



Homelessness – a major challenge for the UK

Homelessness is one of the most visible and devastating examples of poverty in the UK, and homeless people are some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded in our society. It is a problem throughout the UK, not just in urban areas and in London.

Homelessness is often associated with people sleeping rough in towns and cities, but it is about more than someone who does not have a roof over their head. A home is about a sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing; it provides security and ties into a community. A person without these is homeless.

The reason why some people become homeless is due to a mix of interrelated human, structural and institutional factors.

Dramatic changes in circumstance due to financial and personal problems brought on by divorce, bereavement, mental illness or substance abuse can leave people of all ages at risk of becoming homeless. Individuals leaving care or prison are also vulnerable.

Limited access to affordable housing and unemployment can also lead people into homelessness. And poorer people can find themselves in difficulties due to the ever-rising cost of housing.

According to an EU report, 38% of people at risk of poverty spend more than 40% of their disposable income on housing – more than twice the average for the overall population.

The report also notes that data from Member States indicates that the numbers sleeping rough or without accommodation has increased in some countries. In part this may be due to the current recession.

Inadequate support services can compound problems. For example, supply of social housing is patchy across the EU. And because they lack a permanent address, homeless people can find it hard to access social support and health care systems.

Member States have the prime responsibility for developing policies to help the homeless, with the EU offering a coordinating role. The issue is currently at the top of the EU's anti-poverty agenda.

In 2008 the European Parliament adopted a written declaration calling for the end of street homelessness in Europe by 2015. The Parliament asked the Commission to develop a European framework to define homelessness and provide annual updates on action by Member States.

In 2009 homelessness was chosen as a thematic focus for coordination between the EU and Member States in the field of social inclusion.



The EU report calls on Member States to develop integrated strategies to combat homelessness which combine financial support for individuals with effective regulation and good-quality social services – especially in areas such as housing, employment, health and welfare.

Developing more effective policies to tackle homelessness will be the subject of a major conference in Brussels on 9 -10 December 2010. The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness brings together key stakeholders including public authorities, EU institutions, the social housing sector and people who have experienced homelessness.

Meanwhile, the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (EY2010) will continue to raise awareness about the issue and the suffering it causes thousands of people across the EU.

Within the framework of EY2010, the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (Feantsa) has launched a Europe-wide campaign called Ending Homelessness.

The campaign message is that homelessness is a problem that can only be solved through concerted effort to develop integrated strategies rather than by investing in reactive, short-term measures.

For further information

Social protection and social inclusion homepage

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=750&langId=en>

Joint reports on social protection and social inclusion

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=757&langId=en>

FEANTSA website

<http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/hp.asp>