

# Implementation of the Social Investment Package guidelines on homelessness through the Europe2020 strategy: first results

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FEANTSA is the European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People. The more than 120 members of FEANTSA come from 30 European countries and are non-governmental organisations which provide a wide range of social services to homeless people including accommodation, social, health and employment support. The research branch of FEANTSA, the European Observatory on Homelessness, publishes a wide range of research for policy purposes. FEANTSA is the only major European network that focuses on homelessness, and works closely with the European Commission and the European Parliament in the framework of the social Open Method of Coordination and the European Platform against Poverty. As a member of the Social Platform, Social Services Europe and the European Anti-Poverty network, FEANTSA works to promote an EU social policy which has a positive impact on the lives of EU citizens.

This review aims to highlight the types of measures outlined in the 2013 National Reform Programmes which have an impact on homelessness reduction.

## Table of contents

I. Introduction
II. Homelessness: between social and economic policy
III. Implementation of SIP guidelines on homelessness through Europe2020
IV. Integrated homelessness strategies
V. Improvement of service provision
VI. Homelessness prevention measures
VII. Conclusions



## I. Introduction

Europe's monetary and fiscal policies are intrinsically linked to Europe's economic recovery, and despite actions taken in both fields over the last 5 years, unemployment in the Eurozone is at a [record high](#) (12%). The European Commission's [2013 Annual Growth Survey](#), the key document for setting priorities in the yearly cycle of policy coordination to implement the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth through the annual National Reform Programmes (NRP), states that "After several years of weak growth, the crisis is having severe social consequences. Welfare systems cushioned some of the effects at first but the impact is now being felt across the board." The latest [reports](#) of FEANTSA confirm this, showing substantial increases in homelessness in most EU countries (in 15 countries over the last 1-5 years), with an increasing number of women, youth, families and migrants experiencing homelessness. Transitional homelessness is affecting a greater part of the EU population as vulnerabilities are increasing. Without immediate measures to rapidly rehouse people or provide employment opportunities, this transitional homelessness could become more long-term and chronic, with important social and economic costs for society.

In such a context, the Europe 2020 poverty target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty is clearly under threat. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, both at national level and EU level, correcting macro-economic imbalances in ways which respect European welfare models as reflected in article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union: *"In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health."*

The five economic and social priorities highlighted in the 2013 Annual Growth Survey remain the same this year, and are intended to guide Member States to unlock their full potential for economic growth:

1. Pursuing differentiated, growth-friendly fiscal consolidation
2. Restoring normal lending to the economy
3. Promoting growth and competitiveness for today and tomorrow
- 4. Tackling unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis**
5. Modernising public administration

Tackling the social consequences of the crisis is a key priority, and should not be taken lightly. The European Commission's [Communication](#) on the 2013 [Country-Specific Recommendations](#), which reviews the 2013 NRPs and identifies major economic and social challenges for the EU, highlights that *"Several Member States need to pay more attention to combating different forms of poverty – child poverty, **homelessness**, in-work poverty and over-indebtedness of households – and to ensure the effectiveness of the welfare systems that deal with those affected."*

To this end, the Social Investment [Package](#) (SIP) published by the European Commission in February 2013 gives clear guidelines to Member States on ways to strengthen the inclusive growth pillar of the Europe2020 strategy, including detailed guidelines for "confronting homelessness". Expectations are now high regarding the implementation of this Package through the Europe2020 strategy, especially in light of the upcoming 2014 European Parliament elections. There should be a joint effort where Member States highlight key social inclusion measures and funding in their NRPs, and where the EU supports Member States in a strategic way through EU tools available - cohesion funds, research, experimentation and transnational cooperation - to deliver on the EU poverty target.

This paper briefly examines the measures to reduce homelessness outlined in the 2013 NRPs. We start with a short reflection on the links between social and economic policy from a homelessness perspective, followed by a closer look at the integration of the SIP policy guidelines recommendations on homelessness in the NRPs.



