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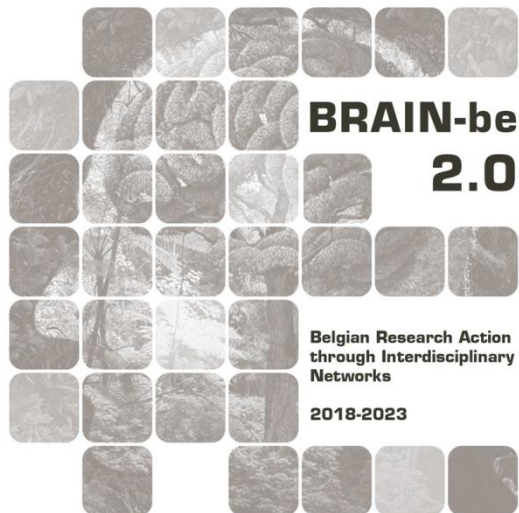
**Belgian Research Action  
through Interdisciplinary  
Networks**

**2018-2023**

## **REFUFAM**

**From Policy Gaps to Policy Innovations. Strengthening the Well-Being and Social Inclusion of Refugee Families.**

Pillar 3: Federal societal challenges



NETWORK PROJECT

## REFUFAM

**From policy gaps to policy innovations. Strengthening the well-being and inclusion pathways of refugee families.**

**Contract - B2/202/P3/REFUFAM**

**FINAL REPORT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the world of ‘immigrant integration’ policies, Belgium represents a complicated case. Competences of migration (e.g. asylum and family reunification), civic integration, and other social policies that directly affect newcomers (e.g. education, work and housing) are divided between federal, regional and municipal governance levels, while support services are dispersed across a range of civil society organizations and state actors. Compared to neighbouring countries like the Netherlands, Germany or France, Belgium’s lack of central coordination has created substantial gaps in policy and support. At the same time, new support practices constantly emerge in the interstices between governments’ competences, which are then, sometimes, transformed into local policies. We know surprisingly little, however, about the effects of Belgium’s complex institutional configuration on the well-being and inclusion pathways of newcomers (i.e. their access to decent housing, durable employment, education, social connections, and well-being).

The REFUFAM consortium addresses this gap by examining the effects of a wide range of government policies on the well-being and inclusion pathways of one particular group of newcomers: refugees and their family members. We conducted interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 109 practitioners (incl. volunteers, social workers, coordinators of municipal policies, etc.). Our interdisciplinary research design consisted of three work packages (WPs): a legal-political WP examining the institutional configuration of Belgium’s of asylum and integration policies; a psychosocial WP analysing refugee family members’ sense of well-being and belonging; and a socio-spatial WP documenting their local inclusion pathways.

The findings provide substantial evidence of a structural discrepancy between the discourse and reality of government policies. Whereas policy-makers constantly emphasise the importance of newcomers’ rapid social inclusion, refugee families encounter numerous barriers that are generated, whether inadvertently or not, by those very policies. It is precisely when refugee families go through particularly challenging periods that they find themselves with very little formal support. This complicates and slows down the social inclusion of refugees and their family members.

### **Keywords**

Refugee families; social inclusion; integration; well-being

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Once asylum seekers receive international protection in Belgium, they enter an intense period of rapid change. They are expected to leave the reception centre and find housing within a maximum of two months (with the possibility of extending this period twice with one month), to register in the municipality, start their civic integration programme, enrol their children in school, open a bank account, and, more generally, find out how to access the relevant public services. Suddenly, they need to learn the language, attend social orientation courses, follow a counselling programme to help them find work and, in Flanders, participate in a programme that fosters their social network. For the refugee families themselves, the priority is often finding housing (Beeckmans & Geldof 2024) and starting to work on family reunification (Debruyne 2024). Due to the difficulty of finding decent, affordable housing, many refugee families move house multiple times after their recognition, which means that many of these tasks need to be done all over again, as quickly as possible. The contrast could not be much starker between these demands and the excruciatingly slow process of awaiting a decision on their asylum application.

It is astonishing that refugee families – which in this project we understand as families in which at least one person has received international protection, either as a recognised refugee or via humanitarian protection – receive little support in this challenging period of transition. Public services provide little practical guidance on finding housing, starting the family reunification process or handling other obligations. There is no integral case management (Carlier et al 2025; Groeninck et al 2025). Instead, refugee families find themselves caught between various levels of policies and different service providers, each of which have their own way of working and which, at times, work towards contradictory goals. While some policy domains try to improve newcomers' social participation (e.g. equal opportunities), others try to exclude them as long as possible from the welfare state (e.g. housing). The current Federal government agreement (2024-2029) has announced plans to extend this exclusion even further: people with humanitarian protection status in particular are at risk of long-term exclusion from a wide range of social rights (Vandevoordt et al 2025; Debruyne 2025).

In addition, refugee families encounter major discrepancies in the quality of service and level of expertise within public service providers, between providers in the same area, and even more so between municipalities with varying local social policies. The universal support, which they should, in principle, have access to, is hidden in a maze in which even the country's most privileged citizens struggle to find their way.

In addition to working papers, policy reports and academic articles and book chapters, we have published our findings in two main sets of output. First, in ten Policy Briefs, we describe in detail how and why a wide range of government policies targeting newcomers seem to fall short in achieving some of their major goals. We put forward more than 100 recommendations on how policies and public services could be organised in a way that is both more efficient and effective. Second, in the book 'Refugee families after recognition', we invite readers to tread in the footsteps of refugee families as they enter the labyrinth of Belgian policies and public services. Whereas the policy briefs detail the technical aspects of policy-making, the book engages with the life-worlds and lived experiences of refugee families themselves. They point towards the same conclusion: the reception of refugee families can be done in a more efficient, more effective and more humane way. And that would benefit everyone.

## 2. STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES

### 2.1 The contested concept of immigrant ‘integration’

Academic definitions of ‘immigrant integration’ typically conceive of the concept as a two-way process in which both newcomers and the host society undergo a process of mutual transformation (e.g. Ager & Strang 2008; Alba & Nee 2014; Berry 1992; Gryzmala-Kazłowska & Phillimore 2018). In practice, however, most empirical research on integration tends to monitor the ‘performances’ and ‘beliefs’ (e.g. on views on the relation between state and religion, or on gender equality) of specific groups of newcomers – i.e. those hailing from the global south – on a number of formal indicators: employment rate, language proficiency, success in passing Civic Integration tests, educational achievements, and their so-called cultural norms and values (e.g. views on the relation between the state and religion, or on gender equality). In other words, as soon as integration is effectively used in policy-oriented research, its meaning shifts from a two-way process into a unilateral one, and its gaze is narrowed to the actions and beliefs of only one set of actors.

This is remarkable because ‘integration’ emerged as a progressive ideal that was inspired by the American model of a nation borne of immigration and diversity – what Adrian Favell (2022) describes as the paradigmatic ‘integration nation’. In this context, ‘integration’ stood in opposition to policies of racialised ‘segregation. It symbolised a modern project that would embrace diversity once and for all.

Over the past 20 to 30 years, however, integration has come to be used as a synonym for the one-sided assimilation of a specific group of newcomers into the host society. This reflects a general trend in West-European policies, as they moved away from models of multiculturalism, minority rights and republicanism, and took a turn towards neoliberal and neo-communitarian ideas (Van Houdt & Schinkel 2013; Joppke 2007) The responsibility to ‘integrate’ is shifted almost exclusively to newcomers themselves, who are expected to become economically self-reliant (i.e. generate their own income instead of attracting social benefits) and to formally prove their cultural assimilation (i.e. to have internalised the norms, values and language of the host society).

In this context, the word ‘integration’ does several things. First, it renders invisible the role policies of the host society, both in terms of its policies and in terms of the structural features of, for instance, its labour market and educational system (Phillimore 2021). In much policy-oriented research, for instance, newcomers’ achievements on the labour market are typically compared to the benchmark of a supposedly homogenous population of established citizens, while the flexibility and openness of the labour market to newcomers (e.g. due to formal language requirements or the accreditation of foreign educational degrees) typically remains out of view.

Second, framing the ‘problem’ as one of ‘integration’ obfuscates the question of who needs to integrate and why. On the one hand, there is a widespread assumption that only certain groups of newcomers need to ‘integrate’: while, for instance, white American citizens are free from such expectations, the opposite applies to non-European immigrants from the global South. On the other hand, ‘integration’ usually portrays host societies as homogeneous entities in which the average of the established population (e.g. in terms of employment rate) and the dominant cultural beliefs are conceived as an undisputed norm. This contrasts starkly with the reality of superdiversity both within and beyond the metropolis (Vertovec 2023).

Third, the cause of any failures of ‘integration’ are usually ascribed to newcomers’ lack of economic independence; knowledge and skills. This diverts attention from the structural inequalities and systemic racisms that are still at play in West-European states. The image that emerges is not one in which the process of ‘integration’ leads to a society in which newcomers and oldcomers live together

in relative equality, but rather the opposite: it projects a society in which newcomers themselves are seen as a problem that needs to be fixed. If the mere presence of newcomers is construed as the main problem, their efforts are bound to be in vain. Hence it makes perfect sense that in recent years, more and more children and grandchildren of immigrants have raised the question: when will they, if ever, be considered 'integrated' enough?

The critiques of the concept of 'integration' - and the policy-oriented research conducted with it - have increasingly taken flight (Favell 2019). In the REFUFAM project, we tried to take a different path. Rather than monitoring the performances and beliefs of newcomers, which would then be explained through their individual characteristics (such as nationality, class, gender, educational level,...), we set out to examine the actual effects of policies on the lives of refugee families, which we then traced back to the choices that were made by local, regional and federal policy-makers.

Translating such a research strategy into clear concepts is always a challenge. Every choice of words has its blind spots and drawbacks. Yet some words may help us to adopt a different perspective. In the REFUFAM project, we chose to use 'inclusion pathways' as the main analytical concept. This refers to the trajectories through which refugee families try to find access to decent housing, durable work, education, well-being and social connection.

The shift is subtle but substantial: rather than measuring the performance and assessing the beliefs of refugee families, we examine the obstacles they encounter in their search for housing, education, work, and social connection. In contrast to how 'integration' is often imagined, there is little 'straight' or 'predictable' about these pathways. The families we spoke with often described the time immediately after their recognition as one of multiple detours, interruptions and breakthroughs. Sometimes they are slowed down, sometimes they need to catch their breath.

As mentioned above, these inclusion pathways need to be understood against the broader backdrop of policies and public services. In the REFUFAM project, we focus on gaps in policies and in support. *Policy gaps* are located in between the objectives of formal integration policies and the reality in which refugee families try to find their way to work, housing, education and society at large. While policies, for instance, may prioritise the economic self-reliance of newcomers, the combination of, amongst other things, a narrow focus on quickly finding any work at all with strict language requirements in the labour market, in reality lead to a vicious cycle of precarious employment and unemployment (Groeninck et al 2025). Policy gaps such as these are the main subject of our Policy Briefs.

In the book, we focus primarily on gaps in support: the lack of integral and transversal forms of guidance at crucial steps in refugee families' integration trajectories. Although it is widely known, for instance, that a lack of stable housing undermines people's ability to learn a new language, find work and ensure that children do and feel well at school, there are hardly any policies that aim to provide even temporary housing to refugee families after their recognition. In this book, we zoom in on what effects such a lack of transversal support have on refugee families themselves, and how it obstructs their inclusion pathways.

Lastly, REFUFAM decided to zoom in on refugee families as a specific group of newcomers. Again, this was a conscious choice. By focusing on *families*, we wanted to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges parents and children are facing, and how the barriers to their inclusion affect the well-being of different family members. This also helped us to approach refugees and their family members through a social role that matters to them. This contrasts with most policy-oriented research, which tends to measure and monitor the performances and beliefs of newcomers on an aggregated group level that is not necessarily meaningful to newcomers themselves (i.e. as members of a certain nationality, ethnicity, class or gender).

By focusing on *refugees*, we sought to identify gaps in support and policy that are encountered by a wider group of newcomers - and, to some extent, established citizens - yet which are arguably more pronounced in the case of this particular group. In other words, it helps to make visible problems that are most likely experienced by broader groups as well. Together with their families, for instance, refugees are faced with a particularly abrupt transition as subjects of different governance levels (from Federal reception during their asylum application to local and regional welfare and integration policies). In addition, refugees are typically at risk of high degrees of psychosocial stress (Derluyn 2023) which can be exacerbated by policies that seek to 'responsibilize' newcomers before providing them access to basic forms of support. And as a publicly contested group of newcomers, as they usually come from the Global South and are subject to negative political framing, they are more likely to face experiences of discrimination on ethnic and racial grounds.

## 2.2 Objectives

REFUFAM sought to address the following **main research question**: How do government policies affect the inclusion pathways of refugee families? This consisted of **3 sub-questions**: a) Which critical gaps in support do refugee families encounter after receiving international protection; b) How are these gaps in support related to gaps in policies; and c) which innovative practices of support emerge in the interstices of government policies and public services?

