

Integrated Family Support Models: 10 years of Houses of the Child: Lessons from Flanders' Integrated approach

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European Observatory on Family Policy: Conference Breaking Silos, Building Futures:
Policy Innovations for Integrated Family and Child Support

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Stream 2

Topics

Welcome & Introduction

Kristien Nys (ODISEE Centre for Family Studies)

Integrated Family Policy through Houses of the Child

Tine Rommens, policy adviser Governemental agency Growing up (Opgroeien)

Houses of the Child from the perspective of local governments

Ivan Pauwels, Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG)

Questions and Discussion

Welcome & Introduction

Expectations?

Undoubtedly: relevant input from all of you

What do you take with you to your practice, your research, your policy work?

Welcome & Introduction

Who's in the room?

- **Politician?**
- **Policy Advisor?**
- **Researcher?**
- **Practitioner?**
 - House of the Child / Family Centre ...
 - Childcare (0-3 years – 0-6 years - ...)
 - Healthcare
 - Education
 - ...

1. Integrated Family Policy through Houses of the Child

Tine Rommens

**Policy adviser Gouvernemental agency
Growing up (Opgroeien)**



Opgroeien

1. Flanders and the agency Growing Up

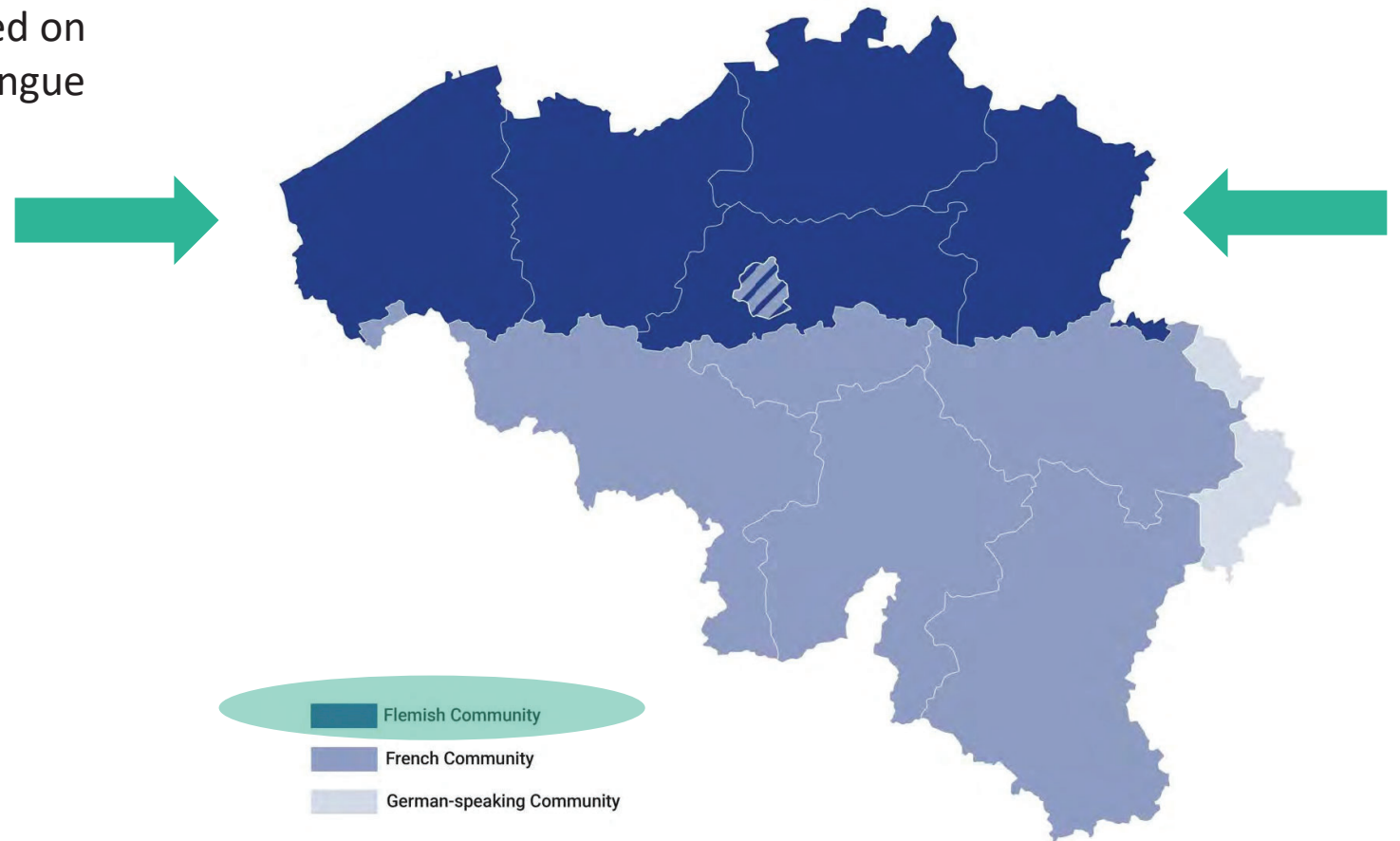


The Flemish community

The communities are based on their residents' mother tongue

Profile

- Area: 13 522 km²
- Inhabitants: 6,7 million
- Language: Dutch



Growing up - Opgroeien

The governmental agency **Opgroeien** joins forces **to create as many opportunities as possible for all children and young people, including their families, who grow up in Flanders and Brussels-Capital Region.**

The agency's service provision ranges from preventive family support, childcare, the child benefits ('Groeipakket'), foster care, adoption, youth support and the approach to juvenile delinquents.

Opgroeien explicitly opts for an integrated, multidisciplinary approach in cooperation with a large number of partners. In this way, families are given maximum support.

Kind & Gezin

Jeugdhulp

GROEIPAKKET

VLAAMS
CENTRUM
VOOR adoptie

2. The Flemish Houses of the Child: an introduction



