



Transition House Mechelen - Belgium

Introduction

Transition House Mechelen, established in 2019, is located in the center of Mechelen, a city situated between Brussels and Antwerp in the Flemish part of Belgium. The facility is managed by Sterkhuis, a collaboration between G4S Care and Exodus the Netherlands, and operates under a contract with the prison system. A transition house is a small-scale facility for people with a long sentence who have already served a significant part of their sentence in a regular prison. It is one of four transition houses currently operating in Belgium.

Transition houses were introduced as part of the Federal Public Service Justice's master plan 'Prisons and Internment,' approved on November 18, 2016. This plan aims to promote a differentiated detention policy to support the reintegration of detainees into society. Residents of the facility are referred to as participants.

Scale

Transition House Mechelen has a capacity of up to fifteen residents, making it a small-scale facility. All residents live together in a single house, creating a communal living environment.

RESCALED-principles in practice:

- Small-scale
- Differentiation
- Community-integration

Differentiation

Target group:

Transition House Mechelen is designed for men eighteen and older who are preparing for conditional release. Residents are admitted eighteen months prior to their conditional release. The facility mainly accommodates men who have served long prison sentences, and the admission criteria stipulate that their offenses must not be related to sex crimes or terrorism. Residents must be proficient in the Dutch language and able to live in a group. People convicted of sexual offenses or terrorism-related crimes are not eligible for placement in the transition house. The selection process involves consultation with local prison

boards and prison psychosocial services, and once a decision is made, a meeting with the transition house staff follows to finalize the placement.

Forms of security:

Transition House Mechelen applies a mix of relational, static, and procedural security measures. At the heart of the facility's approach is relational security, which prioritizes open communication and mutual trust between staff and participants. Staff members are frequently present in shared spaces, encouraging ongoing interaction and a shared responsibility for daily life in the house.

Static security is implemented to manage and monitor access to the building. Each participant's bedroom is individually lockable, and a registration system tracks who is present or absent. Importantly, the facility has no perimeter fencing or internal barriers, Staff and participants do not wear uniforms, and participants can lock their rooms from the outside if they wish.

Procedural security consists of house guidelines that help structure daily life. For example, participants are responsible for cleaning the house, and smoking indoors is not permitted. Everyone must be awake before 10 a.m. and attend a daily meeting in the dining room at that time. Participants may take part in various activities during the day but need prior approval for leaving the facility, exit permits are required for work, sports, or other external activities. Inside, participants can move freely. Personal mobile phones are allowed, and a communal computer is available for use. All participants must be in their rooms by 1 a.m., and between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., no one is allowed to leave the house.

Activities:

Participants at Transition house Mechelen have a relatively high level of autonomy. While they are free to decide where they want to work, when they exercise, and which activities to pursue, any outings beyond the facility require prior approval through supervised exits or exit permits. This level of independence remains steady throughout their stay.

The house's approach is grounded in three key principles: strength, recovery, and connection. It emphasizes building on each person's individual strengths and supporting their personal recovery journey, while also underlining the importance of meaningful relationships. This vision is consistently reflected in how staff interact with participants, helping encourage a sense of purpose and human connection. Each of the three pillars is aimed at gradually helping participants define and reach their personal goals.

Residents are expected to be up before 10 a.m. and attend the daily house meeting in the dining room at that time. Their daytime schedule includes various possible activities, both inside and outside the facility, but these must be approved in advance. Outside activities may include employment, volunteering, study, or sports. While working is not required, those who do take up jobs are paid according to the position.

Inside the house, participants can relax by watching TV, playing games, cooking, or enjoying the garden. Meals are prepared and eaten in groups, and residents may go grocery shopping with staff support.

On a social level, participants can make phone calls and welcome visitors during designated visiting hours. These visits happen in a specific room and are unsupervised. Residents can also leave the facility temporarily during the week or on weekends for visits or personal appointments, provided they receive a formal exit permit or penitentiary leave.

Community-integration

Location and architecture:

Transition house Mechelen is located in the centre of Mechelen, a medium-sized city in the province of Antwerp in the Flemish Region of Belgium. Mechelen has about 89 300 inhabitants (2024).¹ The facility is situated on an ordinary street in the heart of the neighborhood, close to the train station, making it easily accessible by public transportation. The local government was involved in the decision-making process for its establishment, and a neighborhood meeting was held to discuss the project. The facility is scheduled to move to a different building after the summer of 2025.

Transition house Mechelen blends seamlessly with neighboring houses. It has a standard front door, no visible fence and nothing on the outside betrays that it is anything other than an ordinary house. Inside, the rooms meet all required specifications: each room is equipped with a bed, a desk and chair, a lockable closet, a private sink with hot and cold running water, blackout and fireproof curtains, a night light and much more. Residents have their own private room, which they can decorate to their own taste.

The house also has several shared areas, including a common kitchen and dining area, bathrooms with showers, a laundry room, a living room, a visitor's room, a patio and a small garden. The overall atmosphere is intentionally warm and welcoming with comfortable seating areas.

¹CityPopulation.de. (2024). Mechelen (Antwerpen) - Belgium - City Population. Retrieved June 18, 2025, from <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/belgium/antwerpen/mechelen/12025/>

Interaction with the community:

To make reintegration concrete, the transition house works together with various aid and service organisations. These organisations support the participants in various areas. In terms of help and services, for instance, the facility cooperates with organisations such as CAW, CGG, De Sleutel, Social House and Moderator. For employment, participants receive help from VDAB and various local employment agencies like 12 Work and Make It Work. With a view to life after their stay, there is cooperation with various justice houses near the participants' new place of residence. The facility works as a network organisation. Neighborhood work goes both ways: participants use regular services like shops, job centers, gyms, and public transport, just like other citizens. This helps the city, and society as a whole, give them a real chance to rebuild their lives. At the same time, the residents try to give back to their neighbors, the city, and society. Transition house Mechelen has been volunteering in the residential care center nearby for years. For example, the residents take walks with the elderly and provide assistance at events.

Transition house Mechelen

Founded: 2019

Capacity: 16

Autonomy level: High level of autonomy

Nearest city: Mechelen (Belgium)

Nature of interaction:

Visited by vzw De Huizen (22-04-2025)

Publicity/ read more

- About transition houses at the official website of Sterkhuis:

Transitiehuisen. (n.d.). *Home*. Transitiehuisen. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from <https://transitiehuisen.be/>