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5 Migrant Integration Policies in Flanders (Belgium)

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5.1 Statistical information

In this chapter, we examine relevant facts and figures regarding ethnic and cultural diversity in Belgium at all levels: national, regional (Flanders) and municipal (Mechelen).

Historical context

After World War II, migration to Belgium was mainly driven by demand for workers in the (coal) mining sector. To fill that demand, Belgium signed an agreement with Italy (1946). However, after a mining disaster (1956) in which many Italian miners died, the Italian government decided to stop emigration to Belgium. The Belgian government then began to recruit new workers based on bilateral agreements with Spain (1956), Greece (1957) and later with countries outside of Europe: Morocco (1964), Turkey (1964), Tunisia (1969), Algeria (1970) and Yugoslavia (1970). Meanwhile, Europe was developing free movement. Rights to internal mobility applied from 1958 within the Benelux countries and from 1968 among the six member states of the European Communities. An economic crisis in the 1970s, however, led to high unemployment rates in Belgium. After the oil crisis, the Belgian government decided to stop immigration completely. From the mid-1980s onwards, migration rates increased again, but this time the inflow mainly consisted of family members of migrants who were already settled in Belgium, i.e. family reunification (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018).

This historical context explains the presence of the most represented nationalities of origin in Belgium as of 2022: Moroccan, Italian, French, Dutch and Turkish. The list below showcases the top three countries of origin in each region of Belgium:

- Flemish Region: Netherlands, Morocco and Turkey.
- Walloon Region: Italy, France and Morocco.
- Brussels Capital Region: Morocco, France and Italy.

National level (Belgium)

According to data from the Belgian Statistical Office (Statbel) from January 2022, 66.6% of the Belgian population was Belgian with a Belgian background, 20.6% was Belgian with a foreign/migration background and 12.8% was non-Belgian (foreigners) (Statbel 2022). In 2011, these percentages were 74.3%, 15.5% and 10.2% (ibid.).

The percentage of people of foreign origin¹ differs among the Belgian regions significantly for the above-mentioned historical reasons. In 2021, this percentage was lowest in Flanders at 24.2%, rising to 34.1% in Wallonia, and peaking at 75% in the Brussels Capital Region. In the Brussels Region this mainly concerns people of non-EU origin, in Wallonia people of EU origin. All in all, **in 2021 33.4% of the population in Belgium was of foreign origin** (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022a).

Compared to the other EU15 countries², **Belgium issues relatively few residence permits for the purpose of paid employment**. In 2016, half (50%) of the residence permits issued in Belgium to incoming non-EU citizens were for the purpose of family reunification. Study and work accounted for 12% and 10% of residence permits, while the category ‘other reasons’ accounted for 29%. This last category mainly concerns international protection (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022a). In 2021, 25,971³ people filed applications for international protection (refugee status or

1 „People of foreign origin“ includes not only people currently of foreign nationality, but also people who have Belgian nationality but whose nationality of birth was foreign, as well as people of Belgian nationality of birth whose parent(s) had a foreign nationality of birth. (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022a)

2 European countries that joined the European Union in or before 1995: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Sweden.

3 In 2015 the DVZ received 44,760 applications for international protection. This high number was due to the severe, worldwide humanitarian crisis.

subsidiary protection) with the Immigration Department (DVZ)⁴ of the Home Affairs Federal Public Services⁵. Protection was granted especially to Syrians, Palestinians, Eritreans, Afghans and Turks. Of those recognized as refugees in 2021, 25% were Syrian nationals and 16% were Palestinians. Among those who obtained subsidiary protection status, Afghans (41%) and Syrians (16%) constituted the largest groups by nationality (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022c).

Regional level (Flanders)

If we look at the data for the Flemish region, we see that Flanders is characterised by growing diversity. The share of people of foreign origin⁶ is increasing – 25% of the total population in 2022 compared to 10% in 2000 – and so is the internal diversity of the migrant population (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022b). Although the majority of people of foreign origin come from outside the European Union (approximately 60%), when broken down by country of origin, people of Dutch origin form the largest group (14%). This is followed by people of Moroccan, Turkish, Italian and Romanian origin (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022b).

