

Summary

Conditions in refugee reception centres need urgent improvement. Waiting times for a decision on asylum applications are increasing and currently half of the people in reception centers are staying in emergency locations that lack proper facilities and provide few opportunities to participate in society. For many people, life there is on hold for almost two years. The Dutch Dispersal Act (Spreidingswet) offers opportunities to improve this situation. The law allows municipalities to organise structural reception accommodations where refugees have more stability and agency and can participate directly in society.

In order to identify what is needed for this, VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (VWN) conducted research regarding what refugees consider important for good reception conditions. We spoke to 92 refugees in focus groups and interviews and received responses from another 696 refugees in an online survey.

The survey shows that privacy and having your own cooking facilities are important for a good reception centre, but also an environment where refugees feel heard, supported and at home. A safe place, and at the same time a place that offers you opportunities to develop and participate in society. This calls for a different approach in the design of reception centres where the focus is on the person, not the asylum procedure, and where the surrounding society is actively involved from day one. The main needs that emerged from the research are:

1. Refugees should be able to make their reception centre a (temporary) home, where they have space for themselves and can cook

Refugees stress the importance of a place that feels like home, especially for long-term stays in reception centres. They need their own space with enough privacy to unwind. Families also mention the importance of separate sleeping areas for the children, where they can retreat, for instance to do homework, and areas, including play areas, for women and children. Having the opportunity to cook for themselves is very important. This gives refugees control over their own lives and the freedom to decide when and what to eat. *'I have been living here for six months. I don't know how long I'll have to stay here. We should see this as our home, but it doesn't feel like it. In a home, you want a safe place, to be able to make food for yourself and get on with school and work. This is how you can feel at home (Yemeni refugee, Amsterdam).'*

2. A permanent place in a reception centre near facilities is essential so that refugees can spend their days independently and prepare for their future

The many transfers during the period in the reception centre make it difficult to establish contacts in the society in which they live and participate in it. In addition, many reception locations are in remote places, making it difficult for refugees to engage in activities and manage their own affairs. Ideally, refugees should be accommodated directly in or near the municipality where they will later be housed, so that they can start preparing for their future. *'I was used to Amersfoort and when I came to Leiden, I didn't know anyone. Now I will soon have to say goodbye to everyone I got to know and start all over again in Dordrecht (Syrian refugee, Leiden).'*

3. Reception centre near family in the Netherlands offers refugees a sense of home and security

Refugees say that family members already living in the Netherlands are an important bridge to society, especially if they do not yet speak the language and are vulnerable. At present, little consideration is given to this in the placement, which means that refugees sometimes stay in reception centres far away from family members and feel lonely and isolated. *'I am a single mum. I cannot communicate in Dutch, but my family can help me with this. It makes me feel safe to be around them. Especially my brother, because he can speak Dutch very well. I ask him lots of questions about what the system is like here (Somali refugee, Gilze).'*

4. Long stays in a state of uncertainty, often with worries about family in unsafe areas, mark the experience of refugees in reception centres.

The long wait in a state of uncertainty about the outcome of the asylum procedure and the unexpected extension of decision deadlines cause stress and a feeling of helplessness among refugees. They tell stories of losing motivation due to the wait. Lack of clarity and perceived arbitrariness in the order of processing asylum applications makes some feel forgotten. Long-term separation from family members, who often still live in unsafe areas, makes the situation even tougher. *'That's too long and bad for our mental health. Everyone here is tired, 'We have been waiting here for 18 months you can tell by looking at them. We're exhausted. We no longer have the energy we had in the beginning. You try to keep it together (Turkish refugee, Amsterdam).'*

5. Refugees value personal contact with staff: someone to whom they can tell their story, even if there is no immediate solution

In some locations, contact with staff is difficult and refugees feel that house rules are strictly enforced, without consideration for individual circumstances. Refugees need a listening ear and staff who take their personal situation into account. *'I would like COA to come to see us more often. What does everyone need in this asylum seekers' centre, how are we doing? (Syrian refugee, Harderwijk).'* At small reception centres, there is more personal and accessible contact with centre management, which has a positive impact on the stay. People from smaller language groups sometimes feel overlooked when counselling is mainly tailored to the majority. *'The centre management is really good with us. They try to understand us: where we came from and what we experienced. They show sympathy and they try to teach us things about life here (Afghan refugee, Goirle).'*

6. Refugees want to make good use of their time in reception centres and participate in society as soon as possible. Professional language lessons and help finding work are the most important

Refugees consider the Dutch language essential for quick participation, but language classes are often of limited availability and there are long waiting lists. In addition, refugees want to get to work quickly but experience obstacles such as the lack of a Dutch citizen service number. They also find it difficult to find work that matches their background. In this survey, only 15% of refugees who are eligible to work are in paid work. *'Without work, life is weird. I would like to feel normal, just a human being. That's the feeling work would give me (Iranian refugee, Harderwijk).'*

7. The situation of young refugees who have just turned 18 requires attention.

Young people just over 18 fall between two stools in reception centres: they no longer have a right to education and children's activities, but are actually still children and want to develop. Opportunities for further study are not yet available. *'He just kind of sits around all day long. There's nothing for him to do or anything he is allowed to do. A 22-year-old wants to get on with things. The centre management should put these young people who are bursting with energy to work (Syrian refugee, Gilze).'*