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Latvia

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**ESPN Thematic Report on
National Strategies to Fight
Homelessness and Housing
Exclusion**

Latvia

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Summary

There is no official definition of or typology for homelessness in the legislation of Latvia. Assessment of the data collected at the national level regarding the services provided to the homeless, and the number of clients who have used these services, shows that two categories of ETHOS Light are being used: category 1 (people living rough) and category 2 (people in emergency accommodation).

In 2017, 6,877 homeless people used the services of shelters and night shelters. According to administrative data, the number of homeless people who used shelter/night shelter services during the crisis and in the post-crisis period (2009-2017) increased significantly (almost four times). In Latvia, statistical data about homeless people are collected only for some socio-demographic indicators. About 80% of homeless people are men. A large part of the shelter/night shelter clients are people of pre-retirement age.

There are no national or regional strategies in Latvia that would outline the objectives and outcomes of homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE) policy specifically, or the development of housing policy generally. In all policy documents and legal acts, the homelessness problem is reduced to the provision of shelter/night shelter services. No policy measures providing for the transfer of homeless people from shelters to temporary accommodation – and later on to a permanent place of residence – have been introduced.

The adequacy of funding mechanisms to address HHE – including the allocation of funding for social housing, supporting people's access to housing and supporting non-housing solutions – is extremely low. Government spending on cash housing benefits for low-income households is very low. In Latvia, there is a rather limited range of state support instruments, in view of the exceedingly small size of public and municipal housing stock. Social housing makes up less than 1% of the housing stock. EU funding has not played a significant role in addressing HHE issues. Housing policy issues are not subject to systematic monitoring or evaluation.

Homeless people receive mainly low-intensity services, offering basic non-housing support and emergency accommodation. Emergency accommodation is provided by municipalities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or religious organisations, but ultimate responsibility for the provision (including funding) of shelters remains with the municipalities.

The main systemic factors that significantly restrict opportunities to provide effective and sustainable ways out of homelessness include the lack of a strategic approach, the shortage of housing stock, the unsatisfactory technical condition of the housing stock, and the inadequate public and municipal funding in providing housing.

The main weaknesses/gaps that hinder implementation of an effective HHE policy are the following: national and regional strategies for the reduction of homelessness are lacking; measures to address the homelessness problem are left entirely to the local authorities, and no state support is provided in this area; and there are no services providing for the transfer of homeless people to temporary accommodation, and later to a permanent place of residence.

The priorities for improving the way in which HHE issues are tackled are as follows: developing a uniform housing policy to meet housing needs, by increasing the supply of adequate and affordable housing; expanding the range of services to homeless people; increasing the state/local government material support in covering rental and utility payments and in developing targeted support to provide housing to the most vulnerable groups.

1 The nature and extent of homelessness and housing exclusion

In Latvia, there is no reference in any policy documents to a definition of ETHOS Light. There is no official (formal) definition of, or typology for, homelessness in Latvian legislation. There is no other 'definition' of a homeless person, except in Regulation No. 32 of the Cabinet of Ministers (Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2005b) where the scope of those persons being addressed corresponds to disadvantaged and homeless people (among others). In fact, only those individuals who do not have any declared domicile and who have used the services of night shelters or shelters are deemed to be homeless. Thus, the number of homeless people is likely to be higher than the officially available data.

In addition, neither legislation nor policy documents provide any interpretation at all of the concept of 'housing exclusion'.

Even though there is no definition of 'homelessness' in the policy documents and the legislation of Latvia, taking into consideration the data collated at the national level, the annual reports submitted by some local governments and assessments of the situation (for example, in Riga), it can be concluded that ETHOS Light definition 1 (people living rough) and definition 2 (people in emergency accommodation) (see Table A1 in the Annex) are applied. Information that could be attributed to a wider understanding of homelessness (other ETHOS Light definitions) is neither collected, researched nor regularly collated.

According to the yearly statistics on the provision of social services, in 2017 (the latest available data) 15 municipal shelters and night shelters in Latvia provided accommodation to 2,370 people; meanwhile, 4,507 people made use of shelter and night shelter services offered by other providers (19 NGOs and one private person). In total, services were provided to 6,877 homeless people (including 5,325 homeless persons in Riga). (See Table A2 in the Annex and Section 3.)

The Welfare Department of Riga City Council tries to keep records of those homeless people who do not use the night shelter or shelter services (people living rough); however, these data are very approximate. According to the information it has provided, there are about 50 homeless people in Riga in 2019 who stay in places that are not suitable for habitation (abandoned buildings, garages, staircases, barns, landfill sites, etc.) and who are monitored by the Mobile Team of the Riga Shelter (see Table A2).

According to the administrative data of the Ministry of Welfare on the number of clients using shelters/night shelters from the beginning of 2009 until the end of 2017, there is evidence of a significant increase in the number of homeless people who used these services (Ministry of Welfare, (2009-2017)). During the pre-crisis period, shelters and night shelters were used by a comparatively small number of homeless people. For example, in 2008 those services were used by 1,052 individuals.