By addressing these research questions, REFUFAM builds on and bridges several literatures that usually remained rather disconnected. First, there is a significant body of work on the multi-level governance of 'immigrant integration' in Belgium, most of which examines the relations between state actors (Boussetta et al 2018; Vandermeerschen et al 2024; Westerveen & Adam 2019) and/or civil society actors (Mescoli & Roblain 2021; Vandevoordt 2019). Most of this work is firmly rooted within an international agenda of examining multi-level governance in the context of migration (Scholten & Penninx 2016). Second, research examining the well-being of refugees and their family members have recently shifted from strictly psychological and psychiatric approaches that emphasise trauma towards exploring the effects of post-migration factors (e.g. separation of family members, access to social networks, living conditions) on refugees' psychosocial well-being (Çolak 2022; Derluyn & Broekaert 2007; Groeninck et al 2019, 2020; Ryan et al 2008). In identifying these post-migration factors, it has proven crucial to adopt a longitudinal approach allowing researchers to trace the impact of changes in refugees' family status, social networks and living conditions (Vervliet et al 2015). Third, a variety of specialised literatures have addressed the access of newcomers to specific 'functional' domains of 'integration': housing, education and work. Several studies have shown that refugees in Belgium, as in other West-European countries, have less access to housing (Beeckmans and Geldof 2024), work (OECD 2023; Rea et al 2014) and education (Koehler and Schneider 2019) than the more established parts of the Belgian population.

What is generally lacking, however, is a systematic analysis of how these different dynamics are interrelated (Vandermeerschen et al 2024): how are specific groups of newcomers such as refugee families confronted with the support gaps that are produced by complicated governance structures? What is the impact of these support gaps? And where and how do innovative practices emerge?

To address these questions, the REFUFAM project proceeded in 3 steps: to complement the literature on the governance, we conducted a legal-institutional analysis of policy practices that were put in place to welcome temporarily displaced from the Ukraine; to examine the impact of gaps in policy and support on the well-being and social relations of refugee families, we drew on a variety of qualitative methods to engage with members of refugee families; and to examine the support practices that emerged in specific localities, we drew on similar qualitative methods to examine the perspectives of refugee families and practitioners alike.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

As the REFUFAM project sought to trace the connections between the three different fields of policy, well-being and inclusion, we adopted a multidisciplinary research design that was structured around a wide range of qualitative methods. Each of the 3 'work packages' (WP) adopted methods and perspectives that were tailored to specific disciplines: a legal-institutional analysis of governance structures; an anthropological approach to psychosocial well-being; and a socio-spatial approach to social inclusion. The key thread tying these WPs together was a shared research strategy of examining how policies work in practice and which effects they generate for the people involved through adopting a bottom-up perspective. More concretely, the methodological basis of each WP consists of in-depth interviews with refugee families and/or street-level practitioners, which is complemented with a variety of methods in each WP.

#### 3.1 Laws and institutions

As part of work package 1 (WP1), four methodologies were used. Firstly, a *literature review* was conducted at the start of the REFUFAM research project in order to gain an understanding of the available research on the topic of refugee integration and the identified (policy) obstacles to their inclusion. This literature study focused on policy reports from governmental actors as well as reports published by (inter)national organizations and civil society actors. In terms of scope, particular attention was paid to the policy domains of housing, education and employment. Considering the interdisciplinary approach of the REFUFAM project, relevant interlinkages between policy domains as well as policy levels were studied and taken note of.

Secondly, 28 *semi-structured interviews* were conducted among practitioners working in the domains of housing, education, employment as well as diversity and integration policy more broadly. As part of WP1, the interviews were concentrated on (local) government actors within these respective domains. For this reason, multiple employees at local OCMW and VDAB offices were interviewed. Within the domain of education, the focus was placed on secondary schools as a way to gain insight into the practical implementation of the OKAN program. On housing, various actors were interviewed since this domain does not lay with one single actors. For this purpose, municipal officers, civil society, OCMW employees as well as employees of social housing agencies were interviewed to gain insight into the local workings. The interviews were semi-structures, meaning that the interviews were carried out on the basis of a list of topics that were addressed during the interviews. If the interviewee agreed, the interview was recorded and transcribed using Sonix software.

Thirdly, a *policy analysis* was carried out in the context of WP1 to gain insight into the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in Flemish housing, employment, education and integration policies. For this purpose, the database of the Flemish parliament was consulted in order to filter out relevant documents for analysis. The search in the database covers documents published between 1 February 2022 and 31 March 2025. An initial search was carried out using the search term "*tijdelijk ontheemd*". Based on the results under this search terms, documents concerning housing, employment, education and integration policy were selected for analysis. A second search was then carried out using the term "*Oekraïne*". Relevant documents found under this second search term were used to complement the selection of documents obtained under the first search term. The type of documents obtained varied widely, ranging from plenary and committee meeting reports to (written) questions from parliamentary members and legislative proposals. The policy documents were analysed in Nvivo, where both policy justifications as well as comparisons between persons with temporary protection and other social groups (oftentimes persons seeking/ with an international protection status) were highlighted. Where needed, the parliamentary documents were complemented by Task Force progress reports, VLOT-flits newsletters and circulars (*omzendbrieven*), to gain a more in-depth understanding of the (practical) implementation of policy changes in the

context of the activation of the TPD in Flanders. The analysed Task Force progress reports, VLOT-flits newsletters and circulars cover the same time period as the policy documents obtained in the Flemish parliaments' database, meaning that the documents were published between 1 February 2022 and 31 March 2025.

Lastly, a *case law analysis* was carried out to gain insight into judgements concerning differentiation practices regarding access to housing. For this purpose, both EU as well as Belgian case law from the Belgian Constitutional Court were consulted. In the HUDOC database of the European Court of Human Rights, a search was carried out for cases concerning a possible violation of Art. 14, more specifically relating to discrimination on the basis of immigration status. In the CURIA database of the European Court of Justice, a search was carried out under the subject matter "non-discrimination", with a specific focus on cases concerning indirect discrimination on the basis of racial and ethnic origin. Lastly, in the case law database of the Belgian Constitutional court, relevant case law was collected on questions of non-discrimination in the migration context as well as access to housing and/or material aid.

### **3.2 Well-being and social connections**

Work Package 2 attempts to understand the impact of Belgian migration and integration governance on refugee families' psycho-social well-being and their access to core domains of integration such as work, education and housing. This was structured around five key components. First, we interviewed 20 experts from a variety of backgrounds (lawyers, social workers, academics, etc.) for an exploratory mapping of key barriers to refugee families' social inclusion. Second, 23 street-level practitioners, both in a formal and informal capacity - including social workers, administrators, volunteers, legal guardians, experience experts, and (mental) health workers - were identified through prior research and interviewed in depth. These actors, each in their own way, had had a major positive impact on refugee families' sense of well-being in Flanders and Brussels (so-called 'good practices'). By focusing on their embodiment of practices, tactics, ways of doing and performing in their encounter with newcomers, and policy and control, we gained insights in their capacity of care.

Third, these actors facilitated access to 29 refugee families (37 individuals across 33 interviews) in Flanders and Brussels. The majority of them arrived in Belgium between 2015-2022. They originated from Palestine (7), Afghanistan (6), Syria (6), Eritrea (1), Rwanda (1), Morocco (2), Somalia (2), and Turkey (4). In terms of migratory experience as a family, 10 went through a process of family reunification, of which four had an unaccompanied minor as applicant. Fourth, among these 29 interviewed families, 16 were concentrated within three suburban municipalities in Flanders, in a density of between 3 to 7 families per locality. The municipalities were chosen based on their situatedness in the immediate surrounding of one of the three largest cities in Flanders, which are Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels. Through interviews and mapping exercises in these local case studies, the research traced the pathways of support, care, and well-being, identifying both meaningful interventions and systemic absences or frictions. Additional interviews with 11 relevant actors, both present and absent in families' support networks, provided further insights.

Finally, a fifth pillar involved ethnographic participant observation for a period of six to ten months (2022-23) in each of these three local case studies. The main researcher, Mieke Groenick, became a personal volunteer (a 'buddy') for a family in each of these municipalities. She accompanied them to official and social services, practiced their language skills, joined them to activities, and assisted in practical and administrative 'inter-Belgian migrations' when they (had to) move(d).

All interviews were transcribed and along with the fieldnotes inductively encoded using Nvivo. Building on the principles of thematic analysis, the ever larger categories of coding ended up providing insights along a logic of grounded theory into how various domains, policies and practices of 'integration' were considered (in)accessible and (un)satisfying, and how they related to emic

conceptualizations of (un)well-being, as well as into the maneuverings, tactics and risks on its pursuits and pathways.

### **3.3 Social milieux and inclusion pathways**

The methodology used in this work package combines several qualitative methods, in combination with an analysis that emphasised socio-spatial processes. Three contexts have been investigated, in three 2 Belgian regions, where reception and inclusion issues do not take the same form: Bruxelles, as a metropolitan city, and two small towns, one in Flanders and one in Wallonia. More concretely, we conducted: 1) in-depth interviews with 35 members of refugee families, zooming in on their life stories; 2) 18 in-depth interviews with local practitioners; 3) a workshop with newcomers involved in local 'integration' services (3 workshops with 25 participants); and 4) a workshop with local practitioners (1 workshop with 9 participants).

#### 4. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In theory, Belgium's reception and civic integration policies are neatly streamlined with a clear division of tasks between different government services. As a Federal agency, Fedasil is responsible for organising the reception and guidance of applicants for international protection during their procedure, in close cooperation with partners in their reception network and municipalities. Once refugees and their family members are granted protected status, regional governments become responsible for their civic integration trajectory which emphasises refugees' plight to learn the local language, find work and build social networks. Everything else that relates to their broader 'integration' process principally falls under the competence of municipalities and cities. It could not be much clearer.

Unfortunately, in practice, things seem to be a bit more complicated. Refugee families end up in a maze of poorly aligned policy domains that are implemented by a wide range of formal and informal support actors. In Flanders, for example, the Agencies for Integration and Civic Integration are tasked with connecting certain policy domains such as language and employment. Yet other policy domains, such as housing, education and well-being, remain largely isolated from the civic integration policies that are implemented by these very agencies.

In refugee families' life-worlds, these domains are nonetheless intrinsically linked; when they need to move several times to find a stable place to live, this has far-reaching consequences on their ability to find work, pursue education, and build a social network (Beeckmans & Geldof 2024; Wyckaert et al 2020). For families with young children, these interrupted housing pathways force children to start all over again repeatedly in a new school and a new place. Even relatively simple things like registering in the municipality so that the civic integration trajectory can start and families can access other public services are thus needlessly delayed. In other words, the compartmentalisation of all these policy domains creates numerous barriers and detours in the inclusion trajectories of refugee families (van den Boogaard 2021).

What seems simple on paper turns out to be extraordinarily complex in practice. In Belgium, policies are divided between federal, regional and local governments, which is complemented by a strong autonomy for municipalities and cities – although this autonomy is not necessarily supported by adequate structural funding. This leads to substantial local differences in the extent to which refugee families receive support, who provides it, and what expertise public service providers have to work with different groups of newcomers.

This institutional complexity generates gaps in policy and support for refugee families. First, these gaps are situated between the objectives of civic integration policies and the reality in which refugee families try to find their way to work, housing, education and society at large. While policies, for instance, may prioritise the economic self-reliance of newcomers, the combination of, amongst other things, a narrow focus on quickly finding any work at all with strict language requirements in the labour market leading to precarious rather than durable employment. Perhaps it is then no coincidence that Belgium still scores relatively low compared to other OECD countries in terms of the sustainable employment of newcomers (OECD 2023).

Second, there seems to be a lack of integral and transversal forms of guidance at crucial steps in refugee families' inclusion pathways. In some situations, this is due to the poor alignment of certain policy domains, yet in others it is the effect of policy choices to raise the barriers for newcomers. Although it is widely known, for instance, that a lack of stable housing undermines people's ability to learn a new language, find work and ensure that children do and feel well at school, there are hardly any policies that aim to provide even temporary housing to refugee families after their recognition. Together, both types of policy gaps produce policies that contradict their central aims: to organise an

efficient reception and civic integration policy that effectively strengthens refugee families' self-reliance and social participation.

These complex, contradictory policies force refugee families and their supports to come up with creative modes of organisation, cooperation and assistance. Immigrants who have already been settled in Belgium for a longer period, volunteer groups (Carlier, forthcoming), civil society organisations (Vandevoordt 2019) and local authorities continue to improvise support for refugee families when they need it. They guide them through the maze of government services, translate the meaning of difficult-to-read documents, support them in their search for housing (d'Eer et al 2019), register the children in school, foster social bonds (Derluyn 2023) and so on. Much of this front-line support is unpaid or, at most, benefits from temporary, project-based funding. In spite of all the reforms of the 'integration sector' in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels alike, this improvised 'bricolage' (Phillimore et al 2021; Debruyne 2024) of formal and informal assistance still plays a crucial role in the actual reception and inclusion of refugee families and other newcomers alike. As a result, the pace and direction of refugee families' inclusion pathways depends heavily on where they happen to end up, and whom they meet.

The reception of temporarily displaced persons from the Ukraine shows how newcomers can be received and included in a different way. In response to the EU's activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, for instance, ensuring people's access to accommodation and education was prioritised before gradually turning towards socio-economic activation and civic integration. In addition, numerous collaborations emerged between local, regional and federal government actors, as well as NGOs and individual citizens. While we should not blindly romanticise this exceptional set of policies, they clearly offer a vantage point from which we can rethink regular reception and inclusion policies.

In our ten policy briefs we draw on both original and existing scholarly research to document the effects of current policies on the inclusion of refugee families. We also point to several innovative practices of support. In total, we offer **more than 100 recommendations**. Below, we synthesise the main findings, innovative practices, and recommendations on 5 transversal topics that are most relevant across multiple levels (e.g. municipal, regional and federal) and domains (e.g. housing, employment, education) of governance. These include: 4.1 the gap between Federal reception and regional integration competences (§4.1); the fragmented nature of reception policies in Flanders (§4.2), Wallonia and Brussels (§4.3), the lessons learned from policy responses to persons with temporary protection status from Ukraine (§4.4), and the significance of housing as a stepping stone for social inclusion (§4.5).

