DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE AND HOMELESS SERVICE PROVIDERS:

An analysis of benefits, challenges, and solutions

FEANTSA

European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless

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Introduction

Digital inclusion and specifically the access to information and communication technology for homeless people has always been a relevant issue for FEANTSA members. In recent times where a global health crisis has meant a transformation of most public (as well as private) services across the EU to an online format, this topic becomes even more pertinent for the membership of FEANTSA. This is adding to already existing concerns that digitalisation processes are leading to further exclusion of homeless individuals. At the same time, we see some new opportunities to work towards social inclusion with homeless people using digital tools and some emerging good practices.

Concerns are justified by a scarcity of research and political measures addressed specifically to digital inclusion of people in homelessness. Homeless service providers have addressed this issue as part of the support they offer to homeless people, either by facilitating access to equipment (e.g.: smartphones, laptops, internet sources) or by building digital skills among service users. Moving forward, and as the digitalisation of Europe gathers pace, the need for structural support for the digital inclusion of homeless people, and the services supporting them, becomes ever more evident.

The debate around digital inclusion of vulnerable groups is often focused on the elderly, low-income groups, and persons with disabilities, partly due to the size of these segments within the general population. While addressing the needs of these groups is crucial, it is also imperative to include homeless people when formulating and adopting digitalisation policies. Initiatives dealing with the digital inclusion of vulnerable groups most at risk of being left behind, such as homeless people or refugees (incl. studies, advocacy groups, national strategies, policy toolkits), are scarce[1] and organised independently and sporadically.

The objective of this policy paper is therefore to contribute to the debate on digital inclusion among marginalised groups, particularly regarding people experiencing homelessness. To this end we analyse the benefits and challenges of the digital transition for people in homelessness, as experienced in the field. In doing so, we provide evidence to policy makers and service providers on how digitalisation in our societies may negatively impact people in homelessness, as a consequence of a lack of policies and measures targeting this population. The data collected for this policy paper has also revealed how professionals from service providers use digital tools/skills in their work and their needs to develop these competences. Existing solutions implemented by service providers which could be regarded as good practices when developing future policies are presented. A discussion on how COVID-19 has influenced digital inclusion is also included in the paper. Finally, the policy paper formulates conclusions and recommendations to enhance digital inclusion for people experiencing

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1   GSMA (2019): *Accelerating digital inclusion for the underserved in high GDP markets*, p. 8 and p. 12

homelessness and to support homeless service providers in their digital development.

This policy paper builds on the work of the participation cluster at FEANTSA who has developed digital initiatives as part of their services provided to homeless people. Information was collected through desk research as well as through 11 interviews conducted with homeless service providers, app developers, and individuals with expertise in the 'tech for good' domain. People interviewed worked in several countries across Europe: Spain, France, the UK, Romania, the Czech Republic, Denmark, or Luxembourg. Annex 1 of the paper contains the names of the organisations consulted for this paper, to which we are grateful for having shared their experiences with us.

2
Background

In February 2020, the European Commission published the Communication on **'Shaping Europe's Digital Future'**[2], a document intended to set up the strategy for the European digital transition. The Commission presented a focus for the next five years on three key areas of the digital transition, with Europe playing the role of a global player in this issue. The key areas are: 1) technology that works for people; 2) a fair and competitive economy; and 3) an open, democratic, and sustainable society. The first area is the most relevant in terms of digital inclusion, and even for the success of the whole strategy. The communication notes in its conclusions that "The digital transformation **can only work if it works for all and not for only a few**. It will be a truly European project – a digital society based on European values and European rules".[3]

More recently, on the 9th of March 2021, a new Communication on the **'2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade'**[4] was adopted to translate the actions foreseen in the strategy 'Shaping Europe's Digital Future' into reality. From the eight principles formulated in the Compass, we would like to highlight the following ones to become due to their potential for people in homelessness:

▶ Universal Access to internet services.

▶ Universal digital education and skills for people to take an active part in society and in democratic processes.

▶ Accessible and human-centric digital public services and administration.

▶ Access to digital health services.

In its introductory remarks, the Commission states that the COVID-19 pandemic has radically increased our use of digital tools. However, the document notes that **'a new digital divide has also emerged** [...] between those who can fully benefit from [...] digital space with a full range of services, and those who cannot'. That is why, as stated in the Communication, the vision for 2030 is to fight against 'digital poverty' and achieve **'a digital society where no one is left behind**, to ensure that all citizens and businesses in Europe can leverage the digital transformation'.

Indeed, research shows that **digital exclusion and social exclusion are strongly intertwined**. A study commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust found that, among others, those who are socially excluded are less likely to use and benefit from the internet.

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2   European Commission (2020): *Shaping Europe's digital future* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

3   *Ibid.*

4   European Commission (2021): *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade*

And, in addition, digital exclusion may exacerbate existing social exclusion, given that ICT can help to tackle marginalisation[5].

This link between the use of digital tools and its socio-economic determinants is very well reflected in statistics. Data from Eurostat (2019)[6] shows that 97% of households in the highest-income quartile[7] had access to broadband internet compared to 74% of households in the lowest-income quartile. A similar pattern emerges for digital skills (data from EU-28, 2019)[8]: 33% of individuals in the lowest-income quartile had low overall digital skills, against 20% in the highest-income quartile. What is more, 26% of those in the lowest-income quartile could not have their digital skills assessed for the previous three months of the study, because they did not use internet at all, against 5% in the highest-income quartile. For individuals who fit into at least two of these categories: 55-74 years old, low education, and unemployed/retired/inactive, there were more respondents with low digital skills (37%) or whose skills were not assessed because they did not use internet in the previous 3 months of the study (35%), than those with basic or above basic digital skills (26%).

In 2011, the last year for which data is available, **an estimated 1% of the population in the EU-27 could access internet *only* at other places different from home, place of work and place of education**, e.g., public libraries, postal offices, public offices, community organisations, internet cafés and/or other people's houses[9]. Even if 1% may seem a low percentage, it represents around 5 million Europeans (in 2011, EU-27 population was almost 500 million),[10] which is approximately the population size of several Member States such as Ireland, Slovakia, or Finland.

The European Commission demonstrated awareness around these challenges and aims to overcome them. For example, the first cardinal point of the 2030 Compass, on digital skills, states that the acquisition of basic digital skills and lifelong learning for all EU citizens is imperative to benefit from an inclusive digital society. Another similar ambition is presented in the second cardinal point, on digital infrastructures: "Excellent and secure connectivity for everybody and everywhere in Europe is a prerequisite for a society in which every business and citizen can fully participate."[11] The commitments and considerations of EU institutions to tackle the digital divide are encouraging. This also confirms the claims that we need to actively formulate and fund measures to make the digital principles stated in the 2030 Compass a reality for every EU citizen, also for those living in destitution and homelessness.

To this end**, there is still room for more ambitious actions regarding digital inclusion**. For example, in its recent report[12] on the Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027, the European Parliament (EP) stressed the need to target socially excluded groups and to reach all education establishments,

5   C. Martin et al. (2016), cited in FEANTSA (2016-17): "*Digital inclusion and homelessness*" FEANTSA magazine: homeless in Europe, winter 2016-2017, p. 2

6   European Commission (2020): *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 3

7   In some statistics, Eurostat uses income as a criterion to distribute N in four equal groups. In this case, people are categorized by income as follows: from the lowest-registered income until half of the median (25%), from half of the median (25%) to the median (50%), from the median to a quarter above the median (75%), and from 75% to the highest-registered income

8   Eurostat (2019): *Individuals' level of digital skills.* Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database [Access: 9th June 2021]

9   Eurostat (2011): *Individuals – places of internet use.* Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database [Access: 9th June 2021]

10   Eurostat (2021): *Population change – Demographic balance and crude rates at national level.* Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_gind/default/table?lang=en [Access: 9th June 2021]

11   European Commission (2021), *op. Cit.*, note 4

12   European Parliament (2021): *Report on shaping digital education policy (2020/2135(INI))*

including non-formal establishments (see, for example, arts. 14, 16, 39, 41). On this point, art. 42 of the report is very illustrative:

[The European Parliament] Deplores, therefore, the continued absence of measures targeting lower-skilled adult learners and older people in the plan; stresses that this omission undermines the essential lifelong learning dimension of digital education and hampers efforts to ensure that everyone has essential life skills[13]

With this policy paper, FEANTSA aims to contribute to existing efforts on digital inclusion for the most vulnerable, as well as to support the European Commission and the European Parliament in ensuring that **no one is left behind** in the digital transformation of Europe. This decade will only truly be 'Europe's Digital Decade'[14] if every citizen in Europe, regardless of their economic or housing circumstances, can enjoy the same opportunities from the digital transition.

