



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

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Contact: Flaviana Teosodiou and Bent-Ole Grooss

E-mail: EMPL-SPSI-PEER-REVIEWS@ec.europa.eu

Website: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/home.jsp>

European Commission

B-1000 Brussels

**Peer Review on
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Belgium, 27-28 June 2018

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose of the Peer Review

A Peer Review titled 'Homelessness from a child's perspective – What are the key elements of an effective child homelessness strategy?' was held in Brussels, Belgium, on 27 and 28 June 2018.

The Peer Review offered an opportunity to discuss the key policy elements needed to create an effective child homelessness strategy that ensures the well-being and rights of children currently without a home. In addition, it enabled policy approaches and practices that address the homelessness of children and their families to be identified and shared by the participating countries.

The event was hosted by the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner (*Kinderrechtencommissariaat*), which in 2016 conducted a thorough investigation of Flemish housing policies that focused on the multidimensional effects that homelessness has on children. The Peer Review brought together government representatives from Belgium (the host country) and five peer countries: the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania, as well as an independent expert operating at the European level¹. 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 included a presentation of the community-based taskforce 'no child on the street', through which 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; the Peer Review participants were also given a tour of a night shelter, which has the capacity to host families alongside single homeless people.

1.2 EU policy context

In addition to the UN-based International legal instruments², the right to housing is enshrined and protected in a number of legal instruments at the European level, namely the **Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights - ECHR)** and the **Revised European Social Charter (RESC)**. Article 16 of the RESC explicitly covers a family's right to suitable housing (including social housing) and financial assistance to those without sufficient resources to access appropriate housing. Article 31 on the right to housing provides more detailed guarantees through measures designed to 'promote access to housing of an adequate standard', 'prevent and reduce homelessness with a view to its gradual elimination' and 'make the price of housing accessible to those without adequate resources'. As of January 2018, nine EU Member States, including two of the peer countries (Lithuania and Portugal) ratified and are bound by Article 31.

Housing and assistance for the homeless is also 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. Principle 11, which focuses on childcare and support for children, refers to

¹ Although not present at the Peer Review as an official peer country, English policies with regard to child homelessness were shared by a representative of an English children's rights charity.

² The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

the need to ensure that children are protected from poverty and that their right to specific support measures is safeguarded. In addition, the **European Commission Recommendation 'Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (2013/112/EU)**, specifically addresses a child's right to safe and adequate housing and living conditions as fundamental for their development and social inclusion. A recent evaluation on the implementation of the recommendation showed limited progress with regards to housing and living environment in most Member States.³ In Belgium, Denmark and Romania the situation appears to have worsened since 2013 while in the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Portugal no or little change could be observed.

1.3 Key policy messages from the Peer Review

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

Box 1.3: Key policy messages

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, disproportionately 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 as being very important. 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 both a need for stronger cooperation mechanisms between different policy areas such as social housing, family support, child protection and youth care, and a need for joint approaches from youth and family services, judicial systems, social housing services, local governments and other specialised support services.

³ Frazer, H. & Marlier, E. (2017). Progress across Europe in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on 'Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage', A Study of national policies. European Commission, Brussels. Available at: <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c680a1b0-9171-11e7-b92d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

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, temporary accommodation. This includes ensuring a safe, protective and supportive environment that also enables some form of continuity of lifestyle (i.e. children of school age can remain in their school, are 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 so as to better accommodate children's needs and preferences and which would 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 that are 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 a 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 at overcoming 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

- Discussion throughout the Peer Review suggested that strengthening local governance and devoting sufficient resources is essential to effectively address homelessness among families and children. In particular, a local governance solution is necessary for children. It guarantees continuity in their development, education, integration and social inclusion. The role and importance of integrated support services was emphasised. However, this 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.
- Key factors seen as having a positive impact of the success of housing measures included developing a comprehensive framework to prevent and combat homelessness; improving coordination and encouraging partnership between ministries and public agencies through regular meetings; and the exchange of information and the cross-subsidisation of services. Furthermore, engagement and collaboration between a variety of local actors (including municipalities, public service providers and NGOs) was particularly stressed by the participants. Examples of such efforts include organising information and awareness raising campaigns to reduce information and discrimination barriers; establishing local policy plans; and installing a dedicated taskforce to prevent homelessness (e.g. the taskforce 'no child on the street' in Ghent).

