



Executive Summary

BRIDGE Needs Assessment

A descriptive comparison of the design, frameworks and implementation of youth diversion in Greece, Ireland and the Netherlands

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Youth diversion has become an increasingly important component of child-friendly justice systems across Europe. International standards, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), recognise diversion as an essential mechanism for preventing unnecessary stigmatization, promoting rehabilitation and ensuring that deprivation of liberty remains a measure of last resort. While many EU countries have introduced diversionary measures, considerable differences remain in how diversion is defined, organised and implemented in practice, highlighting the need for comparative learning and

the exchange of best practices across jurisdictions.

This Needs Assessment was developed within the BRIDGE project, a partnership between Stichting Halt (the Netherlands), Foróige (Ireland) and Terre des hommes Hellas (Greece), funded by Erasmus+. It examines the legal frameworks, policy developments, institutional arrangements and practical implementation of youth diversion in Greece, Ireland and the Netherlands. The report compares how diversion operates in each country and identifies opportunities for mutual learning and policy development.

The Netherlands has established a specialised and highly institutionalised diversion system centred on the Halt intervention. Halt provides a structured educational response to relatively minor offending and is embedded within national legislation, operational guidelines and long-standing cooperation between police, prosecution services and municipalities. Diversion exclusively occurs before prosecution and is characterised by clearly defined eligibility criteria, standardised procedures and nationwide implementation. The Dutch model demonstrates the advantages of a specialised diversion organisation capable of delivering consistent interventions across the country.

Ireland operates the broadest diversion framework of the three jurisdictions. Diversion is available not only before prosecution through the Garda Youth Diversion Programme but also during court proceedings through Family Conferences. In addition to police-led diversion, Ireland has invested extensively in Youth Diversion Projects delivered by community-based youth organisations. These projects provide educational, social and family-oriented interventions that seek to address the underlying causes of offending behaviour while strengthening children's connections with their communities. The Irish model illustrates how diversion can extend beyond criminal justice agencies through strong partnerships with the youth work sector.

Greece has undergone significant legislative reform in recent years. Amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure, together with new implementing regulations and the National Strategy for the Prevention of Violence and Combatting Youth Delinquency (2025-2030), have considerably strengthened the legal foundations for diversion. Prosecutorial diversion has become the preferred response to misdemeanours, while new community-based educational, cultural and sports programmes have expanded the range of available interventions. Although many of these reforms are still in an early stage of implementation, they demonstrate a clear policy commitment to reducing reliance on formal criminal proceedings and strengthening diversionary responses.

The comparative analysis identifies several important differences between the three diversion systems. First, access to diversion varies considerably. Whereas Ireland offers diversion opportunities at multiple stages of criminal proceedings, diversion in Greece and the Netherlands is primarily limited to the pre-prosecution stage. Second, eligibility criteria differ substantially. The Netherlands restricts diversion largely to designated minor offences, whereas Ireland adopts a considerably broader approach in which diversion may remain available for serious offences and repeat offending where this is considered appropriate. Greece occupies an intermediate position, providing diversion primarily for misdemeanours while leaving prosecutorial discretion for diverting more serious cases.

The report also highlights important differences in the role of restorative justice. All three systems recognise restoration as an important objective, but restorative practices occupy different positions within diversion. Ireland incorporates restorative principles throughout its family conferencing model and victim participation mechanisms. Greece formally includes mediation and reparation among its available reformatory measures, although implementation remains uneven. In the Netherlands, restorative elements are integrated within the Halt intervention but generally function alongside broader educational objectives rather than constituting separate diversion measures.

Across all three jurisdictions, awareness of the importance of maintaining procedural safeguards within diversion is on the rise. Children generally have access to legal assistance, parental involvement and opportunities to participate in decision-making, although differences remain regarding child-friendly information, the practical accessibility of legal representation and the undesirable implications of requiring admissions of responsibility before diversion can be offered. At the same time, determining the appropriate level of procedural safeguards remains a complex balancing exercise. While robust safeguards are essential to protect children's rights, overly formal or burdensome procedures may undermine one of diversion's central objectives: enabling children to be dealt with outside the formal justice system whenever this is in their best interests. Finding an appropriate balance between effective rights protection and preserving the accessibility and informal character of diversion therefore remains an important area for future development.

Despite their institutional differences, the three countries demonstrate a gradual shift away from punitive responses towards rehabilitation, education and social reintegration where children are concerned. Diversion is increasingly viewed not simply as a mechanism for reducing court caseloads, but as a means of promoting children's positive development,

preventing further offending and avoiding the potentially harmful consequences of criminal justice involvement.

The assessment concludes that no single diversion model can be regarded as universally applicable. Effective diversion depends on national legal traditions, institutional structures, available community services and implementation capacity. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis demonstrates considerable potential for mutual learning. Greece's recent legislative reforms, Ireland's extensive community-based diversion infrastructure and the Netherlands' highly standardised implementation each offer valuable practices that may inform future policy development across these jurisdictions and elsewhere.

Building on these findings, the report proposes a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening diversion across Europe. These include expanding access to diversion throughout criminal proceedings where appropriate, adopting more individualised eligibility criteria that move beyond offence-based exclusions, strengthening procedural safeguards and child participation, investing in community-based diversion programmes, improving interagency cooperation and developing broader evaluation frameworks that assess educational, restorative and social outcomes alongside recidivism. Collectively, these recommendations support the continued development of diversion that is effective, child-centred and consistent with international standards on children's rights