

Washable nappies in the City of Brussels' 40 communal crèches by the end of 2026



City of Brussels, Belgium



2019: start-up year for the pilot



Target groups

- 1,700 children and their parents every year.
- Staff at the 40 local authority crèches.

Players involved

- Municipal crèches and the early childhood service of the City of Brussels.
- Service provider of washable nappies.

Initial situation in the municipal crèches of the City of Brussels:



1.5 million disposable nappies every year



51,480 bin bags per year



242 tonnes of waste sent to the incinerator



CO2 emissions per nappy used:

- One disposable nappy = 0.384 kg CO2
- One washable nappy = 0.151 kg CO2

Results

- 1,400 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent saved over a period of 4–6 years.
- 242 tonnes of waste diverted from incineration

THE ECO CRÈCHES PROJECT

The aim of the project is to gradually introduce washable and reusable nappies in all local authority crèches by the end of 2026.

A baby easily uses 4,000 nappies in the first few months of life, before reaching potty training. Every year, Brussels' municipal crèches cater for **up to 1,700 children and use almost 1.5 million disposable nappies**. Every day, an average of six and a half bin bags of used nappies were disposed of in each crèche (i.e. 51,480 bin bags per year), representing **242 tonnes of waste sent to the incinerator over the course of a year**. Until now, crèches have been exempt from the cost of waste collection. However, this exemption ended in 2021. Switching to washable and reusable nappies would **save an estimated €80,000 a year in residual waste collection costs for all the crèches**.

OBJECTIVES

To reduce the amount of waste represented by disposable nappies in the 40 crèches of the City of Brussels, through the use of washable and reusable nappies from 2027.

Around 4,000 washable nappies will be in circulation to cover 1,500,000 nappies a year, each of which can be washed and reused up to 300 to 500 times. If we estimate the lifespan of a washable nappy at between 4 and 6 years, between **6 and 9 million disposable nappies will not be thrown away** thanks to the use of washable nappies in circulation over the same period, saving **1,400 tonnes CO2 equivalent**.

PROCESS AND TIMELINE

- 2019** The local council has given the go-ahead for the **launch of a public service contract** covering the organisation and execution of the hire of nappies, the hire of transport bags for clean and dirty nappies, the recovery of dirty nappies, their cleaning and sterilisation, and the maintenance and redistribution of these in the crèches. This contract was accompanied by an information campaign for crèche staff.
- December 2020** **The pilot phase begins:** the City of Brussels awards an initial 12-month contract for the switch to washable and reusable nappies in two eco-crèches in Laeken (part of the City of Brussels), representing 124 children.
- July 2022** Given the success of the experiment, **a new 12-month contract** were awarded for 2023 for the first 2 crèches and the gradual addition of 7 crèches.
- In 2024, 20 crèches switched gradually to reusable nappies. Thereafter, the plan is to increase the number of crèches to 30 by 2025 and to 40 by 2026.

COST AND FUNDING

1.600.000€ (VAT incl.) over 48 months, partially covered via:

- 180,750 €/year: annual eco-crèche subsidy from the O.N.E.
- 271,524 € incl. VAT: annual contribution to parents' costs.
- The system also avoids the cost of collecting residual waste (estimated at around €80,000). This represents a net annual cost of around €40,000 for the city.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Key moment

1

Raising parents' awareness as soon as their child enrolls in the crèche.

The whole eco-crèche concept was explained to them. In addition to the use of washable nappies, the eco-crèche concept includes 100% organic food, a zero plastic objective (all crockery is durable and reusable) and zero waste (bottled glass water for infants, controlled tap water for older children), as well as ambitious environmental standards for the equipment used (sustainable toys and games, oeko-tex or European ecolabel), the care provided (use of specific, natural soap for nappy changing) and the infrastructure in place (passive buildings, ecological cleaning products, environmentally-friendly paints, varnishes and lacquers). The acceptability of the concept has proved to be very good.

2

The implementation of simple and efficient logistics was a key success factor

A Brussels-based company (Snappies) is offering the hire (collection and delivery) and cleaning of nappies. The service provider is reliable, the necessary quantities are available and the service is perfect, according to the City of Brussels' Early Childhood Service. The company offers nappies made in Europe to strict OekoTex standards, in organic cotton. Deliveries are made by cargo bike.

3

Specific training on the ecological approach of the crèche as a whole has won the support of the staff. They were trained in washable nappies, but also in the use of more natural cleaning products, the use of tap water and mineral water in glass bottles for baby bottles, etc.

4

No logistical changes for parents when switching to washable nappies, as the disposable nappies used until then were already provided by the crèche at cost price to parents (ecological nappies: disposable but produced from more natural materials, safe for baby's skin and more environmentally friendly than conventional disposable nappies). No financial impact either: the fixed price of 88 euros cents per day remains unchanged after the switch to washable and reusable nappies.

No impact on the budget of the City of Brussels, which talks of a 'white operation' thanks in particular to the reduction in food waste. The reduction in residual waste also makes it possible to reduce the cost of disposing of the waste represented by disposable nappies.

DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

- The motivation of the management and the team towards cloth nappies play a huge role in the speed of the transition from disposables to cloth.
- Snappies will have the challenge of being able to handle an ever-increasing number of nappies over time.

RESULTS

During the pilot phase, in 2021, in the two eco-crèches concerned, **almost 100,000 disposable nappies will have been saved from being thrown away in the residual waste bin.** Over a period of 4 to 6 years, washable nappies will save **1,400 tonnes of CO2 equivalent.**

Other outcomes :

- Less use of diaper cream
- Less skin irritation for babies

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Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, experts, and change agents working towards the prevention and elimination of waste in our society. We advocate for sustainable systems; for the redesign of our relationship with resources; and for a global shift towards environmental justice, accelerating a just transition towards zero waste for the benefit of people and the planet.



Zero Waste Belgium is a Belgian association that shares Zero Waste practices in everyday life with citizens, businesses and public authorities. The association aims to encourage change through action and thus participate in the ecological transition towards a Zero Waste society.



In collaboration with Bénédicte Hubinon, Eco-crèches Project Manager at the Early Childhood Unit of the City of Brussels.



The Elevating Reuse in Cities (ERIC) project aims to support 18 to 30 EU municipalities in embedding waste prevention at the local level through the creation of Plastic Prevention Plans (PPPs). These plans focus on implementing reuse actions within the municipalities' direct sphere of public control, including public events, buildings, and procurement tenders.