

# Tilburg

## Local innovations that influence national law.

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Picture: Post-industrial development in Tilburg's city centre, source: © municipality of Tilburg

## 1. Abstract & Takeaways

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### Key Takeaways:

1

Tilburg's pragmatic and innovative local solutions became part of a new national Integration Bill after the city responded quickly to shortcomings in previous national legislation.

2

Regional cooperation with neighbouring municipalities pools existing resources for a greater overall impact for refugees living in the region.

3

All inclusion policies are designed to create a stable environment for migrants through a mutual commitment between the administration and newcomers.

## What is unique about the city?

**Regional solidarity and quick policy innovations:** What sets Tilburg apart from other progressive Dutch municipalities is its focus on regional solidarity and partnership—allowing it to pool resources and lobby the national level more effectively. Moreover, newcomers are actively involved in policy processes and all migration policies aim for a stable environment based on a mutual commitment between the administration and newcomer.

## What is the focus of local migration policies?

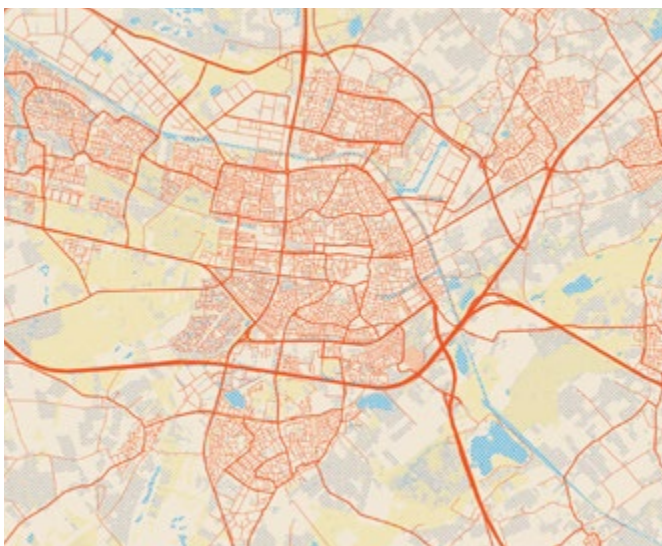
**Pragmatism and persistence pay off:** Tilburg's story is one of pragmatism and persistence, rather than explicit municipal disobedience. The city's approach to migration governance is characterised by the consistent use of silent diplomacy, coordination between Dutch city networks, and close collaboration with local and regional partners to amplify influence at the national level and lobby for changes in Dutch national migration policy.

## What are the most outstanding results so far?

**Above-average labour market participation of refugees:** Tilburg improved local inclusion measures with an experimental pilot programme 'Language, Orientation and Participation' (TOP). As a result, both refugee labour market participation and educational enrolment in Tilburg is higher than the national average. The national Ministry adopted several of these measures and incorporated them into the New Dutch Integration Bill (which will be implemented in 2022).

## Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Tilburg's public officials take part in several international networks dealing with irregular migration. Together with civil society groups, they have recently stepped up their national lobbying as well, banding together with Amsterdam on housing availability, as well as with a coalition of several Dutch cities declaring their willingness to provide refuge to unaccompanied minors.



### Population

217,259

### Location/ region

Southern province of North-Brabant,  
near border with Belgium

### Mayor (party)

Theo Weterings,  
(Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD))

## 2. Local background and context

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### Post-industrial transformations

Tilburg is a city with a rich industrial history that has transformed its former industrial areas into public spaces for the culture and knowledge sectors. The city's migrant communities have played an important role in remaking this post-industrial city. There are also darker chapters in the city's migration history. Until the mid-2000s, there was a detention centre for refused asylum seekers at a former army base in Tilburg that was notorious for its strict and inhumane regime. Local debates about human rights and migration governance are thus not new to the city. During this period, faith-based organisations, progressive municipal politicians, and human rights organisations voiced concerns about human rights violations in this detention facility. Nowadays, Tilburg's political officials and policy advisors present the city as welcoming, inclusive and migrant-friendly. It is home to expats, international students, and refugees and known for, among other things, a large Dutch-Somali community.

