LOCAL STRATEGY

for Equal access to services for unaccompanied children

City	Brussels
Country	Belgium
Lead organisation	Caritas International
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Developed in the framework of the Power2UAMs Project by Caritas International and NADOE, based on the local working group meetings and the child participation platforms.

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1. Introduction

This Local Strategy was developed in the framework of the POWER2UAMs project ('Power to UAMs: Ensuring Equal Access, Participation, and Voice at the Local Level'), funded by the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme.

It aims to strengthen equal access to local, mainstream public services for UAMs (Unaccompanied Minor) in Brussels.

The local working group in Brussels was launched in April 2026 and has convened four times; it consists of local service providers, guardians, representatives from reception centres in the federal reception network, civil society organizations, and experts. Members work for the following organisations: Mentor Escale, Caritas, Brabantia, Maison Babel, Minor Ndako, CPAS Begijnenhof, Samusocial, JAC Brussels, AGII, Foster care service (Flemish Brabant and Brussels), Tchaï and Bruss'Help. The working group maintains an active and persistent outreach strategy to engage administrative representatives from the City of Brussels.

The working group's objectives are to (1) promote coordination among local actors to develop a local strategy that addresses the needs of unaccompanied children and supports their equal access to services, and (2) provide a space for direct dialogue with unaccompanied children through the child participation platform. Given the large number of barriers that unaccompanied children face in accessing public services, the working group decided to select three priority themes: access to mental health care, access to municipalities, public social welfare centres, and other public administrative bodies and access to employment (including internships and student jobs). Following a thorough problem analysis, concrete recommendations and possible actions were formulated for each priority theme. When developing the local strategy, it was important to acknowledge that many of the recommended and necessary changes to the existing system fall outside the authority and sphere of influence of the local working group members. Where measures require decisions or action by public authorities or other external stakeholders, the Local Working Group's role will primarily consist of raising awareness, facilitating dialogue and advocating for change, rather than directly ensuring their implementation.

For recommendations that directly concern the operations or practices of organisations represented in the local working group, it is equally important to recognise that individual members do not necessarily have the formal mandate to commit their respective organisations to specific actions or implementation responsibilities.

Several members of the local working group have already expressed their interest in continuing the collaboration beyond the official end of the Power2UAMs project in December 2026. While participation will remain voluntary, the aim is to maintain regular meetings to exchange information, discuss challenges related to UAMs' access to public services, and identify further opportunities for action. Given that members contribute alongside their regular professional responsibilities, some of

the proposed actions may only be initiated or implemented after the project ends. The local strategy should therefore also be seen as a framework for continued collaboration and longer-term improvements.

2. Local context and research findings

2.1 Overview of Unaccompanied Children in Brussels

The capital of Brussels is an important urban context for the reception and integration of unaccompanied children. Precise city-level up-to-date figures specifically for unaccompanied minors residing in Brussels are limited, as registration and reception data are primarily collected at the federal level. A local mapping of reception facilities in Brussels in July 2025 identified 522 places within [1], distributed across different reception phases. However, recent policy changes have led to a reduction in the reception network, making it difficult to obtain up-to-date figures on the number of places available for UAMs in the Brussels region. Nevertheless, a clear downward trend is visible at the national level.

Nationally, the number of UAMs arriving in Belgium has been decreasing since 2022. The peak of arrivals was experienced in the year 2022 with 6434 UAMs being registered for the first time by the Guardianship Service. In the subsequent years this number decreased to 4366 in 2023, 4068 in 2024, 3328 in 2025 and 1550 in the first eight months of 2026. The UAM population in Belgium is predominantly male and largely consists of adolescents between 12 and 18 years old, with main countries of origin including Afghanistan, Syria, Guinea, Eritrea, Somalia, Colombia, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Morocco[2].

Reception and support for UAMs in Belgium follows the national three-phase model: first, an orientation and observation phase in an Orientation and Observation Centre (OOC), located in or near the Brussels region; second, placement in collective reception facilities; and third phase small-scale reception with the goal of preparing the minors to independent living.

Additionally, specialized second-phase reception places exist under *Plan MENA*, managed by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation's Youth Welfare Administration

[1] Fedasil (n.d.) Reception centers. Retrieved July 2025, from https://fedasil.be/en/reception-centres

[2] Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, (n.d.). Statistieken, DG Wetgeving, Fundamentele rechten en vrijheden. Retrieved November 3, 2026, from https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg_wetgeving_fundamentele_rechten_en_vrijheden

(AGAJ), alongside informal reception arrangements for transit minors (such as Centre Dubrucq) and emergency shelters (including Samusocial and BelRefugees) established to address homelessness amidst the broader reception crisis. Throughout these stages, UAMs can access legal, social, educational (via DASPA or OKAN reception classes), healthcare, and psychosocial services.

