

Sustainable ways of preventing homelessness (Copenhagen, 22 November 2013)

Comments paper from Bulgaria¹

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Current situation concerning preventing and tackling homelessness and in particular youth homelessness

Bulgarian policy in the field of homelessness and housing exclusion is a combination of common and targeted policies with the latter being predominant. The implementation of the national housing policy is based on the vision for establishing balanced, proportionally developing and sustainable housing system by providing conditions for access to quality housing (rental or private) that will satisfy the needs of all Bulgarian citizens. The policies for combating homelessness and housing exclusion are developed, implemented and monitored at all three levels of governance – national, regional and municipal. It should be noted that the main actors are the bodies of the executive authority at central level and the bodies of the local self-governance (the municipalities).

Some of the key priorities in order to increase the efficiency of the implemented policy in the field of homelessness are: development of suitable institutional framework of the housing system; clearly defining and actual undertaking of the public responsibility in relation to housing; strengthening the participation of the municipalities in the processes of forming the housing policy; decentralisation of the functions and the responsibilities on the housing policy. Due to a lack of comprehensive statistics concerning the homeless people in Bulgaria, there is no strategy on a national level for combating homelessness. Therefore, the National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020) provisions the conducting of a survey on homelessness and setting up a statistical database on homelessness and its dimensions, as well as development of a comprehensive strategy against homelessness. Homelessness is also being identified as an issue within the National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion adopted by the Council of Ministers at the beginning of 2013. One of the key priorities set out in the Strategy is "Improving the living conditions of vulnerable groups and providing support to homeless persons". The measures for the implementation of this priority are related to providing access to housing and developing integrated cross-sectoral services for homeless people, including begging children and adults.

Bulgarian policy in the field of homelessness is primarily aimed at providing social services. Bulgaria's social service system has expanded considerably in recent years as a result of actions aimed at deinstitutionalisation and provision of more community-based services and services in family environment. The following

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community-based social services provide shelter and support for homeless persons and children: Centres for temporary accommodation; Shelters; Protected housing; Centres for Street Children; Crisis Centres; Transitional homes; Supervised homes; Units "Mother and baby"; Family-type centres. According to the data collected by the Agency for Social Assistance as of September 30, 2013 at the territory of the country there are 13 Centres for Temporary Accommodation with a total capacity of 625 places (442 occupied), 53 Centres for Family Type of Accommodation with a total capacity of 677 places (621 occupied), 11 Transitional Homes with a capacity of 100 places (95 occupied), 4 Crisis Centres for persons with a total capacity of 45 places (30 occupied), 2 Shelters for Children with a total capacity of 70 places (51 occupied), 13 Centres for Street Children with a total capacity of 231 places (212 occupied), 15 Transitional Homes for Children with a total capacity of 126 places (115 occupied), 104 Centres for Family Type of Accommodation for Children with a total capacity of 1,201 places (1,046 occupied), 14 Crisis Centres for Children with a total capacity of 145 places (105 occupied), 10 "Mother and baby" Units with a total capacity of 75 places (34 occupied).

Local authorities have also specific and very important responsibilities in initiating and implementing measures to combat homelessness and housing exclusion. Sofia Municipality provides various social services to support homeless persons including young people. In 2011, Sofia Municipal Council adopted the city's Strategy for Prevention of Social Exclusion 2011-2015. One of the strategic goals is "full life in the community" targeted at wide range of groups such as homeless people, refugees, immigrants, young people leaving institutions, etc. This goal is in full compliance with the Regional Development Strategy of Social Services in Sofia 2011-2015 that is aimed at the development of alternative support services such as services for crisis accommodation, transitional housing, supervised housing, etc. One of the target groups of the Strategy are children and young people who have been living in institutions in Sofia.

Currently there are 3 Centres for Temporary Accommodation on the territory of Sofia Municipality with a total capacity of 510 places which are usually occupied. One of them, Centre for Temporary Accommodation "St. Sofia" is specifically targeted at young homeless people aged between 18 and 25 years. The amount of the allowance for one user per year is BGN 2,401 (approximately EUR 1,228). In 2009 Sofia Municipality has launched a campaign to provide temporary shelter for homeless people during the winter nights. In 2011 and 2012 the Sofia Municipal Council established and financed a Centre for crisis accommodation for homeless people during the winter months in order to accommodate a large number of people in need of accommodation. From 1 December 2012 until the end of March 2013 more than 465 homeless persons were residing at the Centre. Due to the growing demand for such services and the traditional migration of people from the country to the capital city as well as the influx of refugees in recent months, Sofia Municipal Council approved the establishment of another Centre for crisis accommodation for homeless people, which will be funded entirely from the local budget of Sofia Municipality. Both emergency accommodation centres have a capacity to accommodate 170 people in total. They are designed to provide homeless people not only with shelter, but also to offer a variety of services including psychological services for better realisation in the society.