## II. Homelessness: Between social and economic policy

Homelessness, understood as covering a variety of living situations in the [European typology](#) of homelessness and housing exclusion (rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing, inadequate housing) has to be addressed in national social and housing policy frameworks since its mere existence in our so-called developed European societies is unacceptable and a violation of fundamental rights to housing and adequate living standards. The number of homelessness strategies (at national, regional and local level) in the EU is increasing in order to tackle the phenomenon. Addressing homelessness is essential to meeting the EU poverty target for 2020, and the results of innovations tested in the framework of different national homelessness strategies are starting to emerge, with successful housing retention of formerly chronically homeless people and effective homelessness prevention ([FEANTSA, 2012](#)). After repeated calls from different EU bodies for an EU homelessness strategy, a group of EU countries is developing European cooperation on homelessness linked to the EU's social policy agenda, and under the Irish Presidency of the EU, 23 countries agreed [6 key principles](#) to inform EU homelessness policy.

Tackling homelessness is also a key component of the SIP (which aims to create synergies between the EU's social policy and economic policy agendas) not least because of the costs of homelessness for our societies and economies. The economic dimensions of homelessness measures include:

- **More efficiency of social and health services:** efficient services for homeless people should ensure that people transition rapidly out of homelessness. However the predominant response to homelessness still takes the form of temporary shelter-based solutions, which do not necessarily provide the space needed to recover fully, with consequences for finding employment and a tendency for heavy use of emergency healthcare and services linked to the justice system. Reorganisation of social and health services towards individualised support will not only ensure better impact on homelessness reduction, but also potentially be a source of job creation.
- **Investment in human capital:** the human capital lost through homelessness should not be underestimated. The employability of workers will be affected by their housing conditions. Therefore the benefits of targeting homeless people as a part of active inclusion strategies are evident to empower people to be active citizens who contribute to society and the economy.
- **Structural housing measures:** the importance of housing as a solution to homelessness means that macro-economic measures aimed to stabilize housing markets (as highlighted in the European Commission's country-specific [in-depth reviews](#)) are key to preventing homelessness linked to evictions, housing shortages and housing unaffordability. Such measures are also important to ensure that lack of affordable housing does not stifle employability and economic recovery.

According to the European Commission 2013 [staff working document](#) on homelessness (part of the SIP), "governance of the policy measures tackling homelessness will have to be strengthened notably through a meaningful monitoring of homelessness at EU level. This can only happen when the Member States address the issue of homelessness in their National Reform Programmes."

Homelessness reduction emerged as a social priority in the 2012 round of NRPs. According to FEANTSA's 2012 [review](#) of the National Reform Programmes, more than half the EU member states outlined measures to tackle homelessness in their NRPs, with different approaches such as integrated homelessness strategies as a social policy measure, active inclusion policies for homeless people who are long-term unemployed, preventing homelessness through general housing measures like increasing the social housing stock or finding innovative ways to use empty homes, and improving the quality of services for homeless people with a tendency to provide more permanent forms of housing with support rather than temporary shelter solutions.

The next sections assess the integration of the SIP policy recommendations on homelessness in the 2013 National Reform Programmes, as well as general progress in measures to reduce homelessness.



### III. Implementation of SIP guidelines on homelessness through Europe2020

The 2013 National Reform Programmes highlight various social and economic measures which have an impact on homelessness prevention and reduction. In order to assess these measures from a common European perspective, it is worth considering the detailed SIP [guidelines on homelessness](#) put forward by the European Commission to support efforts to tackle homelessness at national level. They focus on five main dimensions which cover key components of existing homelessness strategies at national/regional/local level, and are therefore useful benchmarks for assessing the implementation of homelessness reduction through the European Semester and namely the National Reform Programmes: \* Prevention of homelessness \* Improvement of service provision \* Participation and empowerment \* Improving access to affordable housing \* Integrated homelessness strategies.

**Prevention of homelessness and access to affordable housing** overlap to a certain extent since many actions to increase affordable housing are part of a structural approach to preventing homelessness, and for the purpose of this assessment will be merged as one single dimension. **Improvement of service provision** covers a number of issues such as improving service standards and quality, providing services to support the employability of vulnerable groups, and ensuring access to basic services for people experiencing homelessness. **Participation and empowerment**, important for resettlement programmes, is very specific to homeless policy and an integral part of any **homelessness strategy** aiming to empower people to transition out of their homelessness situation. So these two dimensions are taken together as well for this review. Taking the SIP policy guidelines as a starting point, we examine the presence of the following three dimensions in the social chapters of the 2013 National Reform Programmes: \* Integrated homelessness strategies \* Improvement of service provision \* Homelessness prevention measures. The table below gives a general overview of actions in the 2013 NRPs which have an impact (generally positive) on addressing homelessness, and the next three sections look at the actions in greater detail.

