

# Integrated Action Plan City of Utrecht



# Section 1: Context, needs and vision

## 1.1 Introduction

Continuing the path towards becoming a city of human rights in a national context that is highly diverse, but also one of the most reluctant towards migration over the last two decades, **Utrecht has been a frontrunner** in making the case **for applying human rights standards in reception and integration**. Based on political leadership and a strong alliance with civil society, the city has worked on applying the Council of Europe's Human Rights legislation in its policies towards residents without papers and has made the case for a paradigm shift towards a more welcoming reception of and accommodation for people who request asylum. Consolidating these achievements to guarantee human rights for people without papers and elements to continue on this path of localising human rights.

## 1.2 Socio-economic context and migrant population

Utrecht is a growing city with a young and highly educated population and more than 35,000 university students. Unemployment rate is at 3.8% (2022), but significantly higher for migrants.

Migrant population Utrecht is home to 168 different nationalities - the most important countries of origin are Turkey, Morocco, Surinam, the Antilles and Indonesia. Furthermore:

- 22% of the population is foreign-born
- 35% of the population has a migrant background (foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents), among youth, this percentage is 50%.
- Approx. 2,660 recognised refugees (with temporary and permanent residence permits):
  - 35% from Syria (over 900)
  - Eritrea 10%
  - Afghanistan 9%.

- 2,000 Ukrainian refugees registered in Utrecht.
- 3,000 undocumented residents (mostly male).

## 1.3 Existing strategies

### 1.3.1 Local policy context

**Utrecht's 'Refugee Action Plan'** is a key framework that was developed with stakeholders and that is constantly updated to incorporate new initiatives. The main areas of intervention are adequate reception and accommodation for asylum seekers, facilitating integration of third-country nationals, promoting social inclusion and community building, and fostering collaboration and partnership.

Key components of the Utrecht approach are:

- 'Active from day 1' Asylumseeker are asked at their first day in Utrecht: This is a different approach,. It is not if you gonna do something, but what are you going to do? What are you aiming for in life.
- The 'continuous line': if people receive shelter in Utrecht, they should stay in Utrecht and not be transferred to facilities in other municipalities.
- Inclusive approach: All activities for newcomers are also open to citizens. That gains local support.

The Refugee Action Plan also includes a policy agreed with the national government that asylum seeker accommodation in the city should be based on the Plan Einstein model (see below), and that the city should receive appropriate funding for this.

### **Utrecht is a member of the Human Rights Cities Network.**

In 2010, the City of Utrecht adopted the universal standard of human rights to guarantee a high quality of life for all inhabitants. In following up on this aim, Utrecht has been working on promoting a human rights culture in the city, fitting the identity of an open, inclusive and social city. In 2013, a Local

Human Rights Coalition was born, consisting of NGOs, local civil society organisations, businesses, politicians, policy officers and researchers. The Coalition's aim is to create awareness and ownership of local human rights in order to enhance the quality of life of citizens by translating global value(s) into the local practices. Although the initiative does focus on this local bottom-up governance approach, best practices are shared with other cities at the national and international level.

The city has an action plan to combat discrimination on the housing market. **The city has a long term history since 2001 of giving shelter and legal guidance to undocumented migrants.** This so called **Bed Bad Bread** and guidance program has the aim to give durable solutions to be legalizing their stay, return to their home or third country. The NGOs in Utrecht support migrants with questions about their legal situation and rights. Several local partners provide shelter, legal advice, support for migrants without residency papers. They have a right to legal support when they re-apply for residency, a right to healthcare, a right to education until 18, and safe reporting of crime.

Utrecht has acted within a coalition with other Dutch cities to force the national government to fund the local provision of basic services ("bed bath bread" later called the LVV, in which 5 cities piloted) for migrants without a valid residence permit.