### Taking the lead in progressive migration governance

Since 2015, the municipality has taken a leading role in migration governance through its prompt and proactive approach to inclusion measures for recognised refugees. Like other pioneering Dutch cities, municipal actors in Tilburg struggled with the shortcomings of national asylum and civic integration policies (see country profile). Tilburg's policy advisors and political officials are part of a small group of progressive Dutch municipalities that did not wait for the central government to address these shortcomings. Still, national asylum and integration policies leave municipalities with few options to respond to these challenges. Tilburg's policy advisors therefore made the best of small room to manoeuvre in developing a broad programme of inclusion measures for recognised refugees (§3.1). Some of these are proving to be valuable inspiration for the development of a new national framework and Integration Bill.

### Solidarity with refugees and smaller municipalities

Through this process, Tilburg's policymakers also found inspiration in initiatives for refugees developed by locals, civil society groups, and social enterprises. Tilburg's approach is based on solidarity with refugees and with smaller municipalities in the region that confront challenges related to refugee reception. Rather than going it alone, Tilburg opted for the development of a joint regional approach (§3.2) and established a regional Refugee Advisory Council (3.3).

The municipality hosts many unaccompanied refugee minors, who are supported by the Dutch guardianship organisation (NIDOS) and stay in two small-scale shelters in the city. Since 2015, Tilburg has provided night shelter accommodations for refused asylum seekers and irregular migrants. It was only in 2020 that the municipality decided to offer



24-hour support and professional assistance, as a few other Dutch cities. This minimal emergency assistance for refused asylum seekers between 2015-2020 stands in contrast to the city's commitment to supporting recognised refugees. In part, this reflects the strict separation in Dutch regulations between centralised policy measures for irregular migrants, and decentralised policy measures for recognised refugees. It is also linked to the strong local presence of church organisations in Tilburg. Irregular migrants have historically found support in shelters run by faith-based organisations in the city and wider region. These initiatives co-existed rather than collaborated with the municipality, and never received financial assistance. In 2020, after the closure of the Hearth, an independent shelter run by a regional congregation, the municipality announced it would expand the number of places in its shelters for irregular migrants. Still, this only happened after members of the municipal council voiced concerns about their plight. It is still too early to determine if this decision is too little, too late—or a turning point in the city's approach to irregular migrants.



Picture: © municipality of Tilburg

## Close collaboration with civil society

Tilburg developed many of its inclusion measures for recognised refugees in close collaboration with civil society organisations and social enterprises. Some of these organisations joined the municipality's pilot project *Inburgering+* (§3.1) and received financial support. One such project is '[Sarban the Future](#)', in which the municipality collaborates with local Afghan-Dutch entrepreneurs (restaurateurs), former refugees from Afghanistan who have offered work experience and internship places to over 200 refugees in their Afghan restaurant since 2010. Recognised refugees who would like to work in the food or hospitality sector can

enrol in a certified Hospitality and Catering Training programme at Sarban that lasts 9-12 months and concludes with an industry-recognised professional diploma from the regional vocational college. Tilburg and the regional network 'Heart of Brabant' also established a partnership with the social enterprise 'Refugee Team'. Through this initiative, approximately 150 refugee participants have joined a team of volunteers on various sporting events. They gain work experience, build a social network, and practice Dutch. In return for their work, event organisers put members of the Refugee Team in contact with their corporate network, to help them find a job, internship, or training position. 70% of the Refugee Team volunteers find sustainable work within a year. In the pandemic's wake, however, the Refugee Team had to transition to digital social networking activities.

## From dispersion to inclusion

In response to national policy shortcomings, Tilburg has developed a programme of inclusion measures that simultaneously address various needs relating to work, housing, healthcare, and language. Tilburg's political officials and policy advisors secured an administrative agreement with the Central Agency for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) to make sure refugees in regional reception centres are allocated housing in the same region after successfully completing their asylum procedures. In this way they can benefit early on from municipal inclusion measures, such as pre-school education for toddlers. Dutch Refugee and children rights organisations note this agreement creates a better environment for refugee children, because it reduces the number of transfers required for completing asylum procedures. They present Tilburg as an 'exemplary municipality' because of its commitment to creating a stable environment, which enables social networks to develop and prevents interruptions of education.

