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# International Learning as a Driver of Innovation in Local-Level Policy-Making: Achievements and Challenges from Peer Review of Local Homelessness Policies.

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› **Abstract\_** *Analysis of housing and homelessness policies commonly focuses on the policy-making process at the national level, albeit recognising an important role for local agencies in policy implementation. This paper examines drivers for distinct local (city) level policy-making, and the potential role for international ‘peer review’ of local policies in sharing changing practice and enhancing the effectiveness of policy development and service delivery. The analysis reviews the first five years of annual peer reviews of city homelessness policies in Europe, mediated through the HABITACT European Exchange Forum on local homelessness strategies (2010-2014). After setting the context of EU-wide and national-level developments on homelessness policy, the paper examines the policy and practice responses of the case study cities that were subject to peer review, comparing city-level policy-making with the international research evidence base to reveal factors driving innovation at the local level. The process of peer review of city-level homelessness models is assessed through a comparison of the five reviews to date (each comprising an initial discussion paper, peer review workshop and post-workshop report) and the reflections of participating cities on the follow-up process, in order to assess the impact for both host and peer cities. The analysis confirms both the substantive role for local policy-making in meeting the needs of homeless people and the added value of a structured peer review process to support international lesson-learning and assess realistic prospects for the transferability of local policy innovations to peer cities with different national policy frameworks.*

› **Keywords\_** *Homelessness, local policy-making, peer review processes, international lesson-learning*

## Introduction

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In the social field, local authorities in many countries are steered by the need to implement national social laws ensuring access to basic social services and benefits. However, times are changing for local social services working with homeless people. On the one hand, there are increasingly complex social problems to resolve and wider challenges linked to the housing market, migration and rising poverty (FEANTSA, 2012; HABITACT, 2013; 2014; EUKN, 2014). On the other hand, there is more demand for services in the context of budgets that have been reduced as a result of the economic crisis (HABITACT, 2013). Local authorities are under pressure, and innovation is increasingly seen as an important way out (Brandsen, 2013; European Commission, 2011; 2013; 2014a). The European Union launched a consultation process in July 2014 on the need for an EU urban agenda, which could, *inter alia*, support local authorities to better respond to complex urban realities (European Commission, 2014b). Local authorities are looking for new social policy models, new skills and new resources in order to find solutions to emerging challenges. It is no coincidence that the HABITACT forum of exchange on local homeless strategies was launched in 2009 by a core group of cities (Amsterdam, Athens, Dublin, Esch-sur-Alzette, Ghent, Odense, Madrid and Vitoria-Gasteiz), with coordination support from the European Federation of National Organisations working with Homeless People (FEANTSA). This forum now consists of a network of 80+ local civil servants keen to drive innovation and to find long-lasting solutions to homelessness in their communities. To this end, they use the HABITACT network in many ways.

One way for them to drive innovation is to organise annual peer reviews of homelessness policy and practice at city level. This draws on the PROGRESS<sup>1</sup> peer review method (used to compare national policies) in peer reviewing local-level policy-making, although without PROGRESS funding. The peer review essentially takes local policy as a starting point for European discussions between local authorities on what works and what doesn't when addressing homelessness, and is supported by the assessment of an independent expert. At the time of researching this paper, five peer reviews had been organised by HABITACT in cooperation with FEANTSA: Amsterdam 2010, Gothenburg 2011, Ghent 2012, Dublin 2013 and Athens 2014. This paper assesses the overall programme of peer reviews 2010-2014 in terms of three key research questions: What have been the key drivers of these peer reviews? What has been the impact of peer reviews at local level? And what are the key factors necessary for these peer reviews to lead to transfer of innovation?

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<sup>1</sup> PROGRESS is the European programme for employment and social solidarity, replaced in 2014 by the EaSI (European Employment and Social Innovation) programme

The research method is set out in the next section before a summary of the current 'state of play' in relation to the international evidence base on homelessness policy and practice. Our empirical findings are set out in sections on: the key drivers for HABITACT peer reviews; the impact of peer reviews at local level; and reflections on the factors required for transfer of innovation, before we draw our overall conclusions on the peer review process.

## Research Method

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The research approach adopted can be identified as an embedded or co-productive perspective, as both authors had some direct involvement in the peer review programme (one as administrator throughout and the other as independent expert for one review). The dual-authorship of the research combined access to research participants with independent distance from the programme. The analysis draws on data from an international evidence review and publicly available peer review documents (discussion papers and meeting reports), as well as new empirical data collected through telephone interviews with a sample of peer review hosts, peer participants<sup>2</sup> and four independent experts. These interviews were facilitated through FEANTSA and HABITACT, with participant consent agreed with each interviewee. The focus of the analysis was principally on lesson-learning for the network itself, as well as on identifying any more widely transferable findings. Telephone interviews were conducted in July and August 2014 with three groups of participants: peer review hosts (representatives from Amsterdam, Gothenburg, Ghent, Dublin and Athens), peer review independent experts, and peer review participants. Interview schedules for peer review hosts and guests focused on local policy, the peer review process and the post-peer review experience, including any recommendations for the process in the future. Interviews with peer review independent experts focused on the expert role and the overall peer review process. While the co-production participants were known to each other, the interview findings are reported anonymously, identifying key themes from the data.

