



# **Peer Review on “Homelessness from a child’s perspective”**

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**‘Without a home’, at policy crossroads:  
homelessness among children in Flanders**

**Belgium, 27-28 June 2018**

**DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion**

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## **Executive Summary**

In 2016, the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner in Flanders investigated the housing policy area in a thorough way. The Commissioner's Office initiative gave an uncommon centrality to homeless children's views and experiences and complemented the existing evidence on homelessness among children and young people by conducting a qualitative research into the topic.

The initiative had two major goals: bringing to light the dramatic living conditions of homeless children and young people in Flanders and to promote positive change at a structural level, by promoting a global approach model which comprehensively covers the multidimensionality of children's experiences, revisited through their own perception.

The homelessness reality of homeless children and their parents (mostly mothers) confirms many of the structural causes of family homelessness and the Commissioner's Office study lively depicts this hard reality and its impacts on children's lives. Children and young people's stories reveal the difficult interplay between individual choice and operational rules; single mothers' testimony on their arduous quest for housing stability and safety and how they are confronted with discrimination in the housing market, housing affordability problems and a lack of effective protection from partner violence. In the end, children, young people and families dream of a common future: a home of their own, the possibility to make choices, peace, security, stability and a fertile ground to launch their roots and rebuild their lives.

The proposal for a comprehensive policy strategy to tackle homelessness among children is built around six key elements: (i) enhancing visibility of homeless children and youngsters as persons in their own right, across research, policy and legislation; (ii) reinforcing children and youngsters' right to housing; (iii) addressing coordination and implementation challenges within a complex multi-level governance framework; (iv) strengthen the paradigm shift towards housing-led approaches and improving children's experiences in shelters and transitional accommodation; (v) moving towards a strong preventative approach and effectively addressing the structural causes of homelessness; and (vi) introducing multi-level improvements within the Flemish housing allocation system.

Positive impacts have been identified following the publication of the study and its dissemination. These mainly regard the acknowledgement of a stronger visibility of homelessness among children across different sectors of the Flemish society, and fostering critical thinking among local level practitioners and service providers on the child-friendliness of their service implementation. Yet, no impact has been identified at the Flemish policy level, namely as regards influencing existing homelessness strategic planning documents.

The absence of children from housing legislation and housing policy plans and the inability to address the situation of undocumented homeless children and families were the two main hindrances identified during the implementation of proposed policy changes within the Commissioner's Office initiative.

Several success factors and transferability elements arise from the analysis of the Commissioner's Office initiative on homelessness from a child's perspective. These relate to the impact of adopting a rights-based approach, to the potential created by the independent ownership of the initiative, to the added value of the methodology chosen, to the impact of the dissemination strategy adopted and finally, to a clear translation of the recommendations into concrete and measurable actions.

## **1 Homelessness among children in Flanders: trapped between selective vulnerability and uncoordinated policy responses**

In 2013, a baseline measurement of homelessness was carried out in Flanders (Meys & Hermans, 2014) based on a counting exercise of homelessness service users. Out of the total users of winter shelters, residential centers and transitional housing, almost one in three homeless people was younger than 18 years old (1,728 children were living in these types of accommodation).

Apart from the strong presence of children across the different types of services within the Flemish homelessness sector, other signs of alert regarding the vulnerable situation of children and a rising homelessness trend among children would also trigger the action of the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner and the production of the 2016 report "With(out) a home. Homelessness from a child's perspective".<sup>1</sup>

Different indicators on the vulnerable housing and living situation of children in Belgium and more specifically in Flanders confirmed the urgent need for a rights-based approach centered on the experiences and the voices of children experiencing a violation of their rights:

- In 2014, children were involved in 25% of the eviction procedures in Flanders, within an overall context of sharp rise of evictions (20% increase over the last years), mainly arising from the private rental market;
- Housing affordability is a major concern – while 10.4% of the population in Belgium is overburdened by housing costs, the rate among poor households reaches the alarming figure of 42.6%;<sup>2</sup>
- The lack of social housing pushes a large number of families into long waiting lists – only in Flanders over 90 000 families are on the waiting list for a state subsidized housing (Kinderrechtencommissariaat, 2018);
- Rental price increases are seriously affecting the social situation of low-income tenants, among which single-parent families are a particularly vulnerable group (Hermans, 2017);
- Children are disproportionately affected by poverty – in 2014, the child poverty rate was 18.8% compared to 5.5% for the general population in Belgium;
- Some children are more at risk of poverty than others, namely children living in single-parent families, in households with very low work intensity or with a migration background (Buysschaert, 2015);
- Existing action plans to fight poverty both at the national and the regional level are not adequately protecting children against poverty and inadequate standards of living – the number of children born into deprived families rose from 12.82% in 2008 to 12.82% in 2016 in Flanders (Kinderrechtencommissariat, 2018).