In order to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable groups including homeless people and children a project "Public Canteens" has been successfully implemented since 2009. The project's goal is to improve the quality of life and to provide support to the most vulnerable persons and families with low monthly income. The funding is provided by the Social Protection Fund under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The amount of the funding of the service for 1 person is



up to BGN 2.50 (approximately EUR 1.28) per day that includes a hot meal for lunch - soup, main meal and bread, as well as other costs such as transport, utilities and supplies – up to 10% of the food value. Since 2013 the service “Public Canteen” has been provided throughout the whole year not only during the harsh winter months of the year. For the period December 2009 – May 2013 the total number of the users of the services is 9,734 persons. Currently 181 public canteens are functioning throughout the country including 525 villages. 11 of the public canteens are on the territory of Sofia city and provide hot meals to more than 1,200 persons from vulnerable groups including homeless people.

In addition, a project “Soup Kitchen” has been implemented by Paribas Bulgaria in cooperation with Sofia Municipality over the recent years. This initiative consists of a regular provision of hot meal for lunch (soup and a loaf of bread) every working day during the winter months (December - March). Beneficiaries are single mothers, elderly persons, homeless people and other disadvantaged groups. The Soup Kitchen initiative marks significant success: the current total number of 1,750 meals per day over the entire winter period is 10 times bigger than at the beginning of the project. Another initiative for food provision to homeless people is the initiative “Charity on the street - food for the homeless”, organised by the “Mission without Borders” Foundation in partnership with Sofia Municipality. Other projects, currently implemented by Sofia Municipality are “The street is not a home – Samusocial for Sofia”, a pilot project for homeless people living in three areas funded by the Embassy of France; “Social inclusion through the creation of community centers for children and families at risk on the territory of Sofia Municipality” funded by the World Bank, etc.

Homelessness is a multi-dimensional and complex problem. Therefore, effective policies addressing homelessness must include actions in different policy areas directed towards specific target groups. Among the most vulnerable groups regarding homelessness are: the Roma, young people leaving the specialised institutions, elderly people, people with disabilities, single parents with children, children at risk, people from ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, etc. Young people leaving institutions can be particularly vulnerable in terms of homelessness unless they receive adequate help in their after-care life preparation, along with sufficient follow-up support (e.g. assistance finding housing).

Social services for children and young people play a very important role in promoting their social inclusion and preventing the risk of homelessness. There are lots of different types of community based social services for children. Some of them which are directed towards homeless people include the Shelters for Street Children, the Centres for Street Children and the Centres for Temporary Accommodation. Regarding the homeless children deprived of parental care the following options are available: accommodation in family of friends or close relatives; accommodation in foster family; adoption; accommodation in Family-type centres; accommodation in specialised institutions.

Children and young people leaving specialised institutions are one of the main target groups of the National Strategy “Vision for the Deinstitutionalisation of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria” and the Action Plan for its implementation. The main objective of the realisation of the five projects set out in the Action Plan for implementation of the Strategy is to guarantee children and young people’s right of a family environment and quality care and services according to their individual needs. One of these projects “Childhood for all” is directed to the reform of institutional care for children and youth with disabilities. Under the project the needs of all 1,797 children and young people were examined and analysed. The information has been used to prepare a “Services Map” covering all community-based services alternative to institutional care. 149 new centres for family-type



accommodation, 1 day centre for children with disabilities, 8 centres for social rehabilitation and integration and 36 protected homes are expected to be built.

In support of the implemented process of deinstitutionalisation a procedure "Community living" is being realised under the Operational Programme "Human Resources Development". The main objective of the Scheme is to ensure the right to life in the community for persons placed in institutions for children deprived of parental care, and for adults with physical disabilities, mental disorders and mental retardation. A Project „Development of the system for planning and provision of social services at the regional level" is being implemented under the Scheme. The objective is to further develop the system for planning and management of social services in order to ensure flexible and individual support for social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Within the frames of the Project 120 new social services are planned to be developed as 39 of them will be supervised homes for young people leaving Homes for Children Deprived of Parental Care.

It should be noted that efforts to combat homelessness and housing exclusion will continue in the new programming period 2014-2020. The project of the new Operational Programme "Regions in growth" 2014-2020 includes measures and activities aimed at providing modern social housing for vulnerable, minority as well as other disadvantaged groups including young people. Their implementation will contribute to the social inclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable people by raising their standard of living and improving the quality of housing for urban communities in general.