Interview data was analysed in relation to the other data sources, including the peer review discussion papers and meeting reports. For each peer review, a discussion paper prepared by an independent expert was circulated to all participants approximately three weeks before the peer review meeting. These discussion papers examined the national and local policy context of the host, as well as the distinct

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<sup>2</sup> Most participants were formally part of the HABITACT network, though some participated in peer reviews without being part of the main network. Some participants had subsequently moved on from their functions as local policy-makers responsible for homelessness at the time of their initial participation.

homelessness policy, and set the local policy in a comparative European perspective, highlighting key factors to consider for transferability of policy to other contexts. Discussion papers also put forward a list of key questions to be considered during the peer review meeting. The discussion papers discussed how the timing of the peer review fit with the local policy cycle (e.g., if the peer review was organised at the beginning in order to gather evidence from other peers, in the middle to build momentum for policy implementation, or towards the end of the cycle to support other policy evaluations). Reports were all written after the peer review meetings as summaries of the key elements of peer discussions during the meeting. These reports gave further insight into the motivation of peer review hosts, the perspectives and questions of peers, emerging challenges in local contexts, and commonalities between different cities (e.g., in terms of their approach to homelessness). The independent expert reports and meeting reports were made publicly available on the HABITACT website at <http://www.habitact.eu/activity/peerreview>.

The analysis of these combined sources addressed the three research questions of this paper in terms of identifying key drivers of these local peer reviews, their impact at local level (both for hosts and peers), and the key factors necessary for peer review to lead to transfer of innovation. The analysis was utilised directly by HABITACT network members to participate in self-evaluation of the HABITACT peer review series so far, and to consider how to improve methods in order to make future transnational cooperation even more effective. The network decided to continue using peer review as a method, and the second phase of the peer review programme commenced in the city of Odense in Denmark in April 2015 (Busch-Geertsema, 2015). This paper facilitates the further dissemination of the achievements of, and continuing challenges for, international peer review of local homelessness policy to a wider international audience of researchers and practitioners.

## **Local Homelessness Policies in a Comparative European Perspective: State of Play**

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Political momentum on homelessness has been gradually building at EU level. In 2014, both the European Parliament and the EU Committee of the Regions called for a European homelessness strategy. These were effectively joint calls for EU support from local constituencies and authorities across Europe (European Committee of the Regions, 2014; European Parliament, 2014). After more than a decade of EU social policy-making (namely exchange of good practice and transnational peer reviews), national homelessness strategies began to multiply and the interconnection between European, national and local policy-making was increasingly present (Gosme, 2014).

Transnational peer reviews between national governments took place between 2004 and 2010 (PPMI/OSE, 2012) and were utilised to promote transfer of knowledge about homelessness policy, with results feeding into national policy reflection and into the EU policy process through the participation of European Commission officials (Gosme, 2014). A FEANTSA representative was present at each peer review related to homelessness and was able to contribute a European perspective and also a service-provider perspective to the discussions. The quality of national peer reviews varied in terms of preparation, the meetings themselves and follow-up actions taken (PPMI/OSE, 2012). However, the core peer review method was considered useful: taking one policy as a starting point for discussions, having an independent expert analyse the policy before the meeting, and then bringing together a select number of peers to discuss the policy in theory and practice (including site visits). These were the elements that were transposed to the local peer reviews in the HABITACT network.

FEANTSA's involvement in both EU social policy-making and in coordinating the HABITACT network was instrumental in the transposition of the peer review method to local policy-making, and local policy-makers were increasingly looking towards European and peer expertise to address their local challenges. This section draws on the international literature on homelessness policy and service provision to highlight some of the emerging challenges and trends in homeless policy-making, drawing on, and updating, a prior review by Anderson (2010).

The governance of homelessness services has received increased attention in relation to analysis of the changing nature of welfare provision and the identification of new ways of steering service provision, as well as direct state intervention. Governance analysis seeks to capture the increasingly complex structures of interaction between national and local government, and between government and non-government stakeholders. This paper adopts Benjaminsen *et al.*'s (2009) use of 'governance' in a broad sense of how homelessness policies are developed and services delivered in different countries and by whom. The HABITACT peer review process suggests a 'steering' role for the local authority, often combined with some direct service provision. The notion of local policy-making raises questions about the role of local leadership in policy development, as well as the extent to which local policy-makers can deliver new approaches without any strong leverage from the state. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Edgar *et al.* (1999) identified a Europe-wide recognition of the need to tackle homelessness and an increased role for non-government providers – rather than the State – for service delivery. While the emergence of a strong NGO sector might suggest national or nationally dispersed policy development, participation in peer review at city level suggests that the local State retains an important role in co-ordinating policy and developing a coherent strategy across its local area. The local policy-making model fits with other identified

trends in the governance of homelessness services across Europe, such as increased decentralisation and regional autonomy, and a role in enabling – rather than providing – for local authorities (Baptista, 2013; Benjaminsen, 2013; Boesveldt, 2015).