During the crisis, the number of homeless people started to grow. Unfortunately, it continued to increase in the post-crisis period, too, except for in 2014 and 2015, when it declined slightly (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of homeless people using shelter/night shelter services in Latvia, 2009-2017

| 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1,766 | 4,654 | 5,138 | 6,478 | 6,556 | 5,426 | 5,501 | 6,660 | 6,877 |

Data source: Ministry of Welfare.

The significant increase in the number of homeless people can be linked to structural factors, such as the destructive influence of the crisis on the ability of the population to handle the loss of jobs; a deterioration in their material situation, resulting in their inability to repay mortgage loans, pay the rent, receive social housing in case of

problems or have adequate support to resolve any other housing issues. The critical shortage of affordable, safe and stable housing directly contributes to homelessness.

Besides that, homelessness is influenced by personal circumstances and relational problems as well. Social workers indicate such personal crises as divorce, domestic violence, addiction problems (mostly alcohol addiction) and health problems.

It must be noted that there have been no significant changes in Latvia over the past 10 years with regard to improving access to the housing market for the most vulnerable people. The private housing construction sector has been developed by private investors, and this housing is oriented towards the solvent part of the population. Researchers (SIA 'Grupa 93', 2014) point out that, even in Riga, most households have an average or slightly below-average income and can therefore only afford to purchase better housing with supportive lending.

There have been some reforms in the welfare system concerning state support for the financing of guaranteed minimum income and housing benefit. During the crisis years, the state supported local governments to cover the cost of guaranteed minimum income and housing benefit; however, as of 2013 state support was discontinued. It should also be mentioned that there has been no significant change in the nature or extent of homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE) service provision. For the most part, night shelters and shelters are viewed as the main services provided.

It is difficult to present an exhaustive description of the profile of the homeless population in Latvia, since statistical data are collected only for some socio-demographic indicators. At the national level, data are collated on the gender of the person who has used the shelter or night shelter services, as well as the number of children who have used these services.

During the period from 2009 to 2017 women constituted approximately 20% of the homeless population, and men about 80%.

There has been a significant decrease in the number of children (aged 0-17) who, according to the collated statistics, should be viewed as homeless. Between the beginning of 2009 and the end of 2017, the year in which shelter services were used by the largest number of children was 2011 (192 children: 131 boys and 61 girls); they constituted approximately 4% of the total number of homeless clients. In 2017, these services were used by 47 children (29 boys and 18 girls), constituting 0.7% of the total number of homeless clients. However, the fact that children must use the shelter services is disturbing. The decline in the number of children who have used shelter services can be explained by the fact that in the post-crisis period it has been policy at both national and local level to provide families with children with more support.

In addition to these data, information is also collected in Riga about the age of people using the shelter services. According to information from the Welfare Department of Riga City Council, the largest segment (30%) is made up of people aged 51-61; they are followed by the group aged 41-50 (24%) (see Table 2). Thus there are grounds to conclude that a large proportion of shelter/night shelter residents are people of pre-retirement age, which testifies to the difficulties that these people encounter in resolving their social situation, finding jobs and housing.

Table 2: Homeless clients of shelter/night shelter services in Riga, by age group (%)

| Age groups | 2013/2014 | 2014/2015 | 2015/2016 | 2016/2017 | 2017/2018 |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 18-30 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 8 |
| 31-40 | 19 | 18 | 17 | 18 | 17 |
| 41-50 | 26 | 25 | 25 | 26 | 24 |
| 51-61 | 31 | 31 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| 62-70 | 10 | 11 | 14 | 14 | 15 |
| 71+ | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Not indicated | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 |

Data source: Welfare Department of Riga City Council.

The annual reports (Welfare Department of Riga City Council, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) indicate that about 5% of shelter/night shelter clients have a medical certificate that includes a psychiatric assessment, or even disability status (a person with mental disorders). Additionally, around 12% of clients who cannot present any medical certificate show signs of mental disorders, according to the observations of social workers.

2 Relevant strategies and policies to tackle homelessness and housing exclusion

By ratifying the Revised European Social Charter of the Council of Europe, Latvia committed itself to ensuring implementation of the measures prescribed in paragraph 1 of article 31: 'everyone has the right to housing', which is designed to promote access to housing of an adequate standard. However, paragraph 2 of the same article – 'to prevent and reduce homelessness with a view to its gradual elimination' – and paragraph 3 of the same article – 'to make the price of housing accessible to those without adequate resources' – are not binding on Latvia (Law on Revised Social Charter, 2013).

At the same time, the national normative acts (e.g. Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, Law on Social Security, Law on Assistance in Solving Apartment Matters, and Law on Social Apartments and Social Housing) include housing among the basic needs of the population, prescribing the provision of social assistance and social services to the population, including to those without adequate resources to satisfy their basic needs.

