

POLICY BRIEF 5

HOUSING: THE FIRST STEP IN REFUGEE FAMILIES' INTEGRATION TRAJECTORY?

This policy brief is relevant for:

- Fedasil and the State Secretary of Asylum and Migration
- OCMW/CPAS, Local Accommodation Initiatives (LOI/ILA) and Municipalities
- Ministries and Departments of Housing in the regions of Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia Regions
- Social Housing agencies

REFUFAM examines the **effects of government policies on the integration trajectories of refugee families**. These *Policy Briefs* are based on interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 99 street-level practitioners and local experts. By *refugee families* we understand families in which at least one person has acquired international protection, either through refugee status or subsidiary protection.

SUMMARY

Housing is the first step in the integration trajectories of refugee families, as well as for other groups of newcomers¹. Yet while having a stable home is crucial to find work, invest in education and develop a social network, there is little institutional support to find housing. Drawing on both

original and existing research, this policy brief describes **the consequences this struggle to find housing has for the integration trajectories of refugee families**. After pointing out innovative practices, we formulate several **recommendations** that include, amongst others, the systematic implementation of **housing support services** and the provision of **temporary accommodation** during the period of transition.

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 months².

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 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.³ 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.⁴ While ILAs/ILOs

¹ See [this report](#) from CIBAI

² 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.

³ See also : [Comment sortir de la crise de l'accueil ?](#), *Rapport du Ciré*, 2022.

⁴ 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.,

have the mission to offer this support, their numbers have been substantially reduced in favour of collective centres.⁵ Many **CPAS/OCMWs** do not have sufficient resources to support refugee families' search for housing.⁶ And while **regional governments** are principally responsible for the domain of housing, they are remarkable 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 market⁷. 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 discrimination⁸. 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.**⁹ 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**¹⁰. 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.¹¹

FINDINGS

1. The Negative Effects of Insecure Housing on 'Integration'

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

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.

⁵ 6014 places in January 2020; 4534 in January 2024. See Fedasil (2025) [Réseau d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile en Belgique](#).

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

⁷ See [this report](#) from CBAI

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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 ?](#)

¹⁰ 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., Vandevoordt, R., & Verschraegen, G. (2018). Samenleven in diversiteit: kwalitatief onderzoek naar de perspectieven van vluchtelingen. Brussels: Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur.

¹¹ 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.

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.
(Congolesse 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.

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 them¹².

"**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 BRUGAL) 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.

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.

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/OCMWs¹³ and actors in the field¹⁴, **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.

¹² 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.

¹³ See [the letter that the federation of CPAS addressed to the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration](#).

¹⁴ See: [Comment sortir de la crise de l'accueil ?](#), Rapport du Ciré, 2022.

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;¹⁵
- 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.)¹⁶

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 (relocation allowances in Brussels, moving allowances in Wallonia, installatie premie in Flanders)

FURTHER READINGS

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¹⁵ 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 ?](#)

¹⁶ 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.](#)

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