LOCAL STRATEGY

for Equal access to services for unaccompanied children

City	Ghent
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 Minors) in Ghent.

The local working group in Ghent was launched in April 2026 and has convened four times; it consists of local service providers, guardians, representatives of a reception center in the federal reception network, the city of Ghent, the social welfare office of Ghent, civil society organizations, and experts. Members work for the following organizations: Foster care service East Flanders Province, Reno vzw, Caritas International, Minor Ndako, City of Ghent, Fedasil, Cessmir, the social welfare office of Ghent (OCMW), Ocup vzw and CAW (Centre for general welfare).

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 housing, access to education and continuity of support upon reaching the age of majority. 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 organizations represented in the local working group, it is equally important to recognize that individual members do not necessarily have the formal mandate to commit their respective organizations 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 Ghent

The city of Ghent is an important urban context for the reception and integration of unaccompanied children and young people. Precise city-level up-to-date figures specifically for unaccompanied children residing in Ghent are limited, as registration and reception data are primarily collected at federal level. A mapping of the federal reception facilities identified 68 reception places in Ghent in July 2025[1]. 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 Ghent 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 the main countries of origin including Afghanistan, Algeria, Eritrea, Ukraine, and Morocco[2].

Reception and support of UAMs in Belgium follows the national three-phase model: first, an orientation and observation phase in an Orientation and Observation Centre (OOC), close to Brussels; second, placement in collective reception facilities; and third, transition towards more independent forms of accommodation, including Local Reception Initiatives (LRI/LOI/SOI). Reception places in and around Ghent are thus part of the second and third phase. Throughout these stages, UAMs can access a range of legal, social, educational, psychosocial, and integration-related services, provided through cooperation between federal and local authorities. Important actors supporting UAMs in Ghent are Fedasil (the federal reception agency), the Federal Guardianship Service, The Agency for integration and civic participation (AMAL), the City of Ghent *(Stad Gent), the* local Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW Ghent), The center of general

[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

welfare (CAW Ghent), including the Youth advice center (JAC), The foster care service (*Pleegzorg Oost Vlaanderen)*, as well as schools, specialised NGOs and civil society organizations , such as Minor-Ndako, CAW Transit Huis, project Leegstand), MindSpring, Ocup vzw, Reno vzw, and Caritas International Belgium.

Mechanisms for child participation are increasingly incorporated into policy development, such as the active presence of the Ghent Youth Council ('Jeugdraad') that gives both requested and spontaneous advice to the city administration on matters impacting youth, local policy, youth spaces, and mental health. Although at the time of speaking to a youth representative from the Council they did not have a group focused specifically on the UAM population, they were eager to include this group more in future. Regionally several UAMs were directly consulted during the drafting of the *Flemish Youth and Children's Rights Policy Plan 2025-2029*.

In the POWER2UAMs project in Ghent, 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 International 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 — summary of research findings

The Power2UAMs local research in Ghent, based on the desk research, stakeholder mapping and qualitative interviews with six unaccompanied children (UAMs) and eleven key stakeholders, shows that Ghent has a relatively strong and diverse support system for unaccompanied children, with municipal services, NGOs, foster-care services *(Pleegzorg)*, reception providers and volunteer networks collaborating across different levels of government.

At the same time, the research also identifies important structural barriers and gaps that limit UAMs ability to fully access their rights and participate in society. It demonstrates that Ghent's support system operates under continuous institutional tension between immigration control and child protection. Responsibility is dispersed across federal, regional, and municipal levels, resulting in a fragmented governance landscape where access to essential public services often depends on administrative status rather than universal child rights.

Housing remains a major challenge in Ghent due to a severe shortage of affordable accommodation, high rental costs and long social housing waiting lists. UAMs face additional discrimination and administrative barriers. Once granted international protection, they lack adequate housing-search support, leaving many at risk of homelessness, prolonged couch-surfing or exploitation by unscrupulous landlords.