Key challenges in preventing and tackling homelessness and in particular youth homelessness

As the financial and economic crisis put more people out of a job and made more people dependent on social protection, the risks of homelessness have recently risen. The profile of the homeless population has been changing and now includes more young people and children, migrants, Roma and other disadvantaged minorities, women and families are increasingly at-risk of homelessness.

There are multidimensional reasons for homelessness and housing exclusion but at its core the reasons are the lack or not sufficient financial resources to ensure access to the housing market. The territorial inequalities and the differences in the economic development of the regions in Bulgaria with the resulting migration from the small settlements to the capital and the bigger towns play a significant role. The demographic changes (decrease of population) and dependencies between Bulgarian households and housing in recent years lead to new regularities and processes in meeting the housing needs of the population on the macro level. Another serious challenge in the field of policies to combat this negative phenomenon is the lack of comprehensive data which would allow for monitoring homelessness.

Furthermore, preventing and tackling homelessness is a complex issue that requires the use of an integrated approach i.e. the implementation of multidimensional policies. Here the following policy fields that are related to the problem should be mentioned: access to the labour market, the training and qualification, access to education, healthcare, social assistance, social services, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination, etc. The key challenges in the field of homelessness are related to the introduction of policies, regulations and institutionalisation of a reform in housing in order to make efficient use of the available housing stock, balance the supply and demand in the rental housing market to help solving the problems of the homeless groups. This process should involve the State, the regional and local authorities, the real estate business, the



construction business and NGOs. Substandard housing and lack of affordable housing can also be recognised as challenges for the local authorities.

This is why one of the key priorities in the field of homelessness and housing exclusion is providing suitable housing conditions for the vulnerable groups. This priority will be achieved by means of, among other things, a complete strategy for combating homelessness, the creation of a network of social, health and educational services for the homeless, the establishment of employment, educational and qualification programmes for the homeless, the improvement of the housing conditions of the most vulnerable members of the Roma community, the creation of a statistical database regarding the homelessness in Bulgaria and its dimensions. The result from the above measures will be a network for the support of the homeless and the prevention of homelessness.

Early intervention and prevention is a very important tool to combat youth homelessness. Homeless young people who are not assisted at an early stage tend to remain homeless for longer periods. Evidence suggests that young people leaving specialised institutions transition more easily into medium and long-term accommodation when supported by a range of services most appropriate to their needs and circumstances. In the frames of the process of deinstitutionalisation of childcare which is being implemented, efforts are focused on the transfer of the institutionalised children and youth in Bulgaria to modern, specially adapted accommodation. In this regard the building of adequate infrastructure for provision of community-based services is of vital importance for the quality achievement of the objective of reducing youth homelessness.

Learning values of the Danish good practice in the field of combating homelessness

Since many EU Member States face similar challenges regarding homelessness and housing exclusion the positive Danish experiences provide an important example of good practice in tackling homelessness. The key transferable lessons and learning opportunities that arise from the Danish experience can be summarised as follows:

- Prevention has shown to be the most cost-efficient and harm-minimising approach to homelessness. General prevention programmes try to reduce the risk of homelessness through structural measures that are part of welfare, housing, employment, education and family and related policies;
- Evictions may successfully be avoided through early intervention, supporting integrated services and protective financial schemes;
- The “housing-led” approach would offer a structural solution to homelessness and has shown to be more effective than the traditional “staircase” approach;
- Improved governance, with key elements likely to include: effective participation of all key stakeholders and consensus on the agreed strategy.

When taking into account some specific national characteristics such as the traditional importance of home to Bulgarian people and the housing statistics showing that the majority of the population is living in an owner-occupied home it should be noted that the “housing first” approach is very effective and could be applied in Bulgaria. The shift from using shelters and transitional accommodation towards “housing led” approaches is the predominant solution to homelessness. This means increasing access to permanent housing and increasing the capacity for both prevention and the provision of adequate floating support to people in their homes according to their needs.

In conclusion, as mentioned above, homelessness is a complex issue, involving more than just a lack of housing. Furthermore, combating homelessness and



housing exclusion requires the implementation of an integrated approach bringing together all relevant fields such as housing, social affairs, health, and employment. This approach must consist of proper governance allowing the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. It must be evidence-based, what requires data collection and research, and must focus on clear targets. In addition, the prevention of homelessness, the promotion of quality services for homeless people and access to affordable housing must be central priorities taking into account the changing profiles of the homeless population.