The combination of worrying data on the living conditions of children, concurring signals from people on the field working with children, and a recurrent gap in addressing topics like the right to housing and to adequate living conditions within children's rights approaches confirmed the urgency to further investigate the situation of homeless children from a child's perspective and to address it at a structural level.

In recent years, both Belgium as a federal state and its regions, have been developing various instruments (plans, strategies, agreements) aiming at strategically addressing

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<sup>1</sup> Due to language issues, the author of the peer review report was only able to access the English version of the original Dutch report and consequently to a summarized version of its original contents.

<sup>2</sup> European Index of Housing Exclusion 2016 – Belgium, available at: [www.feantsa.org/public/user/Index\\_Europeen\\_BELGIUM.pdf](http://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Index_Europeen_BELGIUM.pdf)

poverty and homelessness, both overall and focusing on children. However, several constraints, namely at the level of policy coordination and implementation, as well as political tensions among different government levels seem to hamper the full potential of such instruments to structurally prevent and eradicate poverty and homelessness, namely among children.

It is important to recall that Belgium has a complex institutional model as a federal parliamentary state made up of communities and regions which have their own governments. As a consequence, there is a complex division of competencies across different policy levels both in regard to homelessness, and in regard to the well-being of children. This complexity of powers demand coordination and a strongly integrated approach towards common goals, since all governments determine children's lives.

In Belgium, the National Child Poverty Reduction Plan adopted in 2013 directly addressed the EU Commission Recommendation "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage". Yet, no follow-up of the national child poverty reduction plan has yet been presented, as highlighted in the latest alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

In 2014, the federal state, the communities and the regions signed a cooperation agreement aiming at coordinating policies at the different policy levels to prevent and combat homelessness. However, information from key stakeholder's points to the fact that no efforts are being made to actually ensure the implementation of the inter-federal plan or to monitor progress.

Since 2010, the Government of Flanders has made the fight against child poverty one of its priorities. It has articulated a clear set of objectives in order to reduce poverty among children. Yet, the poverty figures continue to rise, namely as regards particular groups of children: "Instead of slashing the numbers by half as intended, the number of children born into deprived families has continued to rise. (...) The disadvantage index is much higher among children whose mother was not a Belgian national when she was born (31.6%) than it is among children whose mother was born a Belgian national (5.8%)." (Kinderrechtencommissariaat, 2018:23)

In the homelessness arena, the Flemish government approved the first 'Integrated Plan Against Homelessness' at the end of 2016. This action plan was developed for the period 2017-2019 and it formulates four strategic goals to end homelessness: (i) preventing evictions; (ii) preventing youth homelessness; (iii) reducing chronic homelessness; and (iv) adopting an integrated governance policy approach. Some authors (Hermans, 2017) have recently highlighted some of the strengths and weaknesses of the new plan, namely as regards youth homelessness prevention measures. According to the author, the adoption of a housing led approach is less emphasised for young persons than for chronic homelessness situations.

In short, the qualitative study conducted by the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner and respective policy recommendations, directly drew on the existing – although incomplete – evidence on the living situation of homeless children in Flanders and on the urgent need to deal with this challenge at a more structural level. The importance of addressing the realization of children's rights in a comprehensive way – not exclusively related to the 'usual' topics of education, children and youth care, social welfare and health – was also an important key driver for engaging in this initiative and for closely looking at the experiences of homeless children in Flanders, privileging their own perspectives rather than adopting the 'standard' adults' perspective on children's lives.



## **2 With(out) a home. Homelessness from a child's perspective**

*"Enable and encourage children to express informed views, ensuring that those views are given due weight and are reflected in the main decisions affecting them". (EC, 2013)*

In 2016, the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner in Flanders in its capacity of Ombudsperson for children and young people, realized the important task of translating into a complete dossier the in-depth analysis of a structural problem in Flanders: homelessness among children.

The terrible living conditions affecting homeless children, young people and their parents constitute a violation of children's rights which has to be dealt with by placing children both at the center of the analysis and at the center of any policy approach.

The report by the Commissioner's Office investigated the housing policy area in a thorough way, complementing the existing evidence on homelessness among children by conducting qualitative research into the experiences of homeless children and young people.

### **2.1 Looking for children in research and policy: from objects to subjects**

One important objective of the Commissioner's Office initiative was to make sure that the focus on homeless children's views and experiences would allow making them the 'subjects' of the analysis and of the policy recommendations.

More often than not, children do not appear as subjects either in research, policy documents or legislation. When they do, they tend to appear as members of the family, rather than in their own right and through their own voices. According to the Commissioner's Office, this invisibility of children and young people as subjects also applies to policy documents and legislation in the field of housing.