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 the underreporting of statistics were cited by the participants as the main challenges to ensure visibility through data collection. Additional attention was given to the phenomenon of hidden homelessness, which refers to individuals and families that reside with friends or family because of a lack of other housing options; this is a common survival strategy of families but is not visible in statistics.
- Measurements of homelessness are further hindered by the different legal and administrative definitions across Member States, most of which do not capture specific and distinct categories of homeless situations. Consequently, the use of a harmonised definition of homelessness, such as that presented by ETHOS and corresponding measurement tools (e.g. ETHOS Light2), that advances an 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 so that the age of each homeless child can be captured; this will enable conclusions to be drawn on the situation of homeless children, not only homeless adults.
- Quantitative data on housing, such as additional detailed child and 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 number 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.

2 “With(out) a home: Homelessness from a child’s perspective”

2.1 Context and rationale

The Belgian government considers child poverty and homelessness an important social policy issue; policy measures developed in recent years have aimed to address this. In 2013, a National Child Poverty Reduction Plan was adopted, and steps have also been taken to enhance cooperation between the federal state, regions and 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 action plan with strategic goals to tackle the rising problem of homelessness, including youth homelessness.

Statistics on the living situation of children in Flanders show that children face a significantly higher risk of poverty (12%) relative to the general population (10%).⁴ Children living in single parent families (the majority of which are headed by women) and in households with low work intensity, are disproportionately affected. For these families, housing costs represent a considerably larger burden to reducing spending on other necessary items such as food or clothing. In Flanders, the prevalence of housing cost overburden⁵ among poor households (i.e. those with incomes below 60% of the median) was 36.7% in 2016, which is almost nine times as high as among those with incomes above the poverty threshold (4.3%). 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. In 2014, 25% of evictions involved families with dependent children in Flanders alone.

Although statistics on the homelessness situation of children are much less established, estimates indicate that in Flanders, there 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 systematic homeless count organised one night in March 2017 found 653 homeless children living on the streets of Brussels (11) or living in night shelters (238), in temporary accommodation (253) as well as in illegal shelters and housing as squats (151).

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 needed to effectively address homelessness among children, were published in the 2016 dossier “With(out) a home: Homelessness from a child’s perspective”⁶.

2.2 Key features of the host country initiative

The overall objective of the initiative was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to reveal the harsh living conditions of homeless children, young people and their families in Flanders. Secondly, the initiative intended to trigger a positive change at the policy level by promoting a global, rights-based approach model which comprehensively addresses the

⁴ Statistics Flanders, Poverty monitor 2017, <http://www.statistiekvlaanderen.be/vlaamse-armoedemonitor-2017>.

⁵ Percentage of the population living in a household where total housing costs represent more than 40% of the total disposable household income.

⁶ https://www.kinderrechtencommissariaat.be/sites/default/files/bestanden/dossier_homelessness_from_childs_perspective_eng.pdf.

multi-dimensionality of homelessness and its structural causes. A key feature of the initiative was the approach that was adopted to attain these goals. Using a triangulation methodology, it combined multiple methods and different data sources. This included (1) a review of respective legislation and existing policies, (2) quantitative research, and (3) a qualitative study with in-depth interviews of 43 children, young people and parents.