In 2022, foreigners (non-Belgian nationals) made up 9.8% of the total population. This share has risen from 4.9% of the population in 2000. The largest foreign nationality group is Dutch. At the beginning of 2020, Dutch nationals represented 23% of all foreigners in Flanders. This was followed by Romanians, Poles, Moroccans, Bulgarians, Italians, Spaniards and French nationals. Turks and Portuguese complete the top 10. Overall, the number of foreigners in Flanders doubled between 2000 and 2020. This increase mostly concerned persons from the EU13 countries⁷. Among non-EU nationalities, the high number of Syrian immigrants stands out in 2016 due to the worldwide humanitarian crisis. The proportion of foreigners is highest in the outskirts of Brussels (EU-citizens), in

4 DVZ stands for The Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken.

5 Equivalent to the Ministry of Interior in other countries.

6 “People of foreign origin” includes not only people currently of foreign nationality, but also people who have Belgian nationality but whose nationality of birth was foreign, as well as people of Belgian nationality of birth whose parent(s) had a foreign nationality of birth. (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022a)

7 These are the newest Member States of the European Union (which joined in 2004 or later): Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Malta and Cyprus, since 2013 also Croatia).

Antwerp, Ghent, the central cities⁸ (non-EU citizens), and in the border region with the Netherlands (Dutch) (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2022a).

Municipal level (city of Mechelen)

As we will use the city of Mechelen to illustrate integration measures later in this chapter, we present here the data on Mechelen.

In 2020 Mechelen had 86,921 inhabitants. 11.5% of *Mechelaars* (residents of Mechelen) were of non-Belgian nationality and 34.8% were of non-Belgian origin. The number of inhabitants of non-Belgian nationality increased from 5,315 in 1990 to 10,100 in 2020 (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering 2020). The number of inhabitants of non-Belgian origin increased from 6,896 in 1990 to 30,464 in 2020 (ibid.). More than 50% of minors were of foreign origin. In the 65+ age group, by contrast, 89.8% of the city's residents were of Belgian origin.

Mechelen is home to people of 136 different nationalities speaking 69 different languages. *Mechelaars* of Moroccan (41%), Turkish (Assyrian, Chaldean, Aramaic) (6.7%) and Armenian (3.2%) origin form the largest communities. In 2019, Mechelen welcomed 758 adult newcomers, most of whom came as labour migrants, asylum seekers and recognised refugees under subsidiary protection, for family reunification or as EU citizens. The majority came from India, Romania, the Netherlands, Morocco and Syria (ibid.).

5.2 Integration at the national and regional levels

National level

In Belgium, the policy areas of integration, diversity, asylum and migration are spread across three levels of government: national, regional and municipal. The federal Minister of the Interior⁹ is responsible for Immigration Policy. The Minister is supported by the State Secretary¹⁰

8 In the context of its urban policy, the Flemish government designated 13 'central cities'. These are: Aalst, Antwerp, Bruges, Genk, Ghent, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Leuven, Mechelen, Ostend, Roeselare, Sint-Niklaas and Turnhout.

9 Annelies Verlinden, the Minister of the Interior for the period 2020-2024.

10 A State Secretary supports a Minister in the political management of a Ministry. State Secretaries are mainly found in 'heavy' ministries. They are entrusted with specific policy areas, but

for ‘Asylum and Migration’.¹¹ The (national) asylum and migration policy determines who is permitted to enter Belgium and who is permitted to stay in Belgium.