## 3. Selected local approaches

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### 3.1 Tilburg's TOP 'Language, Orientation and Participation' programme (2017-2018)

*In 2016, when Dutch municipalities still had very limited power over integration policies, Tilburg's policymakers and political officials used the minimal discretionary power granted to municipalities to develop a broader range of inclusion measures for recognised refugees.*

In 2017, the Dutch national government made a minor but contested change when it introduced a 'participation declaration' requirement for arrivals. Through this Participation Declaration, specific groups of

newcomers, such as recognised refugees, are required to declare that they know and will respect the ‘values and rules’ of Dutch society, that they will actively contribute to society, and count on support from fellow citizens in doing so. When it was first implemented, various politicians, experts and journalists voiced their concerns. Some consider it a form of ‘symbolic politics’, as the mandatory Dutch civic integration exams (see country profile) already cover Dutch values and norms. These are already on top of the exam an asylum seeker would eventually have to take if they later chose to naturalise as Dutch. Others saw this extra integration requirement as a further impediment to actual local inclusion.

The task of organising Participation Declaration workshops falls upon Dutch municipalities, for which they receive financial support. Many Dutch municipalities stick to the bare minimum, as the law only requires a one-day workshop on Dutch norms and values (along with a ceremony). The controversy around the Participation Declaration did not escape Tilburg’s policy makers and political officials, who opted for a pragmatic and strategic response. They saw an opportunity to have a say on centrally coordinated national civic integration policies and viewed this as a steppingstone towards developing an integrated programme that spanned 12 weeks. These measures formed part of Tilburg’s TOP programme, Dutch for Language (Taal), Orientation (Oriëntatie), and Participation (Participatie). Instead of focusing only on norms and values, Tilburg’s orientation programme was tailored to the different needs and interests of newcomers.

Orientation workshops focused, for instance, on getting to know the city- and neighbourhood-specific facilities, services, and welcoming initiatives. The aim of these ‘Language, Orientation, and Participation’ courses was to welcome newcomers to the city early on and to offer an integration programme focused on the development of a Personal Action Plan adaptable to personal skills, competences, and interests. Tilburg’s policy advisors sought to soften the harsh transition between life in reception centres, where access to work is restricted, to life after status recognition, where a refugee is on their own and confronted with strict integration requirements.

The story of Tilburg’s TOP programme also shows how persistence pays off. A report by the Dutch municipal association ‘DIVOSA’, active in the field of social policies, suggests Tilburg’s experimental pilot programmes are yielding their first results. Refugee labour market participation and enrolment in education in Tilburg is higher than the national average. The national Ministry adopted several measures developed in Tilburg and other progressive municipalities, such as its approach to the Personal Action Plan, and incorporated them in the New Dutch Integration Bill (which will be implemented in 2022). Tilburg’s policy advisors and political officials are proud that their municipal projects serve as inspiration for national policies. That said, they also remain critical, and question how the central government adopts municipal innovations and solutions. Tilburg’s migration and integration policies continue to make up for national shortcomings in pragmatic and progressive ways.

## 3.2 Civic integration+ (2019–present)

Tilburg's current Civic Integration+ (in Dutch: Inburgering+) is one of the follow-up projects to the city's language, orientation, and participation programmes. Through this project, Tilburg collaborates with 10 other municipalities in the 'Heart of Brabant' region. This pilot's goal is to develop complementary language, orientation and participation 'integration routes' for recognised refugees, in anticipation of the new Dutch Civic Integration Act. Municipalities fund the project, along with the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and the European Social Fund. Two independent Dutch research institutes then evaluate.

