long term.

THE ROLE OF MIGRANT LED AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN RESILIENT CITY RESPONSES

The previous section demonstrated how NGOs and migrant-led organisations are a cornerstone of resilient city responses. Cities that have developed long-term approaches to migration rarely do so without civil society organisations and other local actors and networks. CSOs have the capacity to mobilise faster than public administrations and to put their social capital and experience to use to support newcomers from the moment they arrive. They can provide immediate support and build bridges between newcomers, institutions, key public services, and residents. The relationships with NGOs are built over many years, and so resilience depends on sustained investment in civil society partnerships before flashpoints occur.

Dreher and Bauder's (2026) overview article on migrant and refugee solidarity in European cities finds that civil society organisations are often the driving force behind both the design and implementation of local integration policies because of their experience and trusted relationships with communities.

On their side, municipalities can act as a funder, financing civil society organisations to deliver services and programmes, and as a facilitator, providing institutional support while letting civil society lead. The latter can include giving CSOs more responsibility in implementation; bringing together a range of actors to advance integration alongside CSOs; pooling knowledge and capacity between other cities to advance and complement the work of CSOs; and participating in other international and domestic networks for knowledge sharing and advocacy.

Dreher and Bauder's research based on comparative analysis of 28 European cities has found that **institutionalising partnerships with NGOs, or migrant-led initiatives, helps to embed longer-term resilience**. The strongest cities embed collaboration with civil society into their governance rather than treating NGOs as external service providers.

GDAŃSK: AN INTEGRATION MODEL BUILT FROM THE GROUND UP

Gdańsk, Poland illustrates this dynamic well: its city-wide Immigration Integration Model (IIM) originated not in City Hall but with a local NGO, the Centre for Supporting Immigrants, which identified the need and developed the proposal before the mayor lent it political backing. The model was then built through a year-long task force involving roughly 150 people from over 70 organisations — city officials, NGOs, academics, and migrants themselves — and its resilience has outlasted the mayoral term that launched it, with a 2021 evaluation attributing this continuity to the NGO base embedded in the original co-creation process.

A permanent Immigrants Council, made up of elected members of migration origin, was also created to advise the mayor on migration policy – the only body of its kind in Poland.

The IIM is the first regional integration framework of its kind in Poland and provides a model for other Polish municipalities in a country that has no national integration policy.

In this way, NGOs and civil society should play a central role in shaping policy rather than merely implementing it, with participatory governance and the meaningful involvement of migrant-led organisations forming key pillars of this approach. Participatory governance must move beyond tokenistic consultation towards genuine power-sharing, enabling migrants to participate as equal partners in designing, implementing, and evaluating integration policies. As demonstrated by the experience of the Greek Forum of Migrants and the Athens Migrant Integration Council, this requires structured opportunities for migrant-led organisations to influence decision-making, including community events and spaces where they can organise, lead, and shape public debate. This is particularly important in places where migrants face a ‘participation gap’ in their political representation, electoral participation, and/or voting rights.

“Participatory governance is not simply about giving migrants a seat at the table. It is about recognizing migrants as active citizens, community leaders and partners in shaping the future of our cities.”²

CITY NARRATIVES AND MIGRATION: BUILDING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

In times where nativist parties use migration as a main ground of political mobilisation, and where misinformation about migration is systematically spread in social media, communication must be a key part of a proactive local strategy about migration

It is an established fact that misinformation on migration is spread professionally and systematically by well-connected anti-migration and far-right political communities (see, for instance, Nasuto and Rowe 2024, Verma et al. 2026). While their messages represent a small minority of what is said on migration, they spread faster and reach wider and can spark an increase in hate crimes in real life (Müller and Schwarz 2023).

Local governments cannot ignore this new reality and need to shape a counter-narrative that is based on and rooted in their local reality. If their communication reflects a tangible commitment, cities have a lot in their favour when it comes to countering hate speech: they can confront dehumanising discourses with a local reality based on real places and real people. Countering misinformation is therefore not just about confronting fiction with facts, it is also about combining facts with personal stories of migrants and other city dwellers.

² Presentation given by Adla Shashati from the Greek Forum of Migrants to the EU-funded CONSOLIDATE workshop, “Building resilient city responses to population change. A training for local authorities,” 18th June 2026.

GLASGOW: WHEN COMMUNICATION MEANT CONVERSATION, NOT MESSAGING

In 2024, a small group of protesters gathered outside a Glasgow primary school where four mothers from refugee backgrounds were attending an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. Rather than responding solely through media statements, the city's Executive Director of Education, the headteacher, and the chair of the parent council spent the day speaking directly with local residents.