The need for effective policy and service outcomes in the face of rising homelessness put pressure on local policy-makers to develop programmes that move people out of homelessness as quickly as possible or, indeed, prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place. Homelessness research, then, became increasingly concerned with the relative effectiveness of different policies for providing housing and support services. Preventing homelessness requires a broad housing policy approach and a range of services to help people access social and privately rented housing, as well as service user support mechanisms to help sustain the housing situation and prevent eviction. During the 2000s, evidence from both Germany and England suggested that successful implementation of homelessness prevention policies contributed to overall reductions in homelessness (Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick, 2008). Homelessness prevention implies the aim of intervening as early as possible to avoid potential housing crises, and an emerging focus on prevention was evident in the emphasis on reducing numbers of evictions in the English, Norwegian and Swedish national homelessness strategies (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009).

In terms of resettlement interventions to move people out of homelessness, research evidence has broadly favoured a shift away from staged or ‘staircase’ models of resettlement (moving through different types of temporary accommodation with different levels of support) to ‘Housing First’ or housing-led models, where support for tenancy sustainment and independent living is provided in accommodation that offers full tenancy rights (Edgar *et al.*, 1999; Anderson, 2010). The staged model has been criticised as being too prescriptive in terms of assuming that all those experiencing homelessness need to make that type of transition, and temporary homeless hostels have been criticised in terms of restrictions to physical, social and legal space. Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin (2007, pp.72-3) argued that “basic temporary accommodation has often been legitimised by the sheer need of desperate people for physical shelter” (p.72), citing examples of new, large-scale hostels in Madrid and Paris and questioning why the provision of ‘low threshold/ high tolerance’ accommodation was often of a low standard. In contrast, success in reducing homelessness among families was demonstrated in the examples of Germany and Finland, where it was possible almost to eliminate the need for temporary accommodation (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007), and in Scotland, where Glasgow City Council closed large-scale hostels and resettled the mainly single residents in ordinary housing in the community, with support provided (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2010).

Most recently, the Housing First approach developed in New York by Pathways to Housing has emerged as a potentially effective model, placing homeless people that have addictions or other complex needs directly into permanent housing, without any prior requirement for treatment or lifestyle change (Pleace, 2008; Tsemberis, 2010). Culhane (2008) cited evidence to show that providing support in ordinary housing was better value than shelter provision in the US, and Atherton and McNaughton Nicholls (2008) concluded that initial European evidence pointed strongly to the capacity of homeless people with complex needs to maintain an ordinary tenancy, with appropriate support provided as needed. Subsequent Housing First evaluations in five EU cities also showed encouraging outcomes for tenancy sustainment (Busch-Geertsema, 2013). Housing First represents not only an example of emerging policy consensus around 'state of the art' intervention for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also illustrates how rigorous evaluation of local or city-level implementation can influence national and international policy shifts – especially where there is international collaboration across city-level initiatives.

Interventions that focus on putting the individual first and supporting personal pathways out of homelessness through tailored packages of housing and support have also emerged as leaders in the current state of play in responding to homelessness. The pathways approach adopted by Anderson (2010) focused on supporting routes out of homelessness, with an effective pathway being as short as reasonably possible and taking account of existing service provision as well as the needs and preferences of homeless individuals and households. Johnsen and Teixeira (2010) also concluded that transitional housing and Housing First were not mutually exclusive approaches. A flexible approach to utilising transitional housing may be a useful starting point for better integration of settled housing solutions into local contexts, where homelessness started to emerge as a challenge relatively recently and well-developed national or local policy responses are not yet in place. The more substantive question remains around how individual clients choose, or are steered into, different models of provision at the city level. The empowerment of homeless households to choose their pathways out of homelessness is a crucial point of interaction between structural constraints and the positive agency of individuals. The ability of homeless service users to defend their interests is often inhibited by the transitional nature of homelessness in addition to a lack of resources, continuity and stability (Anker, 2009), and the empowerment of homelessness service users remains underdeveloped in Europe, although evidence of increasing user involvement has been identified in Denmark, France, Hungary, the Netherlands and the UK (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010).

While the period 1990-2010 saw significant progress in understanding and tackling homelessness, with a growing research evidence base to support developing policy and practice, the HABITACT homelessness policy peer review process commenced in the wake of the crisis of neoliberalism that engulfed much of Europe in 2008, precipitating severe austerity programmes in many EU states, which would subsequently test the emerging consensus of the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2010, the EU's consensus conference on homelessness sought to take forward a policy agenda on ending homelessness, while the need to protect achievements to date (in terms of providing housing and support services to prevent and alleviate homelessness) became an increasingly critical task for practice and a focus for research. The 2010-2014 HABITACT peer review process offers some insight into the efforts of European cities to sustain and enhance local homelessness policy in a period of economic crisis and to harness international exchange in the continuing effort to avoid more protracted and damaging pathways for those experiencing homelessness.

