

A European Collaboration Platform on Homelessness: A New Policy Action to Deliver on Priority 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights

ABOUT FEANTSA

[FEANTSA](#) is the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. We are the only European NGO focusing exclusively on the fight against homelessness. Our goal is an end to homelessness in Europe. We have over 140 member organisations from 30 countries, including 28 Member States. Our members include NGOs working with homeless people, national and regional public authorities, cities, public agencies, organisations from neighbouring sectors (e.g. housing, health and migration), foundations and research entities.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main responsibilities of the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicholas Schmit, is to develop an action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Commission is currently consulting widely to engage stakeholders in preparing this action plan. As the only European organisation dedicated to the fight against homelessness, FEANTSA wishes to express its strong support for a European Collaboration Platform on Homelessness as a key element of the action plan. Such an initiative would be a new policy action at EU level to deliver progress on priority 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In January 2020, a plenary debate with the European Parliament saw MEPs make a range of proposals for new European initiatives on homelessness, including an EU Convention and an EU Framework on national homelessness strategies. Since then, the Commissioner has repeatedly stated his willingness to develop an ambitious new initiative on homelessness. On the 21st June 2020, Commissioner Schmit published a joint opinion article with Ana Mendes Godinho, Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security in Portugal and Yves Leterme, Goodwill Ambassador for the Fight against Homelessness in Europe, on the topic of homelessness^[1]. They pointed out that homelessness can no longer be accepted as a “fact of life” in the EU; and that the forthcoming Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights presents a “unique opportunity to strengthen the EU’s role in the fight against homelessness”. They proposed “a European collaboration platform as of 2021”. FEANTSA wholeheartedly supports this proposal. We believe that homelessness is an increasingly urgent problem across a majority of EU MS and that strengthened EU-level cooperation could help MS to address it effectively. We believe that the proposed Collaboration Platform could become a motor for progress in tackling homelessness in the EU’s Member States.

The following contribution outlines the favourable context for the proposal of a European

Collaboration Platform on homelessness; and makes suggestions regarding its content and form.

POLICY CONTEXT

The main justification for a major new policy initiative on homelessness in this context is that priority 19 of the EPSR focuses on housing and support for homeless. It is also clear that the European Commission needs to find concrete means to deliver on its commitment to “leave no one behind” in the context of the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

Before the pandemic, it was already abundantly clear that homelessness was on the rise in the EU, with numbers increasing consistently in 24 Member States over the past decade^[2]. FEANTSA estimates that at least 700,000 people are homeless on any given night, 70% more than a decade ago.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added urgency to the issue of homelessness. As governments have urged people to “stay home” to protect themselves and others, they have had to acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children for whom this is not an option. The COVID-19 crisis has seen some extraordinary measures to protect homeless people. Many thousands have been provided with emergency accommodation during lockdowns. Hotels, shelters, apartments, and other facilities have been made available. But the future for people in these places is uncertain, and many have not been reached. Several governments seem to have abandoned the attention they paid to homelessness during the first lockdown. As the economic impact of the crisis gathers pace, there is a risk of massive inflow into homelessness. This alarming situation presents policymakers with an opportunity to take decisive action. The EU can play an important role in helping MS to seize this opportunity.

Several recent policy initiatives at EU level have further strengthened the basis for a new European initiative on homelessness.

1. In 2019, the Commission published its first comprehensive analysis of homelessness and policies to address it in EU MS. The European Social Policy Network’s series of national reports on strategies to tackle homelessness and housing exclusion, accompanied by a European synthesis report, provide a potential benchmark for future monitoring of the homelessness and of MS’ policies^[1].
2. In September 2019, the Social Protection Committee conducted a thematic review on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (HHE)^[2]. Policy recommendations included ensuring that the potential of EU structural and investment funds is fully exploited in the fight against homelessness; clarifying definitions, improving data collection and agreeing indicators at EU level; mutual learning and transnational exchange in the framework of the Social Open Method of Coordination; addressing homelessness in key EU policy frameworks like the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights; mainstreaming across relevant sectoral policies such as gender equality, health, disability, child and youth inclusion, migration, free movement.

