Peer Review on "Access to social assistance and rights for homeless people"
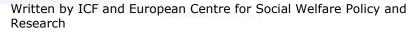
Belgium, 3-4 October 2019

Synthesis report

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

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1   Introduction

The Peer Review on 'Access to social assistance and rights for homeless people' took place on 3 and 4 October 2019 in Brussels, Belgium. It provided the opportunity to discuss the challenges in offering adequate social assistance to people in a situation of homelessness, as well as to identify and share policy approaches and good practices to improve their access to social benefits and to ensure their right to social inclusion.

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: namely Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Romania. Representatives of the European Commission and European and local NGOs also participated in the Peer Review.

During the Peer Review, participants discussed how Member States address the main challenges for people who have lost their home to access their social rights and what possibilities are available for them to access social assistance (including minimum income). The host country, Belgium, presented an overview of its 'Reference address system', a temporary registration in a Social Welfare Centre or at the address of a natural person, which provides an administrative anchorage to people experiencing homelessness. The system entitles them to all administrative and social benefits that require a registration in the population register. Participants from other Member States shared information about procedures available for people in a situation of homelessness within their national systems and highlighted similarities and differences with the Belgian system. A study visit was also organised to the Public Welfare Centre of Brussels, which is an essential stakeholder in the fight against homelessness and provides social assistance through specific psychological, social, financial, medical and administrative support. The social workers of the Public Welfare Centre shared with the Peer Review participants their experience of the procedures in place for people experiencing homelessness to access social rights.

1.1   Background

It is difficult to estimate the dimension of the phenomenon of homelessness in the EU due to a lack of data and official sources and the presence of different methodologies and definitions used across Member States for counting people who are homeless or living in inadequate or insecure dwellings. According to the recent European Social Policy Network (ESPN) study[1], since the availability and nature of data on homelessness vary widely across countries, it is not possible to determine the exact extent of homelessness in the EU. A study carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[2] in 2017, covering 23 Member States, estimated that people experiencing homelessness in these countries were more than 800 000. The data reported from the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) show that more than 700 000 people are in a situation of homelessness on a daily basis in the EU and more than 3 million people experience homelessness at least once every year. In general, despite the improvement of the labour market and the decreasing trend in poverty, homelessness has increased everywhere in the EU in the last decade, with the only exception of Finland, where homelessness has actually significantly decreased.

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[1] Baptista, I. and Marlier, E. (2019), "Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe: A study of national policies", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8243&furtherPubs=yes
[2] OECD (2017), *Affordable Housing Database OECD* - Social Policy Division – Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs

In the last decade, the profile of the homeless population has changed: as a recent study on poverty realised for the European Parliament[3] highlighted: 'homelessness is no longer the fate of middle-aged men with long-standing social problems, but also affects families, young people, and migrants. Lastly, children are amongst the hardest hit by the crisis in terms of poverty'. An important issue to take into consideration is also 'hidden homelessness', which refers to people living in forms of inadequate and insecure housing or temporary staying with acquaintances or relatives. This type of homelessness is difficult to identify and therefore, people in a situation of 'hidden homelessness' are usually excluded from the estimates. Another trend that is being observed across Europe is the increasing criminalisation of homelessness. In most Member States this happens at the local level. An extreme example is represented by Hungary, where vagrancy is a criminal offence punishable also with a prison sentence.

Despite minimum income schemes or other kinds of social benefits to fight poverty in most EU countries, benefits do not always reach their target groups. The so-called non-take-up is a widespread problem across Europe. According to Eurofound (2015), the reduction of non-take-up would contribute to achieving the Europe 2020 poverty and social exclusion targets and the objectives set out in the EU's Social Investment Package[4]. Moreover, while the increase of the take-up rate would raise public expenditure, it could prevent greater social and economic costs in the long run.