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13 *Ibid.*

14 European Commission (2021): *Europe's Digital Decade: Commission sets the course towards a digitally empowered Europe by 2030*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_983 [Access: 9th June 2021]

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Benefits and outcomes of digital inclusion

Access to ICT (Information and Communications Technology) is becoming increasingly important for vital tasks like searching for a job, a dwelling, health care, accessing social security and assistance and other services. Nowadays, most of the population would find it unthinkable to do such tasks without using the internet. For people experiencing homelessness, access to ICT is crucial also for keeping in touch with family, friends, social workers, or peer-support groups, to get information about where to eat and sleep; it can even, for some individuals, lead to finding a way out of homelessness.[15]

Evidence gathered through research and interviews with homeless service providers allows us to get an overview on what are the main benefits and outcomes of digital inclusion for homeless people. Starting from the level of basic needs, homeless people can benefit from available and updated **information about basic services** where they can get support, such as places to eat, to sleep or to shower, including map locations of these services. The following apps are examples identified in this area: 'Copenhelp' (Denmark), 'Mapa bez domova' (Czech Republic and Slovakia), 'Opvang Atlas' (Netherlands), 'On Barcelona', 'Surviving in Brussels' or 'Soliguide' (France) [16]. The organisation 'Podane ruce' developed an app in Brno (Czech Republic) for drug abusers who slept rough, with funding from Erasmus+. The app is an online

map showing points of interest identified by peer workers, users, or social workers, such as shelters, healthcare facilities, Wi-Fi hotspots, locations to eat, plug in devices, etc.

Facilitated contact with people is an identified benefit of being digitally included, since they can be reminded of appointments, or contacted by social workers or other professionals supporting them. This is especially relevant in the case of an emergency or a change in a service provider's program, as happened during COVID lockdown.

ICT tools can also allow for better access to **specialised services** for targeted groups. For example, in the case of asylum-seekers, the app 'Ankommen' helps them to navigate easier during their first days in Germany. For individuals with mental health issues, 'MinVej' (Denmark) supports their recovery connecting them with practitioners. For young people, the use of social networks is emerging as a new way of conducting social work. For migrants, digital inclusion means access to web translations and the possibility to better learn the language of the host country, for example with YouTube videos and other online materials. In the case of women, online resources can alert them to abuse in their relationship, and potentially exit from it by offering information on support possibilities. Finally, for those children living in family shelters, being able to enjoy recreative activities, such as

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15 Ryngbeck, A. (2017): "Two ways digital inclusion can tackle homelessness" *Social Platform*, 20th February. Available at: https://www.socialplatform.org/blog/two-ways-digital-inclusion-can-tackle-homelessness/ [Access: 9th June 2021]

16 FEANTSA (2019): *Digital inclusion and homelessness - FEANTSA's recommendations for an inclusive agenda in the next Digital Single Market strategy*

watching cartoons or online series could lead to improving social relations with their classmates, in providing common hobbies and topics to discuss. During the coronavirus pandemic, access to ICT also had a great impact on children's education, as online classes became the norm. Children experiencing homelessness and living in shelters can be supported to access education by equipping them with necessary tools and skills.

In terms of **social wellbeing,** ICT offers the possibility to communicate with family and friends in the home country (in the case of migrants), or to fight isolation through social networks. Some people experiencing homelessness use social networks to talk with people who have similar interests, without saying they are homeless, so they can build relationships without the stigma they may face in person.

Improved access to **medical care** can also be an outcome of being digitally included. Many times, people in homelessness face barriers when trying to access medical care in person, because of several reasons: difficulties to register in the health system, fear of stigma from health professionals, legal or administrative barriers, etc. In this regard, having a videocall with a doctor or nurse or uploading pictures of physical symptoms might be a good way of seeking advice, with the possibility of an in-person follow-up if necessary. An example of facilitated access to health care is implemented by the organisation 'Casa Ioana' in Romania. They created a platform especially for the homeless people they support, which allows them to have access to a general practitioner, send pictures, have videocalls, etc.

Digitalisation can also mean **gaining autonomy,** if the person has the appropriate devices and enough digital skills and confidence. In addition, this allows to grow self-confidence and to gain access to a wide number of resources online: hobbies, readings, networks, information on legal rights, etc. This autonomy is also beneficial in terms of enjoying the same rights and opportunities in the digital world as any other citizen.

In connection to obtaining autonomy but also for advancing homeless people's inclusion in society, access to ICT can be useful when **looking for a job or an accommodation**. As many recruitment processes happen now online, people in homelessness can use the computer and the internet to write a CV, apply for jobs, increase their professional competencies or to look for a temporary accommodation, among others. For example, 'Fedtekaelderen Kirkens Korshaer' in Denmark has partnered with a company so some of their guests can work delivering newspapers by following addresses in an online map. As digital skills are required to use the device and understand the map and follow the route, or activate personal credentials, the personnel at the shelter offer training.

Better access to rights and welfare benefits can also be an outcome of improved access to ICT, if government websites are sufficiently adapted. For example, digitalisation offers the chance of having translations, audios, or visuals to better understand information, and sometimes simplifies administrative procedures online. Also, online accessibility can contribute to avoiding discrimination as people cannot be seen or heard when accessing services.

Digitalisation can also offer more security to homeless people by providing a way of **storing personal documents in an online system (the cloud)**. In the case of rough sleepers, some of these documents are easily lost or stolen and even though some shelters offer boxes to keep them, they might not be always open, so accessibility to these documents is restricted. For example, with the platform 'Reconnect-Cloud Solidaire',[17] social workers can upload and store critical sensitive data of beneficiaries, such as IDs, passports, or driving licenses, so these documents are always available in case of loss or theft of the physical documents. This online storage could also be useful when police or other authorities ask people to identify themselves.

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17 *Ibid.*, p.6

Digital inclusion is also beneficial for allowing society to acknowledge the presence of homeless people and can offer them the practical means for taking supportive actions. Several organisations have developed tools **to allow broad society to have an active role in supporting homeless people**. For example, 'Arrels tracker app' (Barcelona) or 'StreetLink' (UK) provide a way to let service providers know about the location of a person sleeping rough[18]. 'Entourage' (France) aims to fight social isolation of homeless people by connecting them with their closest neighbours, and 'Vagus SOS' (Slovakia) provides information about facilities like shelters, but also about how citizens can help and donate to NGOs[19].

ICT is also useful to raise awareness about homelessness and invite society to fight against it. As an example, 'Fedtekaelderen Kirkens Korshaer', an organisation in Denmark, organised an exhibition both online and offline with pictures taken by people in homelessness with their smartphones, to break the stigma around them. Arrels Fundació in Barcelona organise, on the occasion of every election, a Twitter campaign called the 'invisible vote', where Twitter 'influencers' give their accounts to people in homelessness for one day so they can raise awareness about their situation in reaching a broad audience. Finally, people in homelessness can use social networks themselves to express their concerns and report damaging practices like urban design made to exclude homeless people.[20]

These initiatives prove that digitalisation can enhance **inclusion for homeless people and can therefore break the vicious cycle sustained between social exclusion and digital exclusion.** Making online opportunities available for homeless people would grant them greater access to social support networks, better physical and mental health outcomes as well as providing more autonomy and independence. Eventually, it allows for trajectories out of homelessness.