There are no national or regional strategies in Latvia that would outline the objectives and outcomes for HHE specifically, or for the development of housing policy generally. There is no coherent and coordinated approach in policy planning to HHE. The lack of any housing policy planning document was mentioned as a significant obstacle to planning an effective housing policy and strategic solutions in the assessment presented back in 2009 (Lace, 2009); however, no progress has been observed in this matter, and the formulation of the basic guidelines for housing policy has been postponed several times now.

The policy planning documents in the housing sector mostly envisage addressing issues related to energy efficiency, heating supply and housing management. In the planning documents of specific sectors, HHE issues are seldom discussed – and then only in a fragmentary manner, either focusing on the development of specific types of support/mechanisms or addressing the accessibility of housing for particular target groups within the frame of the policy of one sector. For example, housing support for

groups of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion is planned only via a low-intensity support service¹ (Ministry of Welfare, 2014).

Housing-focused support for adults with mental disorders, for children and orphans in out-of-family care has been included as one of the elements of social services policy for ensuring deinstitutionalisation (Basic Guidelines for the Development of Social Services for 2014-2020) (Ministry of Welfare, 2013). In all policy documents and legal acts, the homelessness problem has been reduced to the provision of night shelter services. Policy measures providing for the transfer of homeless persons from shelters to temporary accommodation, and then on to a permanent place of residence, have not been introduced in Latvia.

The lack of a strategic approach and targeted policy measures/programmes to address HHE issues has also resulted in a lack of adequate funding. In Latvia, there is a rather limited range of state support instruments, in view of the exceedingly small size of public and municipal² housing stock and the limited financial resources of local governments to undertake the construction of new housing. The provision of assistance to the population in addressing housing issues has been established as an autonomous function of local governments (Law on Local Government, 1994). Local governments have been given the right to define the range of persons/groups of the population to be supported. As the financial possibilities of local governments vary considerably, so the funding opportunities for supporting people's access to housing also vary across local governments and regions.

Housing benefit is one of the mandatory social assistance benefits paid by local government. According to normative acts, local governments have the right to establish eligibility criteria, the benefit allocation procedure and the benefit amount. The average housing benefit in 2017 was €58³ per person per month, while the income poverty threshold for a single-person household was €367 (according to the EU definition of being at risk of poverty – Source: Eurostat, 2018 EU-SILC wave, 2017 income reference year). While on average half of local government social assistance expenditure is on housing benefit, only about a third of all needy persons/households receive it (Ministry of Welfare). Policy makers recognise that the differences in the amounts of housing benefit received and in the eligibility criteria place citizens in an unequal position when issues related to housing expenses are addressed. The different financial possibilities of local governments and the inadequate budgets allocated to social assistance and to addressing housing issues are the main reasons why the inhabitants of one municipality may receive significantly less support than the inhabitants of another municipality, even though they have the same income level and household composition. Moreover, they may not qualify

¹ Low-intensity support services are services which tend to offer basic support (e.g. a basic emergency shelter that provides a bed, food and access to other basic facilities) and access to a small amount of support-worker time (Pleace et al., 2018).

² 'Public housing' refers to housing financed/owned by the government (for example, long-term care institutions). 'Municipal housing' is housing financed/owned by local governments and rented to households. Finally, 'social housing' refers to housing owned/rented by municipalities and let to vulnerable households at an affordable rent.

³ Municipal monthly information on the provision of municipal social assistance and calculations of the Ministry of Welfare. It should be borne in mind that the Ministry of Welfare uses two methodologies for the calculation of average monthly housing benefit amounts:

- a) Operative monthly reports: an average of €58 per person per month that is acquired by adding up the average monthly amounts per person and dividing the said amount by 12.
- b) Annual reports: in 2017, it was €14.73 per month on average, calculated by dividing the amount of money spent by local governments during the 12 months by the total number of housing benefit recipients during the year (irrespective of whether the person has received the benefit for one, three or 12 months during the calendar year). The resulting figure shows the average benefit amount per person per year. Then it is again divided by 12 months, thus giving the average amount per person per month. For example, in 2017 local governments spent €16,570,182 on housing benefits and during the year the benefit was received by 93,738 persons: $16,570,182/93,738 = €176.77$ per person per year; $176.77/12 = €14.73$ per person per month on average.

for this support at all, if their particular local administration has not established their particular population group as eligible or as a priority group to receive support in addressing their housing issues.

The adequacy of funding mechanisms to address HHE, including the allocation of funding for capital expenditure, supporting people's access to housing and supporting non-housing solutions, is extremely low. Such inadequacy limits not only the lack of funding at a local level, but also the lack of state support to address HHE issues. Despite the existing legal framework aimed at providing state funding for capital expenditure and at supporting people's access to housing, no steps have been taken to ensure this support de facto. A support mechanism has been established in the country for the construction of residential housing, the renovation of residential housing that has not been rented out, the conversion of buildings into residential houses, the completion of newly built multi-apartment buildings (where construction has been suspended) and the purchase of separate apartments to help local governments fulfil their autonomous function of providing assistance to their population in addressing their housing issues (Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2005a). The terms for allocating a special-purpose grant from the national budget prescribe that 20-30% of the costs will be covered for the following: construction and/or reconstruction of social residential housing; construction of municipal rental housing; construction of rental housing jointly by local government and a business organisation; the purchase of separate apartments (not in excess of €8,537.23); conversion of buildings owned by the local government into residential housing; and completion of newly built multi-apartment buildings or renovation of residential houses or their parts that have not been rented out. However, no special-purpose grant from the national budget has been allocated to the above measures since 2009.

