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Preventing and Tackling Homelessness

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on behalf of

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DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





Brief description of the working group

The group was established after a meeting of the EUROCITIES Forum social affairs in spring 2004. The following cities are involved: Copenhagen, Genoa, Glasgow, Helsinki, Newcastle, Oslo, Rotterdam, Riga, Stockholm, Utrecht and Vienna. At the moment Madrid and Warsaw are also interested in joining the group.

The *Cities' strategies against homelessness* group aims to carry out a useful comparison between the different local support systems for homeless people and to make visible all the advantages and disadvantages of the respective measures. The outcome of the partnership should be a better understanding of both the framework and practical measures for achieving the successful (re)integration of homeless people in European cities.

The comparative analysis of components and structures of social systems to combat homelessness is likely to result in a catalogue of supporting programmes, which will be identified by the cities involved, to support sustainable homeless integration in European cities.

Meetings in Vienna (October 2004) and Glasgow (February 2005) brought together the first results providing a common overview of the local support systems for homeless people (see attached slides).

In February 2005, eight group participants made an application under the Community Action Programme to combat social exclusion 2002 -2006 to start a wide knowledge exchange programme for the local experts of the cities involved. The success of the application will be decided by July 2005.

Outcome of the working group

At the beginning of the work, the problem of agreeing definitions complicated the discussions. The FEANTSA definition was very helpful, and the group decided to use this in its future work.

The first findings of the working group concern the framework of conditions that are useful in fighting homelessness, and obstacles to supporting and integrating homeless people.



Major obstacles preventing successful integration:

Three regulations, which are applied at most centres of accommodation for the homeless, explain why many homeless people do not want to stay overnight in such institutions:

- Restrictions to men and women living together
- Restrictions on keeping pets
- Restrictions on drinking alcohol in the accommodation

Measures needed to realise effective support for the homeless:

- To prevent as many evictions as possible, so as to avoid the beginning of homeless 'careers'
- Effective support for mentally ill people (homeless and non-homeless)
- Easy access to affordable flats (e.g. communal housing) for inhabitants of transitional shelters
- The offer of unlimited special accommodation for (former) long-term homeless people, (freak houses for older people as well as for younger people).

It seems that the existence or non-existence of such freak houses in any city is closely connected to the number of people sleeping rough in the urban space of the city.

Assessment of relevance and transferability

The discussion in the EURO CITIES working group on homelessness seems to be very similar to the focus of the papers presented to the social inclusion Peer Review. The relevance of combating homelessness as efficiently as possible is not under debate between participants. The transferability of some measures to improve support for the homeless may be difficult because of a lack of involvement of national authorities in some Member States. In some countries, the responsibility for social issues has been moved from national to regional or local levels without transferring the financial resources. Representatives from the local level may be encouraged to move responsibility for supporting homeless people to local NGOs without funding them for the work they need to do.



Questions to discuss

- The status of inhabitants of the freak houses is not really clear. Are they former homeless or currently homeless people?
- What about residents in shelters for victims of domestic violence? Are they homeless (because they are staying in public accommodation) or are they non-homeless (because they used to have accommodation, which they cannot live in at the moment)?

Involvement in the NAPs/incl. procedure

Two participants in the working group on homelessness (Stockholm and Vienna) have been identified as examples of 'best practice' in successfully supporting homeless people, in the European Commission's comments on the NAPs/incl. 2003-2005 (p. 162). But all the working group participants are supporting the aim of the NAPs/incl.; to improve local support measures targeted at the most socially marginalised people, including the homeless.

Appendix: 2nd NAP/incl. Austria 2003-2005 Extracts relevant to policies for the homeless

Evictions

If people are threatened by homelessness, eviction prevention offices become active in order to bring about a settlement of the conflict by means of mediation, advice and social work. The evaluation of eviction prevention has proven that this instrument is very effective. In Vienna for example, two-thirds of all eviction cases pending in court can be avoided due to the eviction prevention office and other public support services.

Update of the 2nd NAP/incl. Austria (2004)

With a view to promoting the social integration of homeless people, the concrete objective was formulated in the NAP/incl. for the *Land* of Vienna that there should be no homeless families and long-term homeless people (accommodation in transitional institutions for a maximum of two years) by 2006. Important steps towards implementing the Vienna Integration Plan for the Homeless, developed since 1998, are to phase out obsolete large institutions and replace them by target-group-specific homes. Homeless people are to be accommodated in these transitional institutions for a maximum of two years.



Subsequently they will live in flats of their own or adequate forms of permanent residence. As permanent housing tailored to needs is expanded, the people moving into these homes become 'former homeless'. In 2003 the number of long-term homeless people in Vienna decreased by 35%. The number of people housed in transitional institutions of Vienna's Homeless Assistance (*Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe*) for more than two years dropped from 428 to 279. The number of people spending more than ten years in such an institution could be reduced from more than 80% to 11% at present. This success is due to the fact that large institutions have been closed and smaller, needs-based and target-group-oriented housing has been made available, which, for example, suits the concrete needs of homeless families or homeless elderly people. Based on the development of the situation of the homeless in Vienna in 2003, it can be assumed that the objective defined in the NAP/incl. will be met by 2006.