



Final report on information provisions by COA

- Summary and conclusions -

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Amsterdam, 14 December 2021
Publicatienr. 20147

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of the Ministry of Security and Justice.

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Summary and conclusions

The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (*Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, COA*) is responsible for the care and support of asylum seekers. The COA provides accommodation, assists asylum seekers in preparing for a future in the Netherlands or elsewhere, and is responsible for maintaining the safety and quality of life at the reception centres. To support asylum seekers during their stay at the reception centre, all residents are given information after arrival on various topics that are relevant to living at an asylum seekers' centre. Since 2016, this information has been provided as part of the Residence and Life at a COA Centre Programme (*Wonen en Leven op een COA-locatie, WLCL*). The programme consists of a number of mandatory components that are offered to asylum seekers quite soon after they arrive. In addition, the programme includes 'in-depth modules' for residents staying at the centre for a longer period who require additional support to become self-sufficient. These 'in-depth modules' did not form part of this study.

The WLCL programme was evaluated by the COA itself in 2019 based on interviews with COA staff. However, this evaluation did not take into account the perspective of the asylum seekers themselves. For this reason, the COA commissioned a study into the provision of information, with the experience of the asylum seekers as the main focus. In collaboration with Utrecht University, RegioPlan has conducted a qualitative study into the provision of information to asylum seekers during the first phase of the reception process. This study is not concerned with the content of the communication provided by the COA but with the communication process only.

The aim of the study is to provide insight into:

- how asylum seekers perceive the information that they receive from the COA during the first phase of the reception process, and
- starting points for possible improvements to the provision of information by the COA to asylum seekers.

This document summarizes the results and conclusions.

Study approach

Various activities were carried out as part of the study. To prepare for the fieldwork, we carried out a *document study* to obtain insight into the design and organization of the information provided to asylum seekers as part of the WLCL programme. In addition, the preparation included *interviews with six COA employees*, who were involved in carrying out and/or developing the mandatory components of the WLCL programme, and with *two COA employees at national level*. A *literature study* was also carried out into various aspects of importance when conveying information to asylum seekers and non-Dutch speakers. For the *survey among asylum seekers*, we approached a total of 23 residents across seven different COA locations to talk about their experiences with the provision of information. We spoke to a diverse group of asylum seekers in terms of age and country of origin, although we did interview a relatively large number of more highly educated residents, some of whom spoke reasonably good English. In order to identify suggestions for improvement, *interviews were held during the final phase of the study with representatives of parties* that assist asylum seekers in the reception and asylum procedure (the Dutch Council for Refugees (*VluchtelingenWerk*), the Municipal Health Service (*Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst, GGD*), Asylum Seeker Healthcare (*GezondheidsZorg Asielzoekers, GZA*), and Trigion security officers). Lastly, a *focus group was held with experts* from the science and practice of intercultural communication, in which the experiences of the asylum seekers and other parties were translated into recommendations for improving the provision of information to various groups of asylum seekers.

Design and organization of the information provision

In communications between government authorities and citizens, there is often a fine balance between providing generally applicable information and taking into consideration the diversity of target groups. With respect to asylum seekers, there are also specific obstacles associated with the provision of information due to the uncertainty faced by asylum seekers and a sense of *distrust towards government institutions*. A review of the literature shows that, due to their refugee background, many asylum seekers

distrust the government of their country of origin. This distrust also plays an underlying role in the acceptance of information provided by the COA. What would facilitate this process is if COA staff learn how to deal with the distrust that is specific to asylum seekers.

When we look at the current design and organization of the information provision, we do indeed notice a fine balance between generally applicable information and a need to take into consideration the diversity within the target group. The key findings and conclusions regarding the organization of the information provision are summarized below.