Important actors supporting UAMs in Brussels include Fedasil, the Federal Guardianship Service, the Brussels-Capital Region, local municipal Public Centres for Social Welfare (CPAS/OCMW), AGAJ/Jeugdhulp, foster care services (*Pleegzorg Vlaams-Brabant en Brussel*), as well as schools offering DASPA/OKAN and dedicated civil society organizations such as Caritas International Belgium, Mentor Escale, Mentor Jeunes, Maison Babel, Minor-Ndako, Tchaï asbl, Samusocial, BelRefugees, Exil, Umoya, Collectif des Femmes, AGII / Masir Avenir; Solentra, and JAC Brussel.

In the Brussels Region, there are several youth participation initiatives or structures in both the Dutch- and French-speaking Brussels communities, although none are specifically aimed at unaccompanied children, as they often have limited support networks and less knowledge of the language, culture and political system in Belgium. Formal settings, such as sitting at a table with policy makers, may also not match their needs, since policy debate is a very particular format. Organisations therefore suggested finding creative ways to gather young people's experiences and opinions, so that their views reach policy through the work they produce rather than through direct contact with decision-makers.

On the Dutch-speaking side, the Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie/Flemish Community Commission (VGC) and its Jeugddienst/ Youth Service supports youth work and youth policy initiatives that give young people space for play, meeting, self-development and group formation, and for taking responsibility for children and for each other. It does so through advice, subsidies, materials, infrastructure and training. At Flemish level, the Ambrassade, based in Brussels, supports the Vlaamse Jeugdraad, which carries out participatory research with children and young people and brings their views to policymakers. Several other initiatives and organisations working on youth participation and policy operate in the Brussels and Flanders regions, such as Bataljong, Kind en Samenleving, and 'Project Ananas' from Tumult vzw.

On the French-speaking side, the Forum des Jeunes represents young people aged 16 to 30 in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. It defines projects with young people during participatory days, issues official opinions on their behalf, represents them at national and international conferences, and carries out citizen initiative projects.

In the POWER2UAMs project in Brussels, the Network of Afghanistan Diaspora Organisations in Europe (NADOE) is responsible for leading the project's Child Participation Platforms (held in summer-fall 2026), and the organization of the unaccompanied child photographic exhibition, directly consulting young people to ensure their lived experiences inform local action plans developed in the framework of the project. Both Caritas and NADOE also put UAMs in touch with

youth forums and education-specific events to further amplify their voice and increase the impact of their opinions in a public setting.

2.2 Key barriers to equal access

The POWER2UAMs local research in Brussels, based on the desk research, stakeholder mapping, and qualitative interviews with eleven unaccompanied children (UAMs) and fourteen key stakeholders, shows that Brussels has a diverse and dedicated network of actors supporting unaccompanied children. Non-profit organizations, social workers, legal guardians, and specialized services work across institutional boundaries to provide protection, legal assistance, and guidance.

At the same time, the research identifies profound structural barriers and systemic gaps that restrict UAMs from fully accessing their fundamental rights and integrating into society. It demonstrates that Belgium's support system operates under a continuous institutional tension between immigration control and child protection, where access to essential services often depends on administrative or residence status rather than universal child rights. Responsibility is dispersed across federal, regional (Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Flemish Community, and Brussels-Capital Region), and municipal levels -including nineteen distinct municipal authorities and Public Centres for Social Welfare (CPAS/OCMW)- resulting in a highly fragmented governance landscape and inconsistent local practices.

Access to psychological support and mental health care is a first major challenge described by the stakeholders and UAMs. UAMs in Brussels exhibit elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, specialized psychological and psychiatric services are severely overstretched, burdened by long waiting lists, and lack long-term care or crisis follow-up. Existing mental health services often lack intercultural and trauma-informed training, while a critical shortage of affordable interpretation in languages such as Tigrinya, Pashto, Dari, and Arabic creates communication barriers. Unaccompanied children outside formal reception structures or in transit face even greater exclusion from mental health diagnostics and care.