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18 Although some issues about personal freedom and equal right to public space could be raised, these apps intend to make society aware of how rights to social assistance and housing are not available for many

19 *Ibid*.

20 For example, in France, the Twitter accounts 'croisepattes', 'Pagechris75', or 'Marcadette1'

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Challenges in digital inclusion of homeless people

Homeless people are not *per se* digitally excluded and straightforward assumptions in this sense may oversimplify the issue.[21] For example, despite a lack of comprehensive data and overarching initiatives at European level, a recent study from 2018 among homeless people in France[22] found out that 91% of those interviewed had a mobile phone and 71% a smartphone.

However, only 55% of the respondents to this study used internet every day and up to 62% never did administrative procedures online. In addition, only 57% of the interviewees had a personal e-mail. The study also showed great differences among the interviewees: people aged 18-40, with university studies and those with less than 5 years in homelessness felt more comfortable using ICT than their counterparts. This data suggests that, **even if people in homelessness are not *per se* digitally excluded, they face many challenges and barriers that prevent them from fully participating in digital society**, and from enjoying the benefits of the digital transition.

The same conclusions were found in the interviews conducted for this paper with representatives of service providers across Europe. One of the main findings following the interviews is that most of the times the digital exclusion of homeless people is not about being offline or online, since the number of

individuals being completely offline is very low, but about the barriers they face when trying to navigate and engage with the online platforms, apps, etc. However, the low percentage of homeless people who use ICT every day or who feel comfortable with it is even more striking if we consider the great number of potential benefits of digital inclusion. As explained in the previous section, digital tools can be of help for many different reasons. It is therefore a missed opportunity when, due to several barriers, people in homelessness are unable to benefit from them.

To better assess those challenges, we should first distinguish the **3 'steps'[23] needed for digital inclusion**. The first step relates to the access to **equipment**, otherwise referred to as the 'inputs': having a computer or a smartphone, internet connection, a telephone line, data, enough battery, etc. The second step relates to the **digital skills** which are necessary to process and navigate successfully through ICT. And the third relates to the **confidence and motivation** to use ICT for several reasons (e.g., its outcomes).

For many people in homelessness, challenges in relation to 'inputs' and/or their digital skills (steps 1 and 2) make it difficult to fully exercise their digital rights, be motivated to use ICT, and benefit from its outcomes, while non-digital aspects may

21 Lemos, G. & Frankenburg, S. (2015), cited in Harris (2019). *The digitization of advice and welfare benefits services: re-imagining the homeless user,* Housing Studies 35(3): 1-20

22 Solinum (2019) : *Les sans-abri et le numérique : Équipement, usages et compétences numériques des personnes sans-abri en France en 2018* , pp. 4-5

23 Van Deursen, A. et al. (2017). *The Compoundness and Sequentiality of Digital Inequality*, International Journal of Communication 11(2017), 452-473

also influence their access. A study on the digital inclusion of people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco (US) categorises many of these barriers[24]. This typology is explained below and used for the purpose of this paper, given the lack of a similar resource for the European context. Nevertheless, information from the interviews conducted with service providers shows that European homeless people face similar barriers regarding digital inclusion as those identified in the US study.

Before going into detail, it is important to highlight that a person may face one or several of the following barriers depending on their particular circumstances, though they can be cumulative. It is difficult to generalise given the great diversity amongst homeless people. For example, people sleeping rough, people who are sofa-surfing, and those staying in inadequate housing may all face different barriers. Other factors like age or mental health can also be important to consider.

1. Barriers regarding 'inputs' (hardware)

▸ **Lack of (functional) devices**. The service providers interviewed for this paper explained how this is an issue, especially considering the high probability for homeless people to lose their devices or have them stolen. Up to 30% of those interviewed in the above-mentioned French study had had their phone stolen. The information from desk research and interviews suggest it is unlikely that people sleeping rough have smartphones for long periods of time. And for those who have phones, it is not unusual that they have a broken screen, or they are too old (so apps cannot work well).

▸ Lack of ID or an address to **register with a telephone company**. Lack of personal documentation (e.g. because it was stolen or lost or because of administrative status), or of an address (required when registering with a company) prevents many individuals from acquiring data plans, for example.

▸ **Affordability for both devices and internet data**. In the French study, 29% of the respondents could not afford to purchase a smartphone. Furthermore, even if one has a mobile phone, data plans are often necessary for its use. Affordability of data plans is an issue depending on location: while in Romania or France monthly subscriptions may be cheap, in the Czech Republic they are not. Regarding this, it is remarkable that many people often end up paying more than the average population for data. The main reason is that, due to a lack of a bank account or an address to register with a telephone company, they are more likely to purchase pre-payment cards, which have limited data and often are more expensive than monthly subscriptions. The study in France showed that 2/3 people in homelessness who had smartphones used the pre-paid cards. Another direct consequence of affordability is data rationing at the end of the month or **insufficient mobile data**. For example, only 37% of respondents to the 2018 study in France had a smartphone with enough internet connection to last the entire month.

▸ **Lack of charging stations**. This is a major problem for rough sleepers and people staying in temporary accommodation or shelters. The inability to charge a device can, of course, very much restrict its use. Individuals in this situation must decide between using the device or keeping enough battery for the next day, given that access to charging points is difficult. This was one of the main challenges reflected in the survey, appearing in all the interviews with service providers, no matter the place: in Prague, in France, in Bucharest, in the UK, in Barcelona, etc.

▸ **Limited Wi-Fi** in shelters, public institutions, outdoors, fast-food restaurants, etc. In the interviews with service providers, limited Wi-Fi connectivity was a common problem for shelters across Europe, whereas accessibility of public Wi-Fi hotspots depended on the place. For example, in Prague and Bucharest there are many public Wi-Fi hotspots in the streets, while in France they are scarce. It can also happen that homeless people may be expelled from libraries or bars just because they are homeless, as reported by

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24 GSMA (2020): *Accelerating digital inclusion for people experiencing homelessness : a spotlight on San Francisco*

some services we talked with. This barrier is also related to the broader issue of agency: as with other needs like food or shower, people in homelessness may depend on other organisations or people to be online.

▶ **Lack of equipment within homeless service providers**, for which affordability is also an issue. Many of service providers cannot afford to purchase several computers or better Wi-Fi networks, which can be a big issue for family shelters, for example, where children need to follow online lessons.

▶ **Concerns over privacy**, fears of being hacked, unsecured Wi-Fi. Public Wi-Fi networks often used by people in homelessness, such as the ones in public libraries or outdoors, are more vulnerable to hacking and security breaches.

2. Barriers regarding **digital skills**

▶ **Digital illiteracy** is an issue for many individuals. It may vary though depending on age, education, or other factors. This illiteracy is not always total: some people may know how to use social media or communication channels such as WhatsApp, but not how to apply for a job or look for accommodation. The same happens when changing the device: some may know how to use their phone, but not how to use a computer. This barrier is related to confidence or interest in developing these skills, too: when people have more pressing needs, learning digital skills may not be a priority. And, in turn, it is also linked to having access to appropriate equipment: it is not the same to learn from a new phone as from a phone with a broken screen.

