De Thuisgevers: Supporting Municipalities in Realising Temporary Housing for Recognized Refugees

EIPA EPSA 25 - 26

EIPA European Institute of Public Administration

About EPSA

The European Public Sector Award (EPSA) is a Europe-wide award scheme for public administrations at all levels of government. Since 2009, the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) organizes EPSA to recognize excellence in public sector innovation across Europe. In doing so, EPSA serves as the platform for sharing best practices to inspire the public sector to develop and implement projects contributing to efficient and effective public administration, and ultimately enhanced service delivery to the benefit of businesses and citizens.

Under the title "*Driving Competitiveness through Reforms and Investments*", the EPSA 2025-26 edition welcomed the submission of projects in three award categories: "Innovating Government, Governance and Policies", "Investing in Infrastructure, Mobility and Energy" and "Delivering User-Centric Services at Subnational Level". The edition sought to identify projects with data-driven innovation and endurable positive impacts on governance and service delivery.

This series of briefings provides key insights into the winning projects and offers lessons learned.

Information for all projects submitted to EPSA 2025-26, as well as previous editions, can be found in the EPSA Database.

Briefing title

De Thuisgevers: Supporting Municipalities in Realising Temporary Housing for Recognized Refugees

Editors

Christoph Klika, EIPA
Isabela Puscasu, EIPA

This briefing draws on the information provided by applicants in the application form as well as substantiation and validation through online meetings, validation visits and Jury meeting. Generative AI tools were utilised to assist in the initial drafting and synthesis of this document, with all content reviewed and finalised by the editorial team. If you cite the publication, please acknowledge the source.

© 2026 EIPA, Maastricht

European Institute of Public Administration
O.L. Vrouweplein 22 | P.O. Box 1229 6201 BE Maastricht | The Netherlands
+31 43 32 96 222 | info@eipa.eu | www.eipa.eu

Publication completed: October 2026

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or SG REFORM. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

INTRODUCTION

De Thuisgevers ('The Homegivers') is a small coordinating platform, hosted by the Municipality of Kampen in the Netherlands, that helps municipalities to find and use housing for recognised refugees. In Dutch policy these are known as status holders (*statushouders*): people who have been granted a residence permit and are entitled to a home in a municipality, but who, because of the national shortage of affordable housing, often remain in asylum reception centres for many months or even years. The platform does not build or let homes itself. A team of independent professionals works alongside municipal officials to identify vacant buildings and overlooked plots, test whether they can be converted, bring together the departments, owners and partners whose decisions are needed, and match each project to the national funding schemes that pay for it, while neighbourhood volunteers support new residents once they arrive. The initiative began in Kampen in 2022, when the town had to accommodate refugees from Ukraine at short notice, and it now works with municipalities across the country. Its interest for other administrations lies in its diagnosis that a housing shortage is partly a problem of implementation capacity: where the legal obligation and the money already exist, a modest intermediary that starts from what a municipality already has can turn policy targets into homes considerably faster.



Key facts

- **Project:** De Thuisgevers ('The Homegivers'), submitted as 'Supporting Municipalities in Realising Temporary Housing for Recognised Refugees'
- **Applicant:** Municipality of Kampen, which hosts the project and administers its finances.
- **Country and level of government:** the Netherlands; a local initiative hosted by one municipality, now supporting municipalities nationwide and working with provincial and national authorities
- **Duration and key dates:** started in March 2022 and ongoing; extended beyond Kampen to municipalities across the country; currently becoming an independent foundation.
- **Funding:** no EU funds; housing and conversion costs are financed through two national schemes, the Hotel and Accommodation Regulation (HAR) and the Through-Flow Location Scheme (DSL), which municipalities apply for and manage themselves.
- **Main components:** hands-on support for individual municipal housing projects, from first exploration to realisation; the Ongeziene Woonmogelijkheden programme (OWM, 'unseen housing opportunities'), which uses geographic data to locate vacant buildings and plots; and a neighbourhood volunteer linked to every new household
- **Headline results:** 1,349 people housed since the start, of whom 581 in the most recent year**;** projects in around 158 municipalities; 1,550 promising conversion sites identified; 38 municipalities scanned through OWM

