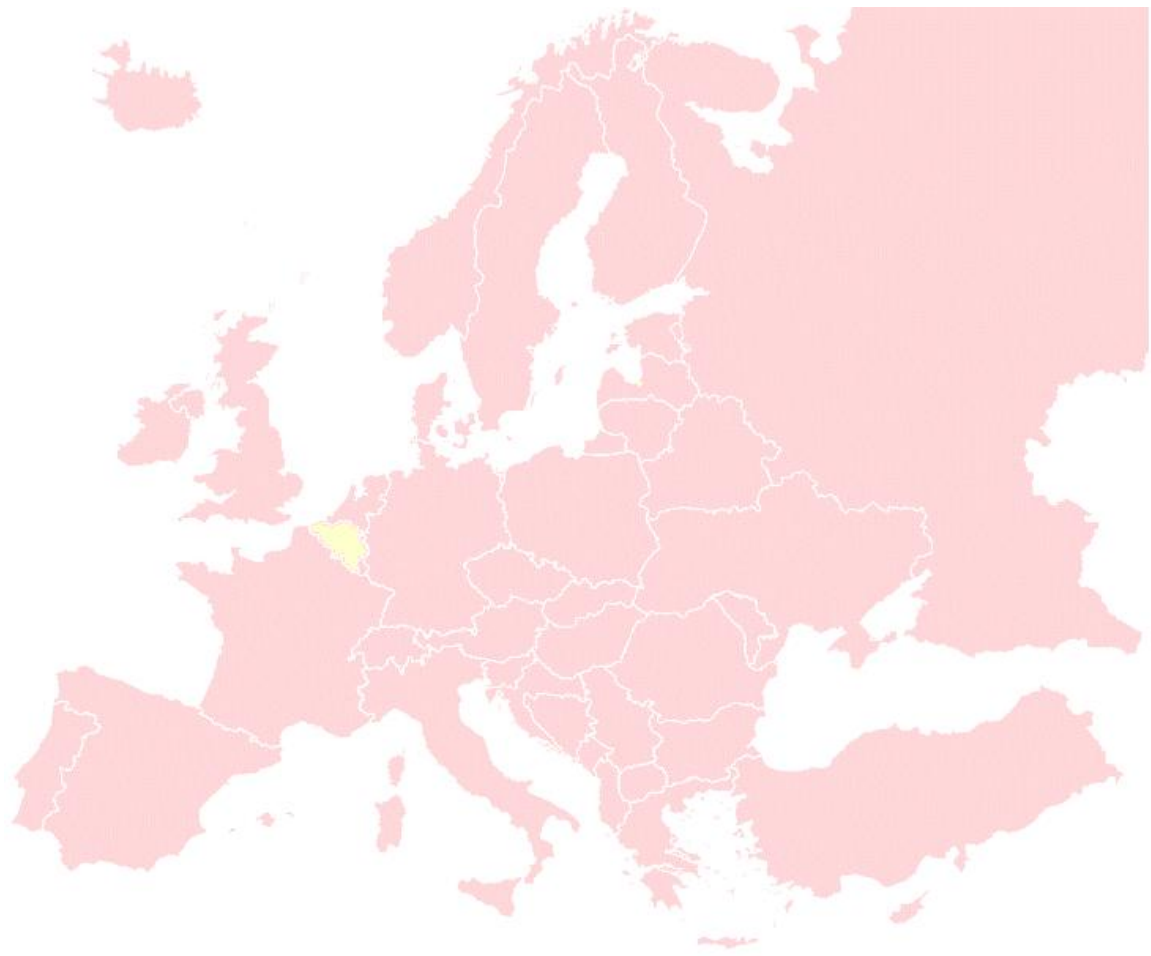




**PEER REVIEW ON HOMELESSNESS
POLICIES IN GHENT CITY
(BELGIUM)**

**HABITACT
PEER REVIEW
2012**





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PEER REVIEW on Homelessness Policies in Ghent Discussion Paper

Maarten Davelaar

MDavelaar@verwey-jonker.nl
Verwey-Jonker Institute
Kromme Nieuwegracht 6
3512 HG Utrecht
Tel + 31 30 230 07 99
www.verwey-jonker.nl

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1. Introduction¹

Over the last decades changing forms of governance have been identified in the field of homelessness policies and social policies in general. In many countries responsibilities for tackling homelessness increasingly have been transferred to local authorities and efforts have been made to mobilise local stakeholders such as municipalities, regional authorities, NGOs, housing providers, etc. (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010). This tendency can also be identified in the national homelessness strategies which have been adopted in many countries mainly in Northern and Western Europe. In the last years the financial crisis has put strains on national governments and the pressure towards local responses to homelessness is increasing.

Increased focus on homelessness has emerged also at EU level. This reflects not only an increased focus on the social inclusion of vulnerable groups but also that new challenges transgressing the boundaries of the national states emerge, such as the situation of new migrants within the European Union. In 2009, homelessness was the focus of policy exchanges within the EU social protection and social inclusion strategy, as the Social Affairs ministers of the 27 EU countries renewed their call for concerted EU action on homelessness. In 2010 combating poor housing and housing exclusion was one of six key priorities in the framework of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion together with promoting the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. In December 2010, a European Consensus Conference on homelessness was held in Brussels. In its policy recommendations the jury concludes that “EU-level policy co-ordination in the area of homelessness in the framework of the Social OMC has enhanced and added value to efforts at national, regional and local level over the past ten years. This has created a body of knowledge and infrastructure that can be built upon. Further progress necessitates continued and strengthened EU level involvement in the fight against homelessness. The jury therefore calls for the development of an ambitious, integrated EU strategy, underpinned by national/regional strategies with the long-term aim of ending homelessness.” (Jury, 2010: 26). In September 2011, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on an EU Homelessness Strategy (B7-0475/201), calling for “the development of an ambitious, integrated EU strategy, underpinned by national and regional strategies with the long-term aim of ending homelessness.” The new European Platform against poverty and social exclusion (launched in the framework of the European Union’s Europe2020 strategy) will be an important framework for developing this EU homelessness strategy.

The involvement of local, regional, national and supra-national levels in combating homelessness reflects that homelessness is a complex social phenomenon emerging in the interplay between structural barriers, social and housing policies and individual vulnerability factors. Local authorities do not always exercise control of the factors which affect the scale and character of homelessness. As centres of both economic and population growth many European cities face challenges in the field of housing supply. Also general social policies such as the level of social benefits are usually set at national level. However, such structural limitations only reinforce the pressure on cities to develop new and innovative solutions to tackle homelessness. Along with the decentralisation of responsibilities and the mobilisation of local stakeholders the need for more research and information on tackling homelessness at local level is increasing. The interplay between housing and social policies and the challenges and experiences of implementing national strategy goals must be understood in the local context.

