



gent:

Anticipating the exodus

GHENT REFUGEE TASKFORCE

CONTENTS

Anticipating
the exodus

GHENT REFUGEE TASKFORCE

ONE	Background Situation	6
TWO	Refugee Taskforce	8
THREE	Reception	14
FOUR	Volunteers	16
FIVE	Language	20
SIX	Welfare and Health	22
SEVEN	Social Relations	28
EIGHT	Leisure	34
NINE	Education	40
TEN	Housing	46
ELEVEN	Employment	50
TWELVE	Neighbourhood-Level Approach	56
THIRTEEN	Considerations	60



Foreword

4



Dear readers,

5

During 2015, the flow of asylum seekers into Europe reached a new peak. For this reason, the City of Ghent and the Ghent Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW) started preparing for the influx in August 2015. The Refugee Taskforce was set up with the support of the mayor and all the councillors. This working group ensured a proactive approach and a broad partnership between all the services involved, numerous civil society organisations, civic initiatives and citizens in order to give asylum seekers in Ghent opportunities to build a new life here.

The players in the Refugee Taskforce responded to the concrete needs of refugees. They created networks for every area of life: health and welfare, language, housing, employment, education and leisure. As a result, newcomers feel supported from day one in their path towards self-reliance and smooth integration into their new society.

The arrival of newcomers also causes some concern. This is a very human reaction. In Ghent, it has proved beneficial to keep focusing on open communication, dialogue and bringing people together: talking to each other instead of about each other.

At a European level, the approach adopted by the Ghent Refugee Taskforce was awarded an URBACT Good Practice label. Migration has always formed part of human existence, and diversity (or super-diversity) in cities is the complex but fascinating reality. As a result, this publication can be regarded as a reliable and inspirational guide that is full of ideas for the future.

Numerous initiatives and partnerships have now been embedded into mainstream operations. For this reason, and because the Flemish subsidies for the increased influx of refugees are being discontinued at the end of 2018, the board has decided to dissolve the Refugee Taskforce in mid-2018.

Nonetheless, the City of Ghent and the OCMW will continue to commit providing refugees with high-quality reception and support. The true strength and power of the Refugee Taskforce always lay in the day-to-day deployment of professional staff, the numerous civil society organisations and their volunteers, civic initiatives and committed citizens. We will continue to encourage these networks, because working together really works.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to you all. You are the driving force behind an “Inclusive Ghent”!

Rudy Coddens

Chairman of the Refugee Taskforce

Background Situation

The European refugee crisis has been making itself felt in Belgium since 2015. The Belgian Immigration Department (DVZ) registered 35,476 asylum requests that year, twice as many as the year before.

In the summer of 2015, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) therefore decided to expand the reception capacity for refugees by 12,100 places. Fedasil put out a public tender to which the private sector could respond with a view to organising collective reception centres for refugees. In addition, Fedasil called upon local authorities to create additional places in their individual centres.

Reception locations in Ghent

When asylum seekers arrive in Belgium, Fedasil assigns them to a reception location. The refugees can stay there while their asylum procedure is being processed, during which time they are entitled to accommodation, sanitary facilities and food. In 2015, the City of Ghent had 50 reception spaces in the “Stedelijk Opvanginitiatief” (Urban Shelter Initiative or SOI). In Ghent, SESO vzw also offered shelter to around 30 refugees under the auspices of the agreement between Fedasil and Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (Flemish Refugee Action).

In January 2016, the SOI expanded its capacity by another 35 places. In March 2016, these were joined by another 250 places on the Reno. The Reno – known locally as the ‘Ponton’ – is a converted boat which was moored in the Muide district. This temporary reception initiative was commissioned by Fedasil and operated by the private company G4S Care. At that time, Ghent therefore had 365 places where Fedasil could place asylum seekers.

Although this did create additional reception locations, the number of asylum requests halved in January 2016 compared with the previous month. The federal government decided to reduce the number of reception locations. In Ghent, this led to the closure of the Reno (March 2017) and the reception structure provided by SESO vzw (June 2017).

Procedure

The asylum procedure often took longer as a result of the increased influx. During this period, asylum seekers remained in a reception project. If their request is approved, asylum seekers are given international protection status either as recognised refugees or people with subsidiary protection status. Since the end of 2015, recognised refugees can no longer remain in Belgium indefinitely. Instead, their status only becomes definitive after a period of 5 years. People with subsidiary protection status must request the extension of their residence documents on an annual basis.

Figures for Ghent

At the end of 2017, Ghent had around 2,250 people with international protection status.¹ This figure represents 0.9% of the Ghent population. Most of these people are young men from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Somalia. Some of them have now also requested family reunification, leading to around 400 extra newcomers at the end of 2017.

¹Source: General Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons (<http://www.cgvs.be/nl/actueel/asielstatistieken-overzicht-2015>) and Civil Affairs Department of the City of Ghent

Refugee Taskforce

Previous migration flows have shown that a proactive approach makes it possible to respond to new challenges more quickly. For this reason, the City of Ghent decided to set up the Refugee Taskforce in August 2015 before more refugees arrived.

Expanding functional networks

The approach of the Refugee Taskforce revolves around the refugees, whether they are asylum seekers or Ghent residents with international protection status. These newcomers have talents, qualities and various needs in the areas of health and welfare, language, leisure, housing, employment and education. Services provided by the city and OCMW Ghent, alongside partner and civil society organisations, operate in each of these areas. Many citizens are also keen to help refugees.

Support from day one

From day one, as soon as refugees arrive in Ghent, the Refugee Taskforce tries to establish functional networks in every area of their life. In order to do so, it calls upon the combined expertise of the policy, administrations, civil society organisations, civic initiatives and individual committed citizens.

The asylum procedure, which takes a long time, may or may not lead to international protection status. The recognition rate – the chance of being awarded this status – was fairly high in Belgium at the end of 2015, namely 60%. It is therefore important to start the integration process as soon as possible, from day one. Accelerated integration ensures that the newcomers have a more positive image and encourages widespread social support for their presence.

Organisational approach

The Refugee Taskforce is a political body which is chaired by the OCMW chairman. It consists of an official steering group with representatives of the city (Social Cohesion, Welfare and Health Department and Education, and Youth Department) and OCMW Ghent (Public Social Welfare Centre). The coordinator of the Taskforce (Welfare and Equal Opportunities Department of the City of Ghent) convenes meetings of the steering group for advice on policy decisions in the areas of asylum and refugee policy.

This steering group is fuelled by three thematic working groups: Reception, Integration and Volunteers and Awareness Raising.

The thematic working groups in a nutshell

The **Reception Working Group** focuses on reception capacity based on the current influx of refugees. Across the various reception initiatives, it combines experiences, signals and new needs on the part of residents in order to ensure an appropriate and coordinated response (see Section 3, p. 14).

The **Integration Working Group** consists of municipal and OCMW services and civil society organisations which focus on integration in one or several areas of life. Each area of life (housing, employment, education, health, youth, language and citizenship education) has its own contact person/coordinator and specific working groups. Focus of the working group(s): to help asylum seekers in reception initiatives and people with international protection status find support services and organisations. To the greatest possible extent, they call upon the ordinary range of services that are accessible to every local resident. This allows refugees to come into contact with local residents. Custom solutions are only created in response to specific needs.

The **Volunteers and Awareness-Raising Working Group** mainly consists of partner and civil society organisations which work with and for refugees and other vulnerable groups. This working group was set up in response to the spontaneous expression of civic solidarity – people wanted to donate supplies to refugees, help them get to know Ghent, help them learn Dutch etc. – and matches the forms of assistance on offer to concrete requirements. This working group is steered by the coordinator of the Refugee Taskforce and the Poverty Policy coordinator of OCMW Ghent: this is a strategic choice which aims to expand the wave of solidarity to other vulnerable target groups.

For the services, organisations and citizens affiliated with one of the working groups, the Refugee Taskforce offers clear added value as an overarching consultation platform. The Taskforce gives them first-hand information about the campaigns and initiatives of other municipal services, civil society organisations and civic initiatives which work with and for refugees in Ghent. In addition, the Taskforce brainstorms possible partnerships and synergies which transcend the known and familiar fields of activity.

Within this structure, the coordinator of the Refugee Taskforce plays an important role on various fronts as a bridging figure between the thematic working groups / subgroups and the steering group, the thematic working groups / subgroups themselves and the local authorities, Flemish, federal and (sometimes) European level.

The strength of the coordination mainly lies in the coordinator's mandate to bring services, organisations and citizens together. From this external helicopter perspective, the coordinator ensures the coordination of the vision, expertise, available manpower (professionals and volunteers) and financial resources (regular resources and various subsidy channels).

As a result, the approach adopted by the Refugee Taskforce provides a structured cooperation model with a clear division of roles and responsibilities, as well as a coordinated asylum and refugee policy which enjoys broad-based support.

In the beginning, the Refugee Taskforce met on a monthly basis to expand its innovative operations. As these operations took shape, the frequency dropped to once every six months from mid-2017.

Communication

The Refugee Taskforce informs local residents about all relevant decisions and initiatives through the regular channels of the City of Ghent and the OCMW (website, city magazine, social media, press releases etc.). Proper and transparent communication helps to overcome prejudices and increases social support for refugees. The policy chooses a constructive and unifying communication style, without shying away from concrete concerns and sticking points.

Financial situation

In the first instance, the regular resources of the City of Ghent and OCMW Ghent financed the operations and projects of the Refugee Taskforce. Since May 2016 through to the end of 2018 at the latest, in line with objective criteria, the City of Ghent can also apply for the Flemish subsidies which have been allocated to cities and municipalities to deal with the increased influx of refugees (Flemish Government Decree of 13 May 2016).