Almost all EU countries have some form of social assistance benefits. The main eligibility requirements applied in national systems include nationality/citizenship and/or residence, age, lack of financial resources, not having assets above a certain limit, and having exhausted rights to any other (social) benefits. The strictness of these criteria determines to what extent a scheme offers universal access. However, even when people are eligible for entitlements and services, there is evidence of non-take-up in most EU Member States.[5] For instance, it has been estimated that non-take-up of minimum income in the EU ranges from 20 % to 75 %[6] of the potential recipients. Non-take-up can be seen as a failure of the welfare state to provide the population in need with the minimum necessary resources. By not reaching the target group, social services miss their objective to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

2   The EU Policy context

The fight against poverty and social exclusion is an essential element of the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In particular, one of the objectives set out by the Strategy is to bring at least 20 million people out of poverty by 2020. Several EU initiatives have been promoted in recent years to tackle inequality, poverty and social exclusion, both in general terms and for specific targets groups. In 2013, the European Commission adopted a Staff Working Document on 'Confronting Homelessness in the European Union'[7], which underlines the need to tackle homelessness through comprehensive strategies based on prevention, housing-led approaches and a review of the regulations and practices on eviction. The

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[3] European Parliament (2016) *Poverty in the European Union: The crisis and its aftermath*, 2016
[4] Eurofound, 2015. Access to social benefits: Reducing non-take-up. Publication Office of the European Union. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2015/social-policies/access-to-social-benefits-reducing-non-take-up
[5] Eurofound, 2015. Access to social benefits: Reducing non-take-up. Publication Office of the European Union.
[6] EMIN, 2015. Toward adequate and accessible Minimum Income Schemes in Europe Analysis of Minimum Income Schemes and roadmaps in 30 countries participating in the EMIN project. http://www.armutskonferenz.at/files/emin_synthesis-report-2014_en.pdf
[7] European Commission (2013), Confronting Homelessness in the European Union, SWD (2013), Brussels. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9770&langId=en

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European Commission also recommended to Member States to reform their social protection system in order to provide effective, efficient and adequate social protection, as well as to ensure its accessibility to everyone lacking sufficient resources.[8] In June 2016, the Council adopted conclusions[9] to establish an integrated approach to combatting poverty and social exclusion. In this framework, it invited the European Commission to keep the prevention against poverty and social exclusion high on the agenda and to monitor the situation in this field in close cooperation with Member States.

The right to housing and assistance for the homeless is also included in the 20 key principles under the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)[10], launched in 2017, to support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in Member States. Specifically, Principle 14 sets out the 'right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life' to everyone lacking sufficient resources and effective access to enabling goods and services; Principle 19[11] makes specific reference to the provision of services to people experiencing homelessness in order to promote their social inclusion; and Principle 20[12] refers to the right of everyone to access essential services of good quality and states that 'support for access to such services shall be available for those in need'. The European Semester, the cycle of economic and fiscal policy coordination within the EU, is the main tool to monitor the implementation of the EPSR. It provides policy guidance to Member States and in the recent cycles, it has increasingly covered the issue of homelessness and housing exclusion. Also, the 2019 Joint Employment Report[13] that monitors Member States' performance in relation to the Social Scoreboard, set up in the context of the EPSR, describes issues and challenges related to homelessness and housing exclusion and reports the reforms undertaken by some Member States.

Another highly relevant instrument is the (revised) European Social Charter, which includes the right to access to some specific social rights: in particular Art.13 to social and medical assistance, Art. 14 to benefit from social welfare services, Art. 30 to protection against poverty and social exclusion and Art. 31 to housing. However, Art. 30 and Art. 31 have been ratified by a few Member States only.

The recent report published by ESPN, 'Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe'[14], shows that Member States are increasingly developing more comprehensive

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[8] European Commission, 2015. Proposed Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States.
[9] Council of European Union (2016), Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion: An integrated approach - Draft Council Conclusions. Available at: http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9273-2016-INIT/en/pdf
[10] The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en
[11] Principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights: "Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need; vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against eviction; and adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion."
[12] Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights: "Everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need."
[13] 'Draft Joint Employment Report from the Commission and the Council accompanying the Communication from the Commission on the Annual Growth Survey 2019'. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0761&from=EN
[14] Baptista, I. and Marlier, E. (2019), "Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe: A study of national policies", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8243&furtherPubs=yes

and integrated approaches at national, regional and/or local level, providing both housing and services, and shifting towards housing-led or 'Housing first' services. 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. The ESPN report recommends that countries ensure sufficient funding in their fight against homelessness and invest in sustainable housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness.

In the next years the principles of the Pillar are expected to play a central role in future EU initiatives: an EU Action Plan to fully implement the EPSR was announced by the president-elect of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen; the Commissioner-designate for Jobs, Nicolas Schmit, during his hearing at the Employment and Social Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, promised to take actions to address homelessness and increase social housing.