Education is widely seen as key to securing a better future, yet UAMs face significant structural barriers. While OKAN provides an important entry point, strict language requirements, waiting lists and age restrictions hinder access to

mainstream education and vocational training, particularly for older UAMs facing pressure to earn an income. Limited teacher training in multilingual and intercultural education can also lead to UAMs being assessed primarily on their Dutch proficiency rather than their abilities, often steering them towards vocational tracks. Furthermore, despite providing a supportive learning environment, OKAN classes offer limited interaction with Belgian peers. The transition to mainstream education is often challenging, with UAMs experiencing a sudden reduction in guidance and support, increasing the risk of early school leaving without qualifications.

The transition to adulthood is a very vulnerable stage in the journey of an unaccompanied child. As soon as a child turns 18, legal guardianship and specialized support for UAMs cease abruptly. UAMs still going through the asylum process are transferred to adult reception centers, where the level of care is considerably lower. For those who have been granted international protection, the availability of supported independent living arrangements, such as CBAW, remains severely limited, while waiting lists for youth support services are often lengthy. As a result, young people may face an abrupt transition to autonomy, with limited support in managing administrative procedures, finances, and housing. This can increase the risk of social isolation and heighten psychological, financial, and other forms of vulnerability.

When the family arrives through **family reunification**, specialized support also ceases. The child comes under severe financial, emotional, and administrative pressure and acts as a translator and caretaker for the family. This often forces them to give up their studies or leisure time to go out to work.

The findings also point to **several additional barriers**. UAMs report high levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while local mental health services are constrained by long waiting times, limited access to long-term care, and insufficient availability of interpretation services in languages such as Pashto, Dari, and Tigrinya.

Complex municipal procedures, digitalized appointment systems, and dense paperwork present high thresholds for youth with limited Dutch or digital literacy. UAMs access to services can depend heavily on the system of knowledge, initiative and advocacy of their assigned legal guardian or social worker (the guardian being the official, legal representative of the minor with the mandate to take official decisions in the best interest of the child and the social worker being the person often linked a specific organisation and offering the child more practical and sometimes emotional assistance), creating what stakeholders describe as a “luck of the guardian” effect.

Overall, the research shows that Ghent has many of the services and actors needed to support UAMs, but that support remains fragmented and inconsistent. Key gaps include limited coordination, unequal access, and weak transitions between reception, education, housing, protection, and adulthood.

3. Legal and policy framework

The legal and policy framework underpinning the Ghent Local Strategy for unaccompanied children operates across multiple levels of governance: international, European, federal Belgian, Flemish, 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 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

[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

[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

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 schoolbased 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 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).

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 (Flemish)

The Flemish Community provides an additional layer of policies and services relevant to underaged newcomers. The Flemish Youth and Children's Rights Policy Plan 2025–2029 (*Jeugd- en kinderrechtenbeleidsplan*) establishes a four-year policy framework focusing on children and youth's well-being, opportunities to participate in society, solidarity, and the transition to adulthood. UAMs are explicitly recognized as a vulnerable group within this broader policy context.

The Flemish Children's Rights Commissioner (Kinderrechtencommissariaat) independently monitors and promotes children's rights within areas such as education, youth care, and welfare. Its work provides an important rights-based reference point for local and regional policy implementation.

Housing, welfare and education, three key areas affecting UAMs' access to public services, fall largely under the competences of Belgium's federated entities (Regions and Communities), rather than the federal government.

Within education, OKAN *(Onthaalonderwijs voor Anderstalige Nieuwkomers*) provides newly arrived non-Dutch-speaking young people, generally between the ages of 12 and 18, with intensive Dutch-language education and orientation towards the Flemish education system and wider society.

Other relevant Flemish instruments include the *Groeipakket*, which provides child-related financial support subject to applicable eligibility conditions (e.g., having started a residence procedure and having a guardian), and the regional foster care framework, which regulates foster care placements and associated support.

Local level (City of Ghent)

The City of Ghent translates these international, European, federal, and Flemish frameworks into local policies and services. The Ghent Child- and Youth-Friendly City Action Plan, adopted in 2015 and reinforced by Ghent's designation as European Youth Capital 2024, this plan commits municipal services to child-friendliness and explicitly prioritizes defending the rights and well-being of the city's most vulnerable children and youth.