The basic premise of a comprehensive framework for child homelessness is that children are protected from violence and from violations of their rights, and that they are entitled to the right to access a range of elementary services and to participate in society on an equal basis. A key objective, and a particular feature, of the initiative was therefore to put children in the centre of the analysis and the policy recommendations. The qualitative study investigated the situation of homeless children from the children's own perspective by interviewing them and recording their testimonies. Existing quantitative data, relevant legislation and policy plans on homelessness were assessed with the specific focus on highlighting children's visibility within them. The findings revealed: how children perceive the experience of living without a home and in most cases very poor conditions; the harmful consequences that such poor living situations have on children's lives; the severe difficulties families face in obtaining housing stability and safety; the discrimination families face 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 and domestic violence⁷. In addition, the report shed light on the absence of references to children in housing legislation and housing policy plans and of their invisibility in statistics on homelessness.

Another important aspect of the initiative is that it went beyond highlighting the homelessness situation of children and their families and identifying the main causes and policy gaps. Based on the collected evidence and in consultation with relevant stakeholders, the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner presented concrete and detailed recommendations for an overarching strategy to move housing and homelessness policy forward. These recommendations are formulated around six key policy elements:

1. Make homeless children visible in policy plans and statistics;
2. Reinforce their legal provision;
3. Enhance local governance and collaboration;
4. Develop child-friendly shelters and support;
5. Prevent child homelessness;
6. Improve the housing allocation system.

Since raising awareness of the issue of child and family homelessness was a principal objective of the initiative, the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner used a wide range of dissemination channels, including organising several events at local as well as national level, to promote the outcomes of the report and its recommendations.

2.3 Initial experiences and success factors

Initial experiences following the publication of the report and its dissemination show an overall positive impact, especially regarding homelessness research and among the academic and research community but also among practitioners and support organisations operating at the local level. While the results are somewhat less obvious at the policy level, there is an indication that the initiative is generating a much needed change in the way local homelessness services are provided (e.g. making local homeless

⁷ With illegal migration being the main external reason.

shelters more adapted to children's and families' needs) as well as in the design of housing-led initiatives across Flanders that could be directly linked to the report's recommendations.

Among the main success factors, the adoption of a rights-based approach and a research methodology that is underpinned by a strong focus on the child's perspective should be highlighted. The initiative also draws attention to the central role of independent national and regional human rights bodies, not only in terms of investigating violations of children's rights, but also as an important source of policy advice. In the Flemish case, the fact that the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner took full ownership of the initiative from the start, devoting its own capacities and resources and with the explicit mission to influence policy and practice, was an important contributing factor in achieving a positive impact. The dissemination strategy that targeted a wide range of stakeholders and different layers of government deserves special mention in this regard. All these factors have a potential for transferability to other Member State contexts. Finally, the clearly formulated and concrete policy recommendations with reference to the multiple causes and consequences of homelessness among children offer valuable points for discussion and reflection not only at national, but at European level too.

3 Discussion points

The discussions with the other participating countries underlined the positive aspects of the host country's initiative which included a holistic and rights-based approach, a specific adapted research methodology which clearly identified 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 host country initiative, 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; and
5. Increasing the visibility of homeless children in policy through improved data collection and statistics.

3.1 Prevention of homelessness among children

The peer discussions identified a number of factors in the participating countries that contribute towards children and families becoming homeless. Structural factors, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, inadequate housing policies and social and welfare benefits and services were mentioned as the most predominant and common causes of family homelessness. Addressing these requires long-term policy solutions that include investing in affordable housing solutions, building more affordable homes and increasing access to social housing. Changes in the social and housing benefit system should involve raising benefit amounts to an adequate level, better targeting and faster administration of benefit schemes.

Policy measures that are aimed at the labour market integration of vulnerable groups and which facilitate their social participation are necessary to prevent families and young

people from falling into poverty. Securing employment and having an adequate income is of great importance, as financial constraints (i.e. mortgage debt, arrears on rents or utility bills) often lead to evictions: a major cause of homelessness. Consequently, secondary prevention measures that keep families and young people in their homes, for instance by providing debt counselling and by having early warning detection systems in place, were deemed to be especially important by the Peer Review participants. Eviction prevention is a priority in **Flemish** housing policy, while in the **Czech Republic** there are plans to implement an early warning detection system to avoid families losing their home because of loss of tenancy.