Thus, the analysis of the situation of homeless children provided in the report privileges a child's perspective through which it: a) (re)reads relevant secondary information (e.g. research reports, policy documents and plans, homelessness statistics, legislation); and b) engages in primary qualitative research by directly interviewing children, young people and their parents (43 interviews were conducted) who are experiencing (or have experienced) homelessness.

Encouraging children to express informed views – as stated in the Commission's Recommendation quoted above – requires specialized skills to engage with children and young people and a solid knowledge on children's rights. Thus, one important element of this initiative was the fact that it was directly conducted by the internal staff of the Commissioner's Office.

In fact, it is important to emphasize that the current practice also illustrates a positive aspect of the operational capacity of the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner in Flanders, i.e. having the resources (both human and financial) not only to respond to individual complaints whenever children's rights are being violated, but also to identify structural problems affecting children's rights and carry out the necessary investigation in order to be able to formulate evidence-based opinions, recommendations and advices.

Moreover, the fact that the Children's Rights Commissioner is entirely independent in the exercise of his functions may also contribute to ensuring that children's views are given the necessary weight and are reflected in the outcomes of the study and, more importantly, in the policy recommendations.

Finally, although the Commissioner's Office is the 'owner' of the initiative, i.e. they were responsible for internally conducting the whole process, once the report was completed, the Commissioner's office consulted with key stakeholders working on the field (e.g.

judges, ministers, street homelessness professionals, NGOs, researchers, housing professionals) in order to discuss the outcomes of the study.

## **2.2 Learning from present experiences and future expectations of homeless children and young people**

### **The present and the future of homeless children in Flanders**

Another important objective of the report by the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner is bringing to light the present situation lived by homeless children and young people in Flanders.

The analysis of existing quantitative data on the living situation of homeless children, at different points in time and from diverse information sources, provides a tough portrait of the Flemish reality. Children join their homeless parents in homelessness services, such as night shelters and transit housing; children are found sleeping rough in public spaces and in illegally occupied buildings; children face serious risks of being evicted from their home and from becoming victims of slum landlords; and homeless families with children are increasingly resorting to Public Social Welfare Centres.

From a child's perspective, time is certainly an important structuring component of their experience, whether positive, or negative. The report highlights three important time elements identified by the analysis of the data from the 2014 study (Meys & Hermans, 2014):

- the duration of children's stay in shelter was longer than six months for most of them;
- recurring to winter shelters had not been a one-off experience for half of the children in the study;
- imagining themselves a future with a home is not easy – just over half (57%) of the children have some kind of future prospects in this regard.

The interviews with 43 homeless children, youngsters and parents highlight the multiple causation of homelessness among children and families. The presence of structural factors such as poverty, the lack of affordable housing, the gap between welfare benefits and rent levels, low incomes and being heavily in debt, tenure insecurity and evictions, discrimination and domestic violence become clear through the discourses of the interviewees. Family conflict and relationship breakdown also play a role within this multiple causation of children and family homelessness as reported by several interviewees.

The operation of the existing support services is an important feature which comes under the spotlight during the analysis. Trajectories into and out of youth care institutions reveal the interplay between individual choice and operational rules: youngsters talk about running away and moving between different youth care institutions and other temporary arrangements, but also about the end of compulsory placement by youth welfare services at the age of 18 and the risks and difficulties faced during this transition.

The interviews also provide compelling evidence on the phenomenon of 'hidden homelessness', namely among youngsters and single mothers. Data on this phenomenon are relatively scarce across Europe, although in some countries (e.g. Denmark), staying temporarily and without a contract with family and friends is included in the operational definition of homelessness and therefore covered by regular national mappings of homelessness (Baptista et al, 2017; Benjaminsen, 2017).

The impact of homelessness on children is probably one of the dimensions explored by the report where the decision to approach homelessness from a child's perspective comes out as particularly enriching. The consequences of homelessness are disquieting

and shocking both for parents and for children and young people but the shared reality which is revealed through their stories is qualitatively different.

Mothers<sup>3</sup> talk about difficult decisions they had to make and the lack of alternatives to move forward (e.g. radically changing their lives, enduring violence); they report their efforts to protect their children although realizing inevitable limitations to such efforts; they talk about the psychological impact (e.g. stress and anxiety) of their trajectories through homelessness; their stories reveal how strongly discrimination is embedded in the private rental market; but they also talk about solidarity among mothers who are facing the same difficulties and struggling to survive.

Children's and youngsters' testimonies of their experiences through homelessness reveal other dimensions which the report righteously translates into key elements for policy and practice within the global approach model proposed. Children's stories reveal the lack of choice they are confronted with; a sense of powerlessness arises while talking about the consequences of decisions which are made on their lives; we listen to their bumpy and interrupted school trajectories where starting over, again and again, appears as demanding and unfair; there is a sense of otherness in regard to their peers which they did not look for; in their search for stability, safety and normality they are confronted with endless instability and mobility; finally, a striking element comes up as a challenge for both policy and practice around children's rights: their basic needs are definitely and not necessarily what adults tend to define as children's basic needs.