	Homelessness strategy	Improving service provision	Prevention
AT			
BE			
BG			
CY			
CZ			
DE			
DK			
EE			
EL			
ES			
FI			
FR			
HU			
HR			
IE			
IT			
LT			
LU			
LV			
MT			
NL			
PL			
PT			
RO			
SE			
SI			
SK			
UK			

 Actions highlighted in 2013 NRPs which have an impact on homelessness reduction  
 Existing national/regional/local homeless strategies not referred to in 2013 NRPs.



#### IV. Integrated homelessness strategies: new strategies and reports on progress

*Countries which are known to have a national homelessness strategy include Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK. New integrated homelessness strategies have been highlighted in three new countries: Czech Republic, Greece and Luxembourg. Some countries have reported on progress in homelessness measures compared to 2012 (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland, UK), whereas others have not (Finland, Slovenia, Sweden). Some countries with strong homelessness strategies have not reported any action on homelessness (Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal). However, the general trend towards an increase in the number of national homelessness strategies and the review of existing strategies where new approaches are being tested, namely Housing First, shows awareness of EU countries of the need for specific strategies to complete general welfare and housing measures to mitigate the impact of austerity measures. These strategies tend to be integrated and developed through inter-ministerial cooperation with relevant stakeholders, and will undoubtedly contribute to lifting people out of poverty by 2020.*

The homelessness measures outlined in the 2013 NRP reveal that countries are at different stages in the development and implementation of homelessness strategies. Some are taking important steps in developing an evidence base for future integrated strategies and setting clear quality standards to ensure effective service delivery; others are at the initial stage of launching a strategy with long-term objectives or passing important legislation; others are driving social innovation by testing new approaches to tackling homelessness which departs from traditional shelter-based solutions.

In the **Czech Republic**, the government intends to approve a “Concept of Solution of the Homelessness Issue in the Czech Republic 2020” which would respond both to the Czech needs and to EU requirements to reinforce “targeted social services for the most disadvantaged groups”. This is a strategic government document to address homelessness, and will be based on preventive action, as well as on support related to existing services. It will also support the access to the housing and medical care and the improvement of awareness and cooperation between relevant stakeholders. This is an important step forward and has possibly emerged from the NRP 2012 initiatives to ensure quality social services for vulnerable groups. In **Greece**, a national action plan to combat homelessness and housing exclusion was developed in February 2013 by an inter-ministerial working group which will aim to apply a simpler tax policy to ensure greater fairness of the system. This is definitely a step in the right direction and progress compared to 2012 where Greece highlighted initial inter-ministerial cooperation to develop a homelessness strategy. However actions to implement the strategy have not yet been determined, and in the meantime emergency measures have been taken by municipalities, churches and NGOs to distribute food and material assistance. In **Luxembourg**, which also reported inter-ministerial cooperation in 2012 with a view to developing action on homelessness, a national strategy to counter homelessness and housing exclusion 2013-2020 was adopted in January 2013, based on a wide national consultation on social exclusion related to housing and homelessness, involving social partners and civil society organisations. The NRP contains detailed information about its objectives, key players, and key actions to ensure implementation and achievement of the objectives, which are linked to Housing First principles.

In terms of emergency responses to homelessness, **Belgium** reports that in the Brussels-Capital region, no homeless person was forced to spend the night in the street last winter through an offer which was equivalent to the number of homeless people in the region. This is a positive development compared to winter emergency plans in previous years, however these short-term responses should be complemented by long-term resettlement objectives. To this end, Housing First actions have been launched (namely experimentations in five Belgian cities) as part of national action on homelessness, and are to be supported by cooperation agreements to ensure structural support to reduce homelessness. This is evidence of progress in terms of defining priorities for promoting sustainable access to housing for vulnerable groups. In **Bulgaria**, the National action plan for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion 2020 includes measures taken in 2012 to create integrated social, healthcare and educational services for homeless people, however according to the 2013 NRP funding for these measures are currently not sufficient for full implementation of the measures. In **France**, the integrated homelessness strategy has actions on different levels including housing stock, improving shelter quality, and moving people on from shelters into more permanent accommodation in accordance with the law on housing rights. The update on progress shows that there have been actions to diversify the housing options for homeless