During one of these conversations, a local protester recognised one of the women leaving the class, saying, "That's the wee lassie [young woman] who lives round the corner." In that moment, the issue shifted from an abstract debate about an imagined "migrant other" to a conversation about a neighbour and fellow parent whose children attended the same school.

For Glasgow, the experience reinforced that while organised extremist groups may have little interest in dialogue, many local concerns can only be addressed through trusted local relationships. Countering misinformation is therefore not simply about providing facts, but about creating opportunities for meaningful encounters that humanise newcomers and strengthen community trust.

Research recommends that cities' communication efforts should not single out migrants, but talk about migration as a part of a local community that is about inclusion, fairness and participation (e.g. Dennison 2024). While it is important to acknowledge concerns that people may have, e.g. about scarce resources, communication should appeal to common sense – for instance that every resident deserves decent housing and access to health care and education.

Importantly, shaping a narrative about migration is not just a matter of the municipality's communication department. The most successful cities have built networks of partners to counter hate speech and misinformation. They include trusted messengers such as local employers, teachers, a football coach or a doctor that combine technical expertise with "street credibility".

FUENLABRADA: A CITY NARRATIVE THAT RINGS TRUE

Fuenlabrada, a city located in the Madrid region, speaks about migration in a way that is coherent with its wider understanding of being an inclusive city. The city promotes itself as “carved by migration”, having grown from a few thousand inhabitants in the 1970s to 200,000 today, first through internal and later through international migration. The credibility of this city narrative has been built on, and embedded in the strong partnership between the city and civil society. Fuenlabrada has a dense network of neighbourhood, cultural and other associations, which in the early 2000s created the “coexistence board” to promote intercultural relations. The board created a solidarity network to collect and distribute food during the COVID pandemic and also forms the core of the city’s anti-rumour network tackling prejudice against minorities.

The result is a city that has interculturality and inclusion woven into its very fabric and identity from the bottom-up. Residents easily identify with the city despite their different backgrounds. “You may question whether you are Spanish or not, but you will never question that you are from Fuenla”, says city councillor Javier Bokesa. Although not a rich city, Fuenlabrada has the lowest crime rate of Spanish cities, showing a high degree of social cohesion.

Often, it can be all too easy to look for a ‘silver bullet’ or quick fix to building trust and confidence with citizens, whether that’s a one-off consultation, a new digital engagement platform, or a communications campaign. But what cities like Fuenlabrada and Glasgow reveal is that there is no substitute for doing the harder work of building relationships and trust, of tackling inequality and exclusion, and of learning and adapting from experience as time goes on, communities change, and new challenges arise.

CONCLUSION

The scale and pace of demographic change in our cities requires a shift from understanding migration as an exception to a more strategic, long-term, and inclusive approach. This means moving away from governance models that are characterised by short-term funding, project-based interventions, siloed municipal departments and public services, emergency or crisis-only tools, or reactive political narratives. This pro-active approach also implies that migration should be understood as one of many factors that bring change in today’s cities, and that governance models should be sensitive by design to populations becoming more diverse, and having more complex and multi-faceted needs.

Shifting from reactive to proactive responses

REACTIVE		PROACTIVE
'Emergency,' ad-hoc, or short-term services for migrants	→	Long-term strategy to build more inclusive city systems, institutions, and leadership & continuous learning
Short-term settlement	→	Long-term inclusion and belonging
Responsibility of a single department	→	Shared responsibility across city government and partners
Focus on needs and vulnerabilities	→	Recognising both needs as well as assets, contributions, and agency
Top-down design and delivery	→	Purposeful co-design and partnership with communities, civil society and migrants
Enduring flaws and frictions in relationships with other levels of government	→	Municipal policy entrepreneurship towards other levels of government

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Embed migration within long-term city governance rather than treating it as an emergency or an exceptional event.

Cities should move beyond crisis-driven responses by integrating migration into mainstream planning, budgeting and service delivery. Migration should be understood as a permanent feature of urban development and a driver of economic prosperity, demographic sustainability, and cultural vitality, requiring resilient institutions capable of adapting to continuous population change rather than responding only to periods of increased arrivals.

2

Provide visible local leadership that champions inclusion and democratic resilience.

Municipal leaders should articulate a clear vision of migration as part of the city's future, while investing in neighbourhoods experiencing rapid change and supporting trusted local institutions that can strengthen social cohesion and build trust in municipal governance. Strong local leadership is essential, particularly where national political narratives are restrictive or polarising.