¹ The author likes to thank Willem Gobeyn (City of Ghent), Tom van Nieuwenhove (City of Ghent), Geraldine Serras (Social Rental Agency, Public Centre for Social Welfare-OCMW Ghent), Danny Lescauwae (Support-office General Welfare, SAW), Ivo Blancke (Social Housing Association Woningent), for sharing their views on homeless and housing policies in Ghent and Flanders. Hugo Swinnen (social policy advisor, Verwey-Jonker Institute) gave valuable comments to a draft of this paper. Thanks to Liz Gosme (FEANTSA policy officer, and coordinator of the HABITACT network) for coordinating the preparations for the peer review and for editing this paper.

HABITACT, the European exchange forum on local homeless strategies, was launched with the support of FEANTSA in June 2009 by a core group of cities. The core group of cities are the following: Aarhus (Denmark), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Athens (Greece), Bærum (Norway), Copenhagen (Denmark), Dublin (Ireland), Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxemburg), Ghent (Belgium), Gothenburg (Sweden), Madrid (Spain), Odense (Denmark), Sandefjord (Norway), Venice (Italy), and Vitoria-Gasteiz (Spain). In addition to the core group, HABITACT works closely with more than 100 municipalities around Europe. HABITACT's first aim is to develop European cooperation between local social policy administrations on tackling homelessness.

HABITACT peer reviews aim to build capacity of local policy-makers to effectively tackle homelessness at local level, and hence support the European exchanges within HABITACT with an evidence base for developing local homeless strategies. The focus of this peer review is local homelessness policies in the City of Ghent, Belgium. Participating "peer cities" in the 2012 HABITACT peer review include: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Baerum, Brussels, Dudley, Esch-sur-Alzette, Gothenburg, Helsinki, Kortrijk, Lucca, Odense, Sandefjord, Stockholm, Tartu, and Verona.

The aim is to create a dynamic and motivating process from which both the host and the peers can benefit. The peer review is designed to deliver the following outputs:

- To identify, evaluate and disseminate good practice on the Ghent model;
- To look at the implementation of the model on a practical level;
- To assess whether and how good practice can be effectively transferred to other local authorities;
- To provide a learning opportunity for cities throughout Europe about the implementation process or policy approaches and programmes in Ghent.

To deal with these questions, we first look at the Belgian and Flemish context and identify the most relevant actors and policies on these levels. We then present some facts on homelessness in Ghent, describe the characteristics of the Ghent model and highlight some developments. Special attention will be paid to Social Rental Agencies as well as other housing dimensions of the Ghent model. Next, we discuss various stronger elements of the local approach which could probably be transferred to other countries / cities and list some challenges for the future. The paper ends by raising key questions for the peer review.

2. Homelessness policies in Belgium and Flanders

This discussion paper continues with an introduction of the broader context of local homelessness policies in Flanders (as homelessness is a regional competence in Belgium, and Ghent is in the region of Flanders). First, we pay attention to the definitions of homelessness used in policy and practice. Secondly, we present some facts on homelessness and housing in Flanders. Third, the most important competences and responsibilities on the national/federal Belgian level and the regional Flemish level are described. We will limit ourselves mostly here to information on Flanders, because the federal (Belgian) level is less relevant for homeless policies and practices in Ghent. A few important exceptions, however, are mentioned. An overview of the main actors involved in developing and implementing policies is given. The chapter ends with a short introduction of some main trends and developments.

2.1 Homelessness in Belgium and Flanders

A comparative analysis by the European Observatory on Homelessness (FEANTSA) of policies and practices of access to social housing for homeless people in 13 EU countries (Pleace et al., 2012), shows that the policy definitions of homelessness in Belgium, reflect quite closely the ETHOS (see annex) operational categories of rooflessness and houselessness (Pleace et al., 2012: 21). In addition, Belgium (Flanders) has relatively broad definitions of homelessness encompassing squatting, living in overcrowded conditions, and living on camping sites in caravans, categories of housing needs that are defined as forms of housing exclusion in ETHOS, rather than as homelessness (Pleace et al, 2012: 27). A remarkable difference between Belgium and the other 12 countries is the fact that in Belgium, people in temporary accommodation for immigrants are regarded as homeless. The services for immigrants and for other homeless groups are, however, in practice separated. People in accommodation for immigrants are not addressed in local homeless policies.

Facts on homelessness and housing

According to older estimations there are 17,000 homeless people in Belgium (12,000 in Flanders, 5,000 in Wallonia, and 1,700 in Brussels² (De Decker, 2003, Demaerschalk and Hermans, 2010), We will concentrate further on the figures for Flanders. This older estimation of 12,000 homeless people in the Flemish residential homeless care per year is based on aggregated information collected by the Centres of General Welfare, *Centra voor Algemeen Welzijn* (CAW) which provide homeless services, and, according to Demaerschalk and Hermans (2010) it is probably an overestimation. On the other hand, this figure does not include the homeless users of the services of Public Centres for Social Welfare - *Openbare Centra voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn* (OCMWs). No aggregated data are available from these municipal services. Their supply of accommodation was estimated in 2008 at 1,158 houses and 2,073 beds in Flanders (De Bolle, Poesmans, & Verbeeck, 2009, in: Demaerschalk and Hermans, 2010: 13), which may give some indication of the number of people they support. Approximately half of the total services (accommodation, support, financial assistance) used by homeless people are provided by the NGO sector (mainly CAWs, but also others) the other half is mainly public (OCMWs and city departments). However, in terms of accommodation (shelters, hostels, temporary and residential accommodation) almost all services are catered for by the NGO sector.

A homeless person from Antwerp, can try and find shelter in Ghent. The costs of that shelter are taken care of by the OCMW in Antwerp. Only if the person decides to stay in Ghent and is registered at the public administration, the city of Ghent becomes financially responsible. The mobility of clients between cities in Flanders is substantial.³ Moving from one to another city is thus possible and according to the SAW quite frequent: once you have lost (your faith in) support from agencies in one place, you can always try and make a new start with another CAW or OCMW. EU citizens - except until 2013 Romanian and Bulgarian citizens - are entitled to all local services, including homelessness services, although under several restrictions: they have to have worked for a period of time before being able to making claims on a minimum income provision. Additionally, they have to fulfil certain duties (learn Dutch, sending children to school, engage in trajectories aimed at education or work).

Among the main trends in homelessness in the last five years, FEANTSA advisor De Decker reported for Belgium (Pleace et al., 2012) a sustained increase in the number of women, migrants and young people, the latter approaching 30% of all homeless people. Rising numbers of homeless families, especially in Brussels, are reported. Especially Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Ostend are reported to have difficulties in controlling and / or supporting rising numbers of unemployed and homeless citizens of - mainly Eastern-European - EU-member states.

