

Detention house Olen - Belgium

Introduction

Detention House Olen is located in the municipality of Olen, in the province of Antwerp, Belgium. The facility falls under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government Department of Justice and operates within the Belgian detention house model.

Housed in the former residential care centre De Sterrewijzer, the building was renovated and officially opened in July 2025, with the gradual intake of residents beginning in September 2025. Detention House Olen is the third detention house to open in Belgium, following the detention houses in Kortrijk and Vorst. The facility is still in an early phase of operation and continues to develop its daily practices, programs, and partnerships.

Scale

Detention House Olen has a total capacity of 58 places. Although this number exceeds the recommended maximum of 30 residents for a small-scale detention facility, the detention house aims to preserve a small-scale character by dividing residents into several living groups. Each living group consists of approximately fifteen residents.

RESCALED-principles in practice:

- Small-scale
- Differentiation
- Community-integration

Differentiation

Target group:

Detention House Olen accommodates adult men (18+) who are serving prison sentences of up to three years and who are assessed as posing a low security risk. The facility is intended for individuals who are considered suitable for a small-scale, community-oriented form of detention that places a strong emphasis on guidance, structure, and preparation for reintegration into society.

People convicted of serious offences, such as sexual crimes, violent extremist acts, or other high-risk crimes, are excluded from admission. In addition to legal eligibility, candidates must demonstrate a willingness to actively participate in counselling, daily activities, and reintegration programs. The detention

house is therefore primarily aimed at short-term offenders who are motivated to take responsibility and work towards a stable and constructive return to society.

Forms of security:

Detention House Olen employs a combination of security measures, with a strong emphasis on relational security. This approach prioritizes the development of positive, trusting relationships between residents and staff. While each resident is not yet assigned a dedicated detention counselor, the facility intends to implement this system in the future. The aim is for such counselors to serve as residents' primary point of contact, overseeing daily supervision and providing ongoing support. Currently, staff members accompany residents throughout the day, encouraging open communication and collaboration. Both staff and residents cultivate a shared "we-story," fostering a sense of community and collective responsibility in addressing challenges together.

In addition to this relational approach, Detention House Olen applies a number of static security measures that support overall safety without dominating daily life. These measures include camera surveillance in hallways and around the perimeter of the building, precautionary window locks, and the availability of a single time-out room equipped with reinforced doors. Static security is therefore present but remains discreet and proportional to the low-risk profile of the target group.

Procedural security at Detention House Olen is organized through clear, transparent, and routine-based rules and procedures. These provide structure and predictability for both residents and staff, while remaining aligned with the facility's rehabilitative focus. Procedural measures are designed to support the relational approach rather than replace it. Taken together, the combination of relational, static, and procedural security creates a balanced framework in which security is ensured while human relationships and reintegration remain central.

Activities:

Detention House Olen operates under a community regime. Residents are expected to participate in communal living and to take up responsibilities within their living groups. While residents are not responsible for managing their own schedules, they are able to provide input regarding the activities they wish to participate in, which are mandatory once agreed upon. Staff members oversee the planning and ensure structure, continuity, and supervision throughout the week.

Upon arrival, residents go through an observation period of approximately two weeks. During this period, they adjust to the routines and expectations of the detention house before resuming activities outside the facility. After the observation period, residents actively work toward their reintegration from day one, supported intensively by staff.

Together with the psychosocial service, residents develop a detention plan that outlines their goals during detention as well as their plans for after release. Weekly activities may include external work opportunities, education or training, and participation in support or counselling initiatives. Detention House Olen collaborates with various external partners, including OCMW, Dialoog, Moderator, AA, CGG, and Digibanks, to support residents in these trajectories.

In addition to individual activities, several group moments are organized throughout the week to maintain cohesion within the living groups and to foster a sense of shared responsibility. Housekeeping tasks are also shared among residents, who are responsible for keeping their rooms and communal spaces clean and orderly. Overall, daily life at Detention House Olen combines structure, external engagement, and gradual preparation for reintegration into society.

Community-integration

Location and architecture:

Detention House Olen is located in a central area of the municipality of Olen, on the site of the former residential care centre *De Sterrewijzer*. Compared to other detention houses located in a city, the location is somewhat more remote, which is less ideal for a detention house, although the facility remains reasonably accessible. Herentals train station is approximately a fifteen-minute bike ride away, and a bus stop is located nearby. Most residents travel by bicycle from Herentals, while some use a car.

The renovated building covers approximately 4,454 m² and includes individual rooms, several communal areas, a large kitchen, fitness and meeting rooms, and adapted infrastructure for persons with reduced mobility. Architecturally, the building has a U-shaped layout with multiple floors. Each floor is divided so that one living group occupies half a level. Within each living group, residents share a small communal space, while bedrooms are either single or shared by two residents.

On the ground floor, larger shared spaces such as the "herberg" and the dining hall are used for meals, which are served in shifts. A small corridor containing administrative offices is not accessible to residents. The property also includes a garden area where smoking is permitted. As the detention house only recently opened, the interior does not yet feel fully homely, although efforts have been made in this direction.

Interaction with the community:

Interaction between Detention House Olen and the local community is still in an early stage, as the facility has only recently opened. As a result, the process of building relationships with the neighbourhood is gradual and still developing.

At present, the most established partnership is with the neighbouring residential care centre (WZC). This collaboration is described as very positive: nurses from the WZC visit the detention house daily to provide medical care, and the detention house recently supported the WZC by offering logistical assistance during a “light walk” event.

Beyond this partnership, direct contact between residents and local community members has so far been limited and mainly occurs on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, broader and more structured neighbourhood engagement is planned for the future, as such interaction is considered important for reducing apprehension and correcting misconceptions about the detention house. Two neighbourhood moments, held in June and again in late August, were experienced as constructive, with little negativity expressed by those who attended. Many local residents indicated that they were pleasantly surprised by how discreet and calm the presence of the detention house has been.

Overall, the village-based location of Detention House Olen distinguishes it from city-based detention houses and naturally makes community integration a slower and more delicate process. Despite this, staff, supported by the director, are actively working toward strengthening ties with the local community, and further integration is expected to develop over time.

Detention house Olen

Founded: 2025

Capacity: 58

Autonomy level: Medium
level of autonomy

Nearest city: Olen (Belgium)

Nature of interaction:

Visited by vzw De huizen
(05/12/2025)

Publicity/ read more

- About Detention House Olen at the official website of the municipality of Olen:

Detentiehuis Olen. (n.d.). Municipality of Olen. Retrieved December 29, 2025, from [https://www.olen.be/detentiehuis](https://www olen.be/detentiehuis)

- About the renovation of Detention House Olen:

Detentiehuis Olen. (n.d.). Regie der Gebouwen. Retrieved December 29, 2025, from <https://www.regiedergebouwen.be/nl/projects/detentiehuis-olen>