There is also evidence that children and youth who experienced support from child protection services, including foster care and child care institutions, are over represented among young people experiencing homelessness. This was reported in the case of **Romania**, where street homelessness among children is a particularly severe problem. Discussions pointed here to the relevance of transition and after-care support, targeted interventions and counselling for young people. Examples from the participating countries include 24-hour helplines that children and young people can call for support (e.g. in **Portugal**), and the buddy system in **Flanders**.

Individual and family-related reasons were also highlighted by the Peer Review. Mental health problems and addiction (i.e. drug and alcohol problems) were mentioned as significant contributing factors to youth homelessness in **Denmark** and **Lithuania**. Family conflicts and domestic violence were indicated as particular risk factors for child and family homelessness in all countries. Many women and children fleeing from such crisis situations end up in emergency family shelters or crisis centres where free support services are offered to them.

What clearly emerged from the Peer Review discussions is that homelessness is often a result of a combination of multiple factors. In the case of **Flanders**, for instance, this includes the lack of sufficient social housing, the high prevalence of poverty, and the low level of the basic minimum income. Tackling these complex problems requires coordinated action and a joint approach in the planning and provision of preventive services, including a range of different players such as family and youth services, social housing services, mental health services, local governments and judicial systems. The **Danish** Housing First for Youth programme (see Box 3.1) presents a good example for how this could be realised in practice.

Box 3.1 Denmark: Housing First for Youth

The Danish National Board of Social Services decided to implement a special Housing First programme for young people in order to prevent youth homelessness. Starting in 2015, selected municipalities received EUR 300,000 to set up a pilot project targeting homeless youth aged 17-24. The programme, which is ongoing, is designed on the basis of Housing First principles, a central part of the national strategy on homelessness in Denmark since 2009. The aim is to ensure that marginalised young people who have become homeless are provided with a permanent place to live at the beginning of the intervention while simultaneously receiving intensive social support.

The programme uses a Collective-Impact Approach which engages multiple actors (the municipality, local housing associations, shelters for homeless people, NGO/voluntary organisations, national boards of social services) who share a common agenda and actively coordinate their action to solve the complex problem of youth homelessness.

The programme itself comprises four key steps and elements:

1. Identification: outreach services carry out a needs assessment of the young person;

2. Visitation: social workers identify and assess the complexity of the problem and aspects of the young person's life (e.g. network, economy, etc.) through personal talks with the young person;
3. Providing housing: the young person receives permanent housing (a small, low-cost apartment situated in ordinary residential areas) so as to avoid having to stay at a homeless shelter and having to move after the project ends. At the same time, the volunteer network helps the young person to get settled in to their new place and to develop a social network; and
4. Follow-up: social workers make an assessment after six months and decide if further support and follow-up is needed.

A particular feature of the programme is that no specific eligibility conditions or restrictions are applied i.e. any young person without a home can enter the programme and sign an agreement with the municipality.

Source: Peer Country presentation

3.2 Management of child-friendly shelters and support

Specific shelters and temporary accommodation that only house families and children exist in the majority of the participating countries (the exception being **Romania**). When they do exist, they typically comprise emergency-type shelters that offer short-term stays for families in crisis situations (e.g. eviction, domestic violence) and temporary accommodations for longer periods (e.g. up to 6 months in **Portugal** and **Flanders**). In **Flanders**, there are both day and night shelters for families. The latter are managed by local and/or Flemish authorities whereas day shelters are operated by the Flemish Government. Families staying in these day shelters need to pay for the services used, but for those without an income the local government will pay the costs. In Romania, different shelters exist that can accommodate adults and children respectively; in an emergency situation concerning the family, children would be housed with their parents in an adult shelter. The peer discussions highlighted a number of challenges related to the availability and quality of family shelters. These include the generally short supply (in the case of **Lithuania**, where the practice is to take the child from the family in the case of family homelessness) or the lack of supply (in **Romania**) of family shelters; the cost of paying for temporary accommodation (in **Flanders**); variations across municipalities in the availability of places in family shelters, especially in rural areas; and the lack of child-friendly shelters and individualised support services. In addition, shelters are often not of suitable quality, lacking adequate space and amenities.