Access to public services and government institutions is another important barrier. Navigating public administration in Brussels presents severe obstacles to young migrants. The division across nineteen autonomous municipal administrations and CPAS/OCMW offices creates widespread geographical inequalities, changing administrative requirements, and refusals of social assistance. Frontline public counters are heavily overburdened, and staff frequently lack training regarding UAM legal statuses or rights. Administrative rigidity, such as blocking identity documents, refusing registration without a fixed address, or requiring a legal guardian for basic procedures, creates paralysis. Furthermore, the rapid digitalization of public services (e.g., online appointment systems and 'Itsme' portals) presents high entry thresholds for youth with limited literacy or digital skills. An unaccompanied child's access to basic public services

(such as opening a bank account, enrolling in school, or securing social welfare) also depends heavily on the initiative, system knowledge, and advocacy of their assigned legal guardian. Stakeholders have referred to this as the 'luck of the guardian'-effect**.**

Another important challenge that was raised is **the access to the labour market** for UAMs. Unaccompanied children display strong motivation to work, achieve financial independence, and support family members. However, they face major structural hurdles entering the labour market, including a shortage of tailored job coaching, complex administrative work permit rules, and language barriers. Schools often fail to provide adequate internship opportunities, while mainstream employment programs lack structural solutions for low-skilled ex-UAMs. As a result, UAMs or ex-UAMs are often disproportionately funnelled into precarious low-skilled employment or feel compelled to leave Brussels to seek work opportunities in Flanders.

The findings also point to **several additional barriers** UAMs in Brussels face: such as a severe shortage of affordable housing, high rental costs, and widespread discrimination by private landlords against young people with a foreign background increase the risk of homelessness, exploitation, and prolonged couch-surfing.

The transition to adulthood creates a major "cliff edge" in support. At 18, legal guardianship and very often specialised youth services end, while programmes offering contextual support to facilitate independent living remains insufficient. As a result, many young people enter adulthood without adequate preparation or support.

Education also presents significant barriers. In addition, significant barriers remain within the education system. Depending on the region and time of year, DASPA and OKAN classes face either capacity shortages and long waiting lists or an oversupply of students. Their separation from mainstream education can limit integration with Belgian peers. Young people may also be disproportionately directed towards vocational education based primarily on their language skills rather than their academic potential.

Other challenges include the contested reliability and emotional impact of age-assessment procedures, lengthy asylum procedures, and the financial and emotional burden of family reunification. Once family members arrive, young people may experience the impact of having to take on responsibilities as translators, guides, and financial providers, which can negatively affect their education and well-being.

3. Legal and policy framework

The legal and policy framework underpinning the Brussels Local Strategy for unaccompanied children operates across multiple levels of governance: international, European, federal Belgian, Brussels-Capital Region, Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the Flemish Community and local. Together, these frameworks establish a comprehensive set of obligations and policy objectives concerning the protection, rights, reception, integration, and well-being of children. At the same time, their practical implementation is shaped by an important institutional tension between migration management and child protection.

International level

Belgian legislation and policy on UAMs are grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which guarantees non-discrimination, protection, development, and access to essential services (such as education, healthcare, and adequate standard of living). Under these international child rights standards, every administrative, judicial, accommodation, and care decision concerning a minor must treat the best interests of the child as a primary consideration[3] Consequently, the protection and support provided to UAMs must be tailored to the child's individual developmental needs rather than dictated solely by immigration status.

European level

At the European level, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights[4] provides an important legal framework for the protection of human dignity, non-discrimination, and children's rights in asylum and transit contexts. These legislative obligations are complemented by policy frameworks, notably the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child[5] which aims to ensure the protection of rights of all children, and secure access to basic services for vulnerable children. A key

[3] De Graeve, K., Vervliet, M., & Derluyn, I. (2017). Between immigration control and child protection: Unaccompanied minors in Belgium. Social Work & Society, 15(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319542310

[4] European Union. (2012). Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Official Journal of the European Union, C 326, 391–407. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2012_326_R_0391_01

[5] European Commission. (2021). *The EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European child guarantee*. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

initiative of the strategy is the European Child Guarantee[6]: an EU-wide initiative aimed at preventing and combating child poverty or social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access of children in need in the EU to a set of key services (e.g. early childhood education and care, inclusive education and school based activities, healthcare, housing), of which children with a migrant background are mentioned as part of the target groups.

Federal (Belgian) level

At the national level, the Belgian framework combines specific child protection mechanisms with legislation governing asylum, migration, reception, and social welfare.

An important element is the federal guardianship system, administered by the Guardianship Service *(Dienst Voogdij)* which currently falls under the Federal Public Service Justice. UAMs are entitled to a designated guardian who represents them legally, supports them throughout asylum and other administrative procedures, and helps safeguard their rights and access to appropriate services.

The Federal Reception Act and System (*Fedasil*) governs the reception of applicants for international protection, including the three-phase national reception structure for UAMs.

The OCMW/CPAS framework (Social Welfare System) provides another important connection between federal legislation and local service delivery. When leaving the reception structure, and depending on their legal and administrative status, UAMs may be entitled to social assistance, financial support, medical assistance, or other forms of welfare provision through the local Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW/CPAS).