So why is one pilot project an exemplary of progressive migration governance? Firstly, because Inburgering+ builds on earlier inclusion programmes Tilburg developed in collaboration with its partner municipalities in the region since 2016 (4.1). The Inburgering+ project comprises various measures, such as a 'Broad Intake' and 'Start Track' that aim at social and economic integration, inclusion, participation, and personal development for refugees in Tilburg. The idea behind the Broad Intake is to identify competencies, attained education, work experience, motivation, interests, skills and other information, such as existing social networks, along with mental and physical wellbeing, to draw up a Personal Action Plan (PAP).

Tilburg policymakers explain that this action plan was always intended as a joint plan developed together with each refugee, requiring mutual commitment. However, this was not initially reflected during the intake interview. In 2020, the municipality changed its approach to avoid reproducing an 'asylum hearing atmosphere'. Along the way, the municipality noticed that conducting a single intake conversation did not really encourage and motivate refugees to participate, and did not provide a clear image of who someone is and what their needs and talents are. The new approach emphasizes building trust over time and enables refugees to remain 'in the lead'. Instead of answering yet another list of questions, they are invited to introduce themselves to their contact person at the municipality (case manager) and fellow participants—on their own terms and in a manner of their choosing. The municipality works with the Refugee Team social enterprise to organise theatre workshops to allow all refugees, including those with low literacy, to share reflections on their past, present, and future identities and aspirations. This 'Broad Intake' period is concluded with a Personal Action Plan, and refugees can appeal if they do not agree with the municipality's advice. The Personal Integration Plan, as envisaged by Tilburg's policy makers, is therefore meant to be a dynamic agreement developed over the course of this Broad Intake period and not set in stone. It can change if an asylum seeker's life circumstances change. This is in sharp contrast with the new national integration policy.

The Personal Action Plan, as outlined in the new Dutch Integration Act, does not allow for much flexibility. It is meant to identify which route newcomers will follow: (1) the Z route for refugees with low literacy, (2) the B1 route for those focused on work and lastly, (3) the Education



route for refugees who want to start a course or study at a higher education institute. The new Dutch Integration Act states that this Personal Action Plan is not just a recommended integration route based on the Broad Intake, but also a legal agreement. Refugees and their municipal contacts (case managers) need to decide within a short 10-week period which route is suitable and whether someone will focus on work or education, besides completing the language requirements. Tilburg's policy advisors are concerned that there is not enough flexibility and that this period is too short to develop a plan tailored to personal needs and aspirations.

They also worry that vulnerable groups, such as young unaccompanied refugees, will be particularly affected by this rigid framework. Young unaccompanied refugees who have attended specialised secondary schools for refugees (in Dutch, 'ISK' schools) are often not admitted to post-secondary vocational colleges because of Dutch language deficiencies. Because language skills are an important factor in the determination of integration routes, municipal actors in Tilburg are concerned that young unaccompanied refugees will have to abandon hopes and dreams of enrolling in vocational education or higher education. The municipality is therefore developing additional language and skills training so they can access regular post-secondary education, and lobbying the central government for more structural support for young unaccompanied minors. Talent development and empowerment are at the heart of Tilburg's approach to integration, which is why policy advisors stress the importance of 'going the extra mile' to ensure access to education, skills training, and participation.

Tilburg's Start Track<sup>1</sup> is another example of the municipality's problem-solving and 'learning by doing' approach within the Inburgering+ pilot. Newcomers with low literacy (Z-route) and those focusing on work and employment programmes often wait a long time before they can start language courses and parallel employment programmes. Refugees who want to enrol in a course or study at a higher education institution start much sooner. To bridge this divide, Tilburg offers a 3-month orientation Start Track programme comprised of language courses and participation opportunities, such as (voluntary) work, traineeships or internships. Mid-way evaluations of an independent Dutch research institute show refugees benefit from Start Track's focus on group activities, collective learning, and team building. It helps them develop communicative and language skills in a safe and familiar environment.

