

## **OCMW/CPAS & NEW MIGRANTS/REFUGEES: OPENING THE BLACK BOX OF POLICY IN PRACTICE: RESEARCH SUMMARY**

### **Context, objectives and methodology**

Today's society is characterised by increased diversity, and this brings a number of challenges to public service delivery, including in the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs), which are the focus of this study. The diversification of beneficiaries, or in other words target users in different situations and with a broad spectrum of assistance needs (think students, the working poor, young people facing poverty, newcomers, etc.) means that traditional, customary strategies are reaching their limits; an approach adapted to the diversification of beneficiaries and their needs and expectations is needed. However, this is easier said than done. In this study, we focused specifically on the experiences of newly arrived immigrants and how PCSWs deal with this target group. This question is all the more relevant because PCSWs play a crucial role in the integration process of newcomers, both in the short and long term. Moreover, for many newcomers, contact with social workers constitutes one of the first contacts with local society. Moreover, the decisions taken within the PCSW can have an impact on the integration of newly arrived immigrants (e.g. in terms of job opportunities or housing).

To gain insight into the practices and interventions for newcomers in the Belgian PCSWs, a study was set up, financed by BELSPO. In this study, newcomers are defined as persons residing in Belgium for up to five years, having legal residence and coming from outside the European Union. The study ran from 2019 to 2022 and was a collaboration between HIVA-KU Leuven, CEDEM - Université de Liège, and CESIR - Université Saint-Louis - Bruxelles. The aim of the research was threefold, namely (1) to map practices and underlying strategies with regard to social integration and activation (and thus also provide insight into policy implementation), (2) to analyse which factors influence social workers' choices and decisions in this regard, and (3) to examine to what extent PCSWs are accessible to newcomers, and how these newcomers experience the services themselves. Thus, both the perspectives of social workers and management as well as the users were central to this study. Specifically, 197 interviews were conducted with social workers, management and committee members, and we also spoke to 87 newcomers/beneficiaries. In addition, a short survey was conducted among PCSWs in Belgium. The survey was sent out to 542 PCSWs and was completed by 99 chief social workers.

The results of this research are described in detail in a peer-reviewed open access book entitled *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system*,<sup>1</sup> as well as (more concisely) in the final report for BELSPO. From the set of findings, we selected some conclusions that stood out strongly during the analyses and at the same time have strong policy relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Conclusions and policy recommendations

### **1. High workload and intensity of working with newcomers puts 'social' work at risk**

The study shows that a lot of social workers experience a high workload and caseload. In this context, many PCSW social workers indicate experiencing an imbalance between the time spent on administrative work on the one hand (e.g. complying with established procedures, completing documents, drawing up reports, etc.), and the time spent on (social) support of beneficiaries, which is also referred to by social workers as 'actual social work'. Many social workers currently do not have enough time left for problem detection (assessing the needs and requests of the beneficiaries). These observations apply in general, not only to newcomers, but are experienced more sharply with this target group in a number of areas. First, the study shows that working with newcomers is on average more time-consuming compared to other beneficiaries. Needs assessment is even more easily compromised with newcomers, as administration takes over even more at the start. Moreover, language is often an obstacle in communication, which also has an impact on the content of assistance and services (see below). Newcomers also do not know the PCSW as an institution, which makes them less aware of what to expect or what to ask for, and thus also 'miss out' on help or support if it is not actively offered. In summary, the general context with a high workload, bureaucratic organisation and procedures that must be respected sometimes make it difficult in practice to provide the support that newcomers need.

### **2. Little transparency on conditions of supplementary aid**

Interviews with newcomers revealed that there is little clarity on what forms of support people are entitled to, and when. While the conditions for the social integration income are clear, this is much less the case for other forms of support. The foreign-speaking beneficiaries depend on their social worker for information about this, and the way this is provided varies between social workers. Not only information, but also the actual access to certain support, benefits or services varies in newcomers' perceptions, both between PCSWs and between social workers. This leads to a sense of arbitrariness in terms of the support received. Newcomers report seeing no underlying logic - nor knowing any rules about it - as to when certain forms of support are granted. It therefore often comes across as a 'favour', or an expression of 'good will' on the part of the social worker, rather than the result of a social right. The predominant logic in PCSWs of working individually and making case-by-case decisions requires discretion; the presence of differences on this basis is thus somewhat to be expected, and is also in line with findings from previous studies. Nonetheless, the extent to which newcomers feel they depend on a 'good' or 'not so good' social worker, or on luck in that regard, does stand out, and the perception of inequality is strikingly strong. From this point of view, we consider regular team meetings as an example of good practice to reduce differences in outcomes, provided that these consultations do not give rise to an equalisation 'downwards', but instead provide an opportunity to highlight the specific needs of newcomers and share the good practices of the most active and experienced social workers in this area. In addition, it also seems advisable to us - despite the need for discretionary space - to further focus on automatic granting of rights, as well as clear and transparent policies and information.

### **3. Need for a more consistent language policy to provide quality services to newcomers**

Based on the interviews with social workers, language-related communication problems emerged as a stumble block. Strikingly, the strategies that are used (and especially with what frequency and in what context) seem to vary widely, both between PCSWs and between social workers. Instead of relying on a professional framework that provides guidance on when to use certain tools or strategies (ranging from google translate to professional translation), it are personal opinions, preferences, practical considerations and ideology that seem to guide choices in practice, resulting in a diversity of approaches in the field. The absence of a clear and consistent policy at the local level is striking, given the importance of this issue: in line with previous international research on the subject, this study also clearly revealed that language has a major impact on how social worker and beneficiary understand each other, and consequently on the relationship that develops between them. Language also has an impact on effective access to support and services, and their quality. A workplace framework that encourages bridging language issues and gives social workers direction on when to employ which strategy could further improve the quality of services and promote equal treatment of newcomers compared to other beneficiaries.