people, as well as a greater focus on the effectiveness of the shelter system and a first study of the costs of the system has been launched. In **Poland**, initial measures were taken in 2012 to improve the shelter system, and this has developed extensively as reported in 2013 through action taken to design a system of social services to support transitions out of homelessness (more below under improvement of service provision). Although Poland does not yet have a homelessness strategy, it seems to have laid the foundations for a strategy with clear standards for the functioning of local services aimed at homeless people. The **UK** has reported progress in Scotland which passed secondary legislation in November 2012 which means that from 31 December 2012 all unintentionally homeless households will be entitled to settled accommodation, and is the culmination of 9 years work from when the Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003 was passed. Local authorities have worked hard to be able to prepare for this new legal duty which expands the number of households that are entitled to settled accommodation.

Some countries highlighted actions in 2012 such as **Finland** (a long-term homelessness reduction programme), **Sweden** (the appointment of a homelessness coordinator to support local actions), and **Slovenia** (the promotion of the employment of the recipients of long-term cash social assistance with various complex problems including homeless people), but failed to provide an update on progress in their 2013 NRP. Some countries known to have very established homelessness strategies (**Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal**) have not even mentioned them in the NRPs. This could be for various reasons. Some NRPs highlight general anti-poverty strategies, of which strategies for homelessness reduction is a key part (e.g. Ireland National Action Plan for Social Inclusion). Some of these countries may be reporting on their social inclusion measures more specifically under the EU social policy framework, namely through strategic updates to the Social Protection Committee. The social policy agenda of some countries is dominated by the Troika (ECB, IMF, European Commission) programme requirements, which leaves less space to report on other fields of action. Some countries may not have strong joined-up government – due to its link to housing and health policy, homelessness is not always the responsibility of social affairs ministries, and the lack of joined-up government in some countries means that not all information on homelessness action is channeled into the Europe2020 process. The absence of national strategies in countries like **Austria, Germany, Spain and Italy** can partly be attributed to the decentralized responsibilities for homelessness. However, Member States are still encouraged to highlight regional and local strategies to tackle homelessness in their NRPs in order to allow for informed cross-country comparisons in the framework of the Europe2020 strategy.

The governance structure underpinning the European Semester clearly has an impact on the priority setting in the field of social inclusion. If the European Semester is to become the main policy framework for monitoring progress on homelessness in the EU, it would be crucial for countries active in reducing homelessness to state this in the NRPs, with brief progress reports where appropriate. This will be crucial for building European cooperation on homelessness with a view to reaching the 2020 poverty target. The SIP policy guidelines for developing effective homelessness strategies can be a useful benchmark for all Member States:

- \* Housing-led approaches with long-term objectives
- \* Prevention measures at different levels
- \* Strengthening cooperation between social and health sectors
- \* Providing sufficient financial support through social transfers
- \* Improving service delivery through integrated approaches
- \* Providing emergency accommodation of decent quality
- \* Making arrangements for extreme weather conditions
- \* Improving employability of homeless people
- \* Empowering homeless people and avoiding criminalization of homeless people
- \* Improving access to affordable housing
- \* Reinforcing partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders

The future PROGRESS programme, the European Programme for Social Change and Innovation 2014-2020, can make an important financial contribution to the development of integrated homelessness strategies through support for transnational exchanges through peer reviews at governmental level but also at the level of local authorities and NGO service providers; through support for experimentations to drive social innovation in approaches to reduce homelessness like Housing First applied in different local contexts or the role of social economy in active inclusion strategies targeting homeless people; and finally through support for research to fill gaps in knowledge from a cross-country perspective. These financial tools are key to allow a cluster of willing EU countries to move forward and enhance transnational cooperation to support their national, regional and local efforts to reduce homelessness and absorb shocks linked to austerity measures.