Vlaanderen
is kansrijk opgroeien

Opgroeien



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

- Established in **2013**: Decree 'The organization of preventive family support': A House of the Child in every municipality
- House of the Child ('Huis van het Kind') = Flanders' adaptation of the Family Centre model.
- They provide multidisciplinary, integrated services - particularly during the **perinatal** phase and **early childhood** - bridging **health, social care and education** to promote family well-being through coordinated support.
- Serving **expectant parents** and **families with children up to age 25**



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

They bring together healthcare providers, social services, educators, and community organizations to achieve **six primary objectives** outlined by the 2013 Decree:

1. Holistic family support
2. Enhancing community-based support
3. Early risk detection
4. Disease prevention (vaccination programs,...)
5. Targeted poverty reduction
6. Contributing to creation of family-friendly environments



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

- Guided by a principle of **proportional universalism**: universal access while prioritizing tailored support for at-risk families
- The Houses of the Child function as **local collaborative networks delivering integrated preventive family support** tailored to **local needs** and aligned with municipal social policy frameworks.
- **Open participation model**: any local authority or relevant actor in preventive family support may take the initiative to establish a House of the Child, with local government required to take the lead where no other stakeholder does.

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': what?

- In addition to the **preventive medical consultation offices**, at least two of the 4 next activities:
 - ✓ Organizing meeting places
 - ✓ Offering group work
 - ✓ Providing low-threshold individual support
 - ✓ Organizing a reception and information point
- **Referral** of parents and children to adequate services

Near-universal utilization
of Kind & Gezin consultation services



Access to families during early childhood =
opportunities for comprehensive support