© Patrick Verheye, City of Ghent



During the 'Warmste Week' charity event (2016), CAW East Flanders (Centre for General Welfare Work) and Decathlon organised a human table football tournament for local residents and newcomers.

These Flemish financial resources have been temporarily or fully allocated to staff and/or operational resources during the period 2016-2018, for:

- **City and OCMW services**
 - general coordination (1 FTE at the Welfare and Equal Opportunities Department)
 - communication (0.5 FTE at the Welfare and Equal Opportunities Department)
 - housing coordination (1 FTE at the Housing Department)
 - specific residence-related advice (1 FTE at the Migration Info Point)
 - work (1 FTE at the Employment Department)
 - supervision of minor refugees and young adults (1 FTE at the Ankerkracht project, OCMW Ghent)
- **Partner organisation IN-Gent vzw, the independent agency which implements the citizenship education and integration policy on Ghent territory**
 - neighbourhood integration (1 FTE as a community networker)
- **Civil society organisations**
 - transitional housing (1.5 FTE at CAW)
 - buddy programme (0.5 VTE at CAW)
 - leisure (1 FTE at vzw Jong)
 - mental health (0.5 FTE at the Eclips Centre for Mental Healthcare)
 - mental health (0.5 FTE at the Mind-Spring project, CAW)
 - coordination of aid for people in need (De Olijfboom) (0.5 FTE at Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen)
 - voluntary work for refugees (0.2 FTE at Refu Interim)

By means of a partnership agreement, the City of Ghent has provided financial resources (both for staff and operational costs) for these civil society organisations to achieve specific goals.

- **Reinforcement of ordinary operating resources**, such as language support, by:
IN-Gent vzw, support to OKAN (reception classes for non-Dutch speaking newcomers) at the education centre Onderwijscentrum Gent, language camps by vzw Roeland etc.

The steering committee monitors the use of these resources.

Subsidies provided by the City and OCMW Ghent, Flemish subsidies for welfare and education and subsidies via the European Social Fund (the ESF project Werkplek Vluchtelingen Gent which helps refugees to find work) are also used.

The seven key aspects of the Refugee Taskforce are as follows:

- 1) To create a structure that has political support and involves all the parties concerned, with a clear division of roles and responsibilities
- 2) To communicate openly and transparently with citizens in order to overcome prejudices
- 3) To involve and support citizens and refugees from their earliest encounters
- 4) To build bridges between services, organisations, companies and citizens: coordination activities
- 5) To work inclusively where possible and categorically where needed
- 6) To have the courage to experiment and embed successful initiatives
- 7) If possible, to expand to other vulnerable target groups

More information about the Refugee Taskforce
<https://stad.gent/refugeetaskforce>

THREE

Reception

When the Taskforce was set up, the Reception Working Group consisted of representatives of the municipal cabinets responsible for the asylum policy, the OCMW, Facility Management, Fedasil, the Urban Shelter Initiative (SOI), SESO vzw, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (Flemish Refugee Action), the Association of Ghent Mosques and the diocese of Ghent.

In the first instance, the Reception Working Group provided an increase in the city's reception capacity for refugees. For example, they closely monitored the potential private initiatives for collective reception facilities in Ghent (see section 1, p. 6). During authorisation of the Reno temporary reception initiative, the private operator G4S Care joined this working group to ensure a smooth working relationship.

Responding to needs

This working group also detects signals and new needs on the part of residents and responds in a targeted and coordinated manner. The various reception initiatives had greater impact as a result of this exchange of experiences and information. The coordinator of the Refugee Taskforce also puts these needs (e.g. mental health, the search for housing etc.) onto the agenda of the other working groups and subgroups, and provides the Reception Working Group with regular feedback. The coordinator also brings the offerings of external parties – such as the range of leisure activities offered by cultural associations for refugees – to the attention of the Reception Working Group.

In this way, the cooperation model adopted by the Taskforce has often found a solution for needs common to the various reception initiatives. For example, many civil society organisations put their operations on a back burner during the summer. This leads to a reduced range of leisure activities. After an appeal, this gap was filled with useful initiatives: for example, police officers gave refugees road safety lessons to help them learn how to cycle safely in the city.

14
Reception

The Reno temporary reception initiative.

© Patrick Henry, City of Ghent



Teaching newcomers how to ride a bicycle.

15
Reception

Volunteers

16
Volunteers

The haunting media images of the flow of refugees in 2015 elicited a wave of reactions from Ghent residents expressing their solidarity. The Gent info helpline, city and OCMW services and civil society organisations were overwhelmed by citizens wishing to donate goods and basic supplies to refugees or help them in some other way.

The policy deliberately opted to integrate the strength of volunteers into the Refugee Taskforce, not just in order to increase operational effectiveness in this acute situation but mainly as a means of ensuring that people live respectfully alongside each other in a diverse urban environment.

Event for volunteers

The Refugee Taskforce organised an event for volunteers where potential volunteers and organisations for refugees could meet. On the digital platform Solidair Gent (<https://solidair.stad.gent>), citizens can also respond to requests from City services, associations and civic initiatives for desired items or a specific type of voluntary work (giving Dutch lessons, becoming a buddy etc.) for refugees. Thanks to its newsletter, Solidair Gent has now grown into a respected information channel for services and organisations working with and for refugees and other vulnerable groups.

This wave of solidarity led to the establishment of the voluntary organisation De Olijfboom as a giveaway shop and intercultural meeting point. Many local residents, with or without a migration background, also put themselves forward as buddies to help refugees find their feet (section 7, p. 28).

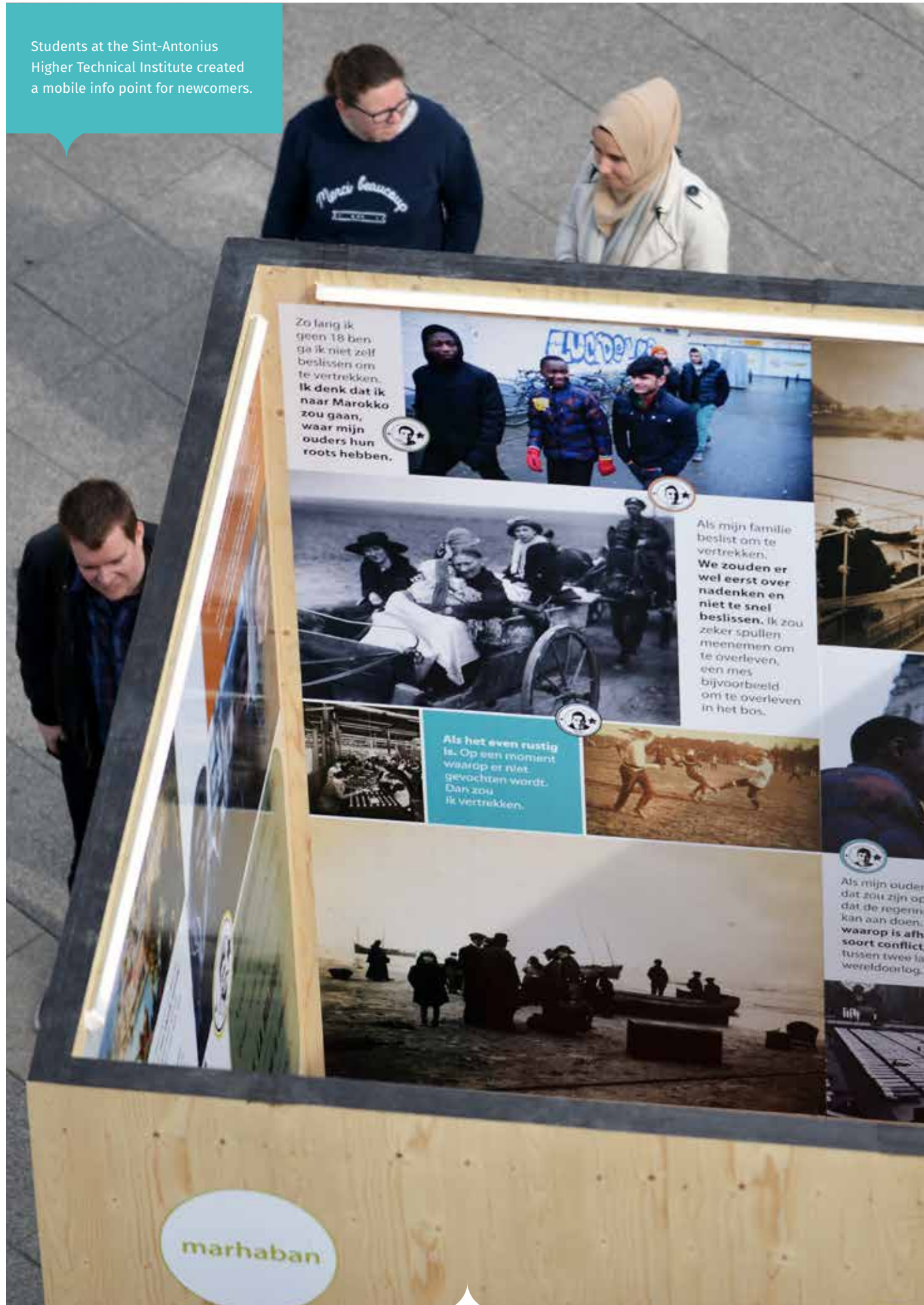


The City and OCMW Ghent support organisations and their volunteers by means of subsidies and by coordinating or facilitating their initiatives in terms of practical matters or communication. In collaboration with the Ghent Welfare Consultation, the “Vrijwilligerspunt”, or contact point for volunteers, arranges custom training sessions (e.g. self-care and care for others, intercultural communication, the use of clear language with non-Dutch speakers, the use of the social map etc.) for organisations and services and their volunteers. These training sessions give volunteers concrete guidelines on how to deal with refugees and also help them to refer people to the right services on the Ghent welfare landscape more quickly and accurately.