The implementation date for the New Civic Integration Act was pushed back several times and is now due to take effect on 1 January 2022. Tilburg's city actors, like their Utrecht and Amsterdam counterparts, worry this delay will hamper the integration of those who are in between old and new policies: for example, refugees who started their civic integration under the current failing system. Because of the municipality's proactive approach and pilot, refugees in Tilburg are among the lucky few who already benefit from more effective, alternative inclusion measures.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Tilburg's Broad Intake is the first phase of the municipality's 'Start Track' for recognised refugees.

### 3.3 Regional solidarity in the Heart of Brabant in the context of pragmatism and dispersal

In 2016, when Tilburg's policy advisors and political officials developed alternative approaches and practical solutions to the shortcomings of national policies, they decided not to 'go it alone'. Instead, they focused on developing a joint regional approach together with ten other municipalities, local civil society partners, and social enterprises in the Heart of Brabant region. Most of these municipalities are small rural municipalities, towns, and hamlets. The municipalities joined forces for pragmatic reasons. Through this regional partnership they managed to negotiate an agreement with the Central Agency for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). The agreement meant asylum seekers in the regional reception centre would be provided with housing in municipalities in the region after successfully completing their procedures. Without this agreement, Tilburg would have run the risk of their early local inclusion efforts being in vain – its refugees dispersed to other municipalities outside the region.

This regional partnership also makes it easier to exchange knowledge and expertise, and to apply for EU funding. Sometimes support is also more cost effective when organised on a larger scale. Regional collaboration also makes it easier to offer a broader, more diverse programme of inclusion measures through various local partnerships with civil society groups and social enterprises, such as [Sarban the Future](#). Smaller municipalities only support and house a few refugees annually, which makes it challenging to offer tailored support on their own. Regional solidarity is therefore at the heart of this partnership. Finally, the partnership puts the municipalities in a stronger position to negotiate with the central government. Regional collaborations of this sort are rare in the Netherlands. This is, in part, why the Ministry of Security and Justice now supports and funds this regional collaboration in a [pilot project](#) in the 'Heart of Brabant' region. In this 'Regional Placement' project (Dutch: Regioplatsing) the municipalities, ministry and Central Agency for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) are working together to ensure that asylum seekers with a high probability of a residence permit are housed near their future place of residence.

Tilburg's municipal officials and policy advisors stress that this regional partnership is underpinned by pragmatic considerations and regional solidarity. But there is another advantage. The regional collaboration results in a more coordinated joint approach that reduces the social-spatial exclusion associated with dispersal policies. After completing their asylum procedures, recognised refugees in the Netherlands are dispersed to municipalities across the country. The Central Agency for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) allocates recognised refugees to Dutch municipalities. There are very few grounds for rejecting this offer the COA will recognise. In practice, most people can exert little influence over where they will settle. Because opportunities for work and access to education and social support (among others) are unevenly distributed between dispersal municipalities, some scholars call dispersal a '[lottery system](#)' that creates social and spatial exclusion of refugees. Often this exclusion

affects chances to find work or to access education. Municipalities differ, for instance, in the support provided for travel expenses to specialised language schools, or permission for refugees who receive social assistance to enrol in higher education. From this perspective, Tilburg's commitment to a joint regional approach and regional solidarity with smaller municipalities contributes to a more just, consistent, and uniform approach for refugees in its region.

### 3.4 The Regional Refugee Advisory Council: 'Nothing About Us Without Us'

Policy advisors in Tilburg stress its migration governance is characterised by a bottom-up, 'learning by doing' approach. The perspectives of refugees in Tilburg are essential to this process of fine-tuning the municipality's existing and future projects and policies. In 2018, Tilburg's senior policy advisors returned from a meeting in Brussels with a plan to set up a refugee advisory board, with the hope this would enable a more structurally defined place for refugee perspectives on policy development in Tilburg. The immediate inspiration was the European Migrant Advisory Board (EMAB). The advisors immediately got to work and started with a small refugee advisory board, established in the spirit of 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. By the end of 2018, they realised that this first attempt was too open-ended, and lacking clear coordination. In March 2019, they replaced this first advisory board with a regional Refugee Advisory Council. This Council consists of 12 members and meets monthly. It is modelled on the guidelines of the European Migrant Advisory board. The municipality thus asked the council to write a report on its policies for recognised refugees. Every member focused on a specific theme, and some conducted short research projects to uncover different aspects of refugee experiences with Tilburg's policies. Compared to Tilburg's first attempt, this Regional Refugee Advisory Council is less heterogeneous, but more structured. Most of the members speak English and/or Dutch and many have a higher education background. The council is coordinated by a chair who has a recent refugee background and works at the municipality. According to Tilburg's policy advisors, this setup and the chair Osama's dedication and expertise contribute to the Advisory Council's success. Dutch city network policy experts recognised it as an exemplary practice in participatory bottom-up policymaking.