## **4.1 From International Protection To Inclusion<sup>1</sup>**

### **4.1.1 Policy**

After receiving protected status, refugees must leave the accommodation provided to them by Fedasil and/or its partners within two months (renewable once).<sup>2</sup> In this period, they find themselves in between policies that are organised on different levels. As applicants for international protection, they were subject to the Federal government, while as refugees they become subject to integration policies that are organised by the regions, communities and municipalities. In Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, **their registration in the formal integration trajectory can only start once they have taken up residence in a specific municipality.**

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was written by: Louise Carlier, Mathieu Berger, Giacomo Orsini and Robin Vandevoordt.

<sup>2</sup> The families we met had arrived before the current reception crisis. The difficulties that we raise in this Policy Brief are most likely to be amplified for families that arrived later.

On a practical level, we know that social workers embedded in (Federal) reception centres, and those embedded in CPAS/OCMW<sup>3</sup> have neither the adequate resources nor the formal responsibility to guide refugee families through this early phase of the integration trajectory. While social workers embedded in Local Accommodation Initiatives (LAIs/LOIs) – small-scale housing funded by the Federal level and managed by CPAS/OCMW and/or NGOs – had a more substantial responsibility to guide refugee families in this transitional period, the Federal government has dramatically decreased their numbers over the past few years, and they also seem to lack the resources needed to accomplish this mission.<sup>4</sup>

**As a result, refugee families' access to institutional support is lowest at a moment that is particularly crucial for an adequate start of their integration trajectory.** Instead of taking a jumpstart, they find themselves spending their time and energy on navigating Belgium's complicated institutional landscape<sup>5</sup> to address their elementary needs: housing, the safety of their family, and their access to social rights more generally. In addition, the quality and quantity of the support they receive varies greatly, and their ability to find it is often a matter of sheer luck. As a result, **these first steps on their integration trajectories are governed in a way that is neither efficient nor effective.**

#### 4.1.2 The 'chance' of finding support

Once applicants for International Protection receive a positive decision on their application, they tend to have two priorities: 1) finding an official place of residence, so that they can gain access to public services and to their social rights; and 2) starting and completing a procedure for family reunification, so that their closest relatives are safe. As long as these priorities are not addressed, they often cannot fully embark on their integration trajectories for administrative and/or psychosocial reasons - See the Policy Briefs 5 and 10 on Housing and on Family Reunification.

While this transitional phase between applying for International Protection and the effective start of their integration trajectories appears to be crucial, it is precisely then that refugees and their families struggle to find access to public services.

**How easily people find access to either informal or formal support depends on three factors.** A first factor is the **contact language, especially** for persons who do not master any of the official languages, and who have not had enough time to master the local language - see Policy Brief 9 on Language & Public Services. Although some municipalities and CPAS/OCMW use a translation service, this practice is not very widespread. Our interlocutors mentioned the need to find someone to translate all the administrative documents they receive (for schools, medical care, registration with the municipality and CPAS/OCMW...), explain the procedures, help them "fill in the paperwork", guide them to institutions, accompany them to appointments and act as a relay with both landlords and administrations.

Before the first year, you need someone to translate (...) because the first year is difficult, there are a lot of letters, you need someone to explain. (Syrian mother, 2.12.2022)

The families we spoke with often mentioned that **volunteers** played a crucial role in offering support and translation in these early stages. And refugees themselves, over time, tend to act as volunteers for newcomers experiencing the same difficulties as they did. The Syrian mother from the quote above, for instance, regularly acted as a voluntary translator for newly arriving families, eight years after her own arrival in Belgium.

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<sup>3</sup> See the Belspo study [Services pour les primo-arrivants dans les CPAS belges: enseignements pour la politique générale](#)

<sup>4</sup>See Fedasil (2025) [Réseau d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile en Belgique](#). There were 6014 places in January 2020; 4534 in January 2024. See also the report from Myria [La migration en chiffres et en droits](#).

<sup>5</sup> Vandermeerschen, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J-M., & De Cuyper, P. (Eds). (2023). Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system. Leuven

It should also be noted that in Brussels, language difficulties seem to be less pronounced due to the multilingual nature of the city. As explained by a Syrian father,

Here in Brussels it's not difficult to find someone who speaks Arabic everywhere. At the municipality you find someone who speaks Arabic. At the CPAS, too. It's very difficult, but I did the paperwork almost by myself. (Syrian father, 06.03.2024)

A **second factor** shaping refugee families' access to support is the **social environment of the reception centres** in which they reside during their application. On the one hand, refugee families who reside in reception centres that are located in major cities such as Brussels, find relatively easy access to a range formal and informal actors that operate within the local area proximity.

In addition, refugee families who were sheltered in **urban centres** during the application already had the opportunity to identify the administrations they will need to go to, to follow language courses, and to develop informal contacts.

We were almost integrated into Belgian society before we took out the papers. There's a lot we know because we lived at the Red Cross here. (Palestinian mother, 02.12.2022)

On the other hand, refugee families who had been living in **isolated reception centres, find it more difficult to start their integration trajectories**, as they are both far from the institutions they need to go to for their formalities, and have not yet had the opportunity to forge the social ties that can make up for the lack of formal support. Families we met evoked the absence of language courses or of training, the difficulties in terms of mobility, and the feeling of social isolation.

A **third factor** shaping refugee families' access to support, is the **absence or presence of "informed" peers or volunteers** in their immediate surroundings, on whom they can rely to support them in their search for **housing, family reunification**, and in taking important **administrative steps**.

The first year was very difficult, but when I met Mrs D., my neighbour, life started to get easier. Because I always need information. She always helps me. (Syrian mother, 21.11.22)

The **role of pioneers** – i.e., persons who have already settled as immigrants themselves - must also be highlighted: they guide families towards NGO's that can help them, they accompany families to appointments, they translate between them and government institutions, and they explain to refugee families what their legal rights and obligations are.

Our research shows that **families who were unable to count on such support from volunteers and pioneers, find it much more difficult to get through the transition phase**. An Afghan family of 7 persons, who arrived in 2018 after a very long family reunification procedure, lived during the transition phase in a studio flat, with no income. 'We stayed 8 months with no money, nothing, no one to help us' (interview with Afghan family, 23.12.2022). They didn't know any volunteers, and experienced a multitude of problems in taking up their social rights.

Another factor that could improve families' ability to navigate the institutional landscape during the period of transition is the **possibility of attending integration courses during the application for international protection**, as highlighted during a workshop with refugee families:

[The integration course] should be from the moment you arrive, it would be much more interesting because it allows you to function and know where you're going, and understand a lot of things that we only understand now. (Refugee in the integration program, 01.03.2023)

### 4.1.3 innovative practices

In Brussels, where the network of associations is more developed, **some NGOs have specialised in offering support to refugee families during this transitional phase**. Convivial, for example, offers transversal support in refugee families' mother tongue, even before they leave the reception centre. After an initial interview to identify needs, they support them in finding accommodation, starting up administrative steps, and family reunification.

**To find housing**, these associations act as mediators (by calling landlords, accompanying people during visits and the signing of lease contracts, and by setting up networks of landlords). And they support families financially by ensuring a rental guarantee for the first month's rent. For the most vulnerable families, they offer access to transit housing (see Policy Brief 5 on Housing).

They support refugee families in taking the necessary **administrative hurdles** such as registering with the CPAS/OCMW and the municipality, and initiating contact with health care providers, banks, schools, etc. They typically work in partnership with around 160 CPAS-OCMWs. Some NGOs (e.g., Convivial) also support families in **during family reunification procedures** and more general forms of **information about legal procedures**.

Caritas is developing similar projects as Convivial, **combining transit housing for vulnerable families with transversal support during the transition phase**. This support extends across several months, to enable a smoother transition, in several Belgian cities. In Brussels, Singa offers accommodation that is shared between refugee families and settled citizens, and trains "admin buddies" who support people in all their administrative tasks (understanding and completing documents, accompanying them to appointments, etc.).

### 4.1.4 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For the **Ministries and Departments of Housing** in the Regions of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, as well as the Federal **State Secretary of Asylum and Migration** and **Fedasil**:

- Invest in a **"transit infrastructure"** for refugee families when leaving Fedasil's reception network. As this is a crucial phase to start up their integration trajectory, this should include guidance through Belgium's institutional complexity information about their rights, and support to find housing. The **social workers** involved in these transit infrastructures **should act as intermediaries** with local (i.e. CPAS/OCMW) and regional (AGII, CRI, BAPA) public services, with whom they will have to register as soon as they have an address;

For the Federal **State Secretary of Asylum and Migration** and **Fedasil**:

- **Appoint one social worker in each reception centre who has a responsibility to provide "exit support"** which includes facilitating contact with local and regional public services;
- **Increase and stabilize the ILA/LOI network**, as proposed by CPAS/OCMW's<sup>6</sup> ;
- **Increase the length of time of accommodation of refugee families in ILAs/LOIs**, and ensure they receive support in finding housing and administrative procedures;

For the Regional Agencies and Ministries of Integration in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders:

- Enable applicants for international protection to **participate in civic integration courses during their application**.

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<sup>6</sup> See [the letter that the federation of CPAS addressed to the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration](#).

### For Municipalities and CPAS/OCMW:

- Invest time and resources into **formal collaborations between the CPAS/OCMW and the various actors involved in the reception of refugees**, to ensure better coordination of support during the transition phase;
- Ensure **translation services** for families who do not speak the national languages, at least in the first year after receiving international protection, to help them understand administrative formalities and facilitate their relations with local services (municipalities, CPAS/OCMW, mutual health insurance...) – see Policy Brief 9 on Language & Public Services.

## 4.2 Towards An Integrated Reception in Flanders<sup>7</sup>

### 4.2.1 Policy

Flemish integration policies are regulated by the Decree of 7 June 2013, which introduced a mandatory programme of civic integration for people receiving international protection and other target groups. Since the amendments of 2022 and 2023, this civic integration programme consist of the following components: (1) a social Orientation programme; (2) a fee-paying Dutch as a Second Language (NT2) training package; (3) employment coaching through registration with the VDAB or Actiris in Brussels; and (4) a 40-hour participation and networking programme, which is not compulsory for those who are working or studying.

With the exception of these four pillars of the integration programme, the competence for local integration policy has been transferred to the cities and municipalities. In other words, Flanders provides guidelines and support, but also offers “the greatest possible policy freedom to the cities and municipalities”. The rationale behind the local management role of cities and municipalities is that this would increase the accessibility of services, as they are “closest to the citizen”. To this end, local authorities are also supported in organising an Integrated Comprehensive Reception service covering the range of local social assistance and services for all their citizens, including OCMWs, CAWs and recognised social work services of the health insurance funds.

The new Flemish Coalition Agreement promises to work towards an ‘ambitious social cohesion plan’ focusing on the Dutch language, employment and education, with the aim of providing ‘integrated support’ for newcomers under the coordination of the Agency for Civic Integration and Integration, in collaboration with the VDAB and Actiris, local authorities and public social welfare centres. However, our research shows that current policy practices are still a long way from achieving this. In her recent policy paper on Integration and Civic Integration, Minister for Home Affairs Hilde Crevits provides for ‘additional support’ for those who need it after obtaining the civic integration certificate. This support would be ‘delivered by the regular services and facilities’, and would be trialled and evaluated through pilot schemes.

### 4.2.2 A fragmented reception

These policy objectives address a problem faced by many refugee families and frontline workers. Our findings show that **comprehensive support and a widely accessible reception system for refugee families are not yet a reality**. They often fail to find the right support, or do so too late, causing their integration process to be unnecessarily delayed. To tackle this problem effectively, it is crucial to paint a nuanced picture of the current **fragmentation of frontline support services** in Flanders, and the consequences this has for refugee families and public service providers.

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<sup>7</sup> This chapter was written by Mieke Groeninck, Dirk Geldof, Giacomo Orsini & Robin Vandevordt.

Once people leave the Local Accommodation Initiative, my colleagues and I tell the residents: “The support I’m currently providing will be split up. You’ll have to do a lot yourself, but you’ll probably also have a social worker from the OCMW, someone from the AgII, someone from the VDAB, and perhaps a network coach as well.” This is very confusing for people; we are very bureaucratic. We’re very strict about the idea that ‘for this, you need to go to that department, and for that, you need to go to the other department.’ And on top of that, it often varies from one local authority to another. (Employee of a Municipal public service organisation, 14.11.2022).

To illustrate the **complexity** of the current support and services, we will examine in more detail the **case of a family** that was supported by the first author of this chapter as a mentor throughout their integration process. This case brings together a range of barriers that we frequently encountered in conversations with refugee families and frontline workers.

The family still has limited language skills and has two children, one of whom has a disability. The parents have been attending Dutch language classes for some time, but due to their age and limited experience with education in their country of origin, their progress is slow. Only their teenage son speaks Dutch fluently at the time we meet. In municipality X, they had a social worker from the OCMW, although they did not receive social security benefits but only an income through the health insurance fund. As they could not find accommodation in municipality X, they moved to municipality Y on the other side of the country, where they were able to rent a property through relatives; however, this was not suitable for a family with a disabled child.