² Figures on Flanders and Wallonia from 2001, on Brussels from 2008.

³ Estimation by Danny Lescrauwaet (Support-office General Welfare, SAW).

Housing

A popular saying is that Belgians are 'Born with a brick in their stomach', stating that owning your own house is an important goal. Promoting home ownership has since long been at the fore in housing policies in Belgium, while the rental sector attracted far less attention – or, as several experts claim- was neglected (De Decker, 2011). The before mentioned European study on access to social housing for homeless people (Pleace et al, 2012) reveals that with an estimated 7 % of the total housing stock, the share of social housing in Belgium⁴ is relatively low (Netherlands 32%, United Kingdom 18 %, France 18%, Sweden 17%, Portugal 15%, Germany 5%, Czech Republic 1%, Spain 1%). In addition to the Social Housing Associations, the system of Social Rental Agencies in Flanders⁵ (organised by both NGOs and OCMWs) offers accommodation to 5,000 people with very low incomes and high housing needs.

De Decker (2011: 129-130) highlights some dominant characteristics of housing policies in Flanders. He argues that home ownership became more popular than ever in the light of an ageing population, since it is seen as the best way of providing for a pension, and thus preventing poverty in old age. All efforts are made to ensure that, although prices are twice as high as they were 20 years ago, the middle classes will be able to afford their own houses. According to De Decker (2011), the warnings that vulnerable groups (low income groups, or groups at risk) are less protected by the housing dimensions of the social welfare system, still do not attract much attention. In general, we can conclude that in the Belgian social welfare system, housing is seen as a private issue. The Belgian social security system is at its strongest in terms of providing income-related social security.

No federal or Flemish strategy on homelessness

Similar to other federal states like Germany and Austria in Europe, but unlike the Scandinavian countries, France and the Netherlands, neither Belgium nor Flanders can build on a strategy to address homelessness. There is a lack of data to set up such a strategy in the first place (see also Pleace et al. 2012). A few years ago the Flemish government started a project to obtain more detailed information on the supply of support to homeless people in Flanders and on the target group of homeless people. This would be a first step for enabling the Flemish government to formulate targets (= measurable goals) for matching supply and demand. In a study on the supply side of support to homeless people in Flanders, commissioned by the Flemish government, Demaerschalk and Hermans (2010) describe the activities of private organisations (NGOs) and public bodies (Municipalities and the Public Centres for Social Welfare – OCMWs). This study proposes definitions for 'packages of care and support' (modules) and instruments targeted at homeless people in order to increase uniformity throughout the public and NGO sectors, and between cities and provinces. It also presents guidelines for developing a database on homelessness.

⁴ Higher in the bigger cities, 12% in Ghent.

⁵ See further 3.2.

2.2 Mapping the context of local homelessness policies

Federal level

The Federal level / government is responsible for, or deploys instruments aimed at:

- All income-related competences and responsibilities, like the level of minimum income (*leefloon*)
- A grant covering installation costs⁶: a once only grant for homeless people and inhabitants of camp sites who have found accommodation to live in
- All laws and regulations on asylum seekers
- All laws and regulations on migration
- Legal system and prison system.

Urban policies (*Federaal Grootstedenbeleid*), including financial schemes aimed at urban development (including social housing) have recently been devolved to the Flemish level.

Flemish level (Dutch speaking community)

The Flemish government is responsible for:

- Financing and controlling 25 Centres for General Welfare (CAW) i.e. NGOs delivering:
 - emergency care, shelters, hostels
 - floating support
 - activities aiming to prevent homelessness
 - after care / rehabilitation / resettlement of people leaving institutions
- Flemish rent subsidy for low income households moving from low quality, unsuitable accommodation to a better one, under conditions of the Flemish *Wooncode*. Provided during a maximum of 9 years and decreasing over time.
- Flemish housing code (*Vlaamse wooncode*), 1997: gives cities the possibility to control the quality of the housing stock and to develop policies on social housing related to vulnerable groups.
- Decree on social rent (*kader besluit sociale huur*) 2008: includes regulations on access to social housing, on control of local special target projects in social housing, financing of social workers in Social Housing Associations.

Local/ regional level

OCMWs: Public centres for social welfare.⁷

- Minimum income provision (*leefloon*)
- Provision of special rent subsidies, rent guarantee, grant covering installation costs
- Social work, floating services
- Coordinating homelessness policies (within the city)
- Welfare / homeless policies: financing and controlling CAW / NGO facilities (partly)
- Personalised projects on reintegration of homeless people
- Accelerated social housing allocation, with 'floating support' by OCMW or CAW workers
- Emergency shelters
- Homes for elderly homeless people
- Social Rental Agencies

Each of the 308 municipalities in Flanders has its statutory public OCMW, with a limited *coordinating* role (of NGO services), running its own *social work, relief and prevention* services and a *controlling* function (decisions on entitlement to minimum income). The boards of the OCMWs are made up of elected politicians.

⁶ Delivered by local public OCMWs, financed by the Federal government (Demaerschalk and Hermans, 2010).

⁷ The activities of OCMWs vary, depending on the scale of the municipality and differences in needs of the population.

City Administration

Municipal departments are responsible for:

- Local Welfare policies, including coordinating homelessness policies (with OCMWs)
- Developing housing policies, social housing, control of the private rental sector,

New regulations aim to foster the integration of OCMW and city department policies and activities in the near future.

Centres for General Welfare Work (CAW)

The 25 Centres for General Welfare Work (*Centra voor Algemeen Welzijnswerk* – CAW) deliver the non-governmental homeless care (*thuislozen zorg*) in Flanders. Except for some smaller organisations in the biggest cities, no specialised, independent organisations catering for homeless people exist. The homeless care of CAWs is part of a wider range of activities on social exclusion. Apart from providing (emergency) shelter, CAWs have been providing resettlement support to 9,500 homeless people, and about 500 interventions aiming at prevention of evictions, with a success rate of about 75%. The main bottleneck here is the much lower success rate of interventions in the private rental sector. The other fields CAWs are working on are youth and family care and social work for detainees. By the end of 2013 the 25 regional centres will be reduced to 12 centres (each with 50 to 300 employees). The CAWs have a supporting agency *Steunpunt Algemeen Welzijn* (SAW), the umbrella organisation of the CAWs in Flanders, with one employee responsible for the field of homelessness.⁸ Compared to the Scandinavian countries, but also to countries such as the Netherlands and France, the general welfare work is not clearly decentralised. It is a mixed system with political steering from different levels and also mixed in financial terms: CAWs can receive subsidies from different private and public sources, and work with both regional and local public budgets. This guarantees a substantial degree of independence from both local and regional (Flemish) political priorities.