3

Institutionalise cross-sector partnerships with civil society and migrant-led organisations.

Partnerships with CSOs and migrant-led organisations should become permanent features of local governance rather than project-based delivery arrangements. Cities should involve these organisations in policy design, implementation and evaluation, recognising them as equal partners with unique expertise, trusted community relationships and the ability to mobilise quickly during periods of change. The objective should be to move beyond representation towards genuine power-sharing, enabling migrant communities to shape, implement and evaluate the policies that affect them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4

Strengthen institutional learning and preparedness across municipal government.

Cities should systematically capture lessons from previous arrival peaks, retaining expertise developed during crises, establishing cross-departmental coordination mechanisms, and investing in preparedness before future population changes occur. Continuous learning, peer exchange and international city networks should be integral to building long-term resilience.

5

Adopt a whole-of-city approach to integration.

Responsibility for integration should be shared across all relevant municipal departments—including housing, education, employment, health and community services—rather than remaining the responsibility of a single specialist team. This should be supported by strong coordination with city districts, public agencies and external partners.

3

Develop credible local narratives that build trust and counter misinformation

Cities should invest in sustained, locally grounded communication that combines evidence with lived experience and trusted voices from across the community. Rather than relying solely on communications campaigns, municipalities should create opportunities and spaces for meaningful interaction between residents and newcomers, framing migration within broader narratives of fairness, participation and shared belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8

Strengthen multi-level governance and advocate for enabling national policies.

While cities deliver integration on the ground, national governments shape many of the policy and funding conditions under which they operate. Municipalities should therefore work collectively through city networks to advocate for stable funding, greater local flexibility and national policies that support long-term inclusion and effective local governance.

9

Recognise migrants as partners in building resilient cities.

Migrant communities often embody resilience through their lived experience. Migrants bring skills, experience and resilience that strengthen cities. Local policies should shift from viewing migrants primarily through the lens of need to recognising their potential agency and their role as residents, workers, community leaders and partners in shaping the city's future. Participatory governance and co-design should underpin this approach.

REFERENCES

1. Dennison, J., 2024. Re-balancing migration narratives: key lessons on communication from EUROMED Migration V.
2. Dreher, N., Bauder, H., 2026. Migrant and Refugee Solidarity in European Cities: A Meta Synthesis of Key Themes and Approaches. Cities, Volume 169: Migrant and refugee solidarity in European cities: A meta-synthesis of key themes and approaches – ScienceDirect
3. Eurostat (2026), Demography of Europe – 2026 Edition: Demography of Europe – 2026 edition – Interactive publications migr_imm1ctz and migr_emi2
4. Eurostat (2024): “EU population increases again in 2024,” news article 11th July 2024: EU population increases again in 2024 – News articles – Eurostat
5. Müller, K. and Schwarz, C., 2023. From hashtag to hate crime: Twitter and antiminority sentiment. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 15(3), pp.270–312.
6. Nasuto, A. and Rowe, F., 2024. Understanding anti-immigration sentiment spreading on Twitter. PloS one, 19(9), p.e0307917
7. OECD (2024): Demographic change in cities. Trends, challenges and insights from G7 economies: Demographic change in cities (EN).
8. Verma, A., Sear, R., Restrepo, N.J. and Johnson, N.F., 2026. Transnational and trans-topic web-of-influence ahead of UK city riots. Applied Network Science, 11(1), p.3.

CONSOLIDATE

Led by Eurocities, **CONSOLIDATE** will set up Communities of Practice that take stock of the most efficient tools and transferrable best practices; and accompany – through financial and technical support – 12 local authorities in designing innovative policy pilots for more effective support in the following areas:

1. Effective labour market integration for refugees and other newcomers.
2. Local support instruments for refugees towards housing autonomy.
3. One Stop Shops as an accessible and efficient model for coordinated service provision.

Furthermore, **CONSOLIDATE** will provide training to partner and external cities and identify best practices in responding to the cross-cutting challenges of

- Collecting and sharing client data in integration support.
- Developing women-centred approaches to integration.
- Managing the transition from emergency to a strategic approach to integration

CONSOLIDATE aims to:

1. Support development and implementation of new and more effective local integration strategies.
2. Identify and disseminate best practice and key knowledge to improve local integration policies.
3. Improve transnational engagement and cooperation between integration stakeholders.
4. Increase engagement of migrants and their organisations at national level.

DISCLAIMER



Co-funded by
the European Union

Views and opinions expressed in this brief are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