This family **did not receive timely professional support in:**

- a) **finding a new school for the son**, despite the mother’s repeated requests for help to the school and to the social worker from the municipality of X. They were too late to use the central enrolment system in the municipality of Y. As a volunteer, I contacted the CLB in the municipality of X, but we received no help from them either. In August, the son and his mother visited several schools on foot in municipality Y. At one school, they were given a telephone number for the new CLB, who provided him with a list of schools they should ring. Eventually, he found a school, without knowing which course he could or wanted to follow there. That school turned out to be a 1.5-hour bus journey away.
- b) **finding new day care for the child with a disability**. Despite requests for help in this regard to the day care centre in municipality X, I had to follow this up as a volunteer for months from 40 km away in municipality Y. Potential new schools only contacted me because they had no one else’s telephone number. The social worker from municipality X and a staff member from the childcare centre in municipality X had informed me that the family had to arrange this themselves, even though both acknowledged that this was actually impossible given the parents’ limited language skills.
- c) **the transfer of their health insurance file**. This happened partly automatically, but an appointment still had to be made with the new health insurance provider in municipality Y. This was because the family needed to know what to do with their health insurance stamps during the transition period, as this was their sole source of income. I made that appointment at the health insurance fund in municipality Y, drove there with the mother, and experienced how difficult it was to explain the complex paperwork to her. Here too, the service was

provided exclusively in Dutch, which made it virtually impossible for the mother to handle this herself at this stage.

- d) **The transfer of files to the new OCMW in municipality Y.** The mother asked the new OCMW to assist her with the paperwork, so that this would not constantly fall to her underage son, who was the only family member already fluent in Dutch. The mother also asked for help in finding a new school for her son, as he had to spend three hours a day on the bus. The OCMW in municipality Y told the mother that they would have to do everything themselves.

The family still has **limited language skills**, with two children, one of whom has a disability. The parents have been attending Dutch lessons for some time, but due to their age and their limited experience with education in their country of origin, their progress is slow. Only their teenage son speaks Dutch fluently at the time we met. In municipality X, they had a social worker from the OCMW, although they did not receive social security benefits but only an income through the health insurance fund. As they could not find accommodation in municipality X, they moved to municipality Y on the other side of the country, where they were able to rent a property through relatives; however, this was not suitable for a family with a disabled child.

Five months after the move, the first person received a phone call from the son's school informing me that he has been absent frequently. At that point, there is no other support worker working closely with the family. The school suggested involving the CLB and launching a 'one family, one plan' initiative. This was set in motion three months after that phone call. By then it was February, and the son would likely have to repeat the year.

#### **4.2.3 Interrupted support**

As this case study demonstrates, there **are no clear guidelines for the transfer of case files** between local public service providers in Flanders. This is a particular problem for refugee families without an extensive support network who are frequently required to move.

The guidelines for file transfer **vary by type of service and by region**. For OCMWs, for example, when moving to a new municipality, the refugee family must contact the OCMW of their new place of residence themselves. This new OCMW then assesses the family's needs and, if necessary, opens a new file. There is no automatic file transfer between OCMWs due to data protection requirements and the need to reassess the client's situation in the new municipality. Nor is there a single staff member responsible for the comprehensive transfer of support for vulnerable families. Support usually only begins after the official move, and for families without a social worker from the OCMW, there is often no support during this period. This leads to unnecessary delays in the integration process for refugee families.

Although the **Decree on Local Social Policy** of 9 February 2018 (Art. 11, §2) provides for the exchange of personal data by members of the integrated comprehensive reception service in accordance with the Privacy Act, this does not apply to the other partners within a local social, integration or welfare policy. The data sharing currently proposed in the coalition agreement therefore appears to be a step in the right direction. However, the problem appears to go beyond the technical feasibility of sharing files: to effectively hand over the support of refugee families, **further social measures** are needed, such as the deployment of support workers and bridge figures, and the provision of structural resources to key government actors to enable them to take on a coordinating role in local integration policy.

#### 4.2.4 Case load of social workers

Due to a heavy workload and caseload, many social workers, advisers and support workers appear **unable to monitor** refugee families quickly and systematically, let alone provide proactive, hands-on support. Yet such support is crucial for refugee families as they take their first steps on their integration journey.

Public service providers such as OCMWs and the Integration and Civic Integration Agencies appear to have **little time for case management**, which is nevertheless essential for the **'integrated support'** of those who need it. After all, refugee families often do not know where to turn or who to contact. In practice, it is often the small non-profit organisations and volunteer groups that fill the gaps in frontline services.

*I can understand Dutch now, but I couldn't two years ago. Whenever I received letters, I'd go to [volunteer X]. She always helps everyone with their letters. [When people come and say]: "We can't understand this" or "We have to pay this, but how can we do it this way or that way". [Volunteer X] is always friendly and helps us. She's quicker than the OCMW. With the OCMW, if you want an appointment, you have to wait at least a week. Just to make an appointment. The response is always a bit slow. (...) Lots of documents and lots of questions, but slow. (Palestinian mother, 29 November 2022)*

*The principle is that they need to sort out many of these questions and matters with their social worker. But we often find that getting in touch with that social worker is very difficult, meaning that it can take four weeks, for example, before there is another contact, and by then there's an urgent question, or they don't realise that they can also ask the OCMW that specific question. (...) We often see that people actually do know OCMW staff, but think that it's only about income support. We sometimes mediate in such cases. We then, for example, contact the OCMW ourselves to see what we can do. (Staff at a non-profit organisation providing support to refugees, 10 October 2022)*

*I'm thinking, for example, of a family where there is support for the children, partly from an external source, and a social worker from the social services. (...) That family, for instance, has been trying to reach the OCMW for two weeks, but can't get through. So I sent an email [to that OCMW] and contacted them, saying, "Could you please ring the father and ensure he gets an answer to his question (...)." (...) One advantage is that I come from that service and I know how things work there: they don't have the capacity to carry out effective social work either. (Liaison officer for primary schools, 25 October 2023)*

Refugee families with a limited social network consequently face **delays** in the early stages of their inclusion process when it comes to administrative procedures and their search for housing, a place in the education system and sustainable employment. To illustrate this, here is one example of how **access to housing** can be delayed:

*If someone signs a tenancy agreement today, they have to make an appointment with the OCMW, which takes days, sometimes weeks, and then they have to apply for a rent guarantee; sometimes they also have to apply for the first month's rent. As a result, a landlord often loses a month's income before they see their first month's rent. So, as a voluntary organisation, we try to bridge those costs in advance [by advancing them]: the first month's rent (...), and then possibly by providing a guarantee for the rent deposit (...). This is something that really ought to be considered to speed up the process at all OCMWs. (Volunteer in a voluntary organisation, 25 October 2022)*

The Flemish coalition agreement primarily looks to the **Integration and Civic Integration Agencies** to take the lead in the 'integrated support' of new arrivals. In our research, we noted numerous indications from various frontline support workers that the case managers and advisers at these agencies are struggling with an **excessive caseload**. As a result, they are only able to fulfil their coordinating role and a number of their core tasks in the support (e.g. language screening) of refugee families to a limited extent.

*I don't know how many cases they have, but if you have to follow up on a case involving a Dutch language course and MO, and then also check whether the person is registered with the VDAB, and then refer them to the fourth pillar as well. That's a lot of tasks for too few people; the caseload is very heavy. And then it's difficult for the VDAB to get much involved there, because they don't really have time for us. (...) We work with them when we need them, but we don't constantly bother them, because we also know [that they are understaffed]. (...) In terms of policy, you could say that they don't want us to work in silos. And they hope that registering with the VDAB will lead to collaboration with the AgII, for example. But there is no structure in place, no time and no resources. (VDAB mediator, 20.09.2023)*

#### 4.2.5 Project-based local policies

In the context of local social policy, equal opportunities or integration, **municipalities decide for themselves** to what extent they wish to access certain funding streams and/or collaborate with external partners. This depends, among other things, on local political priorities, staffing levels, financial and material resources, and the available expertise on integration and civic integration. As a result, there are significant differences in the actual support provided to refugee families across municipalities.

One of the solutions offered by the new Flemish coalition agreement to address this problem is an increase in scale and associated **consultation via reference regions**. In addition, the coalition agreement states that there must be a clear initiator and coordinator to oversee cooperation between policy levels and all relevant actors (OCMWs, OKAN, VDAB, NT2 training institutes, CAWs, the social economy, self-help and voluntary organisations, etc.). At the time we conducted this study, we picked up on various signals from the field indicating that **local authorities currently do not have the structures and resources to implement this**.

*We identify the needs, we work out the details, but then local authorities have to take it on board. And that's where things often go wrong, due to staff shortages. Or it ends up being added to someone else's workload. As a result, in our meetings or steering group sessions with councillors and officials, we often found ourselves with only half the steering group present. The officials sometimes simply didn't turn up because they had other priorities. (...) It often involves additional consultation sessions, or devised structures, schematic representations, and records, which local authorities then have to deal with themselves. All extra work they simply cannot get round to. (Social economy worker, 25 January 2023)*

Instead of systematic cooperation, local authorities often appear to be **dependent on project-based funding**. As a result, the expertise and networks that have been painstakingly built up are quickly lost again.

*Nothing is required for that integration policy anymore; [the local authorities] are allowed to do it, and they don't receive much funding for it either. It's no longer included in their sectoral grant, and no new funds are coming in outside of Plan Samenleven, which is also quite ad hoc (...) In October, they receive notification that they've been allocated the*

*funds; then local authorities have to start issuing tenders, and most can only sign up through an inter-municipal partnership, which is quite a hassle. But the funds are only allocated for one year; new funds must already be applied for in July if you want to continue next year. By the time you've got properly started, you've been at it for three months. That's no way to work either (...). Or the council decides not to sign up, because we don't have the staff to do it. (...) Cuts are being made across every budget; people retiring aren't being replaced, so tasks are being shuffled about, and everything is being crammed together. With integration, there are no mandatory requirements, so if the local council wants to do it, they can. (...) But even with all the politicians' good will, there simply isn't time to really focus on it. (Employee of a social economy non-profit organisation, 19 October 2022)*

By placing the responsibility with local authorities, yet allocating a large proportion of the funds through project grants, local officials all too often become **caught up in chasing grants**. This hinders both structural cooperation within the fragmented landscape of Flemish reception policy and the comprehensive support that depends on such cooperation.

*The government throws around project grants, but not in a streamlined way. (...) Local authorities see these opportunities, are forced to jump at them, but sometimes get carried away because they no longer have an overview of the projects they must or can undertake. Why aren't they simply given a set budget each year? Based on the needs that actually exist? (Employee of a social economy non-profit organisation, 25 January 2023)*

#### **4.2.6 Unequal support**

Due to the fragmented landscape of public services in Flanders, there appear to be significant **differences in the individual support** provided to refugee families. Furthermore, the **level of expertise** available among individual staff members of government departments regarding integration and civic integration varies greatly. This is often dependent on the **specific knowledge that individual support workers** have of the social services network and the relevant administrative procedures for refugee families. How 'comprehensive', 'efficient' and 'effective' the support provided to refugee families is depends heavily on the people they encounter within these government departments.

*Legislation changes very quickly and people have to adapt fast, but a great many mistakes are actually made there [at the local authority counters]. And that often has major consequences for people. For example, with applications for citizenship, documents may be missing that ultimately turn out not to be necessary, but in the meantime they have to wait, and they risk losing their right to stay in Belgium. Because mistakes are made there, it simply causes people a great deal of stress. (...) There is also no neutral legal service. (...) The OCMW should actually be providing that, but well. The Agency [for Integration and Civic Integration] has also scaled back its legal services, and that is actually aimed more at professionals than at those undergoing civic integration (NGO staff member, 19.10.2022)*

*If you've worked at the VDAB for a long time, you've had that experience anyway. (...) For the past few months, I've also been working with someone new, who didn't ask to work with non-native speakers, and one person who asked for it themselves and, fortunately, has years of experience at VDAB. With the latter, I only need to exchange a few words and we know exactly where we stand; with the other person, I really have to explain everything and take a theoretical approach to get that sense of what you need to see... [what is possible or might work] (VDAB mediator, 20.09.2023)*

In other words, there appears to be a **great need for more systematic training** and thorough further training of public service employees in the specific field of integration and civic integration.

#### 4.2.7 Innovative Practices

In our research, we nonetheless came across various practices that demonstrate what a more comprehensive reception policy for refugee families – and other newcomers – might look like in practice.

Firstly, some local authorities are focusing on creating **professionals functions that act as guides to the appropriate support services**. In many cases, their effectiveness lies in working together and getting things moving. Good examples of this include the experienced ‘Diversity Guides’, the network and integration coaches in Beveren-Kruibeke-Zwijndrecht, the recent outreach case management project in Kortrijk, or the family support workers from Kind en Gezin or Caritas. Such guidance involves an outreach approach and providing language-accessible support to refugee families (e.g. through a contact language). This enables them to refer families efficiently, conduct a comprehensive rights assessment and help refugee families navigate the complex administrative landscape of Flanders more quickly.

*My colleague who works in [municipality X] on initial interviews for LOI rang me: there’s a family moving here [municipality Y]. She’s taken the first steps with them... sorted out the contracts and so on... and yesterday I saw the gentleman for the first time, at the bank for that rent deposit. To set up a blocked bank account. And today we’re going back to the bank to take out fire insurance. And then we’ll go to the OCMW for the intake interview to apply for social assistance. That’s how we save time. (...) And with some people, who have to move from [municipality Y]. Those who are on the LOI and find somewhere else, yes, who don’t have a case worker there, for example in [municipality Z]... and at the start, people keep referring them to me: ‘I’ve got this and that, what am I going to do here?’ And I tell people: ‘If you’re moving, at the start, no problem. Just get in touch if anything isn’t clear yet. If there’s anything I can do for you, no problem’. So that contact remains positive. If I can help further, no problem.*

(Diversity support worker, 01.12.2022)

This form of support appears to be in line with the ‘**additional support**’ announced in Minister Hilde Crevits’ recent policy documents. **However**, there seems to be a crucial difference in the timing of this support: for Minister Crevits, it comes after the integration programme, whereas support workers are responding to a need that arises at the very start of the integration process.

