Peer Review on 'Homelessness from a child's perspective – What are the key elements of an effective child homelessness strategy?'

27-28 June 2018, Brussels (Belgium)

Summary report

The Peer Review offered an opportunity to discuss key policy elements of an effective child homelessness strategy to ensure the well-being and rights of children currently without a home, and to identify and share policy approaches and practices from the participating countries to address the homelessness of children and their families. The event was hosted by the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner[1] and brought together government representatives from Belgium (host country) and five peer countries: Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania, as well as an independent expert operating at the European level. Representatives from the European Commission, academics and NGOs active in the field of homelessness also participated in the Peer Review. In addition, a study visit was organised to a model community-based care facility in Ghent, where families with children that have become homeless are sheltered during the night and cared for; the visit also included a presentation of the community-based taskforce 'no child on the street', where local government and civil society work together to prevent homelessness and find a solution for the homeless children and families in the city of Ghent as well as a tour of a night shelter, which has the capacity to host families alongside single homeless people.

Housing and assistance for the homeless is one of the key issues addressed in the European Pillar of Social Rights that was launched in 2017. Under this framework, the European Commission sets out 20 key principles and rights to support equal opportunities. In particular, Principle 19 speaks of access to quality social housing or housing assistance for those in need, the right to assistance and protection against forced evictions, and the provision of adequate shelter and support services for the homeless. It also aims to make a better use of European funds to support the implementation of policies and initiatives targeted at vulnerable groups in the Member States. In addition, the Commission Recommendation "Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage", specifically addresses children's right to safe and adequate housing and living conditions as fundamental for their development and social inclusion. In line with the recommendations, Belgium adopted a National Child Poverty Reduction Plan in 2013, and steps have also been taken to enhance cooperation between the federal state, regional government and local communities, to prevent and combat homelessness. In Flanders, reducing child poverty has been a key policy priority since 2010. Moreover, the Flemish Government initiated an integrated plan with strategic goals to tackle the rising problem of homelessness, including youth homelessness.

Statistics on income and living conditions that children face a significantly higher risk of poverty relative to the general population in Belgium. Children living in single parent families, the majority of which are headed by women, and in households with low work intensity are disproportionally affected. For these families, housing costs represent a considerably large burden, which reduces the amount that can be spent on other necessary items such as food or clothing. Increases in rent prices in the private market, the insufficient supply of social housing and long waiting lists mean that affordable housing remains out of reach for many families. Children are also increasingly affected by the sharp rise in evictions in recent years. Although statistics on the homelessness situation of children are much less established, estimates indicate that in Flanders, there

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[1] Kinderrechtencommissariaat.

are hundreds of children, youngsters and their parents who experience homelessness or are forced to live in dangerous housing conditions. At the end of 2014, 1 728 children in Flanders lived in homelessness services, including night shelters and transit housing. A homeless count organised in March 2017 in one hour found 653 children living on the streets of Brussels alone.

As a response to the dire situation, the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner initiated and conducted an in-depth analysis of the root causes and the impact of homelessness on children's lives. The results, along with proposed policy changes to effectively address homelessness among children, were presented in the 2016 dossier "With(out) a home: Homelessness from a child's perspective". The initiative aimed to depict the harsh living conditions of children, young people and their families from the experience and views of the children themselves, and to promote a comprehensive policy strategy based on a rights-based approach. The report revealed, among other issues: the difficulties for families to obtain housing stability and safety; the discrimination families faced in the housing market; the problem of housing affordability and the lack of adequate protection from evictions and domestic violence. It also confirmed many of the structural causes of family homelessness and in particular, the centrality of poverty as a contributing factor; in addition, the report shed light on the absence of children in housing legislation and housing policy plans. The outcomes of the report were disseminated through different channels, including several events organised by the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner, to raise awareness of the issue.

The discussions that took place amongst the other participating countries throughout the Peer Review underlined the positive aspects of the host country's initiative, which included a holistic and rights-based approach, a specifically adopted research methodology and the clear identification of concrete actions to be taken. The report's attention to the gap between policy declarations and practice strongly resonated with most peer countries' experience.

Building on the findings of the aforementioned report, the Peer Review sought to discuss Member States' policies and practices to tackle child homelessness, focusing on five key themes:

1. Preventing homelessness among children;
2. Developing and managing child-friendly shelters and services that are adapted to homeless children's needs;
3. Developing and widening access to sustainable housing solutions for homeless children and their families through housing allocation and social support systems;
4. Strengthening local governance capacity and cooperation among stakeholders in delivery of services for homeless children;
5. Increasing the visibility of homeless children in policy through improved data collection and statistics.

The key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:

Prevention of child homelessness

- The Peer Review reiterated the importance of prevention and early intervention to effectively address the structural causes of child homelessness. These include increasing access to affordable housing, strong poverty reduction measures, the provision of adequate welfare services, and comprehensive child protection systems and youth services that support young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence.

- Basic minimum income schemes and housing and social assistance benefits that help vulnerable families with housing costs need to be raised to an adequate level. Concurrently, social inclusion beyond monetary support, including measures to facilitate labour market integration and improve social participation, is essential. Single parent families for instance, disproportionally face a combination of inadequate resources and inadequate employment participation to secure well-being.

- Participants underlined the need to strengthen secondary prevention measures, such as early warning detection and debt counselling to prevent evictions, and adequate alternative housing provision to ensure that eviction does not result in children and their families being rendered homeless.

- Interventions targeted at specific groups of children and families who are at risk of homelessness, such as young people leaving care, or those in crisis situations (e.g. families experiencing domestic violence) were emphasised. Examples from the participating countries include, among others, the operation of 24h national toll-free telephone hotlines, family shelters and crisis centres offering free support services, counselling for young people and a buddy system to help facilitate transition from youth care.