▶ **Platforms not designed to engage marginalised users** or people with special needs. For example, as the study in France shows, many websites from public authorities are not adapted to mobile phones, are not available in alternative languages and/or are very difficult to understand by persons with low digital skills. This problem arose in many interviews with service providers from different countries. For example, Citizens Online UK discussed how some people struggle to apply for Universal Credit or council housing even if they have a smartphone or use a desktop computer in a library. Demands of the IT system or website

design are often exclusionary factors. This organisation reported that 40% of those who applied for Universal Credit (for which there can only be online applications) needed help during the process. Websites from public authorities should be more user-friendly, with more visual materials, creative elements, and translations.

3. **Non-digital barriers** also affecting digital inclusion

▶ In the case of migrants, there is also a **language** barrier adding to the digital one. For example, most of the guests in Fedtekaelderen Kirkens Korshaer (Denmark) did not show a high interest in using the app 'Copenhelp' because they did not understand Danish nor English, even though this app is useful to search for shelters offering food or other services. This problem has been identified by other organisations interviewed, like FAS in France and Arrels Fundació in Barcelona. It may worsen in the future given the increasing numbers of migrants within the homeless population in Europe.

▶ **Material deprivation** can also have indirect consequences on excluding homeless people digitally. As an example, a lack of a pair of glasses would translate into being digitally excluded, even when an appropriate device is available and there are good digital skills.

▶ Problems in **adapting to the digital environment** or being afraid of the 'unknown'. The online space is a cultural space, too, and it requires time to understand and adapt to it. For example, many guests in Fedtekaelderen Kirkens Korshaer (Denmark) do not understand why they must create several e-mail accounts, or are afraid of breaking a device when clicking on something. Another organisation, Solinum (France), is aware that many people in homelessness fear being hacked or spied when moving online.

▶ Finally, **other problems** concerning physical or mental health, drug or alcohol abuse, etc., can make digital inclusion harder as they can increase feelings of mistrust and security fears, difficulties in learning digital skills, etc., especially when these complex situations become chronic.

5

The use of ICT tools for professionals working with people in homelessness

Homeless service providers staff and those working with people in housing exclusion recognize the importance of ICT tool and that of digitalisation in their work to support people into safe and adequate housing. Digital tools can facilitate their work and develop innovative professional practices. At the same time, professionals continue to face several challenges and inconveniences of digital transition in their work.

From the interviews with service providers, the most common use of ICT by professionals is for things such as doing administrative procedures, register data about the people they support, draft reports, communicate with work colleagues and other services, or sharing documents online. However, only a minority integrate online tools in their everyday work or the general support they give to people. Many times, the only way professionals integrate ICT in their work is when the people they support ask them for help when going online: to search for things they like, to apply for jobs or welfare benefits, to look for accommodation, etc.

Nevertheless, digital tools can be a big opportunity to improve the support professionals give to people. As discussed during the interviews, some of the main **benefits** of including digital tools in the work of professionals support homeless people are related to:

► **Obtaining more accurate and faster information on services available for and rights of people in homelessness**. For example, the apps 'Mapa bez domova' in the Czech Republic and 'Soliguide' in France give complete and updated information about services and resources for homeless people. The developers of these apps found out they had more searches from social

workers and other professionals than from people in homelessness. The reason is that while traditional compilations of services might be printed annually, this database is updated regularly and is more user-friendly, given that it is possible to create filters and see map locations in real time. Being connected to devices also means more access to information about homeless people's rights and facilitating access to services (e.g., to finding information about citations received from courthouse or doctor's appointments).

► **Using digital tools to facilitate their work**. It is the case of videocalls during the pandemic, creating e-mail addresses for their clients so they can have access to more rights, using 'clouds' to store personal and sensitive documents, providing outreach workers with tablets, communicating with beneficiaries by 'WhatsApp', Facebook, etc. Another example would be the 'Tracker app' from Arrels Fundació (Barcelona), where people can indicate basic information about a person sleeping rough and their location, helping outreach workers.

► **Innovating and creating new ways to do their work**. For example, the Danish organisation 'Fedtekaelderen Kirkens Korshaer' set up an online exhibition with pictures taken by people in homelessness, which had very positive outcomes among staff. After this exhibition, more professionals were interested in learning about digital skills, and as the organisation reached a wider audience, they could recruit new volunteers with multilingual and other skills. Other organisations working with homeless youth are using social networks to better communicate with this audience and plan new activities, as reported by FAS in France. However, these new tools must

be deployed without endangering the right to privacy and confidentiality.

The professionals interviewed for this paper have also talked about the main **challenges and inconveniences** they face regarding digital transition in their everyday work:

▶ Several barriers related to **motivation and confidence** among staff to offer support on digital inclusion have been identified. Sometimes, they may think they already have more important tasks to do, so training on digital skills would only be a burden. For some other people, they might be interested, but they do not have enough digital skills or confidence to support their clients. On some occasions, it is a matter of lack of time and funding for charities to train their workers on digital skills. Finally, some professionals might be afraid of becoming 'the go-to IT guy' for the clients and the other work colleagues in the case of receiving training.

▶ Furthermore, **it is not yet clear enough whether 'digital mediation', or supporting people in doing online activities, is part of social work or not**. The pandemic has made it clear that access to ICT should be considered a right, therefore professionals working with people in destitution should also support them on this domain and receive training to do so. However, given the increasing demands of doing administrative procedures online, some social workers are afraid their work will only consist of helping their clients do these online procedures. That is one of the reasons why digital transition is seen more as a hassle than as an opportunity by many professionals.

▶ **Ethical concerns in relation to personal data protection**. While service providers understand that authorities ask for information to improve policies or have better statistics regarding the homeless population in the country, there are concerns over more personal data. FAS in France is aware that more and more professionals are
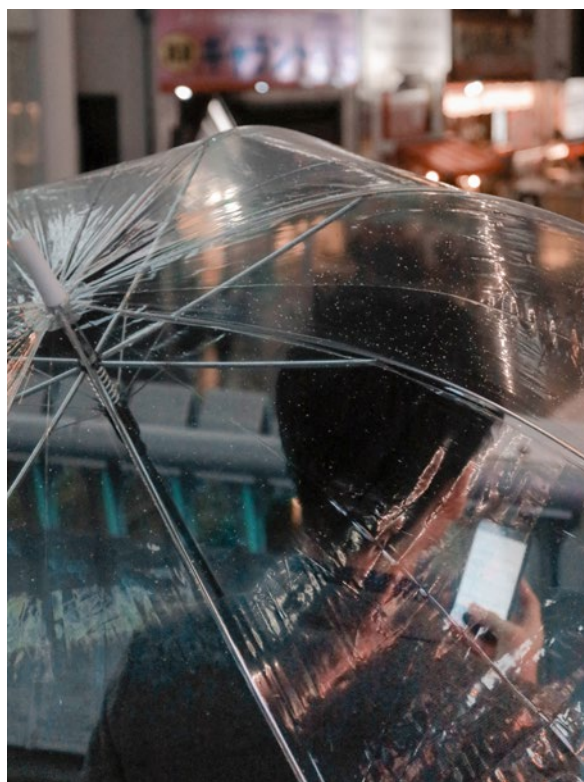
being asked for sensitive information of their clients through online channels. In this regard, the most dangerous areas are migration and alleged fraud in welfare benefits. As an example, between September 2016 and February 2017, the Home Office (UK) used data from charities in London to deport European rough sleepers, while outreach workers were not aware of this misuse[25].

There are concerns among professionals on how the **digital transformation of public services** may affect their work, their organisations, and access to rights for the people they work with.[26] Though digitalisation can be useful for social workers and other professionals due to its opportunities to fight social exclusion, it can also be a challenge for these professionals to adapt to new technologies, and to work with them appropriately.