### **4. Newcomers are in a dependent position and an administrative burden weighs on them in accessing help**

Throughout this study, it became clear how access to CPAS services for newcomers is coloured by strongly asymmetric power relations: as beneficiaries, they are in a strongly dependent position vis-à-vis the social worker and the CPAS in general. This dependency is exacerbated for newcomers vis-à-vis other beneficiaries, for example by their unfamiliarity with the system (what is a PCSW, how does it work, what can you expect, and so on), by their lesser knowledge of the language, or by their hope for family reunification, which is subject to conditions.

Related to this, it is also important to remember that the assistance and services provided by PCSWs also come at a price for beneficiaries, not so much financially but in other ways. In the study's literature review, we refer to the concept of 'administrative burden' (see e.g. Moynihan et al., 2014), which amounts to the costs that citizens experience when interacting with the public administration. Administrative burden consists of learning costs, psychological costs and compliance costs and has an impact on access to and use of services. Examples are the efforts it takes for newcomers to get to know the PCSW, its functioning, conditions for support, etc. (learning costs), the cost and accompanying stigma of being welfare-dependent instead of being able to provide for their own (and better) income (psychological costs), dealing with the controlling nature and the stress that comes with it because mistakes can have consequences for receiving a living wage (compliance costs), being sent from pillar to post for the right documents (compliance costs), etc. Based on the experiences of newcomers, it is clear that compliance costs are sometimes high. Although PCSWs seek to increase the autonomy of beneficiaries, monitoring practices and the burden of procedures often have an opposite effect in practice. In short, if PCSWs want to improve their accessibility for newcomers, there is a lot to be gained from reducing the administrative burden, because - as it is described in the literature - '*small costs can mean a big deal*' (Moynihan et al., 2014: 147): they determine not only beneficiaries' experiences with the organisation (i.c. newcomers in the PCSW), but also the choices made by indi-

viduals, e.g. whether or not to apply for support, whether or not to bring something up with the social worker.

### **5. Social workers have a central role regarding the access to the labour market**

In terms of activation, social workers stressed that there are big differences between newcomers (depending on their profile - such as age, gender, residence status, for example - but also on previous education and experience, opportunities that present themselves, etc.), but overall, the path to work is considered a big challenge. Although there is cooperation with VDAB/Forem/Actiris and other organisations in the field of labour market activation, social workers in PCSWs are the main players in the guidance/trajectory to work. With regard to labour market activation, it turned out that newcomers should not only be considered 'willing to work' but also employable and ready for entry to the labour market. In practice, social workers therefore usually do not follow the 'work first' principle - which assumes that work is an important springboard to integration and for that reason should get priority - but often choose to encourage (or more or less oblige) the newcomer to go through a number of other steps first, especially - but not exclusively - in terms of language acquisition (also depending on the newcomer's profile). Labour market activation often comes later for newcomers compared to other beneficiaries, as other (intermediate) objectives take priority, think of learning Dutch/French or attending training, (from the social workers' perspective) in view of a realistic and sustainable labour market integration. Social workers indicated that they (felt they) had to temper the expectations of newcomers in terms of labour market entry. In short, guidance towards work is an important objective for social workers in their counselling, only this process consists of many steps with newcomers. For newcomers, the condition of 'willingness to work' linked to receiving a social integration income is often translated into demonstrating willingness to take 'preparatory steps', such as learning Dutch/French, but also working on other pre-conditions or following training. The above also implies that social workers act as a kind of gatekeepers to employment.

### **6. Need for greater awareness of challenges for newcomers**

Finally, the analyses also showed that awareness of the challenges faced by newcomers varies greatly between social workers and between heads of service, and this has an impact on service provision in practice. More generally, we found that there was - on average - little reflection on accessibility for newcomers within PCSWs, and little questioning of the 'system' and current practices in this sense. This also affects the appropriateness of the service, which is a dimension of accessibility. In addition to addressing the challenges and problems identified through this study, it is therefore necessary to focus on further strengthening staff and those responsible for working with newcomers, for example through training, exchanging experiences and sharing good practices. An interesting practice we observed in the field - when there is no separate/specialised service within the PCSW for following up files of newcomers - is to work with local 'specialists', namely a designated team member with experience and affinity with newcomers whose task is explicitly to share knowledge and to be a point of contact in case of questions or doubts. This example comes from a metropolitan context in which quite a few teams work and manage files of newcomers, where the different specialists also had a common agenda, followed training together and shared experiences (in other words, the specialists acquire expertise and disseminate their knowledge). However, this also seems an interesting and workable

concept to us in smaller contexts, more particularly by appointing a specialist per municipality and exchanging experience and taking initiatives at an inter-municipal level. In this way, the specialised team member can disseminate expertise within the municipality, but also has his/her own network in case of questions or doubts, and difficulties can be signalled more widely. Along the same line, a diversity specialist active within a partnership/network of municipalities could also add value.

**Keywords:** immigrants, street-level bureaucracy, accessibility, welfare state, social rights