The past 5 years we cooperated with 5 cities (Utrecht, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Eindhoven and Groningen) with the immigration office, Repatriation agency and foreigners police) on reaching this goal. This so called LVV scheme started on 1 april 2019 but although it was a success the present national government stopped the scheme which also included 2/3 of the funding by national government by 1 january 2025. The local governments, the undocumented migrants didn't agree with this decision, so a human rights lawyer took the national government to court, because within the European Social Charter, European Convention on Human Rights and European Return Directive, states that you can't take away someone's right by putting them on the streets and bringing them in a state of "material deprivation". In preliminary decisions all the courts decided that the shelter for undocumented must be continued, and that the state is responsible to

pay for the local shelters in the cities among Utrecht. The cases will now be decided in higher courts in 2026.

### 1.3.2 Reception of people seeking asylum

The reception of people seeking asylum is a competence of the national reception agency (COA). Through the Plan Einstein concept, Utrecht has been able to demonstrate the benefits of locally led new reception model that is of a smaller scale, provides mixed housing also for local residents and that also offers mixed services for locals and asylum seekers). The city has reached an agreement with COA that any new accommodation in Utrecht should be based on this model. For the next 4 years this Plan Einstein concept led by the municipality is partly financed by the national reception agency and partly by the municipality of Utrecht. In contrast to asylum seekers, municipalities are directly responsible for the reception of the approximately 90,000 Ukrainian refugees who came to the Netherlands.

**Asylum seeker accommodations** are typically designed as efficient and low-cost housing options (e.g. in former military barracks) at the outskirts of cities. Their architecture and location reduce interaction with locals to a minimum. In addition to that, asylum seekers typically do not receive integration support (e.g. language training) during their procedure. In its **Plan Einstein** pilot project, funded by the EU Programme **Urban Innovative in 2016 a radical shift in local and national policy followed.**

- **Actions**, the city of Utrecht successfully attempted a radical break with this model. In a space in different neighbourhoods among a less affluent neighbourhood, the city provided mixed accommodation for young neighbourhood residents and asylum seekers. It provided services from day 1, activities for newcomers, that addressed both the locals and newcomers. We offer a lot of voluntary activities like eating together, playing Sports together, learning together (English courses, Dutch lessons, Entrepreneurship courses, building your own future, women in business, ICT courses, voluntary activities on culture, having fun, organizing festivals, etc))

- Plan Einstein has manifold positive effects. They include the wellbeing of newcomers, social acceptance and benefits for the local population, the creation of social networks of newcomers and the more productive use of time for newcomers awaiting their asylum decision and faster integration afterwards. Since 2021 Dutch municipalities are again in charge of the national “inburgering” integration programme that is mandatory for most newcomers from outside the EU. This works well within the continuous line of Plan Einstein, because we can start as early as possible while they are still in an asylum centre in Utrecht.

## 1.4 Main challenges

Include section on wider scope challenges and needs:

- Although many asylum seekers await for a decision on their asylum request, for those who get a decision till 2025 around 70% get a residence permit and 30% don't. Although there are return policies by the national government for the denied asylum seekers in place, the last 25 years less than 20% are returned to their country of origin. So many 5000 a year nationally become undocumented. Some try their luck in another European country, others stay in the Netherlands in especially migrant communities in the cities. The national government puts people on the streets if they can't be returned within a few months. The streets are the cities in the Netherlands.
- Different research done over the years is that the estimates are that there are 3000 undocumented people in Utrecht. NGO's who work for the municipality of Utrecht, shelter around 300 persons a year and others come for legal support or support by gaining access to the health care system. Most of the undocumented are men aging from 18 till 50 years. There are some families although the national government has to provide shelter for children and their parents till they are 18 years. This because of litigation done by a human rights lawyer and Defence for Children between 2008 and 2012. Then the Dutch high court decided that these families should be provided a place in an asylum centre, because of the International Treaty of the

Rights of the Child, and decision made by the European Committee on Social Rights. Utrecht supported this human rights based strategic litigation.

- Because of the Linkage act of 1998 undocumented people don't have a right to (voluntary or paid) work or a right on social benefits. Exceptions are right to basic healthcare and right to school, for children. This exclusion strategy makes participation in society very difficult. Especially for children it is problematic because they are in the same school as another Dutch children and sometimes because of poverty or the linkage act they can't take part fully. When they become 18 years the law prohibits to do a follow up study is not possible it really becomes appearing. People who are inactive and living in extreme poverty gain a lot of health issues. This especially the case of undocumented people so a strategy to activate them is also preventing extra health issues.