“The granting of refugee status falls within the competence of the FPS Home Affairs. These competences of the FPS Home Affairs lie with the **Immigration Office (DVZ)** and the **Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS)**. [...] The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter: Refugee Convention), which was signed in Geneva on 28 July 1951, is the key document for granting refugee status. Belgian legislation explicitly refers to this Convention. [...] Refugee status is granted to foreigners who meet the conditions of article 1 of the Refugee Convention (1), where a refugee is defined as ‘any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country’. [...] On 10 October 2006, to complement the Refugee Convention, subsidiary protection was introduced in Belgian law. [...] Subsidiary protection status is granted to any foreigner ‘who does not qualify as a refugee but in respect of whom substantial grounds have been shown for believing that the person concerned, if returned to his or her country of origin, or in the case of a stateless person, to his or her country of former habitual residence, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm (...), and is unable, or, owing to such risk, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, provided that he or she does not fall under one of the exclusion clauses defined in article 55/4’”(Federal Public Service 2022).

Fedasil, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, handles the initial reception of applicants for international protection and guarantees quality and conformity within the various reception structures. It also coordinates the organisation of relevant individuals’ voluntary return to their countries of origin.

Belgian citizenship can be acquired in three different ways. For applicants under 18, citizenship is ‘automatically attributed’. For those over 18, it is ‘acquired’, which can be done through two possible procedures: ‘declaration of nationality’ (general) and ‘naturalisation’ (exceptional).¹²

the Minister remains co-responsible. Like the Minister, the State Secretary is accountable to Parliament.

11 Sammy Mahdi, the State secretary for Asylum and Migration for the period 2020-2024.

12 The situations in which each of these procedures is used and the specific conditions for each

Regional level

Civic integration and access to social benefits are managed at the regional governmental level. Civic integration policy in Belgium thus differs from region to region. Each region (Flanders, the Brussels Capital Region, Wallonia) and the German-speaking community has its own priorities, measures and policies (Adam, Martiniello, and Rea 2018). Since the city of Mechelen is located in Flanders, we will focus below on integration policy in the Flemish region.

The Flemish integration policy is an inclusive policy¹³, which means that it is implemented within various policy areas, largely via general measures and only when necessary via specific measures. In other words, **integration is the responsibility of every policy domain**. Integration policy responds to the situations and dynamics linked to the consequences of migration, with the aim of enabling independent and proportional participation, the accessibility of all services, active and shared citizenship and social cohesion (Vlaanderen 2019). The integration policy should ensure that newcomers and people with migrant backgrounds feel at home quickly and can fully participate in society. In Flanders, this is achieved through the civic integration programme and local integration measures (see below).

The Flemish Integration Decree manages integration policy on a regional and local level (Vlaanderen 2013). Flemish integration policy aims at the whole society but pays special attention to: 1) people of foreign origin and 2) people who legally reside in Belgium.

The Flemish Government recognises and **subsidises one participation organisation that aims to strengthen the social position of people of foreign origin in Flanders**, promotes respect between different nationalities and acts as a voice and advocate for foreigners in Flanders and Brussels. It also promotes participation in society among the groups highlighted in the integration decree, issues policy recommendations and works on the positive image of the target groups. This organisation must apply for funding every five years. For the past 20 years, this organisation has been the ‘Minderhedenforum’, but in 2020, their application for further funding was rejected:

can be consulted via Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering (the Flemish Integration and Citizenship Agency): <https://www.agii.be/thema/vreemdelingenrecht-internationaal-privaatrecht/nationaliteit/procedures-om-belg-te-worden>.

13 General / inclusive policy versus specific / categorical policy.

“Instead of being an umbrella of associations, the participation organization should consist of various actors who organize or support the political participation of persons of foreign origin via a variety of activities. This is necessary for it to fully assume its role as representative of ethnic-cultural minorities”, explained Bart Somers, the Flemish Minister responsible for integration and equal opportunities. Somers is the former mayor of Mechelen for the Liberal party and was awarded the 2016 World Mayor Prize in recognition of his outstanding achievements in welcoming refugees during recent years and for the city’s long-term integration of immigrants from different cultures, religions and social backgrounds.

Somers wants the new participation body to move “beyond pigeon-holing” and to “bring together different experts, companies, organizations and citizens with experience in the field to promote integration and equal opportunities.” (DeMorgen 2020). On 26 November 2021, the Flemish Government recognized LEVL as the participation organisation it will support for the next 5 years (2022–2026).