## **Key Drivers of HABITACT Peer Reviews**

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As homelessness affirms itself as a policy field in its own right, local homeless policies (formal strategic documents, which set policy and service objectives to be met by a given long-term deadline) have multiplied, and they formed the basis for the HABITACT peer exchanges over the five-year period from 2010 to 2014. The commitment to this series of five HABITACT peer reviews was substantial, given that participants received only organizational support and expertise from the FEANTSA network and no financial support from EU programmes. Participating cities and other agencies attended peer review meetings at their own cost. In this section, we explore the reasons behind this level of motivation, drawing on interviews with city hosts, peers and independent experts, to understand what drove local policy-makers to organise and attend the peer reviews.

### ***Key facts about the peer reviews***

FEANTSA staff coordinated and facilitated the peer review process from beginning to end, liaising with the host city, nominating the independent expert with host city approval, developing the peer review agenda, and inviting peer cities to attend the review. Peer cities are invited to make co-presentations during the review, providing their perspective on key discussion points related to the policy model being reviewed. HABITACT peer reviews have so far focused on homelessness policy models in large and medium-sized local authorities that function in different welfare contexts and at different stages in their policy cycle. In 2010, Amsterdam hosted the first peer review as it was entering the second phase of its homelessness



strategy (Hermans, 2010). In 2011, Gothenburg hosted a peer review in order to take stock of existing approaches to homelessness, and has now published a five-year homelessness strategy (Gothenburg City, 2014). In 2012, Ghent organised a peer review that coincided with local elections but was also in the middle of the implementation of its 2011-2013 local social policy programme (Davelaar, 2012). In 2013, Dublin hosted a peer review towards the end of its homelessness policy cycle – and during the Irish presidency of the EU – and has subsequently entered a new policy phase with the launch of a new strategy to 2016 (Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, 2014). Finally, Athens welcomed local policy-makers in 2014, as it sought to develop a new social policy model in order to address the social consequences of the economic crisis (Anderson, 2014).

The peer reviews take place over one and a half working days. In the first half day, peers are introduced to the local policy, after which site visits are conducted to see the policy in practice. This is then followed by a full day of peer discussions on different aspects of the local model, with structured interventions from peers providing their own local perspective. The peer review meetings have been composed on average of 30 participants, including the host delegation, policy-makers from the ‘peer’ cities, European facilitators and some external guests. Attendance of peers varied over the years, from six peer cities in Amsterdam to fifteen in Ghent, with an average of between eight and ten peers. Overall, local policy-makers from eighteen European countries attended the peer reviews over the five years: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and UK. While this represented reasonable geographical distribution, local authorities from the Eastern and Southern parts of Europe were under-represented among participants. Moreover, no Eastern European local authority hosted a peer review in the first five-year phase.

Key discussion points for peer review meetings over the five years included: transition from staircase to Housing First policy models; cost-effectiveness of service delivery; moving towards person-centred policies; developing the evidence base for policy-making; the coordination role of local authorities; assessing results/policy outcomes; homelessness prevention; working with hard-to-reach groups, including migrants; housing and support packages; and access to housing. This list broadly reflects the policy trends referred to in the comparative review section above, and indicates some common challenges facing local policy-makers across Europe who are responsible for homelessness programmes in their communities.

### ***Key motivations for hosting a peer review***

In general, the peer review host expects to get access to 'Europe' (expertise, contacts, external point of view) and to trigger new local dynamics at home. Athens and Dublin were capital cities that had been particularly badly hit by the financial crisis, which resulted in strict constraints on the cities' use of public money. Hosting the peer review was a way for both local authorities to attract peers and other experts to their cities and to benefit from their combined know-how. This was all the more important in the case of Athens, which was in the process of developing a new policy model to address rising homelessness. The aim was to identify the state of play in current homeless policy across EU countries. The motivation was the same for the Gothenburg peer review in 2011, thanks to which new policy-makers in the local administration were able to take stock of existing approaches to homelessness, particularly through the peer co-presentations and discussions.

Peer review, then, provides a platform to bring external European points of view to the table. Hearing arguments made by a third party can help drive strategic change and get local stakeholders on board. During the Gothenburg 2011 peer review, ongoing discussions with local researchers about the effectiveness of the Swedish staircase approach meant that a European view on the matter was important to help find an agreement on the way forward. In the case of the Ghent peer review, policy-makers were keen to create a European context for debate about homelessness in their city, creating a collective moment of innovative thinking. In other cases, there was interest from peer review hosts in gaining expertise on specific issues such as: how to deal with housing market dynamics, the coordination/leadership role of the local authority, and the impact of migration (Amsterdam and Dublin). Hosting a European delegation at a peer review event provided access to expertise and an external point of view, but was also considered an important networking opportunity for the host delegation, as it ensured that all local homeless policy-makers and implementers could benefit from the HABITACT peer network of reference (not only the main HABITACT contact for the local authority). The HABITACT peer reviews were also used to mobilise local stakeholders (such as other local authority departments, community organisations, corporate stakeholders and local politicians). Local authorities took risks by opening themselves up to peer criticism in the presence of a European delegation, but there was a general consensus from hosts that it was important to be challenged on certain aspects of the local framework and system. Hosts were able both to share the successful experiences of their local policy and have open discussions about the challenges they face in implementing the policy, in the hope that this would provide input for internal discussions with local service providers.