WLCL: mainly entails the transmission of a great deal of information to promote the safety and quality of life at the location

The WLCL programme consists of five mandatory components that, as a rule, are offered in the first few weeks after the asylum seekers arrive at the reception centre (pre-process reception location (pre-pol), process reception location (pol), or asylum seekers' centre (azc)). These components are: 'welcome', 'rights and obligations', 'healthcare', 'staying at this centre', and 'safety'. The first component ('welcome') is carried out by a sheltered housing supervisor after a new resident arrives at the reception centre and mainly comprises welcoming them, showing them their room, and giving them a tour of the centre. A programme supervisor is then responsible for the other programme components. Residents must be given information within five days about the organization of healthcare at the centre and about who they can contact if they have any questions or medical complaints. This is important as healthcare is a basic facility that asylum seekers must be able to have access to. Another component that takes place shortly after the process starts (within fifteen days of submitting the request for asylum) is the 'rights and obligations' talk, in which the resident is informed about their rights and obligations, the house rules and rules of conduct at the centre, and their duty to report. The modules on 'safety' and 'staying at this centre' must be offered within 45 days of arrival. In the 'safety' module, the residents are informed about democracy and the rule of law, non-discrimination and safety, and how to go about reporting incidents. In addition, the module covers physical safety on and around the reception centre (fire safety, traffic rules, etc.). All in all, the residents receive a great deal of information on many different topics that they have to process in a short space of time.

The 'welcome' and 'rights and obligations' talks take place individually. In principle, the other components take place in a group setting, but may sometimes take place individually if it is not possible to form a same language group or other group. The provision of information, including that which takes place in a group setting, mainly focuses on the transmission of information only. There is very little interaction during the meetings. This means that there is no opportunity to discuss or exchange information, or give it meaning, which is something that the asylum seekers miss. The transfer of information has been even more of a one-way transmission process in recent times when the provision of information was mainly organized online due to the Covid-19 measures.

Conclusion: the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) provides a great deal of information but has little insight into whether the information given is actually understood and accepted by the asylum seekers. It is only during the rights and obligations talk that the asylum seekers need to sign to confirm acceptance of the information. It is important that sufficient attention is paid to the question of whether the information given is truly understood.

Basic information for all asylum seekers that is not tailored to specific groups

The purpose of the information provision, as formulated by the COA, is to promote self-sufficiency, safety, and quality of life at the reception centre. The five mandatory components of the WLCL programme make up the basic information provided to all asylum seekers. These components are considered to be the main topics that all asylum seekers should be aware of. In principle, the content of the information provided during the first phase of the reception process is the same for all residents.

When creating groups for the information sessions, the only thing considered is the language background of the asylum seekers so that large groups can be formed. The group meetings are mainly organized according to the major language groups (Arabic, Tigrinya) which means that people of different nationalities are placed together. The composition of the groups is not further differentiated according

to level of education. In the employees' experience, it is not necessary to differentiate according to level of education for the basic modules of the WLCL programme.

What does require special attention, however, is the group of residents that are illiterate. To ensure that this group can also understand the information, the staff rely on using pictures and sharing the information verbally, more than once if necessary. The COA is currently working on a method to improve the way in which this group is given the information. At the moment, this is usually done on an ad hoc basis and depends on the competence of the individual COA employee handling the programme components. One issue that makes it difficult for COA employees to adapt the information for this group is that it is not always known that an asylum seeker is illiterate or semi-literate when they are placed at an asylum seekers' centre. This information is not recorded in the COA's systems.

Implementation differs between centres and employees

Sample scripts have been drawn up for the various components of the WLCL programme that can be used to carry out the modules. However, the centres can decide for themselves how to deal with the various topics and how much time to spend on them as long as the content is covered. This allows the centres to place extra emphasis on certain aspects of the information that are relevant for a specific reception centre but can also lead to differences between centres. It is important to have insight into what information asylum seekers have or have not been given, especially as asylum seekers are often moved between centres. The COA is currently working to improve the registration process so that it is easier for staff to see which modules the asylum seekers have already completed.

Almost all programme components are carried out by a programme supervisor from the COA. At the very least, they are expected to have good presentation skills, be able to lead discussions with adults, and adapt their use of language to the target group. Programme supervisors can take a course in Practical Trainer Skills to ensure that the information is conveyed effectively, although not all employees are aware of this training course or have completed it. It varies per location whether or not FTEs are specifically made available for the provision of information or whether the programme supervisor does this task alongside their other duties. From the interviews we conducted with COA employees, it is clear that they sometimes find it difficult to spend enough time on the provision of information, which means that the information sessions are not always given the attention they need.