Students at the Sint-Antonius Higher Technical Institute came up with their own project for a city map showing places of interest to newcomers of their own age.

17
Volunteers

Students at the Sint-Antonius Higher Technical Institute created a mobile info point for newcomers.



© Patrick Henry, City of Ghent

Positive image

The Refugee Taskforce network initiated numerous awareness-raising campaigns which aimed to ensure that refugees and newcomers had a positive image: sharing Iftar (the meal immediately after sunset during the fasting month of Ramadan), opportunities for dialogue, creative workshops etc.

In April 2016, the street art festival Sorry, Not Sorry distributed 1000 small figurines – modelled on five refugees living in Ghent – in the streets and in public spaces in Ghent. Passers-by who found one of these figurines also immediately found out the refugee's the story. They could take the figurine with them and were invited to leave it in a different public space. In this way, the miniatures turned into travelling story-tellers: Moving People.

With municipal subsidies, the 4th-year electrical engineering students at the Hoger Technisch Instituut Sint-Antonius (HTISA) in Ghent developed their own project for a welcome package for young newcomers. Among other things, this package contains a handy map which shows newcomers locations in the city where they can exercise, watch a film, get together etc. They also incorporated these details into an interactive map at a mobile info point which allows passers-by to express their solidarity with newcomers.

In the context of the street art trail Sorry, Not Sorry (2016), Moving People distributed 1000 figures of Ghent refugees (Tourad, Kassem, Avin, Kassala and Claudine) on the streets and in public spaces in Ghent.

You can read their story on <https://www.movingpeople.nu>



© Patrick Henry, City of Ghent

Language

20

Language

After the fourth month of their procedure, asylum seekers receive a standard letter, informing them that they are entitled to an integration programme. This consists of a social orientation course, Dutch as a foreign language (NT2) and personal guidance. However, they can actually start NT2 right from day one of their asylum request. As soon as they receive recognition – often after a lengthy asylum procedure – they will be informed that an integration programme is compulsory. In practice, asylum seekers tend to start learning Dutch from the fourth month onwards at the earliest, or only after they have been granted international protection.

Access to NT2

However, many asylum seekers wanted to learn Dutch as quickly as possible in order to ensure better and faster integration. Under the auspices of the Refugee Taskforce, IN-Gent vzw (integration agency) and the various reception initiatives made arrangements to inform asylum seekers that they could start learning Dutch from day one. The reception initiatives organised group visits to IN-Gent vzw to facilitate access to the NT2 course and other services. As a result, many asylum seekers learned Dutch more quickly.

Newcomers during their civic integration programme.



© IN-Gent vzw

21

Language

Language promotion

Alongside formal Dutch language lessons in the NT2 course, the Refugee Taskforce places a strong emphasis on language promotion: creating a positive and stimulating climate in various contexts in which foreigners can learn, practise and use Dutch. Language promotion ensures that insufficient knowledge of Dutch does not form a barrier to participation in society. This is beneficial as active participation in various Dutch contexts (education, leisure activities etc.) does in fact accelerate the learning process. This vision includes scope for tools to bridge language barriers such as social interpreters, the use of contact languages (e.g. French and English), icons and the like, without detracting from opportunities to practise Dutch.

Some non-Dutch speaking residents do not have enough opportunities to practise the language or are afraid of using it in everyday life. Organising extra opportunities to practise speaking Dutch – such as conversation groups, language camps, buddy methods and intercultural meeting points – allows them to develop their language skills in a safe environment (see Section 7, p. 28).

IN-Gent vzw organises Dutch conversation groups for non-Dutch speakers arranged by language level, where people can practise Dutch in small groups. 'Op stap in je wijk met Nederlands' (Out and about in your neighbourhood in Dutch), a project run by the local OCMW service centres, encourages non-Dutch speakers whose progress has stagnated in the regular range of services to get out and practise speaking Dutch. Numerous civil society organisations also provide opportunities to practise speaking Dutch. For example, along with Het Perspectief Provincial Centre for Adult Education, Vormingplus Gent-Eeklo organises regular 'language carousels' for the Dutch-Arabic and Dutch-Russian language combinations. In these intercultural chat cafés, Dutch and non-Dutch speakers can learn to speak the other language better. They alternate between talking in Dutch and the other language about everyday things such as family, culture, food or education.

The Macharius Taalcafé (language café) is a fortnightly international exchange market where people can practise and exchange languages. The local services of KRAS vzw – a partnership between Ghent voluntary organisations which are working to combat poverty – regularly organise opportunities to practise Dutch. Schools also provide conversation opportunities for non-Dutch speaking parents.

Nederlands Oefenen is a monthly newsletter that brings together initiatives from the website www.nederlandsoefenen.be/oost-vlaanderen offering opportunities for people to practise speaking Dutch in Ghent and also providing digital tools to help people learn Dutch.

Welfare and Health

W

elfare and health include mental, social and physical wellbeing, with the focus on active efforts to improve this wellbeing. This section mainly focuses on the physical and mental aspects of welfare and health. Social relations will be covered in the following section.

Project 1: Development of a continuum of care in and provided by the reception centre

When the temporary private reception initiative the Reno was announced, the SOGA (urban health committee for asylum seekers and other vulnerable target groups), a working group which developed out of the Stedelijke Gezondheidsraad (Municipal Health Council), immediately stepped into action. The SOGA wanted to create a continuum of care for asylum seekers which starts on day one with their arrival at the reception centre and continues even after they leave.

Members of a multidisciplinary care team (GPs, nurses, psychotherapists and psychologists) were present on the Reno three days a week. Fedasil refunded the cost of these services, as long as a GP made an assessment and referred the patient on. In order to recruit GPs for this, the SOGA called upon the professional group General Practice and First-Line Healthcare at Ghent University, the Ghent Association of General Practitioners (HVG) and Ghent's district health centres. The centre leader of the reception initiative helped to find experts from the other disciplines.

The major advantage of having this group of care providers with roots in Ghent is that it is easy for them to refer people to other partners in their field. It was difficult to offer dental care on the Reno itself, for example, given the equipment required. For this reason, the SOGA organised regular visits by the Ghent University Dentomobiel: a vehicle which had been equipped as a dental practice to provide dental care in residential homes for the elderly.

The specific problems facing refugees were new to many of these care providers. For example, they had little experience of tropical diseases or symptoms of post-traumatic stress. An Afghan doctor who was once a refugee himself was employed by the professional group General Practice and First-Line Healthcare to fill this gap. His presence helped residents of the reception centre develop more trust in the care team. The team also started dealing with the patients in a more culture-sensitive way. This doctor also spoke two Afghan languages, which enabled him to resolve many communication problems.

Not only did the SOGA and care providers expand the first-line healthcare in the reception initiative itself, they also made clear working agreements with secondary care (care in hospitals or care after people have been referred by another care provider) and tertiary care (intramural care in specialist institutions).

Once asylum seekers have their asylum request approved, they need to leave the reception initiative within two months. For this reason, even during their stay in the reception centre, the SOGA taught them how to access primary healthcare themselves. This introduced them to the various types of care available (independent doctors, group practices and district health centres) and the services available out of surgery hours (GPs, pharmacists, dentists).

A multidisciplinary file was created for each of the asylum seekers in the PRICARE software used by the Belgian district health centres. This simplifies the transfer of data to the GP they choose if they are awarded international protection status. After the closure of the Reno, these initial experiences and the potential added value of the electronic medical records were reported to Fedasil.

Project 2: Development of the psychosocial counselling network

The life of a refugee is far from enviable: firstly there are the horrors they experience in the country of origin, then the need to leave all their possessions and loved ones behind and the dangerous journey to their country of destination etc. In Belgium, refugees are faced with an uncertain asylum procedure, a new language, a different culture and the challenge of integrating and building a new life: uncertainties, tension and stress which affect their mental health. Scientific studies have shown that around 10% of recognised refugees struggle with symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The same number of people suffer from depression, psychological issues and anxiety, possibly in combination with post-traumatic stress. They need psychological support.

The Refugee Taskforce was aware of this fact from the beginning. As a result, they developed an accessible and graduated network of psychosocial counselling for asylum seekers.

Step 1: Mind-Spring, resilience for people of all ages

IN-Gent vzw has been offering Mind-Spring group sessions since 2011. Thanks to financial resources from the Flemish government, CAW East Flanders also joined in.

Mind-Spring, developed by Paul Sterk from the Netherlands, is a psychological education group for asylum seekers and refugees that enables them to strengthen their mental resilience on the basis of their own strengths and talents. Group discussions and relaxation exercises help them to develop skills which make them more resilient. It is often not possible to transform difficult situations (with the accompanying stress and uncertainties) overnight. However, the way in which they deal with or look at these situations can make a huge difference. The programme consists of six two-hour sessions, with an optimal group size of ten participants. The following support is provided:

- a trainer with first-hand experience – a refugee or migrant who has already found his or her feet in this new society and taken the Mind-Spring programme – who will accompany the group in their mother tongue,
- a Mind-Spring-certified co-supervisor, who is professionally active in the social, medical or education sector,
- an interpreter (via IN-Gent vzw), if required.

Over the course of 2016 and 2017, 228 refugees took one of the twelve Mind-Spring courses, including three Mind-Spring Junior groups.