### ***Key motivation for attending a peer review***

As discussed in the state of play review above, the governance of homelessness across Europe often involves local authorities delegating responsibilities to voluntary organisations, though in some cases this is changing. Local authorities want more say in how budgets are used and better results in addressing homelessness, especially in countries with national, binding policy targets on homelessness. Hence the need for expertise and the importance of the peer reviews. Peer participants are keen to see a local homeless policy in practice; most local authorities interviewed highlighted the importance of the site visits, meeting the policy ‘implementers’ – namely the service providers – and seeing how they interact with the policy-makers. The combination of peer (policy), independent expert (scientific) and local service provider (practice) input is considered by peers a helpful way to access expertise.

The five local policy models examined in HABITACT peer reviews attracted different types of peers, depending on their interest and welfare context. Some peers were interested in peer exchange on a specific policy model that was close to their own in welfare and housing terms; for instance, there is reinforced bilateral interaction and mutual interest between capital cities like Helsinki, Copenhagen, Dublin and Amsterdam. Even in exchanges between peers working in similar contexts, however, there are many differences, and this provides inspiration, which is key to driving innovation. Most peers are interested in discovering policy models that function in very different contexts to theirs, and are keen, therefore, to have the full diversity of EU welfare contexts present in peer reviews. For instance, the Athens 2014 peer review was considered interesting, inter alia, as a way of seeing how a local authority copes in a crisis and what the basic requirements are when faced with these difficulties.

This is a situation in which any local authority could potentially find itself. If funding is not an issue, then a local authority might continue to fund homeless services without thinking of changing them. But if budgets are reduced, they will look at other approaches and elements, such as the importance of the family (Athens) or prevention (Glasgow). So there is a need for ideas that go beyond classic social service provision and for complementing a legal framework with a policy-based framework, with more space for innovation. The peer reviews have been useful in this respect. The challenge for many policy-makers is to keep up a high level of support for homeless people, and peer reviews help by driving innovative thinking and flagging emerging trends. Attending a peer review is like looking at one’s reflection in the mirror: one meets people who are addressing similar challenges but in different ways and with new approaches to the problem. The dynamics of the peer review meeting extend beyond the meetings themselves, as peers get to know each other and build a European support network that can be called upon when new challenges emerge.

## Impact of Peer Reviews at Local Level

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From the interviews with policy-makers in the HABITACT network, it seems clear that the peer review process has had at least some impact. However, this impact can be subtle and local changes can happen on different levels – for example, in a change of mind-set, a change of discourse, a change of governance or a change of policy outlook. In this section, we examine the impact at three main levels: policy discourse and models; awareness of gaps or strengths in local policy; and local stakeholders.

### *First signs of impact on policy discourse/policy model*

Peer exchanges help to enlarge the concept of ‘social service’, linking it to other local policy areas such as urban planning, housing, environment, community and migration. Peer review enables policy-makers to link their work to these different realities and to try and change the model if need be. Despite being mainly local social services, the housing dimension of homelessness is often a particular challenge for local policy-makers across the HABITACT network. In some local authorities, housing is already part of the policy discourse; in others this is new territory and discussions during peer reviews are contributing to a situation where greater importance is given to housing solutions (HABITACT, 2010-2014). Moreover, the impact of the economic crisis and failing housing markets has contributed to a heightened perception of the housing system as a factor in homelessness. Documentation of peer reviews has been used by some local policy-makers in preparing local policy and strategic documents, and having an external perspective was reported as useful. The independent expert evaluations and outcomes of the peer evaluation that were recorded in meeting reports were useful to send to politicians when pushing through policy changes, notably in regard to the Housing First model. One drawback was that these documents were in English and therefore not always easy to use in local contexts where English is not a working language.

In some cases, the content of peer reviews was used to spread awareness of the topic of homelessness as a living policy field or to try to move away from a rigid institutional/legal framework towards a more policy-based model. Peer reviews provide a forum where the creation of such new policy models can be inspired, or a policy model reinvented to meet new challenges. The ETHOS typology of homelessness and housing exclusion was used as a common reference base across all five peer reviews to ensure that policy-makers fully grasped the cross-country comparisons. This typology is considered by most as a useful starting point to ensure that all peers are ‘speaking the same language’ when referring to homelessness or homeless people, and it can be used as a benchmark against which local policies are measured. The transfer of innovation in local policy can happen on different levels: from small ideas that can be integrated in every day work, to major concepts like Housing First that require more convincing and greater political

backing before they have an impact. Housing First is a major innovation in the homelessness field that was discussed in all five peer reviews. Some local policy-makers in the network were convinced that Housing First was a useful model for addressing chronic homelessness, and referred to the time needed to get local stakeholders and politicians on board. Innovation also works on more subtle levels; for example, one interviewee mentioned that a learning point from the Athens peer review in April 2014 was the importance of the family in addressing homelessness and the need to consider how best to accommodate this in interventions, such as in the provision of temporary accommodation (visiting hours for family, rules about overnight stays, etc). Such examples reinforced awareness of how individual policy-makers can have a long-lasting impact on city-wide discussions and on the types of services funded.