EPSA Category

Investing in Infrastructure, Mobility and Energy

Prize

1st Place Winner

1. Relevance

In the Netherlands, municipalities and the national government share a statutory responsibility for housing and integrating status holders, and each municipality is given a national target for the number it must house. The legal expectation is that a person moves from a reception centre into municipal housing within three and a half months of being granted status, but representatives of the national association of municipalities, VNG (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten), and of the national reception agency, COA (Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers), told the EPSA evaluation team during its visit that the average wait has stretched to a full year, with complex cases taking four or five years. COA's shelters were running at 105% of capacity at the time, and a director at the Ministry of Justice and Security, put the number of recognised refugees still living in national shelters for lack of municipal housing at 18,000. Behind these figures lie a structural shortage of affordable homes, rising construction costs and a scarcity of building locations, which affect every group seeking housing.

The consequences spread well beyond the people waiting. Each status holder who cannot leave a reception centre occupies a place needed for new arrivals, which pushes the system towards costly emergency reception and increases pressure on public finances, while the person concerned has fewer opportunities to start work, school or ordinary community life. For municipalities, the obligation competes with social care, youth services, the energy transition and their own housing shortage, but because it is backed by law and national targets it cannot simply be postponed, and falling behind carries administrative, financial and social consequences.

The project's starting point is that the bottleneck lies less in policy goals or money than in the capacity to implement them. National funding schemes exist but are not fully used, because turning them into a concrete housing project requires time for project development and coordination between departments for spatial planning, housing, finance and social affairs that rarely work together, as well as decisions taken under uncertainty about costs, legal conditions and the reaction of neighbours. That uncertainty makes local authorities cautious, and frequent changes of the officials responsible erode what has been learned. Kampen's City Manager observed that local authorities naturally lose focus on large, complex projects that cut across sectors. At the same time, social, public and semi-public buildings, as well as commercial premises and plots, stand temporarily empty.

The approach took shape in Kampen in early 2022, when the municipality, local churches including the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), volunteers and local entrepreneurs together opened small-scale locations that housed over 300 Ukrainian refugees, with the national government as a partner. The model was then extended to other permit holders waiting in reception centres. The Mayor of Kampen placed this in a local tradition of offering shelter that goes back around 800 years, to church properties built for the poor and the sick and later to the reception of French Protestant refugees, and described the trust between the city council, church networks and national ministries as the basis of the present governance arrangement.

What distinguishes De Thuisgevers from the usual responses, which rely on allocating social housing or on new construction, is that it neither creates a new policy instrument nor competes for an already overstretched social housing stock. It adds capacity by activating buildings and locations that regular processes overlook, and it acts as an intermediary that helps municipalities through the legal, financial and organisational steps rather than as a housing provider. The EPSA jury regarded its principal contribution as a reframing of the problem: instead of starting from a fixed number of people who must be accommodated, the team first establishes which spaces, data and opportunities a municipality has and then assesses how these could become housing. Because the homes created can serve a mixed population, refugee housing becomes part of the general local housing challenge, which also changes how the issue is presented to residents who are themselves looking for a home.

2. Project design and implementation

De Thuisgevers was deliberately designed to strengthen municipal implementation capacity without creating a parallel delivery organisation. It has no legal entity of its own and works with a flexible pool of independent professionals with expertise in housing, spatial planning, finance, legal frameworks and social support, who are engaged according to the scale and stage of a particular municipal project. The Municipality of Kampen hosts the financial and administrative processes and acts as financial administrator for the national subsidies, which gives the platform access to public funding without the overhead of a separate organisation. The team describes its way of working as a 'start-up mentality' combined with 'constellation thinking', by which it means assembling, for each stalled local situation, every administrative party whose decision is needed and the experts who can remove blind spots.