‘At last I can enjoy life again.’ (Fatemeh, Syria)

‘I am capable of more than I thought.’ (Pjot, Tajikistan)

‘I sleep better now.’ (Mamadou, Ivory Coast)

The increased influx of asylum seekers has led to an acute shortage of Mind-Spring trainers who speak Arabic, Pashto, Dari or Tigrinya. A Mind-Spring course in these languages resulted in 16 new Mind-Spring trainers. In addition, 26 extra co-supervisors were trained. IN-Gent vzw used volunteer contracts to remedy the shortage of Pashto and Tigrinya interpreters.

The existing Mind-Spring programme focuses on adult asylum seekers and young people between the ages of 14 and 18. With the founder of Mind-Spring and the financial support of the cities of Ghent and Sint-Niklaas, CAW East Flanders and IN-Gent vzw

Trainers, co-supervisors, Paul Sterk (the creator of the Mind-Spring programme) and colleagues developing the Mind-Spring Junior programme in 2016.



© Elmira Erstukajeva, CAW East Flanders

organised a course to develop a Mind-Spring Junior programme for refugee children and young people (between the ages of 8 and 13). The first ten supervisors started work under the expert supervision of Ghent University. During the Mind-Spring Junior programme, the parents are given the opportunity to follow a parallel pathway which supports the training received by their children.

After the Mind-Spring sessions, participants sometimes need to be referred through for individual psychotherapeutic support. For this reason, the next step in the psychosocial counselling for refugees was expanded and enhanced.

Step 2: Enhancement and expansion of psychotherapeutic support

It is not always easy for refugees to find their way to mental healthcare resources (which are often oriented towards the Western world) as a result of practical barriers (language, accessibility etc.) and cultural/intercultural ones. In addition, there is sometimes a taboo on seeking help for psychological problems. In turn, existing services feel insufficiently equipped to work with this target group.

The newly-founded consultation platform with the psychological service of OCMW Ghent, CAW East Flanders, private therapists, Eclips Centre for Mental Healthcare (CGG Eclips) and Ghent University have grown into an active network of organisations and therapists to provide refugees with regular psychological support and exchange experiences at monthly case meetings. As Western care providers are often less familiar with the concrete impact that a drastic experience such as fleeing or migrating from your home country can have on mental wellbeing, Ghent University organised information sessions on this subject.



Exercise to enhance mental resilience during a Mind-Spring Junior session (for children aged 8-13)

The Eclips Centre for Mental Healthcare (CGG Eclips), which has extensive expertise in trauma counselling for refugees, was already struggling to cope with waiting lists before the increased demand. Thanks to Flemish subsidies, the City of Ghent has made it possible for 60 refugees to follow an individual care programme at CCG Eclips.

“I remember the Chileans fleeing the dictatorship in their home country in the 1970s, often bringing serious trauma with them. We had little experience of that at the time. As a society, we must not forget to develop expertise in trauma counselling.”
(Dr. Jan De Maeseneer, Professor Emeritus, Ghent University)

Step 3: Specific resources for young people and young adults

Young people and young adults are a vulnerable group. Certainly the age of 18, the age of majority, is a sensitive turning point. That is when people often need to move into a home of their own and start further education and/or a job. Certain forms of support also stop at this age.

For this reason, OCMW Ghent’s Ankerkracht (Anchor Force) project aims to provide young people who are between the ages of 16 and 25 and have international protection status with multidisciplinary support in the areas of psychological education, identity and personality development, integration, participation and social and financial self-reliance. This is done through language acquisition, education, employment, network building, leisure activities and a multidisciplinary assistance programme. The approach involves both canvassing and outreach. The team invests strongly in breaking through resistance and taboos related to receiving help, and being visible available to young people on informal occasions. At the end of 2017, Ankerkracht had 85 current cases on its books.

The AMIF project² ‘Testing ground for centralised support for newcomers aged 15-19 from outside the EU’, run by IN-Gent vzw, develops a custom range of services for this target group: a social orientation course, a Mind-Spring programme, extra activities and individual guidance. In order to achieve this, IN-Gent vzw works in close collaboration with the further education coaches, Urban Shelter Initiative and other organisations in the Ghent region.

²AMIF: European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

Social relations

For newcomers, building a new social network in an unfamiliar environment with a different language and social conventions is no easy matter. In the first instance, their contacts often remain limited to other people with a migration background and there is a lack of 'social bridging' relationships, i.e. contact with people from Ghent society. And it is precisely these relationships that help people get to grips with the Dutch language and encourage social mobility. In these bridging relationships, the various groups talk to each other rather than about each other, giving prejudices less chance to take hold. Building social networks is therefore not an individual process, but a process which is shared between the newcomer and the host society. For this reason, the Refugee Taskforce also focuses on a neighbourhood-oriented approach in order to shape the relationships between newcomers and local residents (see section 12, p. 56).

"I worked as a volunteer at a summer festival alongside a local resident who did not think much of refugees. Despite the differences between us, we got talking to each other. I found that amazing, because in my country people tend to shoot rather than talk in those kinds of situations. In the end, we even became friends..."
(Mazen Ali Abu Marasa, from Gaza to Ghent)

This is why the Refugee Taskforce invests greatly in setting up social networks for refugees. This mainly happens through buddy programmes and the support of intercultural meeting points.

Buddy programmes

A buddy is a volunteer who develops a one-on-one relationship with a person in a socially vulnerable position in order to help them with specific tasks – such as finding a home – or to help them get to know the city or simply to do enjoyable things together. The Refugee Taskforce charted the buddy programmes of external organisations, both for refugees and for other socially vulnerable target groups. The Taskforce coordinator then brought various buddy initiatives together, aligned them and filled in any gaps, for

example with a buddy programme for unaccompanied minor refugees. The initiatives exchanged expertise and received additional training from the City of Ghent's contact point for volunteers.

Samen Gentenaar

Samen Gentenaar (Ghent Together) is a project run by IN-Gent vzw, in which volunteers commit to helping people with their integration process. Over a period of 3 to 6 months, the local buddy will help the newcomer get to know the city. During these fortnightly or weekly meetings, the newcomer will also practise speaking Dutch. With the launch of the Reno temporary reception initiative, the Refugee Taskforce intensified this buddy formula. In 2016-2017, this led to 150 active duos with around 20 different nationalities among the newcomers.

The buddy formula leads to close friendships.



© CAW Gent

A Samen Gentenaar duo: Johan (Ghent) and Mohamed (Syria)

“The school gives me words, but I didn’t have anyone to practise the words with. But when I talk with my buddy Johan and other people, I start to learn Dutch faster and faster.”
(Mohamed)

“Samen Gentenaar lasts for six months. Mohamed and I are already over time, but we are certainly going to keep in touch. Mohamed belongs to my circle of friends now. They are not separate worlds.”
(Johan)

Housing buddies

Housing buddies specifically help refugees with their search for accommodation (see Section 10, p. 47). After a successful search for accommodation, some housing buddies wanted to carry on supporting the person or family with international protection status. As a result, their role shifted from housing search buddies to that of housing assistance buddies under the auspices of the Knooppunt2GO project.

Knooppunt2GO

People with international protection status may be entitled to a living wage and the accompanying support of a social worker provided by the OCMW. This applies in around 90% of cases. As a result of this high figure, the OCMW social worker is the best person to refer the newcomers to the CAW buddy programme Knooppunt2GO if required. These buddies will provide practical administrative support (e.g. accompanying refugees to the health insurance fund to put their papers in order), carry out activities together, provide opportunities to practise Dutch etc. This will help the newcomer to build a social network. The Knooppunt2GO buddy will sometimes also act as a housing buddy, for example if the newcomer needs to look for larger accommodation as a result of family reunification.

Thanks to the Flemish subsidies in the context of the increased influx of refugees, a CAW East Flanders employee was freed up on a half-time basis from July 2017 to the end of 2018 in order to recruit, train and coach the Knooppunt2GO buddies.

30

Social relations

“I help refugees with practical matters such as requesting an internet connection, going through their post, recycling, explaining what a ‘structured communication’ is when it comes to bank transfers etc. As a buddy, you learn to put everything into perspective. So many of our worries are just ‘first-world problems’. You do need to keep a certain distance, though. However bad their situation may be, you can’t fix everything. Listen to what they need and help where you can. The art is to get to the point where you are no longer needed.”
(Hadewieg)

Intercultural meeting points

Intercultural meeting points encourage social contact between local residents and refugees or newcomers. Many refugees meet other local residents at existing organisations in Ghent’s active civil society, such as the KRAS services³, Hand-in-Hand, the walk-in teams at Kind en Gezin (Child and Family) and others. Several new intercultural meeting points also saw the light of day.

De Olijfboom

The haunting media images of the refugee crisis encouraged many local residents to donate items for refugees. When it became clear that refugees would be coming to Ghent, organisations and civic initiatives also wanted to collect supplies for Ghent refugees. The Refugee Taskforce took the initiative of streamlining this wave of solidarity along with Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen, the KRAS services, Victoria Deluxe, Helping Hands vzw, Hart boven Hard vzw and the reception initiatives. The civic initiative Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen received support which allowed it to offer starters’ packages of supplies in its giveaway shop De Olijfboom. The target group was immediately expanded to include all local residents who are making a fresh start, such as refugees, ex-prisoners, ex-psychiatric patients, victims of house fires etc. When they are referred to the initiative by care providers, starters can come here for clothing, household items, small electrical appliances and other necessities. De Olijfboom does not have enough storage space to store furniture. Starters can be referred through to two specific recycling shops in Ghent for furniture. From October 2016 to the end of 2017, De Olijfboom provided 2450 registered people with help getting started.

31

Social relations

³KRAS vzw is a partnership between Ghent voluntary organisations which are working to combat poverty.



Around 100 volunteers, a third of whom are newcomers, keep Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen running smoothly.

© Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen vzw

Supported by numerous volunteers, many of whom were refugees and newcomers themselves, De Olijfboom soon grew into a meeting point for refugees and local residents. Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen vzw expanded its operations to include workshops, encounters to bring people together, a buddy programme for unaccompanied minor refugees and the project 'Warme harten zoeken een thuis' (Warm hearts looking for a home, see Section 10, p. 48).

Dzjambo: intercultural encounters

Dzjambo, a project by Vormingplus Gent-Eeklo, organises meetings between local residents and non-Dutch speaking newcomers. On a monthly basis, there is an opportunity to talk and discover the activity programme for the month in question. The activities include cooking together, going on cultural outings or visiting a factory, for example. A culturally mixed group of volunteers prepares and supervises these activities. As a result, these Dzjambo activities lead to spontaneous connections and networks between local residents and non-Dutch speaking newcomers.

Activities within the refugee community

From within their own communities, refugees also organise initiatives which aim to familiarise newcomers with Belgian culture and to establish a bond with the neighbourhood and local residents etc. Examples include the Syrian-Belgian House, the Afghan National Union and the Somali and Eritrean communities.

An overview of all the initiatives can be found at <https://solidair.stad.gent> (only available in Dutch).

EIGHT

Leisure

34
Leisure

Like everyone else, asylum seekers and refugees need social contacts and something worthwhile to do with their time. Leisure activities play an important role here.

Participation in the regular range of activities

In order to provide refugees with the best possible chances of integrating and getting to know local residents, the aim is to give them as many opportunities as possible to participate in the regular, existing range of leisure activities (youth, sport and culture). Football is very popular among asylum seekers. The Sports Department of the City of Ghent, Netwerk Planeet Gent⁴ and spontaneous offers by clubs meant that most of them could join a Ghent football club. As the demand was greater than the existing supply, the Sports Department and Sportnetwerk Gent vzw organised extra football training sessions twice a week for a whole year. Three enthusiastic volunteers took on this commitment.

Refugees can get an UiTpas (discount card for leisure activities) at a reduced rate by means of a group pass which the Culture Department makes available to the reception initiatives. Just like all local residents, people with international protection status can also buy an individual UiTpas.

Thanks to subsidies in the context of the increased influx of refugees, VZW Jong expanded its operations for refugee children and young people to include the NIEMO project (mobile youth work for newcomers). This project team organises weekly activities for this target group, sometimes in response to specific demands (such as cricket and football). NIEMO also encourages these young people to participate in the existing range of sporting and cultural activities, provided both by VZW Jong and other leisure initiatives in Ghent. Every month, the programme includes a trip to a theatre or music show.

Dagje Planeet Gent, a collaboration between IN-Gent vzw, the Ghent Youth Service and numerous youth programmes, gave non-Dutch speaking newcomers (OKAN) in secondary education the opportunity to explore the local range of leisure activities.

© City of Ghent



© Patrick Henry, City of Ghent

⁴ Netwerk Planeet Gent is the consultation platform for the youth sector.



Initiatives such as the NIEMOCup football tournament and evening meetings with local residents help to expand the young people's network. The organisation of Mind-Spring Junior sessions (psychosocial support, see Section 6, p. 24) at VZW Jong helped many young people to overcome barriers to participation.

In addition, the regular range of leisure activities is enhanced by numerous spontaneous initiatives by organisations and citizens. The TimeOut project by NTGent (theatre company), in collaboration with numerous other stakeholders on the Ghent cultural scene, allows refugees to participate in cultural activities such as concerts, theatre, guided tours and workshops. Not only does this familiarise them with the range of cultural activities in the city, it also helps them to integrate more quickly. Civic initiatives also encouraged their integration: Critical Mass Gent organised cycling lessons for refugees and Dine With Us allowed local residents to invite newcomers and refugees to share meals in their own home. JES vzw organised a cycling tour for newcomers which lasted several days.

Voluntary work for refugees

Voluntary work is a valuable way for many people to spend their time. Many refugees also request the opportunity to work as volunteers. As part of its regular operations, IN-Gent vzw steers newcomers towards voluntary work. There are also initiatives such as the contact point for volunteers and Refu Interim, which help refugees to find voluntary work.

Contact point for volunteers

Ghent's contact point for volunteers approached specific organisations, City services and OCMW Ghent services in order to find a suitable match for potential volunteers. After an intensive round of awareness-raising, around ten organisations (including cultural organisations such as MIAT, NTGent and De Centrale) and summer festivals were prepared to take on asylum seekers, who often spoke little Dutch, as volunteers. Afterwards, it became clear that a minimum level of Dutch is not strictly necessary for a fascinating and educational voluntary work experience. In addition, the contact point for volunteers sometimes sent potential volunteers in the direction of the ESF project (see Section 11, p. 50).

Refu Interim

In 2016, Cirq vzw took the initiative of accepting refugees as volunteers for their Ghent Festivities production 'Batahlan'. As it was a great success and there was an explicit demand from refugees themselves, Cirq vzw set up Refu Interim: a temporary employment agency which finds refugees voluntary work in the cultural, social and leisure sectors. In 2017, the City of Ghent awarded a one-off subsidy through the Culture Department to set up Refu Interim in the cultural sector. In 2018, Refu Interim is calling upon the subsidies available in the context of the increased influx of refugees. In addition, subsidies from the Flemish Ministry of Culture are still available from 2018 to 2020.

Refu Interim aims to promote the social and professional self-reliance of newcomers by helping them to find voluntary work in the broad cultural, social and leisure sectors. They try to achieve an optimal match between the interests, talents and experiences of the people concerned and the voluntary work in an organisation. This ideal match demands a two-pronged approach: firstly, you need to discover the talents and skills of refugees and secondly, you have to ask voluntary associations about what they offer, the support they provide and their willingness to integrate diversity into every level of their operations.

When it was launched in February 2017, 250 newcomers registered with Refu Interim. Their pathway starts with a welcoming introduction, under the motto 'craziness as a lever for integration'. This is followed by an individual discussion and the volunteers are divided into work pools (bar, kitchen, handymen, people who work with the public, artists etc.). There are test and orientation moments for the volunteers – under professional supervision – as well as in-depth training sessions and courses. Leisure activities and group moments ensure a strong community feeling: full immersion in a warm, positive and non-discriminatory environment.

On the other front, Refu Interim assesses the potential voluntary association: operations, the activities they provide, the support they give volunteers (and any extra support needed) and efforts to integrate diversity into all layers of their operations. Refu Interim motivates organisations to tackle barriers to participation in their operations and to join in the preparatory phase, either through the use of their professional and artistic expertise or by contributing financial and logistical resources.

© Annelies Vanhove



Volunteers of Refu Interim
working during the Ghent Festivities

© Annelies Vanhove

In 2017, this two-pronged approach led to over 140 newcomers doing voluntary work in around 60 organisations in and around Ghent, mainly in the cultural sector.

In the future, Refu Interim wishes to enhance its operations by making the voluntary work tie in more closely with the regular labour market. In addition, depending on the subsidies awarded, Refu Interim aims to expand its approach to other sectors such as youth and sport and other Flemish cities and municipalities.

Education

The education sector in Ghent has a long tradition of welcoming non-Dutch speaking newcomers. The education sector works in close collaboration with both internal and external partners and organisations, such as the local consultation platforms.

The influx of children and young people into local schools remained fairly limited during the refugee crisis, however, even when the Reno temporary reception initiative was launched.

Each child or young person was given a place in a primary school with targeted language support to suit the needs of non-Dutch speaking newcomers (ATN) or in OKAN classes (reception classes for non-Dutch speaking newcomers) in secondary education. This was made possible thanks to frequent monitoring in collaboration with IN-Gent vzw. Initiatives were also undertaken for refugees who wished to progress to higher or adult education.

Requirements of the education sector

The education centre Onderwijscentrum Gent wanted to assess the needs of Ghent schools that had many non-Dutch speaking newcomers in order to provide them with targeted support. To do so, the Onderwijscentrum spoke to several schools during the course of the 2016-2017 academic year. They were found to have needs at three different levels:

Structural policy needs

The schools work within the context of regional and federal legislation. This causes specific barriers to the reception of non-Dutch speaking newcomers. For example, the assignment of hours and financing must be done at Flemish level. The schools lose impact and flexibility as a result and are struggling to cope with the high turnover of committed and motivated (OKAN) teachers. This places the continuous acquisition of expertise at risk, as the final report of the Flemish OKANS study also shows.

When the Reno temporary reception initiative closed, the federal approach prevented children from being able to complete the academic year at the school they were familiar with. The city, Fedasil, Reno and the schools made every effort to allow families with children to move house during the school holidays, but this was only partially successful.

Content-related needs

Teaching staff need specially adapted teaching and evaluation materials and databases which allow them to share this material with each other. They do not have ways to chart the progress of their pupils or the didactic support and expertise required to work with specific target groups, such as illiterate people or unaccompanied minor refugees.

Care-related needs

Children and young people from these target groups require specific psychological and social counselling. Teaching staff often feel that they lack sufficient training to respond appropriately to the children's needs and therefore require improved support and greater professionalism.

'Letter mosaic' workshop on 'Litter Day' in the context of our MOS project (environmental care at school).



© Mieke Broothaerts (Toren van Babel)



Learning to use a microscope in a biology lesson



Yoga session during the 'Exercise Day' in the context of the MOS project



As part of the *What's My Name* project, young people from the Provincial Trade and Language Institute (PHTI), including many ex-OKAN students, accompanied visually handicapped people before, during and after a performance by Opera Ballet Flanders in Ghent.