### ***Impact on awareness of gaps or strengths***

When a local authority hosts a peer review, it opens up its policy to peer criticism and to the perspective of an independent expert (who prepares a discussion paper ahead of the review). But there is an understanding from participants that homelessness programmes are very much influenced by local culture and societal perceptions, which vary hugely across the EU. Consequently, any criticism tends to be constructive. All hosts have stated that the peer review was a useful exercise, which yielded fruitful reflections for strategic policy planning. By opening up their policy to discussion, hosts also discovered gaps in their policy that had not been identified locally. The concentration of expertise from other European local authorities in a 1.5-day peer review and the consequent discussions often raised questions in the minds of hosts about their policy. In the case of the Athens peer review, discussions on Housing First were welcomed, though with a degree of recognition that this concept would be difficult to put into practice in the current welfare and housing context in Greece, and would require greater national government intervention. In the case of the Amsterdam peer review, the hosts were already trying to steer homelessness policy away from group housing towards independent flats for homeless people with health care needs. The need to move further in this direction was validated through interaction with participants from the Helsinki local authority.

Peer participants have also said that the peer reviews help them better understand the gaps and strengths of their own local policy. In some cases, participation enabled local policy-makers to assess the strength of their own local policy model or innovation. For instance, continued discussions about Housing First made it clear that challenges arose when adopting this model. Moreover, it emerged that Housing First is being implemented locally across Europe in many different ways, although most agreed that it was an innovative and effective policy. This confirmed the need to continue having debates with local stakeholders about Housing First, even in a local

authority like Odense, which had introduced Housing First three years previously. Peer review is also a way for policy-makers to check they are moving in the right direction, and to compare whether others are testing similar policy ideas. Rather than policy transfer, the tendency in this case is towards international policy benchmarking, where peer review allows policy-makers to understand how policies in other countries are evolving and how their own policy compares. In some cases, site visits have actually led to slight tensions, where delegates did not necessarily consider the host services particularly innovative in comparison to their own local context.

Peer reviews have raised questions about the impact of intra-EU migration on local social services. Migration as an issue was initially raised at the Amsterdam 2010 peer review as a new phenomenon, and it acquired increasing importance in discussions over the years (HABITACT, 2010-2014). These discussions – for example, best practice as presented in Dublin 2013 – have enabled some local policy-makers to better prepare for this challenge and to respond appropriately. Likewise, the Athens peer review showed policy-makers how innovation can be driven by necessity and urgency. But policy-makers can also use the peer reviews to study and plan ahead strategically for the future. Awareness of gaps in policy is key to this planning process.

Some policy-makers have said that attending peer reviews heightened their awareness of flaws in their local policy. The importance of public perception and support in addressing homelessness was a clear conclusion of the Athens peer review, as the mobilisation of public, community and corporate stakeholders was important in addressing the impact of the financial crisis, and the general public was mobilised through a new citizens' solidarity hub (Anderson, 2014). Local policy-makers realised during their discussions that, in some contexts, the media was helpful in shaping public opinion on homelessness, and in other contexts is rather a hindrance. The Amsterdam peer review highlighted the fact that clear policy objectives combined with pragmatism and flexibility were needed to address challenges, though this flexibility did not exist in all local policy contexts. Peer discussion led to increased awareness of the need for a common vision or goal for all local stakeholders, and to the idea that the partnership approach to homelessness (through local authorities and voluntary organisations), which exists in many parts of Europe, is essential in addressing homelessness, though it can also slow the process down considerably and place pressure on local policy-makers. Following the Athens peer review, the presence or absence of a national action plan on homelessness, and the effective implementation of any national plan, was a topic that provoked discussion and reflection. Austria has no such plan, and adopting one might provide political support for the local departments responsible for homelessness and ensure common goals for all stakeholders working to prevent and address homelessness. Site visits in other cities are also useful in identifying gaps in, or the

strengths of policies and their impact on staff and service users, and they can be much more effective in this way than a presentation. For example, the positive environment of a social restaurant in Dublin (with no security guards, a high staff-service user ratio, little violence, and good relations between staff and restaurant customers) helped to underscore the importance of designing and setting up a service environment that empowers both staff and users.