EU funding has not played a significant role in addressing HHE issues. It has been mainly used for improving the condition of buildings (energy efficiency improvement measures), and not for ensuring the accessibility of housing.

During the 2014-2020 programming period, co-funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is earmarked for improvement of the energy efficiency of residential buildings: namely, for the implementation of energy efficiency improvement measures for multi-apartment residential houses, as well as measures to apply 'smart' energy management and renewable energy resources (Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2016b). In general, the ERDF investments to develop the infrastructure for childcare services in a family environment and for independent living on the part of the disabled and their integration into society may be assessed as targeting a reduction in HHE problems. In particular, it envisages that by 13 December 2023, 390 places will have been established or upgraded within the framework of the deinstitutionalisation process to provide community-based social services for people with mental disorders; and an additional 223 places will have been created for childcare in a family environment. The amount allocated by the ERDF for the development of social infrastructure is €44,441,978; while the amount allocated by the national budget is €6,666,297 (Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2016a). However, the target groups and their coverage are quite limited; thus, these investments by the ERDF will not make any significant contribution to resolving HHE problems.

Housing policy issues are not subject to any systematic monitoring or evaluation. The lack of a quantified target has a direct impact on the absence of a monitoring mechanism at the national and regional level, and does not allow the effectiveness of the policy measures to be assessed.

The public and local government agencies involved in addressing housing policy issues collect and maintain data on their area of competence; however, it is unfortunately not possible to speak of any systematic monitoring or analysis of policy implementation. For example, the Ministry of Welfare collates and collects annual data on a regular basis on social services provided by local governments, on the allocated funding and on the recipients of services, including shelters and night shelters. However, it is not clear actually why these data are gathered, since the planning documents in the field of social

services do not set out any tasks related to addressing the problem of homelessness or housing exclusion issues. Likewise, the Ministry of Welfare has not identified any policy initiatives or initiated any discussion of the given issues on the political agenda. That said, the Ministry of Welfare's monthly data summary on social assistance, including housing benefit provided by local governments, has resulted in the formulation of proposals concerning the revision of housing benefit and the establishment of uniform criteria.

The Ministry of Economics, which is the ministry responsible for formulating housing policy, has collated and published annual data on the assistance provided by local governments to address housing issues. The attitude of the state is illustrated by the fact that in 2018, the Ministry of Economics ceased to gather even the incomplete data on the assistance provided by local governments to address housing issues (data that had been gathered over the period 2009-2017), on the grounds that it took a lot of effort to collect information from all local governments. The last available data are from 2016. Thus, information on the assistance provided by local governments to address housing issues is no longer available at the national level. The fact that the Ministry of Economics has failed to formulate any planning documents in the field of housing, and has been incapable of ensuring that complete and high-quality information is acquired from local governments on the assistance provided in addressing housing issues, confirms that there has been no targeted or systematic use of the data, and that no analysis of the situation has been undertaken at the policy planning level. It is possible that the above problems will be (partly) resolved by the new government, which has reaffirmed its commitment to addressing housing issues and to the cooperation project 'Housing Accessibility in Latvia' which was started by the Ministry of Welfare and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). During the project implementation period (from June 2019 until March 2020), OECD experts will help Latvia to identify households that need support in ensuring access to housing, and also to formulate proposals for a set of effective support mechanisms to ensure the accessibility of housing in Latvia, by transferring and adapting best practice followed abroad.

Since there are no national or regional strategies to address HHE in Latvia, there is no systematic use in the country of EU indicators on housing in policy planning, evaluation or monitoring.⁴

3 Analysis of the current patterns of service provision and challenges in implementing Latvia's responses to homelessness and housing exclusion

Low-intensity services, offering basic non-housing support and emergency accommodation, form the bulk of the homelessness service provision in Latvia. Homeless people are offered mostly shelter/night shelter services, in accordance with the requirements of regulatory acts (Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2017). Some facilities offer only basic humanitarian aid (shelter or night shelters, sometimes with a meal and sanitary facilities); others provide a wider spectrum of services, including support in social reintegration. Service providers are mostly located in the biggest cities. Data on this service show that the demand for shelters and night shelters is fully satisfied (Ministry of Welfare, 2009-2017).

Since it has the largest number of homeless people, the capital Riga offers a more extensive range of services. An action plan – Provision of Assistance to Homeless People in Unfavourable Weather Conditions in Riga – was adopted in 2007 (Riga City Council,

⁴ EU indicators on housing exclusion consist of the following: housing cost overburden, overcrowding, severe housing deprivation, and arrears on mortgage or rent payments. For the definitions and national values of these indicators (for all EU countries, as well as North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey), see Eurostat website: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

2007), and since then information about the assistance provided to homeless people has been collated during the period from October until April.

