Austria 2009

Counting the homeless – improving the basis for planning assistance

Short Report

ösb CONSULTING™   INSTEAD CEPS   ies institute for employment studies   APPLICA

Counting the homeless – improving the basis for planning assistance, was the theme of the Peer Review meeting that took place in Vienna, Austria on 12-13 November 2009. The City of Vienna and the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection hosted the event, which aimed to examine and share instruments for data collection, and strategies to counter homelessness across Europe. The participating peer countries were Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden. Two organisations - FEANTSA and Eurocities – took part on behalf of stakeholder groups. The European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities was also represented, and the Thematic Expert was Bill Edgar from European Housing Research Ltd.

1.   The policy under review

The Peer Review followed a different procedure from usual in that it did not focus on a specific example of good practice, but made room for a general debate on the challenges of "managing" or "ending" homelessness, and how to collect the data required for effective policy-making. It asked the question: How can the planning basis for assistance to the homeless be improved?

In Austria, the federal *Länder* are responsible for social welfare provisions, including assistance to the homeless. In Vienna, which has the dual status of region and municipality, the Vienna Social Fund (VSF) manages services for homeless people through the municipal housing association (Wiener Wohnen GmbH) and in conjunction with NGOs.

In recent years, the number and quality of places for homeless people has increased, and the range of alternatives has become wider. The offer includes outpatient facilities, such as daycare centres, and various forms of inpatient accommodation. Reintegrating the homeless is a priority, entailing better cooperation with health and other services. 'Socially supported accommodation' provides supervised flats for people no longer in a position to live on their own.

Vienna, with a population of 1.7 million, has the largest social housing sector of any city in Europe, with a stock of 220,000 dwellings. Yet despite the social housing programme, comprehensive subsidies and eviction prevention, the number of homeless people is rising.

Through the Peer Review, the host country wished to explore the reasons for this evolution, and the scope for better data collection. Only when a full understanding of the extent of the problem and its causes has been established can effective policies be identified and suitable strategies and measures developed.

2.   The key issues

Availability of data varies widely between EU countries, with some still at the early stages of collecting information. This makes it virtually impossible to compare homelessness in different Member States. One reoccurring question was which comes first: data collection to inform policy-making, or a strategy indicating what data are required?

Legal definitions of homelessness do not exist everywhere, or are not consistent. The FEANTSA ETHOS typology of homelessness and housing exclusion has been adopted as a basis for discussion in parts of Europe.

The MPHASIS project (2007-2009), funded by the European Commission, aims to improve monitoring capacity in 20 European countries through transnational exchange and action-oriented research: http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/

One of the prime challenges is that responsibility for housing policy is often devolved to a regional or municipal level, leading to different policies and approaches and a lack of national coordination.

There was widespread concern that the questions asked in the forthcoming 2011 census will not yield accurate information about homelessness.

In recent years, in Austria, increasing liberalisation of the housing market has loosened price controls, while at the same time the social housing stock is not growing.

Some participants warned that cost-benefit arguments in favour of housing the homeless to save expenditure on services such as health and security, risk stereotyping all homeless people as problem cases. It was concluded that rather than having 'special needs', most have the same needs as the rest of society.

Whereas well-crafted housing strategies exist in some Member States, they are not necessarily translated into action to end homelessness. However, even where national strategies do not exist, it is better to launch initiatives at a local level than to be "overwhelmed" by the problem.

Lessons, conclusions and recommendations

The debate produced a number of lessons and recommendations:

- Different EU countries are at different stages with regard to data collection and support for the homeless. Mapping service provision is a good place to start for those Member States that have little information.

- Highlighting the cost benefit of prevention can help to draw attention to the main issues at stake. For example, a 2008 study in England suggested savings of £21,000 on temporary accommodation and £54,500 on health, legal and other costs, over two years.

- More research is needed on specific groups such as young people, and on the extent of empty housing, how housing markets operate, and how the private rental sector can be harnessed to help counter homelessness. The growing privatisation of housing stock brings a need for better regulation of landlords, or social rental agencies (SRAs) as in Belgium.

- People may become homeless through the actions of others (landlords, institutions) of through their own action (or inaction), and groups with difficult lifestyles may need permanent support. Homelessness is often the result of failure in other service areas such as psychiatric care. Involuntary sharing with family or friends is one of the least understood phenomena, including overcrowding in ethnic communities.

- Evidence is necessary to establish service and quality standards, so there is a need for studies on outcomes and successful strategies. Efficient structures for planning and monitoring are required: for example Ireland has local planning forums.

- Forecasting is never 100% accurate. Yet there are models in existence for predicting housing support and community protection needs. Whereas case management takes place locally, sustainable centralised data coordination and analysis is vital to support policy-making, and can be outsourced e.g. to university research depts.

- We need to understand what information is needed, in order to develop mechanisms to acquire it. The MPHASIS website identifies core data.

- Norway and Denmark have developed SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). Lessons can be passed on to others. Programmes need a baseline and timescale (three years is too short).

- Organisational management: In Member States with many small local authorities it may be more cost-effective to focus on large urban centres. Some countries have NGO-led (bottom-up) information systems. While there are opportunities for the transfer of such systems, care is needed in transplanting existing systems into different contexts (see the Mphasis website research on Sweden and Hungary). Capacity building may be necessary to create structures and mechanisms for data collection at local level (Norway has a fund for capacity building). Service users must be involved.

- Information output must be appropriate for use. It is important not to overcomplicate efforts.

- Governance: should data collection be mandatory or voluntary? Where governments provide money for NGOs to offer services, compiling information could be a funding criterion, although this could be politically sensitive in some countries.

- Staff must be properly trained to carry out and understand the purpose of data collection.

At European level:

1. The EU must reinforce political will in Member States through a high-level mandate to the relevant actors to collect data. A clear message should go to the Spring Council 2010 on the need for robust information and monitoring systems.

2. Data should be used for defining strategy and achieving specific goals, and the EU can support this process. The existing European objective is broad (access to affordable and quality housing). However, progress is underway on questions such as measuring affordability and defining overcrowding. The Commission will continue talks with stakeholders on establishing baselines and the 2011 census. Eurostat will produce a set of indicators each year, published in the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion.

3. The EU does not have competency on homelessness or housing policy, and therefore is not yet in a position to draw up a Europe-wide strategy. However, the Commission will continue to support Member States.

Key message: homelessness is a complicated problem, but solutions are possible. A number of examples already exist of data collection systems working and showing benefits.