Conclusion: There is a potential conflict between the COA's aim to provide all asylum seekers with the same information and their aim to take into consideration the diversity among asylum seekers when providing information. COA staff should be offered more guidance on how to deal with this conflict and tailor the transmission of information to better suit the diversity of the residents.

Dealing with multilingualism: English is the main common language used to communicate with asylum seekers

The only time that a formal interpreter is used in the WLCL programme is during the 'rights and obligations' talk. This talk covers the rights and obligations of asylum seekers and the house rules. At the end of the session, the asylum seekers sign a document to confirm that they have been given a copy of the house rules. As a breach of these rules may lead to sanctions, a formal interpreter is used to ensure that the talk and the information are translated correctly. The use of a formal interpreter seems not only prompted by the concern to ensure a decent translation, but also to have a 'legal' basis for enforcement should any house rules be breached.

For the other components, COA staff mainly use English, alongside Dutch, as the common language for communicating with the asylum seekers. A limited number of COA employees have other language skills, such as Arabic. The meetings within the context of the WLCL programme are mainly given in Dutch or English with assistance from an informal interpreter (often another resident).

Information is also transferred during contact between COA employees and asylum seekers outside the WLCL programme, such as in the corridors, during room visits or individual counselling sessions, and at the information desk. Once again, English is the main language of communication in these situations, in which there may or may not be assistance from an informal interpreter.

On the other hand, written information (house rules, the information folder given to residents on arrival, and the MyCoo.nl website) is available in several languages. Residents are shown where they can find this information, but it is primarily up to the asylum seekers themselves to look up and consult the information. In addition, there are posters and information boards hanging in the centres which make considerable use of pictograms and images to reach out to less educated asylum seekers on a variety of topics.

Conclusion: Asylum seekers who are proficient in Dutch or English are generally well catered for. It is often problematic to provide information to asylum seekers with a low level or lack of education who do not speak English or Dutch. This means that further consideration is needed when choosing a language for the transfer of information.

Experiences of asylum seekers regarding information provision

Satisfied about the content and timing of the information provided, although some asylum seekers need a little more time after arrival

As far as the topics covered in the modules of the WLCL programme are concerned, the asylum seekers are generally quite positive. The themes covered are considered to include important information needed to be able to live at the asylum seekers' centre.

Asylum seekers are given a great deal of information immediately or within a few days after arrival in a pre-process or process reception location or asylum seekers' centre. This coincides with the time that asylum seekers also have all sorts of insecurities and questions related to their asylum process. In other words, they have a lot on their mind during this period. For some asylum seekers, the information is given too soon; what they most need after arrival is to rest and take some time to get their bearings. At the same time, it is also important that asylum seekers are given some basic information about the ins and outs at the asylum seekers' centre.

Asylum seekers prefer general information to be given out in group meetings. They see it as a good way to share experiences and to get to know other residents. It is important that there is opportunity for interaction rather than information just being handed out to the group. According to the asylum seekers interviewed, however, this does not currently happen enough.

The asylum seekers questioned are reasonably satisfied about the content and timing of the information provided, but some caution is needed in the evaluation of this finding. On the whole, the 23 asylum seekers interviewed in this study had a higher level of education and were more or less proficient in English. This group does not therefore reflect the entire group of asylum seekers at an asylum seekers' centre.

Proficiency in English is an important factor in the experiences relating to the provision of information by the COA

A large proportion of the asylum seekers interviewed as part of this study speak English to a greater or lesser extent. This gives them a major advantage when communicating with COA staff. The information they receive from the COA is clear to them and they receive a clear answer from COA staff to any questions they might have. However, they also notice that it is more difficult for asylum seekers who do not speak English to have contact with the COA. The problem of multilingualism can be solved in the modules of the WLCL programme through the use of a formal or informal interpreter by the COA, but it is more difficult when it comes to direct contact with COA staff. This is because residents who do not speak English always need an interpreter in order to communicate and cannot simply ask a question. As a result, residents who do not speak English sometimes prefer asking other residents for information rather than the COA. Although this is a practical solution, there is a risk of incorrect information being shared. Asylum seekers that do not speak English also ask fellow residents proficient in English for help in communicating with COA employees. This too carries a risk, however, as those who do not speak English are susceptible of becoming reliant on a fellow resident who does.

