

POLICY BRIEF 4

LESSONS DRAWN FROM THE RECEPTION OF PERSONS WITH A TEMPORARY PROTECTION STATUS FROM UKRAINE

This Policy Brief is particularly relevant to:

- VDAB
- *Wonen in Vlaanderen* and the Flemish Ministry of Housing
- *Vlaams Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur, Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, Atlas vzw, Amal vzw, and Bon vzw*, and the Flemish Ministry of the Interior

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

In 2022, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (the Directive)¹, which granted persons living in Ukraine before 24 February 2022 a temporary right of residence in EU member states. Several policies were put in place in Flanders to provide for the rights of persons who enjoyed this temporary protection status. Based on interviews with first- and second-line practitioners, in this Policy Brief we

compile some insights on what we can learn from this to make the reception of other groups of refugee families more effective and efficient.

We formulate several policy recommendations, including: **prioritise housing and education** in the first phase after a protected status is granted; **facilitate and invest in temporary housing** during the period when refugee families are looking for permanent housing; and **apply language requirements flexibly in specific public services in the first year after recognition**, so as not to waste precious time on administrative hurdles and to make it easier for refugee families to find their way to quick and sustainable employment.

FINDINGS

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 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))

¹ Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced

persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof.

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 VDAB², 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 OCMWs³ 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.⁴ **Several frontline workers evaluated the delays in these obligations as a positive approach:**

"It is 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 our policy brief on 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!'"

(Congolesse 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**.

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 concluded⁵**, and **vacant dwellings and other buildings** - often awaiting renovation - owned by public institutions to be temporarily occupied for rental

² The Flemish Employment Agency (more [information](#)).

³ The Flemish Public Social Welfare Services (more [information](#)).

⁴ 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 begunstigen van het tijdelijk beschermingsstatuut*), reference 8775, 10 July 2023.

⁵ 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*).

through social housing companies.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

Especially in municipalities where more extensive support was offered to host families, this form of accommodation was perceived as very positive.⁹ 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 hampered by complex administrative procedures¹⁰ and by time limitations (max. 3 years).¹¹ 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 06¹² 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**.¹³ Considering that the development of this tool amounts to an investment of almost 3 million euros, it

⁶ Art. 5, ibid.

⁷The campaign was launched at the federal level by Sammy Mahdi (then secretary of state for Asylum and Migration) but continued to be shaped in policy terms by the Flemish government.

⁸ 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.

⁹ See also Schrooten, M. et al (2022). #PlekVrij. Particuliere opvang van Oekraïense vluchtelingen in België. Brussel: Onderzoekscentrum Sociaal Werk & Kenniscentrum Gezinswetenschappen (hogeschool Odisee).

¹⁰ Interview municipality C, 14.05.24.

¹¹ Orbit vzw, Handleiding: Melding Tijdelijk Wonen – voor zij die hun woning willen delen met erkend vluchtelingen.

¹² Circular of 3 March 2022 (n8).

¹³ As Refugee Council Flanders also endorses: see Refugee Council Flanders, Tien lessen die we trekken uit de voorbije maanden Oekraïne beleid.

would be efficient to give this tool a durable purpose by allocating temporary housing for refugee families.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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 rights¹⁸ 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**

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ Interview CPAS employee, municipality C, 04.12.2023.

¹⁶ See [Vlaanderen helpt Oekraïne](#) en [Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen](#).

¹⁷ VDAB, [VDAB helpt Oekraïense vrachtwagenchauffeurs de weg op](#), 6 november 2023.

¹⁸ The Flemish coalition agreement provides for a minimum (speaking) level B1 Dutch for social tenants.

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.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For *Wonen in Vlaanderen*¹⁹ 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.²⁰
- 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**²¹; make this a condition for municipalities to receive subsidies for the housing they make available through the tool.

¹⁹ The Flemish government agency on housing (more [information](#)).

²⁰ 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).

²¹ 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.

²² The Flemish Agency for Internal Affairs (more [information](#)).

²³ The Flemish Agency for Civic Integration (more [information](#)).

- **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*.**

For the *Vlaams Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur*²², *Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*²³ 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.²⁴ 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**²⁵ to ensure that

²⁴ 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*).

²⁵ 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).

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.**²⁶ 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 VDAB²⁷:

- **Encourage the use of employees' right to training leave**²⁸ as an opportunity to continue taking Dutch language classes during office hours.

READ MORE?

- Federaal Instituut voor de bescherming en de bevordering van de Rechten van de Mens (FIRM), Myria, Unia, Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, het Kinderrechtencommissariaat & Délégué général aux droits de l'enfant (DGDE). (2022). [Van goede praktijk naar structurele beleidsmaatregel: Beleidsvoorstellen naar voorbeeld van het onthaal van Oekraïners op de vlucht.](#)
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Thanks to all interlocutors and other experts for sharing their insights with us

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²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The Flemish Employment Agency (more [information](#)).

²⁸ 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).