## V. Improving service provision namely social, health, housing infrastructure

*Improving service provision for homeless people as highlighted in the SIP varies from improving the employability of homeless people through active inclusion measures, skills training and social economy measures, to ensuring quality social and health service provision, to reviewing the emergency shelter system. These guidelines are reflected to a certain extent in the measures of the 2013 NRPs. Some countries explicitly mention improving services for homeless people (Croatia, France, Poland), some refer to special health services for vulnerable groups (Denmark, Lithuania), some refer to active inclusion strategies for people on social assistance benefits (Greece, Ireland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden), and finally some countries mention general reforms in social and health infrastructure, including actions promoting community-based services (Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia). All these actions can have an important impact on ensuring access to effective services for all, including the most vulnerable, and are an opportunity to make smart social investments with a lasting impact.*

People experiencing homelessness use a variety of social, health and housing support services to ensure they get their life back on track. Every person who applies for support has a completely individual story so that some services will be more appropriate than others. Some people who are transitionally homeless tend to require temporary accommodation and advice to access housing or employment or sort out their debts. Others who have been homeless for a longer period or who are even chronically homeless clearly need targeted support to access to health services (mental health, psychiatric, physical health, etc) and a stable housing environment to recover fully. Some people who have been unemployed for a long period can genuinely benefit from active inclusion strategies which take into account their specific needs in relation to gaining and maintaining employment. The NRPs highlight actions in service provision which can have an important effect in creating pathways out of homelessness or preventing long-term homelessness.

In **Croatia**, there are specific actions for war veterans and their families, which are linked to supporting homeless people. This includes broadening of the provision of health care, psychological and social services and the provision of services in the community, including accommodation, care and rehabilitation. In **France**, different types of supported housing have been introduced in order to vary service provision to meet the diversity of needs in the homeless population. There are also actions to make the current temporary accommodation stock more effective in addressing homelessness, and continued emphasis on the renovation of temporary accommodation with €20M allocated in 2011. In **Poland**, action has been taken to design a system of social services that responds to the new challenges related to social exclusion (mainly funded under the European Social Fund - ESF), including launching pilot projects with regard to the implementation of new service standards to ensure people can transition out of homelessness. In **Denmark**, a number of initiatives have been adopted targeting the most disadvantaged groups in Danish society, namely the right to a refund of dental expenses has been introduced for people receiving the lowest benefits. In **Lithuania**, there are plans according to the NRP to improve infrastructure for mental health care services, which could open the way for more Housing First programmes for homeless people.

In **Greece**, actions have been highlighted to generally develop a “social safety net” against social exclusion, which includes access to basic services, such as medical care, housing and education. This specific objective is not quantified, but highlights the need and willingness of the Greek government to increase access to basic services in the framework of the third pillar of active inclusion policy. In **Ireland**, an active inclusion strategy is in place in order to contribute to meeting the poverty reduction targets, with clear actions in relation to the service pillar. Community-based initiatives are considered to have a vital role to play in supporting social participation and enabling access to services, in particular the local and community development programme and the family resource centres programme. Housing and health services are also considered important in the fight against poverty, especially for marginalised groups, and this is detailed in the Irish National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. In **Slovenia**, actions for “social activation” will be pursued for individuals from vulnerable groups who have particular difficulty finding employment and/or are far removed from the labour market. This is in line with the active inclusion measures proposed in the 2012 NRP which also targeted homeless people, so it can be assumed that these social activation programmes will also be aimed at supporting homeless people. In **Spain**, a number of Autonomous Regions have promoted measures that, together with those implemented by the central



government, try to improve the employability of vulnerable groups as well as offering effective child and family support services, in order to improve the situation of people at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion. In **Sweden**, social assistance reforms have been undertaken in order to help reach the EU poverty target. The Government has proposed changes in the Social Services Act aimed at strengthening the opportunities for those receiving social assistance to support themselves through work and to extend the social services' possibilities to stimulate, encourage and support those receiving assistance to support themselves.