Given the great psychological and emotional toll that homelessness and the experience of living in shelters takes on children's lives and development, it is of particular importance that shelters provide a safe, protective and supportive environment and ensure a degree of continuity with regard to community and social ties. For instance, while children's access to education is ensured in all countries, there is no guarantee that they can continue their studies in the same school and thus maintain relationships with their friends and peers.

Making shelters child-friendly also means that there is ample time and adequate facilities for children to play, that children and young people have their own personal space, and that they have access to educational and recreational programmes appropriate to their age and specific needs. The Peer Review participants also emphasised the need for trained and dedicated staff and for the direct involvement of children in the development of programmes so as to ensure that shelters are truly adapted to children's needs. Good practices on how to design child-friendly practices in shelters were presented by the Centre for General Well-being in Oost Brabant, Belgium (see Box 3.2). The English Change it! Campaign (see Box 3.3) shared its unique approach to empowering children to initiate policy change.

Box 3.2 Belgium: 'My life as a superhero'

'My life as superhero'⁸ is an interactive book for children who arrive and stay in a homeless shelter. It is inspired by many conversations with homeless children and written by a childcare worker for homeless children.

'My life as superhero' tells the story of Noah, who, from one day to the next, becomes homeless. Together with his mother and his younger sister, they go first through a crisis relief centre and then to a women's shelter from where they find a new home.

The book tries to give homeless children a story of hope with which they can identify. It provides them with many challenging interactive assignments pertaining to small and not-so-small issues from their own lives. It shows to children the resilience they have in them and it invites young readers to go looking for their own strengths, to discuss their experiences with peers, and to learn from each other.

At the same time, 'My life as a superhero' promotes the involvement and participation of children in assessing children's needs and developing child-friendly shelters and services.

A number of more difficult themes such as divorce, homelessness and addiction are addressed in the story at a level that children can understand.

Source: CAW Oost-Brabant presentation

Box 3.3 England: Change it! Campaign

*"We campaign for the people in power to change things for children. And we empower children and those who care about children to push for the change that they want to see."*⁹

In England, 120,510 individual children live in temporary housing, the overall majority (73%) in London. At the end of 2017, 2,050 families with dependent children were housed in Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs), often in dirty and cramped conditions for several months.

The Change it! Campaign, which was launched in 2016 by the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), aims to end the use of temporary accommodations, like B&Bs, for housing children for long periods of time. An important feature of the campaign is that it is led by children and young people themselves, many of whom have experienced homelessness and living in temporary housing and know first-hand how devastating the impact can be on children's lives. They are members of the campaign's steering group and are co-creators of all information material and publications the campaign produces. The children are guided and supported by CRAE, but the main goal is to enable and empower them to speak for themselves.

The campaign's latest output is a report that was published in 2018. Drawing on the direct testimonies of children, it depicts the shocking living conditions in B&Bs where an increasing number of children are placed by local councils because of a lack of alternatives. The report was presented in the House of Parliament with the active involvement of the research participants and the steering group members.

⁸ Leeman L. (2018), Mijn leven als superheld, CAW Oost-Brabant.

⁹ Children's Rights Alliance for England (2018). Change it! I's like being in prison: Children speak out on homelessness. CRAE, London. Available at: http://www.crae.org.uk/media/125719/462614-CRAE_CHANGE-IT-REPORT-Digital-final.pdf

Source: CRAE presentation

Participants from the Peer Review countries unanimously asserted that they were not aware of any such initiative having been conducted in their country regarding child homelessness that was child-led.

3.3 Establishment of a holistic housing allocation system

One important policy area to ensure access to affordable homes is social housing, provided in the form of rental housing below market rents and allocated according to need. Overall, families and children without a home tend to have priority access to social housing in all participating countries, although there are variations in terms of eligibility conditions.