Finally, asylum and family reunification procedures are primarily governed at the federal level, with responsibilities involving institutions such as the Immigration Office (DVZ) and the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGVS). These procedures determine an individual's migration and protection status and therefore have significant consequences for access to services and long-term integration opportunities.

Regional Level (Brussels-Capital Region & Community Frameworks)

Unlike the regions, Brussels operates within a multi-tiered regional structure comprising the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, and the Flemish Community

Newly arrived non-native-speaking children aged 12 to 18 receive intensive language instruction and orientation prior to entering regular secondary

[6] Council of the European Union. (2021). Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 223, 14–23. http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2021/1004/oj

education. In Brussels, this is delivered through DASPA (*Dispositif d'Accueil et de Scolarisation des élèves Primo-Arrivants*) in French-speaking schools and OKAN (*Onthaalonderwijs voor Anderstalige Nieuwkomers*) in Dutch-speaking schools.

A structural agreement -*Plan MENA*- concluded between Fedasil and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation's General Administration for Youth Welfare (*AGAJ - Administration Générale de l'Aide à la Jeunesse*), provides 92 specialized second-phase reception places for vulnerable UAMs (typically under 15 years of age).

Child allowances in the Brussels-Capital Region are managed regionally. Unlike Flanders or Wallonia, where UAMs can access child benefits while their residence procedure is ongoing, UAMs in Brussels become eligible for child benefits (*Iriscare*) only after being formally granted a residence status.

Compliance with children's rights standards is monitored by independent regional bodies, including the French Community's Ombudsperson for Children's Rights (*Délégué Général aux Droits de l'Enfant - DGDE*) and the Flemish Children's Rights Commissioner (*Kinderrechtencommissariaat*).

The Brussels-Capital Region funds and coordinates emergency homelessness interventions through regional bodies like *Bruss'Help* and outsourced emergency reception providers (e.g., *Samusocial* and *BelRefugees*) to mitigate street homelessness amid the broader reception crisis.

Local Level (City of Brussels)

The Brussels-Capital Region is administratively divided into 19 autonomous municipalities, each with its own municipal administration (*service des étrangers*) and its own Public Centre for Social Welfare (CPAS/OCMW). While CPAS/OCMWs operate under a federal legal framework, local implementation, administrative requirements, and staff capacity vary significantly across the 19 municipalities, creating geographic disparities for UAMs seeking social aid, registration, or urgent medical care (AMU).

Civic integration and language courses are managed locally by BON (*Brussels Onthaalbureau voor Inburgering*, part of the Flemish *Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*) on the Dutch-speaking side, and by BAPA (*Bureau d'Accueil pour Primo-Arrivants*), VIA, and civil society partners (such as CIRÉ and BXL-Laïque) on the French-speaking side.

Third-phase accommodation and transitional guidance toward independent adulthood are supported by specialized civil society organizations working alongside LRIs/LOIs, including Youth in Transit (Caritas International Belgium), Mentor Escale, Maison Babel, Tchaï asbl, and Minor-Ndako.

Local service delivery is reinforced by specialized civil society initiatives, including Exil, PsyBru, JAC Brussel, Collectif des Femmes, and AGII / Masir Avenir.

4. Strategic priorities and Objectives

The proposed measures provide a flexible and indicative roadmap for future action. They reflect opportunities for improvement and collaboration identified by participating stakeholders, rather than formal commitments by the organisations represented in the Local Working Group. Their implementation will depend on the respective mandates, responsibilities and capacities of the actors involved, as well as the availability of funding and other necessary resources. Consequently, concrete actions for the working group often involve advocacy efforts directed at the institutions and decisionmakers with the authority to implement these changes. Another important area of action involves awareness-raising and sensitisation activities, such as organising workshops, developing infographics and other informative materials, or mapping and promoting existing tools and resources that can support awareness-raising efforts among relevant stakeholders.

As noted above, the desk research and interviews with UAMs and relevant stakeholders identified a wide range of barriers to service provision. Given the limited timeframe and scope of the local working group, it was necessary to focus on a limited number of priority areas. These priorities were selected on the basis of two main criteria: their relevance to the actors represented in the working group and their significance within the local context. On this basis, three priority areas in which UAMs and former UAMs face structural barriers were identified: **access to mental health care, access to municipalities, public social welfare centres, and other public administrative bodies and access to employment (including internships and student jobs)**. Across all three themes, the same challenges recur: a lack of knowledge about the specific situation of MENA individuals, fragmented service provision, significant differences between institutions and municipalities, language and digital barriers, and insufficient continuity in support, especially during the transition to adulthood.