Other local NGOs

The biggest cities in the country host relatively small organisations building mainly on volunteers and often with a faith-based background. Some of them are specialised in supporting homeless people, most of them try to serve broader groups of excluded, vulnerable people (Dierckx et al., 2011, Davelaar and Kerstens, forthcoming). This includes organisations like *Huize Triest* in Ghent, a Catholic organisation working with volunteers and providing night shelter, meals, and other low-threshold and easily accessible services.

Social Housing Associations (SHA)

Flanders has a rich tradition of social housing associations: industrialists, (Catholic) Christian-democratic and socialist movements engaging in building for lower income groups. Nowadays activities include building new houses, renovating the existing housing stock and developing housing services with social partners. An example is *Woningent*, a Social Housing Association in Ghent.

Social Rental Agencies (SRA)

*The Sociale Verhuur Kantoren*⁹ in Flanders can be dated back to the 1970s and 1980s. In reaction to the shortage of social housing and discrimination on the housing market, grass roots NGOs started to rent houses and sublet them to their members. The Social Rental Agencies sublet 5,000 apartments and houses throughout Flanders. Social Rental Agencies in Flanders are housing an increasing number of homeless people (for example in Ghent around 90%). People looking for a place to rent, can register with an SHA or SRA if they fulfil certain access criteria (more details in 3.2).

⁸ Since Flanders does not have a separate Federation of organisations working for the homeless, this Support agency represents the homeless sector in FEANTSA, the European umbrella organisation of Federations working for the homeless.

⁹ <http://www.vob-vzw.be/SVK/tabid/64/Default.aspx>

2.3 Trends and developments

The overall trend in Flanders regarding the governance of homelessness seems to show that cities have become far more active in the field of homelessness and housing exclusion. Partly due to the lack of initiatives and direction from the Flemish level (De Decker, 2005), and confronted with a fairly autonomous range of NGO services in this field, local public authorities in the bigger cities have started creating their own services - or taking over civil society initiatives - by deploying transit houses, floating support services, Social Rental Agencies, etc. In addition, city departments and OCMWs started co-financing and enlarging existing CAW services, thereby enhancing their influence on the sector. However, the formal instruments to influence and direct services in the NGO sector are still limited and mainly restricted to the services that the municipalities pay for.

While the formal steering capacity of the cities remains limited, and the situation should be characterised as 'incomplete decentralisation', voluntary cooperation between the public and the NGO sector has intensified, and as a consequence coordination of policies and practices has grown, at least in the bigger cities in Flanders.

Moreover, cities in Flanders significantly increased their organisational capacity to contribute to general welfare policies. More specifically, policies on housing of low-income groups, including homeless people, have become stronger instruments in the hands of cities. Some housing regulations have been decentralised from the Flemish regional level to the local level. In cities like Ghent, the previously small and independent Social Housing Associations were stimulated to merge into bigger organisations and were brought under the control of elected politicians. The municipality also intervenes more in the private rental sector.

Quite recently, the Flemish government has also become more active. A first expression of this trend were the before mentioned efforts to start working on more uniformity in the sector in terms of interventions and instruments, and creating a starting point for monitoring the sector. Secondly, the government is encouraging the investments by the CAWs in floating support and supported housing. The CAW capacity in these interventions is now greater than investments in shelters and other forms of temporary accommodation, hence leading to less institutionalised and more community-based housing solutions for homeless people.

However complex the picture might be, the political landscape of the country should not be used as an excuse for not developing a joined-up, comprehensive strategy to tackle homelessness, according to the support office / umbrella organisation for General Welfare, *Steunpunt Algemeen Welzijn* (Lescrauwaet, SAW 2010: 7). Recently announced changes (State Reform, 2011) will, according to our contacts, reduce the complexity to some extent by providing the Flemish government with more responsibilities in this area. However, the consequences of the State Reform for the steering capacity of cities are not entirely clear yet, and will probably be less profound.

The homelessness sector in Flanders has been operating quite successfully over the last 10 years. This is partly why there has been no real sense of urgency in the media or the political arena. Things are changing fast, however: first, for the last three years, the Belgian State has not managed to provide all asylum seekers with accommodation, which results in people knocking at the doors of homelessness shelters. The same is happening with regard to homeless people without papers - either refused asylum seekers or undocumented labour migrants - trying to survive with whatever support they can find.. Second, a growing number of EU migrants without work and without a minimum income are turning to local homelessness services, especially in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Ostend.

3. Homelessness policies in Ghent¹⁰

3.1 The Ghent model

Ghent has been developing new forms of services and assistance for homeless people over the last few years. For the last three years homeless policy in Ghent has been coordinated by the Unit for Local Social Policy (City departments and OCMW). The Ghent approach in keywords:

- a combination of emergency, prevention and resettlement services for homeless people;
- developing a needs-based approach to tackling homelessness;
- developing local homeless policy on the basis of data and research.

The four main objectives of Ghent's homeless policy (Local Social Policy Programme 2011-2013) are:

- to significantly reduce the number of homeless people by 2013;
- less people in a night shelter or residential homelessness centre;
- less people leaving institutions (psychiatric care, hospitals, prisons, special youth care) without a clear perspective on appropriate and long term accommodation;
- preventing youth homelessness in cooperation with relevant agencies.

In order to reach these objectives, the municipality is focussing on housing-led action plans, which are implemented through close cooperation of public and private service providers: the department for Citizens and Welfare, the housing department, the OCMW (Public Centre for Social Welfare), the outreach organisation *Straathoekwerk* (street corner work), the welfare centres *CAW Visserij* and *CAW Artevelde*, the *Huize Triest* (a private faith-based NGO), Social Housing Associations and two Social Rental Agencies.¹¹

Policy results 2008 - 2011:

- the city and partners have developed a common vision and policy;
- developing emergency services such as storage of luggage and belongings, washing machines and showers, day care and food distribution networks, and a guide for homeless people;
- central reservation point for night shelter and common conditions for access to shelter;
- increased capacity of night shelters / winter shelters;
- social housing associations increased the number of houses and apartments reserved for homeless people.

Future priority actions include:

- housing of homeless families;
- data collection: measuring the extent and nature of homelessness in Ghent¹²;
- developing alternative forms of housing and accommodation for homeless people;
- further development of personalised supported resettlement pathways and prevention of 'shopping';
- further differentiation between groups in the homeless population;
- administrative and legal support;
- experiments on consumer-run initiatives;
- addressing issues like food, health and personal care and access to basic health services;
- cooperation with the mental healthcare sector on prevention of homelessness.

¹⁰ A Local Round Table on homelessness, 1-12-2011, organised by the City of Ghent, offered useful information for this chapter.

¹¹ The work of these core partners is supported by several NGOs, including KRAS, a network of mainly voluntary anti-poverty initiatives in neighbourhoods, including walk in centres, food banks, basic social support and referral towards more specialized services.