For instance, in **Denmark**, the number and age of children is an important factor that is taken into account when allocating social housing for families with dependent children. In **Romania**, homeless families and children need to meet legally set priority criteria in order to access social housing (e.g. families who are evicted or are about to be evicted, families from housing returned to former owners, young people aged 18 or above leaving child care institutions, families with disabled family members etc.). In reality, however, access even in the case of prioritised groups is greatly hindered by the lack of available social housing.

Insufficient supply of social housing has been identified as a major challenge, although the scale of this problem varies across the six countries. With the exception of **Denmark**, where the social rental housing sector represents around 25% of the housing stock, this type of housing provision remains very limited in the **Czech Republic**, **Lithuania**, **Portugal** and **Romania**. The housing markets across these countries are characterised by high rates of home ownership with social housing playing an extremely limited role.¹⁰ Social housing remains a pending issue in the **Czech Republic**, where a social housing bill was submitted but got rejected by the Parliament. A new legislation is currently under preparation by the Ministry of Interior and Regional Development. In **Portugal**, some steps to increase accessibility to social housing in the private rental sector have been taken and there is a plan to offer tax incentives to landlords who provide long rental contracts for social tenants.

In **Flanders**, social housing is provided by two systems: social housing operated by Social Housing Associations, and rental housing by Social Rental Agencies (SRAs). SRAs, unlike the social housing system, do not own houses themselves, but lease dwellings in the private sector and let these to low-income tenants with sub-market rents. Another significant difference is that SRAs particularly target those with the most urgent housing needs, such as the homeless. Indeed, more than 55% of their rental units are allocated to homeless people. Due to its specific features (see Box 3.1), the SRA model offers an innovative solution to the lack of affordable social housing.

Box 3.4 Flanders: Social Rental Agencies

Social Rental Agencies (SRAs) in Flanders are operated by housing organisations which are run by local municipalities and non-profit organisations. They provide affordable and good quality housing and support for the most vulnerable and high-risk groups who would otherwise face discrimination in the private rental market.

SRAs oversee the allocation of the rental units to tenants based on certain selection criteria and according to needs. They are also responsible for making sure that the dwellings are of sufficient quality before they are let out. Other responsibilities include

¹⁰ According to OECD figures, the social housing sector accounts for 2% of the housing stock in Portugal, while in the Czech Republic it is virtually non-existent (0.5%) (OECD, 2016). Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/social/affordable-housing-database.htm>

the guaranteed monthly payments to landlords, the provision of housing maintenance services, and resolving conflicts between tenants and landlords.

The support offered by SRAs to tenants goes beyond assistance with housing issues. They also help with applications for social and welfare benefits and services that tenants may be entitled to. As such, SRAs work closely with local social service providers.

Source: Peer Country presentation

Notwithstanding the innovative characteristics of the Flemish SRA model, some challenges were highlighted. These refer to the inadequate supply of rental units and consequently its relatively marginal role in the housing market (at present around 10,000 homes), the high rates of evictions in comparison to the mainstream social housing sector and the reluctance of some local municipalities to house high-risk groups. An additional challenge relates to the rent level which is higher than rents in the social housing system. The high inflow from SRAs to social housing suggests that many families struggle to meet housing costs even when paying lower rents.

Although monetary support, either in the form of rent subsidies, special rent premiums, basic minimum income, loans or other social assistance and housing benefits are available in the participating countries, these are often not sufficient (e.g. low benefit amount, limited duration of benefit payment) to guarantee sustainable housing solutions for many vulnerable families and young people. In particular, the situation of single-parent families was highlighted as they disproportionately face inadequate employment and inadequate income to secure their well-being.

There was a strong consensus among the Peer Review participants that a holistic housing-led policy approach is needed: both employment policies and policies that ensure an adequate income represent important components of a desirable policy mix.