### *Impact on stakeholders*

Participating local policy-makers have reported that peer reviews contribute to energising them in their work, and they have been a key factor in building and strengthening the HABITACT network. The awareness that one's counterparts in other European cities are also trying to innovate is considered inspiring, and it is increasingly clear that cooperation and learning is possible even between local authorities that work in very different welfare and housing contexts. Bilateral visits have been organised between local policy-makers following peer reviews, and in the case of Amsterdam have led to investment in research on governance models in local authorities in different international contexts (Boesveldt, 2015). Hosting a peer review not only opens up the network to local authorities, but the English language outputs (discussion paper and meeting report) are made publicly available, meaning that information about the peer review host can be disseminated well beyond the HABITACT network. Local policy-makers who attend a peer review tend to present themselves differently than they would in their local context, where they are merely part of an institution (with budgetary, institutional and political constraints). In HABITACT peer reviews, they are individuals with responsibilities within their local communities and they have an opportunity to speak openly about the pros and cons of homelessness policy-making. They can be empowered as individual policy-makers, thus building an alliance of expertise and competence, which can in turn help justify and legitimise innovation in their local context.

Similarly, hosting a peer review with the attendance of local stakeholders can contribute to creating new dynamics locally, as spinoff networks or committees can be created or dialogue strengthened by peer review dynamics. For example, a local social housing programme was piloted in Athens in 2014 at around the same time that the peer review took place; a local social housing committee was set up a few months following the review, which was influenced on some levels by the presence of the international delegation in Athens for the peer review. The Gothenburg peer review brought local stakeholders closer, strengthened cooperation between social and housing departments, fostered closer relations with the other city districts, and led to better cooperation with local researchers and Gothenburg university (now part of a local authority-led working group on Housing First). The Ghent peer review was an opportunity to bring together all those involved in tackling homelessness

(including street workers, social rental agencies, those working in shelters and food distribution, etc.) in order to create a renewed common dynamic and vision for making a difference together. Some of the peer reviews were opened by local politicians, which has been useful in raising the profile of homelessness in local politics and raising the awareness of local politicians about the realities of homelessness policy dynamics. The Dublin peer review led, five months later, to a meeting of local European councillors from the cities of Utrecht, Odense, Gothenburg and Rimini to discuss homelessness policies. Some members of the HABITACT network considered that it would be useful to involve politicians in peer discussions, thereby enabling them also to acquire expertise and to integrate the homelessness issue into their general vision for their local community.

## **Key Factors for the Transfer of Innovation**

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The ongoing reflections of HABITACT network participants suggested that the city-level peer review process was having some impact and influence on driving innovation in local homelessness policy-making, but that this dimension of the approach could be strengthened further. On the basis of the research in this paper, it appears that a number key factors are required for international peer reviews to be real generators of local innovation.

### ***Common language***

The European typology of homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) developed by FEANTSA in 2005 provided an important basis for the comparison of policies and services across cities. In particular, the definitions helped to understand differing target groups for homelessness policies. In contrast, other important policy concepts such as Housing First and service user involvement have emerged with no clear European consensus on definitions. Housing First as a concept was gaining ground in Europe, as different cities launched Housing First pilots. However, international benchmarking was still difficult because the concept was interpreted and applied differently across local authorities.

### ***Practical focus***

Peer reviews took place in a political context, but they aimed, first and foremost, to provide policy-makers with practical tools. Local policy-makers were often close to the frontline of service delivery and needed to be responsive to emerging challenges. It was considered that the site visits undertaken added considerable value by demonstrating policy in practice, which helped to ensure that presentations made during the meetings had been fully understood and interpreted correctly. Peer reviews started out with a presentation of the overall homeless strategy of the



host city, but they also allowed for focus on specific points in the peer exchanges. Some interviewees believed that the practical benefits for participants could have been further enhanced through highlighting some specificities of the local policy model and taking a closer look at implementation (for example, budget allocation, accommodation allocation mechanisms, staff-client ratio, or existing social housing stock). Discussions at a more detailed implementation level may better facilitate transfer of policies and practice across cities in different countries.

### *Open mind-set*

Peer reviews tended to be attended by innovators and forward-thinkers who were keen to improve their local policies – whether looking for new policy models or seeking to benchmark their policy against others – but they also provided space for newcomers who were keen to join a European dynamic. Hence, participants had varying levels of knowledge about homelessness policy-making. Sensitivity to this dynamic was important to maximise benefit from the process and allow for effective peer exchange. There was some suggestion that peer reviews should be organised for clusters of local authorities with similar ambitions and welfare/housing contexts, but the overall consensus was that participants wished to continue being exposed to different local realities from across EU28.

### *Core knowledge of the host policy*

While levels of expertise across participants was varied, it was important to provide all participants with basic core knowledge about the local policy being reviewed. The discussion paper prepared by the independent expert prior to the peer review meeting was important in setting the context of discussions. Ideally, local homelessness policy should be developed on the basis of clear evidence about the causes and profiles of homelessness; the availability of such evidence would further strengthen the potential quality of the peer review. While much information was provided about the host city, there was generally less information available about other peer participants and the context in which they operated prior to the peer review meeting (welfare context, policy model, services, etc.). Such additional preparation would be useful for integration into the peer review – particularly for newcomers – and could also further facilitate policy transfer amongst peers.