However, the action plan also follows the narrow understanding of homelessness (ETHOS Light categories 1 and 2). Thus, the services offered provide some support when a person is already homeless: certain services to ease his/her situation, in particular during the winter months.

Attention in Riga is focused on providing shelter/night shelter services. At shelters and night shelters, homeless people are provided with short-term shelter, hygiene services and meals, as well as counselling from a social worker.

In general, night shelter services in other cities are not provided to people suffering from alcohol intoxication; however, having analysed the seriousness of the situation in the capital, the Welfare Department of Riga City Council concluded a service agreement with the Latvian Red Cross on the 24-hour operation of one shelter/night shelter in Riga, as of May 2016, for people suffering from alcohol intoxication (the service was in part financed by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development).

Homeless people need to use shelters/night shelters for a protracted period of time; however, 'prolonged stays in emergency accommodation are not an integration solution, but a temporary stopgap in the absence of better alternatives ... The lack of coherent support over time makes it impossible for an individual to plan for the future' (Abbé Pierre Foundation and FEANTSA, 2019).

There is also a day centre of the Riga Shelter operating in Riga. This day centre (DC) offers people the chance to stay at the DC for a full workday (from 9.00 until 17.00) and services to develop various skills, including work skills. It provides other social rehabilitation services, too, including: meetings of support and self-help groups; services of family doctors at the primary healthcare level; showers (including the opportunity to use personal hygiene products); disinfection services; meals for clients participating in DC activities and performing co-participation duties; and laundry services. A person receives the DC services after an assessment of the person's individual needs and resources by a social worker. During the winter months of 2017/2018, DC services were provided to 88 individuals. To reduce the possibility of shelter/night shelter clients getting frostbite during the winter period, the DC also provides services on Saturdays, Sundays and over national holidays during the period from 1 November to 15 March.

In Riga, homeless people may receive social rehabilitation services. The number of places for homeless people in the social rehabilitation centre and the scope of the services provided have both increased since this service provision started in 2008. The social rehabilitation centre for homeless people (SRC) provides a set of activities aimed at developing social and work skills, enabling a person to regain his/her social status as an independent person, and to integrate into the labour market and society, according to the individual social rehabilitation plan developed for each client. In 2017, there were 72 places at the social rehabilitation centres. During 2017, the SRC service was provided to 162 people, of whom 44 individuals (27%) regained their social skills sufficiently to be able to lead an independent life, as a result of social rehabilitation (in 2016, the service was provided to 130 people, of whom 33 (25%) regained sufficient social skills to be able to lead an independent life) (Welfare Department of Riga City Council, 2018). These people no longer needed to use shelter/night shelter services.

In 2017, a new service was initiated. Social care beds (25 beds for women and 10 beds for men) were organised in gender-segregated sections at the Riga Shelter, for clients to use when short-term or long-term social care and institutional social rehabilitation are not necessary, but they do need a home care service. Since these people do not have any permanent place of residence, the care services for them are provided by the Riga Shelter.

In addition, one more new service started in Riga in 2017 – a boarding-house service with 20 places. People, including homeless people with self-care difficulties who are close

to requiring long-term social care in an institution, are provided with housing and social care services, while retaining the principles of an independent life. This enables clients to be moved from long-term social care institutions if their self-care needs are greater than can be provided at their place of residence, but still they do not require institutional social care. Thus, these people are capable of living in their own environment, in their own apartment, with the support of a social worker. In 2017, boarding-house services were provided to 28 people, of whom 21 individuals were homeless with care needs.

The city of Riga has several local-government financed soup kitchens, where the homeless (and other poor residents of Riga) can get a hot meal. The soup kitchens operate five days a week, providing up to 650 servings a day. In 2017, they served up a total of 126,400 co-financed meals (including support received from religious organisations and NGOs).

The Mobile Team (MT) for street social work with the homeless was established as a structural unit of the Riga Shelter at the end of 2007. The purpose of the MT is to provide information and support to the homeless. It cooperates with the Riga Municipal Police in identifying places where the homeless stay in Riga. The main tasks of the MT include travelling along various routes in Riga, identifying and regularly inspecting places where homeless people tend to stay, and starting to work with them. The mission of the MT includes analysing the situation, needs and problems of each client; informing people of possible support and of the options available for receiving it; motivating clients to address their social problems; and providing adequate individual support to the client. The goal of this work is to increase the trust of homeless people in MT staff. If there are no vacant places in a specific night shelter, if necessary the MT can transfer people to another night shelter that does have free places. During the week, it inspects all the suburbs (districts) of Riga.