Working with non-Dutch speaking newcomers

The City of Ghent receives Flemish subsidies in the context of the refugee crisis. Some of these funds are allocated to reception classes for non-Dutch speaking newcomers, both in primary and secondary education. Onderwijscentrum Gent used these resources for the project *Aan de slag met anders-talige nieuwkomers: schoolteams versterken* (Working with non-Dutch speaking newcomers: enhancing school teams). This project will run until the end of 2018 and responds to the content and care-related needs of schools. The project also encourages schools to join forces across the various networks and levels.

Strengthening teaching staff and increasing their professional skills

This project invests heavily in the strengthening teaching staff and increasing their professional skills at a content-related level. In a co-creation project with university centres of expertise, 15 primary and secondary schools exchange experiences. They also develop educational toolkits for use in the classroom with non-Dutch speaking newcomers and former ATN/OKAN pupils. For example, these kinds of instruments help to chart the language level of a departing ATN or OKAN student in order to provide the next school with accurate information. Themes such as evaluation, transition and differentiation form the central focus.

This project, in collaboration with other partners, also focuses on strengthening and increasing the professionalism of teaching staff when helping the pupils with their psychological and social needs. Many teachers do not find it easy to work with newcomers who arrive in Belgium with a great deal of emotional baggage that is often traumatic.

Cultural education

This project also provides resources for workshops for and with OKAN and former OKAN pupils, in collaboration with Opera Ballet Flanders. These revolve around themes such as identity, connectedness and self-discovery. Under supervision, the pupils are introduced to various media such as music, drawing, video or dance. This gives young people different 'languages' in which to express themselves. This language of culture and creation often allows them to dig deeper than the Dutch language of education.

Follow-up education coaches

Follow-up education coaches help newcomers transition from their OKAN year into a subsequent educational stream that ties in with their interests and skills. This system was expanded in the autumn of 2016 in order to provide the students with better follow-up care. The follow-up education coaches combine their strengths and expertise in a cross-network partnership. They discuss practical cases, organise interviews and study days and develop materials and step-by-step plans. Since the 2016-2017 academic year, further education coaches in Ghent have been helping teachers who work with ex-OKAN pupils. Within the project, they are given a four-day training course in coaching skills and methods.

Digital platform

Finally, this project is also investing in a significant update of the portal site www.meertaligheid.be. Teachers and other interested parties are still looking for concrete information, guidelines and toolkits on the subject of multilingualism. The website also features recent scientific research. This is translated in a comprehensible manner in order to provide professionals who come into contact with multilingual children with good and accurate information.

Access to higher or adult education

Since 2016, Ghent University has noticed that more recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection status wish to study at the University. In 2017, there were 114 refugee students. Some of them have also showed an interest in employment or a research position at Ghent University.

Diversity policy

Ghent University introduced an active diversity policy back in 2008 in order to attract talented students from under-represented or vulnerable groups in society. Ghent University's initiatives focus on supporting the target group on the one hand and the university's policy on the other, with the aim of eliminating barriers in the existing structures.

For example, Ghent University introduced a mentoring initiative in 2009. In this initiative, senior students voluntarily take a first-year student under their wing – giving priority to students from socially vulnerable groups – in order to help them find their feet at university. In 2013, this initiative was structurally embedded into the curriculum as a practical component of a university-wide elective subject. Refugees are encouraged to request a mentor.

Preliminary stage

In collaboration with IN-Gent vzw, Ghent University has been organising a preparatory higher education programme for non-Dutch speaking newcomers since 2014. These newcomers often have previous work experience and are looking for work that ties in with their skills. Their difficulties are often connected to the recognition of foreign qualifications and the language barrier. They are motivated to study (or retrain) at higher education level. The language and Western education system take a lot of getting used to. This one-year programme includes guidance on study choices and paths, academic study skills, an intensive Dutch language course with a focus on the academic use of language and elective modules which aim to refresh specific knowledge such as English, maths and research skills. After the preparatory higher education programme in 2016 and 2017, 40 people with international protection status already progressed to higher education.

Ghent University has developed specific communication channels in order to respond to the growing interest among refugees. A central point of contact for refugees was set up with information, internal references to suitable services and a reporting function to the administration. There is also an online platform with information about studying, PhD programmes or working at Ghent University: Search for 'Refugees welcome at Ugent' on the home page www.ugent.be/en. Both in 2016 and 2017, over 100 refugees attended information sessions and tours of Ghent University (with interpreters) during the targeted Refugee Welcome Day.

Since September 2017, Ghent University has been organising monthly information sessions for refugees about the opportunities for further study. Professional or voluntary refugee supervisors are given separate information sessions.

Housing

Once asylum seekers have been granted international protection status, they have to leave the reception centre within two months. This is determined by the federal reception legislation. Two months does not give these people much time to find suitable and affordable housing by themselves, certainly not in a central city such as Ghent where the range of (rental) housing is limited and expensive. During their search, 1 in 7 potential tenants also face discrimination because their name does not sound Flemish.⁵

The Housing working group of the Refugee Taskforce focuses on helping refugees with international protection status in their search for suitable accommodation. The working group includes representatives of the various reception initiatives (SOI, SESO vzw and the Reno, while they were active in Ghent), the CAW East Flanders, the Huurdersbond (Tenants' Association), the OCMW, the Housing Department of the City of Ghent, Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen vzw and Caritas International. This mixed composition gives the working group greater impact. The representatives share expertise and deploy the available resources and staff as efficiently as possible.

Support network

The Housing working group has developed a flow chart to serve as a guideline when guiding newcomers who are looking for accommodation. In each phase of this search, a supporting network is available to help them with everything from preparing for the search to individual support and the provision of a range of transitional houses.

Preparing for the search for housing

The preparation for the search for housing already starts in the reception initiative. When they are awarded recognition, newcomers are given an **initial orientation** about the housing market here. They can then participate in **training sessions** offered by the Housing Department in collaboration with the Huurdersbond (Tenants' Association). IN-Gent vzw provides interpreters in order to translate these sessions into the most

common language spoken in the reception initiative at that time. **The Housing Guide for Refugees** serves as a guide during these training sessions. This offers a handy step-by-step plan in the search for housing: where do you start? What should you look out for when you visit a property? Other relevant aspects such as social rentals, housing benefits, fire insurance and the living wage are also covered.

Download the *Housing Guide for Refugees*

https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/page/documents/20180118_18_00050_Folder_Wonen%20voor%20vluchtelingen_ENG_2_LR.pdf

Or search for 'Wegwijzer wonen voor vluchtelingen' on the home page www.stad.gent

This brochure, which is available in Dutch, French, English and Arabic, was produced by the Housing Department in collaboration with IN-Gent vzw and serves as a source of inspiration for other local authorities.

Individual support

If their time in the reception initiative is coming to an end and the search for housing is proving difficult, newcomers can call upon various forms of individual support.

Housing buddies are volunteers from CAW East Flanders who help newcomers to find suitable housing (see Section 7, p. 30). They will call the owners or head out together with the newcomer in search of affordable accommodation. They can help with the paperwork and the search for furniture and kitchen equipment. Often, housing buddies will also help the refugees to develop a social life from their new home.

The CAW East Flanders screens the volunteers and looks for a workable match between volunteers and newcomers. The volunteers receive support and coaching. The Housing Department and the OCMW organise regular training sessions for them. These cover the laws which apply to rented accommodation and the services of the OCMW (living wage, community etc.). The volunteers can also put forward specific cases during these sessions.

In collaboration with several volunteers, the Housing Department has developed a checklist with the minimum steps to be taken by housing buddies. This gives all the housing buddies the same basic information and makes it impossible to overlook any important steps.

In the period from April 2016 to December 2017, 53 out of a total of 59 people or families found housing thanks to the efforts of 43 housing search buddies, helped by 73 housing assistance buddies.

As well as being a useful form of social engagement, many housing buddies also regard their voluntary work as a cultural eye-opener which leads to warm friendships.

⁵ Source: <http://persuimte.stad.gent/162304-gentse-aanpak-werkt-slechts-kleine-minderheid-vastgoedmakelaars-blijft-discrimineren> (article on discrimination in the housing rental market, only available in Dutch)

“Being a housing buddy can be quite stressful sometimes, but it’s very rewarding to be able to help someone. It’s wonderful to see how grateful the refugees are. It’s genuine gratitude, something we’re not really used to.”
(Geert)

Until the end of 2017, thanks to Flemish welfare resources, recognised refugees or people with subsidiary protection status and a high vulnerability profile received the support of a **personal professional counsellor** from the CAW. The personal counsellors supported them for up to three months after they moved into their new accommodation.

Other forms of housing support

Several initiatives are setting up outreach housing support in places which are already visited by refugees and people in a vulnerable position. For example, De Olijfboom (Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen vzw, see Section 7, p. 31) organises the initiative ‘Warme harten zoeken een thuis’ (Warm hearts Looking for a Home). This takes the form of several meetings per week, during which volunteers help people to find suitable housing. For example, they will show them how to look for suitable accommodation on the internet and how to contact potential landlords by telephone, or will even make the first telephone contact themselves. An experienced housing buddy from the CAW leads this initiative and passes on his experience to other volunteers. Since March 2017, ‘Warme harten zoeken een thuis’ has created files for 140 people in a vulnerable position. By the end of 2017, 41 of them had found a new place to live. In the six-month period after April 2017, 199 relocations also took place.

The City of Ghent took advantage of the temporary use of a premises in the city centre to hold a Huursalon (Rental Salon) twice a week from June to December 2017. This aimed to help people from vulnerable groups by means of one-off interventions. The Huursalon helped 40 people who were looking for housing.

