Family Homelessness: A Child's Perspective

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"Thomas and Kelly are living with their mother Ria, in the house of Ria's new boyfriend. Their own house had been declared unfit for habitation. The two other brothers are at boarding school and living in a youth care institution respectively. Before that, they spent time living at various shelters for homeless people, scattered across Flanders. Time and again, they had to change schools. The family has debts and not enough money to rent a home."

Sadly, Thomas and Kelly are not the only children in Flanders to find themselves without a home or a roof over their heads. A few years ago, Professor Koen Hermans counted some 3,730 homeless people in Flanders' homeless shelters. 1,728 children joined their parents to live in homeless shelters, including night shelters and transit housing. In March 2017, homeless sector support center, La Strada, together with volunteers, counted in one hour 653 homeless children in Brussels. The children were sleeping rough in public spaces, staying in night shelters or living in illegally occupied buildings.

As a response to the dire situation in Belgium, we - the Flemish Children's Rights Commissioner and his Office - produced a dossier[1] analysing the root causes of the homelessness affecting children and proposing policy changes that would effectively address this homelessness. For this dossier, we analysed the housing and homelessness policy in Flanders from a child's perspective and interviewed 43 parents, children, and young people who were homeless, or about to become homeless.

In 2018 the European Commission and the Belgian government gave us the opportunity to host a Peer review on "Homelessness from a child's perspective, Brussels, 27-28 June 2018[2]" and discuss the dossier at a European level.

In this paper we highlight the key elements of an effective child homelessness strategy, to ensure the well-being and rights of children currently without a home, that was agreed on by the countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania and Belgium) who participated in the Peer Review.

The multiple vulnerabilities of homeless children demand a multistrand child homelessness strategy that takes these vulnerabilities into account

The interviews in the dossier, with children, young people and parents, show that homelessness has grave consequences for children. Homeless children frequently change neighbourhoods, schools, friends and neighbours. Each time, they move they must start again. It compromises their physical and psychological well-being, as well as their health and development. It shapes their future. The situation of homelessness does not only contradict a child's right to housing, but also denies them their other rights, such as the right to privacy, friends, leisure and education. They become refugees in their own country.

Homelessness among children is a "both/and" story, meaning several key elements and policy changes must be taken into account when attempting to protect the well-being and rights of these children.

The participants of the Peer Review agreed that an effective child homelessness strategy must focus on five key elements: prevention of child homelessness, data collection to increase visibility of homeless children at policy level, management of child-friendly shelters and support, establishment of a holistic housing allocation system, and local governance and collaboration among stakeholders.

Prevention of child homelessness

In their initial stages, the interviews set out from the idea that homelessness is largely the result of a lack of money and means. However, over the course of the first few interviews it became clear that homelessness among children and young people is not a single-cause event. Parents, children and young people cited reasons for homelessness including: their home being declared unfit for habitation and forced eviction, as well as: alcohol abuse, a parent in the process of radicalising, a mother who stopped looking after the children, domestic violence and constant arguing between parents.

The Peer Review reiterated the importance of prevention and early intervention in effectively addressing the structural causes of child homelessness. These include increasing access to affordable housing, taking strong poverty reduction measures, the provision of adequate welfare services, and the implementation of comprehensive child protection systems and youth services that support young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independence.

Data collection to increase visibility of homeless children at policy level

As a group and as individuals, homeless children and young people are insufficiently visible in regulation and policy plans on homelessness, housing, and rental issues. They are also ignored in statistics and data collection on homelessness. How many children, young people and parents need a home? Who needs a bed each night in winter shelters? How many evictions are carried out (each year) and how many children are involved in these evictions? Almost none of the participating countries could answer these questions.

Highlights of the Peer Review demonstrate that existing data on family homelessness is often incomplete and sporadic. The participants stated that data collection and improved statistics on homelessness among families and children is crucial for the scientific evaluation and regular monitoring of policies, in order to assess their effectiveness and ensure that spending makes sustainable social impact. More specifically, in each data collection exercise on homelessness, specific measures need to be integrated so that the age of each homeless child can be captured. This will make it possible to form conclusions about homeless children, not only homeless adults.