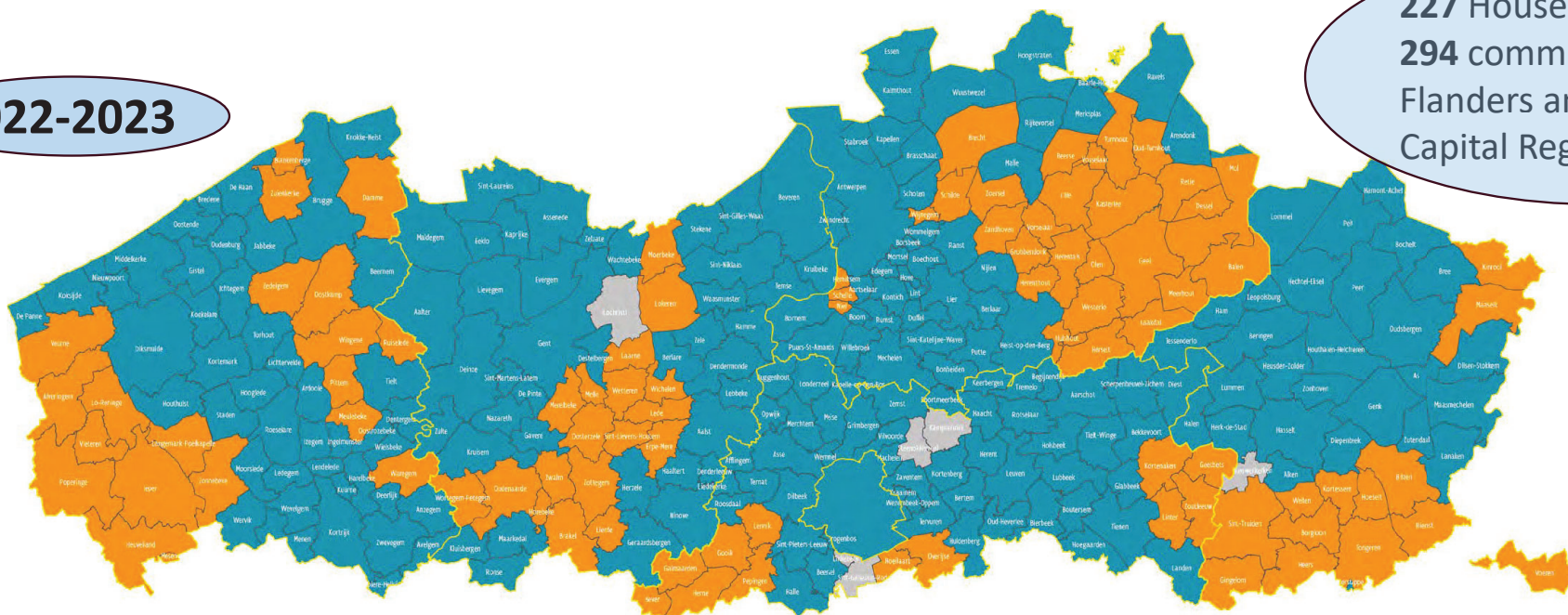
HUIS VAN HET **KIND**

Opgroeien

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': where?

2022-2023

227 Houses of the Child in
294 communities in
Flanders and Brussels
Capital Region



- 29 inter-municipal Houses of the Child
- Municipal House of the Child

In 2024: final expansion: 284/285
municipalities in Flanders + 19/19
Brussels Capital Region

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': funding mechanism?

January 2025

Basic services – Core funds

- The amount of Flemish funding varies between +/- € 1.200 en € 98.000 (median amount +/- € 8000) per House of the Child
- Based on the number of minors and vulnerable families in each area

Total amount for all Houses of the Child = **€ 2.793.973**



The Flemish 'Houses of the child': funding mechanism?

Supplementary services – on call funding

- Extra **family support initiatives** including:
 - ✓ targeted assistance for families in vulnerable situations
 - ✓ support programs for expectant and young parents
 - ✓ home-based volunteer support
 - ✓ Language and developmental aid for disadvantaged parents
 - ✓ group-based parenting support and parent-child activities
- Total amount for all supplementary services = **€7.129.831**

Total amount (basic + supplementary) = €9.923.803

The Flemish 'Houses of the child': funding mechanism?

Preventive medical consultation offices

- Separate legislation, but part of the Houses of the Child
- 289 offices with **doctors, staff of Kind en Gezin** (Child and Family), part of Opgroeien, and **volunteers**
- Funding
 - ✓ Infrastructure and the support of volunteers: € 5.197.992
 - ✓ Doctors' fees: € 11.877.496
- Total amount of funding = **€ 17.075.488**