So it is important as Utrecht as a human rights city to step in and looking what is possible.

#### 1.4.1 Needs

- ▷ How to improve access to rights for those in the most deprived situations like the undocumented people?
- ▷ How to be a welcoming city also for undocumented people who are not welcomed by the state?

#### 1.4.2 SWOT Analysis

##### Weaknesses Threats Opportunities Strengths

<b>Strengths:</b> There is political commitment to becoming and being a welcoming,	<b>Weaknesses:</b> As everywhere there is a lack of funding especially because National government stopped the
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human rights city and know-how on how to do it.	funding from 1/1/25 for the undocumented scheme (LVV) in Utrecht and other cities.
<p>Opportunities:</p> <p>The city is proactive in working with international organisations and national government to make national and local institutions comply with human rights standards.</p> <p>Innovativeness in implementing human rights standards and widespread support among the population and politicians.</p>	<p>Threats:</p> <p>Unwelcoming national narrative about refugees, especially in the current moment of national elections and the formation of a new government.</p> <p>There is a decreasing political national support level for supporting undocumented people.</p>

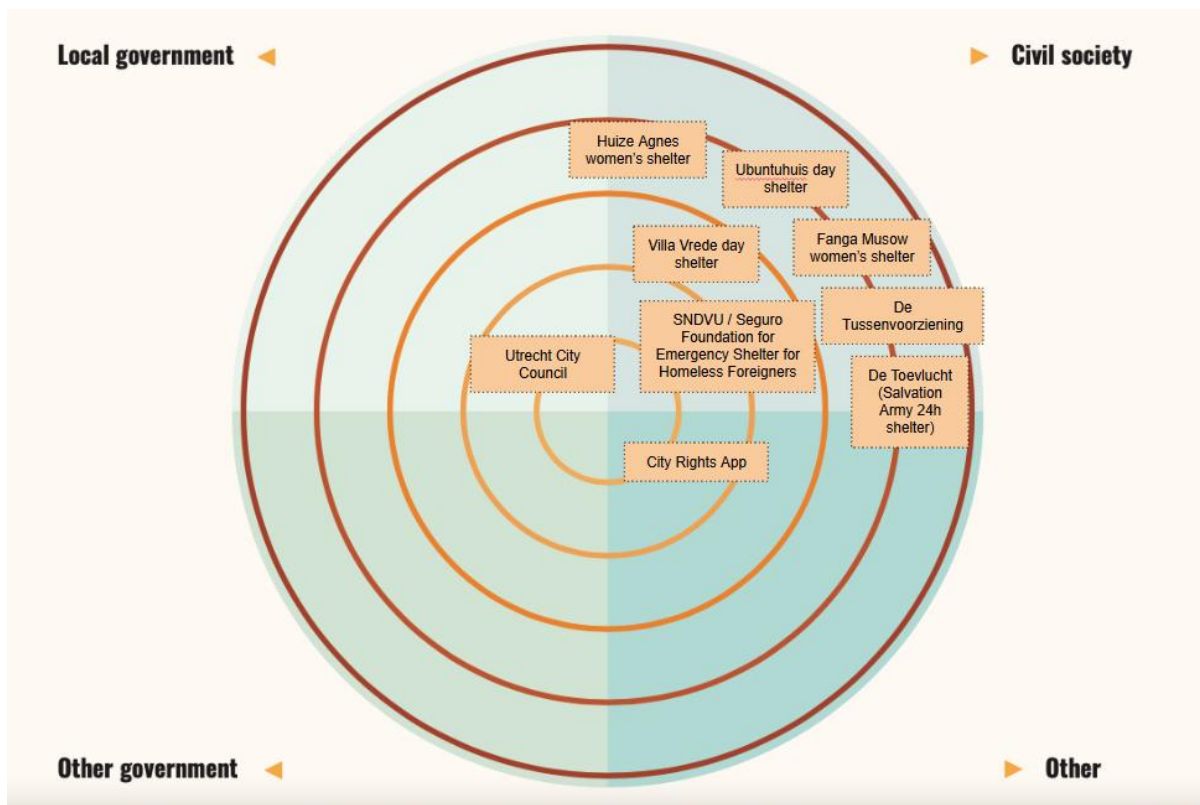


## Section 2: Overall logic and integrated approach

### 2.1 Focus of the integrated action plan

- ▷ Develop a more elaborate translation of international human rights standard in the local ecosystem for refugees and migrants.
- ▷ Develop a city rights app and a city- card to take the next step in safeguarding access to fundamental rights for people without papers living in Utrecht.