*The aim of our work is for people to be able to sort everything out independently by the end. But, for example, if the person or people have only just arrived here at the LOI... I currently have a family who arrived in Belgium just two months ago, so they know nothing. They don’t speak the language, nothing... The woman was pregnant. So I know they really need everything... And they can’t manage on their own. Because they don’t know their way around, they don’t know our public transport system, and they don’t know all those administrative matters. So, at the start, it’s quite hectic for me. When I get a new family, I know: for a month or so I’ll be really busy, and afterwards it starts to calm down a bit when the children go to school, so it’s a bit quieter. First, I show the parents the way, for example: where is the school? How can they catch the bus? When do they need to be there on time... and... those sort of things. (...) And then I go with them on the bus or the train, so they can learn how to find their way around. (...) It’s the same for the local council. I go with them. I always go with them. But afterwards, once they can manage on their*

*own, go somewhere independently, then I let go a bit. (Palestinian diversity mentor, 01.12.2022)*

A second approach involves **drop-in sessions** without an appointment, based on the so-called STEK methodology or the one-stop-shop principle. This refers to an accessible meeting place in the local area where people can go with a variety of questions or requests and receive a warm welcome. Various initiatives, such as Huizen van het Kind (Children's Centres) or Koffie en Formulieren (Coffee and Forms), which are often organised by volunteers, schedule open drop-in sessions where people can come with a wide range of questions; in other words, before any bureaucratic division is made into services, sectors or areas of expertise. The support worker on duty attempts to formulate an answer themselves, assist with administrative matters, work with the person seeking help to find possible solutions, and/or provide a warm referral. This lowers the threshold to accessing support and makes it possible to put a 'broadly integrated reception' into practice.

Thirdly, in the context of a fragmented landscape of public services, some social workers carry out a **network analysis** together with refugee families.

*When there are difficult cases, we create a mind map with the client to identify our specific role. Here in municipality X, there is a lot of work being done by many highly motivated care providers, but everyone still operates somewhat in their own little bubble, with little communication, and they are not entirely clear on exactly what each other is doing. So we create a mind map with the client and take it to client meetings, or to the doctors themselves, and this includes, for example, their personal network, or church, or something similar. That is very important for helping the client in a holistic way. (Community Health Workers, 14 September 2023)*

Fourthly, some support workers deliberately **match their pace** to that of refugee families. One way to do this is by using WhatsApp, as this is quicker than having to schedule an appointment with a social worker for every administrative query. Without the right information at the right time, it is difficult to make progress. The speed at which refugee families can be helped has a direct impact on the speed of their integration process.

*I have a work phone. I always tell people: just send it to me first [via WhatsApp] [if you have a letter you don't understand], so that you clearly understand what it says. If I can do that with them straight away and explain it [via WhatsApp], fine. If there are any further questions or information I don't know myself, then I'll pass it on or we'll meet up to sort everything out. (...) But clients also don't know all the administrative work social workers have to sort out; people don't see that. Social workers sometimes can't explain it properly from the start, that it can take a while, or that it isn't their responsibility. That it has to go before the committee and that decision takes time, but clients don't understand why it takes so long. Because sometimes the question isn't difficult. That's why they sometimes ring me directly, when they know their social worker won't reply straight away. (Diversity support worker, 01.12.2022)*

Finally, an integrated approach also requires **flexibility** regarding the duration of support programmes, as well as **making time for longer contact sessions** to arrive at a holistic assessment of the problem or an exploration of rights. An example of this is 'one family, one plan'; or the project for the integrated support of particularly vulnerable families provided by Caritas International to the OCMW in Leuven.

#### **4.2.8 Policy recommendations**

##### **For the Flemish Integration and Civic Integration Agencies:**

- Facilitate the core remit of support workers by reducing their administrative workload and enhancing their role as social professionals in line with the principles of the Social Work Conference. Following the Dutch model, support workers should be able to act as integrated case managers, working with and between the various services supporting families.
- Ensure an accessible legal back-office per region specialising in private international, social, migration and residence law. Make this a frontline service directly accessible to professionals and newcomers
- Provide introductory interviews and active outreach to refugee families and other newcomers in a language they understand

##### **For cities and municipalities:**

- Employ diversity-focused 'Toeleiders' (guides) with lived experience as fully-fledged staff members, and ensure that the issues they raise are taken into account in local policy-making.
- For vulnerable families, focus more on the 'one-stop shop' approach: by engaging family support workers, pathway coordinators, case managers, (experienced) integration guides, or professional buddies
- Integrate network analysis into intake interviews, and normalise active outreach to other support providers around families with the client's consent
- Separate the welfare desk from social support: for example, by separating active and outreach-based reception from the provision of income support or matters relating to the Special Committee on Social Services.

##### **For the Flemish Agency for Domestic Governance:**

- Include the deployment of 'mentors' in the earliest stages of the integration process within the planned pilot schemes for 'additional support' for newcomers, and invest in their sustainable integration within cities and municipalities (see above).
- Facilitate an efficient and effective transfer of files between public services when refugee families move from one municipality to another, subject to their consent and with due regard for professional confidentiality. An example could be the digital client profile from the Netherlands.
- Facilitate the participation of small and medium-sized municipalities in consultations with central city authorities on Integration and Equal Opportunities
- Provide more long-term structural funding for local authorities to enable them to meet metropolitan challenges.

##### **For all public service providers:**

- Through further training and development, systematically focus on the personal networks and knowledge of the local social landscape of individual service providers, as well as on building and maintaining local expertise in civic integration and integration, through further training and development.

## 4.3 Towards an Integrated Reception in Wallonia and Brussels<sup>8</sup>

### 4.3.1 Policy

In **Wallonia**, there are 8 Regional Integration Centres (CRI), one per province (which have the status of non-profit organisations); in Brussels, there are four approved organisations responsible for setting up reception centres for new arrivals: one Dutch-speaking (BON) and three French-speaking (VIA, BAPA Bxl and Convivial), governed by the COCOM decree. VIA has two centres (Schaerbeek and Molenbeek), as does Convivial (Forest and Anderlecht); there are therefore six reception centres spread across the regional territory. The programme of the pathway is fairly similar within the CRIs and the BAPAs. It includes a ‘social assessment’ to identify the individual’s needs across a range of areas (including health, housing, children’s education, professional experience, etc.) and to define personalised support; a language assessment; information on rights and responsibilities; citizenship and French language classes; and socio-professional guidance.

In **Wallonia**, the CRIs are responsible, in addition to organising the reception programme, with providing support and guidance to Local Initiatives for the Integration of People of Foreign Origin (ILI), coordinating integration activities across their territory, training practitioners working in the integration sector, and designing a ‘**local integration plan**’ with local partners. The aim of this plan is to “promote the integration of foreign nationals or people of foreign origin, by highlighting their specific needs and defining the strategies to be developed to better meet them, in each area covered by a centre”.<sup>9</sup> The ILIs are funded by the Walloon Region and run by civil society organisations, which receive a grant to set up services relating to French language training; citizenship training; socio-professional integration; and specialist legal aid in immigration law.<sup>10</sup>

In **Brussels**, projects addressing integration issues are funded<sup>11</sup> in particular by the COCOF when they meet the objectives of the Social Cohesion Decree.<sup>12</sup> This decree provides for support for initiatives relating to ‘the inclusion of people with a migration background’, and for initiatives aimed at ‘the reception and empowerment of refugees, migrants and undocumented migrants’. It also provides for the establishment of local coordination bodies, bringing together local authorities and associations, as well as the creation of a ‘local pact’ in each municipality within the Region located in the Urban Renewal Zone (ZRU), defining municipal objectives in terms of social cohesion. However, it does not provide for a specific action plan for the inclusion of people from abroad.

In both Brussels and Wallonia, **municipalities play a minor role**, their sole responsibility being to refer target groups who register with the municipality to the CRI and BAPA.<sup>13</sup> They ‘may’ work in coordination with local stakeholders, provide temporary accommodation, or set up specific services within municipal administrations and CPAS. Consequently, **the role of local authorities varies from one to another**, depending on their willingness to improve the welcoming environment of their areas.

<sup>8</sup> This chapter was written by Louise Carlier, Mathieu Berger, Giacomo Orsini and Robin Vandevordt.

<sup>9</sup> 30 April 2009/ Décret modifiant le décret du 4 juillet 1996 relatif à l'intégration des personnes étrangères ou d'origine étrangère.

<sup>10</sup> 27 March 2014 - Décret remplaçant le livre II du Code wallon de l'Action sociale et de la Santé relatif à l'intégration des personnes étrangères ou d'origine étrangère) – art.13

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the European AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund) also funds time-limited projects focusing on integration issues in the various regions.

<sup>12</sup> Décret du 30/11/18 relatif à la cohésion sociale, qui fixe 4 axes propriétaires : 1° ) l'accompagnement à la scolarité et à la citoyenneté des enfants et des jeunes; 2° ) l'apprentissage du français et l'alphabétisation; 3° ) l'inclusion par la citoyenneté interculturelle; 4° ) le vivre et faire ensemble

<sup>13</sup> See: Hantson L., Westerveen L., Adam I. (2022) [Immigrant integration in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas: local policy and policymaking relations in Belgium](#), Whole Comm Report, VUB. See also: [Monitoring 2022 du parcours d'accueil pour primo-arrivant.es](#), Rapport annuel 2023 du CRAcs.

The **responsibility of the CPAS**, which fall under local authority jurisdiction, is **underarticulated** when it comes to integration policies, even though they play an important role in the lives of refugee families. Any foreign national residing legally in the country is entitled to social integration income. The CPAS is a key player in social policy, including refugees within a broader public, complementing integration policies directly aimed at foreign nationals or those of foreign origin. In practice, when a person applies for social assistance at the CPAS, a social worker conducts a social assessment to understand their needs and difficulties, and to determine the support required to address them (whether this involves financial or material assistance, or social support, including referral to other organisations if necessary); Subsequently, the granting of social integration income is extended into an **'Individualised Social Integration Plan'** (PIIS), a contract between the beneficiary and the social worker, jointly determining the former's path to socio-professional integration and the support expected from the latter.

However, **there is no regulatory framework specifying the terms of support for the specific group of refugee families**, who nevertheless represent a significant proportion of social assistance recipients. The CPAS 'may' set up an ILI or an ILA, which then provides support better suited to the issues and needs of this group; however, the number of ILAs is very limited and is tending to decrease.

#### 4.3.2 A malfunctioning institutional trajectory

Firstly, community organisations highlight a **'bottleneck' in the integration process**, which, from a regulatory perspective, is supposed to unfold as follows: refugee families receive their residence permits, register with the local council, which then refers them to the CRI/BAPA, where registration opens the way to personalised support.

However, the registration of refugee families with the CRI/BAPA generally **takes place several months after they leave the reception centre**. In other words, they have already taken up residence, registered with the local council, and completed a series of administrative procedures (enrolment with the health insurance fund, the CPAS, etc.); **in the meantime, they encounter problems accessing housing** (see 4.5 on Housing) **and administrative difficulties** (see 4.1) for which no structural support is provided. Consequently, **it is often local 'frontline' actors** – where they exist – who are called upon to fill these gaps and provide support until registration with the CRI/BAPA. Most of the time, people are referred to these services by word of mouth via peers or frontline actors, rather than by the local authorities.

In our case study in Wallonia in particular, we observe a **reversal of roles**: whilst the CRI has a coordination and guidance mandate, in practice it is local associations that take on these functions. The reason cited by the associations is the CRI's lack of local presence, as it is located some forty kilometres from the town where the families we met live. Refugee families also mention the lack of information regarding the integration process from social workers at the CPAS or the local council, even though these are the first public services they come into contact with.

#### 4.3.3 Gaps in support

The regulatory framework for integration policies does not cover all areas and challenges relating to the integration process. There is a **structural lack of support in three areas: housing assistance, administrative support and translation**.

Firstly, there is **no provision for housing support** in either reception policy or integration policies (see chapter 4.5 on Housing). Although housing is a fundamental right, essential to their integration journey, and although people can only come to the attention of local social services if they have a fixed address, the responsibility for finding accommodation falls on the new arrivals themselves. A social worker at a BAPA, speaking on the subject of housing, said:

*We do what we can, because there are many needs and few organisations offering help, and we have limited means of action. It's a problem that's beyond our control. (Social worker at a BAPA, 19 October 2022)*

Secondly, there is a **lack of legal and administrative information services**; in the words of an NGO representative active in this field:

*People do not know what they are entitled to and how to access it. (NGO representative, 24 March 2023)*

A problematic situation increasingly observed by frontline workers is that of refugee families who have been unable to secure a place in a reception centre, who have not had access to certain fundamental information regarding their journey in Belgium, and who therefore remain 'stuck' in the social emergency system.

Thirdly, for those who do not speak the national languages, and even more so for the illiterate, language difficulties **exacerbate the lack of access to social rights**. However, there is a lack of use of translation services in municipal administrative departments and CPAS offices in both regions. To quote a Syrian mother:

*The biggest problem for refugees here is the French language. How am I supposed to integrate without speaking French? Language is the key! (Syrian mother, 21 November 2022)*

Refugee families therefore lack support in various key areas during the early stages of their journey.

#### **4.3.4 Lack of support from CPAS**

All the families we met had gone through a phase where they needed social assistance to meet their basic needs. However, as noted by both those working in the sector and the families themselves, **social workers at the CPAS are reportedly poorly informed about the rights and obligations of foreign nationals**, and frequently refer them to **volunteers and charities** for administrative assistance – which in turn gives the impression that a public service is 'offloading' its responsibilities onto them. Whether in Wallonia or Brussels, volunteers and community organisations act as a link between the CPAS and refugee families:<sup>14</sup> they translate documents, help complete applications, liaise with social workers, and inform beneficiaries of their rights.