Houses of the child: Survey 2022-2023

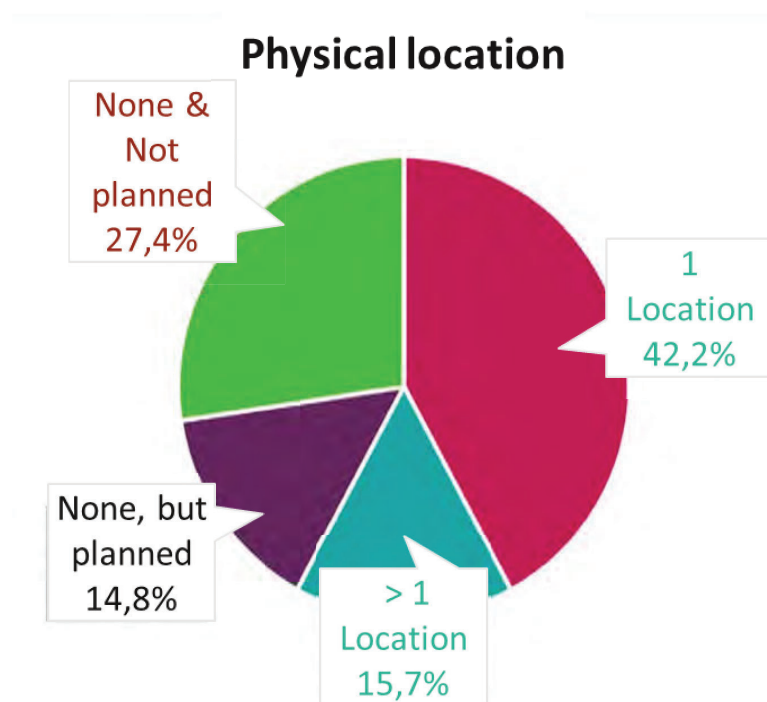
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Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- **Purpose:** 10 years after the decree, gaining a comprehensive picture of local practices, delivering insights for future policy
- Extensive survey in **spring 2022**
- Examined **multiple operational dimensions** including target demographics, service provisions, partnership networks, and organizational structures
- **Methodology:**
 - ✓ Oral interview based on standard questionnaire (open + closed questions)
 - ✓ Interviews by local staff of Opgroeien with the coordinator of the House of the Child
- Extended report in 2023

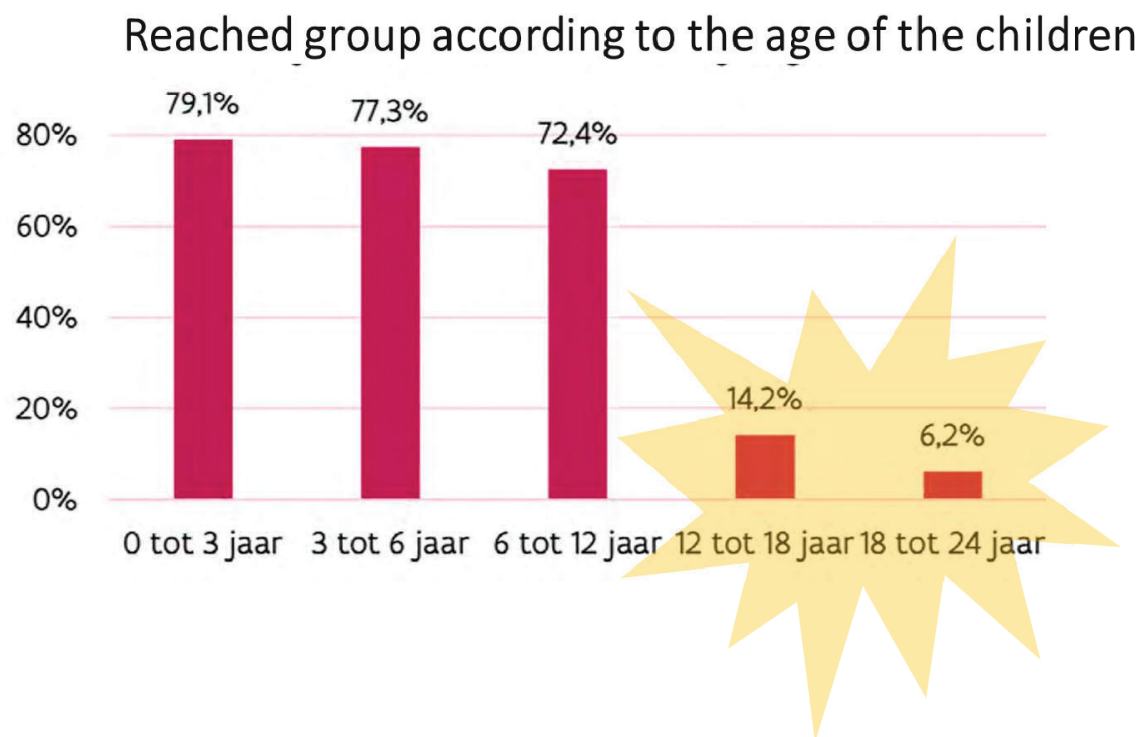
Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- No obligation by legislation
- But: **crucial role** of physical location (**accessibility!**) and **co-location** in the development of Houses
- **Sharing facilities** with complementary services such as public libraries, Kind & Gezin offices, community meeting spaces, or childcare centers creates **integrated service hubs** where families can naturally seek guidance on various parenting and child development matters



Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- Focus on families with children between **0 – 12 years old**
- Challenges in effectively reaching all family demographics:
- Realising a **social mix = significant challenge**
- Families with **children requiring specialized support**: only **13%** of the Houses reports a good reach of this group



Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

- **Great diversity** in partnerships and life domains
- Connecting different life domains is a major challenge: truly integrated work across life domains is still not a reality.
- Few connections between Houses and **more specialized support services** (f.e. youth care)

Top 3 life domains ➤ active engagement	n	%
Parenting support	150	67
Childcare	129	57
Education (cf. school)	88	39
Social cohesion (e.g. play day, picnic, birth tree event)	84	37
Culture/Sports/Youth	57	25
Mental Health	54	24
Practical support	37	16
Healthcare	35	16
Socio-economic determinants	36	16
Youth assistance/help	4	2
Play(groups) & informal exchanges/support	5	2
Other	6	3

Survey – Developments over the past decade and major trends

MAJOR TRENDS

- Remarkable **diversity among Houses: strong Houses of the Child** models with broader cross-sectoral integration with areas such as education or leisure services versus Houses remaining at **earlier developmental stages**, still primarily situated within welfare services
- Strong commitment of **local governmental authorities**: financial investments (Flemish funding is insufficient!)

Ongoing challenges and future policy directions



Challenges and future directions



1. NEED FOR MORE FUNDING + MORE EQUALLY SPREAD

- Decree (May 9, 2024) ‘Towards a strong and integrated youth care and family policy’: Houses of the Child as crucial access points for family services
- But: substantial **budget increases** from the Flemish government remain **necessary** to fully realize this expansive mission
- Current **funding disparities between regions** needs to be rethought, guided by the principle of proportional universalism

Challenges and future directions

2. NEED TO ESTABLISH FRAMEWORKS FOR SERVICE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

- **Wide variety** in services, vision, partnerships,...make it difficult to establish consistent expectations regarding the services families can anticipate from any given House.
- In principle, all families in Flanders and Brussels should have access to **consistent basic services**: welcoming, accessible neighbourhood hubs offering child-friendly spaces for interaction and information exchange,...
- **Define clear expectations** in new legislation and support of the Houses of the Child, allowing for **local adaptation**