4.1. Priority 1: Access to mental health care

Current mental health care does not adequately address the situation of UAMs. The working group points out, among other things, long waiting lists and overburdened services, language barriers, a lack of intercultural expertise, and both missing and inappropriate diagnoses. Furthermore, there is no systematic focus on mental health upon arrival. Even when support is available, taking the step to see a psychologist or use psychiatric services often presents a high barrier; assistance with appointments and access to interpreters are not guaranteed.

The following **recommendations** were put forward by the local working group:

1. **Strengthen early identification and prevention without automatically medicalising psychosocial difficulties.** Provide accessible assessments of psychosocial well-being upon or shortly after arrival, with clear referral pathways when additional support is needed. Ensure that young people are informed about available support in an accessible way and have opportunities to discuss their well-being with someone they trust.

2. **Invest systematically in trauma-sensitive and intercultural competencies** among all professionals regularly working with UAMs, including psychologists, psychiatrists, reception centre staff, teachers, CPAS/OCMW staff, youth workers and other frontline professionals. The working group emphasises that this expertise should not be limited to guardians or specialised care providers.

3. **Bring psychological support closer to young people's everyday environments, particularly schools.** Strengthen structural collaboration between PsyBru/primary care psychologists and reception centres, schools, residential care facilities and youth organisations. This would allow psychologists to provide support in familiar and trusted settings. The working group explicitly recommends creating more such accessible points of contact (lieux d'accroche) to facilitate engagement with mental health services.

4. **Ensure effective language support and assistance in accessing healthcare.** Interpretation services and intercultural mediation should be considered essential components of quality care rather than optional additional services.

5. **Ensure continuity of support during major life transitions, particularly upon turning 18 and following family reunification.** Guardians, reception services, CPAS/OCMW social workers and specialised youth support organizations should coordinate to prevent gaps in guidance, psychosocial support and access to care. Where necessary, general social assistance should be complemented by specialized professionals with expertise in the specific and often complex needs of UAMs and former

UAMs. Support should not end abruptly when young people reach adulthood or their administrative or family circumstances change.

6. In addition to professional help, **buddy programs, youth organizations, and other local gathering places can strengthen the social network of UAMs and help prevent isolation.** While they are not a substitute for specialized care, they can play an important preventive and connecting role.

Based on these recommendations, the Local Working Group intends to develop a joint **policy brief** to support further advocacy. Drafting is planned for January and finalization for February 2027, drawing on working group recommendations and young people's contributions. It could form the basis of an open letter or meetings with decisionmakers.

The group identified possible **training sessions on trauma-sensitive and intercultural approaches and accessible information materials** to help services identify support and referral pathways. Members could first map existing resources, training programmes and tools to avoid duplication.

Another avenue is **promoting the lieux d'accroche model**. Members could contact PsyBru to clarify participation and encourage collaboration with schools, reception centers and youth organizations.

The group could advocate for continuity of support during transitions, including after age 18, by raising awareness among guardians, CPAS/OCMW services, reception providers and specialized organizations, and advocating for adequate funding and coordination.

Members could identify and connect existing buddy programmes, youth activities, and community-based support. Young people's reflections reinforced the importance of social inclusion and trusted relationships. Mapping existing opportunities would be a useful first step before proposing new initiatives.

It is important to acknowledge that **not all these actions fall within the mandate or capacity of the working group members**. Their contribution may therefore primarily involve mapping existing resources, raising awareness, facilitating collaboration, developing proposals and advocating for changes with the relevant institutions. Implementation will depend on the involvement and commitment of the organisations and authorities concerned.

Practical follow-up opportunities:

- Write a **policy brief** with clear recommendations from the Working group (Timing: January – February 2027)
- **Contact PsyBru** about lieux d'accroche and identify interested schools, reception centres and youth organizations. (timing: first quarter of 2027)
- **Share existing trauma-sensitive and intercultural training resources** and explore a joint session. (Timing: 2027)
- **Map existing buddy programmes, youth activities and community-based support** accessible to UAMs. (Timing: first half of 2027)

4.2. Priority 2: Access to municipalities, public social welfare centres, and other public administrative bodies

The problems in public services are not merely administrative. According to the working group, cumbersome or delayed procedures can have a domino effect on income, housing, education, and mental well-being. Furthermore, significant differences between public social welfare centres (OCMW/CPAS) and municipalities, limited knowledge of the legal status and rights of unaccompanied children, staff shortages, and varying administrative requirements lead to unequal treatment.