In **Belgium**, the region of Flanders has extended services in terms of preventive support in housing and a partnership has been forged with stakeholders in the fields of housing, health care and welfare, and with local administrations. In addition, funding is planned for experimental projects relating to both housing and welfare issues. In the Wallonia region, social and health action centres are creating networks of public and private players to meet the needs of people in acute social distress. In **Finland**, a National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care (KASTE II) was launched early 2012. Its objectives include narrowing well-being and health differences and developing social welfare and health care structures and services on a more customer-oriented basis. The national programme to reduce long-term homelessness is funded under the KASTE II programme and therefore is part of a wider reform agenda affecting social and health services in general. Finland is known to be one of the drivers of Housing First in Europe which is about putting the individual first, and providing social and health support in housing especially for homeless people with complex support needs. In **Hungary**, action has been taken to modernize residential social institutions to introduce supported housing for vulnerable groups. They are working towards models which combine social and housing services as way of de-institutionalising current services so that people can be given greater independence, enhanced social and family relationships and the development of other skills and capacities. Scheduled for completion in 2013, professional guidelines for providing supported housing will provide methodological support for service providers. However, given the recent changes in the Hungarian constitution which make it possible to criminalise homelessness, it is unlikely that homeless people will benefit from these service reforms. In **Italy**, an experimentation will be launched in the twelve biggest cities to test the use of a "social card" aimed to provide income support for vulnerable groups over one year, including homeless families as one of the key target groups. The use of the social card will be associated with individualised support plans to ensure better access to basic services. In **Latvia**, actions in the NRP focus on continued development of social services, with particular attention to the diversification of services and development of alternative services for institutions with an aim to introduce more "community based services" that allow the service user to be in their usual environment or as close to their usual environment as possible. It is not clear to what extent homeless people are the target of such community-based services however. In **Malta**, an "Independent Living in the Community Scheme" aims for independent living of vulnerable groups through community-based solutions. This scheme is targeted to persons with mental health problems, homeless people, young people leaving care, adults or children who are victims of domestic violence and disabled persons. In **Portugal**, a four-year social emergency programme was adopted in 2011 which includes measures to simplify the legislation and the technical guidelines concerning social services, to ensure more rapid and effective responses to social needs in the current context. This includes more emergency accommodation and home support services, while trying to test new models of service delivery which provide support to people in their local community. In **Romania**, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) has financed several projects aiming to improve the quality of social infrastructure and rehabilitating health care infrastructure. In February 2013, financial interventions ensured the rehabilitation of 16 health care units and 44 residential social centres. In **Slovakia**, availability and quality of social services and other measures related to social inclusion have been taken as part of general actions to deinstitutionalise the social service system with a view to reduce institutional isolation and segregation of people in specialised establishments and provide solutions for people within their local communities through alternative social work models. In **Slovenia**, there are also moves to review social work models namely through a reorganization of social work centres which has begun in 2013 in order to improve availability of services. Such social centres (which also work with people who are homeless) will be expected to have a strengthened role as links with the services of other government organisations (regional employment offices, health care services, school advisory services, police etc.) as well as non-governmental organisations operating various programmes for vulnerable groups. A trial reorganisation of social work centres will begin in the second half of 2013 in one of the smaller Slovenian regions.



The different reforms being undertaken in social, health and housing services in different countries should have an impact on homelessness reduction, since the main trends highlighted above show moves towards better linkages between different services through holistic thinking (key for prevention of homelessness), de-institutionalisation and strengthened links with local communities, individualisation of support, and giving individuals the tools to empower themselves to participate actively in society. These actions highlighted in the 2013 NRPs are also in line with the European Commission's recommendations to invest in the social and health sector as a source of job creation potentially contributing to economic growth. In **Austria**, the main driver of employment growth is to be found in the field of social and healthcare services, together with education and retail trade. Both the ERDF (for investment in social, health, housing infrastructure) and the ESF (for investment in training programmes for social and active inclusion of homeless people) will be key channels for EU support to implement the reforms highlighted in the NRPs.

## VI. Homelessness prevention measures in housing policy

*Measures which contribute to homelessness prevention are referred in many NRPs, namely for Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK. The SIP guidelines refer to different types of prevention measures including general prevention through welfare allowances or increasing the availability and affordability of housing, and targeted prevention aimed at vulnerable groups through income support or reducing eviction threats. The measures in the 2013 NRPs partly cover these different types of prevention but especially focus on actions in the field of housing namely stabilizing housing markets and making better use of empty properties (Denmark, Spain, UK), promoting affordable housing solutions (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Sweden) and facilitating access to housing for vulnerable groups (Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Spain).*

Prevention measures are an important part of any homelessness strategy, both on a general and targeted level. Most welfare measures referred to in the NRPs, including the reforms in social, health and housing support services highlighted above, contribute in some way to homelessness prevention. However, our focus in this section is more on structural measures to improve the access and affordability of housing. According to [2012 EU statistics](#), a third of the EU population at risk of poverty spends more than 40% of their budget on housing costs, which is considered a heavy burden which increases the vulnerability of low income households in some cases leading to eviction or repossession of housing. Measures in the 2013 NRPs do not always target homeless people specifically, but generally target households at risk of homelessness or suffering from housing exclusion, and should therefore have an impact on homelessness reduction.