However, one should be cautioned not to underestimate the presence of commonalities in the consequences of homelessness trajectories both for homeless children and their families. Therefore, it is not surprising that their dreams for the future are colored by similar expectations: a home of their own; the possibility to make choices; peace, security, stability; and a fertile ground to out down their roots and rebuild their lives.

One final important reflection on the outcomes of the qualitative analysis performed regards the highly gendered nature of family homelessness which becomes visible through the interviews conducted. Out of the 43 interviews, only one father was reached by the team. Studies on family homelessness across Europe have often described it as highly gendered, i.e. there is a very disproportionate rate of homelessness experienced by lone women parents and their children compared to lone men parents with children. Although not explicitly formulated in the report, the interrelationships between gender and homelessness definitely surface in the outcomes of the study and therefore need to be brought forward in terms of recommendations for policy and practice.

### **2.3 From homelessness reality towards a global commitment aiming at the realisation of children's rights**

The responsibility to promote positive change at a structural level led the Commissioner's team to move from the evidence and respective analysis towards a concrete proposal, whereby homelessness among children needs to be tackled within a global approach model which covers as many dimensions as the ones emerging from the stories of children, young people and their parents (mostly mothers).

The proposal for a comprehensive policy strategy to tackle homelessness among children is in line with an established acknowledgement that homelessness is generally triggered by a complex interplay of structural, institutional, relationship and personal factors. (Busch Geertsema et al, 2010). Thus, coordination between a diverse range of policy areas (e.g. housing, welfare, justice, health, child protection, employment, education, migration) is a precondition for effective delivery. From a child's rights perspective, this complex interplay should be reflected through a combined and coordinated approach across the different areas involved and demands commitment to action both at service and policy level.

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<sup>3</sup> The team only managed to interview one father for the study.

Implementing such a policy strategy may be particularly challenging in countries characterised by a multi-level institutional framework, demanding both horizontal and vertical coordination and integration of policies. The presence of political tensions may add to the complexity of the task.

The Commissioner's proposal for a comprehensive policy strategy is built around six key elements:

- Make homeless children visible in policy plans and statistics;
- Reinforce their legal position;
- Local governance and collaboration;
- Child-friendly shelters and support;
- Prevention of child homelessness;
- Housing allocation system.

The six key elements are duly explained in the report and therefore only a few comments on each domain will be presented in the next paragraphs, aiming at fostering further reflection and discussion.

### **Visibility and measurement**

According to the report, homeless children and youngsters are mostly subsumed as part of different groups across policy documents and regulations. This should therefore be addressed by bringing them to the front of the policies which deal with their lives and their future.

Yet, homeless children's (in)visibility reveals finer shades across the different policy areas. In some stories we can witness how strongly visible children are for child protection services until the age of 18, triggering equally strong responses. The transition into adulthood seems to introduce an abrupt curtain of invisibility in the lives of these youngsters and a corresponding halt in the support received by those services. Thus, the importance of including a sixth objective within EU efforts to prevent and combat homelessness: "no one who is underage should be made homeless through a lack of availability in the Youth Welfare services or a lack of guidance and rehousing opportunities". Kinderrechtencommissariaat (2016: 10)

Visibility issues are also directly linked with homelessness definitions. And indeed, very few EU countries adopt homelessness definitions which contribute to the visibility of certain categories of people, such as women and children living in hidden homelessness situations (e.g. living temporarily with family and friends). A recent comparative study on family homelessness (Baptista et al, 2017) has shown that although homeless families in emergency shelters and temporary accommodation for families are included in the definition of homelessness in a wide range of countries, the same does not apply to situations which are strongly visible in the Commissioner's report on the situation of homeless children in Flanders (e.g. women and children resorting to refuges for victims of domestic violence; families with children temporarily sharing with friends and relatives due to lack of housing).

Collecting statistical data where children become visible across different policy areas – as proposed – is therefore a crucial step for promoting more child sensitive policies and better ensuring children's rights.

### **Reinforcing children's right to housing**

"A rights-based approach to tackling homelessness promotes access to decent, stable housing as the indispensable precondition for the exercise of most of the other

fundamental rights".<sup>4</sup> The global model approach includes several recommendations which are clearly in line with one of FEANTSA's approaches towards developing effective homelessness policies, quoted above.

A particularly interesting aspect of the way these recommendations are formulated in the report, is the fact that their contents are directly traceable in the stories shared by the children and their families. Most importantly, they try to directly address the challenges and constraints faced by them throughout their homelessness trajectories, e.g. youngster's rights to social housing, clear safeguards against eviction, transition into adulthood including to independent housing solutions with support as needed.

