



Peer Review on "Access to social assistance and rights for homeless people"

3-4 October 2019, Brussels (Belgium)

Summary report

The Peer Review offered an opportunity to discuss the challenges in providing adequate social assistance to people experiencing homelessness and to identify and share policy approaches and good practices to improve their access to social benefits and ensure their right to social integration. The event was hosted by the Belgian Federal Public Service for Social Integration and brought together government representatives and national experts from Belgium (host country) and eight peer countries: Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Romania. Representatives of the European Commission as well as European and local NGOs also participated in the Peer Review. In the framework of this Peer Review, a study visit was organized to the Public Welfare Centre of Brussels, where social workers provided an overview of the procedures for homeless people to access social rights.

Adequate housing is an essential element of social inclusion and a human right. The right of people experiencing homelessness to housing and assistance is recognised in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The EPSR sets out 20 key principles and rights to promote upwards social convergence and support equal opportunities in EU Member States. Concretely, its Principle 19 addresses (a) access to quality social housing or housing assistance for those in need, (b) the right to assistance and protection against forced evictions, and (c) the provision of adequate shelter and support services for the homeless. Moreover, Principle 14 states that "Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services". The issue of homelessness and housing exclusion has also been increasingly monitored in the European Semester process, and various EU funding instruments (e.g. European Social Fund, Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived) are being mobilised to support Member States with the implementation of policies and initiatives to address homelessness.

In Belgium, the fight against homelessness has been one of the main priority areas in the *Federaal Plan Armoedebestrijding / Plan Fédéral de lutte contre la Pauvreté* (Federal Plan against Poverty) since 2007. Steps have also been taken to improve cooperation between the federal state, the regions and the communities to prevent and combat homelessness. The 2014 Cooperation Agreement on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion is of particular importance in this regard as it clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the Federal Government and regional and local authorities and also provides a common definition of homelessness. Furthermore, there has been increased attention to investing in housing-led approaches with Housing First initiatives being piloted and extended across the country.

Access to social assistance and social rights in Belgium is tied to the registration at an address. To improve the situation of people experiencing homelessness and facilitate

their access to social assistance, the system of the reference address was introduced in 1991. A reference address can be the address of another natural person, a non-profit organisation, or a Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW), which is the main public institution tasked with the provision of social assistance and social integration in each municipality. However, differences in the interpretation and implementation of the reference address on the local level mean that homeless people often face difficulties in taking-up social assistance and benefitting from various support services.

Building on the Belgian experience of the reference address, the Peer Review sought to discuss Member States' policies and promising practices to facilitate the access to social assistance and social rights for people experiencing homelessness, by focussing on the following key themes:

- Measures and processes to facilitate the take-up of social assistance and benefits and main challenges and success factors of models like the 'reference address'.
- Monitoring take-up rates of social assistance and benefits by people in a situation of homelessness - challenges to measure non-take-up and how to improve its monitoring.
- Ways in which Member States can better support people who are homeless in accessing minimum income benefits and social assistance and reach-out to homeless people.

Key policy messages from the Peer Review

The key learning messages from the peer review are summarised below:

- People experiencing homelessness face a number of barriers when it comes to accessing and claiming social benefits. They include administrative barriers such as understanding and completing complex application procedures, lack of information and access to administrative support and fulfilling requirements related to integration measures (e.g. obligation to accept job offers).
- Lack of resources such as the ability to navigate through the system, to provide detailed documentation or to travel to welfare offices may also deter from taking-up benefits. Because of the social stigma associated with homelessness, people in this situation are also more likely to experience discrimination and negative behaviour from welfare officials towards them, especially if the administration acts as a fraud controller.
- In addition to complex schemes, poor information and social and institutional barriers, a key factor hindering people in a situation of homelessness to access social assistance and social rights is the absence of having a fixed address. The Peer Review discussion showed that countries use different approaches to address this challenge, for instance through the use of a reference address which allows people to register their address at an NGO, the local welfare office or a natural person, as is the case in Belgium. Other practices from the peer countries include using a fictitious residence address or the post office as an address.
- Participants also discussed other possible solutions to facilitate access by using email address or other electronic forms of correspondence and making use of existing national population registers to identify and reach out to the homeless. While participants agreed that the reference or proxy address can serve as an important entry point to accessing social rights and benefits, there was also a general consensus that this is only a first step in the process of social integration.
- The Peer Review underlined the need for a more proactive approach in reaching

out to people in a situation of homelessness and thereby ensure better accessibility and higher take-up. Low-threshold services, simplified administrative procedures, and measures that tackle issues of discrimination, stigma and trust were considered especially important in this regard.

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities, improving coordination and creating opportunities for collaboration/co-creation and (rapid) information exchange between local welfare centres and housing and other social services are crucial to ease access for clients; in particular, for persons on the margins of benefit and service entitlement. The need for integrated services, single access points and individualised support, tailored to the specific needs of different groups of homeless service users were also highlighted. The discussion drew attention to geographic disparities in the availability and quality of services, especially in those Member States where service provision and administration is decentralised.
- Strengthening local governance and devoting sufficient resources are essential to provide services that can effectively respond to the needs of people experiencing homelessness. This should include not only adequate and efficient funding, but also the provision of trained personnel in public services and social work.
- The Peer Review reiterated the need for a preventive approach that addresses the main structural drivers of homelessness. This should entail, among others, ensuring an adequate minimum income, investing in affordable housing, as well as in secondary prevention measures, such as early detection, counselling and other forms of preventive support.
- The Peer Review discussions and the study visit demonstrated that housing-led approaches that help people in a situation of homelessness to obtain affordable permanent housing are increasingly being utilised (e.g. Housing First for young people and for Roma, implemented by the Public Welfare Centre of Brussels). Such innovative initiatives should be further encouraged.
- At the national and regional level, homelessness and housing policies should be integrated and aligned with existing strategies on social exclusion and poverty. Policies should also strive to promote participative approach as well as support evaluation and implementation. The peer review also strongly echoed the notion that political commitment and consensus-building is crucial in order to bring about change.
- Improved data collection and monitoring of take-up of social assistance by people in a situation of homelessness is of utmost importance for the scientific evaluation and effective monitoring of policies. As the peer review showed, systemic data collection is often lacking or incomplete. In particular, little information is available about hidden forms of homelessness.