¹² The city of Ghent is collecting data and invests in obtaining profiles of users of emergency night shelter and in using data from the centralised intake for the night shelters; and it is working on building a 'marginal housing' monitor (monitor "wonen aan de onderkant van de stad").

Table 1: Some Facts on (homelessness in) Ghent¹³

<i>Fact</i>	<i>Figures</i>
Total no. of inhabitants in Ghent	246,719
Demand for relief services	2,684
Need and inflow (no. of requests per relief unit)	2,54
Inflow homeless persons (adults)	803
Inflow homeless persons (under age)	252 ¹⁴
Persons using emergency night shelters	1,285 ¹⁵
Night shelter capacity	47 ¹⁶ + 15 ¹⁷
Extra winter shelter capacity (2011)	40 ¹⁸
Residential capacity in homeless care CAWs in the region of Ghent	217 ¹⁹
Rent contracts reserved for homeless people by Social Housing Associations (per year)	53
House evictions after a legal procedure, 398 legal procedures started	125 ^{20 21}
Trajectories by the supported housing team of the CAWs (outreaching, floating services)	81 ²²
Trajectories within project 'prevention house evictions rental sector'	94 ²³
Apartments sublet through Social Rental Agencies (mainly to (formerly) homeless persons)	182 ²⁴ + 104 ²⁵
Number of households in Ghent	114,795 ²⁶
Low income households	33,500
Households in Ghent reported to have difficulties in paying the rent	7,900 ²⁷
Renting households living in low quality housing	14,900

¹³ Second largest city in Dutch-speaking Belgium.

¹⁴ All figures above from Ghent in figures (Gent in cijfers), 2010.

¹⁵ 2010

¹⁶ 2011

¹⁷ Nightshelter for chronic homeless people (patients), strictly reglemented, 2011

¹⁸ 2011

¹⁹ 2008, source: SAW, in Demaerschalk and Hermans, 2010.

²⁰ Other estimations are much higher: 300-400 house evictions.

²¹ 2010, Homeless monitor, City of Ghent.

²² 2010

²³ 2010, source: CAWs Gent-Eeklo.

²⁴ SRA Woonfonds, Jan. 2012.

²⁵ SRA OCMW Ghent, Jan. 2012.

²⁶ All figures below from housing study Ghent, 2009,

²⁷ (18 % of all renting households)

3.2 The housing dimension of homelessness policies in Ghent

Since the housing dimensions of Ghent's local approach to homelessness and especially the practices of the social rental agencies, are the main focus of the peer review, we will present in some detail now various policies, instruments and projects related to housing.

According to a study on housing and (future) housing policies in Ghent, commissioned by the municipality of Ghent (*woonstudie Gent 2009*) low income groups, as target groups of social housing, are still highly overrepresented among households in Ghent: 33,500 households, on a total of 114,795 households in 2009.²⁸ This study on housing recommends the city give priority to housing conditions and opportunities for low income groups (homeless people are not directly addressed but included). Although special attention is paid to prevent higher and middle income households leaving the city, the report considers it useful to invest more public means in social housing. This would be necessary more in particular in relation to the vulnerable position of many households relying on the private rental sector. Not less than 7,900 renting households in Ghent are reported to have difficulties in paying their rent (18 % of all renting households) and up to 14,900 renting households live in low quality accommodation (overlap exists between these groups). (*Woonstudie Gent, 2009*). According to this study, one of the most important measures should be – even if there are no statutory obligations here – to voluntarily increase the share of social housing in cooperation with the Flemish government.

Housing policy instruments in Ghent aiming at the prevention of homelessness and re-housing of homeless people in Ghent²⁹ include institutions and processes (working methods, agreements, platforms and networks). Although it is impossible to list all organisations and initiatives at work in Ghent, the examples below give a good idea of the approach of the City of Ghent and its partners.

The **institutions** include:

City of Ghent, municipal departments

The housing department coordinates the housing policies, and protects the quality of the local housing stock. Since 2011, the housing department hosts a database on availability of social housing in Ghent (types, geographical spread, providers (SHAs, Flemish housing fund (*Vlaams Woonfonds*), OCMW). The city's own housing stock – 1,800 dwellings – has been mostly transferred to SHA Woningent, except for a contingent of transit-houses designated for those affected by an expropriation procedure or a declaration of “un-inhabitability”.

The Citizens and Welfare department coordinates homelessness policies and coordinates the implementation of new policies, together with all public and private (not-for-profit) partners.

Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW)

All people experiencing homelessness and all other service providers in the city can approach OCMW Ghent for support and assistance. In the OCMW Ghent there is the department of homeless care (*dienst thuislozenzorg*). The OCMW provides social assistance (*leefloon*), and additional financial assistance (rent guarantee, special rent subsidy). OCMW social workers try to find structural solutions and address all kinds of issues. The ultimate purpose is to provide homeless people with a home and a job. OCMW Ghent runs some housing facilities: pension De Baai for (45+) homeless people and a Social Rental Agency (see below). People living in this accommodation have to accept supported housing by social workers of the public service. OCMW Ghent supports (financially) the night shelters in the city. The department for homeless care also reaches out to people living rough, multiproblem households with rent arrears, etc.

²⁸ <http://www.gent.be/gentincijfers>

²⁹ <http://www.kenniscentrumvlaamsesteden.be/kennisbank/instrumentenlokaalwoonbeleid/Pages/Gent.aspx>

Social Rental Agencies (Sociale Verhuur Kantoren)

Close to 286 apartments in Ghent are sublet to households with low incomes and high housing needs. The NGO *Woonfonds* currently sublets 182 apartments; the SRA of the public OCMW 104 apartments.³⁰ The information below is based on the practices of this public agency.

SRAs cannot use the instrument of accelerated allocation/ access (Flemish housing code) in trying to get homeless clients in social housing. Instead, people with high housing needs and low incomes benefit from the points-systems that the SRAs use for allocation of the apartments they sublet. Although homeless people are not a target group of the SRAs and others can subscribe to their waiting lists, 90% of the actual tenants of the SRAs in Ghent are homeless people.

Main characteristics:

- access according to the Flemish decree on social rent: subscription in public administration or registration as foreigner is necessary;
- allocation according to a points-system. (SHAs: allocation mainly on length of waiting time);
- the points-system favours people with highest housing needs and low incomes;
- the level of rent is based on what the SRA pays the home owner (whereas the level of rent at SHAs is based on the tenants level of income). The difference can be €50 - €75 for similar apartments;
- home owner gets a contract for 9 years and is entitled to apply for renovation subsidies;
- the SRA is responsible for (behaviour of) the tenants.

The SRA does not communicate the rental prices it wants to pay, in order not to undermine its negotiation strength towards home owners who want to do business with the agency. The SRA system is well-known and mainly home owners operating on a small-scale tend to contact the agency, but occasionally even estate developers find the (certainty of the) return and the services offered by the agency attractive enough.

