CITY MEASURES TO SUPPORT HOMELESS PEOPLE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

During the covid-19 pandemic and while many European countries were going into lockdown, homeless people were quickly identified as among the most vulnerable populations. With no house to go back to, they had very limited options to implement physical distancing precautions. Additionally, health-related pre-existing conditions often increased their vulnerability to the virus. But besides this, the lockdown greatly impacted their access to essential services. Confronted with this situation, cities were at the forefront to provide emergency solutions and quickly took a diverse set of measures.[1]

Providing emergency housing solution and shelter

The measures most frequently taken by cities were to provide emergency housing solutions or shelter to homeless people. Some cities such as Genova increased the capacities of the existing shelters or refurnished older shelters, including with entertainment material like in Madrid. Many cities (Athens, Brussels, Dusseldorf, Madrid, Stuttgart, Utrecht, Vienna) opened new shelters, sometimes for specific groups like women or as isolation places for homeless people who have contracted the covid-19. Night shelters were also converted to remain open all day long. In Madrid, the winter campaign was extended, ensuring that all existing emergency solutions would remain available during the crisis. To respond to the huge demand of emergency accommodation, some cities had to convert sport centres (Gijon, Nice, Paris, Zaragoza), exhibition centres (Barcelona) or to create a quarantine town like in Bratislava. The most frequent solution adopted by cities to provide decent emergency housing solution was to book empty hotel rooms, B&B or youth hostels to host the most deprived. Barcelona and Bristol also took advantaged of empty tourist apartments to provide adequate housing. Less frequent solutions also included the use of former nursing home (Stockholm), student housing (Bristol), converted shipping containers (Cardiff) or former office building adapted with specific quarantine stations (Berlin). Glasgow and Leeds also reached an agreement with housing providers to use vacant housing.

These measures were mainly targeted for roofless people especially those with underlying health conditions, refugees and migrants and people living in cramped households belonging to the identified risk groups. Madrid also opened access to these measures for people at risk of evictions. While many of these groups were previously known to social services, cities also identified new groups increasingly at risk of housing exclusion such as international students who had no solution to go home (Birmingham). Many cities (Ghent, Glasgow, Gothenburg, Leeds, Lille Metropole, Sheffield, Toulouse,

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[1] This report is based on inputs from 36 cities during city dialogues, target groups and bilateral exchanges as well as contributions from cities published on EUROCITIES platform COVIDnews.eurocities.eu

Cities which contributed: Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Birmingham, Bordeaux, Bratislava, Brest, Bristol, Brno, Brussels, Cardiff, Dusseldorf, Edinburgh, Genova, Ghent, Gijon, Glasgow, Gothenburg, Hanau, Leipzig, Leeds, Lille Metropole, London, Madrid, Munich, Nantes, Nice, Paris, Riga, Sheffield, Stockholm, Stuttgart, Utrecht, Vienna, Zagreb, Zaragoza

Vienna) additionally focused some of their support on Roma people who were particularly hit by the situation due to a combination of factors (language barrier, lack of decent housing, difficult access to sanitation, precarious work conditions, lack of access to state benefits etc.)

Ensuring access to food

Emergency measures also had to be taken to **ensure food delivery**. While access to food was ensured in emergency accommodations, the importance of the demand also lead cities to increase the number of distribution points. In Ghent, Glasgow and Toulouse, specific food deliveries were organised in the Roma settlements. Bordeaux and Paris also ensured that drinking fountains were easily accessible throughout the city. Most of the support is funded by cities, either directly or through grants to NGOs running the food banks. Bordeaux combined the city grant with the organisation of a fundraising campaign to provide additional funds to the third sector. In Bordeaux, Dusseldorf and Toulouse, the municipality also requisitioned public sector catering services to prepare meals for those in need. Demanding hygiene restrictions and higher needs sometimes lead to a lack of volunteers and shortage of products. In Leeds, outreach workers were thus taking care of food distribution. As a result, some cities opted for prepaid food cards (Madrid, Toulouse) or direct subsidies to families who would otherwise have benefited from subsidised canteen meals for their children (Paris). Birmingham shared the importance of long-term preparation. NGOs in the city had identified the risks as early as early February and a joint preparation was started with the city. This enabled the creation of 2 food hubs and provided flexibility to move from an original estimate of 20 tons of food to distribute per week to the current 60 tons.