3   The State of Play in Belgium[15]

According to data compiled in the Belgian national ESPN report[16], there were 3 386 homeless individuals counted in the Brussels capital region in November 2017, which is a 30 % increase since 2014 (2 603). A similar count carried out in Flanders during January and February 2014 found that 711 adults and 53 children were staying in winter and emergency shelters, and 3 019 adults and 1 675 children were living in accommodation for homeless people and in emergency housing. The number of persons receiving an installation premium (paid to people who exit homelessness) in Belgium was up to 10 731 in 2016 from 1 680 in 2003.

While the fight against homelessness has been one of the main priority areas in the Belgian Federal Plan against Poverty (*Federaal Plan Armoedebestrijding / Plan Fédéral de lutte contre la Pauvreté*) since 2007, there exists no integrated homelessness strategy at the federal level. Housing policy remains the responsibility of the regions who made homelessness a key focus of their recent strategies and action plans (e.g. the first Flemish integrated action plan on homelessness 2017-2019, the third Flemish Action Plan on Poverty Reduction 2015-2019, and the 2015-2019 Plan for the fight against poverty in Wallonia). At the same time, important steps have been taken to improve cooperation between the federal state, the regions and the municipalities to prevent and combat homelessness. The 2014 cooperation agreement on homelessness and housing exclusion, adopted in May 2014, is of particular relevance as it clarified the roles and responsibilities of the federal government and regional and local authorities, and also provided a common definition of homelessness. Furthermore, there has been increased policy attention in Belgium to support and invest in various housing-led approaches and to further roll out the existing Housing First model.

3.1   The reference address system

The reference address was introduced in Belgium in 1991 as a way to ensure that persons lacking a fixed address as their main residence are able to register in the

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[15] This section relies also on the information provided by Host Country Discussion paper prepared by the Belgian authories in view of the Peer Review. For more information, see Commère M. , Deleenheer J., Dutrieux B., Leiva-Ovalle F., Morel T., Pasgang J., Tobac J., Van Capellen J. and C. Verschoore C., *No one left out. For an administrative system that includes the most excluded. Host Country Discussion Paper*, Belgium.

[16] Schepers, W. and Nicaise, I. (2019), "National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion - Belgium", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?advSearchKey=ESPN_hhe2019&mode=advancedSubmit&catId=22&doc_submit=&policyArea=0&policyAreaSub=0&country=0&year=0

national population registers. The registration entitles them to exercise their social and political rights (e.g. the right to vote), obtain documentation (e.g. valid identity card) receive postal mail, have access to basic services, and claim social benefits which require such registration. The reference address is thus an administrative address that makes it possible for people in a situation of homelessness to have an administrative anchorage and gain access to fundamental rights and social integration measures. The reference address, in its specific form for people who are homeless, can be the address of the Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW)or of a natural person. In practice, registering at the PCSW is the most common while having the reference address with another person is relatively rare.

To register a reference address at the PCSW the following conditions apply: (1) Being homeless [17] (2) not being registered in the population registers (ex-officio deletion), and (3) Having the right to social assistance and requesting for assistance from the PCSW.

After filing a request for the reference address at the PSCW, an assessment is carried out by social workers to check if the person fulfils all the conditions. If the reference address is granted, the client is then obliged to report to the PCSW and pick-up their mail every three months. When the person no longer meets the above conditions, the PCSW will inform the municipality, which will then terminate the registration at the reference address.

Box 1: The Public Centre for Social Welfare

The Public Centre for Social Welfare (in short PCSW) is the main administrative body responsible for granting social assistance and providing general social support in Belgium.

PWCSs operate at the local level and are present in each municipality. They provide a variety of support measures that include psychological, social, medical and administrative support as well as financial assistance available for persons experiencing homelessness such as the equipment grant and the social integration income grant. Since 1997, PCSWs can also grant reference address with the possibility for people without a home to register as their address the local PCSW.

PCSWs also have an important role in homelessness prevention. By law, they have to be informed of eviction procedures so that they can contact the client and offer support. They work in close collaboration with housing services and NGOs that provide temporary or emergency accommodation in the same locality. In addition, PCSWs are actively involved in housing first initiatives. For instance, the PCSW of Brussels is currently implementing a housing first project for young people and another for Roma families.

It is important to note that the reference address can only be granted to those with Belgian nationality or to foreign nationals who have a residence permit and are authorised to stay in Belgium.

3.2   Issues and challenges with the reference address

The host country paper identifies various challenges and uncertainties concerning the system of reference address and its current application in everyday practice. These mostly stem from lacking clarity in the current legislation.