25 The Guardian (2017) : « Home Office used charity data map to deport rough sleepers", 19th August. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/19/home-office-secret-emails-data-homeless-eu-nationals [Access: 9th June 2021]

26 Haut Conseil du Travail Social (2018) : *Pourquoi et comment les travailleurs sociaux se saisissent des outils numériques ? Recommandations du groupe de travail « Numérique et travail social »*

6

The perils of digital transition for people in homelessness

As explained previously, digital transition could bring a wide variety of benefits for people in homelessness if the barriers they face in accessing and engaging with ICT are overcome. **If these barriers are not challenged, digital transition could cause further social exclusion** as well, as noted in the introduction.

While the section on the 'challenges for digital inclusion' described the main barriers for homeless people when trying to be digitally included, the focus of this section is a different one. The following paragraphs will briefly explain some of the current or potential negative, unintended consequences of digital transition for those people in homelessness facing digital exclusion.

As an increasing number of essential activities are moved online, from looking for a job, to making a doctor's appointment or interacting with other people, etc., those who lack a regular access to a device or internet will be further excluded. If digital transition is only accelerating, something that we can definitely state is happening in Europe, it is crucial to be aware of the perils it poses for those who face social and digital exclusion.

One of those risks concerns **access to public services and welfare benefits**. Digitalisation within this domain may be an opportunity to avoid stigmatization and to improve access to rights for homeless migrants, as stated in the 'Benefits' section of this paper. However, for those who are already digitally excluded, **loss of rights and/or autonomy can be an unintended consequence of**

digitalisation of public services. This conclusion was shared among all the service providers interviewed for this paper. As more of MS' administrative and welfare services move online, not being able to fill in a form or make an appointment online can have dramatic consequences.

For example, FAS in France reported a loss of autonomy for many people when public services moved online: some people who could usually do administrative procedures by themselves, were unable to do so independently once these procedures became digital. In the case of France, this 'digital-by-default' format means that the first response of public services to citizens who seek advice is that they should look for the information online and apply to any benefits using the internet. However, this puts a burden on those who are digitally excluded when claiming for their rights, therefore they need assistance from professionals to carry out these procedures. The 'Haut Conseil du Travail Social' estimates that 1 in 5 people in France experience difficulties when trying to do administrative procedures online and warns that digitalisation can endanger the principle of equality in accessing public services, especially for the most vulnerable. That is why it recommends public services should keep their 'physical windows' ('guichets physiques') open to the public, together with their 'digital windows' ('guichets numériques').[27]

In Denmark, 'Fedtekaelderen Kirkens Korshaer' reports that many of their guests often cannot access public services because they face digital

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27 *Ibid.,* p.5

exclusion. It is extremely hard for people who lack (adequate) devices or skills to carry out online procedures like registration in the municipality, exchange of e-mails with public authorities, job search, etc. Also, as many of their guests come from other EU countries, the language barrier for these administrative procedures is an additional burden.

In the case of **migrants who need to renew or apply for their residence permits**, the digitalisation of these procedures is often a big challenge. As an example, the French organisation 'la Cimade' even purchased a robot to prove that, in some 'préfectures,[28]' it was almost impossible to make online appointments to renew or obtain residence permits.[29] Recently, the court of Rouen ruled that the 'préfecture' of Seine-Maritime had to accept again applications in person, since allowing access to them *only* via online procedures was found to be unlawful.[30]

Also concerning migration, homeless **mobile EU citizens in the UK** have struggled to apply to the fully online EU Settlement Scheme. Many have not applied yet, which could have serious consequences in terms of access to rights and residence. Online applications, scanning documents or even being granted an 'online status' are sometimes not possible for people facing housing and digital exclusion[31].

Another important issue related to digital transition is **how new tools like AI, machine learning or Big Data may disproportionately affect marginalised and discriminated groups**. Although this issue goes beyond the focus of this paper, it is an important aspect in a digitalised world and academia, policy makers, and CSOs should be aware of the biases of these tools and how they impact vulnerable groups. Discriminatory algorithms, predictive policing, biometric surveillance, etc. can pose a threat for people facing housing exclusion, especially if they have a migrant background or if they are undocumented,[32] producing breaches in fundamental rights.[33] As an example, in the UK, the Home Office has relaunched a programme which could potentially be used to obtain personal data of rough sleepers and to deport those of them who are non-UK nationals[34]. Another example: the District Court of The Hague ruled that 'SyRI', a programme used by the Dutch government to detect and predict fraud in welfare benefits, was in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, during all the years the programme was in place, many people ended up in destitution due to this unlawful practice.[35]

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28 In France, the services belonging to the national/central government which are located in each 'département' (administrative division of the country) and led by a 'préfet', who represents the State in a particular 'département'

29 La Cimade (2021): Dématérialisation des demandes de titre de séjour: de quoi parle-t-on? Available at: https://www.lacimade.org/dematerialisation-des-demandes-de-titre-de-sejour-de-quoi-parle-t-on/ [Access: 9th June 2021]

30 Ruling nº 2001687 of the "Tribunal Administratif de Rouen" (18th February 2021). Available at: https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CIMADE-Jugement-TA-Rouen-dematerialisation.pdf

31 Homeless Link & Praxis Community Projects (2019): *Brexit and EU Settlement: Briefing for homelessness services*; Morgan, B. (2020): "Unsettled: what will happen to EU nationals who don't sort out their status in time?" *Right to Remain*, 24th February. Available at: https://righttoremain.org.uk/unsettled-what-will-happen-to-eu-nationals-who-dont-sort-out-their-status-in-time/ [Access: 9th June 2021]

32 ENAR (2019): *Data-driven policing: the hardwiring of discriminatory policing practices across Europe*; PICUM & Statewatch (2019): *Data protection, immigration enforcement and Fundamental Rights: What the EU's Regulations on interoperability mean for people with irregular status*

33 EDRI (2020): *Use cases: Impermissible AI and fundamental rights breaches*

34 The Guardian (2021): "Home Office revives plan to deport non-UK rough sleepers", 27th March. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/27/home-office-revives-plan-to-deport-non-uk-rough-sleepers [Access: 9th June 2021]

35 The Public Interest Litigation Project (2020): "Profiling and SyRI". Available at: https://pilpnjcm.nl/en/dossiers/profiling-and-syri/ [Access: 9th June 2021]

7

The impact of COVID-19 on the use of digital tools

With the outbreak of the **pandemic**, access to ICT has become even more important. In the context of a global health crisis, for people in homelessness being connected can mean survival. Among other things, being connected may translate into quick access to information, health advice, and professional assistance when many public services and charities are closed, or the possibility to find emergency accommodation or food. Having virtual connection with other people is also very important for those with mental health issues, which are more common among homeless people than the general population, evidenced by a sharp difference in suicidal rates.[36]

But digital devices are not only important for seeking information or communicating with other people. They are also very important in allowing for direct communication, especially during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. For example, people with mobile phones can be contacted by their GPs or social workers or receive notifications on vaccination and health advice through text messages and/or app notifications.[37]However, it is important to keep in mind that not all people in homelessness can access digital tools and, even if they might have access to a device, the barriers mentioned in the previous section still existed during the pandemic. Indeed, from the information gathered in the interviews, almost all service providers agree that the pandemic has had a polarizing effect, exacerbating the distance between those who can appropriately use digital

tools and those who are more severely excluded in the digital domain. At the same time, for many of the homeless service providers, the pandemic has brought both positive and negative consequences regarding digital inclusion.

Some of the **negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic** in many countries, have to do with **public offices shutting down** and moving processes online. It hugely affected people facing housing exclusion when claiming for welfare benefits, for example. It is very difficult to do administrative procedures online for those who do not have access to devices (or they have an old and used device) or whose digital skills are poor. In case that the public offices were not closed, for instance in Romania, it was only possible to communicate with authorities by making appointments (online) or through postal offices. For people without an address, or not knowing how to make an online appointment, it was therefore a **challenge to communicate with civil servants** during the pandemic. This was also the case for **healthcare** facilities. People without continuous access to a phone, or those who could not make online registration or appointments, were severely excluded from health advice amid a pandemic.

