

GOOD PRACTICE

Munich

A City's journey: from reactive to proactive and strategic approach in newcomer inclusion



GOOD PRACTICE ID

Essential information

Title

A City's journey: from reactive to proactive and strategic approach in newcomer inclusion

City, Country

Munich, Germany

Period covered

2015 - 2026

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City context

Munich is Germany's third largest city, with a population of around 1.6 million. Refugee reception falls under the city's Department of Social Services, specifically its Office for Housing and Migration. Responsibility for refugees in Germany cascades through several levels of government: the federal government is formally in charge, but delegates the task to the states, and in Bavaria's case further down to the Upper Bavaria district, which assigns Munich a fixed number of refugees each year under a national formula called the Königsteiner Schlüssel. The city has no say in that number but carries full legal responsibility for housing and integrating the people it receives.

Munich (as of June 2026) runs 46 smaller, decentralised municipal shelters with space for around 9,500 people. Bavaria separately runs 26 larger centres providing housing for a further 4,000. The city carries a separate legal duty to house its homeless population.

Munich's approach was already shaped by a long-standing principle, the Münchner Weg (the Munich Way): integration for every newcomer from day one, regardless of legal status. What was still missing was a formal, citywide strategy to put it into practice. That gap became clear in 2015, the year refugee arrivals into Germany surged with nearly 67,000 people arriving in Munich within ten days, and the city had no coordinated plan in place, relying instead on improvised measures for housing such as hospital beds and school buildings. However, this marked the starting point for Munich's structured work in response to refugees.

Drivers for change

In September 2015, roughly 67,000 people arrived in Munich within ten days, as the city became Germany's main entry point from Austria. Most refugees continued on elsewhere while 14,700 refugees settled in Munich between 2014 and June 2019. The scale of the initial influx forced a purely reactive response, with hospital beds and school sports halls used as emergency shelter and exposed the absence of any coordinated citywide plan.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in March 2022 created a different kind of pressure. Munich became Bavaria's main arrival and distribution hub, recording more than 96,000 arrivals since the start of the war, with around 23,000 Ukrainians living in the city today, roughly 4,300 in municipal facilities and more than 18,000 in private flats. Unlike earlier refugee groups,

Ukrainians fall under the EU Temporary Protection Directive and can seek private housing directly. With the support of Munich citizens and NGOs, about 80% of the Ukrainian refugees are able to find private accommodation.

Both moments were shaped by the same structural risk: Munich's housing market is tight and expensive, making large, concentrated accommodation difficult to site. Furthermore, practical experience in the past has shown that smaller accommodation units facilitate a more successful integration of refugees into their new neighbourhoods. These challenges pushed the city toward smaller, decentralised sites. The real difference in 2022 was that Munich no longer had to start from zero: it could reactivate the coordination structures and site knowledge already built after 2015.

The Journey

1 Stage 1: Early response and managing initial needs

Munich's first priority in 2015 was pure emergency accommodation: temporary shelter in hospitals, school sports halls, and similar short-term sites used to house displaced people.

Munich had no existing coordination mechanism to activate. Responsibility for reception and accommodation was split across departments with no standing body to bring them together, so the city created one: an interdepartmental task force for accommodating refugees and homeless people which meets regularly and has run continuously since 2014 and became Munich's central coordinating body for site planning.

Alongside the task force, the city began building a database of potential accommodation sites, screened against criteria including school capacity, transport access, and funding efficiency. The database has since grown to more than 1,000 entries and was reused when Munich rechecked facilities under renewed pressure in 2022.

In addition, local initiatives and NGOs were working in cooperation with the Munich city administration to provide housing and support for displaced people.

Together, the task force, the database, and civil society response marked Munich's first real step away from emergency improvisation and toward a more structured city response to migration.

Stage 2: Adaptation and learning

As the emergency phase eased, Munich began building the wider system needed for longer-term integration, starting with new partnerships built with local initiatives and NGOs, such as

- Bellevue di Monaco, which provides housing for more than 40 refugees and supports the integration of refugees today. It also serves as a hub for community engagement, connecting refugees with local residents and fostering intercultural dialogue.
- MORGEN, a migrant umbrella organisation founded in 2013 with more than 100 member organisations, which aims at strengthening and promoting the civic participation and engagement of people with a history of migration.
- Münchner Freiwillige, which worked alongside police, aid organisations, and disaster relief services to provide basic necessities to more than 150,000 refugees during the emergency in 2015, also runs a dedicated housing programme: it rents flats directly from private landlords, often building trust over several visits, then sublets them to refugees matched by household size and need.

Though each began independently, all three are now woven into the city's structured response: Bellevue di Monaco operates under a 40-year leasehold granted by the city, MORGEN was brought directly into shaping the 2018 integration plan, and Münchner Freiwillige's housing programme is partly funded through municipal grants alongside donations.