- There was general consensus among the participants that for prevention to be effective, there is a need for both stronger cooperation mechanisms between different policy areas such as social housing, family support, child protection and youth care, and joint approaches from youth and family services, judicial systems, social housing services, local governments and other specialized support services.

Management of child-friendly shelters and support

- Although all participants considered shelters to be a last resort, and as providing only a temporary solution, there was general agreement that they should be as adapted to children's needs as possible, in order to mitigate the adverse effects of living in such transitional or temporary accommodation. This includes ensuring a safe, protective and supporting environment that also offers some form of continuity of lifestyle (i.e. children of school age can remain in their school, able to retain relationships with their peers etc.).

- The Peer Review highlighted existing good practices and innovative ways (e.g. the Change it! Campaign in England; child-friendly practices from Brabant, Belgium) to adjust shelters in order to better accommodate children's needs and preferences, and which could be relatively easy to transfer to other country contexts.

- The involvement of children is vital to developing child-friendly shelters and services. Children have to be seen as individuals with their own rights. They have to be able to stay children, to do activities for children, express their feelings and get the information they need. Children have to be able to lean on a reliable adult. The participants agreed that this participatory approach requires specially trained and dedicated staff, able to assess children's needs, their specific circumstances and to ensure that children's vulnerability and privacy are protected. Empathy and the establishment of trust is crucial here.

Establishment of a holistic housing allocation system

- Across the participating countries, young people and families with children who are homeless or living in uninhabitable conditions are considered a priority group

when it comes to housing allocation. How this support is realised however tends to vary among the Member States: in reality, it depends upon specific eligibility conditions, criteria for matching children, young people and families with housing suitable to their needs, and importantly, on the scale of the housing provision.

- Insufficient supply of social housing resulting in long waiting-lists and the financial constraints of families were identified as key obstacles in the participating countries in accessing affordable housing. The peer review discussed a number of interesting and innovative housing-led initiatives and alternative housing solutions (e.g. Housing First for youth in Denmark; social rental agencies in Belgium) aimed to overcome these challenges. At the same time, a more structural policy is needed to guarantee housing affordability.

- Although financial support, provided either in the form of minimum income benefit, rent subsidy or special loans, is available in all countries for those with the least resources, these alone are insufficient to ensure sustainable solutions. A holistic approach with respect to housing and the social integration of families and children is necessary. Such an approach calls for close cooperation, in both design and implementation, of policies across different levels (central, regional, local) and among different stakeholders.

Local governance and collaboration among stakeholders

- The Peer Review echoed the notion that strengthening local governance and devoting sufficient resources are essential to address homelessness among families and children in an effective way. Especially for children a local governance solution is necessary. It guarantees continuity in their development, education, integration and social inclusion. The role and importance of integrated support services was emphasised. This however, also implies challenges, namely bringing together different organisational cultures and streamlining knowledge among social workers.

- Access to service provision, in particular ensuring the quality of housing and other social services, and the need for a variety of access points to ease access for different groups of service users, was considered of great importance by the participants. The discussion drew attention to disparities in the availability and quality of services, especially in countries where service provision and administration is decentralised.

- Developing a comprehensive framework to prevent and combat homelessness, improving coordination and encouraging partnership between ministries and public agencies through regular meetings, exchange of information and cross-subsidising services were mentioned as key factors that have a positive impact on the success of housing measures. Furthermore, engagement and collaboration from a variety of local actors, including municipalities, public service providers and NGOs - for instance in organising information and awareness raising campaigns to reduce information and discrimination barriers or making local policy plans and install a taskforce to prevent homelessness (e.g. taskforce 'no child on the street' in Ghent) - was particularly stressed by the participants.

Data collection to increase visibility of homeless children at policy level

- Data collection and improved statistics on homelessness among families and children is crucial for the scientific evaluation and regular monitoring of policies, in order to assess their effectiveness and ensure that spending makes sustainable social impact. As the peer discussion highlighted, existing data on

family homelessness is often incomplete and sporadic. A lack of systematic and regular data collection and underreporting of statistics, were cited as the main difficulties by the participants with regard to ensuring visibility through data collection. Additional attention was asked for hidden homelessness, referring to persons and families staying with friends or family because of a lack of other housing options, since this is a typical survival strategy of families but not visible in statistics.

- Measurements of homelessness are further hindered by the different legal and administrative definitions used in the countries, most of which do not allow for specific and distinct categories of homeless situations to be captured. Consequently, the use of a harmonised definition of homelessness, such as that presented by ETHOS and corresponding measurement tools (e.g. ETHOS Light[2]), that advances understanding of the issue through measuring family homelessness to make children more visible in statistics, should be encouraged. More specifically, in each data collection exercise on homelessness, specific measures need to be integrated to capture the age of each child, which makes statements possible not only on the level of the adult but also on the level of the child.

- Quantitative evidence on housing, such as additional detailed child family-specific data in large European datasets (e.g. European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey; housing statistics, statistics on the total amount of children involved in evictions), would enable more in-depth cross-country comparisons. Qualitative research, as shown by the host country initiative, not only offers valuable insights into the reality of child homelessness, but also reinforces the need for child sensitive policies that better ensure children's rights.

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[2] ETHOS Light is a simplified version of the harmonised definition of homelessness - the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) – developed by FEANTSA in the context of a 2007 European Commission study: Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level. It is a pragmatic tool for the development of homelessness data collection, rather than a conceptual and operational definition to be used for a range of policy and practice purposes. It aimed at improving understanding and measurement of homelessness in Europe. Further info on ETHOS available at:
https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion