

Turning Imabari into a 'welcoming city where children can shine' through its own version of Neuvola

Imabari City



Background

Imabari is located in the northeastern part of Ehime Prefecture, which is almost in the centre of the Seto Inland Sea. It has a population of approximately 148,000 and an area of approximately 420 km². The Setouchi Shimanami Kaido (Sea Route), a famous mecca for cyclists, links the plains around the city centre and the lush, green mountains with the surrounding islands, which boast one of the world's most beautiful archipelagos. The local economy is rich in maritime industries such as shipbuilding and shipping, as well as local industries such as the production of 'Imabari towels', which attracts many people to the city.

The current Imabari City was established on 16 January 2005 as a result of the great municipal mergers of the Heisei Era, and the 20-year anniversary of the merger will be celebrated in January 2025. It was originally a city of about 179,000 people, but with the declining birth rate and the accelerated ageing of the population, it was listed as a 'city at risk of disappearing' according to Japan's future population projections published by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (*hereinafter, referred to as 'IPSS') in 2014. This led to a strong sense of urgency to address the issue of population decline.

Objectives

The city is developing measures to become a city of choice for child-rearing households by implementing

the 'Imabari version of Neuvola', which aims to provide seamless support to all families with children from pregnancy up to age 18, turning Imabari into 'a welcoming city where children can shine.'

Project Outline

'Neuvola', which means 'a place for advice and consultation' in Finnish, is an initiative that aims to support families' physical and mental health from pregnancy up to the period before the child starts school. The Imabari version of Neuvola provides seamless support to all families with children from pregnancy up to age 18. In addition to comprehensive child-rearing support services, child-rearing households are also provided with accompanied consultation support and financial support.

Features and Advancements

Prior to the establishment of the national Children and Families Agency, the child-rearing departments were consolidated through a reorganisation in FY 2022, and the Neuvola Policy Division was established to provide one-stop services for procedural matters, consultations and information dissemination related to child-rearing.

The Child and Family Centre incorporates the maternal and child health care functions of the 'Comprehensive Support Centre for the Child-Rearing Generation' and the 'Development Support Centre', which was formerly part of the Welfare

Department to provide comprehensive support for various concerns as well as consultations regarding children's growth and development.

In terms of tangible aspects, as one of the city's distinctive efforts, Imabari is planning to develop base facilities that will play a central role in child-rearing support for its version of Neuvola. The city aims to make them into 'bases for multi-generational exchange' by integrating the functions of a community exchange centre into these facilities, developing them into landmarks for child-rearing support. At the same time, in order to ensure that Imabari's version of Neuvola child-rearing support is available everywhere in the vast city area, familiar places such as day-care centres, children's centres and parks have been positioned as 'consultation satellites' and 'playground satellites', where information can be provided and consultations can take place as part of ongoing efforts to enhance the environment in which children can be raised safely and happily.

In FY 2024, new 'functional consultation satellites' were established at large shopping complexes, where parents and children can interact and consult with professionals such as public health nurses, midwives and childcare workers. In addition, special play areas for young children called 'Sukusuku Gardens' have been established in parks throughout the city as part of efforts to enhance the 'playground satellites', and park playground equipment is being renovated to ensure that children can play safely. Furthermore, children are actively involved with new park openings, such as having them select the playground equipment and decide the name of the park through voting.

As for intangible measures to provide child-rearing support, the city is taking a multi-faceted approach with innovative initiatives such as the 'All Children Can Attend Preschool System', the first of its kind in Ehime Prefecture, and nation-leading full subsidies for the costs of infertility treatment. Additional measures include the 'Consultation System for Five-Year-Olds' with online screening, the 'Papa and

Mama Smile Health Checkup', which provides parents with a health checkup at the same time as their child's 3-year-old health checkup, and the 'Wood Start Project', which promotes educational activities involving trees to foster a caring spirit for forests and nature through high-quality play experiences.

Results of the Project

As a result of these efforts, as well as the effects of other measures such as migration policies, the city was able to achieve its aim of escaping from the list of 'cities at risk of disappearing' that was published by the Population Strategy Council in April of this year. Also, for the second year in a row, the city won four awards in Takarajimasha's 2024 edition of the 'Best Rural Places to Live Ranking' in the category of cities with a population of 100,000 to 200,000, and was the first city in Ehime Prefecture to win the '5th Japan Child-Rearing Support Award 2024' selected by the Japan Child-Rearing Support Association (General Incorporated Association).

Issues and Response

According to the future population projection released by the IPSS in December last year, the harsh reality that the city's population will fall below 100,000 by 2050 still exists.

However, by further strengthening the city's unique initiatives and continuing to support childbirth and child-rearing throughout society, we believe that this is an opportunity to make Imabari into a city chosen by families with children as a 'child-rearing-friendly town' where the burden of child-rearing is reduced and the fun and joy of it can be experienced.

Future Developments (expected effects, project vision and issues)

Going forward, the city will continue to promote both tangible and intangible measures through providing speedy and detailed child-rearing support and creating local resources such as the Wood Start

Project and the development of Neuvola base facilities and parks in order to create a ‘welcoming city where children can shine’, a place where everyone can feel glad that they raised their children there.

development concerns and so that they and their families can live happily in the community. Developmental tests and coordination services with relevant organisations are provided as needed.



The Imabari♥Neuvola Instagram has quick-to-access, useful information about child-rearing, happily shared by the Neuvola pandas.

URL Reference

<https://www.city.imabari.ehime.jp/neuvola/>

Contact

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Meaning of Terms Used

Comprehensive Support Centre for the Child-Rearing Generation—a consultation agency for pregnant and nursing mothers’ mental and physical anxieties and concerns.

Development Support Centre—an agency providing consultation for people with mental and physical