In **Denmark**, housing market stability is promoted through measures for stable housing finance and good customer advice services, also reducing risks of eviction, and focusing more generally on youth as a form of prevention. In **Spain**, measures were taken to increase the national supply of private rental housing, which currently accounts for about 17% of households, closer to the regional average of 38%. Incentives were introduced to make the rental market more flexible and dynamic by increasing guarantees for tenants and landlords and giving greater security to the system, aiming to guarantee access to housing and increase the use of new empty or unused homes. In the **UK**, measures were taken by the Welsh government in its 2012 Housing White Paper outlining an ambitious programme of legislative and non-legislative action. The approach is based on three strategic objectives: increasing the supply of housing; improving the quality of existing housing; and improving housing and housing-related services. One of the key developments includes making the best use of existing homes by bringing 5,000 empty properties back into use. The White Paper also provided a solid foundation for the Housing (Wales) Bill, which is due to be introduced in autumn 2013 and will place a greater focus on preventing homelessness as well as enabling local authorities to discharge their main homelessness duty through suitable accommodation in the private rented sector. It will include provisions to modernise the private rented sector to improve the conditions in the sector and the practices of landlords and lettings agents. However, a recent EU Committee of the Regions [survey](#) refers to the anticipated reduction in housing revenue from welfare reform changes, which may impact negatively on tackling homelessness.



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In **Belgium**, the region of Flanders is preparing the creation of a fund to combat evictions. In the region of Wallonia, a rent allowance scheme was activated in 2012 for tenants who have been on the waiting list for social housing for at least 5 years. In **France**, a recent measure made automatic the allocation of social rates for energy and gas, hence aiming to reduce housing costs for low-income households. In **Luxembourg**, an analysis of the financial assistance provided by social service centres in 2012 revealed that the largest category of assistance was housing allowances (representing 26.61% of the overall budget), and assistance for energy costs (electricity, water and heating) represented 8.98% of the total budget. In **Malta**, a “Subsidised Rental Scheme” introduced in March 2012 (€800,000 per annum, targeting about 1300 beneficiaries for up to 5 years) has been sustained in order to allow tenants to rent residences that are more suitable to their needs, thus improving their standard of living. This scheme, which is means tested, will target those who are in a difficult financial position, by easing the burden related to housing costs, thus reducing the risks of homelessness. In **Portugal**, access to housing is considered a basic necessity and has led to the creation of a fund aimed to create 1,200 homes in a first phase, with an expected increase to 2000 homes, covering about 100 municipalities. One of the objectives of the fund is ultimately to make private rental housing more affordable for low-income families which cannot afford rents at market prices. In **Sweden**, housing allowances have been increased for households with children which translates as a 30% increase compared to 2011 for an average family. In general, housing allowances were increased last year on different levels and for different target groups (single parents with children, young people between 18 and 29 years of age, and pensioners).

In **Lithuania**, attempts are being made to increase the availability of housing for vulnerable groups of residents - LTL 13M million was allocated for the development of social housing in 2012. In **Luxembourg**, the Sector Housing Master Plan (PSL) plans to use some 500 hectares of land for large-scale residential projects that meet specific social and environmental criteria, so as to keep the shortage of affordable housing to a minimum. Housing built under this program should accommodate up to 44,000 persons. In **Poland**, legislative work related to social housing and protection of residents' rights is in progress. The programme for social and communal housing and creating protected flats, night shelters and housing for homeless people was implemented with financial support from the State budget. In **Slovakia**, measures have been taken to ensure housing sustainability for vulnerable groups. Low-income households will receive direct financial support based on new legislation aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion. Better access to housing for at-risk groups will be carried out through better targeting of other types of housing support. In **Slovenia**, the National Housing Programme will boost investments in the construction of public apartments in areas where they are most needed, and the construction of apartments for vulnerable population groups. In **Spain**, funds have been allocated to improve living conditions and to contribute to the fight against poverty, in particular in the most deprived areas, including funding for programmes that help the most disadvantaged groups access housing. However, feedback from FEANTSA members indicates that the measures taken, namely through the [Rent Act 2013](#), provide more advantages to the landlords renting the homes than to the tenants of rental housing, and therefore do not really favour access to housing for vulnerable groups.