According to the professionals at the Welfare Department of Riga City Council, the following urgent needs can be identified in the work with homeless people:

- In order to develop street social work and to provide assistance to a larger number of homeless people, it would be desirable to expand the operation of the Mobile Team, extending its working time on workdays from 8 to 10 hours during a 24-hour period, and from 11 to 12 hours in particularly unfavourable weather conditions and during all days off and national holidays.
- In view of the increase in the number of people suffering from alcohol intoxication who are provided with the shelter/night shelter service, during the winter period it is necessary to organise an additional shelter/night shelter service for intoxicated persons.
- To improve the effectiveness of the work of the shelter with people with mental disorders, the clients of a shelter should have access to consultations with a psychiatrist or psychotherapist – at least once a month these medical personnel should be available.
- It is necessary to develop the service of a family assistant (case manager) for those homeless people who have found housing, thus providing support and an individual approach to addressing the social problems that they face in starting an independent life.
- It is necessary to improve the effectiveness of the social work at the Riga Shelter, by planning the intensity of the social work in line with the motivation level of the client. For example, more-intensive social work should be undertaken with a better-motivated client who cooperates with the social worker and who wants to change his/her situation, while less-intensive work should be undertaken with a client who refuses to cooperate (Welfare Department of Riga City Council, 2018). However, this last recommendation is rather controversial, as this approach, if followed, would risk those clients who require more effort-consuming social work

over a longer period being left without the required support due to their lack of motivation.

It can be concluded that in Latvia, as in many other European countries, 'the public response is structured to deal with homelessness: seasonal management that responds to weather conditions, which undermines the need to adopt continuous and constant strategies in the fight against homelessness' (Abbé Pierre Foundation and FEANTSA, 2019: 17). The services offered (the emergency accommodation) for homeless people are a reactive response to homelessness (neither curative nor preventive), disorganised (without a strategy) and segmented (not continuous).

Emergency accommodation is provided by municipalities and NGOs, but ultimate responsibility for the provision of shelters remains with the municipalities.

Arrangements exist to allow someone from one municipality to stay in the emergency accommodation of another municipality, with the home municipality reimbursing the costs of the shelter.

Since 2003, night shelter services in Riga have been purchased from NGOs by the municipality. In 2018, Riga Municipality contracted night shelter services from five organisations (four NGOs and one private organisation), providing services in different locations in the city. In 2017, four organisations (NGOs and religious organisations) provided social rehabilitation services in Riga.

Soup kitchens in Riga are mainly run by different religious organisations. In the winter season of 2018, the soup kitchen services provided by four contracted organisations were co-financed by Riga Municipality.

One of the main roles of local government in Latvia is to fund and plan emergency accommodation services for homeless people. The main role of NGOs and religious organisations in relation to homeless people is to deliver different kinds of emergency accommodation services.

Mostly the services for homeless people that are provided by NGOs are financed, planned and coordinated by local authorities. But local authorities can also directly provide emergency accommodation services.

The effectiveness of existing services in preventing homelessness is limited in Latvia. The Law on Insolvency (article 148) provides the possibility of reaching agreement, so that a debtor may continue to live in their apartment: a natural person may reach agreement with the creditor during the insolvency process, so that the apartment/house, though signed over to the creditor, is not sold. If an apartment/house whose cadastral value does not exceed €142,287 is inhabited by the debtor, together with persons who are the debtor's dependants, and if this apartment/house is the declared place of residence of the debtor and the persons who reside with him/her and are his/her dependants, then the sale of the property by auction may be postponed for up to one year from the date of the commencement of the insolvency process, in order to enable the debtor to find another place of residence (Law on Insolvency).

Under the Law on Residential Tenancy, if a tenant owes more than three months' rent and payment for basic utilities, the owner has the right to evict the tenant and his/her family without providing alternative premises. The law identifies specific vulnerable groups who, in case of eviction, must be provided with other accommodation by the local government after a court judgement on eviction becomes effective. These target groups include people on low income who have reached retirement age or are incapable of work due to disability; people who live with at least one underage dependant; poor people who have reached retirement age; and poor people who are incapable of work due to a disability (Law On Residential Tenancy). Similarly, local governments have the right to provide additional support to prevent eviction. Some local governments provide material support for the repayment of debts related to maintenance of the housing (utility payments). Unfortunately, there is no information available on the actual number of

people evicted for rent arrears or on the number who receive the necessary support from local government.

To assess the situation in formal terms, there is a *de jure* legal mechanism and support instruments to prevent eviction; however, the differences in the support provided by local governments to prevent HHE prevent any assessment of the effectiveness of the existing mechanisms and services, because the scope of the support provided varies between local governments.

Given the inadequacy of the municipal housing stock, the lack of temporary housing is a significant constraint in providing housing to inhabitants in various crisis situations, when short-term solutions and rapid re-housing support are required.