While the Public Center for Social Welfare (OCMW) operates within a federal legal framework, it delivers their services at the local level. Each OCMW is integrated into its local municipal government and restricted to its municipal territory. Consequently, whilst these organizations offer the same opportunities and forms of aid, the technical application may differ across Belgian cities, and local governments may offer extra benefits, beyond the minimum federal scope.

The Ghent Refugee Taskforce, established in 2015 in cooperation with OCMW Gent, provides a coordination mechanism for multiple local stakeholders involved in reception, integration, and support for refugees and newcomers.

AMAL (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering* in Ghent) serves as the local agency for integration and civic participation, managing Dutch language acquisition and formal integration courses. Beyond formal coursework, AMAL also fosters local community connections through initiatives such as the Habibi Network and Parkoer.

At the operational level, the Stedelijke Opvang Initiatief (SOI) Ghent provides a local form of accommodation for UAMs who are moving towards greater independence. It therefore forms an important bridge between the national reception system *(Fedasil)* and longer-term local integration and independent living.

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 organizations 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 sensitization activities, such as organizing 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 were identified: **access to housing, access to education, and more specifically the transition from OKAN to regular education, and the continuity of support upon reaching the age of majority.** Across these three themes, several recurring issues emerge: a highly fragmented social services landscape, limited flexibility in existing systems, sudden disruptions in support, a limited social network, and insufficiently tailored services.

4.1. Priority 1: Education: the harsh barriers between OKAN and regular education

The main problem identified by the working group is the abrupt transition between OKAN and mainstream education. OKAN offers many young people a safe and adapted learning environment, but also isolates them from their Belgian peers. At the same time mainstream education is perceived as more rigid, and teachers there are less familiar with the specific backgrounds and needs of newcomers. This can lead to inappropriate academic guidance, overrepresentation in vocational pathways, a limited (or non-existing) sense of belonging, and ultimately to school dropout.

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

1. **Make the transition from OKAN to mainstream education more gradual and individualized.** Enable young people to temporarily combine subjects from both systems, depending on their language proficiency, previous educational experience, talents and support needs. Rather than following a standard one-year OKAN programme, students should be able to access mainstream classes earlier where appropriate, with regular assessments allowing their individual learning pathways to be adjusted. This would ensure that OKAN provides a supportive introduction without unnecessarily delaying educational progression.

2. **Promote structural collaboration between OKAN and mainstream teachers and peer-to-peer initiatives.** Encourage co-teaching, joint lessons and the exchange of expertise to ensure that knowledge and experience in newcomer education are shared beyond OKAN. Joint classes in subjects such as physical education, music and arts could facilitate interaction between students. Peer-to-peer initiatives, such as classroom buddy systems, should also be encouraged to strengthen social connections, mutual support and opportunities to practice Dutch.

3. **Promote experimentation with mixed student groups, flexible learning pathways, and co-teaching.** Explore pilot approaches that combine intensive Dutch-language support in OKAN with participation in selected mainstream subjects. These approaches should also examine how to better prepare students for the academic expectations of mainstream education, maintain appropriate support after the transition, and involve students in evaluating their experiences.

4. **Ensure that language proficiency does not disproportionately determine educational pathways.** Educational guidance and placement decisions should consider students' talents, previous education, interests and learning potential, rather than primarily their Dutch proficiency, which too often leads UAMs towards the B-stream or vocational pathways. The working group also considers the '*toelatingsklassenraad*' (admissions class council), held approximately one month after the transition from OKAN to mainstream education, too early for a well-founded assessment. More time

should be allowed for students to adapt, and placement decisions should be based on a broader assessment of their abilities and potential.

5. **Make educational and career guidance more practical and experience-based.** Organise educational orientation fairs, talent discovery events, job-shadowing opportunities and introductions to different professions to help young people make informed choices. Students should have opportunities to explore several educational and vocational pathways before making decisions. Information about available options should be made more accessible, and coordination between schools, follow-up coaches, guardians and other support workers should be strengthened.