The following **recommendations** were put forward by the local working group:

1. **Ensure access to specialised support for UAMs, former UAMs and young people following family reunification.** General public services are not always sufficiently equipped to address the complex administrative procedures and challenges these young people face. Dedicated support is therefore needed to ensure effective access to their rights and services.

2. **Develop a more consistent approach to UAMs and former UAMs across municipalities and Public Centres for Social Welfare (CPAS/OCMW)**. Establish clear procedures and common protocols for frequently encountered cases to ensure that access to rights and services does not depend on the municipality, CPAS/OCMW or individual staff member involved.

3. **Strengthen the capacity of frontline professionals to support UAMs and former UAMs.** Priority should be given to municipal and CPAS/OCMW staff, but professionals working in banks, health insurance funds, schools, employment services and the police should also be included. Training should cover UAMs' legal status, social circumstances and specific practical challenges when accessing services, including adapting procedures to young people's age, school obligations and support needs.

4. **Improve access to administrative support by establishing dedicated contact points for complex UAM cases within municipalities and CPAS/OCMWs.** Designated reference persons or specialised service desks could help young people and their support workers navigate administrative procedures more efficiently and avoid having to repeatedly explain their situations.

5. **Maintain accessible non-digital alternatives to public services.** Online service platforms, digital appointment systems and identification tools such as itsme are not accessible to all young people due to language barriers, limited digital literacy or administrative difficulties. Public administrations should therefore guarantee in-person services and assisted access alongside digital channels.

6. **Ensure that administrative appointments and procedures are compatible with compulsory education and young people's schooling.** Offer appointments outside school hours and take account of the availability of guardians or support workers. Minimise repeated visits and ensure urgent cases are handled promptly. Administrative procedures should not unnecessarily disrupt young people's education or compromise their access to rights and support.

Based on these recommendations, the Local Working Group plans to develop a **policy brief to support further advocacy efforts**. This policy brief will be developed in the month of January and finalized in February, based on the recommendations put forward by this working group.

In addition, the working group identified several **possible concrete actions** to improve UAMs' access to administrative and public services. These include **promoting more consistent procedures and dedicated contact points** for UAMs within municipalities and Public Centres for Social Welfare (CPAS/OCMW), as well as **providing targeted training for frontline staff**. As a first step, the working group could identify relevant contact persons within public administrations, request meetings to explore the development of common protocols, and create an infographic to raise awareness of UAMs' specific administrative challenges.

Another proposed action is to contact the Federal Public Service for Social Integration (POD MI/SPP IS) to request an update of its online FAQ. The working group also recommends **advocating for accessible non-digital services and appointments outside school hours**, alongside **strengthening specialised support** for UAMs and former UAMs, including following family reunification. However, not all these measures fall within the mandate or capacity of the working group members. Their role would therefore primarily involve raising awareness, initiating dialogue with relevant institutions and advocating for improvements, while implementation would depend on the decisions and commitments of the competent authorities and organisations.

Practical follow-up opportunities:

- Write a **policy brief** with clear recommendations from the Working group (Timing: January – February 2027)
- **Identify contacts** within municipalities and CPAS/OCMW and organise initial exchange or advocacy meetings. (Timing: First half of 2027)
- **Compile training and information resources** for administrative frontline staff. (Timing: First half of 2027)
- **Contact POD MI/SPP IS** about updating its FAQ relevant to UAMs and former UAMs. (Timing: First quarter of 2027)

4.3. Priority 3: Access to employment (including internships and student jobs)

Employment challenges, including internships and student jobs for minors aged 16-17 years old, and regular employment for former UAMs, extend beyond a shortage of opportunities. Barriers include language requirements, limited networks, fragmented support services, inadequate individual guidance, and difficulty securing a first work experience. Young people often struggle to secure internships or student jobs without previous experience or contacts. Support from schools can vary, and a generic employer list does not itself secure placements. These difficulties can contribute to demotivation and school dropouts.

Young people may receive contradictory advice from education, employment, and support services. In Brussels, language requirements and the separation between Dutch- and French-speaking services create additional barriers. Digital-only guidance can be inadequate where hands-on support is needed.

Financial pressures, including supporting relatives, can affect education and work choices. Without appropriate guidance, young people may encounter precarious work, undeclared employment, or exploitation. Some leave school or programmes without subsequent support.

UAM's feedback confirmed the importance of accessible work experience, career guidance, opportunities aligned with their skills and interests, and support when mental health difficulties affect educational or professional pathways.

The following **recommendations** were put forward by the local working group:

1. **Develop individualized and accessible pathways to employment for UAMs and former UAMs.** These should combine language support, job coaching, administrative guidance, and practical assistance with job applications.