Challenges and future directions

3. PROMOTE INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

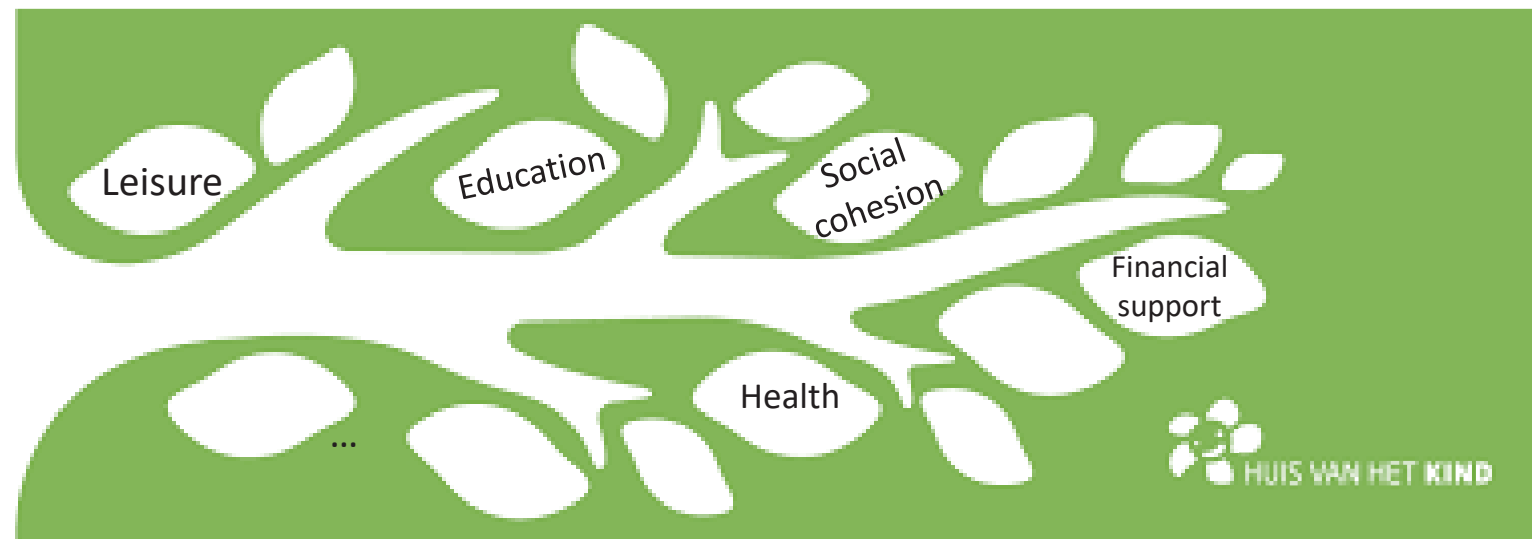
- Strategies to improve **access for all families**: socially disadvantaged families, families with children with specific needs, families with migrant background,...
- F.e. working with innovative outreach methods
- Realising more connections between preventive family support and **more specialized services** (f.e. youth care) will increase **accessibility and continuity** for families requiring specialized support services
- Supporting Houses of the Child in realising social inclusion and accessibility (vision, methodologies, tools,...)



Challenges and future directions

4. FACILITATE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION

- Incentivized **partnerships** across health, education, youth work, leisure, youth care, social services,... could create more integrated support ecosystems.
- Contributes to realize **holistic family support systems**
- Increases **accessibility**, especially for socially disadvantaged families