The price the SRA is willing to pay the home owner must be well below the market price. Even so, SRAs require public investments: for maintenance of the apartments, for tenants who need support, for losses on defaulters / bad payers, for the costs of evictions (the SRA-OCMW has about 2 evictions per year). But even so, the system of SRAs is considered to contribute to social sustainability in three respects:

- it contributes to (fast) re-housing of homeless people;
- it is accessible for groups with various and problematic backgrounds: often with a long history of evictions, detention, misbehaviour;
- it contributes to the quality of the local housing stock.

While rewarded – the Mayor and executive board of Ghent decided to enlarge the SRA (OCMW) by 50% over the next 7 years – the agency faces many challenges:

- 1,300 candidates for 100 apartments, with only some 20 apartments per year available for new applications: people on the waiting lists continue to stay in residential facilities, with friends or in unfit housing.
- rent contracts are only for a maximum 9-years. Home owners can give notice to the SRA after 9 years. This can result in clients having to leave a home after for example 3 years, and unlike the SHAs, SRA can often not re-house people directly.
- the points-system is designed to take fair decisions, but it is not always perceived as transparent and it seems to be quite complicated for both employees and clients:
 - small or temporary changes in income or housing situation, influence the chances to rent an apartment through the SRA.
 - on each indicator, the client has to hand over written evidence: although under the same decree on social rent as the SHA, potential clients often have to present more written evidence on several occasions; actual disposable income, eviction, decisions, confirmation of homelessness by police officers or social workers, etc.
 - moreover, these bureaucratic requirements result in pressure on the already limited capacity of the OCMW to support people.

³⁰ January 2012.

Faced with these bottlenecks, and determined to enhance its capacity for combating homelessness, the SRA works on solutions, including stimulating its tenants to get on the waiting-lists of SHAs, and exploring possibilities to partly integrate its allocation-system (waiting-list) with that of the SHAs.

Social Housing Associations

Whereas 7% of the total housing stock in Belgium is social housing, the share in Ghent is estimated at 12%. The biggest social landlord in Ghent is *Woningent*. In general, houses are allocated based on the time of registration on the waiting-list. The instrument of accelerated access (based on the Flemish decree on social rent, 2008) is not used. Instead, 53 rent contracts per year are reserved for homeless people.³¹ Due to some (recent) mergers, *Woningent* is by far the largest SHA in the region, with 9,300 houses / apartments. These are available only to people with a low income (e.g. for a 2-person household, a disposable income up to €19,000 a year). The total waiting time before receiving a rent contract varies from 18 months to 19 years (also depending on the most optimal use of the housing stock: one and two person households in smaller units, large families in larger ones).

The 'social' department of the organisation (7 employees plus one manager), is responsible for individual social support, combating nuisance, liveability issues. With 1,328 households per 'social worker'³² this is a huge task. However "90 % of energy and time goes to 10% of households". Despite these efforts and support by specialised workers from OCMW and the NGO services (see below), *Woningent* conducts 20 - 25 house evictions per year.

Woningent has experienced increasing influence of the municipality. The board of directors consists of elected politicians, including 4 members of the executive of the municipality (*Schepenen*) and members appointed by OCMW and the province of East-Flanders. Over time, the organisation became less focussed on building bricks and more engaged in developing housing projects with social partners in domains like elderly care and psychiatric care, and experimenting with new forms of support for its clients.

The processes include:

Housing Platform (Woonoverleg Gent)

Chaired by the City of Ghent, at least twice a year political and administrative representatives of the municipality (and its departments), the OCMW, the social housing associations, the advocacy organisation for tenants, and others meet to discuss shortfalls and develop new policies. Increasing the share of social housing in the total housing stock is an important goal of the administration at this time.

Protocol between OCMW, Municipality and Social Housing Associations

This protocol includes a set of procedures concerning rent arrear mediation, SHAs subletting emergency accommodation (*noodwoning*) to the OCMW, the amount of SHA houses reserved for homeless people and supported housing of new tenants from this group by OCMW during the first six months.

Protocol between Municipality and Social Rental Agencies on screening of apartments

The SRAs and the City of Ghent agree on the screening of apartments by housing inspectors before subletting them. The municipal inspectors examine whether the apartments are in accordance with the Flemish housing code. A negative advice can be given in cases where the quality is too low. Small adjustments can be suggested.

³¹ Protocol on cooperation between City, OCMW and SHAs.

³² The social work of the SHAs is aimed at assistance to tenants with support-needs, and addressing issues concerning the quality of life in and around property of the SHAs. This type of work is co-financed by the Flemish government.

Floating services / supported housing

Supported housing (*woonbegeleiding*) by OCMW is provided according to the above mentioned protocol, but also on other occasions. The CAWs *Visserij* and *Artevelde* are running a supported housing team with a capacity of 81 out reaching trajectories for adults with a history of homelessness (including 12 trajectories in “community homes” and 6 trajectories in studios with training for regular housing). They work with personalised plans and targets.

Protocol on housing-related nuisance

Woningent works with a well-documented procedure³³ in cases of severe nuisance (disturbing the neighbourhood, aggressive behaviour towards other tenants and employees of the Housing Association, pollution, self neglect, etc) caused by its tenants. After three complaints and a few attempts by social workers of *Woningent* to make the tenant change his behaviour, a support team of *CAW Artevelde* intervenes, with the ultimate goal of preventing an eviction. The support team needs approx. 5 weeks to establish contact with the tenant and to propose a 3-month trajectory during which it tries to help the tenant and to reduce tensions in the neighbourhood. Until the evaluation of the 3- month trial period, the SHA does not take further legal steps.

Agreement (covenant) on the prevention of evictions in the rental sector

With this agreement between City, OCMW and CAWs, the municipality wants to expand its tools for tackling housing problems. Building on knowledge and experience gained through the above mentioned protocols – primarily targeting the social housing sector, - it enhances NGO capacity to address problematic situations on the private rental market. Both tenants and landlords (social and for profit) can use the central point of entrance of the two CAWs, to report problematic situations related to renting.³⁴ 94 trajectories were started during 2010.

³³ Protocol overlast, *Woningent* and *CAW Artevelde* / Supportteam (Bijstandsteam) 20-04-2006

³⁴ <http://www.cawvisserij.be/teksten/VerkortetekstPreventieUithuiszetting.doc>

4. Transferability issues

In this section we want to highlight several strengths of the Ghent approach that could inspire authorities in other cities. In some cases these approaches, protocols or working methods contain tried and tested elements that could be used for experimenting in other local contexts.