### **Local governance and collaboration**

The presence of an array of local arrangements to address poverty and homelessness, including among children, does not seem to adequately address the precariousness which continues to affect children's lives in Flanders, in spite of positive examples of effective cooperation in various towns and cities.

Local authorities in Flanders play an important role in the housing domain: they are responsible for preparing housing plans, for expanding the social housing stock according to established goals, for monitoring housing quality, for rehousing residents living in substandard homes, for setting allocation regulations, and for delivering shelter and transitory accommodation either directly or in cooperation with other stakeholders.

From an outsider's perspective, the coexistence of multiple local governance platforms - Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW), Centres for General Welfare (CAW), local consultation platforms on child poverty, and local homelessness networks - may represent both an important resource for preventing and addressing homelessness among children, as well as a challenge. From a homeless child's perspective - as we have seen in the report - the objective and action of these services should basically be guided by what truly matters: ensuring safety, stability and normality in their lives as any children should be entitled to.

The proposals by the Commissioner reinforce this need for stability, the urgency to ensuring the right to adequate housing and the strengthening of the collaboration between different local actors, both at the planning and the delivery stages. Efficient and quick responses at the level of prevention and resettlement are also emphasized. There is a clear message that no efforts will produce significant impacts in the lives of children and their families, unless they rely on mutual support and multi-level collaboration centred on the needs and rights of children. Breaking policy and institutional barriers across areas should definitely be inescapable.

Positive examples from several towns and cities (e.g. Antwerp, Kortrijk, Genk, Sint-Niklaas, Gent) show that institutional barriers may be addressed effectively, and that smooth cooperation is crucial to prevent and address homelessness.

A final strong message in this area regards the need to ensure equal protection against homelessness and equal respect for children's rights irrespective of geographies. No 'territorial lottery' should determine the adequacy nor the effectiveness of the support to be provided to homeless children.

### **Child-friendly shelters and support – the need for a paradigm shift**

'Long periods in a shelter take their toll' could probably be reformulated into 'any period in a shelter takes its toll'. Research literature on the impacts of homelessness and the use of emergency accommodation on the development of children has offered some insights into homeless children's well-being, social development, mental health and educational issues. Evidence has shown that children and youngsters who are living in

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<sup>4</sup> Feantsa toolkit for developing an integrated strategy to tackle homelessness, available at: [https://www.feantsa.org/download/enfr\\_2006toolkit\\_5b1\\_5d-2-34521781459519216752.pdf?force=true](https://www.feantsa.org/download/enfr_2006toolkit_5b1_5d-2-34521781459519216752.pdf?force=true)

this type of accommodation are more likely to experience higher rates of behavioural, mental and health problems (such as low self-esteem, anxiety and depression), lower school attendance rates, greater deterioration of peer and support networks among others. (Walsh & Harvey, 2002; Halpenny et al, 2002)

The call for a paradigm shift towards housing-led approaches is the strongest message within this fourth element of the comprehensive policy strategy. The four steps towards achieving this goal with regard to children and youngsters may strengthen the housing-led approach taken by the Flemish Integrated Plan against Homelessness and which is expected to have continuity after 2019. In fact, one of the identified weaknesses of the current action plan is precisely the fact that the 'housing-led approach is less emphasised for young persons than for chronic homelessness.' (Hermans, 2017b: 142)

On the operation of shelters – as a short term and an as exceptional as possible solution to children and families – several recommendations are made, namely: ensuring the best possible balance between communal facilities and the respect for family privacy and teenagers' quest for autonomy and for the continuity of peer relationships; ensuring alternative responses to night shelters whenever urgent support to families with children is needed; assessing possibilities to introduce housing first programmes for single parent families and youngsters (learning from existing experiences in other countries); removing financial obstacles which contribute to aggravate the economic vulnerability of many homeless families with children when using homelessness shelters and women's refuges; and ensuring that the basic needs of children and youngsters are child-friendly.

### **Preventing homelessness among children**

The strong plea for preventing child homelessness and for effectively addressing the structural causes of homelessness which underpins the Commissioner's comprehensive policy strategy is supported by mounting evidence that preventing homelessness is an effective way to prevent the human costs associated to this phenomenon.

From a children's rights perspective, preventing homelessness is a compelling task which demands strong effective primary prevention systems (e.g. poverty reduction, adequate welfare benefits, access to affordable housing support, debt counselling and other social support). There is evidence that prevention work which is developed in Flanders with children (e.g. Houses of the Child and the local networks to fight poverty) seem to focus on a diversity of aspects affecting children's lives (e.g. health, social care, education, child care, outreach services, social welfare, sports), but not on housing issues.

