

Working group on Homelessness (WGH)

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The Eurocities Working Group on Homelessness (WGH)

The Eurocities Working Group on Homelessness (WGH) was established in 2004. It is chaired by the City of Vienna and currently has 12 members: Barcelona, Bergen, Malmö, Newcastle, Munich, Oslo, Riga, Rotterdam, Stockholm, Utrecht, Vienna and Warsaw. The WGH meets on a regularly basis to analyse policies and practices in preventing and coping with homelessness within cities. This includes analysis of the interventions and services aimed at 1) preventing homelessness, 2) at organising shelter and other services to homeless people and 3) at sustaining people who have previously been homeless but are now in sustainable accommodation.

To better understand the overall situation in a city, the WGH carries out study visits and systematic information exchange to compare the effectiveness and transferability of strategies and service provision. The WGH develops recommendations for services for homeless people, as well as measures for preventing homelessness and sustaining accommodation. The role of the city is to provide leadership, direction and co-ordination to enable all stakeholders to improve the outcomes for service users. We have sought to establish common principles rather than detailed joint procedures. This is because we seek to serve clients that have similar needs in different legislative and financial contexts.

The WGH has developed a transferable strategic model for preventing homelessness, which we have called the “integrated chain”. The “integrated chain” is a whole systems approach that refers to the city’s role in developing a range of commissioned services working together under a common strategy that seeks to support homeless household’s (by which we mean single people, as well as couples and families) progress to the optimum level of independence and social inclusion. Within the “chain” there should be a range of services to meet the diverse needs of homeless people. The specifics of “integrated chain” vary dependent upon local conditions, yet many of the measures which are put in place in the cities are very similar. The WGH has also used the ETHOS definition in order to get a perspective on the numbers of homeless people and services in each individual city. And recently there has been a discussion within the WGH about the use of the so-called “integrated chain matrix” which looks further than the offer of services and more in terms of procurement and policy chains.

Over the last years, the member cities of the WGH put considerable energy into improving coordination between relevant stakeholders in healthcare, housing and labour market. They worked towards securing a necessary amount of affordable accommodation and appropriate support for homeless people. It is crucial to understand and acknowledge the individual needs of homeless people and to arrange services in an integrated and coordinated way. This requires joint working of public and NGO services. They have to cooperate positively and understand their role within the system and how this contributes to the individual’s long-term wellbeing.

Eurocities WGH statements for the Peer Review

Both the discussion paper from European Housing Research Ltd as well as the host country report have provided useful inside information for the Peer Review. As a first reaction to these papers, we would like to make some statements for this discussion.

- **Possible relevance of the strategy to other countries in the EU**
 The use of counting methods in order to plan the offer on homeless services is relevant throughout the cities involved in the WGH. As long as it is clear that the data collection should be of service to the policy making, and not a virtue in its own. Since the cities that participate in the Eurocities WGH are also the larger municipalities within their countries, they are often seen as a role model for other municipalities. Hence, several WGH cities have recently developed new methods of counting themselves. For example, in Barcelona, a form of city mapping is used to determine the amount of rough sleepers throughout the city. And in Oslo there is a planning and control method in which user involvement is used.
- **Brief assessment on potential transferability (plus conditions and obstacles)**
 In order for the Vienna data gathering and planning method to be transferrable, we need to see more in depth on how it is used in practice. So, it's hard to say anything about this beforehand. However, it can be said that the particularities of the city of Vienna will be of influence on the transferability. For example, the fact that Vienna has the largest social housing sector of any city in Europe will make it harder, because this will probably have an effect on the way of data gathering. Then again, the fact that in Austria the responsibility for homeless issues is delegated to the municipality, as it is in other countries and cities that participate in the Eurocities WGH, will make it easier.
- **Discussion issues within the WGH related to the Peer Review**
 Recent discussions within the Eurocities WGH have involved the aspect of people without documents who are homeless, as well as Roma and Sinti people ("gypsies"). In the discussion paper from the European Housing Research Ltd it is suggested to use the national identity number as a key for data collection. However, illegal people do not have such a number. How to cope with this? In the discussion paper, the focus is mostly on data gathering of input information. It seems to be more offer-driven instead of demand-driven or client-driven. This should be a topic for discussion.
- **Contribution to the National Strategy reports**
 The aspect of data gathering for planning is an important part of the national strategies. In general, it's a helpful instrument to convince both politicians and citizens to invest (money, time, personnel) in homeless issues. It also shows the obstacle if there is no common denominator such as the Feantsa definition. Within the Eurocities WGH the first part if the Feantsa definition is used. The WGH cities recommend the use of the Ethos definition to the other municipalities in their countries as well as on the state level. However within the EU countries MPHASIS project, which also promotes the use of one standard definition like Ethos, has had different outcomes.

- **Key issues and main questions**

Besides the questions raised earlier, about counting people without documents and the issue of demand-driven versus offer-driven counting, there are some more practical issues. For one, we should explore the importance of a baseline in counting. How to make the decision what is the baseline?

Also, within some cities that participate in the Eurocities WGH, there has been a positive experience with outcome measurements. This can be positive for a city to show some “hard” results (as compared to “soft” input data). For example, in Rotterdam there has been a “business case” that showed that each euro that is spent in homeless care, pays itself back in terms of less costs for the police and justice departments. It also contributes for a benchmark, as to show good or best practices.

Within most Eurocities WGH cities there has been a discussion on how to organise client involvement as it comes to homeless policies. This means not only the client satisfaction about the services offered, but also to use their input (experiences en opinions) in procurement and decision making.

And finally, how to organise that NGO's and (local) government can work together on the issue of data collection and counting, as it benefits both? And what will this mean in regard to privacy issues (of the client as well as the organisations involved)? Who “owns” the data collecting system and hence the data that are collected?