In its first year, the Advisory Council issued a report detailing and scrutinising various dimensions of Tilburg's programmes and policies for refugees. The report pointed towards different issues and untapped potential in local policies, but the advisory process was challenging. This was in part because of the format, a lengthy written report. After consulting with the chair and members of the Advisory Council, Tilburg and its regional partner municipalities opted for an alternative format. The Advisory Council now offers continuous advice on specific projects and policy interventions through focus group meetings. In 2020, the Advisory Council helped to improve and check the accessibility of municipal communication. It also offered input for and feedback on the development of a joint vision on civic integration of municipalities in the Heart of Brabant region.

## 4. Advocacy and network activities:

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Tilburg's political officials and policy advisors position the city as an international city that promotes responsible international cooperation, global citizenship, and an inclusive, welcoming culture for migrants. Between 2015-2017, Tilburg's former mayor, Peter Noordanus, was an important driving force behind the city's pragmatic and progressive approach to migration governance. Tilburg's current mayor, Theo Weterings, is taking a somewhat different course. He has adopted a moderate approach; in part this may be because he chairs the Dutch municipal association's (VNG) working group on governance and security. In this role, Weterings represents all Dutch municipalities in negotiations on municipal involvement in asylum governance.

Tilburg's municipal executive board includes political officials of conservative liberal and centre-left parties. On matters related to refugee solidarity and migration governance, the municipal council is sometimes unanimous, but on other occasions divided. Altogether, these factors shape Tilburg's cross-local activities on migration governance. The municipality positions itself as pragmatic and progressive rather than as an openly defiant welcoming city. While Tilburg uses its progressive migration policies to diverge from restrictive national regulations, it rarely explicitly undermines or contradicts national approaches, except for with its shelter for irregular migrants. Tilburg's municipal actors go the extra mile to make full use of the municipal discretion to develop alternative approaches. These projects are also intended to help anticipate and aid the development of a new civic integration framework nationwide.

Tilburg's policymakers and public officials take part in national and international networks dealing with irregular migration. These networks include the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG) and the G40 network, a partnership of 40 large and medium-sized Dutch municipalities. The city has also joined the 'Dutch Coalition of the Willing', a solidarity campaign of Dutch municipalities that mobilise to relocate unaccompanied minors from refugee camps in Greece. Although Tilburg's mayor did not sign a joint letter of five mayors to the Dutch Minister of Migration, requesting the national position on Greek relocation to change, Tilburg's policy advisors are still actively involved in these advocacy efforts. This involvement is often 'backstage,' but should not be overlooked. The municipality hosts the largest number of unaccompanied minors and therefore brings a lot of expertise to the advocacy campaign. Tilburg's policy advisors also chair the VNG and G40 working groups on asylum and integration.

In 2020, the municipality teamed up with Amsterdam's policy advisors to push for a more integrated approach for housing recognised refugees. In doing so, the two cities are taking on one of the most pressing challenges in Dutch migration governance: the housing of recognised refugees, who must often wait a long time due to housing shortages. Beyond Dutch borders, Tilburg works together with IOM and takes part in migration-related city networks, such as EURO CITIES and INTERCULTURAL

cities. Tilburg is also a signatory to different solidarity declarations, such as the EUROCITIES Statement on the Relocation of refugees from Greece (2020).

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The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

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