



THE NETWORK  
OF MAJOR  
EUROPEAN  
CITIES

## **EUROCITIES response to the Commission's Green Paper on mental health**

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### **EUROCITIES**

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EUROCITIES is the network of major European cities. Founded in 1986, the network brings together the local governments of 128 large cities in some 33 European countries. EUROCITIES represents the interests of its members and engages in dialogue with the European institutions across a wide range of policy areas affecting cities. These include: economic development, the environment, transport and mobility, social affairs, culture, the information and knowledge society, and services of general interest.

EUROCITIES website: [www.eurocities.org](http://www.eurocities.org)

## Introduction

EUROCITIES welcomes the Green Paper ‘Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on Mental Health for the European Union’ (COM 2005 484), believing that:

- more attention should be given to the importance of mental well-being
- there is an added value in developing a strategy at European level, as this may help cities deal with the challenges caused by mental illness

EUROCITIES stresses that the success of the proposed EU Strategy on Mental Health depends on the involvement of cities and recommends that:

- cities are involved as key partners in shaping the Strategy from the start
- the urban dimension is reflected throughout all parts of the strategy, taking into account the fact that Europe's population is concentrated in urban areas, and the mental health of individuals is affected by their social environment and quality of life
- the Strategy should recognise the role that local government can and does play in terms of developing and delivering effective responses to these issues, working with and alongside the formal health care system

Furthermore, a European Strategy on Mental Health should

- reflect the complexity of defining mental health and well-being and put emphasis on preventive measures and on initiatives that accompany and complement mainstream health care services
- ensure that policies are developed together with those affected by mental illness and delivered in ways that take into account the wide variety of individual needs and situations of people at risk of mental illness

## Mental health in cities

EUROCITIES believes that local authorities have a critical role to play in contributing to the prevention and reduction of mental illness in our societies, given that:

- problems of mental illness (including physiological suffering that is not defined as mental illness as such) are most commonly found in cities;

*This is a result of several factors. Urban living can contribute to provoking mental illness as the economic and social pressures can be more extreme at the same time as social networks are less tightly knit, and so there is a greater risk of individuals feeling isolated and lonely. The anonymity cities offer can also attract individuals at risk of mental illness. Furthermore, people with diagnosed mental health problems often gravitate to cities in order to receive*

*treatment, and/or make use of social services.*

- as host the majority of immigrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, cities need to develop responses to illness resulting from factors like discrimination and alienation, but also from traumas triggered by the personal experiences of many refugees;
- local authorities are responsible for the provision of public services and for adapting those services also to meet the needs of people affected by mental illness;
- local authorities are responsible for promoting the physical and mental well-being of all citizens and residents;
- local authorities are the level of government closest to the citizens, and are therefore best placed to enable citizens participation in the development and implementation of policies and measures to prevent mental illness;
- local governments are well placed to develop integrated approaches and work in partnership with other stakeholders, including health service providers;
- local governments are in many cases responsible for managing social support services for people with mental health problems
- local governments have a wealth of experience and expertise in this area

## EUROCITIES responses to specific questions raised in the Green paper

### 1. How relevant is the mental health of the population for the EU's strategic policy objectives, as detailed in section 1?

EUROCITIES agrees that mental illness is not only a personal problem but also a societal problem, and therefore preventing mental health can contribute to achieving the EU's strategic goals in terms of social cohesion and employment (for example). We therefore:

- strongly support the proposal to launch a pan-European strategy to prevent mental illness and promote mental well-being;
- believe that promoting the mental well-being of the population should be a core aim and a positive dimension of social policies at all levels;
- emphasise the importance of preventive actions, in order to reduce the numbers of people who are affected by mental health problems.