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[17] See Box 2 for the PCSW definition of homelessness. It includes two elements: (1) An absence of housing: no place of residence or temporary residence ; (2) Lack of financial means

3.2.1 Territorial competence

It is not always clear which PSCW is responsible for administering the reference address. The PSCW that has territorial competence to grant the reference address and social welfare rights should be the one located in the municipality where the person's actual place of stay is at the time the request is made. However, in practice, PSCWs can refuse if they cannot ascertain whether the place of stay corresponds to their territory which is often the case for people experiencing homelessness, especially since they may move frequently from one place to another. If the PSCW, where the request was made, contests its competence, it can take up to 10 working days until a decision is made and the reference address can be granted.

3.2.2 Definition of homelessness and its interpretation

The definition of homelessness applied by the PSCWs (see Box 2) is rather vague and leaves much scope for interpretation. As a result, it can happen that a person considered homeless by one municipality or PSCW may not qualify as such in another. A review of case law[18] on the reference address by the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service (Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting/ Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale)found that the largest number of legal disputes (34 of the reviewed 100 legal cases) were related to the interpretation of the homelessness definition.[19] Differences in interpretation mostly refer to the two conditions contained in the definition: the lack of a fixed address and lack of sufficient means. For instance, there appears to be unclarity as to what extent a temporary stay with friends or family can be regarded as a fixed residence based on the current definition used. Given that such hidden forms of homelessness affect a large proportion of people in a homelessness situation, both the Federation of PSCW of Wallonia and the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network promote the adoption of a more inclusive definition based on the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS and ETHOS Light).[20]

Box 2: Definition of homelessness

Definition used by the PCSW to assess a person as homeless:

'Homeless refers to a person who does not have their own accommodation, is unable to obtain it by their own means and therefore has no place of residence, or resides temporarily in a shelter (or with a private individual) until accommodation is made available'[21]

Definition proposed by the Federation of PSCW of Wallonia:

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[18] Combat Poverty Service, 2018. *Case law on the reference-address.* Brussels.
Dutch version: www.armoedebestrijding.be/publications/refadresOCMW.pdf
French version: www.luttepauvrete.be/publications/adressrefPCSW.pdf
https://www.luttepauvrete.be/volante/ladresse-de-reference_annexe/
[19] The study was carried out during the period 2016-2017 and collected and analysed 100 legal decisions of Belgian labour courts and tribunals related to the reference address. The Combat Poverty Service (full name: Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service), responsible for the study, is an independent public institution that was established by the cooperation agreement between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions with the mandate to protect and oversee the human rights of people in poverty.
[20] https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion
[21] Commère M. , Deleenheer J., Dutrieux B., Leiva-Ovalle F., Morel T., Pasgang J., Tobac J., Van Capellen J. and C. Verschoore C., *No one left out. For an administrative system that includes the most excluded. Host Country Discussion Paper*, Belgium.

The definition is based on the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) which is also included in the Cooperation Agreement on homelessness and housing exclusion, adopted on 14 May 2014. The definition covers the following four categories:

1. Being homeless (sleeping rough)

2. Being excluded from housing (with a place to sleep but temporary, in institutions or shelters)

3. Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to precarious tenancies, eviction, domestic violence)

4. Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, unfit housing, extreme overcrowding).

Definition proposed by the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network:

The definition refers to the ETHOS Light typology that uses six categories corresponding to specific living situations including hidden forms of homelessness (i.e. category 6):

1. Living rough

2. Living in emergency accommodation

3. Living in accommodation for people experiencing homelessness

4. Living in institutions (in healthcare institutions, in penal institutions)

5. Living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing (mobile homes, non-conventional buildings, temporary structures)

6. Living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing).

3.2.3 Eligibility conditions and procedures

Eligibility conditions for the reference address are not administered uniformly across PSCWs and the procedure for registration is complicated and lengthy. A person can only be registered at a reference address with the PCSW if they are no longer registered in the population registers of a municipality. Because the administrative procedure for registering the reference address is shared between the municipality (responsible for the population registers) and the PSCW, the process is rather cumbersome and can take a long time. If the person's previous registration needs to be deleted from the population registers, it can further delay the process. Another set of challenges relates to the uneven way eligibility conditions for granting the reference address are applied by different PSCWs. Also, some PSCWs impose additional conditions not included in the law, for instance, that the person provides proof they are searching for accommodation or participates in addiction treatment.