*We (the staff) provide information on the housing allowance, on assistance with the rent guarantee... we try to tell them what's available and help them with the procedures, fill in the forms with them, refer them to the CPAS services, and inform the person who's going to take them in about the situation... it's a bit like the world's turned upside down. [We need to] be sure that someone will take over (at the CPAS), that the person won't be left in the lurch. (Social worker at a BAPA, 19 October 2022)*

Whilst some CPASs collaborate with local stakeholders, in most cases this communication is lacking; there appears to be a **lack of 'a point of contact within the CPAS'** to whom information about the people being supported can be passed on, and to whom they can be referred.

Furthermore, many families report that the CPAS **withholds information** regarding certain forms of assistance to which they are entitled (e.g. settlement allowance, material assistance):

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with a social worker from a legal support organisation. 24.03.2023

*At the CPAS, I get the impression there's a sort of rule saying that if the applicant doesn't know about one or other right or benefit that should be granted to them under normal circumstances, just pretend you don't know either. (Burundian father, 04.10.2023)*

Consequently, families themselves do not understand what their social rights are. Access to these often requires having been informed beforehand by support organisations or by peers. You therefore need to be **lucky** to come across a social worker who will commit to providing support:

*I was lucky enough to have a social worker who was really very kind to me. (...) He was, I would say... someone who tries to respect people's rights. (Burundian father, 11 March 2024)*

As for the CPAS, the lack of resources and the administrative burden are such that social workers' administrative tasks take precedence over social support.<sup>15</sup> The heavy **caseload** means there is no time to properly identify needs or provide information on rights and available assistance – especially when people do not speak the national languages. Civil society organisations involved in integration issues highlight the withdrawal of public services from the support of refugees.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.3.5 Lack of coordination

If the CRI/BAPA are tasked with drawing up a 'social assessment' to determine the support arrangements for refugee families in line with their needs; and whilst the CPAS are also tasked with determining the needs of their beneficiaries and the arrangements for support provided by social workers as part of the social assessment and Individualised Integration Plans (PIIS), there is **no systematic communication between these actors**, despite the fact that they are supporting the same families. Furthermore, whilst both the CPAS and the CRI/BAPA form part of a wider network of actors focused on the challenges of supporting refugee families, coordination between these actors remains poorly structured. **Yet all the actors interviewed emphasise the importance of referring beneficiaries to the appropriate people**, with whom contact has already been established:

*It is very important to refer beneficiaries to people with expertise, because they already face so many obstacles on their journey... (...) you need to know how to refer them to the right person to avoid sending people round in circles. (Trainer at an organisation involved in the integration process, 14 November 2022)*

However, coordination at local level depends on municipal willingness and community initiatives; it varies considerably from one municipality to another. For refugees and their families, this means they have to 'be lucky enough to end up in the right place'.

#### 4.3.6 Local divergences

In Wallonia in particular, there are significant **regional disparities** in the distribution of ILIs and training programmes linked to the integration pathway. In rural areas, in particular, provision is inadequate.<sup>17</sup> Access to training and support for families, and the opportunities available to them, therefore depend on where they live. It should be noted that local variability is also exacerbated by the '**project-based approach**', which takes precedence over the implementation of a sustainable and harmonised integration policy: projects funded by ILIs, the Social Cohesion Plan or the FAMi are mostly temporary, linked to funding through calls for proposals, which are not renewed. Stakeholders in the sector highlight the volatility of projects, their haphazard geographical distribution and the lack of

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<sup>15</sup> See also: Vandermeersch, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J.-M., & De Cuyper, P. (Eds). (2023). *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system.* Leuven University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Expert panel workshop conducted by REFUFAM team. 23.04.2024.

<sup>17</sup> See also: [Gossiaux A., Mescoli E., Rivière M., Evaluation du parcours d'intégration et du dispositif ISP dédiés aux primo-arrivants en Wallonie, Rapport de l'IWEPS n°33, 2019.](#)

coordination, which can exacerbate the already sporadic and unstructured nature of the support provided.

#### 4.3.7 Innovative practices

Firstly, whether in Brussels or Wallonia, **various stakeholders aim to fill the ‘gaps’** in the institutional pathway and ensure more cross-cutting support, tailored to local institutional arrangements.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in **Brussels, some BAPAs** incorporate frontline services to complement the integration pathway, in response to the recurring issues faced by social workers: information relating to administrative procedures, problems accessing housing, etc. For example, VIA offers a **legal service and collaborates with translation services** (run by associations or volunteers) to enable families to access information in their own language. At Convivial, the primary focus is on providing **comprehensive and personalised support** to individuals, in their own language, at various stages, starting with an initial interview aimed at identifying needs, followed by assistance with settling in, help with family reunification procedures, legal aid, enrolment in the integration pathway, and socio-professional guidance. The organisation is divided into various departments, to which new arrivals are directed according to their needs, and which work in close collaboration with one another.

In **Wallonia**, where the survey was conducted, it was mainly **volunteers** who took charge of supporting families upon their departure from reception centres, assisting them with finding accommodation, administrative procedures and the translation of documents (using IT translation tools). Gradually, various associations have also become more professionalised and have set up a legal information and administrative support service for new arrivals, in addition to certain training courses organised as part of the integration pathway.

Another innovative practice involves the establishment of **coordination hubs**. These spaces can be developed at local level: for example, in Schaerbeek (a municipality within the ZRU), a social action coordination body has been set up by community organisations operating within the municipal area in partnership with the CPAS, to identify each party’s role and the complementarities between services, integrate their actions into a network of stakeholders and work in partnership (as provided for in the Social Cohesion Decree). In Tournai, community organisations working on integration issues have embarked on a joint project aimed at simplifying access to information for newcomers and helping them find their way around the local community and institutional landscape. Although institutional stakeholders (such as the CPAS and health insurance funds) were invited to join these coordination forums, they are notably absent.

Certain coordination initiatives are also emerging at regional level to facilitate networking among stakeholders and the coordination of their actions (such as COPILI or RISOME, which bring together the ILIs).

#### 4.3.8 Policy recommendations

**For the Brussels Joint Community Commission and the Walloon Region (DG for Home Affairs and Social Action), in partnership with the municipalities:**

- Ensure the establishment of local coordination bodies. In Brussels, these should be managed by the BAPAs, which are already part of the network of local stakeholders, provided that sufficient resources are made available to them to fulfil this role. In Wallonia, whilst this role falls to the CRIs, their provincial scale does not always align with the most appropriate

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<sup>18</sup> CRAcs, [Monitoring 2022 du parcours d'accueil pour primo-arrivant.es](#), Rapport annuel 2023 du CRAcs.

territorial level for organising action. The municipal level should be prioritised in small and medium-sized towns where there is a significant number of registered refugees and no CRI centre.

- Support the development of legal and administrative information services and housing support within each local coordination body where such services are lacking.
- Harmonise the provision of support services and training related to the integration process across Wallonia.

#### For municipalities and CPAS:

- Within the CPAS, strengthen support work for refugee families. In addition to reducing the number of cases handled by each employee, this would involve appointing and funding a designated contact person from among the staff within each CPAS, who would have various responsibilities:
  - to undergo training in immigration law (training to be provided by the CRIs and BAPAs);
  - establishing contacts and partnerships with the various voluntary and institutional bodies involved in the integration pathways of families;
  - acting as a resource person for colleagues responsible for supporting refugee families;<sup>19</sup>
  - becoming a key partner for the CRIs and a representative of the CPAS within local coordination bodies. Partnerships between the CRIs/BAPAs and the CPAS should be systematically established in order to coordinate their support for each refugee family.
- To ensure the accessibility of public services, interpreting or translation services should be systematically provided for families who do not speak the national languages, who, despite having greater needs for information and guidance, receive correspondingly limited support. Integration schemes could be utilised to this end, formalising the role of translation and guidance that people from foreign countries, who have been settled for longer than the new arrivals, currently fulfil on an informal basis.
- Set up a ‘new arrivals’ helpdesk in local authorities, where recent arrivals are received by trained, multilingual staff, where documents are provided in their own language and where they are guided according to their specific needs.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.4 Lessons drawn from the reception of persons with a temporary protection status from Ukraine<sup>21</sup>

### 4.4.1. Prioritising Housing and Education

Temporary residence status entitles displaced persons from Ukraine to social assistance, housing, access to the labour market and to education. To realise these rights, the Flemish and federal governments have taken various measures, often in cooperation with local governments and/or NGOs.

The Flemish government initially prioritised access to housing and to education for the children. Employment and other requirements that are usually part of the official integration pathway were out of the question in the initial period.

*The minister stressed that [persons with a temporary protection status] should not be seen as the solution to labour shortages, with them being used literally and figuratively*

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<sup>19</sup> See also: Belspo, [Services pour les primo-arrivants dans les CPAS belges: enseignements pour la politique générale](#).

<sup>20</sup> See also: Recommandation également formulée par des acteurs du secteur comme le CIRE, voir notamment Voir [cette position](#) du Ciré.

<sup>21</sup> This chapter was written by: Roos-Marie Van den Bogaard, Giacomo Orsini and Robin Vandevordt.

*at any cost. [...] The first priority then is to find shelter and make sure the children can go to school. (Report on exchange of views Committee on Economy and Labour, 1315 (2021-2022), 02.03.22)*

This approach seems **in line with the needs** of this group of newcomers. As one municipal coordinator explains:

*You have seen that evolution where in the beginning it was really purely about social benefits, housing, what should I do here in Belgium? [...] Then came much more targeted questions; about education, their children and school, then children and hobbies. That really always runs in a line. And with employment it was also like that, yes, that took a long time. [...] I think they received a lot of information about employment in the first six months, but there was very little interest in it at the time, that only started later. (Municipal Employee, 16.10.2023)*

In the first year after arrival, persons with a temporary protection status were **not required to register with VDAB<sup>22</sup>, nor to follow an Individualised Social Integration Project (GPMI)**. This changed in May 2023, when registration with VDAB became mandatory.

From 1 October 2023, the additional subsidy for OCMWs<sup>23</sup> to provide services to persons with temporary protection was reduced from 35% and 25% to 10%, and linked to the start-up of a GPMI, indirectly obliging them to start a GPMI.<sup>24</sup> **Several frontline workers evaluated the delays in these obligations as a positive approach:**

*It's good that [persons with temporary protection] were given a lot of space to learn the language and so on, yes, and that in the beginning there was also a lot of understanding indeed for the background and trauma. I do think that is important and that with every refugee we have to keep in mind that those people did go through something. (VDAB employee, 16.10.23)*

As we describe in chapter 4.5 (Housing), refugee families often spend most of their time and energy looking for suitable housing. In turn, for parents of minor children, another primary concern is the children's welfare and education - see our policy brief on Family Reunification. Until these pressing needs are met, refugee families feel they have no choice but to put other integration activities temporarily on hold.

*I started with [language] classes, I did module one, module two, we were going to start the third [module], but the housing situation was terrible, so I had to stop everything [...] And the teacher said to me; 'I can see that this is too hard for you, it's not going to work like this... it's better if you find new housing first, then you can relax better, you know, these days you can't work properly'. (Congolese mother, 29.09.2022).*

Based on our research on refugee families with an international protection, we suggest that **prioritising housing and education would make the four pillars of the Flemish integration policy** (i.e. NT2, Social Orientation, pathway to work and social networks) **both more effective and efficient**.

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<sup>22</sup> The Flemish Employment Agency (more [information](#))

<sup>23</sup> The Flemish Public Social Welfare Services (more [information](#)).

<sup>24</sup> Circular replacing the circular on the law of 18 May 2022 promoting the integration of beneficiaries of the temporary protection status (*Wet van 18 mei 2022 tot bevordering van de integratie van de begunstigden van het tijdelijk beschermingsstatuut*), reference 8775, 10 July 2023.

#### 4.4.2. Assistance in Finding Sustainable Housing

The reception of persons with temporary protection provides a striking example of **how governments can prioritise housing in a pragmatic, feasible way**. Among other things, the Flemish government allowed **shorter rental agreements** to be concluded,<sup>25</sup> and vacant dwellings and other buildings - often awaiting renovation - owned by public institutions to be **temporarily occupied for rental through social housing companies**.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the Flemish government purchased housing units that functioned as **emergency villages** in Mechelen, Ghent and Antwerp, in close cooperation with municipal administrations. These housing units were entered in the **Flemish Housing Tool**, allowing for efficient allocation throughout Flanders.

However, several practitioners noted that with these forms of housing, it is **crucial that the homes are of sufficient quality** and that they are available long enough so that residents do not have to move again in a short amount of time - see also our Policy brief on Housing.

*[...] in an extreme emergency, you can put someone there for a month, but we don't move people from here to there. For example, I know of a location with limited housing quality, and yes, we could have put people there for three months, but then the renovations start, so they have to move again. We always tried to look for sustainable housing as much as possible. (Municipal Employee, 16.10.2023)*

Through the **#plekvrij/#placedispo campaign**, the Federal Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration at the time, Sami Mehdi, encouraged Belgian citizens to host persons from Ukraine as host families.<sup>27</sup> To facilitate this form of housing, a **special code was activated (housing code 06)**, allowing the municipal administration to easily register a second family at the same address in the municipal register.<sup>28</sup>

**Especially in municipalities where more extensive support was offered** to host families, this form of accommodation was perceived as very positive.<sup>29</sup> A municipal employee explained how this form of accommodation also **contributes to opportunities to learn Dutch, build social networks, and find their way in Flemish society as a whole**.