3. During the Finnish Presidency, the Council adopted conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing, inviting Member States and the European Commission to “continue to design and implement measures acknowledging and addressing homelessness and promote access to affordable housing for all”.
4. The proposals for the future EU budget, namely the MFF 2020-2027 and the Next Generation EU recovery plan create substantial scope for EU investment to support ending homelessness
5. 2020 has seen the European Parliament consistently raising homelessness as an urgent social policy priority and calling for enhanced cooperation at EU-level to address it.

ELEMENTS OF A EUROPEAN COLLABORATION PLATFORM ON HOMELESSNESS

FEANTSA believes that a successful new European policy initiative on homelessness should involve two core elements: a voluntary high-level political commitment; and a Commission-led programme of activities to support progress in the fight against homelessness across the EU. The latter would serve to underpin and support the impact of the former.

The first step towards the Collaboration Platform should be for Member States to voluntarily commit to the shared goal of ending homelessness, and to making substantial progress towards this goal by 2030. This commitment should be expressed through a voluntary political declaration whereby MS and the Commission define what ending homelessness means and the key steps that must be undertaken to get there. Such a declaration should be signed by as many MS as possible at the occasion of a high-level event during the Portuguese Presidency, following the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Ultimately, the Collaboration Platform should entail a programme of EU-level activities designed to support all MS to make progress in the fight against homelessness. This would ensure that it becomes a real motor for change and provides accountability as well as practical support for MS. The precise activities could be defined step-by-step and in consultation with MS and by forthcoming Presidencies. In FEANTSA's view, priority areas for action include:

1. An annual monitoring report on homelessness in each of the MS, published by the European Commission. The 2019 ESPN report provides a baseline for this exercise.
2. An annual review of MS' policies to address homelessness, accompanied by a programme of regular thematic Peer Reviews.
3. Capacity-building and sharing of best practice to support Member States' use the EU's Structural and Investment Funds to tackle homelessness effectively.
4. A multi-annual action plan to scale-up Housing First in the EU.
5. European research to support the development of evidence-policies to tackle homelessness.
6. A proposal for an EU Recommendation on Ending Homelessness by 2022.
7. EU-level training and capacity building activities relating to key challenges and emerging issues in the field of homelessness policies.
8. The possibility for Member States to request technical assistance on specific issues in

relation to homelessness

9. Strident measures to challenge the criminalisation of homelessness
10. Ensuring that ongoing COVID19 response and recovery plans include measures to protect people experiencing and at risk of homelessness, notably by providing access to housing

This list is illustrative and non-exhaustive. We believe that the Platform should be built step-by-step in a collaborative fashion.

In terms of governance, the European Commission, under the responsibility of Commissioner Schmit, should play a coordinating role. A Chair should be appointed to the Platform. High level civil servants responsible for homelessness should have the opportunity to meet regularly and monitor progress. FEANTSA is hopeful that forthcoming Presidencies of the Council will take steps to further develop the Collaboration Platform.

FEANTSA AS A PARTNER

FEANTSA is ready to act as the key partner of the European Commission and MS in delivering on the proposal of a European Collaboration Platform on Homelessness. Our contribution can include expertise, mobilising key stakeholders such as the NGO homeless service sector, public authorities, the research community, neighbouring sectors etc.

We fully support Commissioner Schmit, Portuguese Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security Ana Mendes Godinho; and Goodwill Ambassador for the Fight against Homelessness in Europe Yves Leterme when they say:

“there is nothing acceptable about homelessness. It is a profound assault on dignity, belonging, and life itself. It is fundamentally irreconcilable with the EU's objectives of social progress and is impossible to square with any vision for Europe's social model” ^[1].

We are ready to seize the opportunity of the action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights and work with the European Commission, Member States and stakeholders to progressively reduce homelessness.

[1] <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/opinion/homelessness-cannot-be-just-another-fact-of-life-in-the-eu/>

[2] Baptista, I and Marlier, E (2019) *Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe: A Study of National Policies*, ESPN, European Commission

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8243&furtherPubs=yes>

[3] Baptista, I and Marlier, E (2019) *Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe: A Study of National Policies*, ESPN, European Commission

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8243&furtherPubs=yes>

[4] SPC Thematic Review 2019 *Housing-led enabling social services tackling homelessness and housing exclusion* <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22314&langId=en>

[5] <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/opinion/homelessness-cannot-be-just-another-fact-of-life-in-the-eu/>