In addition, in 2015 the Flemish government founded **three independent, external agencies** to implement the Flemish integration and Civic Integration policy in the field. These are the Flemish Agency for Integration,¹⁴ which works within the entire Belgian-Dutch language area, including the city of Mechelen and the bilingual Brussels-Capital area; In-Gent (for the city of Gent); and Atlas (for the city of Antwerp).

The aim of civic integration is to assist people who migrate to Belgium in becoming self-reliant and to give them the opportunity to participate fully in society. To this purpose, the above-mentioned agencies implement a civic integration programme consisting of three pillars: Belgian-Dutch language lessons; Social Orientation course; and individual guidance when looking for a job or applying to study. Newcomers are not expected to integrate on their own; every individual is offered various types of individual coaching from the start, including with a permanent programme counsellor. A fourth pillar is now being added, which consists in an additional tailor-made participation programme (40 hours) to strengthen newcomers’ social networks and participation. This can for example include: buddy projects; training courses at companies, associations, organisations or local administrative offices; guidance in voluntary work; language training; introductory placements at cultural,

14 Vlaams Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering. For more information see: <https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/>.

youth or sports associations, residential care centres, local service centres or neighbourhood centres. The local authorities (i.e. the municipalities) are responsible for the coordination of this fourth pillar, in close cooperation with the integration agencies responsible for the other three pillars.

Before participating in this integration programme, each newcomer/migrant (anyone born abroad, with legal status, who is over 18 years of age) must sign an integration contract (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering b.r.). There are two kinds of contracts: one for people who are obliged to take part in the course and a second for people who are entitled to take part in it. By signing the contract, individuals commit to attend the Dutch language lessons provided within the programme (they must complete at least levels A1 & A2) and the Social Orientation course (they must complete at least levels A1 & A2) and the Social Orientation course (they must attend at least 80% (compulsory trajectory) / 50% (voluntary trajectory) of these lessons). The Social Orientation course takes 60 hours, is provided in the individual’s mother tongue or a contact language, and covers all aspects of life in Belgium (education, work, housing, health...).

Client orientated civic integration programme as from 2022

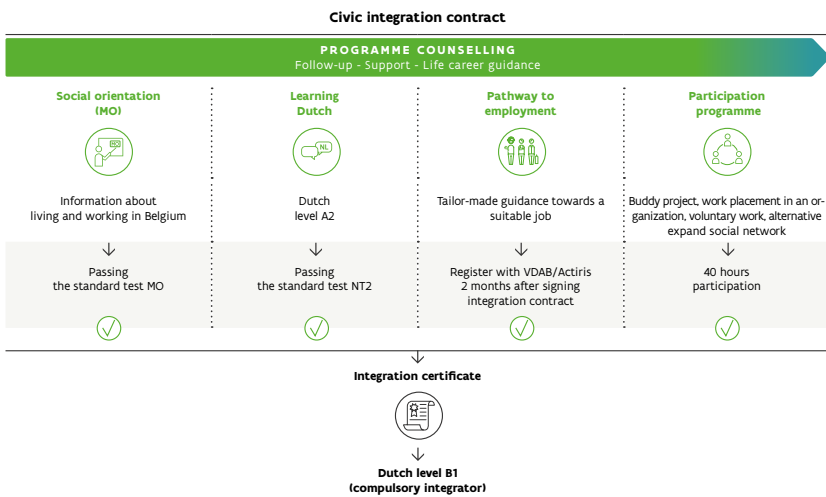


Plate 2 Client oriented civic integration programme (Flanders) as from 2022

Source: Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 2022, <https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/inburgeringstraject>

An administrative fine may be imposed for failure to comply with the obligation to participate in the course (from 50 to 5,000 euros), or if the individual has voluntarily signed the integration contract and then unlawfully and prematurely terminates the training (maximum 150 euros).