6. **Provide alternative learning pathways when OKAN or mainstream education is not feasible.** When OKAN classes or traditional schooling no longer meets a young person's needs, meaningful educational or training alternatives combining education, vocational training and practical work experience should be available to prevent periods without education or structured daily activities. Collaboration with NAFT programmes as well as adult education centers (CVOs) and second-chance education providers should be explored.

7. **Combine education with broader individualized support where needed.** Explore holistic, tailored support and paid internships as potential local measures, particularly for older UAMs for whom education, employment, financial independence and the transition to autonomous living are increasingly interconnected. Ensure sufficient direct guidance throughout the transition to mainstream education and strengthen coordination between follow-up coaches, schools and other support professionals. Young people leaving education without formal qualifications should be offered opportunities for further training, work experience, or paid internships.

Based on these recommendations, the Local Working Group identified the following **possible actions:**

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. In addition, several possible concrete actions have been identified to improve UAMs' access to and experience in education. However, not all proposed measures fall directly within the mandate or capacity of the working group members, meaning that their role may primarily involve advocacy, facilitating collaboration or developing project proposals.

The first two actions focus on **raising awareness and providing training** for education professionals on diversity, racism, discrimination and the specific needs of UAMs, as well as **promoting collaboration between OKAN and mainstream teachers** through co-teaching, joint classes and peer-to-peer learning. The seminar on classroom diversity scheduled for 17 November 2026 offers a concrete opportunity to advance both actions, including through a workshop presenting

the POWER2UAMs recommendations. Working group members may also explore further opportunities to advocate for these changes.

A third proposed action is to **explore a pilot project in a Ghent school offering flexible, individualized learning pathways**, combining Dutch-language support in OKAN with participation in selected mainstream subjects and increased interaction between students from both systems. As a first step, working group members could jointly develop a project proposal to present to CESSMIR, potentially involving a doctoral researcher to coordinate and evaluate the pilot, as well as to the City of Ghent and interested local schools.

Finally, the working group identified **accessible short-term orientation placements (*snuffelstages*) and talent discovery fairs**, potentially in collaboration with organizations such as TAJO, as promising ways to support informed educational and career choices. However, no concrete opportunities for the working group to contribute to the implementation of this measure have been identified so far.

Practical follow-up opportunities:

- Write a **policy brief** with clear recommendations from the Working group (Timing: January – February 2027)
- Use the **seminar** on classroom diversity (17 November 2026) to present the POWER2UAMs recommendations and promote collaboration between education professionals.
- Develop a **concept note** for a pilot project in Ghent, potentially involving CESSMIR, the City of Ghent and interested schools. (timing: January – February 2027)
- **Map alternative educational pathways**, including opportunities offered by CVOs, second-chance education and NAFT providers. (timing: first half of 2027)

4.2. Priority 2: Access to Housing

According to the working group, it is particularly difficult for (ex-)UAMs to find affordable, high-quality housing. The housing shortage is exacerbated by discrimination, a limited social network, a lack of knowledge about the rental market, the loss of housing support, and financial regulations that can discourage cohabitation. The consequences extend beyond housing alone: homelessness, overcrowding, exploitation by unscrupulous landlords, poverty, stress, and negative impacts on education and employment.

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

1. **Increase the availability of affordable, quality housing.** The City of Ghent should strengthen efforts to bring vacant properties back into use (e.g. by transforming them into temporary living units) and promote social rental schemes. The working group also recommends exploring modular housing and other alternative housing solutions, including for larger families

following family reunification[7]. Greater attention should be paid to identifying and mobilizing vacant properties, including through dialogue with owners, social housing organizations and other local stakeholders. The effectiveness of existing measures, including raising vacancy taxes and incentives for owners, should also be examined.

2. **Make alternative housing arrangements legally and financially viable.** Cohousing, temporary housing and shared accommodation, including intergenerational housing arrangements, could help expand housing opportunities. However, clear legal frameworks and financial safeguards are needed to prevent young people from being financially penalized for sharing accommodation. Administrative requirements, housing quality standards, and maintenance obligations should also be examined to identify unnecessary barriers to alternative housing arrangements, while maintaining adequate standards of safety and habitability. Agreements with the OCMW should help ensure that young people do not automatically lose social assistance benefits when sharing accommodation.