Asylum seekers sometimes need more support and sometimes have to wait a long time for answers to their questions

For questions that arise in the meantime, COA staff usually refer asylum seekers to the information desk. However, asylum seekers feel restricted by the fact that they always have to go to the information desk whenever they have ad hoc questions. They sometimes have to wait a long time before they can ask their question and, furthermore, the information desk is not always open.

In principle, all residents are allocated a contact person when they arrive at the asylum seekers' centre. However, in practice, not all asylum seekers know who their contact person is at the beginning and how they can contact them if they have any questions.

Preference for the use of informal interpreters for the provision of general information

For general discussions and questions about staying at the centre, asylum seekers say that they would prefer other residents to translate. They feel more at ease with someone they know who is also familiar with the situation at an asylum seekers' centre. However, for personal discussions, they would prefer the use of a professional interpreter. Asylum seekers who do not speak English say that it would be very useful if there could be an employee at the information desk able to speak other languages. This is not always the case at the moment, which means that non-English speaking residents always need an informal interpreter for any quick questions they might have.

Conclusion: The use of informal interpreters can facilitate the transfer of information to asylum seekers that do not speak English (or Dutch), but it does entail risks that require extra measures to be taken. In addition, increasing the multilingual skills of COA staff can be another way to provide information to asylum seekers who are not proficient in English.

Insufficient compatibility between digital resources and the needs of asylum seekers

In addition to the modules of the WLCL programme, the COA provides information in various languages via the MyCOA.nl website on various aspects of living at an asylum seekers' centre and in the Netherlands. Asylum seekers have found, however, that the digital resources used by the COA are not compatible with their skills and needs. Social media, such as Facebook, are an important way for asylum seekers to find and share information¹, but this is not something that is used by the COA. Furthermore, the quality of the digital infrastructure (including WiFi) is often inadequate, limiting the possibilities for asylum seekers to gather and exchange information themselves.

Digital means of communication are very important for asylum seekers to maintain contact with their family and acquaintances in their country of origin. These contacts are important to help them cope with the culture shock that all migrants experience, particularly asylum seekers because of their refugee background. It is therefore important that substantive conditions for WiFi etc. are in place.

Suggestions for improving information provision during first phase of reception process

More customization and opportunity for information to be repeated

A review of the literature shows that, during the first phase of their stay, asylum seekers primarily need information regarding their basic safety (food, clothing, accommodation). Additionally, they have a clearly-felt desire to become self-sufficient so that they can resolve problems themselves. To do so, asylum seekers need information regarding the organizational structure in the Netherlands. Not all asylum seekers are able to search for the required information themselves and need help in doing so. In communications with employees, engagement and humanity are important.

¹ See, for example, Dekker, R., H. Vonk, J. Klaver & G. Engbersen (2015) *Syrische asielmigranten in Nederland en het gebruik van sociale media bij migratiebesluitvorming* [Syrian asylum migrants in the Netherlands and the use of social media in migration decision-making]. Erasmus University/ Regioplan.

The information provided by the COA during the first phase of the reception process mainly relates to matters such as safety and self-sufficiency and, in that sense, the content meets the primary information needs of asylum seekers. The parties involved do, however, point out the need to:

- *ensure that the information provided is better tailored to different groups* and, above all, pay greater attention to certain vulnerable groups, for example by making greater use of visual material for illiterate or semi-literate residents or by providing more information on education to asylum seekers with children
- *adapt the information provided to the situation in the centre concerned*, while also *creating a sense of uniformity that is recognizable to asylum seekers* who move between centres
- *pay greater attention to ensuring that information is received properly*, by repeating it if necessary and by checking that the message comes across clearly
- make greater use of *group settings and interactive forms of information* to deal with content-specific themes and to reflect on them together.
- *be more aligned with the digital skills and needs of asylum seekers* – the COA could explore how to make greater use of social media to convey information.