#### 2.1.1 URBACT Local Group



### 2.2 How are local entities compensating citizenship: a comparison by examples

Several years ago Utrecht was inspired by City cards in other cities in the USA and Canada. In cities as Montreal, New York, New Haven they

introduced city cards for undocumented to give them access to local services, discounts with cultural organizations and sometimes also with shops. The aim of the city card is to give a sense of belonging.

Also at the Migration Alliance conference in January 2023 a workshop was done on City cards among the also city of Montreal and New York. It was also at this conference the cities of Saint Denis and Utrecht met, which led to the present Weldi project. After the conference a digital meeting was organized by the City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe network. This C-MISE network is led by Utrecht and Oxford University together and this follow up meeting deepened the knowledge on the City card. Cities as Zurich and Berlin are also working on introducing the City card and the city of Villeurbanne introduced it already in 2024 after the Anvita City network did research on the city card.

## 2.3 Status quo in Utrecht

### Utrecht City Rights app:

Utrecht is during and because of the Weldi project introducing the CITY RIGHTS APP. Amsterdam already had this app. After discussion with the organization who develops the City rights, the city of Utrecht found the funding to introduce the app in Utrecht. The app is free of charge for the undocumented and on the app they can look for information on

1. Know your City
2. Know your Rights
3. Journal
4. Calendar
5. Profile

Information is available on when you are new in town, where to go for help, day and night centres, food aid and clothing, health care, legal support, education activities, community organizations, LGBTQIA+, support for women and children, showers and public toilets, reconnection programs.

The information will be up to date and the app with information about Utrecht is available in the app stores. The communication on this app is made available by the NGO's working with undocumented people. The City

rights app is more known by the target group because of mouth to mouth communication and we will also use this poster on different spots in the city.

## UTRECHT CITY RIGHTS APP



The aim is that 500 undocumented people in Utrecht, downloaded the City Rights app.

Utrecht City Card:

Utrecht has a:

- International Welcoming Centre / One stop shop where expats and EU Migrants can get information on their visa and their rights
- Local Digital platform coalition with a human rights website
- There is political support and discussion within the city council to start a city card for undocumented people. The deputy mayor mr vd Graaf showed the first show model of the city card at the end meeting of Weldi in Utrecht on 12 december 2025







This gives enough political support for further introduction of the city card.

- On the moment there is a informal Citizens Card put out by the NGO's like SNDVU and Huize Agnes. On the card there is a logo of the municipality of Utrecht and the specific NGO.
- The U- Pas for local citizens with low income is also open for undocumented children, so that they can take part with children activities with a discount and are treated the same way as Dutch children in the same deprived situation. Undocumented adults are excluded from this card.

So, the City card will be a more formal extension of what is already there and to give undocumented a better sense of belonging.

## 2.5 Areas of intervention

### Relation to existing strategies

Registered inhabitants of Utrecht with a low income can receive the 'U-pas', which gives access to a number of leisure activities and services. Also children get extra money to spent on a bicycle to go to school and a computer, that is necessary if a child is on school or in doing their homework. The Work and Income department of the municipality are organizing the issue the U-Pas and the target group are people with low income, with a Dutch nationality or a residence permit and many of them are on social benefits.

### Possibilities for access to services and activities for the City card

- Involvement of a wide range of services and institutions, which we will research in next phases
- Safe reporting of crime
- Healthcare
- Culture
- Sports
- Voluntary activities

### Safety, privacy and ethics

- How to protect privacy. A privacy check will be done by the privacy officers of the municipality
- Trust of people in having a card

### Technology

- Digital or on paper? We will start with a paper card and later look into the possibilities of a digital card

## Governance

- Who will give out the card? The municipality responsible department for policies on undocumented will issue the card to the target group
- Who is responsible for coordinating participating services? The municipality will be responsible for this.