3. **Extend the transition period between reception facilities and independent living.** The current transition following the granting of international protection is considered too abrupt. Young people need more time to secure housing and organize their administrative and financial affairs. The working group also highlights the importance of continuity of support beyond the age of 18, in line with principles applied in youth care.

4. **Strengthen housing-related life skills before and after leaving reception facilities.** Support should go beyond finding accommodation and prepare young people for independent living, including managing rental agreements, budgeting, property maintenance, communication with landlords and the early identification of housing-related problems. Accessible community-based initiatives, such as 'wooncafés', could combine practical information, housing-search assistance, volunteer support and opportunities to connect with landlords and other local actors.

5. **Strengthen collaboration with the City of Ghent, private landlords and other housing stakeholders.** The working group recommends developing a more coordinated approach, involving the City of Ghent as a key partner, to inform and support private landlords who may be willing to offer accommodation to UAMs and other vulnerable groups. This could include a central information point, clear referral procedures, information sessions and accessible guidance on existing rental schemes, subsidies, rights and obligations. Positive examples of successful housing arrangements should be shared to encourage participation and help address misconceptions.

6. **Improve emergency accommodation for young people experiencing homelessness**. The working group recommends not only increasing

[7] The working group refers to the Housing First Program in Denmark as a good practice.

capacity but also developing more accessible and supportive accommodation models, offering longer stays, guidance, meals, activities and greater autonomy for residents[8].

Based on these recommendations, the Local Working Group identified the following **possible actions:**

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.

The Local Working Group identified several other possible concrete actions to improve UAMs' access to housing in Ghent. These include **mapping existing housing support schemes, subsidies and alternative housing initiatives,** sharing this information with relevant stakeholders, and exploring collaboration with organizations providing housing-search assistance. The group could also help **raise awareness among private landlords** through information materials, information sessions and the promotion of positive examples of housing arrangements. The working group could also map potential partners and funding opportunities, including collaboration with social organizations and other actors involved in making vacant properties suitable for occupation.

However, **several key recommendations fall outside the direct mandate of working group members**, including increasing the supply of affordable housing, adapting housing regulations and administrative requirements, simplifying access to subsidies, and introducing or expanding alternative and emergency housing schemes. For these measures, the group's contribution would primarily focus on **awareness-raising, facilitating dialogue and policy advocacy**. In particular, the working group could engage with the City of Ghent to explore its potential coordinating role in centralizing housing information, supporting private landlords and mobilizing vacant properties.

Practical follow-up opportunities:

- Write a **policy brief with clear recommendations** from the Working group (Timing: January – February 2027)
- **Contact the City of Ghent.** Explore its possible coordination role, landlord engagement and existing housing schemes; (Timing: March – April 2027)
- **Map 'wooncafés' and housing-search support.** Identify existing practical support and volunteer accompaniment. (Timing: March – April 2027)
- **Explore vacancy awareness-raising.** Consider a public initiative such as a guided "vacancy walk" (leegstandsloop), alongside advocacy. (Timing: First half of 2027)

[8] The making available of beds for homeless people by Treck Hostel during covid is put forward by the working group as a good practice.

4.3. Priority 3: Transition to adulthood

The working group considers the eighteenth birthday to be a significant turning point. Guardianship ends, some forms of support are discontinued or modified, and at the same time, UAMs must independently manage their housing, income, paperwork, education, and social rights. Furthermore, the available services have waiting lists and often have strict eligibility requirements.

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

1. **Ensure continuity of support beyond the age of 18.** Support should not automatically end at a specific age but should be based on each young person's individual needs and development. The working group advocates for an easily accessible, cross-sectoral support model, similar to CBAW (Context-Based Support for Independent Living), and recommends exploring the possibility of extending certain forms of reception and support up to the age of 25. Continuity should also be considered across different forms of reception, foster care and family reunification, recognizing that different support arrangements and eligibility requirements may not always align.