Munich also developed new tools. It shifted to modular housing over cheap containers and began converting empty office buildings into accommodation, both in line with national best practice. On-site counselling was introduced at every shelter, run by welfare organisations that also coordinate local volunteers, alongside smaller housing formats with social-pedagogical support for vulnerable groups such as people with special needs, young adults in education, and LGBTQI residents.

Communication was one of the new tools Munich developed at this stage. Its strategy started from one idea: "take the public with you, through frank and transparent communication". Implementing public mailboxes so residents could contact the city directly, holding open house events before refugees moved into a neighbourhood so that the local residents are able to gain a firsthand impression of the accommodation facilities and speak directly with the local representatives in charge, and fast responses to public correspondence. All of it was aimed at countering extremism and xenophobia through transparency in communication.

Stage 3: Consolidation and embedding change into city systems

It took Munich time to move from emergency response to a long-term strategic approach. The clearest marker came in 2018, when the city council adopted a comprehensive integration plan that has continued to evolve ever since.

The structures built during the 2015 crisis were carried forward rather than dismantled once the immediate pressure eased. The interdepartmental task force became a permanent coordination body rather than a one-off crisis measure, and the site database built alongside it, now more than 1,000 entries, remains in active use, reused to speed up the 2022 facility recheck rather than starting the search from scratch.

That institutional shift was formalised in policy. The city council adopted Munich's comprehensive integration plan on 6 March 2018, developed interdepartmentally and participatorily with civil society and backed by political leadership. The plan was followed by a formal implementation report in May 2020, which set a further target of completing medium-term measures by the end of 2022, and the plan itself is continuously revised as circumstances change rather than fixed once and left alone.

Munich also evaluated its crisis management of 2015 and 2022, including a dedicated research project reviewing the 2020 Corona experiences. The reviews resulted in identification of clear roles and responsibilities for future crisis situations, recommending prioritisation that adapts to the current situation, nominated crisis team members with deputies for 24-hour coverage, and dedicated, rather than ad hoc, staffing for finance, legal affairs, communications, and civil society liaison.

Where is the city today?

The most recent development is institutional: Munich renamed its former immigration office and opened a new walk-in Welcome Centre, giving newcomers direct access to services and answers to their questions without extensive bureaucracy or waiting time, and referring them on to specialist counselling where needed.

The structures built after 2015 remain active today. Munich also remains an active member of international peer networks for exchanging practice: the German Network of Safe Harbours, now with more than 120 member municipalities, the International Alliance of Safe Harbours, founded in Palermo in 2021, and Eurocities. At home, a Migration Advisory Board continues to give newcomers and migrants without the right to vote at municipal level a formal channel for representation.

The housing market remains Munich's most persistent challenge. It is tight and expensive, particularly in the inner city, a constraint that continues to complicate the city's goal of distributing accommodation evenly rather than concentrating it in a small number of sites.

What enabled progress?

Several factors enabled Munich's shift from reactive to proactive practice:

- an existing guiding philosophy, the Münchner Weg, to build on rather than starting from nothing
- sustained political leadership, including the city council's formal adoption of the 2018 integration plan
- a willingness to convert temporary crisis structures into permanent ones, most clearly the interdepartmental task force
- a mix of city-initiated and citizen-led partnerships, including welfare organisations, Bellevue di Monaco, Münchner Freiwillige, and MORGEN
- a growing site database that preserved institutional memory across the ten-year period, rather than starting from scratch each time
- concrete, repeatable tools for public trust building, including open house events and fast responses to residents
- membership in international peer networks for exchanging practice with other cities

Obstacles and lessons learnt

Munich faced several distinct obstacles: fragmented departmental responsibility before 2015; a tight, expensive housing market that shaped almost every accommodation decision, a national German problem rather than a uniquely local one and, later, a reliance on ad hoc staff reassignment during crises rather than dedicated capacity.

The key turning point was a decision, not just an event. After the scale of the September 2015 arrivals made clear that a purely reactive, department-by-department response could not continue, the city chose to build standing structures instead of treating each new pressure as its own emergency. That decision produced the interdepartmental task force, the site database, and eventually the 2018 integration plan.

The 2022 Ukraine response tested that decision rather than repeating it. Instead of rebuilding from scratch, Munich reactivated what it had already built, most clearly by reusing the site database as an institutional memory tool rather than starting the search over.

Recommendations to another city – the do's and the don'ts

DO'S:

1. Move from emergency responses to strategic thinking
2. Support and cooperate with NGOs and civil society, communicate with the public in an open and transparent manner
3. Establish regular interdepartmental exchange and cooperation

DON'TS

1. Allow the loss of "institutional memory"
2. Neglect proactive contingency planning for future crises
3. Underestimate the significance and contributions of civil society and NGOs