Protecting homeless people from the virus

To ensure the security of homeless people, cities also took **protection measures**. Free face masks were distributed to homeless people in Brno and Nice. Bratislava and Dusseldorf also gave sanitary supply and disinfection products. In Munich, hygiene truck toured the city. Shelters were also updated to reinforce protection. In Bordeaux, the municipality opened new access to showers and public toilets in the council building. Cities also reinforced the access to healthcare via accessible medical centres, street outpatient clinics and medical and social workers in emergency accommodations. Berlin and Leeds also created telephone hotlines to ensure easy access to first health support. These measures were combined with information campaigns often run in several languages (Berlin, Brno, Ghent, Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, Vienna) or targeting specific groups (for example homeless youngsters in Utrecht).

Preventing an increase in homelessness

Prevention measures were also taken with the hope to mitigate the social impact and avoid an increase in the number of homeless people in the coming months. Several municipalities implemented eviction bans, in particular for tenants of municipal housing dwellings (Vienna) and informed tenants about their rights (Leeds). Cities like Nantes also created subsidies for tenants who have lost their job. Paris offers counselling in the clearing of debts. Municipalities additionally provide financial support to those who lost their income but are not

covered by national schemes, financing the salaries of the homeless street newspaper in Utrecht, maintaining scholarships and providing additional emergency aid for students in Paris.

Providing continuous support

Continuity of support was also at the heart of the management of this crisis. Cities ensured that access to support teams of social workers, psychologists and doctors was maintained. Contact points remained opened in many cities to provide advice on most urgent matters, support teams were available in emergency accommodations or reachable via tablet installed in hotel rooms like in Madrid. In Bratislava, Cardiff and Leeds, outreach teams continued to contact homeless people and inform them about covid-19, share options about shelter of track their health. In Brussels, a mobile unit of medical staff allows for a safe transition to the hospitals when homeless people with serious health conditions and bring other to centres and shelters. Paris also used support from volunteers to continue social patrols as well as the preparation and distribution of meals.

Coordinating stakeholders

Throughout the months of lockdown, flexibility and coordination of city administrations were essential. In Vienna, a task force was created to gather delegates of different departments of the city administration. This enabled workers on the ground to share information and needs quickly to decision makers. The city council of Madrid launched a homeless emergency plan and Bratislava created a standardised procedure to access quarantine shelters through social services.

Additionally, this crisis reinforced the importance of collaboration of national, regional and local authorities to provide best possible services to the most deprived. In Brussels, the coordination with regional and local authorities ensured a swift implementation of the changes while in Nantes financial support was coordinated with county level. Barcelona and Bratislava received the support of the army to quickly install shelters or provide access to health services. All cities also reinforced their collaboration with NGOs which often support access to services in the different neighbourhoods. Madrid also collaborated with enterprises through a public-private partnership aiming at providing new equipment for a homeless shelter.

Preparing for the future

With lockdown measures being slowly lifted throughout Europe, cities more and more question what will happen with these emergency solutions and how to convert them into more long-term opportunities. Several cities opened big shelters which are not aligned with their usual standards guaranteeing autonomy and privacy or even with the Housing First model. Municipalities highlight once again that the question of homelessness is only considered at national from a housing perspective, thus preventing the implementation of long-term integrated approaches. They hope that the crisis will increase awareness on this

question and encourage governments to act. In the Netherlands for example, a new strategy for homelessness dedicate €200 million for the next two years. Cities have been advocating for years for such a plan, which might have been accelerated as a result of the dire needs linked to covid-19.

The needs are not new but are expected to become even more pressing as a result of the covid-19 crisis. Cities foresee an increase in the number of rough sleepers and homeless people in the coming months. Many people lost their job and cannot afford their already precarious housing solutions anymore. Migrants working in the informal sector are often not covered by national and European supporting schemes of benefits. Students which were using flexible work options or summer jobs to pay their studies are likely to struggle even more in the coming months. Increased electricity and water bills during the lockdown might also have burdened already tight budget. In Ghent, an additional risk was identified through the difficulty to apply for social housing. During the pandemic, social housing services were not outreaching and were only accessible digitally. Therefore, the most deprived groups in the city might have failed to ask for social housing, a situation which could have long lasting impacts on their housing condition. Additionally, strict lockdown measures might have had a huge impact on individual mental health and result in an increase of social exclusion, often linked to housing exclusion.

The number of people accessing social services is already increasing and this is likely to be only the beginning. A recent Eurofound study[2] showed that almost 6% of Europeans find it very likely or rather likely that they will need to leave their accommodation in the next 6 months because they will not be able to afford it anymore. This figure reaches almost 14% in Greece. Cities will play a key role in mitigating the impact of this crisis and preventing housing exclusion, yet this will only be possible with the support of all level of governments, including the EU.

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[2] Eurofound (2020) *Financial situation and covid-19,* https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19/financial-situation