For several decades, this integration programme was provided free of charge; as of January 1, 2022, newcomers (both those who are obliged to attend and those who choose to do so) must pay a fee (of at least 360 euros) (Vlaamse Regering 2020). Other changes (ibid.) include a new requirement for each participant to sign a declaration at the beginning of the programme, endorsing their essential rights and duties. Further, every participant with job prospects is obliged to register with the Flemish employment service. At the end, those who pass a citizenship test are given an integration certificate. This certificate is an important condition for becoming a Belgian citizen or renting social housing.

For minors, integration does not take place via the integration programme, but via the school system.

5.3 Integration at the municipal level

Within their own boundaries, Flemish cities and towns are in charge of managing local integration policy. This means that, within the limits of the subsidiarity principle, they are responsible for the elaboration, guidance, coordination and implementation of an inclusive local integration policy. Attention to diversity must be embedded in all city departments and in external services, institutions and organisations, all of which are responsible for taking into account new needs and requirements resulting from increasing diversity by adapting their HR policy, increasing their accessibility, giving people a say, and bringing people into contact with each other. This diversity policy will only bear fruit if everyone – citizens, facilities, associations and authorities in all policy areas, in all sectors and at all levels of the population – take responsibility. This approach is described as inclusive.

The local authorities coordinate relevant stakeholders in their city or municipality and involve the target groups and their organisations in the implementation of the inclusive policy. All policy domains (national, regional, local) come together on a local level, which is where innovative solutions across these domains are created.

Since 2016, seven Flemish sectoral subsidies,¹⁵ including integration subsidies, have been integrated into an additional allocation within the Municipal Fund (with the exception of the municipalities with facilities). This means that, since 2016, all sectoral subsidies have been merged and the municipality no longer has to account for them sector by sector. This reform is part of the process of administrative simplification, giving local authorities more freedom to use Flemish resources locally. Thus, local administrative departments who are eligible for this grant can decide for themselves whether they use the resources for local integration policies within their multi-year strategic plans and budgets.

In 2016, 57 (out of 300) Flemish cities and municipalities had an integration service and received the integration subsidy. This subsidy is granted based on two criteria: where at least 1,000 inhabitants have a migration background (for the smaller municipalities) or where more than 10% of inhabitants have a migration background. These criteria date from 2013 and have not changed since the subsidy was integrated into the Municipal Fund. In 2022, at least two thirds of Flemish cities and municipalities were eligible to receive funding according to these criteria, but the regional budget is limited and no new municipality has been accepted for subsidy since 2013.

In 2022 the Flemish government launched a new 3-year funding programme, called 'Plan Living Together' that consists of 7 objectives with 24 actions to support cities and municipalities in promoting living together. All cities and municipalities in the Flemish Region with more than 7,500 inhabitants of non-EU-15 origin can apply for this grant.

In addition to the Municipal Fund, there are many additional (supralocal) subsidies and financing options available to strengthen integration policy and make integration easier and more effective at the local level (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering 2019). These grants are often project-based.

The integration agenda is embedded to various degrees within the structure of the municipality. In some municipalities there is a separate integration service (ranging from a one-man/woman-service to an entire team, subdepartment or department); in others it is mainstreamed at the strategic level. Many (often) smaller municipalities in Flanders, however, do not have a dedicated integration service. They have local integration

15 Namely: local cultural policy, local youth policy, local sports policy, flanking education policy, combating child poverty, development and integration.

strategies, set out within the Flemish framework, and often assign one civil servant to implement them, on top of other tasks. By consequence, they do not have any active integration policy or strategy or, where they do, this is low on their priority list.

Key stakeholders in local integration include the Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG)¹⁶ – an advocate, knowledge contributor and network organisation for the local authorities – and the above-mentioned Flemish Agency for Integration,¹⁷ which supports local authorities in their local integration and diversity policies.