*You do notice a big difference between the Ukrainians in a reception centre and the Ukrainians living with host families in [municipality C] or, yes, they are a lot more self-reliant. [...] You can also see that their language skills have progressed much faster than in the reception centre. [...] I have had people who were in a host family, who didn't have a new home and who then came to the reception centre and really said at the reception centre: 'My Dutch is deteriorating fast because I don't use Dutch anymore'" (Municipal Employee, 16.10.2023)*

This experience highlights the **potential of the Melding Tijdelijk Wonen**, which enables a structured form of cohabitation for citizens and refugee families. However, this formal way of co-housing is still

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<sup>25</sup> Art. 6, Decree of 18 March 2022 of the Flemish Government regulating the temporary housing of families or singles who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless as a result of the war in Ukraine (*Besluit van 18 maart 2022 van de Vlaamse Regering tot regeling van de tijdelijke huisvesting van gezinnen of alleenstaanden die dakloos zijn of dreigen te worden naar aanleiding van de oorlog in Oekraïne*).

<sup>26</sup> Art. 5, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> The campaign was launched at the federal level by Samy Mahdi (then secretary of state for Asylum and Migration) but continued to be shaped in policy terms by the Flemish government

<sup>28</sup> Circular letter of 3 March 2022 on Registration of the Ukrainian population in the population registers under the temporary protection status (*Inschrijving van de Oekraïense bevolking in de bevolkingsregisters onder het statuut van de tijdelijke bescherming*), reference III21/724/R302/22.

<sup>29</sup> See also Schrooten, M. et al (2022). #PlekVrij. Particuliere opvang van Oekraïense vluchtelingen in België. Brussel: Onderzoekscentrum Sociaal Werk & Kenniscentrum Gezinswetenschappen (hogeschool Odisee).

hampered by complex administrative procedures<sup>30</sup> and by time limitations (max. 3 years).<sup>31</sup> With the right adjustments, this form of temporary accommodation could be rolled out in a sustainable way as a form of transit housing, so that refugee families have access to permanent residence and counselling while they search for a home of their own. The new Housing Code 06<sup>32</sup> could remain in use as an interim solution while persons go through the (complex) administrative procedure for the Melding Tijdelijk Wonen.

As mentioned, the Flemish Housing Tool was developed to consult and allocate available housing. This tool can also be used to allocate similar forms of temporary housing to refugee families.<sup>33</sup> Considering that the development of this tool amounts to an investment of almost 3 million euros, it would be efficient to give this tool a durable purpose by allocating temporary housing for refugee families.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Flexibility with regard to Language

To facilitate the smooth arrival of persons with temporary protection in Belgium, institutions such as the VDAB and OCMW **appointed Ukrainian- and/or Russian-speaking employees to assist people from Ukraine** to find employment and to put their administrative files in order with social services.<sup>35</sup> These employees were given temporary contracts to bypass the Dutch language requirements that usually apply to employees with permanent contracts in comparable positions. In particular, to correctly inform persons with a temporary protection status about their formal rights and obligations, these foreign-language employees proved to be **of great value to social assistants**.

*We sometimes had an Arabic-speaking contact person to form a bridge between the social worker and the client, but that was one person for the whole group. If you see now what has been set up to be able to communicate with [persons with temporary protection] [...] It has helped the social workers tremendously, because we couldn't communicate with those people. So we then deployed those Ukrainian and Russian-speaking people to contact them and explain which papers we needed, just to get the file in order. We should perhaps have done the same for the other refugees. (OCMW Employee, 04.12.23)*

In addition, the Flemish government invested in an **info-line** to answer questions from persons with a temporary protection status, front-line workers, volunteers and host families regarding housing, education, employment and psychosocial well-being, among others. In addition to Dutch and English, the info-line was **also available in Ukrainian**. The info-line was operated by the NGOs Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, Orbit vzw and Solentra vzw.<sup>36</sup>

This **flexible attitude towards language requirements** was also evident in the organisation of a professional course for Ukrainian truck drivers, which enabled truck drivers with a temporary protection status to practise their profession within Europe.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Interview municipality C, 14.05.24.

<sup>31</sup> Orbit vzw, [Handleiding: Melding Tijdelijk Wonen – voor zij die hun woning willen delen met erkend vluchtelingen](#).

<sup>32</sup> Circular of 3 March 2022 (n8).

<sup>33</sup> As Refugee Council Flanders also endorses: see Refugee Council Flanders.

*Tien lessen die we trekken uit de voorbije maanden Oekraïne beleid.*

<sup>34</sup> The cost for the development of the Flemish Housing Tool, as part of the Ukraine Emergency Fund, was budgeted at €2,950,000 (see “General explanatory note on the adjustment of the resources budget and the expenditure budget of the Flemish Community for the financial year 2022” (*Algemene toelichting bij de aanpassing van de middelenbegroting en de uitgavenbegroting van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap voor het begrotingsjaar 2022*), 17 (2021-2022) - No 1, 20 May 2022, p. 156).

<sup>35</sup> Interview CPAS employee, municipality C, 04.12.2023.

<sup>36</sup> See [Vlaanderen helpt Oekraïne](#) en [Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen](#).

<sup>37</sup> VDAB, [VDAB helpt Oekraïense vrachtwagenchauffeurs de weg op](#), 6 november 2023.

This course was organised in line with the **Vijf voor Taal language plan**, which aims to promote language acquisition as a function of work. This was also perceived as a positive measure by several practitioners:

*This might also be an initiative we can do for other sectors. We are organised regionally, training is also organised regionally. But in some cases it might be more convenient to open it up completely to several provinces and then have people arrive somewhere central and give the training there, then you can also arrange an interpreter if needed. [...] It can't be done for all professions. [...] [But] that way we can also remove some obstacles internally. (VDAB Employee, 25.10.23)*

Despite the strong emphasis in the Flemish coalition agreement on language acquisition as a condition for access to certain rights<sup>38</sup> and the strict application of language legislation on the use of the Dutch language by public services, our research shows that **a well-considered flexibility regarding language requirements benefits the self-reliance of refugee families** - see our policy brief on Language and Public Services. Especially in the context of crucial administrative procedures and targeted guidance towards quick and sustainable employment, a flexible language policy in the first period after recognition can lead to a more effective and efficient integration policy.

Since the Flemish coalition agreement stipulates that newcomers must achieve a B1 level of Dutch (speaking) proficiency in order to pass the civic integration exam, it seems all the more important to focus on employment with integrated language learning opportunities to avoid unnecessary delays in the sustainable employment of refugee families. This could include **stronger efforts to use workers' right to training leave** so that refugee families can continue to strengthen their Dutch even after they find employment - see also our policy brief on Sustainable Employment.

#### 4.4.4 Policy Recommendations

##### For Women in Vlaanderen and the Flemish Ministry of Housing:

- Use part of the housing units registered in the Flemish Housing as transit accommodation for refugee families who have received a positive decision, so they have temporary accommodation while they look for a durable housing option.<sup>39</sup>
- Ensure that homes registered by municipalities in the Flemish Housing Tool for the temporary housing of refugee families are available for at least 6 months<sup>40</sup> ; make this a condition for municipalities to receive subsidies for the housing they make available through the tool.
- Keep housing code 06 active and allow this form of housing while persons go through the administrative procedure for Melding Tijdelijk Wonen.
- Simplify the administrative procedure for Melding Tijdelijk Wonen.
- List Melding Tijdelijk Wonen as a possibility on the Flemish government's website and provide appropriate information about this form of co-housing as well as its procedural obligations.
- Inform relevant actors about the possibility of Melding Tijdelijk Wonen so that applications are not unfairly rejected.
- Remove the time limit (max. 3 years) currently set for Melding Tijdelijk Wonen.

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<sup>38</sup> The Flemish coalition agreement provides for a minimum (speaking) level B1 Dutch for social tenants.

<sup>39</sup> In conjunction with the temporary accommodation of social tenants in case of renovation works in social housing, as announced in the *Housing Policy Paper (Beleidsnota Wonen) 2024-2029* of 15 November 2024 (140(2024-2025) - No 1).

<sup>40</sup> Based on research conducted by the VVSG (Association for Flemish Cities and Municipalities) in 2019 (see [here](#)), a minimum of 6 months seems appropriate. Based on developments on the Flemish housing market, this period could possibly be increased.

**For the Vlaams Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering and the Flemish Ministry of Interior:**

- Gradually impose social obligations regarding integration on refugee families and other newcomers so that they can focus on finding sustainable housing and education for the children in the first phase following a positive decision. Under current legislation, integration pathways can already be deferred if a newcomer qualifies based on one of the reasons.<sup>41</sup> Consider wider application of this scheme to make the integration process more efficient and effective.
- As was the case with the info-line, provide at the different government services the possibility of translation into a contact language during (at least) the first year after a positive decision<sup>42</sup> to ensure that administrative obligations surrounding settlement in Flanders are handled correctly and efficiently and persons with international protection and their family members have a good understanding of the roles of the different Flemish services, as well as their own rights and obligations - see our Policy Brief on Language and Public Services.
- Make an exception so that multilingual employees can hold positions within the public service, and that no Dutch language test is required of them to qualify for permanent contracts.<sup>43</sup> That way, less knowledge and experience is lost than when using only temporary contracts (as was the case with Ukrainian/Russian-speaking employees). These individuals can improve their Dutch 'on the job' while assisting language peers.

**For the VDAB:**

- Encourage the use of employees' right to training leave<sup>44</sup> as an opportunity to continue taking Dutch language classes during office hours.

**4.5 Housing: the first step in refugee families' integration trajectory?<sup>45</sup>****4.5.1 Policy**

During their procedure, applicants for international protection have the right to accommodation, either in a collective reception centre coordinated by Fedasil or one of its partners, or in a local accommodation initiative (LAI/LOI) under the responsibility of a municipality or an NGO. As soon as they receive a positive decision on their application, refugee families are expected to find accommodation themselves within a period of 2 months, which can be extended once with another 2 months<sup>46</sup>.

Among practitioners and policy-makers, however, it is widely known that the **transition of refugee families into the housing market has been riddled with problems**. At the federal level, there has been

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<sup>41</sup> As stated in Art. 22 of the Decree of the Flemish Government implementing the Decree of 7 June 2-13 on the Flemish integration and civic integration policy (*Decreet van 7 juni 2-13 betreffende het Vlaamse integratie- en inburgeringsbeleid*).

<sup>42</sup> <sup>25</sup>With a possibility of extension, based on individual assessment. See also the advice of the Standing Committee for Language Supervision (*Vaste Commissie voor Taaloezicht - VCT*) to the VDAB of 13 May 2022 in which they specify that: "The Dutch section of the VCT [...] [has] already advised several times that it can accept the use of other useful languages exceptionally, limited and temporary in the provision of services with regard to the specific residents who are in an initial integration phase and have not yet had the opportunity to learn sufficient Dutch..." (p. 4).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Decree of 12 October 2018 on Flemish training leave and on various provisions concerning the Work and Social Economy policy area (*Decreet van 12 oktober 2018 houdende het Vlaams opleidingsverlof en houdende diverse bepalingen betreffende het beleidsdomein Werk en Sociale Economie*).

<sup>45</sup> This chapter was written by: Louise Carlier, Luce Beeckmans, Mathieu Berger, Dirk Geldof, Giacomo Orsini and Robin Vandevordt.

<sup>46</sup> Note that when they have a temporary accommodation solution (with a friend or family member, for example), they receive two months' worth of meal vouchers. See [these instructions to access social aid](#) from Fedasil.

a perpetual reception crisis, due in part to fluctuations in the number of applications for international protection, and in part due to the repeated closing and opening of new collective centres and ILAs.<sup>47</sup> This crisis has only intensified recently, with more and more applicants finding themselves on the streets while their application is being processed. In turn, this has put significant pressure on residents to leave their reception centres as soon as possible after receiving international protection.

**When they leave accommodation centres, however, refugee families struggle to find housing.<sup>48</sup>** While **ILAs/ILOs** have the mission to offer this support, their numbers have been substantially reduced in favour of collective centres.<sup>49</sup> Many **CPAS/OCMWs** do not have sufficient resources to support refugee families' search for housing.<sup>50</sup> And while **regional governments** are principally responsible for the domain of housing, they are remarkably absent in period in the early integration trajectories of refugee families.

The causes for **refugee families' difficulties in finding housing** have been documented extensively. Especially refugee families – and other groups of newcomers - with limited linguistic, financial and social resources find it difficult to find housing on the private market<sup>51</sup>. In the case of large families, the difficulties are even greater due to the lack of appropriate (rental) housing. On the private housing market, this is exacerbated by various forms of discrimination<sup>52</sup>. In the case of large families, the difficulties are even greater due to the lack of suitable (rental) housing. In Flanders, newly arriving refugee families are de facto excluded from social housing due to the decision to enforce the criteria of 'local bonding' [Lokale Binding] up to 5 years.

As a result, **a growing number of refugee families are "stuck" in reception centres or emergency shelters, and face the risk of homelessness.<sup>53</sup>** When they do find housing, their first accommodation is often expensive, small, and/or insalubrious. In response, **informal "sleep merchants" have emerged to fill this gap<sup>54</sup>**. This difficulty in finding access to housing, which often extends into several years after their recognition, **interrupts refugee families' trajectories in terms of finding work, following education, and developing social networks.<sup>55</sup>**

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<sup>47</sup> See also : [Comment sortir de la crise de l'accueil ?](#) , *Rapport du Ciré*, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Beeckmans L. & Geldof D. (2022). Reconsidering the interrupted housing pathways of refugees in Flanders (Belgium) from a 'home-making' perspective: a policy critique. *Housing Studies*, 1-23; Wyckaert, E., Wyckaert, Leinfelder, H., De Decker, P. (2020). Stuck in the Middle: The Transition from Shelter to Housing for Refugees in Belgium. *Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning*, 4(1), 80-94.