Much remains to be done to stabilize housing markets and ensure access to affordable housing for all: reforms of mortgage legislation in some countries could prevent large increases in homelessness (as called for by the [European Court of Justice](#) in the case of Spain); more balanced housing markets are needed with an adequate, accessible and affordable rental sector which is able to cater for the most excluded; generating more affordable housing, including social housing, and improving access and security of tenure for the most excluded, should be a priority in housing strategies rather than re-launching speculative housing bubbles; measures should be systematically taken to promote the use of empty properties on the market. The ERDF is a key source of funding to help address housing imbalances across Europe, with projects which can achieve multiple objectives (urban regeneration, renovation of existing stock, access to housing for marginalized communities, conversion of buildings into forms of housing, conversion of institutions into community-based solutions).



## VII. Conclusions

This 2013 FEANTSA review of the NRPs shows that eleven countries have reported targeted social investments to address homelessness (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland and the UK).

New, integrated homelessness strategies have been highlighted in three countries (Czech Republic, Greece and Luxembourg), which shows increasing awareness in EU countries of the need for specific strategies to complete general welfare and housing measures to mitigate the impact of austerity measures. Some countries have reported on progress in homelessness measures compared to 2012 (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland, UK), whereas others have not (Finland, Slovenia, Sweden). Some countries with strong homelessness strategies and strong interest in EU cooperation on homelessness have not reported any action on homelessness (Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal). Some countries explicitly mention improving services for homeless people (Croatia, France, Poland), some refer to special health services for vulnerable groups (Denmark, Lithuania), some refer to active inclusion strategies for people on social assistance benefits (Greece, Ireland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden), and finally a significant number of countries mention general reforms in social and health infrastructure, including actions promoting community-based services (Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia). Measures in the NRPs focus also on actions in the field of housing namely stabilizing housing markets and making better use of empty properties (Denmark, Spain, UK), promoting affordable housing solutions (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Sweden) and facilitating access to housing for vulnerable groups (Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Spain).

It is fair to say that a significant number of countries are taking action to prevent and reduce homelessness, on a general **structural** level (especially through promoting access to affordable housing and reorganizing services to make them more accessible and effective), but also **in a more targeted way** (through targeted integrated homelessness strategies, measures for people furthest from the labour market, and the improvement of temporary accommodation services for better responses to social emergencies).

Following the publication of the 2013 NRPs, the European Commission published Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) on 29 May 2013. FEANTSA strongly welcomes the European Commission's statement in its general [Communication](#) on the CSRs that several Member States need to pay more attention to combating different forms of poverty, including homelessness. Whereas the Commission calls in its general Communication for more Member States to address homelessness, it did not publish any CSRs on homelessness. However, a number of recommendations in the social field have a potential impact on tackling and preventing homelessness, namely CSRs calling for more efficient social and health services, for employability programmes targeting people furthest away from the labour market, for actions to support social inclusion of migrants, for better targeting of social policies, for general progress in poverty reduction with a focus on children, and finally for changes in housing policy to ensure better access for all. We will be monitoring closely country responses to these CSRs.

The mainstreaming of social policies in the European Semester has been encouraged through the publication of the Social Investment Package and is already starting to yield some results in terms of priority-setting. We call on **all** Member States to report on progress on tackling homelessness in their annual National Reform Programmes using the SIP guidelines. However, annual reporting through the National Reform Programmes is not enough to ensure real progress in homelessness reduction. The EU needs to give space to countries to move forward together in a strong policy framework to coordinate their homelessness policies, as a response to calls from different EU bodies and institutions over the last 5 years (Irish Presidency of the EU, EPSCO Council, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions, European Economic and Social Committee). Furthermore, the EU must support the allocation of 25% of the overall future cohesion funds (from 2014-2020) to the European Social Fund in order to respond swiftly to the negative impact of austerity measures.