2. **Start preparing for the transition to adulthood well before the age of 18.** Young people should receive timely information and practical guidance on housing, income, health insurance, education, employment and other social rights. Currently, this transition is often only addressed shortly before formal support arrangements come to an end.

3. **Promote the coordination between services, with the appointment of a dedicated support person or case coordinator at the OCMW or CAW.** The working group highlights the fragmentation of services as a major challenge. Assigning one person to coordinate support across different areas of life could help ensure continuity, prevent young people from repeatedly having to explain their situation and reduce the risk of falling through gaps between services.

4. **Improve the capacity of support services to proactively reach and maintain contact with UAMs.** Young people who become less visible to support services after turning 18 may not always be able to seek help independently. Support services should therefore have sufficient capacity to maintain proactive contact and coordinate with other organizations. Particular attention should be paid to maintaining contact with young people who are no longer in formal reception or care arrangements.

5. **Pay particular attention to young people relocating to another city upon reaching adulthood.** Relocation can disrupt established support networks and relationships with service providers. Coordinated handovers between services and the identification of a dedicated contact person in the new municipality could help ensure continuity of support.

6. **Strengthen informal support networks alongside professional services.** The working group proposes establishing or expanding peer-buddy systems

involving former unaccompanied children, who could act as mentors or community guides. Existing buddy initiatives should be explored, with particular attention to appropriate matching, training and support for volunteers and young people. Greater collaboration with local youth, leisure, and community organizations should also be encouraged to promote social connections, participation and a sense of belonging. These initiatives should complement, rather than replace, professional support.

7. **Ensure continuity of support following family reunification.** The arrival of parents does not automatically resolve the challenges young people face in becoming independent. On the contrary, financial responsibilities, administrative burdens, changing family roles and emotional tensions may increase their vulnerability. Support should therefore consider the situation of the young person and their family, including housing needs, administrative requirements and the continuity of existing care or support arrangements. Guidance should respond to actual needs rather than being determined solely by formal age or legal status thresholds.

Based on these recommendations, the Local Working Group identified the following **possible actions:**

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.

The Local Working Group identified several other possible actions to support UAMs in their transition to adulthood and independent living. Actions that could be explored directly by participating organizations include **exchanging good practices** on preparing young people for independence, **strengthening collaboration** between reception facilities, guardians, foster care services and other support providers, and identifying opportunities to improve coordination during major transitions, particularly upon turning 18 or following family reunification. The group could also **map and promote existing buddy and mentoring initiatives**, including exploring whether former UAMs could act as peer mentors for newly arrived young people, building on existing initiatives such as those of OCMW Ghent. Such an approach would require appropriate matching, guidance and support for both mentors and participants.

Another possible area of action is to **strengthen connections between UAMs and local youth, leisure and community organizations**. Working group members could exchange good practices, promote initiatives that facilitate participation in recreational activities, and explore ways to improve collaboration between reception facilities and local organizations. Awareness-raising activities and opportunities for encounters between young people and local residents could also help foster more positive perceptions of UAMs and strengthen informal support networks.

However, **several recommendations require structural changes or additional resources beyond the mandate of working group members**, including extending formal support beyond the age of 18, improving continuity between different care systems, strengthening professional follow-up and allocating additional resources to psychosocial or leisure support. For these measures, the working group's contribution would primarily focus on **advocacy, awareness-raising and dialogue with the competent authorities**. As with the other priorities, the implementation of proposed actions will depend on the respective mandates, capacities and voluntary engagement of the organizations involved.