3.2.4 Reference address with a natural person

There are legal uncertainties regarding the procedure for obtaining a reference address with a natural person. As mentioned before, people in a situation of homelessness can also register at a reference address with a natural person. In this case, they need to present a written consent of the natural person who has to commit to ensuring that all mail and administrative documents intended for the person in question are sent to their address. In reality, getting a reference address with a natural person is often problematic partly because of its misinterpretation as a main residence or cohabitation and because of fear of perceived negative consequences for the persons lending their address.

4   The access to social rights and services for people in a situation of homelessness

4.1   The situation in selected peer countries

Austria has established a similar system to the Belgian reference address, entailing 'the confirmation of main residence'. It aims at ensuring that people who lack permanent accommodation can access social security benefits. To get a confirmation of residence, one needs to reside in the community where the request is made and have to name a contact point, which can be a shelter, day centre, or service centre. Naming a natural person as a contact point is also an option, but it happens rarely. Since most homelessness services are provided by NGOs, they usually serve as the contact point. NGOs are rather flexible when it comes to the conditions people in a situation of homelessness have to fulfil to be registered at their address, but in general the person has to be an Austrian citizen (or equivalent) and must not be registered at another address. A common condition is that the person in a situation of homelessness has to accept a supervision agreement which -*inter alia*- establishes the number of times for maintaining contact with the NGO. This can vary from once a week to once a month, but there can be exceptions. As in Belgium, the registration in Austria is done by the municipalities who are responsible for handling the population registers and checking main residence. They generally work well with the NGOs and the registration requests submitted by NGOs are rarely refused.

Box 3: Vienna Service point for Homeless Persons of the Caritas Vienna

In Vienna, the so-called P7 or Service Point for Homeless Persons (*Wiener Service für Wohnunglose*) is the central point of contact and support centre for people experiencing homelessness. P7 works in cooperation with the Viennese Social Fund (*Fonds Soziales Wien*). The main task of P7 is to provide counselling and to find suitable accommodation (e.g. checking for free bed capacity in night shelters and emergency shelters and organising placement). P7 offers individualised support by trained social workers, information and advice on available sleeping and living places in Vienna, crisis intervention, assistance with financial and legal claims, help with applications for subsidised housing, etc. They work in close collaboration with the Vienna Homelessness Agency (*Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe*) and its facilities. P7 is also regularly consulted on housing-related issues and plays an important role in identifying and signalling structural problems in the social system.

In **Germany**, an official address is not a requirement for accessing social rights and claiming certain benefits such as the unemployment benefit (*Arbeitsförderung und Arbeitslosengeld*), the basic income support for job-seekers scheme (*Grundsicherung für Arbeitssuchende*) and the social assistance (*Sozialhilfe*). However, in the case of the statutory pension insurance scheme, an address is necessary for receiving notifications, but it can be any address where the person is reachable via mail (e.g. address of a shelter, family member or post box). In terms of benefit payments, unemployment benefit is received in cash at the Jobcentre which has to be collected on a daily basis by the person. To receive the basic income support for job-seekers and the pension benefit, payments can be made through a bank account (for the latter, payments can also be received in cash at a postal bank). Payment of the social assistance cash benefit is administered by the municipal social welfare offices. In addition to cash benefits, people in a homeless situation are eligible for various support measures provided by public authorities, depending on their needs, such as assistance with costs for accommodation or rent debts as well as personal support and counselling services. Other types of support include shelters, day-centres or help with filling application forms for social benefits.

Box 4: Improving access to care institutions and programmes for persons in situation of homelessness through the use of FEAD in Germany

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) includes people without a home or at risk of homelessness as a specific target group. Germany makes use of this EU funding scheme to improve homeless individuals' take-up of existing support programmes. During the first financing period (2015-2018), 19 projects wer funded that targeted people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Overall they reached 21 450 persons (85% of whom gained access to one or more local or regional support measures). For the second financing period, 13 additional projects are being implemented for the same target group.

In the **Czech Republic**, competence with regards to ensuring access to social rights for persons experiencing homelessness is split between the local employment services -that administer social assistance benefits- and the municipalities which are legally responsible for social services. However, it is mainly NGOs and faith-based organisations that are the major service providers for people experiencing homelessness at the local level. They offer emergency and overnight accommodation, prevention services, social work and other types on non-housing support. Specialised outreach programmes for people in a situation of homelessness were also put in place. To be granted social assistance, having a permanent address is necessary. For social assistance purposes, the last permanent address is used to establish at which employment office the application for social benefits should be filed and, if approved, the payments provided. Social workers and NGOs cooperate with the municipalities to help people in a situation of homelessness with registering a new address, but the registration procedure can take a long time (1-2 months).