As regards secondary prevention systems, there is a strong emphasis in the report on the prevention of evictions although preventative housing advice services are already in place in several cities in Flanders as well as a Fund for the Prevention of Evictions. Recommendations are clearly in line with existing evidence on the need to re-orient preventive services targeting the social housing sector towards the private rental sector from which most of evictions originate (Hermans, 2017b).

Targeted actions towards young people in transition to adulthood reveal the concern of the authors of the report in relation to cooperation and coordination work between youth welfare services, housing services and social welfare. The shortage of affordable housing and existing incongruences between housing and social support criteria for young people in transition to adulthood are two of the issues demanding urgent solutions. In this specific domain, the report mentions some positive actions which are being developed, namely the buddy system aiming at facilitating transition from youth care into independent life and counselling for young people (e.g. Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living).

The links between domestic violence and family homelessness are clearly illustrated by the qualitative research conducted. The recommendations in the report recognise that there have been improvements within the various levels of government in order to better protect women and children experiencing domestic violence, including at the level

of cooperation mechanisms between different areas (e.g. specialised assistance, the Family Justice Centre, and targeted multi-agency cooperation projects involving the justice system, the police, local government and support services). Yet, as in many other countries, there is still a long road to be travelled between legislative progress in the field of domestic violence, the reinforcement of victims' protection rights through international instruments and the actual and effective protection of women and children experiencing domestic violence: their preferential right to the family home, privileging safety but also stability and continuity should become a right in action.

### **Housing allocation system**

The recommendations made aim at improving the housing allocation system in Flanders at different levels, in a context of a relatively small social housing sector and strong competition in the private rental market where affordable housing is scarce.

The two main actors providing access to social housing – social housing companies and social rental agencies – already provide priority access to social housing for homeless families and young people. Flemish rental subsidies and rental premiums are also available for families in specific vulnerable conditions (e.g. long waiting for social housing or whose housing has been declared uninhabitable). A rental deposit system has also been developed, aimed at tackling discrimination in the private rental market. The system eliminates the mediation by the Public Social Welfare Centre which often raised reluctance among landlords.

In spite of these instruments, the government's target to increase the share of available social housing recognises the need to reinforce public investment in social housing in order to address persisting and increasing difficulties in access to affordable housing. The discussion around the number of social housing is deemed to be necessary and the Government's decision to expand the target towards 50 000 additional homes by 2025 seems to be ongoing.

In this regard, an explicit call is made by the Commissioner regarding the need to ensure that there is a match between targets set and the hard reality of families who continue to endure long waiting periods for access to affordable housing with all the consequences that living in transition entails for their children.

Addressing the needs of an increasing number of larger families for whom it is even more difficult to access social housing and revising the waiting list system in order not to penalise homeless families with children in transition are two important recommendations directly drawing on the evidence collected through the interviews.

One of the recommendations directly addresses the need to strengthen the role of the Social Rental Agencies (SRAs). These agencies act as mediating agents between private landlords and people in housing need. In short, SRAs lease dwellings in order to sublet them at an affordable rent to tenants with low-incomes. The practicalities of letting are transferred from the landlord to the SRA (De Decker, 2012). Although offering a more limited number of dwellings compared to the social housing companies, the innovative character of the SRAs in terms of their operation ensures an effective and comprehensive support to the actual social needs of homeless families.

Discrimination in the private rental market was identified as an important constraint faced by homeless families with children. The report highlights some positive actions in this area already in place in Flanders as well as areas for improvement. Financial constraints are also addressed, since they often prevent homeless families from moving on towards independent housing solutions and to linger on temporary forms of accommodation which do not ensure the necessary stability and security of children.

The final recommendation in the report relates to recent incentives by the Flemish Parliament to encourage and facilitate new forms of housing. There is indeed great scope for innovation in homelessness policy and practice. The evolution in the homelessness sector in Flanders in recent years shows a reversal in the emphasis on less residential

services and a stronger investment in housing support and prevention services. Housing First initiatives have also proved highly successful, in line with similar initiatives across the EU and elsewhere. The Flemish action plan to combat Homelessness foresees an expansion of Housing First projects, the adoption of a housing-led approach and a reform of residential centres.

Thus, the option to encourage alternative forms of housing which appear to be translated into alternative forms of communal living should be considered with caution. Indeed, in light of the outcomes of the qualitative study regarding the experiences of homeless children and families in communal living – shelters and other transit accommodation- it would be crucial to validate such experimental initiatives from a child's perspective in order to ensure that children's rights of privacy, stability and normality are respected in such environments.

### **3 Influencing policy and practice: results and limitations**

The Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner had two main objectives when the process was initiated: to raise visibility on the reality of homeless children and young people in Flanders and to promote positive change in policy and practice in this specific field.