2. **Improve the accessibility, coordination and continuity of existing employment support services.** Young people and their support workers need a clear, central point of contact that can direct them to relevant services, training opportunities, internships, student jobs, and potential employers.

3. **Expand opportunities for internships and initial work experience.** Schools, Actiris, VDAB, employers and socio-professional integration organizations should collaborate more closely to create accessible opportunities. Combine employer identification with active support for young people and employers rather than relying only on placement lists. Explore supported introductory experiences, clarifying supervision, remuneration and insurance.
4. **Explicitly integrate student jobs into employment guidance.** Student jobs can provide young people with an accessible introduction to the labor market. However, they need support in finding vacancies and understanding their employment rights, contracts and administrative obligations. Support should also identify jobs compatible with schooling, reception arrangements and personal circumstances.
5. **Combine employment support with basic information on labor rights, contracts, financial obligations and exploitation risks**. Particular attention should be paid to temporary agency work, self-employment and platform work, payroll administration and the risks associated with undeclared work. Recognize family-related financial pressures and provide practical information before young people start work. Where appropriate, use voluntary and carefully supported testimonies to illustrate risks.
6. **Promote inclusive opportunities that build on young people's talents and long-term aspirations, avoiding automatic referrals to low-skilled or precarious jobs.** Employment guidance should also consider young people's skills, educational backgrounds and long-term development opportunities, ensuring that rapid labor market integration does not come at the expense of their future prospects.
7. **Prevent loss of guidance when young people leave school, employment programmes or other support services.** Establish proactive follow-up for UAMs and former UAMs at risk of disengagement. Maintain contact where possible and develop realistic options in education, training or supported employment that build on their abilities and aspirations.

The working group identified potential actions focused on making existing opportunities accessible, strengthening collaboration and raising awareness among employers and support services.

As a first step, the Local Working Group plans to develop a **policy brief to support further advocacy efforts**. This policy brief will be developed in the month of January and finalized in the month of February, based on the recommendations put forward by this working group.

A second step would be to **identify a small network of employers** open to internships, student jobs or introductory work experience for UAMs and former UAMs, recording available roles, conditions and required support. This would be a targeted stakeholder-mapping exercise rather than an extensive generic list.

An additional action is **employer awareness-raising** through positive but realistic testimonies, possibly short videos, discussing both successful experiences and support needs.

Members could **clarify existing employment guidance and referrals** by mapping eligibility by age, types of services and opportunities to connect Dutch- and French-speaking services and link language learning with work.

The group could develop a **practical factsheet on student jobs, contracts, labor rights and exploitation risks**, potentially complemented by voluntary testimonies from young people or lived-experience experts with appropriate safeguards.

The working group also highlighted **follow-up for those leaving school or employment programmes without a next step**. This could be raised in the policy brief and examined with services supporting disengaged young people.

A new digital platform was mentioned, but participants suggested **establishing a concrete network of employers and partners first**. Members' role remains mapping, connection, awareness-raising and advocacy; placements and ongoing individual guidance depend on relevant providers.

Practical follow-up opportunities:

- Write a **policy brief** with clear recommendations from the Working group (Timing: January – February 2027)
- **Identify and contact employers** potentially open to internships or student jobs for UAMs/former UAMs. (Timing: First half of 2027)
- **Map employment guidance services,** age eligibility and referral pathways. (Timing: First half of 2027)
- **Explore a short information session** or factsheet on student jobs, contracts and labor rights. (Timing: First half of 2027)

5. Monitoring and follow-up

The Power2UAMs working group in Brussels was established in April 2026 and convened four times over the course of the year. This Strategy should therefore be regarded not as a final product, but as a foundation for further development. The absence of dedicated long-term resources should also be taken into account when designing the monitoring framework. Monitoring should therefore remain proportionate and practical.

Interested stakeholders will continue to share relevant information on activities, developments, barriers, and, where available, emerging results. This information can serve as a basis for continued dialogue and help identify areas for further action and advocacy.

Recognising that members of the local working group do not necessarily have a formal mandate to represent their respective organisations, neither the Strategy nor its monitoring framework should create formal reporting obligations or assign implementation responsibilities to potential contributors. Where feasible, progress may be reviewed periodically on the basis of the indicative indicators set out below.