Access to permanent accommodation solutions, particularly for low-income groups, remains a challenge in Latvia. The OECD has indicated that many low-income households are inadequately housed; many Latvians live in rented accommodation, which reduces their mobility; and social housing is scarce. Social housing makes up less than 1% of the housing stock. Unfortunately, the policy measures and support to address housing issues that have so far been implemented are insufficient to ensure affordable housing for low-income and medium-income households (OECD, 2017). Although the purpose of the Draft Law on Rent of Living Premises proposed by the government (reviewed by the Cabinet of Ministers on 3 May 2018) is to promote the accessibility of housing and the construction of rental apartment houses, the representatives of the Society for the Protection of Tenants in Denationalised Houses gave the draft law a negative assessment. In the Society's view, the new regulation has been formulated to protect the interests of landlords.

A significant problem is the inadequate municipal housing stock, which has essentially not been added to/supplemented since the restoration of the independence of Latvia (1991), due to lack of funds. The internal migration of the population is obstructed by the high rental costs in the private sector, as the housing stock at the disposal of local governments constitutes only a small proportion in percentage terms. On 1 April 2018, the vacant local-government housing stock consisted of 3,286 units; however, only 1,046 of these were fit for habitation (i.e. two thirds are not). With the exception of a few towns, local governments by and large are not expanding their housing stock or actively improving its condition (Ombudsperson of the Republic of Latvia, 2018). As of 1 April 2018, there were 7,215 persons (families) on the housing waiting list in municipalities. Given the limited housing stock of local governments, the waiting lists for local-authority housing can be long – up to a decade. During this period, inhabitants have actually no access to housing. The Ombudsperson's report emphasises the priority issues that need to be addressed by local governments: namely, they must earmark funds for the development of the housing stock – in particular, promoting the accessibility of social housing for the most vulnerable groups of the population.

As mentioned in the OECD's Economic Survey of Latvia,

government spending on social housing and on cash housing benefits for low-income households are among the lowest in the OECD. Support for low-income households to improve access to quality housing only cover a small share of the low- and middle-income population. Waiting lists for housing at subsidised rates are often long, especially in high demand areas as the Riga metropolitan area. Cash-benefits to help low-income households pay rent in the private market would not be effective for as long as the private rented housing market is not well developed. In the near term, social housing should therefore be the preferred option to improve access to housing for low-income households. (OECD, 2017)

When assessing the effectiveness of the existing responses in providing access to permanent accommodation solutions, it ought to be mentioned that homeless people encounter far more restrictions than other groups of the population. One of the conditions for receiving social assistance and social services from the local government (except shelters and night shelters) is to have a declared place of residence in the

administrative territory of the local government. Arranging a declared place of residence is left entirely to the discretion of homeless people (as their personal problem); there are no support mechanisms at the national or local government level to help them.

The representatives of Riga local government who were interviewed⁵ indicated that in Latvia, the Housing First model and the provision of permanent housing solutions for homeless people cannot be implemented for several reasons. First, the inadequate housing stock and the social housing stock of local governments restrict the options for providing housing to this target group. The long waiting lists for municipal housing essentially deny the homeless the opportunity of receiving municipal housing even in the medium term. In practice, the only available solution is night shelters and shelters, which are only emergency solutions. Secondly, a significant obstacle to providing housing is the underdeveloped rental market. Since in neither the local government sector nor the private sector are there any state support mechanisms (co-funding) to develop the rental market that would allow housing to be made more accessible to those groups of the population that are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, then in reality the only people who stand to gain from development of the private rental market and the construction of new housing are those on relatively high incomes.

Homeless people are provided mostly with emergency support – the services of shelters and night shelters. Although night shelters and day centres offer access to a social worker and/or a shelter employee who can provide information to homeless people about possible assistance and opportunities to receive support, this cannot be regarded as comprehensive and flexible support according to people's needs. The provision of such consultations (which are mostly restricted to the transfer of information) is, in essence, a passive strategy. The representatives of local governments interviewed also recognised that further possibilities of using support depend largely on the motivation and interest of a person in changing his/her situation.

Some shelters, night shelters, the social rehabilitation and day centres for the homeless (in Riga) offer the services of a psychologist and a medical professional. However, it is the motivation and the wish of a homeless person to receive support that determines whether these options are utilised: the support is not provided in a systematic way to all homeless people. Unfortunately, none of the shelters and night shelters provide the services of a financial consultant, for example, or a support person (mentor). In the opinion of those specialists interviewed, the effectiveness of the available support depends primarily on a client's initiative and motivation (which tend to be very low in this particular group); the existing services and the mechanism for their provision are focused on low-intensity support.

To be eligible for social assistance, a person/household must acquire the status of a needy (poor) person (Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers, 2010). A family (individual) is recognised as poor if its average monthly income per family member has not exceeded €128.06 over the past three months. In many cases, people without a place of residence are not granted the status of a poor person, because they have not declared their place of residence in the administrative territory of a particular local authority; they are thus denied the possibility (or it is made considerably more difficult) of receiving municipal social assistance and social services.

The main systemic factors that should be mentioned as significantly restricting the possibilities of providing effective and sustainable ways out of homelessness include the lack of a strategic approach (strategy), the shortage of housing, the unsatisfactory condition of the housing stock, and the inadequate public and municipal funding for housing. These problems are the main causes of the problems identified in renewing and building the housing stock; of the insufficient development of the rental housing market; and of the long waiting lists for municipal and social housing.