Consider multilingualism and the use of residents as interpreters

At the COA, interpreters are often only available for medical purposes and for formal (legal) conversations relating to the request for asylum. All other communications, such as that which take place within the context of the information programme, is done in English and/or with the help of fellow residents who provide informal interpreting services. A review of the literature shows that English is not, or less, suitable as a common language when communicating (in writing) with semi-literate residents, people who originally speak Pidgin English, and people not proficient in using the Latin alphabet. For other groups, English can be used to supplement the information given in Dutch. Many asylum seekers come from a multilingual background in which it is normal to switch between languages.

If English is not adequate, it would be logical to use informal interpreters. A review of the literature shows that there are advantages and disadvantages associated with the use of informal interpreters. The advantage is that an informal interpreter often knows the person well and can provide context. The disadvantage is that a relationship of dependence may develop or communications may be translated incorrectly. It is important to consider carefully the situations in which informal interpreters would or would not be useful.

The most important points to consider or suggestions for improvement to emerge in relation to the use of interpreters and multilingualism are as follows:

- A resident that is used as an interpreter can act as a bridge between the COA and asylum seekers but it is important that this *resident is given an official status as an informal interpreter*. In addition, a professional interpreter must continue to be an option, such as for use during personal discussions.
- More COA staff (at the information desk) that speak other languages to make it easier for asylum seekers who do not speak English to make contact with a COA employee. *Linguistic and cultural diversity should be a starting point for staff policy*.

Improving the accessibility of COA employees and dealing with distrust

An important point for consideration is that COA employees should be aware of possible distrust and that it is essential to establish a relationship of trust. The latter may be difficult to achieve as COA employees have different roles in their support of asylum seekers (informing, enforcing, conducting talks about the future, etc.) that may conflict with one another. To somewhat resolve this issue of conflicting roles, the COA is already working with other organizations, such as within the context of the training course to prepare for the future. The COA could *seek even greater collaboration with external organizations and key persons from the target group* (such as volunteers from the Dutch Council for Refugees, key persons from Pharos) when informing asylum seekers about the various aspects of living at a reception centre, so that COA staff do not have to fulfil the various – possibly conflicting – support roles themselves.

Ensuring that COA staff are easy to approach can give asylum seekers a greater sense of trust and the feeling that COA staff are willing to help them if they have any questions. Asylum seekers themselves indicate that they would like more opportunities to be able to ask ad hoc questions. Suggestions for improvement in this area are:

- *Extended opening hours of the information desk, the option to ask questions via e-mail*, and the option to make an appointment with the contact person via MyCOA.nl (instead of via the information desk).

In conclusion

For more highly educated asylum seekers with a reasonable command of English, the basic information provided as part of the WLCL programme during the first phase of the reception process seems reasonably adequate. They believe that the programme deals with various topics that are essential for living at the asylum seekers' centre safely and self-sufficiently and think that the way in which the information is given is generally understandable. However, there are some indications that this is not the case for all residents. The COA expects residents to be quite outspoken and assertive when asking questions, but not everyone is able or willing to be. Asylum seekers who do not speak English or who are more reticent are particularly likely to miss out on information as a result. Given that a considerable number of residents at the asylum seekers' centre speak little to no English and a sizeable group of them are semi-literate, it is only logical that specific attention should be paid to these groups.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the COA is already working on a number of suggested improvements, such as improving the information for illiterate residents, providing a digital version of the rights and obligations talk in the resident's own language (implemented in May 2021), and redesigning the MyCOA website into a more user-friendly and interactive web application. However, the provision of information can be problematic in practice. COA staff regularly come up against a lack of time to carry out their various tasks. The importance of repeating information to allow it to sink in is acknowledged, for example, but there is often a lack of capacity for this task. To ensure that information is communicated to asylum seekers effectively, it is important that staff are given enough time to develop a bond of trust and also given the opportunity to repeat information at various times and to check that it is properly understood. This is all the more pressing now that the reception centres are filling up again and the COA has to pull out all the stops to accommodate the growing number of asylum seekers. Due to the high case load of COA employees, there is a risk that the provision of information will simply become another thing to 'tick off'.



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