In addition, many service providers, which are the main contact point for people in housing exclusion for help with online activities, had to **close or restrict their opening hours to provide only basic services**. As an example, the app 'Soliguide', which

36 Von Koettlitz, R. (2020): "Digital inclusion, homelessness & COVID-19: lessons learned" *Diversity and Ability*, 15th September. Available at: https://diversityandability.com/blog/digital-exclusion-covid19/ [Access: 9th June 2021]

37 FEANTSA (2016-17), *op. Cit.*, note 5, p. 2

includes information and locations of services for homeless people in France, registered an increase in searches from 90 000 to 500 000 in 2020. In the case of **organisations and service providers that remained open** during the pandemic, like some day or night shelters, the new restrictions heavily affected their services. People could only access them for a **limited time** (e.g., one hour) to grab food or take a shower. This had serious consequences in terms of personal connections, mental health, counselling or just having a place to rest, but also regarding digital inclusion, because people did not have enough time to charge batteries or ask for help with digital issues.

The **lack of adequate equipment** in temporary accommodation was also further underlined by COVID19. With everything moving online, the scarcity of devices and/or a weak internet connection was even more evident. For example, for those facilities hosting families in homelessness, it was a great challenge to support all the children to follow online lessons.

The **closing of facilities like libraries, museums, or cafés**, where people in homelessness used to go to charge their devices or connect to Wi-Fi, was also considered a major problem by most of the service providers. It made more visible the 'data poverty' many people faced. For example, in a survey from November 2020 conducted among their clients, Arrels Fundació (Barcelona) found out that 41% of those interviewed said it was very difficult to access internet, and 34% said it was a challenge to charge their batteries.[38] Before the pandemic, this already happened during weekends (when shelters and public places would close), but since March 2020 it was exacerbated.

The pandemic has also made more people aware that **digital inclusion is not only about giving devices**: it is also about connection, data poverty, skills, and receiving specialized support when using ICT tools, among other factors. As an example, though in England there has been some national

schemes during lockdown to provide devices to those who did not have one, many people in homelessness could not benefit from them because they lacked skills, dedicated support, or enough internet connection. Within the interviews with professionals from the UK, it was discussed how providing funds to homeless charities for digital inclusion could have brought better outcomes than these device schemes.

Several positive consequences of the coronavirus pandemic have been identified as well, with new initiatives being adopted in this period. In France, a **network of 'digital mediators'** has been created (e.g., professionals working to provide digital skills and facilitate digital transition) which set up a call centre to respond to people asking for help, with interpreters, who have been very helpful for people in homelessness with a migrant background.

Some initiatives **provided devices** like smartphones or tablets to people facing housing exclusion. In the UK, they have been funded in several ways: some charities paid for new devices with their own budgets, others have partnered with companies to donate second-hand devices, and some local authorities offered funding[39]. In France, FAS has partnered with other associations and public authorities to provide children living in temporary accommodation with computers, so they could follow online lessons during the pandemic. Similarly, some French local authorities have funded, with their own budgets, computers for families living in destitution.

Other organisations have **adapted their work** to cover bigger groups and needs. It is the case of 'Citizens Online UK', which before the pandemic provided consultancy and training services on digital issues for charities[40], since the start of the pandemic, they set up a helpline directly attending people in need. The organisation also funded an improvement in the Wi-Fi network of a temporary accommodation service. As installing Wi-Fi routers in every flat would be too expensive, they put some

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38 Information from the interview with Arrels Fundació for this policy paper

39 See, for example, this initiative developed by St Mungo's and this one by TESCO mobile in partnership with CRISIS

40 For more information, please visit: https://www.citizensonline.org.uk/covid-19-digital-inclusion-digital-brighton-hove-response/

'boxes' that are often used in humanitarian crisis to boost connectivity.

New ways of doing social work have been developed using the online environment. For example, 'Podane ruce' in the Czech Republic has established two online projects. The first one consisting professionals who actively enter online forums and social networks to give advice on drug use. The second one was for young people to keep in touch online with professionals during the pandemic. In the UK, there have been many of training activities and resources for professionals working with people in homelessness so they could smoothly move online and keep supporting their clients.

Given that moving online has been difficult for many, some **services went directly to where beneficiaries lived**. In France, the 'Caisse d'Allocations Familiales', together with the 'Caisse Primaire d'Assurance Maladie', several associations and agents of the social security system, developed a pilot project during the pandemic where professionals would go to social housing and temporary accommodation. There, they ensured that people got registered to seek health advice, to claim for the welfare benefits they are entitled to and helped the residents with online procedures. Unfortunately, after the first lockdown this project had to stop at national level and could only continue in some areas, due to a lack of funding.

Where available, **therapy has continued online** for those people experiencing homelessness with drug or mental health issues. For example, counsellors in the Czech organisation 'Podane ruce' moved to therapy with Zoom or Skype calls. However, as with other services, those who could not attend the online sessions, or who could but did not have enough privacy, remained excluded from this support.

The coronavirus pandemic has emphasized the importance of digital inclusion, given that almost all services in Europe had to move online for several months. It has highlighted the fact that **everyone in society, no matter their circumstances, should have access to internet, as everyone should have access to adequate housing, too**. In the process of the digital transformation of the EU, lessons and successful practices such as this should be harnessed in order to ensure that digitalisation will happen for all.

8

Good practices to overcome the identified challenges in digitalisation for homeless people

Organisations and service providers supporting homeless people are aware of the challenges and benefits that digital inclusion comes with for their clients. Over the years they have designed and implemented solutions to overcome digital exclusion through their services, which have been developed even more during the coronavirus pandemic. This period can be considered an opportunity in terms of awareness raising, providing a *momentum* to tackle the digital exclusion of the most vulnerable. The following good practices are only some examples which could be expanded and implemented across Europe.

1. Initiatives regarding **access to equipment or 'inputs'**

   ▶ **Partnerships** between private companies and public services and/or non-profit organisations to deliver devices and/or data plans. For example, Vodafone has partnered with several social services in the Czech Republic to make monthly data subscriptions more accessible to people in destitution, given that these subscriptions are quite expensive in the country. In France, FAS has also partnered with a foundation to support outreach workers acquire digital skills and deliver smartphones or tablets to people sleeping rough. Also in France, 'Emmaüs Connect' has partnered with companies to give devices and/or data plans at a low price for people in destitution. In Romania, Casa Ioana worked with Amazon to provide tablets for children in their shelter so they could follow online lessons during the coronavirus pandemic.

   ▶ **Volunteering and grassroots movements** to foster digital inclusion – volunteer based 'tech for good' initiatives. The app 'Mapa bez domova' in the Czech Republic and Bratislava is a good example of this. The concept 'tech for good' consists of placing social progress at the heart of technological innovation, as well as using these innovations to tackle social inequalities and exclusion.

   ▶ More and better **public Wi-Fi hotspots**. In most of the countries there are public networks accessible in places like libraries; some countries (e.g.: Romania or the Czech Republic) also have a high number of hotspots in the streets (at least in urban areas) which is a good example to follow.

   ▶ **Charging stations** in day or night shelters. For most of the shelters, it is not possible to set up charging stations with multiple plugs due to technical or financial reasons. However, it has been a big success when they have been able to do so – an example here are the charging boxes that 'Solinum' put in place in a day shelter in Bordeaux (France).

2. Regarding access to **digital skills**

   ▶ **Funding** from public authorities for service providers and other organisations working in the domain of digital inclusion, to improve digital skills of their beneficiaries. For example, the programme 'Aidants numériques' (digital mediators) by the French government, although not being specifically for the homeless sector, will allow many charities to give

support and teach digital skills. However, it is important to note that to seek advice for digital issues, many people in homelessness need first a **contact point to trust** and who knows him/her well. It is the case of the services 'Citizen's advice'[41] in the UK or 'Espaces Publics Numériques'[42] in France, which are not often used by people in homelessness even if they could potentially benefit from them, because they lack the trust relation with the staff.