A first point to mention here is the fact that Ghent succeeded in increasing local cooperation for the sake of combating homelessness, although one could argue that this achievement could also be listed under the heading 'challenges'. Nevertheless, given the relatively complex nature of the political-administrative and wider organisational landscape, Ghent proves that cooperation and coordination is possible, even in a situation of imperfect decentralisation, with no overarching homeless or housing strategy, and services that are politically and financially linked to different levels of government and sections in civil society. Building partnerships, convincing parties, working with effective, yet simple, agreements, works. Ghent seems to prove that full decentralisation is not a *conditio sine qua non* to develop a comprehensive and effective homelessness strategy. One might expect, however, essential further benefits from integration of regional and local policies.

A second element is the growing cooperation between the social and housing sector. Despite the fact that housing policies are relatively weak in Belgium and Flanders and that the large rental market generally receives limited attention, one can witness changes here. The initiatives in Ghent presented here illustrate at least two things: 1) a growing willingness to address abuses and imperfections (low quality housing, no access) in the private rental market, and 2) a commitment to invest in the social housing sector and to link it to the cities' policies on housing, homelessness and other forms of social exclusion.

Thirdly, the system of Social Rental Agencies in Flanders is a good practice that could be transferred to other contexts. Social rental agencies play a role in increasing the responsibility of the private rental sector in a situation where the public and NGO sectors have to deal with a strongly fragmented commercial sector (much small or medium size ownership). Given that situation and although the number of sublet apartments is limited, the influence of the SRAs is substantial.

A fourth strength of the Ghent approach to be mentioned here are the relatively well-developed structures of floating services by workers from both OCMW and CAWs. These services contribute to prevention of homelessness and foster the resettlement of people. This emphasis on floating services goes hand in hand with a clear development towards personalised plans, in a needs-based approach.

To sum up, the transferability potential of 'Ghent' lies in:

- The cooperation models both within local government and between local government and (civil) society: e.g. the local social policy unit (putting homelessness on the agenda), the use of protocols and agreements facilitating and regulating floating services on the crossroads of the housing and homelessness sectors.
- The public / private (not for profit) cooperation in order to increase influence on the (important) private rental market: the example of the Social Rental Agencies and investments in addressing severe forms of nuisance and preventing evictions.

5. Challenges for the future

Homeless policies in Flanders are well developed, especially in terms of emergency services and residential care facilities, but also increasingly in terms of actions aimed at prevention of homelessness. The general feeling seems to be that the problem is more or less under control, because the most visible manifestations of homelessness and adherent forms of hardship are managed and contained. In the pre-crisis decade, homelessness was not considered as a priority to the general public and to politicians. Due to the relative success, there was no sense of urgency to tackle some persistent problems that have remained somewhat under the surface, like growing costs and the limited access to social and private housing sectors and thus the long waiting lists for permanent and decent accommodations.

The city of Ghent seems more than others aware of the relativity of its successes. Yet, at the same time, the city faces just as other municipalities, an increasing demand on its services. There is e.g. the growing problem of youth homelessness and the pressing need to regulate new pressures for providing shelter for people (including families) from (eastern European) EU countries sleeping rough or in insecure, overcrowded apartments: *"You are asked to concentrate on prevention of fire, while the fire in the house is blazed up."* As a consequence, time to develop new approaches towards priorities for prevention and floating services for people in regular, permanent accommodation is frustrated. The expected budget cutbacks will furthermore reduce the capability to force the desired breakthrough towards a full Housing First strategy.

Another underlying main challenge is the absence of a housing policy for population groups depending on the bottom of the housing market. Housing in Belgium is considered as an individual matter and not really considered as part and parcel of the (classical) social welfare system. The emphasis has been on home ownership. No Federal nor Flemish strategy on the lower side of the housing market exists, with as a result a lack of sufficient and adequate, permanent affordable housing. This leads also to a shortage of social housing in general in Belgium: social landlords already face many difficulties in housing the priority groups of elderly and disabled people. In addition, there is a shortage of affordable and decent accommodation on the private rental market, especially in the bigger cities. Recently, a municipal working group started to investigate the potential of community land trusts for Ghent.

At the same time, it is too simple to explain the pressure on the lowest sections of the housing market (social housing, private rental and home ownership) entirely by pointing at the underdeveloped federal or Flemish housing policies. Other causes include some specific characteristics of Ghent, like the position of Ghent in educational services and the large student population. After finishing their studies, students try to stay in the city, increasing the prices for small apartments in the inner city. The pressure on the housing market comes also as a side effect of successful urban programmes. Gentrification coincides with a rise of (rental) prices in inner cities. The existence of many old buildings, old polluted industrial lots, etc, demands strict safety, energy and architectural regulations for social housing and restricts to a certain extent supply of apartments on the private rental market. It also seems to enhance a black market of home owners, trying to avoid all regulations. Whatever the causes, a shortage of social housing and decent affordably private market apartments is combined with the attractiveness of Ghent as place to live, also for low income groups. The resulting mismatch between supply and demand, means also that the outflow from temporary or specialised homeless accommodations is blocked.

And while it continues to be difficult to move people on from 'temporary' accommodation and achieve an outflow towards regular housing, Ghent continues to be a 'popular' destination for new marginal groups, like people leaving institutions. In that light, more cooperation on the Flemish level would be required. In addition, Ghent, together with Brussels, Antwerp and Ostend are reported as being confronted with pressure on their services due to citizens from Eastern Europe with no or limited income. Growth of low or no income families is reported, whereas access to social housing is extremely difficult (entering waiting lists is restricted, waiting-lists are long and growing). As a consequence, pressure on the temporary and emergency services is growing. Responsible policy-makers are calling for a European social approach of the underestimated but existing free movement of EU-citizens *without* work within the official framework of free movement of EU-citizens *with* work.

Other specific challenges can be identified: prevention in terms of preventing evictions could be brought to a higher level: we have described some (potentially) effective initiatives here, but more (timely) exchange of information between the responsible courts (*Vrederechter*, a typical Belgian phenomenon: Justice of the peace) and OCMWs and CAWs is needed. Finally, programmes and projects aimed at prevention of homelessness are still underdeveloped in General Social Care. In the coming years the government of Flanders intends to invest in activities targeting prevention of evictions. Interventions in the social housing sector are making a real difference, but on the private rental market more needs to be done.

6. Key questions for peer review

The focus of the peer review is to examine local approaches tackling homelessness, with special attention to the housing dimensions of the Ghent policy. The discussion could therefore focus on the following specific questions in relation to the situation in Ghent and in the peer cities:

Challenges, needs and institutional solutions

1. (How) are homeless policies linked to housing policies in other cities?
2. Housing needs assessment: linking homeless data to general housing data; what are the experiences?
3. What challenges do other cities face in terms of housing of EU-migrants? Are they banned from relief services? Do they have access to forms of social housing?
4. How are barriers of access to regular housing for formerly homeless people tackled in peer cities? What are the possibilities for access to regular housing? Do initiatives similar to the Social Rental Agencies exist in other European cities – what are the experiences?
5. Are there other examples of point-systems like that used by the Social Rental Agencies that do 'favour' homeless people / in which date of entry on a waiting list is overruled by the seriousness of the (housing) situation of the applicants?