Box 5: National strategy to address homelessness and housing exclusion in the Czech Republic

In 2013, the Czech Republic adopted a strategy called the 'Concept of Preventing and Tackling Homelessness Issues in the Czech Republic until 2020'. The strategy was prepared by an inter-ministerial group formed by ministry officials, representatives of NGOs and the academic community. The strategy is based on a coordinated and integrated approach that puts prevention and sustainable housing-led solutions at the centre of policy action. It formulates specific goals in particular policy areas, such as access to housing (e.g. more effective utilisation of existing measures regarding the systems of benefits), social services, access to healthcare (e.g. raising awareness of and tackling the stigma of homelessness in accessing healthcare services), awareness and cooperation (e.g. evidence-based policy and cooperation between different ministries and different levels of administration). So far no mechanisms or action plans were developed to monitor and evaluate the measures proposed in the strategy; therefore its impact cannot be properly assessed.[22]

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[22] Sirovatka, T., Jahoda, R. and Maly, I. (2019). "National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion - Czech Republic", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels. Available at:
https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?advSearchKey=ESPN_hhe2019&mode=advancedSubmit&catId=22&doc_submit=&policyArea=0&policyAreaSub=0&country=0&year=0

4.2 Challenges for people in a situation of homelessness to access social rights and services

The literature identifies several reasons for people not being able to access social rights and factors that determine the (non-) take-up of social benefits including both institutional barriers and social motives, namely:

- **Information barriers:** Entitled persons may abstain from taking-up benefits if they lack awareness or understanding of application procedures, or misperceive the benefit and have no, or limited, access to information and support. Social benefit schemes are often non-transparent or complex with poor information and materials that are not accessible to all and therefore limiting the capacity of individuals to realise and exercise their rights. Uncertainties regarding the application outcome may also contribute to non-take-up.

- **Administrative barriers:** Long waiting times, queuing and filling application forms can deter from take-up. Also, welfare agencies may require claimants to report detailed information or set conditions for participating in integration measures and check on their willingness to accept suitable offers for specific services or jobs. Lack of resources, such as the ability to navigate through the system, or to travel long distances to the welfare or employment office can also be a hurdle. This is especially the case for people living in rural areas where support and specific services for people experiencing homelessness are mostly absent and they are required to go to larger cities where such services tend to be concentrated.

- **Social barriers:** The overall negative perception of state support, and specifically of social assistance, and the social stigma associated with homelessness, can foster non-take-up. Welfare officials' behaviour towards claimants who are in a situation of homelessness can be perceived as humiliating or mistrusting, especially if the administration's approach is more about fraud control.

These barriers are common among the countries that participated in the Peer Review. The discussions also highlighted other challenges that hinder access to social rights and take-up of benefits and services among people experiencing homelessness. These challenges include:

- Insufficient funding for municipalities;
- Inadequate coordination between different levels of governance and between different authorities at the local level; and
- The lack of a personalised approach that takes into account the specific situation and needs of people who experience homelessness.

There also remain difficulties when it comes to outreach and follow-up. In addition, an environment of mistrust (e.g. chasing social fraud) and stigmatisation still prevails among public administrators and officials.

4.3 Existing measures for people in a situation of homelessness to ensure better accessibility of social rights and increase take-up

The requirement for an existing address to access social rights can pose a serious challenge for people in a homelessness situation when they want to take up benefits and services to which they are entitled. Countries have various approaches to this ranging from the use of a reference address (e.g. Belgium, Austria) to a fictitious residence address as is the case in Italy or Hungary, for example. In the UK, a proxy address can be used which follows the beneficiary regardless of the location. It connects people with support, allows the opening of a bank account, receiving mail, seeing a general medical practicner and obtaining entitlements. Also, Ireland is

currently experimenting with a post-office-based service, called the Address Point (i.e. the person can choose a post office to serve as their address and contact point).

To help people navigate through complex administrative rules and procedures for registering and applying for support, tailor-made assistance provided by trained case managers can offer a solution. There are also already existing good practices that aim to increase outreach. Examples include especially trained outreach teams (e.g. in the Netherlands) or mobile teams (e.g. in France). In several countries, early warning detection systems are in place which help to identify those at risk of homelessness and to reach out to them and offer support.