In October 2017, Caritas International launched the Housing Café with volunteers. People with international protection status can make an appointment there when they are looking for their first place to live. The manager of the Housing Café follows up on the files and keeps the volunteers informed of progress. In contrast to the housing buddies provided by the CAW, this support is not based on one-on-one relationships. If positive results are achieved, Caritas International will also handle the administrative side of the rental contract and other documents. If required, the volunteers can also provide help with relocation, getting people set up in their new home and follow-up care. Of the 27 clients, 7 people/families have now found somewhere to live via the Housing Café.

Transitional houses

Despite their own efforts and the support offered, people with international protection status sometimes fail to find a housing solution within the two-month period after which they have to leave the reception centre. In these cases, the City of Ghent offers temporary shelter in one of the 10 available transitional houses (provisionally up to May 2018). They can stay here for four months, with an exceptional extension by another period of two months.

These transitional houses consist of vacant social housing owned by the social housing company De Volkshaard. These properties are on the list for renovation and are being used in the meantime as temporary accommodation for recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection status. The properties have been made to comply with the Flemish Housing Code. The CAW East Flanders rents these properties and makes them available to people with international protection status who need to leave the shelter but have nowhere to go. During their stay, the CAW gives them intensive professional guidance to help them find a long-term housing solution.

Over the course of the grant agreement, the target group was expanded under certain conditions to include recognised refugees or people with subsidiary protection status who are domiciled in Ghent and find themselves in problematic housing conditions. Family reunification may also lead to the provisional use of transitional housing and the accompanying support.

The Refugee Housing working group allocates the halfway housing in accordance with a fixed set of guidelines which take into account the vulnerability of the person or family concerned. The City of Ghent finances the transitional housing by means of Flemish subsidies. From June 2016 until the end of December 2017, 27 people or families managed to progress from halfway housing to a new home on the private housing market. Social housing only provided a solution in one case.

Innovative forms of housing

New methods of helping vulnerable groups to find housing are also emerging. Various initiatives, such as Labland vzw, are experimenting with alternative modular forms of housing which can be (temporarily) installed on an empty site or in premises such as warehouses or churches and dismantled later.

Organisations and citizens are also working to develop cohousing formulas with newcomers. For example, one Ghent ‘cohousing’ group wishes to keep a housing unit free in order to accommodate a recognised refugee. This warm, respectable living environment forms a base for recognised refugees or people with subsidiary protection status and allows them to integrate more quickly.

Employment

50
Employment

The Employment sub-working group includes representatives of the VDAB, OCMW Ghent, City of Ghent and IN-Gent vzw. They joined forces to examine the accessibility of the labour market for asylum seekers and recognised refugees. This brought quite a few barriers to light.

Policy and social expectations

With a valid employment card, asylum seekers can work from the fourth month of their asylum procedure onwards. At the same time, there is an unwritten rule in society that non-Dutch speaking newcomers can only start work once they have completed the entire Civic Integration Programme and Dutch lessons. Knowledge of the Dutch language is therefore essential for their integration. Experience has shown – without detracting from the importance of language in the integration process – that stubbornly upholding this vision reduces the chances of participation.

“Language acquisition and integration are two converging and mutually enhancing and supporting processes.”

(Piet Van Avermaet, Ghent University)⁶

Both the VDAB and the OCMW impose language-related conditions on the courses they run that help people into employment. As a result, people with little or no Dutch will not have access to this support. In addition, the OCMW’s range of offerings is only accessible to people with a living wage or equivalent.

This is a shame, as it causes this motivated group of people to lose precious time when taking their first steps towards the labour market. Not only does this delay their integration process, at the same time the labour market is missing out on valuable skills.

Mayce: “In Syria, I had already worked as a teacher for three years. This voluntary work as a teaching assistant is fantastic! Dutch is still difficult for me of course, certainly the grammar, but this is something I really want to do. So I’m making every effort to get back in front of the class. Recently, I got the fantastic news that my Syrian diploma has been accepted in Belgium.”



Mohammad: “I am a painter by trade. I never went to school in Syria. In Belgium I am now learning how to read and write, in combination with my favourite work. It’s quite a challenge, because the paint and the techniques are completely different here than they are in Syria.”

51
Employment

© Thomas De Boever

Werkplek Vluchtelingen

The partners within the Employment working group used subsidies from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Flemish government to look for methods to help this target group into employment more quickly. In September 2016, this led to the ESF project Werkplek Vluchtelingen (Refugees in the Workplace). This project focuses on the refugee’s own skills. By creating and seizing opportunities on an individual basis, their approach circumvents the linear discourse of the civic integration programme – learning Dutch – work. The partners developed an innovative cooperation model with a view to shared and integrated operations.

⁶ Source: Agency for Local and Provincial Government (2016). Van opvang naar samenleven (From Shelter to Society), p. 62.

This ESF project adds five extra building blocks to the regular services on offer: an integrated preliminary stage for refugees with poor language skills, voluntary work with professional prospects (social activation), job hunting, language coaching and finally brief job-oriented training and generic skill enhancement. As a result, the project fills the gaps which had been found in the regular services on offer.

Each procedure starts with a pre-screening and an exploratory initial discussion, preferably in the refugee's mother tongue with a language assistant. This takes place as early as possible, making the refugee's ambitions and challenges clear from the outset. The refugee is then steered to the most appropriate building block of the ESF project or the regular range of support or education opportunities. The client can then progress to the next building block of the project or the regular range.

By the end of August 2018, Werkplek Vluchtelingen aims to find a job, training or qualification for 15% of the 320 refugees it supports. 50% of the recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection status are taking steps towards employment. This obligation to achieve a specific result includes a road map containing 'lessons learned with refugees' about accelerating their progression to employment. This road map⁷ also makes it possible to check whether and how this cooperation model could be transferred to other target groups, such as non-Dutch speaking newcomers.

Project 1: Integrated preliminary phase for refugees with poor language skills

The Training and Employment Centre (OTC) of the OCMW Ghent focuses on the group of people – a growing group - with poor language skills, by means of an integrated, dual preliminary phase.

In this phase, language acquisition and work go hand in hand: on the one hand, knowledge of Dutch improves their prospects on the labour market and on the other, work experience also gives them additional knowledge of the language. Work (experience) is a motivating lever for language acquisition.

This integrated preparatory phase consists of a screening programme (Via) and supervised work experience (Job-Intra). The screening programme Via helps participants to select a realistic job target which takes into account their individual skills and interests. At the same time, by means of group and individual coaching sessions, this programme encourages the use of spoken language attuned to the future workplace.

Job-Intra is an induction traineeship which allows participants to familiarise themselves with the specific expectations in the workplace. The traineeship will take place at the OCMW itself, associations or private companies and occupies 3 to 4 days per week. In the workplace, the OTC provides language coaching and intensive support. The aim is to further refine the skills of the participants, allowing them to gradually progress onto the regular labour market. During the traineeship, the participants attend Dutch language stimulation classes or NT2 one day a week.

Project 2: Voluntary work with professional prospects

Voluntary work allows refugees to enhance their skills and learn Dutch in an active way. This support method offers professional prospects for asylum seekers and people with international protection status who have a clear employment target. They will already have some experience in this area but cannot immediately find work due to cultural factors, availability, emotional stress or other reasons. It is crucial for the voluntary work to be in line with the job requirements of the refugee in question. As a result, support is required in two directions: both for the job-seeking refugee and for the company or organisation providing the voluntary position.

In consultation with the job seeker, an activation counsellor will look for a suitable voluntary position which ties in with the refugee's profile. The counsellor, employer and client will draw up a package of tasks and starting profile for the job. A growth plan will make it possible to assess the evolution of technical skills, work attitudes and Dutch language acquisition. The counsellor will visit the voluntary workplace on a regular basis to check on progress. The workplace itself will receive support from a language coach who provides concrete tips, workshops and advice in order to ensure that the refugee is given as many opportunities to practise Dutch as possible. The language coach will also advise the employer on how to deal with diversity.

In-depth discussions will be held with the refugee in advance about his or her package of tasks, expected commitment and the use of language in the workplace. These agreements are clearly laid down on paper.

By default, the refugee will start with a commitment of three months (20 hours/ week). This will be enough for the client to get to know his or her job and tasks properly, learn and implement new skills and correctly assess expectations regarding work attitudes. An evaluation will follow after this initial period. The voluntary work can then be extended or deepened, or the client can take the next step in the activation path.

⁷This road map will be available in digital form on the website of Werkplek Vluchtelingen Gent in the autumn of 2018: Search for 'Werkplek Vluchtelingen Gent' on the home page www.stad.gent (only available in Dutch).

Results in a nutshell (September 2016 – middle of January 2018)

- 331 refugees attended an intake interview with Werkplek Vluchtelingen.
- 81 of them were eligible for voluntary work with professional prospects.
- 57 of them started doing voluntary work which tied in with their job aspirations (architect, shop assistant, barman, teacher, woodworker, painter, kitchen employee, bookkeeper, metalworker, bicycle repairer, librarian, archive employee, etc.).

This professional voluntary work has an enhancing and positive effect and reduces the distance from the regular labour market.

This building block has evolved into a kind of work-related traineeship. Here too, the volunteers are closely monitored and their steps towards the regular labour market are evaluated. For them, this work-related traineeship forms an initial introduction to the concrete requirements of a job and helps them find their way around the labour market. It allows the participants to expand their professional social network. The traineeship also improves their technical skills and Dutch language acquisition.

Project 3: Approaching employees, a three-pronged policy

In order to get refugees onto the labour market more quickly, the ESF project Werkplek Vluchtelingen also explicitly focuses on approaching employers. This involves a three-pronged approach: (1) job hunting, (2) prospecting companies and (3) informing and raising the awareness of employers.