▸ **Partnerships between homeless service providers and organisations specialised in the digital domain**. For example, in the UK, 'Citizens Online' provides consultancy and other kinds of support to charities, some active in the homelessness sector. Given the complex needs many homeless people may have, the approach of these charities is adapted to this population. Instead of only helping them to do specific things online (like writing a CV or a job application), they integrate online activities in the overall support a person receives, so people are motivated to do things online and find that learning digital skills is enjoyable. For example, activities on social media, networking, creating projects or making friends online are organised to tackle both social and digital exclusion. A similar organisation, 'Good Things Foundation', has been collaborating with Homeless Link (UK) for 6 years already, with very good outcomes in terms of digital support to frontline workers or training 'digital champions' (experts in ICT) within organisations in the homeless sector[43].

▸ Creating a **pool of resources** related to digital inclusion for the most vulnerable groups. For example, the programme 'Learn My Way' by Good Things Foundation (UK) is intended to offer personalised resources and learning journeys to their clients, following the UK's 'Essential Digital skills Framework'. Access to

basic services like applying for welfare benefits or looking for a job is important, but this organisation has found out it is better to start with something smaller, like a cooking class, access to medicines, or YouTube videos, and once people are interested and have the skills, then teach them how to apply for a job, or fill in a form. Another good practice in this regard is the **MEDICI project**, funded by the European Commission, whose aim is "to develop and disseminate widely the existing best practices for integrating vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the Digital society across the 28 EU member states."[44]

3. Regarding access to both **equipment and digital skills**

▸ In France, the national government created several **'Espaces Publics Numériques'** (digital public spaces). These are centres which offer staff working as 'digital mediators' and equipment that all can access, aiming to reach the digitally excluded groups. This type of practice could enable digital inclusion for people in homelessness. However, the organisation FAS has seen that many potential users, and especially those staying in shelters or sleeping rough, do not use these centres because they are not designed for people in destitution or homelessness. For example, even if this staff is expert on digital issues, they lack knowledge about the social dimension. That is why some shelters in France are trying to partner with the closest centres, so their beneficiaries could also make use of them.

▸ Currently, many service providers and other organisations provide **in-house, internal** training on digital skills, support with online tools or apps, or access to a (limited) equipment for homeless people. Many organisations have basic equipment, such as a desktop computer,

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41 For more information, please visit: https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/

42 For example, this is the network of EPN in Paris: http://www.epn-paris.org/

43 The Reboot UK programme, run by a partner consortium of Good Things Foundation, Homeless Link and Mind, focuses on people affected by homelessness and mental health problems

44 For more information, please visit: https://medici-project.eu/digital-inclusion/
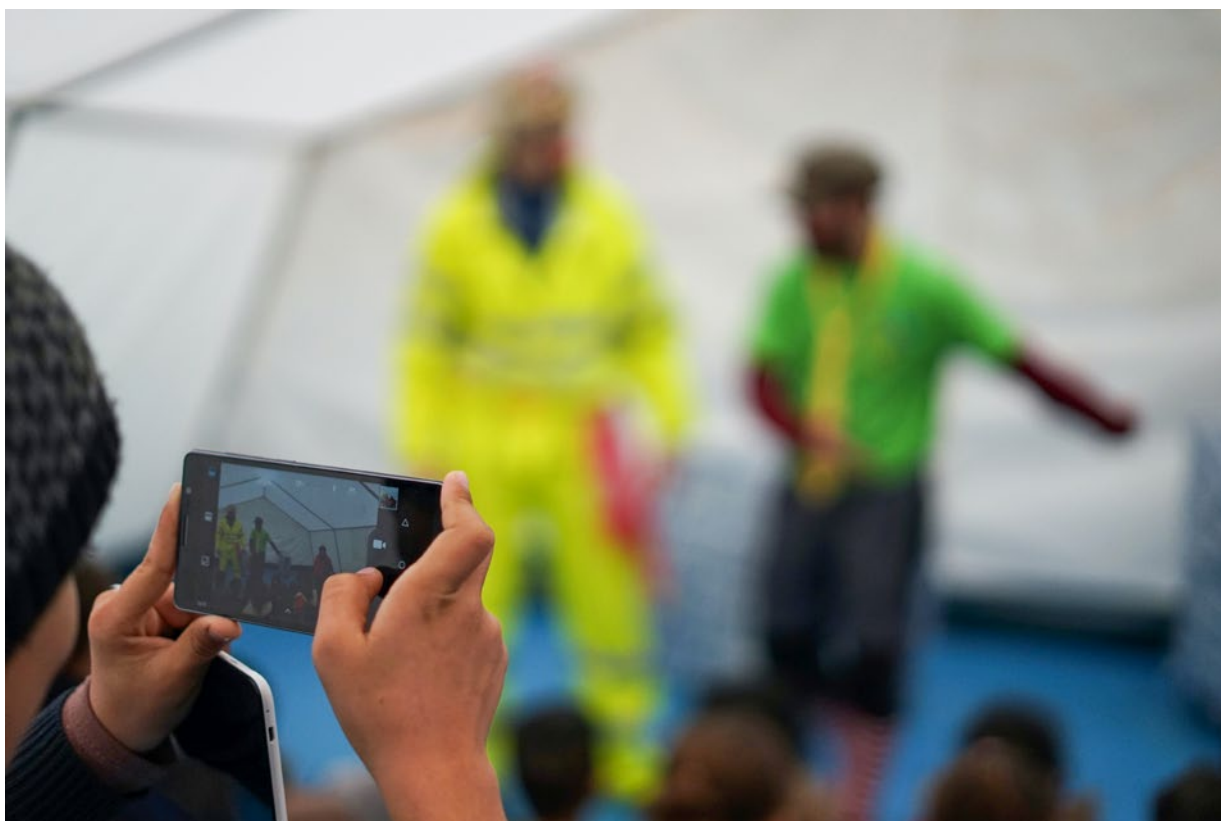
accessible Wi-Fi, plugs, and professionals/ volunteers that offer support with digital issues. However, due to a limited budget, the offer is often very limited, as explained in the previous section regarding challenges for digital inclusion. An interesting, good practice with which to address this issue is the project 'Maraud'IN' coordinated by FAS (France), aiming to provide devices and digital skills directly on the streets to people sleeping rough.

▶ Establishing Communities of Practice around digital inclusion, organising webinars, sharing

successful stories, etc. are also good practices to tackle digital exclusion. In general, any activity within the homeless sector aiming at **sharing knowledge** and expertise about digital inclusion is much appreciated by the organisations consulted for this paper.

All these initiatives are encouraging and contribute to minimising the digital gap. However, **there is need for more financial support for this type of action and to coordinate and ensure that successful practices are transferred and implemented at European level**.

9
Conclusions and recommendations

Nowadays, ICT is vital to fully participate in society and access an increasing number of services, which are moving to digital-by-default (e.g., e-Government).[45] As explained before, digital transition can bring enormous and varied benefits for people in destitution, such as those experiencing homelessness. However, if challenges regarding 'inputs' and digital skills are not addressed, digital transition may further exclude people in homelessness.

On a policy level, solutions to overcome challenges for digital inclusion should focus on the following aspects: ensuring that needs and demands of marginalised people are considered, implementing initiatives to tackle the challenges on the 'inputs' and digital skills, partnering with relevant stakeholders and civil society organisations in the homelessness sector, and enabling digitally inclusive environments.