3.4 Local governance and collaboration among stakeholders

Local governments play an important role in making sure that services to homeless families and children are provided. In **Flanders**, they are responsible for the delivery of social and welfare services, drafting housing plans, monitoring housing standards, establishing housing allocation regulations and for operating shelters and temporary accommodations working together with other stakeholders. In terms of service delivery, municipalities are the key actors also in the peer countries, but the way responsibilities for policy planning and regulation settings are shared between central, regional and local levels of government varies across the countries. In **Denmark**, municipalities tend to have a much more significant role in this respect than they do in the other peer countries.

There are more commonalities among the participating countries with regards to challenges of local homeless and housing service delivery. Here, the insufficient financial resources of municipalities to adequately deal with homelessness and offer permanent housing solutions was emphasised. Disparities in the availability and quality of services was identified in all the participating countries. Institutional barriers as well as weak coordination between different layers of government also appear to be an important obstacle in most countries. Finally, cooperation at the local level between different service providers and local authorities was reported one specific aspect that needs to be strengthened.

The Peer Review also showed that there are positive approaches and practices to address these challenges effectively. In Ghent, a taskforce 'No child on the streets' was established and inter-institutional working groups were established where local actors work together to solve the complex issue of child and family homelessness in a comprehensive way. Another example from **Portugal** concerns the involvement of and close collaboration between different policy areas and agencies in the preparation of a

new national strategy on homelessness. The strategy focussed on prevention (mainly through information and awareness raising on the issue of homelessness), on strengthening intervention to promote the integration of homeless people, and on enhancing coordination, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at local and national levels (see Box 3.5).

Box 3.5 Portugal: National Homelessness Strategy for monitoring homelessness on a local level

In Portugal, the 'Intervention for Homeless People' began in 2009 with the implementation of the National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People 2009-2015. The National Strategy was implemented until 2013. The work at central level was interrupted in 2013 and it was re-launched again only in 2016 following a new Parliament Resolution that put homelessness among national priorities. In 2017, Portugal adopted its National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People (ENIPSSA) for the period 2017-2023 and reactivated the inter-institutional group made up of representatives from different ministries and other relevant stakeholders. The Portuguese national strategy is foreseen to be implemented in bi-annual action plans.

The strategy identifies three main areas of intervention: (1) prevention mainly through information and awareness raising of the issue of homelessness, (2) strengthened intervention to promote the integration of homeless people, and (3) follow-up through enhanced coordination, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

One strategic action point directly addresses the situation of at-risk families and aims to develop programmes that prioritise permanent housing solutions for them. Specific measures planned in this direction include more targeted and integrated local level support to identify families who are at risk of becoming homeless and creating referral circuits that enable the prevention of (recurrent) homelessness among this target group.

An additional element concerns the development and updating of risk indicators to be used for monitoring at the local level.

Source: Peer Country presentation

Strong political commitment and support, as the Portuguese example shows, are vital to develop a comprehensive policy framework to combat homelessness. At the same time, ensuring access to good quality housing and other social services at the local level is of equally great importance. The peer discussions also emphasised the need for integrated support services which require concentrated efforts in identifying and establishing common goals, bringing together different organisational cultures and streamlining knowledge among social workers.

3.5 Data collection to increase visibility at policy level of homeless children

Despite recent improvements in many Member States regarding data collection and statistics on homelessness, the Peer Review revealed that data on family homelessness is still patchy in most of the peer countries (CZ, LT, PT, RO); this is mainly explained by the absence of systematic and regular data collection and various data reliability issues.

Even where data exists, comparability across countries remains a major challenge due to the variety of collection methods and validation approaches used. **Denmark** for instance has a well-developed system for collecting data on homelessness through registers. Problems of cross-country comparability are further compounded by the fact that countries use different definitions of homelessness. ETHOS, which provides a

harmonised definition of different categories of homelessness, was highlighted as a good starting point towards developing comparable statistics in this regard. Its 'light' version, ETHOS Light, has the additional advantage of highlighting hidden forms of homeless situations, for example when families and children temporarily stay with families or friends (see Box 3.6).