## Resources

- Financial The resources are limited at the start. The cost of the card only with a chip in it will be €8 a card.
- Solidarity card. We will start a “crowd funding” action with the Utrecht population for €10 a €15,- a card. The money will be used to give discounts or make activities accessible for the target group with the City card owners.

### 2.5.1 Dilemma's for the Utrecht approach

- existing arrangements, the literature says to formalise things and make it public and has political risks especially in a national migrant unfriendly political climate. Utrecht since 2001 has the policy to develop a strong policy and then face the political and media discussion. We are very experienced in this and to change heart and minds of the people and the politicians. You need to face the opposition of your policies and then investigate ways that the counternarrative will prevail.

- inclusion/exclusion; The question is: is the city card for all citizens with low income including undocumented following the New York, New Haven, Zurich, Villeurbanne model. We tried that 5 years ago and the internal discussion got stuck because of the existing U-pas for local people with low income. It would take a lot of new knowledge with that department on undocumented and it will cost a lot more that they issue the card. Als It will take a long decision process.

Now the momentum is there in 2025/2026 also because of the end of the cooperation with national government. It is better to put your own policies in place with a more formal City card to replace the NGO cards. The solidarity is that both low-income groups without or with a residence permit



have a card City card or U Pas which will support them. Maybe somewhere in the future it can still become 1 card but first start with the city card.

- The city card will be proof that persons are within the Utrecht Bed, Bad Bread scheme for undocumented. It gives a sense of belonging to be a Utrecht citizen. The card will be for 1 year and can be extended if the persons are still eligible. The card is not an official Identity card because that is not the competence of the municipality but of the national government.

We will develop during 2026 and 2027 which services can be added like general or specific support from the Utrecht neighbourhood team or neighbourhood team for families. It can make it easier for children who are undocumented to get a U pas, because they don't have an identity card but the city card proofs that they are supported within the Utrecht shelter for undocumented. It shows that they are in the shelter in Utrecht. We give them access with the City card to all our Plan Einstein activities. We will also later pursue the possibilities on a discount for entrance to cultural activities or sports. First we want to issue the card to cover the basics and then later we will extend the possibilities. The commitment first and the building blocks later.

- human rights based, Utrecht is a human rights city since 2011. That means we take human rights at the heart of our different policies. So it is the guarantee of rights, that in present times can't be taken for granted, especially in difficult times human rights are important and should be at the heart of your local policies. As Eleanor Roosevelt said: "Where, after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world."

- The costs will be limited, because it is the paper and the digital card. The cost will be for the municipality of Utrecht, and it will pay the organizations which will issue the card.

The card will be physical (paper card) and a digital card. After the visit at city of Liege during the Weldi project in november 2024, they convinced us of this. If a person has a new Phone, it can be installed on that. We will start on practical reasons with a paper card, in beginning of 2026.

All these questions we will consider during our conversations with the Utrecht local group, so when we introduce the card formally (Planning february 2026) all the important questions are asked and answers can be formulated.

### **How much does it cost?**

We are trying to keep the costs as low as possible and start with a paper card which will cost €8,- a card; We will develop a digital card with other cities like Liege, a Weldi partner or other Dutch cities. In the end, we are aiming to combine the cities Rights App and the City Card.

### **Who will issue the card?**

The Utrecht for Everyone team and within that team the special task force on undocumented migrants within the municipality will be responsible. They know who the target group is and how to know who is eligible. They will print and give out the card to undocumented people from the welcomes centre. The municipality of Utrecht is trusted by the Undocumented community in Utrecht.

The target group is first the undocumented people (300 in 2025) in the shelters in Utrecht. We will develop to expand to possibly other undocumented within the city of Utrecht.

## **2.6 The Utrecht concept**

All the choices that will be made about the city card will be in co-creation with the Utrecht Local Group of NGO's. We work really a long time together so we are all optimistic that good results will come out of this. The NGO's will talk with the undocumented migrants and their boards about this, so if implemented we will be sure that it has enough support.