The two national schemes, HAR and DSL, finance the housing costs and the building conversions. Municipalities submit the applications and manage the money themselves, while De Thuisgevers advises them on which scheme applies and helps prepare the application. Planning follows individual municipal projects rather than fixed programme phases, and each project passes through a recognisable sequence that is adapted to local circumstances:

1. **Exploration.** Contact begins either through proactive outreach by De Thuisgevers to municipalities that are behind on their housing targets or through a request from a municipality. Targets, local constraints and organisational capacity are discussed, and the team, which does most of the searching, identifies possible buildings or locations.
2. **Feasibility.** Candidate sites are assessed for technical suitability, legal conditions and financial viability, and the municipality is informed about the funding scheme that fits, usually HAR and, where relevant, DSL.
3. **Coordination.** Once a workable option is found, De Thuisgevers aligns municipal departments, property owners and other partners, clarifies who is responsible for what, supports the funding application and organises communication with stakeholders, including local residents where appropriate.
4. **Settling in.** Every new home is linked to a volunteer from the neighbourhood who helps the household with practical daily life and with the informal codes of Dutch society.
5. **Monitoring and learning.** Progress is tracked through completed feasibility assessments, approved funding applications, realised housing locations and the number of people housed, and lessons from each project are carried into the next.

The OWM programme, now a complementary line of work, applies data analysis to the search for sites. Using geographic information system (GIS) scans that combine over 1,500 data layers, the team identifies vacant factories, warehouses, agricultural sites, forgotten plots and empty public spaces that commercial developers tend to overlook. The scan does not stop at existing buildings: it is used to show what could be built on a site, after which municipalities are connected with specialists in flexible housing and sustainable construction firms able to deliver anything from temporary timber buildings to permanent dwellings within a matter of months. Thirty-eight municipalities have been scanned so far. The Province of Gelderland, which supervises 51 municipalities, is running a pilot in eight of them to refine a data dashboard built on this method and to extend it to asylum seekers, older people and other urgent housing seekers.

Social acceptance is treated as part of the design rather than as an afterthought. Local resistance is the main obstacle the team meets, and it addresses it in three ways: by encouraging hesitant councils to adopt mixed housing, typically about 70% local residents and 30% refugees, so that young people still living with their parents, for example, also gain a home; by spreading placements across small, decentralised locations; and by involving the volunteer buddies and communicating openly with neighbours. The building on Broederweg in

Kampen, a historic property formerly owned by the Theological University of Utrecht, illustrates the method on a small scale: it has been converted into a home for 16 men**.**

The project has had to adapt continuously. Regulations change often, contact persons in municipalities move on and take knowledge with them, and shifting social, political and economic conditions create financial uncertainty that sometimes requires plans to be revised or carried out in phases. Since the project began, the Dutch government has changed three times, and the team has kept political support by working closely with influential local leaders such as the Mayor of Kampen and by stressing cost-efficiency, an argument that appeals across the political spectrum. Regular contact with national ministries and agencies also allows experience from municipal projects to inform national housing policy.

3. Outcome

Since 2022 the project has helped to house around 1,300 people, 581 of them in the most recent year reported in the application, and it has been active in 158 municipalities. Through the OWM scans it has analysed thousands of locations and identified 1,550 sites with strong potential for conversion. Each placement frees a place in a reception centre and allows a household to move into a stable home, and for the municipalities concerned it represents progress towards a statutory target that they had struggled to meet through social housing allocation and new construction alone. The project has also widened beyond its original group: it now houses permit holders of all nationalities, and the knowledge gained in applying HAR and DSL is being used for other urgent housing seekers.

The financial case rests on the comparison with the alternatives. A place in a national shelter is far more expensive than a home in a municipality, which the team describes as making local housing an easy choice for the national government. Reusing and converting existing buildings avoids the capital cost of building on new land, and placing people in community assets replaces more costly commercial accommodation. The platform's own running costs are kept low by engaging experts only when their skills are needed and by relying on volunteers for social support, which led evaluators to describe it as a 'self-running system'.