Management of child-friendly shelters and support

"We were in a winter shelter and now we're here (family shelter). They don't lock the door as early in the evenings. So I can play and stay out longer. At the winter shelter, we were also able to do some arts and crafts, like making rainbow looms. They have a playroom there and we're allowed go on the computer if we like. Here (family shelter), you can't." (Zaid, primary school, family shelter)

The children, young people and parents who participated in the interviews illustrated that long spells of living together in collective homeless shelters present further problems, especially when there are barely any prospects of moving to a home of their own. Parents and children are stressed and lose heart in the face of their seemingly desperate situation. Parents and children find themselves in a constant state of transience, when the very things they need the most are stability and steadiness. This stress and despair weighs on the relationship between parent and child, between parent and care worker, and between other residents. Teenagers especially find this particularly hard. As time goes on, they want to have more of a say in their own life. They want to build an independent life for themselves, which sometimes clashes with the collective rules of the facilities. Families that do have some privacy, courtesy of the infrastructure of separate residential units, greatly appreciate this.

Although all Peer review participants considered shelters to be a last resort and as providing only a temporary solution, they generally agreed that they should be adapted to children's needs as much as possible, in order to mitigate the adverse effects of living in such transitional, temporary accommodation. This includes ensuring a safe, protective and supportive environment, that enables a life of some continuity (i.e. children of school age can remain in their school, are able to retain relationships with their peers etc.). It is also vital that children are involved in the development of child-friendly shelters and services. Children should be seen as individuals with their own rights. They must be allowed to stay children, to engage in appropriate, children's activities, express their feelings, and access information that will allow them to grow. Above all, children must be able to depend on a reliable adult.

Establishment of a holistic housing allocation system

It won't come as a surprise that the greatest wish of the children, young people and parents that we interviewed, is to have their own home; A place where they feel happy, can build a family life and secure their future. Parents and adolescents talk about their discouraging search for a suitable and affordable home. They experience several barriers to housing: unaffordable rent, discrimination in the private rental market, and a shortages of social rental housing

"That I have a home where I can stay and go on living. That I won't need to move again. Now I have to move again, for the umpteenth time. I've moved 22 times. And now I'm made to move out again." (Ria, single mother of 4, staying with her new boyfriend)

Across the participating Peer Review countries, young people and families with children who are homeless are considered a priority group when it comes to housing allocation. However, how this support is realised tends to vary among the Member States. In reality, allocation depends upon specific eligibility conditions, criteria for matching children, young people, and families with housing suitable to their needs, and

importantly, on the scale of the housing provision. In the participating countries, the key obstacles to accessing affordable housing were identified as the insufficient supply of social housing, resulting in long waiting-lists, and the financial constraints of families.

The Peer Review discussed several interesting and innovative housing-led initiatives and alternative housing solutions (e.g. Housing First for Youth in Denmark; social rental agencies in Belgium) directed at overcoming these challenges. Meanwhile, a more structural policy is needed to guarantee housing affordability.

Local governance and collaboration among stakeholders

"At the shelter in my town, I would go round to play at my friend's home on Wednesdays. She didn't come to play at mine. She was allowed to, but I didn't want her to. In the evening, I attended music classes." (Rebecca, primary school, social house)

From a child's perspective, local solutions and collaboration among different services are crucial for preventing children and young people from becoming homeless. If they could find a suitable home or a place at a shelter in their own municipality, they would be more likely to experience continuity in their education. Their ties with the local neighbourhood, school and friends would remain intact.

The Peer Review echoed the notion that strengthening local governance and devoting sufficient resources are essential for addressing homelessness among families and children in an effective way. A local governance solution is necessary for children. It guarantees continuity in their development, education, integration and social inclusion.

The Member States considered access to service provision, in particular ensuring the quality of housing and other social services, and the need for a variety of access points to ease access for different groups of service users, of great importance. Furthermore, smooth cooperation between the homelessness services, the Public Social Welfare Centre, local policy, social housing organisations and letting agencies, youth welfare, education and youth policy are key.

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