Box 3.6 ETHOS and ETHOS Light

ETHOS, which stands for European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, was developed by FEANTSA. It provides a framework definition that enhances transnational exchange of policies and practices in the homelessness and housing exclusion area. ETHOS classifies living situations according to four main conceptual categories: Rooflessness, Houselessness, Insecure Housing and Inadequate Housing, which are then further divided into 13 operational categories.

ETHOS Light, developed by the same organisation, has a more pragmatic purpose. It offers a harmonised definition for the measurement of homelessness in data collection and statistics. It uses six operational categories corresponding to specific living situations:

- 1: Living rough
- 2-3: Living in houseless situations
- 4: Living in institutions
- 5: Living in non-conventional dwellings
- 6: Living temporarily with family and friends (due to lack of housing)

Source: FEANTSA

In the European context, the European Union Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey is the primary source for data on housing indicators. Among others, it collects information related to housing affordability (e.g. housing cost overburden), quality of housing (e.g. overcrowding) and housing deprivation. However, EU-SILC, like other European general population surveys, covers only people living in private households. Consequently, young people and families who live in collective households or institutions (e.g. shelters, residential accommodations) are excluded from the target population. A special EU-SILC ad-hoc module on housing difficulties, including questions on past experiences with homelessness and living in emergency or temporary accommodations, will be run by Eurostat in 2019 with results expected to be out in 2020.

Homelessness counts, which provide a snapshot of the homelessness situation, were also discussed. Usually organised at the city or local community level, they provide valuable information on the estimated number, key demographics and service needs of homeless people. In Brussels, a one-hour count involving hundreds of volunteers is conducted every second year on the first Monday of November to collect information on the number of rough sleepers. Data is also gathered on the number of people living in both official and illegal shelters and temporary accommodation, and interviews are conducted with clients of low-threshold day centres. It is organised by La Strada, an organisation working with homeless people based in Brussels. Similar counts were also mentioned in the case of some cities in the **Czech Republic**, while in **Romania** such counting exercise is carried out nationally on street children.

In terms of data needs, comparable statistics on evictions and more detailed child and family-specific data in European surveys and housing statistics were considered of great importance by the participants. These would not only enable more in-depth comparisons across countries but would also be necessary to get a better picture of the particular living situations of children. The peer discussion reiterated that more must be done to ensure the visibility of children in data collection and statistics on homelessness as this is crucial for the evaluation and monitoring of related policies as well as for the

development of more child-sensitive measures and programmes to combat child homelessness.

4 Lessons learned and priorities for the future

The Peer Review provided participants with the opportunity to discuss challenges and approaches to tackle homelessness among children and their families and to derive some useful policy suggestions focusing on five key policy elements (prevention; child-friendly shelters and support; holistic housing allocation systems; local governance and coordination; visibility of children in data collection) that are considered crucial for an effective child homelessness strategy.

The research and the subsequent report of the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner offers a good example for countries where no similar initiatives exist. It also sets the bar relatively high both in terms of the ground-breaking research and comprehensive approach, and its dedication to bring forward a positive policy change in the living situation of homeless children.

As the Peer Review showed, there is still much to be done to increase the visibility of child homelessness in research and especially in national policies. There is also an obvious gap between policy declarations and practice. Nowhere is this more visible than in the commitment to protect children's right to a safe and nurturing living environment.

Ensuring that no child is left without a proper home should be a top priority at the policy level, also making sure that sufficient resources are devoted to implementation and monitoring. Consideration should be given to develop overarching policies that involve coordination of different policy areas. Given the complex and intertwined problem of child homelessness, policy initiatives that foster inter-agency cooperation in order to provide a more holistic service to those in need of support are essential.

The Peer Review also pointed to the fact that tackling the underlying causes of child and family homelessness is easier when a safe and decent home has been secured. Housing-led approaches, such as Housing First, which help homeless families obtain affordable and quality permanent housing as soon as possible should therefore be prioritised.