The available qualitative information regarding the first goal reveals that the initiative by the Commissioner had a very positive impact at different levels. It echoed the concerns which had been put forward by practitioners working with children regarding the serious situation of homeless children and the signs of alarm which recent research on homelessness in Flanders had flagged up. Concurrently, the qualitative approach adopted in the study revealed a ground-breaking reality on the experiences of homelessness through the eyes of children and young people, enriching the existing knowledge by adopting a research perspective which had not been common in addressing the issue in Flanders.

The report directly addressed the need to bring a child's right perspective into the analysis of the phenomenon of homelessness among children and its outcomes had a strong public visibility, namely through the media. The outcomes of the report were also presented in Parliament where the study raised a lively debate with questions being addressed towards the Ministers responsible for Housing, Welfare and Poverty reduction.

Collaboration between the Commissioner's Office and the Flemish Housing Advisory Board shortly after the publication of the study resulted in the issuing of a recommendation around housing from a children's rights perspective.

The Commissioner has also been active in organizing events aiming at disseminating the outcomes of the study and respective recommendations, at discussing interesting examples and good practices, i.e. raising awareness on homelessness from a child's perspective and on enhancing local level dynamics for promoting positive change.

One of the important concrete results of the study which has been confirmed by different sources is precisely the impact it had at the local level. The issue of homelessness among children has generated discussion and a lot of thinking among practitioners and support organizations, namely as regards the provision of residential care services and the impact of long stays in temporary accommodation on children and young people.

But most importantly the initiative by the Commissioner seems to be generating change in the provision of support. There is evidence of initiatives aiming at the reconversion of existing shelters into more individualized accommodation aiming at homeless families with children. According to our source, this change is directly linked to one of the recommendations in the report, i.e. ensuring family's and children's privacy. Other initiatives in line with the recommendations are also being reflected on by shelter providers, such as internet access for young people and families.



Furthermore, housing-led solutions and specific accommodation projects for young adults are being developed across Flanders, through a set of projects which are being supported by the Flemish government and which are directly linked to one of the priorities set by the Flemish Action Plan Against Homelessness.

According to several stakeholders interviewed, the results at the policy level have been less obvious. On the one hand, there are no links between the policy recommendations formulated in the report and the measures proposed in the Flemish action plan. According to the information collected, this lack of synergy between the study and the action plan may arise from the timing of both initiatives which may have hindered the possibility for the Flemish Plan to integrate some of the recommendations issued by the Commissioner's Office. However, other criticisms arise regarding the architecture of the Plan itself, i.e. the fact that it adopts a very general perspective with a lack of clear and measurable goals and rather vague actions and a very restricted focus as regards youth homelessness. Such a design would therefore not be particularly welcoming to the introduction of very specific recommendations addressing homelessness from a child's perspective (e.g. the night and winter shelters are not suitable for children). Yet, there is strong expectation that the drafting of the next Flemish Action Plan Against Homelessness may directly learn from and address some of the important outcomes of the Commissioner's report.

If at the Flemish policy level, the impact of the study's results is not visible and a comprehensive policy strategy on children's homelessness has not been adopted, policy developments are apparently more positive at the local level. According to key stakeholders, there are several local policy actors engaged in the development of local policy plans and the issues of housing and the situation of children seem to be high on the agenda, at least in some communities. The fact that there will be elections at the community level at the end of 2018 may foster further developments in this area.

#### **4 Housing in Flanders: shutting children out?**

Housing issues clearly came up as the main constraint encountered.

The lack of affordable housing, the extensive waiting lists for social housing which particularly affect families with two or more children, the need for an increased investment in social housing facilities, the housing cost overburden among poor families and discrimination in the private rental market are some of the identified hindrances that affect access to housing in Flanders and on which the report provides insightful discussion from a child's perspective.

Yet, the Commissioner's Office adds one important element to this discussion when reflecting on the difficulties faced during the process of drafting the report: the presence of children facing housing exclusion under different forms is clearly acknowledged by professionals working in the field, existing eviction data shows that children are present in these situations, authorities are aware that many children live in social housing units; yet, children are totally absent from housing legislations. According to the Commissioner's Office this invisibility of children on a legislative level means that they are not really a subject within housing policy in Flanders.

This finding is certainly an important point for reflection both at the national level, but also at the EU level. The Commissioner's Office rightly recalls that from a children's rights perspective homelessness not only violates the right to adequate living but all other rights which are interconnected (e.g. to a full and decent life, to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental and social development, to education on the basis of equal opportunity) (UN, 1989).

One final difficulty identified during the preparation of the report was the practical impossibility to reach other important and serious situations affecting children who are living in homelessness situations: undocumented homeless children and families. This is an important issue at the national level and there is evidence that homeless

undocumented migrant families might experience rough sleeping (e.g. the 2017 count in Brussels identified 653 homeless children, including rough sleeping situations). The absence of this reality from the report and from the recommendations may come as a shortcoming of the analysis, particularly for practitioners working with this population.