⁵ Deputy Director of the Welfare Department of the Riga City Council and expert of Social Services on Riga City Council.

As mentioned above, a significant problem is the insufficient municipal housing stock, which has essentially not been added to/supplemented since the restoration of the independence of Latvia. Local government funds are inadequate to ensure accessibility of housing, while the rental housing stock developed by the private sector and the construction of new houses are focused on providing housing for solvent residents and inhabitants on relatively high incomes.

It remains important for Latvia to ensure that there is a clear allocation of resources to support the implementation of integrated strategies. In particular, ensuring the allocation of sufficient resources to support implementation at local level is essential. In this regard, the EU Structural Funds can play an increasingly important role in supporting efforts to address HHE' (Frazer and Marlier, 2009).

Unfortunately, there have been no important innovations in the provision of homelessness services in the past five years.

The main weaknesses/gaps in addressing homelessness are as follows:

- The reduction in homelessness is not among the national priorities, and no targeted policy measures are envisaged in any national policy document.
- At the local level, the approach to HHE issues depends on the understanding of local governments/social services, their level of knowledge, their attitude and their readiness to address homelessness problems.
- Low-intensity services, offering basic non-housing support and emergency accommodation, form the bulk of the homelessness service provision; there is little opportunity for homeless people to move on to temporary accommodation – and then later to a permanent place of residence.
- State support for local governments in constructing rental and social housing is inadequate, as there is no encouragement to develop long-term affordable rental homes for the most vulnerable groups and for needy people.

In the light of these weaknesses/gaps, the priorities for improvement are:

- to develop a uniform housing policy, paying particular attention to addressing the problem of insufficient social housing, and to developing affordable quality housing support mechanisms (state and local government support in building rental housing/state guaranteed support for groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion, etc.);
- to adopt the ETHOS Light classification as the basis for setting up a data-collection system;
- to expand considerably the range of services offered to the homeless, moving to a comprehensive range of social services to prevent homelessness;
- to increase state/local government material support to cover rental and utility payments for the most vulnerable groups; and
- to ensure that national and local governments earmark funds to develop the housing stock, and in particular to promote the accessibility of social housing for the most vulnerable groups of the population.

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Annex

Table A1: ETHOS Light categories defined as homeless in Latvia

| Operational category | | Living situation | | Definition | Defined as homeless in Latvia |
|----------------------|---|------------------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | People living rough | 1 | Public space/ external space | Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters | YES (but no definition) |
| 2 | People in emergency accommodation | 2 | Overnight shelters | People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation | YES (but no definition) |
| 3 | People living in accommodation for the homeless | 3 | Homeless hostels | Where the period of stay is time limited and no long-term housing is provided | NO (for 3.3, 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6) |
| | | 4 | Temporary accommodation | | |
| | | 5 | Transitional supported accommodation | | |
| | | 6 | Women's shelter or refuge accommodation | | |
| 4 | People living in institutions | 7 | Healthcare institutions | Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing available prior to release | NO (for 4.7 and 4.8) |
| | | 8 | Penal institutions | | |
| 5 | People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing | 9 | Mobile homes | Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence | NO (for 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11) |
| | | 10 | Non-conventional building | | |
| | | 11 | Temporary structures | | |
| 6 | Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing) | 12 | Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence | Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence | NO |

Table A2: Latest available data on the number of homeless in Latvia

| Operational category | | Living situation | | Most recent number | Period covered | Source |
|----------------------|---|------------------|---|------------------------------|----------------|---|
| 1 | People living rough | 1 | Public space/ external space | ~50 people in Riga | 2019 | Welfare Department of Riga City Council, data provided by the Mobile Team for street social work with the homeless |
| 2 | People in emergency accommodation | 2 | Overnight shelters | 6,877 people in Latvia | 2017 | Ministry of Welfare, Pārskati par sociālajiem pakalpojumiem un sociālo palīdzību novada/republikas pilsētas pašvaldībā 2017.gadā [Reports on social services and social assistance in the county/city municipality in year 2017]; http://lm.gov.lv/lv/publikacijas-petijumi-un-statistika/statistika/valsts-statistika-socialo-pakalpojumu-un-socialas-palidzibas-joma/gada-dati/0-par-2017-gadu |
| 3 | People living in accommodation for the homeless | 3 | Homeless hostels | No data | | |
| | | 4 | Temporary accommodation | | | |
| | | 5 | Transitional supported accommodation | | | |
| | | 6 | Women's shelter or refuge accommodation | | | |
| 4 | People living in institutions | 7 | Healthcare institutions | No data | | |
| | | 8 | Penal institutions | | | |
| 5 | People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing | 9 | Mobile homes | No data | | |
| | | 10 | Non-conventional building | | | |
| | | 11 | Temporary structures | | | |
| 6 | Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing) | 12 | Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence | No data | | |