Cooperation

6. What are experiences with bringing both public and private housing providers together in the provision of supported housing?
7. What are, in general, vital elements of successful cooperation between a multitude of different public and NGO-services with their own working methods and financial sources, and their specific ways of rendering accountability?
8. Cost-benefit analysis: how to deal with the fact that those departments, sectors or administrations that invest (costs) in solutions to prevent or reduce homelessness are often not those who can reap the fruits (benefits) of these efforts? For example: investments in housing solutions require federal and regional investments, but will reduce local problems in the social domain. And federal costs related to better referral of released detainees, will lead to benefits elsewhere. Similar, local investments in out-reaching services will reduce costs in the legal system and on policing.

Alternative solutions

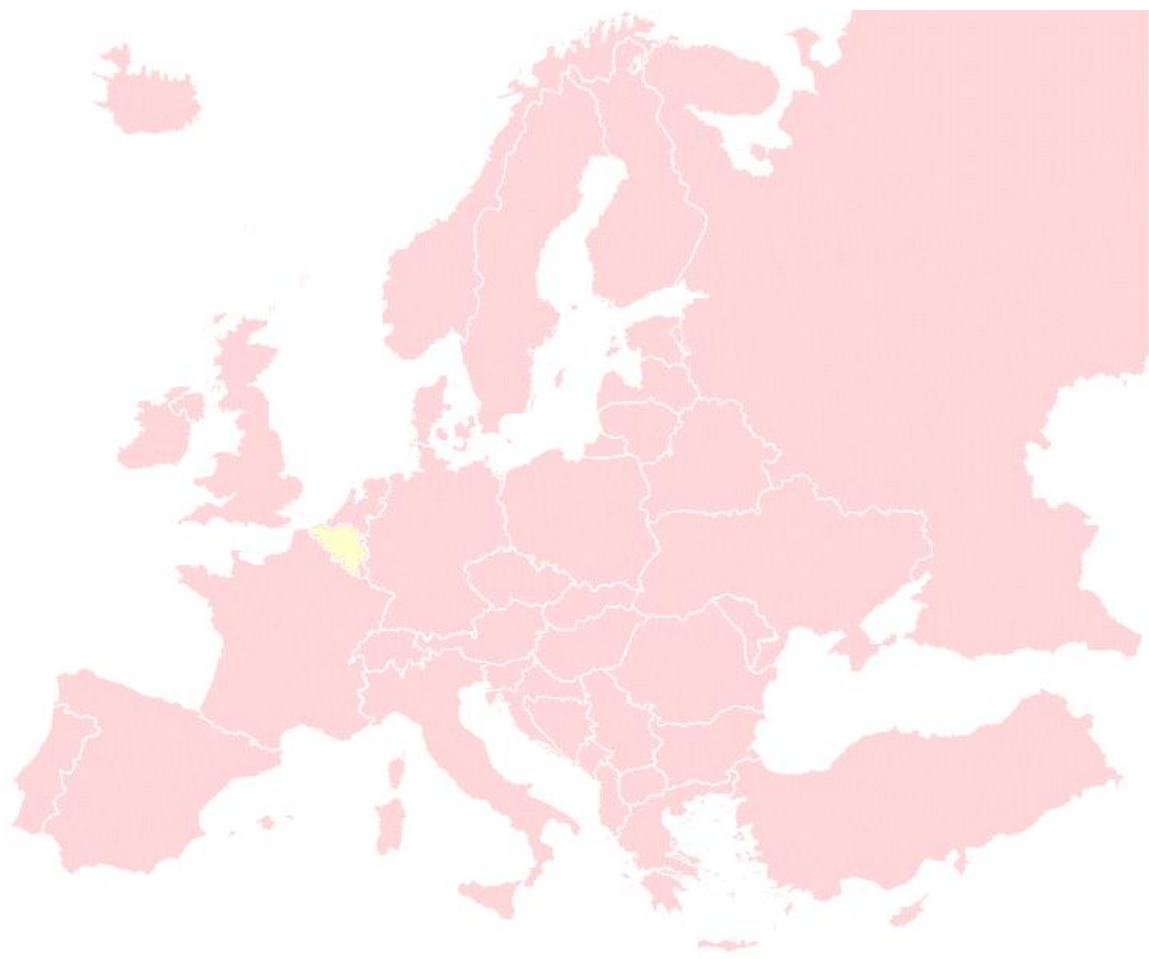
9. Can alternative housing solutions like housing in small scale 'sub-optimal' housing projects (inspired on Skaeve Huiset, container-apartments, etc.) contribute to reducing waiting-lists and enhancing the streaming out of residential services of people who can not adjust themselves to regular housing amidst other citizens?
10. What potential for solving homelessness lies in the use of empty housing? (e.g. community land trusts)?

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Annex: ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion

		Operational Category	Living Situation	Generic Definition
Conceptual Category	ROOFLESS	1 People Living Rough	1.1 Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2 People in emergency accommodation	2.1 Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	HOUSELESS	3 People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 Homeless hostel	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
			3.2 Temporary Accommodation	
			3.3 Transitional supported accommodation	
	4 People in Women's Shelter	4.1 Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term	
	5 People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 Temporary accommodation / reception centres	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status	
		5.2 Migrant workers accommodation		
	6 People due to be released from institutions	6.1 Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing identified (e.g by 18th birthday)	
		6.2 Medical institutions (*)		
		6.3 Children's institutions / homes		
	7 People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 Residential care for older homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)	
		7.2 Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people		
INSECURE	8 People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 Temporarily with family/friends	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy illegal occupation of a dwelling Occupation of land with no legal rights	
		8.2 No legal (sub)tenancy		
		8.3 Illegal occupation of land		
9 People living under threat of eviction	9.1 Legal orders enforced (rented)	Where orders for eviction are operative Where mortgagee has legal order to re-possess		
	9.2 Re-possession orders (owned)			
10 People living under threat of violence	10.1 Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence		
INADEQUATE	11 People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1 Mobile homes	Not intended as place of usual residence Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin	
		11.2 Non-conventional building		
		11.3 Temporary structure		
12 People living in unfit housing	12.1 Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations		
13 People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1 Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms		
<p>Note: Short stay is defined as normally less than one year; Long stay is defined as more than one year. This definition is compatible with Census definitions as recommended by the UNECE/EUROSTAT report (2006)</p>				
(*) Includes drug rehabilitation institutions, psychiatric hospitals etc.				





HABITACT PEER REVIEW 2012