However, from the information gathered in our research and the interviews with service providers, it is a shared conclusion that **public policies regarding digital inclusion do not yet sufficiently address people in destitution**. Apart from some occasional funding for charities, the core policy work is focused on older people, people with disa-

bilities, or those who are low-skilled, while people living in destitution or facing homelessness are often excluded from these policies. One of the reasons that this group are excluded from the policy agenda on digital inclusion might be that, for many people, access to ICT is still considered a 'luxury'. Several organisations we talked with reported that, when discussing digital inclusion with commissioning authorities, they often ask 'why do they need a smartphone?' While there seems to be no problem in providing food, or a shower, since these are considered basic needs, that is not the case for internet and digital tools. Nevertheless, this report has demonstrated that digital inclusion is not only a matter of equal rights, but also an opportunity to tackle exclusion in several domains, as the section on 'benefits and outcomes' explains in detail.

To enhance digital inclusion for people experiencing homelessness, to make the principles stated in the 'European Digital Compass for 2030' a reality, and to ensure that everyone in Europe has universal access to internet, devices, and digital skills, regardless of their economic or housing conditions, **in FEANTSA we suggest the following recommendations for the EU and the Member States**:

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45 E-Government can be defined as "the use of ICTs to more effectively and efficiently deliver government services to citizens and businesses. It is the application of ICT in government operations, achieving public ends by digital means." (From https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/about/unegovdd-framework)

REGARDING ACCESS TO DIGITAL 'INPUTS'

1. Establish **funding mechanisms at European and national level to provide people in destitution with devices and other tools** (e.g., data plans or charging stations). Economic deprivation should not be an obstacle to digital inclusion. These mechanisms could be run through partnerships between government, private corporations, and civil society organisations. To help with funding, the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (especially the section earmarked for digital transformation) should be explored to see how they might contribute to these programmes.

2. **Make connectivity available to everyone**, regardless of housing and economic conditions. The recent Digital Compass for 2030 should also include people in housing exclusion, given that the current ambition focuses only on households: "by 2030, all European households will be covered by a Gigabit network."[46] Authorities at all levels within Member States should also take actions to ensure connectivity is available for those without a household and/or living in destitution.

3. Explore the possibility of **considering access to internet and digital devices a basic amenity**, such as water and electricity. This would improve legal protection against digital exclusion. A good example to follow might be Directive 2014/92/EU, which improved access to bank accounts in ensuring that "anyone residing legally in the European Union has the right to open a payment account with basic features in any EU country."[47]

4. **Increase and improve public Wi-Fi hotspots.** Given that people in homelessness may face several difficulties in connectivity, such as lack of data plans, insufficient Wi-Fi in shelters and community centres, non-existent or bad internet connection in unfit or insecure housing,

etc., public Wi-Fi is often key to access internet. The EU should consider expanding the scope of the WiFi4EU programme: increase its funding, promote more hotspots in those facilities where people in deprivation go to (charities included), and improve its checks to tackle fears of security gaps in public Wi-Fi networks. Actions at national level should complement this European programme and replicate it where appropriate.

5. Include in the equipment or connectivity plans, both at European and national levels, those **services and professionals working with citizens in destitution**. For example, in the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 drafted by the EC, connectivity gaps of non-formal digital education centres are not sufficiently addressed, as noted in the Report of the EP on the Plan.

REGARDING DIGITAL SKILLS

6. Expand the scope of the Digital Education Action Plan to include one stream focusing on digital skills of **socially excluded groups**. In this regard, the sub-target in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan to achieve basic digital skills for 80% of those aged between 16-74 may hide marginalised groups in statistics and policies just because they are a minority of the population. Given that people in homelessness face specific challenges when trying to improve their digital skills due to housing and economic deprivation, there should be specific actions to enhance their digital skills and those of other socially excluded groups, too.

7. **Invite civil society organisations in the design and development of the European Digital Skills Certificate**, announced in the Digital Education Action Plan, to ensure it can be used in the future by marginalised groups.

8. Include in the education plans for digital skills, both at European and national levels, those services and professionals offering **non-formal**

46 European Commission (2021), *op. Cit.*, note 4, p.6

47 EUR-Lex: "Summary of Directive 2014/92/EU — comparable and transparent fees and rules for all payment accounts and payment account switching". Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/LSU/?uri=CELEX%3A32014L0092 [Access: 9th June 2021]

trainings (e.g., charities, social workers, libraries, etc.). As stated before, the Report of the EP on the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 of the EC, highlighted the need to include them in the Action Plan. Improving the provision of digital skills for people working with marginalised groups can foster their work, better address the needs of their clients, and ensure benefits of ICT are also available for people in homelessness.

9. Improve the **inclusivity of public authorities' websites**. Following the success of the Web Accessibility Directive (2016/2102) for digital inclusion of people with disabilities, public authorities' websites should engage other marginalised groups, too. For example, by ensuring they are appropriate for mobile users, so people without access to a computer are not excluded, or by adapting them for people who are digitally illiterate and/or people with language difficulties. Efforts at both European and national level around this issue should be complementary and simultaneous.

10. Develop toolkits, directorates and other resources with webpages and mobile applications that can support socially excluded groups. These tools can improve the awareness of targeted services for homeless people. They can enhance digital inclusion as well, in case they include resources on digital inclusion and infrastructure (charging stations, internet hotspots, training centres, etc.). regarding this sense, the adoption of a common **European portal collecting information relevant for homeless people and the service providers that assist them** could be explored, similar to the European Youth Portal in the case of young people. It could include information on resources at EU level and Member States, access to EU funds for NGOs, links to websites or applications targeted for people in homelessness, etc. The MEDICI project, which is a pool of resources on digital inclusion for marginalised groups, might be a good example to follow.[48]

HORIZONTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

11. Fund and conduct **more research** on how digital transition will affect people facing social exclusion, homeless people included. Research on these issues at European level is still scarce. Given that digital transition is rapidly accelerating, it is key to know more about the perils and the benefits it may bring to marginalised groups, so policy makers can boost the benefits and counter the perils. In relation to research, the scope of **data collection** should be expanded to monitor how socially excluded groups, such as people experiencing homelessness, participate in the digital world.

12. Coordinate and establish **partnerships** between governments, tech sector and civil society organisations working with people in destitution. To ensure universal access to ICT for everyone, governments should contribute with appropriate policies and funding, the tech sector with technical expertise and scalability, and CSOs with an awareness of the specific needs of vulnerable people and the best practices to achieve digital inclusion.

13. Develop **ethical guidelines** for professionals and organisations working with vulnerable people around data privacy and fulfilment of GDPR. As described before, practices like 'SyRI' in the Netherlands or the Home Office (UK) using data from service providers to deport homeless migrants must not be repeated in Europe. Public authorities should take steps to protect very sensitive data of vulnerable users on an ongoing basis, ensure they get access to redress and justice if their rights are violated, and monitor more closely the implementation of the GDPR, including violations of rights of vulnerable users.

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48 For more information, please visit: https://medici-project.eu/

14. In the face of new tools like **AI, machine learning or Big Data**, governments should collaborate with CSOs and human rights organisations to ensure these technologies will not discriminate against already vulnerable groups, like people facing housing exclusion.

15. **Keep in-person public services to assist people who will remain digitally excluded**. Even if public policies to enhance digital inclusion are highly successful, there might be a small number of people who could still face digital exclusion, due to several kinds of reasons. To ensure the principle of equality in accessing public services, at least some in-person contact points should keep working during digital transition.

16. **Involve citizens living in destitution and the professionals working with them** in the design, implementation and evaluation of digital policies and laws that may affect socially excluded groups.

17. **Include funds for equipment and support on digital skills when public authorities commission homeless services**. They can be considered as another kind of counselling, and thus be eligible for public funds. Commissioning contracts should reflect the increasing importance of being digitally included to social inclusion. Digital transformation within homelessness organisations, as well as initiatives to provide devices and digital skills, need dedicated policies and funding. For that purpose, a part of the budget could be ringfenced for digital inclusion only.

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