### *Key people*

Peer reviews were generally aimed at policy-makers in local administrations, trying to provide them with a ‘safe place’ where they could speak openly without political repercussion or over-criticism. While this tended to work well for peer participants, the hosts were often under rather more pressure as they generally opened up the meeting to local stakeholders, not all of whom would necessarily agree with the direction of policy. While this may limit the openness of the host delegation in

discussions, it can also create positive dynamics and be the starting point for more structured cooperation between local organisations and policy-makers. It has also been suggested that including politicians in the process may be good both in increasing their expertise and because they may be in a better position than administrators to enact real change and innovation transfer in the local context.

## Conclusion

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This concluding section reflects on the main findings of the article in relation to the drivers and impact of the peer review process and factors influencing policy transfer. It also draws some broader conclusions on prospects for the subsequent phase of the HABITACT peer review. Although to an extent modelled on the EU national peer review exercise, city-level peer review had its own momentum, largely driven by a local desire for access to international knowledge and learning. This shift from the national to the local level reflected, at least partly, a real need for cities to respond to the changing nature and increasing levels of homelessness locally. It was a much more bottom-up process than the officially funded EU national reviews.

The peer review mechanism accelerated the process of assessing the current 'state of the art' and provided support for recommendations for policy change. The peer review process was found to improve networking at both local and international levels. In some cases participants were more able to effect actual policy change and to promote emerging initiatives such as Housing First. Participants were able to identify policy strengths and gaps that local scrutiny had failed to detect, and there were personal development benefits for individual participants. Policy transfer appeared to be nurtured through developing a common language for problem definition and analysis, ensuring a practical focus of the peer review process. The process facilitated openness to change and face-to-face discussion, building on core knowledge from prior discussion papers. It enabled key people to debate new ideas in a safe peer environment.

Notwithstanding the broadly positive self-assessment by HABITACT network participants and independent experts, a number of points of critique can be identified. The process facilitated international exchange of local policy-making but perhaps did not sufficiently incorporate the influence of the national level policy context on local implementation, or embrace national level governance issues. Such a process may not be effective for tackling high-level issues such as housing as a human right. There was divergence on what constituted good practice, and the policies presented by hosts were not always considered good practice by peers, though that said, the process takes local policy as a starting point for a constructively critical discussion. Innovation resulting from the process may be

very gradual and is often a case of 'soft' governance and exchanges, where very different local contexts influence each other. Achieving change in the post peer review period may be more challenging but the data collected was not substantive enough to draw any further conclusions. Additionally, the exclusive use of the English language may also have constrained knowledge exchange at the local level.

While cities from 18 of the 28 EU member states participated at some point in the process, cities from Southern and Eastern European countries were under-represented as participants and no Eastern European cities hosted a peer review. There is scope for the network to reflect on the reasons for this imbalance and how it might be addressed, for example by proactively encouraging an Eastern European peer review. Network participants need to be transparent in recognising the continuing diversity of experience across Europe with a view to negotiating an inclusive approach that is of value to cities with more limited resources.

Despite these shortcomings, it can be broadly concluded that initiatives such as the HABITACT peer review, with the support of a network of expertise like FEANTSA, make a valuable contribution to evidence-based policy transfer, although careful consideration needs to be given to appropriate methods for the peer review of city policies in different national contexts. While many of the challenges faced by local authorities across the EU28 in preventing and addressing homelessness are similar, cultural differences mean that approaches to the phenomenon vary. This can create both obstacles to and stimulus for the transfer of innovation.

With regards to the governance of homelessness, the peer review process demonstrated the centrality of the municipality as facilitator and co-ordinator across a range of active policy stakeholders and service providers. Although tensions did emerge in some peer review discussions, networking across sectors helped cities respond to the local consequences of the national and international context. As noted earlier, while the Anderson (2010) review acknowledged significant progress in understanding and tackling homelessness over the period 1990-2010, it was published just as the full extent of the post-2008 economic crisis and ensuing austerity programmes became evident. Despite the extreme crisis facing the city of Athens and Greece as a nation, the Athens 2014 homelessness peer review indicated that some continuing progress could be made in refining homelessness policy and practice (Anderson, 2014).

The HABITACT network was set to continue post-2014, building upon the conclusions of the review and adapting its format to meet the shifting needs of local policy-makers. While policies continue to differ hugely from one local authority to another, there were some signs of convergence in policy thinking. Moreover, common strands emerged from the five peer reviews that were useful for developing the subsequent peer review series (2015-2019). These included continued

support for a move away from emergency to long-term accommodation; the development of realistic objectives and indicators to measure progress in homelessness prevention and reduction; and increased efforts to unlock EU funding to support homelessness reduction through local services. Local authorities across Europe remain at different points in the development of homelessness policy models, with wealthier Central and Northern Europe tending to be further ahead in strategic thinking than Southern and Eastern Europe. However, despite inequalities in national and city-level resources for tackling homelessness, the HABITACT peer review process nevertheless provided a positive example of international networking across European city-level policy-makers.

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