EUROCITIES recognises that there are social as well as individual determinants of mental health. Furthermore, much mental illness remains undiagnosed, including for example depression, particularly amongst children and older people. While healthcare services can seek to provide medical solutions to clinical problems, in the longer run it is essential to invest in developing and implementing preventive measures to improve the mental health of the population, focusing

especially on groups who are at greatest risk of mental illness. It is therefore important that:

- Improving the mental well-being of the population should be a key aim of public policies at all levels;
- Local authorities involve citizens and provide support for local social development, including support for social programmes and frameworks which reduce the risk factors leading to poor mental health;
- Indicators for measuring the mental well-being of the population are developed, so that the impact and effectiveness of public policies and actions in this field can be assessed;
- Employers should recognise that work-related stress is a major factor in generating mental health problems and that good employment practices will not only promote the mental well-being of employees but will also improve the performance and effectiveness of the whole organisation;
- Particular attention should be paid to addressing the needs of vulnerable groups and those facing social exclusion, and the various factors which result in these groups facing a significantly higher risk of being affected by mental illness.
- Mental illness can also lead to social exclusion. The media should be encouraged to raise public awareness about mental health issues, and contribute to overcoming the false assumptions, negative stereotypes and prejudices that are faced by people with mental health problems.
- Current and past users of mental health services should be consulted and actively involved in evaluating and improving the delivery of these services

## **2. Would the development of a comprehensive EU strategy on mental health add value to the existing and envisaged actions? And does section 5 propose adequate priorities?**

EUROCITIES believes that there would be an added value to developing a comprehensive European strategy for mental health as this could strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of current and future policies at all levels. However, EUROCITIES warns that if the urban perspective is not properly reflected in this framework from the start, the added value of the Strategy will be limited.

The role of local governments must be recognised and reflected in:

- Governance structures and the policy-making process
- Opportunities for exchanging and improving knowledge
- Research, monitoring and evaluation

EUROCITIES furthermore supports the four priority areas outlined in section five of the Green Paper. EUROCITIES recommends that the EU Strategy should focus especially on supporting the development of preventive actions and initiatives alongside mainstream health care services. Cities are well placed to deliver effective responses to these issues, and should be entrusted with the necessary resources and decision-making powers. Involving current and past users of mental health services in the evaluation and improvement of these services is important.

**3. Are the initiatives proposed in sections 6 and 7 appropriate to support the coordination between member states to promote the integration of mental health into the health and non-health policies and stakeholders action, and to better liaise research and policy on mental health aspects?**

EUROCITIES generally welcomes the initiatives proposed in sections 6 and 7 of the Green Paper, although we would like to emphasise the following:

- Effective preventive measures must not only target clinical illness, but also support action that encourages a greater sense of social solidarity and neighbourhood cohesion, enabling people to better face stressful situations. and helping to reduce the incidence of loneliness and depression.
- Preventive measures also depend on improving the urban environment including housing conditions, especially for people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods.
- EUROCITIES recognises that depression is an increasingly prevalent mental health phenomenon with many causal factors. In this respect, particular attention should be given to the impact of poor physical and socio-economic environments as well as to the particular challenges faced by members of minority groups, including immigrants.
- Attention should be paid to the negative impact of criminal and anti-social behaviour on the mental health of the population, especially for the victims of crime.
- Attention should also be paid to the impact of criminal justice systems on the mental health of offenders and their families.
- Providing 'normal' living conditions for people with established mental health problems is often a major contributor promoting social inclusion and reducing discrimination faced by people with disabilities. Local government agencies across Europe are working hard to promote this, and there are many lessons to be learned from successful initiatives in this area.

- Exchange of information and knowledge on mental health should focus on the changing social dimensions of modern lifestyles and their impact on mental health and well being, rather than on clinical and medically dominated initiatives. This should contribute to the development of policies that can reduce and reverse the growing incidence of mental health problems in Europe.
- Indicators should be developed that will assist policy-makers and service providers to take into account:
  - the relationship between mental and physical well-being;
  - the significance of participation and empowerment,
  - the potential beneficial effects of measures that are neither clinical nor medical
- Research, monitoring and data-collection must be undertaken also at city level in order to enable the development of targeted approaches.

EUROCITIES warmly welcomes the proposed dialogue on mental health, the establishment of a European Platform on Mental Health and the development of an information system, and EUROCITIES strongly recommends that:

- Past and current users of mental health services and members of other relevant target groups should be involved.
- EUROCITIES should be invited to become a member of the Forum and participate in the dialogue and in the development of the information system.

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