Financed by Flemish municipalities and cities' membership fees, the Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities works alongside others on integration and defends local authorities' interests at the Flemish level. Financed by the Flemish government, the Flemish Agency for Integration works in 3 areas: supporting local authorities and organisations in the implementation of their integration policies, providing integration and civic participation services, and directing newcomers to providers of Dutch language lessons.

5.4 Mechelen: from a categorical to an inclusive approach

Fifteen years ago, Mechelen had a very bad reputation. Polarisation was high and over 30% of the city's inhabitants voted for the far right. The city had one of the highest crime rates in the country, middle class families were leaving the city and deprivation was high. Nowadays, Mechelen is hailed as one of Flanders' flagship cities and 76% of *Mechelaars* are proud to live in Mechelen (Vlaanderen 2020a). Local inhabitants' appreciation for the city's integration policy is one of the highest in the country. The overall culture has changed, people are becoming more open to each other, and 42% of people in Mechelen have a positive attitude towards diversity (Vlaanderen 2020b).

How did Mechelen manage to make this radical change in just 15 years?

16 Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten vzw. For more information see: <https://www.vvsg.be/kennisitem/vvsg/integratiebeleid>

17 Vlaams Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering. For more information see: <https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/>

First, the city started to invest in urban renovation and renewal projects in green areas, parks, open spaces, outdoor playgrounds¹⁸ and sports infrastructure, with the aim of creating social mix in the public domain.

Second, to increase the objective and subjective feeling of safety, the city installed a large number of street cameras and invested in strengthening the capacity of the local police force,¹⁹ front-line workers and those involved in outreach: street patrols, social workers, community guards, etc. These personnel keep their eyes and ears open and can respond quickly and preventively where and when necessary.

Thirdly, the city decided to work on an inclusive policy. Thus for the past decade, policy attention has been increasingly directed towards diversity, upward social mobility and equal opportunities. Mechelen's success in these areas has been described repeatedly (Wieland 2018; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018; Whybrow 2018; McDonald-Gibson 2016; INCLUCITIES 2020; World Mayor 2017).

The city established its integration service in 1998, and by 2000 it had transformed it into a diversity service working on themes such as equal opportunities, integration, senior citizens, disability, gender, racism and interpreting. The integration service was co-financed by the Flemish government (two thirds) and the city of Mechelen (one third). The objectives and priorities (policy action plan) were set out in a cooperation agreement between Mechelen and the Flemish government. This agreement has been renewed every three years.

The Flemish government provided this specific integration funding (between 170,000 and 180,000 euros per year) until 2019. In 2016, this specific funding was integrated into the municipal fund (see above) for administrative simplicity. As a result, local authorities are no longer obliged to account annually for the use of these resources.

Until 2013, Mechelen's diversity service, embedded within the Department of Society's Welfare sub-department, consisted of a team of nine employees, each working on a specific topic/target group. After the 2013 budget reform, the Department of Society was reorganized, in part as a result of the 2013 budget declaration on diversity: "Instead of a powerless individual service that is often positioned outside the organisation, diversity policy is horizontally embedded throughout the organisation

18 Every household should have an outdoor playground within either 500 or 800 m², according to the city regulations.

19 Police recruitment is actually a federal (national) matter, but Mechelen decided to invest in local recruitment campaigns with the aim of diversifying the local police department.

with a network of competent officials in key departments. There will be a special focus on effectively channelling diversity in our city towards traditional youth work.”²⁰

After a city-wide survey, the College of Mayor and Aldermen/-women established **six strategic/transversal goals** in 2013: Mechelen wants to be an inclusive, child-friendly, participative, customer-friendly, smart, shopping city. This means that attention to these themes must be embedded in all policy sectors and in various city services and external services, organisations and institutions. The ‘Inclusive City’ strategic programme manager, in cooperation with the diversity project coordinator, is mandated to work cross-departmentally and horizontally on this theme within the city.²¹ As a result, the diversity service was closed at the end of 2013.