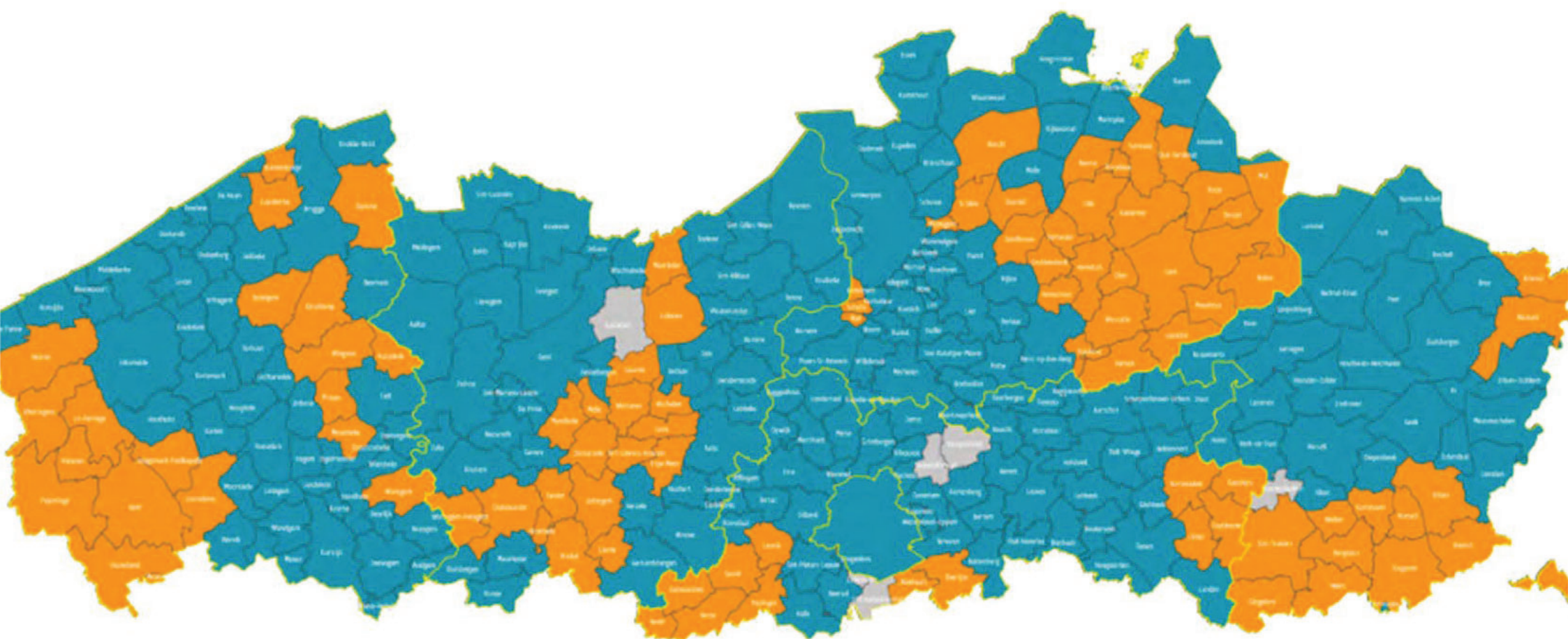


2. Houses of the Child from the perspective of local governments: a long and winding road (but we're getting there)

Ivan Pauwels

Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG)

vvsg



- Erkende Huizen van het Kind
- Intergemeentelijke Huizen van het Kind



Local family policy

... is more than facilitating actions

... is more than providing budgets



What do we, as a local council, want to achieve for children, young people and families in our municipality ?

- What is important for us ?
- How do we get there ?
- How realistic are these goals ? How do we prioritize them ?

Why is this so difficult ?

- No tradition of ownership
- Limited budgets (make limited interest)
- Complex landscape

Problems arising from this in clarity

- On a governance level
- On the level of local employees
- Towards local families

COFACE

Supporting families is about more than just parenting advice





...



Child care



Spatial
planning



Leisure



Mobility



...

Family policy

So it's about ... everything for everybody ?



Survey data on characteristics of good support:

- Reliable
- Usable



Let's create a local network:

- That is nearby
- That feels safe and familiar for parents (and their children)
- That provides shared, custom made support for every individual

For families

The House of the Child = this
network



For city councils

The House of the Child = a policy
instrument



Challenges:



...



Child care



Spatial
planning



Leisure



Mobility



...



Family policy

COFACE

Surpassing actions towards a proper vision on family policy



COFACE

**Surpassing actions towards a
proper vision on family policy**

... also on a Flemish level







3. Questions and Discussion

... the floor is yours ...

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Basic support for (all) families?

- **Basic support?**
- **What support (activities) must be provided to be recognized as a basic service?**

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Basic support for (all) families?

- All families?
- Proportional universalism?
- The (local) government should primarily/only finance support for families in vulnerable situations?

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Integrated support for (all) families?

- What is integrated support and how can you achieve that kind of support?

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= Collaborative network

- Public and private (local) actors?
- How to involve / engage local actors?
- How to persuade local actors to engage?
- How to persuade local practitioners and policymakers to make a sustainable and active contribution to integrated support?
- Encouraging factors? Preconditions?

Houses of the Child – Integrated Family Support Hubs (Service Hubs)

= providing basic quality

- Quality assurance (e.g. monitoring, impact measurement) of integrated support?
- To be established by each network itself?
- Supra-local development (e.g. instruments) and management (e.g. datacollection)?

Information?

Contact?

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<https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Insights-Flanders-Website.pdf>

INSIGHTS ON FAMILY POLICIES

DOSSIER 2

**THE
FLEMISH
HOUSES OF
THE CHILD:**
TEN YEARS
OF FAMILY
SERVICES
COORDINATION
AT THE LOCAL
LEVEL

KATHLEEN EMMERY
TINE ROMMENS
IVAN PAUWELS
KRISTIEN NYS

EUROPEAN
OBSERVATORY ON
FAMILY POLICY



THANK YOU