5.1 Indicators

Priority area	Indicator(s)
Priority 1: Access to mental health care	1. Number of policy briefs developed, consolidating all recommendations made by the working group (Target: 1) 2. Number of targeted stakeholders or institutions reached through dissemination of the policy brief (Target: 5) 3. Number of organisations that register as a 'lieu d'accroche' at PsyBru 4. Number of trainings given to first line actors in healthcare working with UAMs 5. 1 social map created of existing structures offering buddy programs and youth activities
Priority 2: Access to municipalities, public social welfare centres, and other public administrative bodies	1. Number of policy briefs developed, consolidating all recommendations made by the working group (Target: 1) 2. Number of targeted stakeholders or institutions reached through dissemination of the policy brief (Target: 5) (Timeline: first quarter of 2027) 3. 1 Mapping of contacts within municipalities and CPAS/OCMW 4. Number of trainings given to frontline staff 5. Number of advocacy meetings with administrations, e.g. POD MI/SPP IS
Priority 3: Access to employment	1. Number of policy briefs developed, consolidating all recommendations made by

	the working group (Target: 1) Number of targeted stakeholders or institutions reached through dissemination of the policy brief (Target: 5) (Timeline: first quarter of 2027) 2. Number of inclusive employers in the Brussels region identified and mapped as potential providers of internships or student jobs for (former) UAMs (Target: 5) 3. 1 Mapping of employment guidance services 1 factsheet developed for UAMs on student jobs and employment rights

5.2 Updating the strategy

If the Local Working Group decides to continue its collaboration beyond the official end of the Power2UAMs project in December 2026, the strategy should remain a flexible and evolving document, regularly reviewed to reflect new developments, emerging needs and progress made. A review every six months could provide an opportunity to assess the implementation of proposed actions, identify challenges and adjust priorities where necessary. However, given the limited time and resources available to working group members, this process should remain light and practical, building on existing meetings rather than requiring a separate, time-consuming evaluation exercise. Updates should focus on key developments, progress achieved and necessary adjustments, ensuring that the strategy remains relevant and actionable without creating an additional administrative burden.

6. Child participation

Unaccompanied children were involved in contributing to this strategy in two ways. A child-friendly version of the draft recommendations was prepared and shared with young people for input. It was organized around three themes: feeling well and having someone to talk to, administrative procedures, and work and future orientation. Young people were asked which idea would help them most and whether anything was missing. However, it proved difficult to obtain detailed input on the strategy directly, in this format.

Young people's perspectives were therefore taken into account mainly through the individual conversations held to develop their photo exhibition. These conversations touched on a range of topics important to them, such as housing, mental health and social support, administrative procedures, and their plans for the future, and were then linked to the draft recommendations. Three young people took part: two unaccompanied children and one accompanied child.

Their input largely supported the draft priorities, in particular having a trusted person to talk to, not losing support abruptly, finding opportunities that match their interests and aspirations, and easier-to-organize appointments at the commune. Their experiences also pointed to areas the draft covers only partly or not at all: the length of age assessment procedures and the absence of a guardian during that time, vulnerability to homelessness and unclear responsibility for housing support, the accuracy of interpreting in legal and administrative interviews and the ability to understand what one signs, the detention of minors, support for young people who wish to change direction in their studies or career, and orientation to the city for newcomers. Young people also described social activities and orientation services, such as those offered by Umoya and BON, as valuable sources of support and connection. These contributions informed the final recommendations and helped ensure that the strategy reflects the lived experiences of the young people concerned, alongside the perspectives of professionals in the Working Group.

7. Sustainability and next steps

Regarding the sustainability of the local working group, several members have already expressed their interest in continuing the collaboration beyond the official end of the Power2UAMs project in December 2026. While continued participation will remain entirely voluntary, all members will be invited to express their interest in remaining involved. Ideally, the working group would continue to meet every few months to exchange information, monitor developments and challenges related to the situation of unaccompanied children (UAMs) and their access to public services, and identify opportunities for further collaboration and action.

It is also important to recognise that many of the actions identified in the local strategy may not be initiated or completed before the official end of the project. Instead, their implementation may take place at a later stage, depending on the availability, capacities and priorities of the organisations and individuals involved. This is a natural consequence of the voluntary nature of the working group's engagement, as members participate alongside their regular professional responsibilities and therefore have limited time to dedicate to joint discussions, planning and the development of concrete actions. The local strategy should therefore be understood not only as an action plan for the remaining project period, but also as a framework for continued collaboration and longer-term improvements beyond December 2026.

8. Adoption by the local working group

The Local Strategy was developed through a participatory process involving the members of the Local Working Group. Between the third and fourth meetings, members had the opportunity to review the draft strategy and provide feedback. During the fourth meeting, the group discussed the proposed recommendations

and actions, identifying necessary adjustments and additions. Following this meeting, members were invited to review the revised version and provide any final comments before approval. Given the voluntary and informal nature of the working group, no formal signing procedure was organized. Instead, the strategy was approved by working group members via email, reflecting their collective endorsement of its recommendations and proposed directions for future action, without implying binding commitments by their respective organizations.