Instead, a **programme manager** was appointed for each strategic goal (inclusive, child-friendly, participative, customer-friendly, smart, shopping). He/she coordinates and oversees (directs) the particular strategic goal within the town hall (including regular activities, ongoing projects, new developments/projects, etc.), and ensures that all services, departments and sub-departments operate within the vision, the agreed framework and the (policy) priorities and contribute towards reaching the inclusive policy objectives. The programme manager is a point of contact, a partner for discussion and a coach within (and outside) the organisation for the implementation of the particular strategic goal.

The strategic programme manager for the ‘Inclusive City’ works city-wide. Through the city’s long-term strategic plan, this officer convinces the other departments to incorporate the ‘Inclusive City’ organisational goals into their regular policies. This is not an easy task because he/she has to lead from a non-hierarchical position. That is why the support, commitment and mandate from the political and managerial leadership is crucial.

Originally, the six programme managers were scattered across various departments, but this changed in July 2016 when the six strategic goals were embedded into the **Strategy & Development Department**. The head of the Strategy & Development Department watches over the effective implementation of inclusive policy and liaises with the management team. At the political level, the theme remains the responsibility of the authorized alderman, who is a member of the political board, the

20 Internal policy document regarding evaluation of the diversity policy and future approach 2013-2018, Mechelen.

21 Internal policy document regarding the vision on strategic programme management, 12.03.2014, Mechelen.

college of mayors and aldermen. The alderman is responsible for the diversity and equal opportunities agenda and, in that capacity, holds final political authority.²²

Another important body is the **Steering Committee**, composed of administrative, political and management representatives. The committee is the strategic programme manager's instrument in managing, monitoring and coordinating the 'Inclusive City' programme. It monitors the progress of projects/initiatives that contribute to the objectives of the programme within the different departments and subdepartments. Politically, the Alderman for Diversity and Equal Opportunities has the final say, but since several policy areas are involved, the aldermen decide among themselves under which authority a particular initiative/project is to be handled.

With regard to the practical implementation of the inclusive policy, each strategic programme manager works substantively with a 'source' department. For the 'Inclusive City' programme, this is the Living Together Department and its Social Policy Sub-Department. Mechelen's transversal inclusive policy translates into projects that go beyond traditional policy domains and involve inter-departmental cooperation across the city hall, with the aim of mainstreaming diversity (mindset, attitude, language). Such projects include e.g. an internal learning trajectory on polarisation and hate speech and how to respond adequately as a local government, as well as cooperation between the communication, prevention, diversity, youth, and culture departments.

All this naturally requires a dedicated budget. As the 'Inclusive City' is a transversal strategic goal, including areas such as diversity, integration and equal opportunities, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact amount dedicated to integration work and migrant/refugee services, projects and initiatives. The city invests roughly 360,000 euros per year in realising the objectives of the 'Inclusive City' programme (50% from the Flemish government and 50% from the city of Mechelen). In addition, the city of Mechelen regularly applies for European project subsidies to create the required experimental space to tackle local integration and diversity challenges.

22 Gabriella De Francesco, for the period 2019–2024.

5.5 Conclusion

We conclude with a reminder that, in the Flemish context, towns are responsible for managing the local integration agenda within their territory and for planning, leading, coordinating and implementing inclusive local integration policies. The city of Mechelen serves as an excellent example of how well thought-out, long-term and targeted inclusive policies can play a major part in transforming a city and improving quality of life for its residents. The pathway Mechelen took to achieve this transformation is described in greater detail in chapter 7. It is nevertheless important to note, when taking an overall view of local integration policy in Flanders, that despite their clear responsibility for this agenda and relatively easy access to resources to support it (when certain conditions are met), many (smaller) Flemish towns (and they are rather numerous) are not currently building effective integration policies because they are lacking capacity or/and resources. Due to the lack of these essential conditions, these municipalities often lack a long-term vision. The coexistence of population groups with different experiences of migration thus often leads to the creation of partially parallel societies, with all the associated negative (in particular social) consequences. It should thus be emphasised that Mechelen serves as a good example of a Flanders success story, but that it is far from representative.

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