The changes inside municipalities may prove as durable as the homes. Feedback from participating municipalities, reported to the jury, indicates that the approach has altered working methods and encouraged civil servants from the social and physical domains to cooperate on housing questions, and the working methods developed in earlier projects are now reused in later ones. Provincial and national actors confirm this effect from their own perspective: the Province of Gelderland regards De Thuisgevers as a broker that gives its municipalities the structural support and advice on funding and local policy they need to meet their targets, the representative of the Ministry of VRO called the mapping of housing opportunities an 'eye-opener', and Utrecht University has validated the project's bottom-up scaling framework. Interest from other municipalities and public bodies in similar implementation support is growing.

De Thuisgevers is being developed into a permanent support model for municipalities and is converting from a project under the Municipality of Kampen into an independent foundation. Its funding from the Ministry of Justice and Security is currently allocated year by year, and the national government has indicated that it expects municipalities to take on operational costs and help to secure future funding; the team is also considering European funding streams. Continued cooperation with municipalities and the national funding frameworks for housing status holders provide the basis on which this transition is taking place.

Success factors

- A systematic interface between unmet housing need and unused space, which pools the relevant knowledge and applies it to the circumstances of each municipality.
- A single implementation process that connects the policy, housing, finance and social domains and so reduces the fragmentation that held municipalities back.
- A goal-oriented and practical programme that works with precision while requiring very few resources, and that is continuously adapted as conditions change.
- A lean structure: a flexible pool of independent professionals without a separate legal entity, which needs no additional budget and was commended for exceptional financial management.
- A clear support model combining expertise, coordination and outreach, focused on specific help to municipalities rather than on large-scale reform.
- Pragmatic use of vacant buildings and existing national funding schemes in place of reliance on new construction alone.
- Mobilisation of neighbourhood volunteers, which helps to overcome local resistance and to integrate newcomers into society, using low-cost, high-impact volunteer structures.
- Deep social and civic commitment rooted in the local community, which the evaluators considered the project's outstanding dimension.
- A problem-solving intermediary role that could serve as a model in fields other than housing.

Lessons learned and recommendations

1. **Start from what is available, not only from the target.** Before deciding how to accommodate a given number of people, map the vacant buildings, plots and decision-makers in the area. Open geographic data and GIS scans make this feasible even for small municipalities, and they often reveal options that do not appear in regular housing pipelines.
2. **Invest in implementation capacity where the obligation and the money already exist.** When national schemes are underused, a small, hands-on team that helps municipalities through feasibility, coordination and funding applications may achieve more than a new instrument, and at much lower cost.
3. **Organise work around one concrete site at a time.** Bringing the spatial, housing, finance and social departments to the same table for a specific building makes their interdependence visible, allows decisions to be taken in parallel rather than one after another, and changes working habits in ways that outlast the individual project.
4. **Approach the municipalities that are stuck.** Proactive outreach to authorities that are behind on their targets reaches those who most need help and are least likely to ask for it.

5. **Keep the support structure light, but plan its future early.** Hosting a platform within an existing public body and engaging experts per project keeps overheads low and allows a quick start. As the work grows, settle its legal form and a funding model shared between the national and local levels before short-term allocations become a constraint.
6. **Design for acceptance from the outset.** Small, dispersed locations, mixed housing that also serves local residents, and a volunteer linked to each household reduce resistance and turn a house into a home in which newcomers can take part in community life.
7. **Secure support that survives changes of government.** Working with respected local figures and presenting the case in terms of public cost, which appeals across party lines, helped the project to keep political backing through three changes of national government.
8. **Record methods and feed experience back into policy.** Standardised workflows, real-estate toolkits and spatial methods protect continuity when municipal staff change, and regular contact with national authorities lets practical obstacles inform the design of national schemes.
9. **Check the preconditions before transferring the model.** The approach can be adapted by other administrations and other Member States, but it depends on vacant property, a legal obligation or clear target to work towards, funding instruments that cover conversion costs and a host organisation willing to administer them.

EPSA 2025-26 OFFICIAL PARTNERS

EPSA 2025-26 is supported by the European Commission, Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM), through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI).

European Commission

Austria

The Netherlands

Luxembourg

City of Maastricht

With the support of

Province of Limburg



Co-funded by
the European Union