<sup>49</sup> 6014 places in January 2020; 4534 in January 2024. See Fedasil (2025) [Réseau d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile en Belgique](#).

<sup>50</sup> See [the letter that the federation of CPAS addressed to the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration](#).

<sup>51</sup> See [this report](#) from CBAI

<sup>52</sup> See UNIA (2014) [Baromètre de la diversité : logement](#); See also: Verhaeghe, P. P., & De Coninck, D. (2022). Rental discrimination, perceived threat and public attitudes towards immigration and refugees. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(7), 1371-1393.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a Social and Administrative Information Service, providing first-line support and assistance with asylum procedures, as well as with the integration of IPs (March 2023). By the end of 2022, around 2,000 asylum seekers had no place in accommodation center – See Ciré, (2022) [Comment sortir de la crise de l'accueil ?](#)

<sup>54</sup> Interview with the manager of an NGO setting up temporary housing projects for IPs during the period of transition. April 2022. See also Saeys, A., Vandevordt, R., & Verschraegen, G. (2018). Samenleven in diversiteit: kwalitatief onderzoek naar de perspectieven van vluchtelingen. Brussels: Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur.

<sup>55</sup> Beeckmans L. & Geldof D. (2022). Reconsidering the interrupted housing pathways of refugees in Flanders (Belgium) from a 'home-making' perspective: a policy critique. *Housing Studies*, 1-23.

#### 4.5.2 The Negative Effects of Insecure Housing on inclusion

Wherever refugee families have ultimately settled, most of our interlocutors had **as a first home a studio apartment that was too expensive, too small and often unfit for habitation** due to humidity problems, lack of a heating system, or pest infestations. Some have benefited from **transit housing** provided by the non-profit sector, giving them the time that they need to find housing on the private rental market. Others find themselves living in **emergency shelters** for several months or even years.

**It often takes several years before refugee families find adequate housing.** Many of our interlocutors were only able to do so through social housing, after a period of having been on the 'waiting list', or, eventually, by buying a property themselves. Until they do so, refugee families' trajectories are marked by **frequent changes of accommodation**, and by a situation of poor housing. This has a strong impact on their overall 'integration' trajectories.

**First** without housing, they run into several **legal-administrative problems which hamper their access to a wide range of public services**. They are caught in a vicious circle: without housing, it is not possible to obtain an identity card, and without an identity card, landlords are all the more reluctant to sign a rental contract. In the case of a **family reunification procedure**, when it is not launched in the first year, the granting is conditional on having adequate accommodation to receive the family members. Yet often, until the family is reunited, the applicant spends their time putting together the file, and has not yet achieved financial independence or sufficient income to be able to rent a property that is suitable to accommodate their families.

Second, as long as refugee families are not settled, they **devote a significant part of their time to finding housing before enrolling in professional or language courses and looking for a job**.

One of our interviewees, who was evicted from his home due to its insalubrity, found himself unable to sign his employment contract, as he no longer had a domicile.

*When you don't have a house, you don't have an address, you don't have a contract. (Iraqi father, 15.11.2022)*

Due to housing problems, a mother who arrived in Belgium several years earlier had to put her children in boarding school while she found a solution, and interrupt the training she was about to finish.

*I started the training, I did the first module, the second module, the third we were going to start, but the housing problem at home was terrible, so I had to leave everything, everything... (...) And the supervisor said to me "I can see that it's too heavy for you, you won't be able to... it's better that you find accommodation first, because if you find accommodation, you'll be able to relax, you see these days, you can't work properly. (Congolese mother, 29.09.2022)*

**Third**, living in poor housing conditions has a **negative impact on children's ability to do well at school** due, for instance, to the lack of space to study.

*We all sleep on the floor, we don't have enough mattresses, in fact on two single mattresses we sleep four. [...] I study on the floor, I don't have a bed, I sleep on the floor too. (Young Syrian family member, 02.12.2022)*

What's more, **successive changes in housing mean successive changes in the schools attended**. The daughters of a Syrian family changed school 3 times since their arrival, six years ago, due to their several relocations.

*The first school was in Saint-Josse. It was very far, we had to use public transport a lot, [...] So, I changed the school to Schaerbeek, next to us. Then we moved here, Schaerbeek is very far, so we changed schools here. But as it is not a secondary school, we have to change again. (Syrian father, 06.03.2024)*

Fourth, inadequate housing **affects the health of families**. Especially for refugee families with **young children**, housing represents a constant source of anxiety which **hampers their ability to plan for the future**.

*When you're responsible for a family, but you're not stable, you can't project yourself in life, because you say to yourself a few months later I'm going to change; you can't even equip your house, for example, because you say, if I buy stuff, and then I move, and it's not up to standard... so there are lots of things that keep you unstable. (Burundian father, 11.03.2024)*

Fifth, interrupted housing trajectories have a **negative impact on refugee families' access to all formal and informal support**. On the one hand, each change of address involves navigating a **new administrative context** (change of CPAS/OCMW, municipality, mutual insurance company, etc.). This is exacerbated by the lack of translocal communication and collaboration between social services in different locations (see PB 'integral support'). On the other hand, the process of building up a strong and diversified **social network** is also slowed down by regularly moving throughout Belgium in search of adequate housing.

#### 4.5.3 Innovative Practices

Within this challenging policy context, various actors have developed innovative practices to support refugee families in their efforts to find housing. These practices have emerged mainly from the bottom-up, whether from local state actors, civil society organisations, or collaborations between them<sup>56</sup>.

"**Transit housing**" has been provided by several organisations (e.g., Caritas International and Convivial), especially for vulnerable families and non-accompanied minors during the transition period between receiving protected status and starting up their integration trajectories. This gives families the time they need to find a more durable housing on the private rental market, and is combined with transversal support during the period of their accommodation.

Another innovative practice is the development, of a **network of "solidarity landlords"** who agree to rent their accommodations to refugee families. Organisations such as Convivial and Caritas International then act as intermediaries between the former and the latter. This practice can also be observed more informally in volunteer movements, which also act as intermediaries between certain owners who are part of their social network, and refugee families they accompany.

Some **public authorities** (e.g., Brussels Housing Fund BRU-GAL) have offered **interest-free loans** for paying the rental guarantee and the first month's rent.

Lastly, some NGOs (e.g. SINGA) have established **shared accommodation** for refugees, where they live with people who can guide them in their new environment for several months.

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<sup>56</sup> Geldof, D., D'Eer, L. & Robeyns, L., (2019). 'Before you can make a home, you need to find a house. How volunteers support refugees in Flanders in the search for houses and/or homes.' In: Gola, A. Singh, A. Singh, A. Eds. Displacement & Domesticity since 1945: Refugees, Migrants and Expats Making Home. Leuven: KU Leuven, pp. 217-223.

However, most of the actors offering these services have **limited resources**, and are **structurally overwhelmed** by the needs on the ground. More formal support services are generally lacking, both on a federal, regional and municipal level. Instead, the support provided in reception centres, by CPAS/OCMWs and NGO is **scattered, fragmented and often limited in time**. As a result, access to housing, the first step towards ‘integration’, depends heavily on the support that is offered by volunteers, NGOs, social workers and refugee families’ own networks.

#### 4.5.4 Policy recommendations

##### For Fedasil and the State Secretary of Asylum and Migration:

- Fund the **setting up of either a housing service or the designation of a social worker in each reception facility**, whose mission is to guide refugee families in the process of finding housing, and to initiate contact with municipal services (e.g., CPAS/OCMW) they have to register to as soon as they have an address.
- In line with earlier requests from CPAS/OCMWs<sup>57</sup> and actors in the field<sup>58</sup>, **stabilize and invest in Local Accommodation Initiatives (ILA/LOI)**, so that CPAS/OCMW can both build capacity for accommodation, and for supporting the transition into the regular housing market (see Policy Brief 1 on transition After Recognition).
- **Increase the duration of accommodation in ILA for refugee families**, to give them sufficient time to find sustainable housing.

##### For Ministries and Departments responsible for Housing in the Flemish, Brussels and Walloon Regions:

- Invest in “**transit infrastructures**”, giving refugee families access to temporary housing when they leave the accommodation centre and have no housing solution. This needs to be **combined with administrative support and assistance in finding sustainable housing**. The actors involved in these transit infrastructures would act as a relay to the municipal public services and CPAS/OCMW, as well as to regional reception and integration offices (AGII, CRI, BAPA).
- For the Flemish Agency for Living in Flanders: **reduce the weight of the ‘Lokale Binding’ criteria** in decisions to allocate social housing, especially in case of urgency due to housing conditions or the risk of homelessness.
- Structurally guarantee a **10% rate of social housing** in the overall housing market, in each municipality;<sup>59</sup>
- Make it **administratively easier** for owner/tenants-occupiers and refugee families to live together, without losing any income (such as social assistance) in case of cohabitation.
- Develop **mechanisms to increase the overall affordability of private housing to all persons in needs**, as recommended by various associations involved in housing issues (e.g. rent control/rent allowance, facilitating access to land for organizations offering transit or solidarity housing, requisitioning unoccupied buildings to increase the supply of temporary housing, etc.)<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See [the letter that the federation of CPAS addressed to the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration](#).

<sup>58</sup> See: [Comment sortir de la crise de l'accueil ?](#), Rapport du Ciré, 2022.

<sup>59</sup> The percentage of social housing in the total housing market was 5.6% in Flanders, 5.3% in Wallonia and 7% in Brussels in 2015. See Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale (2018) [Des faits et des chiffres. Combien y a-t-il de logements sociaux en Belgique et combien de personnes sont-elles inscrites sur une liste d'attente ?](#)

<sup>60</sup> For Brussels, see: Dessouroux, C., Bensliman, R., Bernard, N., De Laet, S., Demonty, F., Marissal, P., & Surkyn, J. (2016). ‘Le logement à Bruxelles: diagnostic et enjeux.’ Note de synthèse BSI. Brussels Studies. See also « [Le Baromètre du Logement](#) », RDBH/BBRoW. Crisisplatform Wonen (2017) [Dossier: Huisvesting](#).

### For municipalities and CPAS/OCMW

- With support from the Regional Government, make "**transit accommodation**" available in every municipality, by the reconversion of unoccupied buildings for refugees, and by making unoccupied social housing available;
- Systematize the **registration of refugees on waiting lists for social housing** and at Social Housing Agencies, in partnership with CPASs;
- **Guarantee CPAS access to the installation allowance**, and administrative assistance to benefit from regional rental aid

## 5. DISSEMINATION AND VALORISATION

Findings were presented in multiple formats to a variety of publics.

- 5 bilateral meetings with policy-makers: 3 with cabinets of the federal and regional governments, and 3 with representatives of municipal governments;
- 7 presentations and workshops to street-level practitioners in civil society organisations, municipal public services and federal government agencies;
- 2 bilateral meetings with specialised NGOs;
- 4 book launch events, including panel debates with policy-makers and practitioners;
- Press appearances in [De Standaard](#) (31 January 2025), [Visie](#) (11 March 2025) and [SamPol](#) (March 2025)
- A [Final conference](#) entitled Navigating the politics of (dis)integration: Refugee families' pathways to inclusion on 23-24 April 2025. This included ca. 60 international academic participants and ca. 20 local stakeholders;
- [16 presentations](#) during local and international academic conferences, in addition to 3 keynote lectures on academic events in Ghent, Brussels and Rotterdam.

## 6. PUBLICATIONS

### 6.1 Working papers and policy reports

Çolak F. Z. (2022), “Post-migration stressors and psychosocial well-being of refugee families”, REFUFAM Working Paper. Available at: <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REFUFAM-Working-paper-Post-migration-stressors-and-psychosocial-well-being-of-refugee-families.pdf>

Carlier L., (2024) “Expérience d’hospitalité et trajectoires d’inclusion de familles réfugiées à Tournai”, Refufam working. March 2024. Available at <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REFUFAM-Working-paper-Experience-dHospitalite-et-Trajectoires-dInclusion-de-Familles-Refugiees-a-Tournai.pdf>

van den Bogaard, R.-M., Desmet, E., Belloni, M., & Vandevordt, R. (2024). *Refugee families’ contributions to Belgian society : obstacles and mitigating practices*. UN Submission for the “Report on Revisiting migrants’ contributions from a human rights-based approach: a discussion on facilitating and hindering factors” of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. Available here: [https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REFUFAM\\_submission-UN-Special-Rapporteur-2024.pdf](https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/REFUFAM_submission-UN-Special-Rapporteur-2024.pdf)

### 6.2 Policy Briefs

Vandevordt, R., Orsini, G., Carlier, L., Debruyne, P., Geldof, D., & Groeninck, M. (2025). REFUFAM Policy Briefs: Introduction. Refugee families after recognition gaps in policy and support. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PB.-Intro.-EN.pdf>

1. Carlier, L., Orsini, G. & Vandevordt, R. (2025). REFUFAM Policy Brief 1. From international protection to integration. From International Protection to Integration. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PB1.-After-Recognition.-EN.pdf>

2. Groeninck, M., Geldof, D., Debruyne, P., Orsini, G. & Vandevordt, R. (2025). REFUFAM Policy Brief 2. Naar een geïntegreerd onthaal van vluchtelinggezinnen in Vlaanderen. <https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PB2.-Naar-een-geintegreerd-onthaal-van-vluchtelinggezinnen-in-Vlaanderen.-NL.pdf>

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