Low-threshold services and programmes that minimise the conditions of use for service-users can help to overcome the issue of non-take up due to the access threshold being too high or the conditions being too demanding on people in a situation of homelessnes.

Another way to facilitate the first contact is taking into account users' experience, their skills and expertise (i.e. via expert by experience). By involving them in designing and delivering service and support for persons experiencing homelessness, municipalities and NGOs can improve outreach and help to reduce stigma and discrimination.

Barriers to access	Existing measures to improve accessibility
Requirement for an address and complicated rules and procedures	Use of proxy address Tailor-made assistance/case management (to help people find their way through the system)
Low outreach	Specifically trained outreach teams Mobile teams Extended opening hours, no need for appointment, 24-hour helpline Early warning systems (detecting people in a crisis situation)
High access threshold	Low threshold services
Mistrust/stigma	Experts by experience, training / sensitisation of staff in administrations beyond social workers working with people in a situation of homelessness

5   Analysis of the effectiveness of the measures

Across Europe, there is a lack of systematic data collection and when it is carried out, it is generally incomplete. Moreover, assessments and evaluations of the results achieved by new measures introduced to support the access of people who have lost their home to social assistance and rights are not frequent. The development of a 'monitoring culture' and the improvement of data collection are crucial elements to support an evidence-based approach to designing successful measures. In order to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives, it is important to monitor the different aspects of homelessness and include both qualitative and quantitative criteria in the analysis.

Quantitative criteria take into consideration administrative data and quantitative surveys that provide information such as the number of:

- persons who get access to housing;
- people who access available services;
- nights spent in shelters; and
- days necessary to access the services (i.e. length of the procedure).

It is important to keep in mind that these types of data do not cover people experiencing homelessness who are not in touch with homelessness services, and not engaging with welfare, health or other publicly funded systems. On the other hand, **qualitative criteria** include aspects that cannot be properly described by quantitative data, such as the user/client satisfaction and lessons on how and why results are (or are not) achieved.

The assessment should also include the sustainability dimension and consider the impact of the measures in a long-term perspective. For this reason, it can be useful to conduct follow-up assessments to track the situation of the service-users after a certain period of time to analyse the changes/improvements. Evaluations should be as much as possible 'participative' and involve a broad range of stakeholders, including service users. In this context further steps in the development of indicators, monitoring the different dimensions of homelessness, may also represent a useful path for the improvement of support activities.

5.1   Success factors and shortcomings of the procedures

5.1.1 Main success factors

- **Reference/proxy addresses:** Providing homeless persons with reference addresses can be a tool for allowing persons without a permanent address to access social services and to have an administrative anchorage and receive their mails. This type of measure can be considered as a first step to overcome homelessness.

- **Outreach measures and low-threshold services**: Outreach measures seem to be effective in connecting people in a situation of homelessness with services and in reducing non-take-up. Moreover, it has been observed that low threshold services are an important first point of contact. The success of this approach relies on the competence of social workers and operators working in these services. It is also linked to the capacity to understand what 'happens in the street' and to offer to everybody, irrespective of their individual condition, every opportunity available on an equal footing with all others. Having a specifically trained team is one of the success factors of these types of measures (e.g. the Netherlands). Working with experts by experience has also been highlighted as a success factor.

- **Personalised approaches:** Considering that often people experiencing homelessness have different complex needs and use a wide range of services managed by different service providers, a personalised approach built around an individual service user can be crucial. A social worker acting as a 'case manager' can help the person in a situation of homelessness to navigate around the different services. For instance, a 'Housing First' approach is an example of a successful personalised approach that delivers services centred on understanding individual needs. By comparison to the Staircase approach, which supports people progressively through a series of temporary accommodations whilethey fulfill certain conditions (e.g. being sober), Housing First allows people who have lost their home to rapidly take back control of their life and fully access their entitlements, social assistance and social protection.

- **Prevention:** An approach based on prevention, which addresses the main structural drivers of homelessness has been identified as a success factor. This entails, among others, ensuring an adequate minimum income, investing in

affordable and in social housing as well as in secondary prevention measures such as early detection, debt counselling and other forms of preventive support.

5.1.2 Main shortcomings

- **Risk of stigmatisation:** Both the use of some types of services targeting people who have lost their home and the registration in the population registry through a fictitious residence address, especially if the names of the streets have fictitious names (Italy), can be a stigmatising experience for people experiencing homelessness.