Practical follow-up opportunities:

- Write a **policy brief with clear recommendations** from the Working group (Timing: January – February 2027)
- **Explore peer-buddy arrangements.** Contact OCMW Ghent and other buddy programmes to discuss appropriate involvement of former UAMs, matching and safeguarding. (Timing: first half of 2027)
- **Strengthen access to leisure activities.** Explore whether OCUP's approach to linking young people with activities could be shared with other organizations. (Timing: first half of 2027)
- **Exchange practices on independence.** Compare support models across reception facilities and foster care. (Timing: first half of 2027)
- **Promote social connections.** Identify opportunities for neighborhood encounters, awareness-raising and volunteer recruitment. (Timing: 2027)

4.4. Safety and inclusion of UAMs

During the consultations with unaccompanied children (UAMs), one young person highlighted the importance of addressing **the safety of LGBTQI+ UAMs in reception centers and other environments**, noting that this issue had been largely absent from the Local Working Group's discussions and recommendations. When this feedback was shared during the fourth working group meeting, members acknowledged the importance of the concern and agreed to broaden the recommendation to include other UAMs facing heightened risks of discrimination, exclusion or violence, such as girls and young people experiencing racism. The group therefore decided to introduce **safety and inclusion as a cross-cutting recommendation**, recognizing its relevance across different areas of young people's lives, including reception, education and social participation.

The following recommendation was formulated:

1. **Promote a safe, inclusive and supportive environment for UAMs.** Schools, reception facilities and other spaces frequented by UAMs should provide safe environments where young people can openly discuss discrimination, racism, gender-related concerns and their well-being. Particular attention should be given to LGBTQI+ young people, girls and

others facing heightened risks of discrimination or violence. This requires preventive measures, accessible support mechanisms and opportunities for young people to actively participate in shaping safe and inclusive environments.

The Local Working Group could contribute to this recommendation by **raising awareness, exchanging good practices and promoting collaboration** between organizations working with UAMs on safety, inclusion and the prevention of discrimination. During the fourth meeting, OCUP vzw shared a concrete initiative in this area: the organization had submitted a funding application for a project aimed at creating a **safe space for vulnerable young people, including LGBTQI+ refugee children**, where they could openly discuss their experiences and concerns and receive appropriate support. At the time of the meeting, the funding decision was still pending, with a response expected by the end of 2026. If approved, this initiative could provide an opportunity to develop and share good practices on creating safe and inclusive environments for UAMs, potentially inspiring similar initiatives in other reception and community settings.

5. Monitoring and follow-up

The Power2UAMs working group in Ghent 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.

Recognizing that members of the local working group do not necessarily have a formal mandate to represent their respective organizations, 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: Education	1. Create a policy brief with all recommendations made by the working group. 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 educational professionals participating in awareness-raising and training activities on diversity, discrimination and the specific needs of unaccompanied children. (Target: 1) 4. Number of schools interested in starting a pilot program (Target: 1)
Priority 2: Housing	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 meetings held with relevant stakeholders, including the City of Ghent, to present and discuss the working group's recommendations (Target: 1)
Priority 3: Transition towards autonomy	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 meetings held with relevant stakeholders, including OCMW Gent, to present and discuss the working group's recommendations. (Target: 1)

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 local 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

The development of the local strategy was also informed by exchanges with unaccompanied children at several stages. During the summer, participatory activities were held to explore their experiences and priorities, and an overview of these discussions was presented to the Working Group in session 3. A photo exhibition offered a further opportunity to hear their perspectives: guided by five prompts, the young people took and shared photographs about what a normal day in their life in Ghent looks like, in which spaces or places they feel good or not good, what challenges they face, what they consider important for their future, and what would make life better for them in the city. Between sessions 3 and 4, a child-friendly version of the draft recommendations was prepared and used in a small focus group with interested unaccompanied youth, who were invited to comment on the proposals and share their experiences. Their reflections were brought back to the Working Group in session 4 and used to refine the recommendations.

Their feedback was largely aligned with the suggested strategies and priorities, highlighting the need for more flexible educational pathways, more opportunities to explore study options, stronger support during the transition to mainstream education, and more chances for social interaction and language practice. Young people also raised concerns about safety and inclusion in reception facilities, particularly for LGBTQI+ youth, which led to an additional recommendation on creating safer and more supportive environments. These contributions from young people helped ensure that the revised strategy reflects not only the perspectives of professionals in the Working Group, but also the lived experiences and priorities of the young people concerned.

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. A first meeting will be planned in the second half of January 2027.

It is also important to recognize 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 organizations 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.