- 1) **Job hunting** is a method which tries to achieve a concrete match between a job-seeking refugee and a company. It is mainly suitable for refugees whose profile can be applied to the regular labour market immediately. Two business consultants from the VDAB or the OCMW will draw up a profile of the job-seeking refugee and look for suitable employers. They will do so on the basis of:
- a. outstanding vacancies via the VDAB, temping agencies or company websites
 - b. existing contacts with companies from the Employment Department, VDAB and OCMW
 - c. their own assessment of opportunities within specific companies.

The job hunters will then make contact with the companies in order to introduce job seekers, arrange interviews and sit down with the client to prepare and evaluate applications.

In the event of a successful match, the job hunter will advise the employer about the applicable employment measures and will coach the client during the whole process. In the workplace, a language coach will help the refugee with his or her Dutch language skills. The coach will also give the other employees tips on how to give their new colleague more opportunities to practise Dutch. This approach proves most successful when the company gives the refugee a warm welcome, adopts an open approach to diversity and works in close collaboration with the language coach.

In addition to the individual support during the job hunting process, job-seekers can also participate in application training in groups.

- 2) The job hunters also tap into the network of the VDAB, City of Ghent and OCMW in order to find vacancies by means of cold calling. The **cold calling** quickly makes it clear which companies are open to this target group.
- 3) Finally, the job hunters **inform** employers about the legislation, employment measures and opportunities for asylum seekers and people with international protection status and raise their awareness of these aspects.

Neighbourhood-oriented approach

The Reno moored in the Muide
The Reno temporary reception initiative, also known in Ghent as the 'refugee pontoon', accommodated 250 asylum seekers. When the arrival of the Reno in the Muide neighbourhood was announced, this elicited a wide variety of reactions. In response, the City of Ghent organised an information meeting for local residents in conjunction with Fedasil and G4S Care, the private operator of the reception initiative, well before the arrival of the Reno.

Before the first asylum seekers moved onto the Reno, local residents were able to visit the boat to take a look behind the scenes. This was followed by two brainstorming sessions – one with local organisations and residents and another with various Ghent organisations – in search of ideas for welcoming the new residents to the neighbourhood and the city. Many citizens and volunteers were keen to get involved. The city offered concrete help, provided support during information meetings and organised training sessions. Right from the start, this created a strong and positive dynamic in the neighbourhood and the city as a whole.

The Reno residents were not given ready-made meals but had to cook for themselves. As a result, they needed to go out frequently to go shopping. This meant that local residents and asylum seekers came into contact with each other on a regular basis.

"In the beginning, there were people from the Muide who were against the arrival of the Reno. However, a short time later they were putting up the tent for the neighbourhood party together with the asylum seekers. Two years later, I hear they are still maintaining close contact with ex-residents of the Reno via social media."

(Kathleen Van de Kerckhove, Refugee Taskforce coordinator)

© Patrick Henry, City of Ghent



Talking to each other.

Expanding social networks at the neighbourhood level

The dynamic of the Muide is now expanding to other Ghent neighbourhoods. Many newcomers with international protection status are settling in the various Ghent neighbourhoods after leaving a reception initiative. The Refugee Taskforce is therefore working hard to help the newcomers integrate into the social networks of these neighbourhoods (see Section 7, p. 28).

Figures from the end of 2017 show that this group of newcomers mainly settle in Ghent city centre and in certain neighbourhoods in the 19th-century suburbs. These neighbourhoods are mainly attractive because of the type of housing on offer: student rooms, studios, smaller and cheaper apartments or houses.

However, in other respects these neighbourhoods vary greatly. A differentiated approach is therefore required. As a result, the Refugee Taskforce works with the City of Ghent's social neighbourhood management team: a 'social neighbourhood manager' in each neighbourhood works as a bridging figure between the neighbourhood partners and services of the city and OCMW Ghent. The directors facilitate sustainable solutions for community, welfare and health in the neighbourhood by means of mutual coordination and cooperation. The City of Ghent analysed the support in the neighbourhoods and among the active neighbourhood partners in combination with the number of people with international protection status. On the basis of this analysis, it appeared beneficial to employ a staff member from IN-Gent vzw as a networker in the city centre and several neighbourhoods in the 19th-century suburbs. This is possible thanks to Flemish subsidies in the context of the increased influx of refugees.

This networker serves to build bridges between services, associations, people with international protection status and local residents. Although the approach varies in each neighbourhood, the focus of the activities always lies on expanding the network of the people with international protection status in the neighbourhood. The networker will make contact with them proactively, chart their interests and suggest an appropriate range of opportunities in the neighbourhood and the rest of the city. This includes voluntary work, leisure initiatives, buddy programmes and opportunities to practise speaking Dutch. In addition, the networker will seek out local residents with similar interests and match them up with people with international protection status so they can exercise, cook or go on cultural outings together, for example.

Meeting opportunities simplify this matching process. These opportunities can be combined with existing initiatives such as a neighbourhood party or an activity run by a local organisation. Other channels include neighbourhood-oriented or thematic newsletters (such as the newsletter produced by the Sports Department), the digital contact point for volunteers in the City of Ghent and socio-cultural associations of ethnic and cultural minorities.

The networker's tasks also include working with local partners to start the debate about migration and refugees. For example, senior citizens from a local services centre in Sluizeken-Tolhuis-Ham and refugees started talking to each other in response to the documentary Kakuma, The Invisible City. In consultation with students and educational institutions, it will be possible to set up more new social networks in the various neighbourhoods. For example, one route might be to match up students who are studying a particular language with newcomers who speak this language.

Refugees and local residents get to know each other at a networking session in Sluizeken-Tolhuis-Ham.



© IN-Gent vzw

Considerations

Ghent city council decided to set up the Refugee Taskforce in August 2015. This taskforce worked with civil society organisations, citizens and other partners to welcome a growing group of newcomers and help them find their feet as quickly as possible. A wide range of new initiatives and partnerships were created and barriers within social structures were removed.

Many of these initiatives and new partnerships have now been integrated into regular operations. For this reason, the administration decided to shut down the Refugee Taskforce in the middle of 2018. In order to keep coordinating the various initiatives, the City of Ghent will be investing in a point of contact. The Flemish subsidies will not be continued in 2019, not even partly. At the same time, the number of recognised refugees, people with subsidiary protection status and their families in Ghent is continuing to rise. The city and the OCMW Ghent are working hard to find ways to provide refugees with sustainable support in response to their highest-priority needs: housing (also in the context of family reunification), health and social networks.

Housing

Without the Flemish subsidies, the guidance and professional support of housing buddies for newcomers will also grind to a halt. New voluntary initiatives are being set up to help refugees find suitable housing, however. This is not a good development, as complex cases such as family reunification require professional support.

It is not just newcomers but also other people in a vulnerable position who need professional help when searching for accommodation. This group is continuing to grow. At the end of 2017, the City of Ghent therefore set up the Housing Taskforce⁸, modelled along the lines of the Refugee Taskforce. This Taskforce aims to develop a supportive housing policy for all groups in a vulnerable position, including people living in poverty, homeless people and asylum seekers.

⁸ Info: <https://stad.gent/wonen-verbouwen/taskforce-wonen> (only available in Dutch).



© Patrick Henry, City of Ghent

Health

Scientific studies have shown that around 10% of refugees with a protection status struggle with symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The same number of people may suffer from depression, psychological issues and anxiety, possibly in combination with post-traumatic stress. The extra Flemish resources were able to enhance the operations of CGG Eclips and the Mind-Spring group session. However, there were waiting lists even then. There is still a considerable need for psychological support. It therefore remains important to invest in the mental health of refugees, as this also gives them the mental space they need to handle their integration process.

Creating networks

The many volunteers play a key role in the networks which newcomers are building and the bridging relationships which they form with local residents (see Section 7, p. 28). However, their social commitment requires a professional framework which is now in danger of disintegrating. Ongoing investment in networks is required in order to help newcomers find their way around our complex society more quickly.

Publishing information

© April 2018, City of Ghent, Botermarkt 1, 9000 Ghent

Published by the Community, Welfare and Health Department of the City of Ghent.

Ghent Refugee Taskforce?

For more information, please contact Kathleen Van de Kerckhove,
Refugee Taskforce Coordinator
tel.: 0032 9 267 03 12
email: kathleen.vandekerckhove@stad.gent
<https://stad.gent/refugeetaskforce>

Content and editing:

Patrick Verheye (Welfare and Equal Opportunities Department, City of Ghent)

The following parties assisted with this publication:

City of Ghent

- Welfare and Equal Opportunities Department (Kathleen Van de Kerckhove, Kristel Danel, Zohra Diouani, Marijke De Moor)
- Urban Shelter Initiative (SOI) (Kris Vanduffel)
- Employment Department (Britt Roels, Tina Demeersman)
- Housing Department (Eveline Coolens, Caroline Beyers)
- Onderwijscentrum Gent (Steven Delarue)

and:

OCMW Ghent (Johan Maekelberg)

IN-Gent vzw (Memet Karaman, Leen Gaublonne, Josefien Goethals, Feride Deduci, Désirée Derksen, Susan Pector)

Ghent University (Dr Jan De Maeseneer, professor emeritus, Prof. Ilse Derluyn, Katrien De Bruyn)

CAW East Flanders (Marleen Bolangier, Mirte Van Haver, Elmira Erstukajeva)

Een Hart voor Vluchtelingen vzw (Evelyne Huughe)

Vormingplus Gent-Eeklo (Janusz Vanhellemont)

VZW Jong (Paul Storme)

Refu Interim (Farah Laporte)

Housing Café – Caritas International (Indra Versmesse)

Final editing and design: Volta.be

Translation: Blue Lines Translations bvba