- **Strict conditionalities:** Often measures that provide people in a situation of homelessness with a reference/proxy address require that they have a legal status (Belgium), thus limiting its use. In other countries support measures and benefits to which people experiencing homelessness are entitled come with strict requirements. For instance, in Germany, payments of unemployment benefit II (Arbeitslosengeld II, ALG II) are carried out in cash on a daily basis at the Jobcenter. While, in theory, cash payments ensure that people who have lost their home receive this minimum income, in practice it is a very cumbersome procedure. For example, it might be difficult for a person in a situation of homelessness to go to the Jobcenter every day, preventing them from claiming benefits on a daily basis. Another example is provided by the Netherlands, where in order to get a reference address, people in a situation of homelessness are required to stay in a shelter, even though they might have friends or family to stay with. Moreover, people experiencing homelessness often undergo controls over their finances, when trying to access benefits or services.

- **Complexity and length of the procedures:** Procedures are often complex to understand both for the users and for the staff of the administration, not always well trained and aware of the appropriate application of the rules.

- **Unsustainability:** Measures such as the reference or the proxy address are temporary. The people making use of these measures remain homeless and providing them with a (sustainable) housing solution should be a priority.

- **Arbitrariness:** Often processes to grant assistance to people living in inadequate dwellings rely on judgement calls by individual social workers. This can lead to the risk of overlooking or dismissing situations of need (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany).

- **Geographical disparities:** In Member States where service provision and administration are decentralised, there is a risk of geographic disparities in the availability and quality of services. Access seems to be particularly problematic in rural areas and small cities.

- **Online tools:** Online tools, such as online one-stop-shops, do not seem to be an appropriate entry point for people in a situation of homelessness.

5.2   Effectiveness of the measures

There are different ways to enhance the effectiveness of the measures for people experiencing homelessness. Good coordination among the actors involved in the implementation of measures (i.e. administrations, services providers and outreach services), with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities can contribute to achieving a more effective strategy. In line with the principle 'Nothing about us without us', the involvement of experts by experience (i.e. persons who have lived in a situation of social exclusion) is an important resource for public administrations to understand the needs of the people experiencing homelessness, as well as their difficulties and obstacles to access services and social rights. This can lead to better-targeted measures and higher effectiveness. Other stakeholders, such as civil society

organisations should be actively involved in the design of strategies for people living in inadequate dwellings, in order to build a wider consensus.

Service-providers should take part in the design of the concrete measures, in order to share their practical experience and to feel more ownership about the measures' implementation. Given the central role played by social workers and case-managers, capacity-building needs to be integrated as part of the measures.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the national strategies, it is useful to include benchmarks and to set clear targets, defined in advance. Also, at each measure-level, quantitative and qualitative monitoring should be set in order to be able to evaluate their outcomes. Also, the provision of higher financial incentives based on outcomes can stimulate service providers to achieve better results.

6   Conclusions

The Peer Review provided participants with the opportunity to discuss challenges and approaches to ensure people in homelessness situations have access to social benefits and support they are entitled to and are thus able to realise and exercise their social and fundamental rights.

As the Peer Review showed, there is still much to be done to make sure there is better accessibility of rights and entitlements for this vulnerable group. Policies should adopt a more proactive approach in reaching out through the use of low-threshold services, participatory approaches and individualised support, for example. Removing institutional barriers by simplifying administrative procedures and taking steps to combat discrimination and stigmatisation were regarded as key to facilitate access for people in a situation of homelessness.

Improved data collection and monitoring of take-up of social assistance by homeless people were considered by the participants of utmost importance for the scientific evaluation and effective monitoring of policies. However, systemic data collection is still often lacking, or incomplete, in many countries. In particular, there is little information available about hidden forms of homelessness situations, for instance when people temporarily stay with family or friends.

While the Belgian experience with the reference address provided the basis for the Peer Review, the discussions went much further, also addressing the underlying causes and structural drivers of homelessness. It reiterated the need for a preventive policy approach that tackles the structural problems, such as poverty, unemployment, the lack of affordable and social housing, inadequate housing policies and social and welfare benefits which are among the most important causes of homelessness. It also emphasised the salience of moving away from a treatment first or staircase approach, which remains the predominant approach to homelessness, towards a housing-led approach, such as the Housing First model.