## 5 Learning from a child's perspective on homelessness

The main success factors of the initiative by the Flemish Commissioner's Office may be structured around four main dimensions:

- A rights-based approach – adopting a right based approach centred on the experiences of children through homelessness enabled the building up of a comprehensive policy strategy which aims at the realisation of children's rights in areas (e.g. housing) which are often not considered as children's rights 'topics' in national legislation and policy;
- Ownership of the initiative – the independent status of the Commissioner's Office, their specialised knowledge on children's rights issues, the capacity to use their own resources and their explicit mission to provide policy advice were important elements of success both in terms of the quality of the report and of the potential positive impact of the recommendations;
- The research methodology adopted – conducting interviews directly with children and young people turned the issue of homelessness among children in Flanders into a very concrete reality;
- The dissemination strategy – the use of a very diverse range of initiatives (e.g. conference, small events at the local level, attractive publication, hearing at the Parliament, use of social media) to publicise the results of the study and the recommendations was crucial to give visibility to the issue and to foster the potential for change at the practice and policy levels;
- The clear identification of concrete actions within the comprehensive policy strategy suggested for addressing the causes and consequences of homelessness among children and young people, underpinned by clear links with a child's perspective on those issues.

Some of these success factors, as detailed below, have a clear potential for transferability towards other EU Member States and even with regard to EU policy.

The Convention of the Rights of the Child which was used as a reference point and the legal framework for analysing this important issue by the Flemish Commissioner's Office can certainly be mobilised in similar ways either by other national Ombudspersons for Children or – in their absence – by the national Ombudspersons. This initiative is certainly a good example of the Convention 'in action' to be followed.

The research methodology used is also another important element of transferability which has been widely used in qualitative research, namely on youth homelessness (e.g. Mayock & Parker, 2017; Quilgars et al, 2008) and is therefore accessible for other research and policy informed initiatives to be conducted in different EU Member States.

Adopting a child-centred approach to review the housing area both in terms of legislation and policy documents is probably one of the most important elements of transferability which other countries could adopt.

Adopting this explicit attention to homelessness from a child's perspective could certainly be enhanced at the EU level, particularly as stocktaking exercises of the implementation of EU recommendations (e.g. the 2013 Recommendation on "Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage"<sup>5</sup> or in the setting of priorities (e.g. for

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:059:0005:0016:EN:PDF>.

implementing the principles in relation to children within the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>6</sup>).

## **6 Key findings and conclusions**

The decision by the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner in Flanders to translate the in-depth analysis of children's homelessness into a complete dossier on children's rights to adequate housing and living conditions was a ground-breaking initiative. It managed to advance knowledge on the experiences of children and youngsters, and to raise significant discussion regarding the need to place them at the centre of practice and policy change.

It is furthermore important to emphasize that the current practice also illustrates the potential of existing advisory bodies in the area of children's rights – in Flanders and elsewhere – not only in addressing individual cases in order to solve them, but also in bringing the violation of basic rights into a different level, i.e. dealing with them at a structural level and issuing consistent recommendations regarding legislation, policy and practice.

The outcomes of the report confirm existing research on family homelessness in other EU countries, namely as regards the disruptive consequences of this phenomenon on the experiences and trajectories of children and young people and on the highly gendered nature of homelessness among families with children.

Unsurprisingly, the complexity of factors which underpin the reality of homelessness among children – vividly reinforced by the testimonies of the interviewees – recall the urgency for an effective and true multi-level coordination, particularly in countries characterised by a complex institutional model and sharing of responsibilities and power. Breaking down policy and institutional barriers across areas and across levels should definitely be one of the main goals in order to promote positive changes in the lives of homeless children, young people and their families.

Putting at the centre of any policy strategy accessibility to affordable and decent housing as an indispensable pre-condition for the exercise of children's fundamental rights should become more than just rhetoric. It needs to be directly tackled and put into action. Research literature on the impacts of homelessness and the use of emergency accommodation in the development of children has offered some insights into homeless children's well-being, social development, mental health and educational issues. Thus, the call for a paradigm shift towards housing-led approaches and homelessness prevention is one of the strongest messages voiced in the report's recommendations.

The Commissioner's initiative also shed light on a crucial aspect of the invisibility of children within national and regional legislation and its impact at the policy level (e.g. housing policies) which applies to the Flemish reality but certainly to many other Member States' contexts. In fact, adopting a child's centred-approach to review the housing area both in terms of legislation and policy documents is probably one of the most important elements of transferability which could be applied to other EU countries.

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/towards-european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/towards-european-pillar-social-rights_en).

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