

FROM DREAM TO REALITY: ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN BELGIUM

NOTES AND PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PANEL DISCUSSIONS
DURING THE CONFERENCE



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INTRODUCTION

The year 2023 marks a significant anniversary in the history of homelessness in Belgium: on 12 January 1993, the law containing an emergency programme for a more supportive society took effect. This act conferred the competence for homelessness on the public social welfare centres (OCMW/CPAS), in addition to repealing the vagrancy act.

In addition to the closure of shelter homes for beggars, changes to the law on outpatient care (cf. closure of psychiatric beds) and in the treatment of asylum seekers also had an impact on the increased presence of people on Belgium's streets in the 1990s.


In anticipation of the fact that most public social welfare centres (OCMW/CPAS) really take this competence for homelessness seriously, a fairly significant number of new services have been created in Belgium, mainly by NGOs but also by the OCMW/CPAS.

Street outreach activities, night shelters or emergency accommodation, funding for day centres, etc. have all contributed to the desire to engage with people who are living on the street using low threshold methods. At the same time, humanitarian reception efforts have been stepped up in all major cities, especially during the winter period.

In all three regions, progress has been made in terms of strengthening and professionalising the sector's full range of services, both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view. New approaches, which are called assisted housing, post-housing or Housing First, have been tested, approved, and consolidated. New professions such as housing mediation services have also been created. Field workers have experimented with new ways of taking social action and offering support to people. The coordination of services within a network, both in Wallonia and in Brussels, and with integrated community services in Flanders (cf. reform of the CAWs, Centres for General Welfare Work) has continued.

Recently, the governments of Flanders, Wallonia, the Brussels-Capital Region and the German-speaking region reiterated their desire to take action to resolve homelessness, by focussing on prevention, stepping up support, the coordination of services as part of a local policy, access to housing and housing retention, and the strengthening of study centres, to better identify situations (in qualitative and quantitative terms) and to understand how people come to be homeless and have no place to call home.





Thirty years ago, the Law containing an “Emergency Programme” entered into force, and it is worth noting that the sector has since evolved. At the same time, the censuses by Bruss’help point to a steadily growing number of people in this situation. Other censuses in Belgium also indicate that this is a complex theme and that the different situations of homelessness are not limited to large cities. There are people all over Belgium searching for a place to live. Their profiles are increasingly diverse and the health, migratory, social, and energy crises have only served to compound these situations.

In the late 1990s, the dream was to end homelessness by conferring this competence on the OCMW/CPAS. While this legislation was a major step forward, the significant efforts of the past 30 years unfortunately proved insufficient, and ending homelessness in the short term more than ever seems illusory.

And yet, we have observed a change in the perception of these people in recent years. We have gradually evolved, from the dissocialised vagrant to whom the State solely provides urgent humanitarian aid to an approach that facilitates aid to people with the most complex problems, promoting housing retention and their gradual reintegration in society. Ultimately, this means that it is possible to help anyone lead a life in dignity. In June 2021, Belgium signed the Lisbon Declaration, setting itself the target to eradicate homelessness by 2030. The main principles of this declaration are:

*« no one sleeps rough outdoors for lack of accessible, safe and appropriate emergency accommodation;
no one lives in emergency or transitional housing for longer than is necessary to successfully transition to a permanent housing solution;
no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, care centre) without an offer of adequate housing;
evictions should be avoided whenever possible and no one is evicted, when necessary, without assistance for an adequate housing solution;
no one is discriminated against because of their indigent status.»¹*

Below we will present the most important learnings from our conference: “From dream to reality: Ending homelessness in Belgium.” The panel discussions during this conference and this report attempt to provide a status quo of good practices, to formalise wishes for the future, and to suggest ideas for solutions to achieve this objective, focusing on four key themes:

1. data collection
2. housing
3. support
4. prevention

¹ Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform to combat Homelessness, 21 June 2021.

AN ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

In her keynote speech, **Kara Heron** of the **Glasgow Alliance to End Homelessness** elaborated on the innovative strategy that the City of Glasgow (Scotland) rolled out to achieve this objective.

Scotland has a population of 5.5 million, of which 35,230 people who are homeless or have no home to call their own. The first action plan was implemented in 2018 by a group of academics, social workers, and people with lived experience. Their proposal was to deliver person-centred services. One of the main strategic aims in Glasgow is to find housing as soon as possible for these people, reducing the time they spend in shelters or temporary accommodation as much as possible. In Glasgow in particular, which makes up just 10% of the population, 19% of the population is either homeless or has no place to call home. These people also spend the longest time in temporary accommodation.

In 2016, the City of Glasgow conducted a strategic review of homelessness in the city, formulating recommendations to combat this problem. One of the main conclusions of this review was the overlap between the activities of workers in this sector and the fragmentation of organisations that essentially did the same work. In 2017, workshops were organised to devise a solution, consisting of an alliance, which was approved by the local authorities. This led to the establishment of the Alliance in 2020.



Above all, this Alliance consists of a formal (and legal) collaboration between partners that share responsibility. The approach prioritises the development of better services for the people who use them. The project's success is measured based on the overall performance of the partners, rather than on all their individual performance. The partnership consists of ten organisations.

The main strategic aims are prevention of homelessness, prioritising settled homes for everyone, reducing the number of people and time spent in temporary accommodation, delivering person-centred services, and, finally, the creation of a movement for change by partnering with other sectors and civil society.

Decision-making within the Alliance is done by consensus. Everyone must agree on the steps to be followed to ensure that they are given the green light. This partnership approach is crucial for embedding the project on the local level. Much of the first year was spent on building strong relationships with the sector and developing services with the competent people. External cooperation is equally important. Workshops, surveys, and panel discussions with field workers are regularly organised to strengthen the Alliance's relations with the sector. Public surveys are also used to find out what the population's take is on the problem. In the future, the Alliance wants to be able to centralise all the information about the various services so that the people who use them will feel that their case is handled by one single service.

DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

The **Q&A** session provided a wealth of information. In Brussels, and Belgium as a whole, it has become clear that working together (perhaps based on the same model as that of the Alliance) is a necessity. In light of this, audience members had many **questions about how this Alliance works in practice.**

Kara Heron began by reminding everyone that the Alliance was founded because of the **need for collaboration**, and to develop real solutions for the people who use these services and the workers. The initiative came from academics, social workers, and people with lived experience, who joined forces. The need to work with civil society to build a community in which people feel safe and not stigmatised was also a stipulation.

The keynote speaker explained how everyone wanted to **work more closely together with the private and public housing sectors** to improve access to and the quality of housing. She also explained that (formerly) homeless people were and still are involved in the Alliance project. Moreover, the workshops with these people were launched long before the establishment of the Alliance, during the preparatory phase. Scotland has a national tradition of **involving these people in action plans to end homelessness.**

The audience was especially interested in how they **mobilise and involve government bodies** as well as other sectors. Kara Heron proceeded to explain that the process was fraught with doubt at times and that change was neither easy, nor accepted by everyone. Some people needed convincing. The fact that everyone recognised that previous joint missions had failed was the decisive factor in getting everyone on board for this new strategy.

This project, which is founded on a consensus-based method and the agreement of everyone as well as the desire to work together towards a common mission, seems to be bearing fruit even though it is just in its initial stages and many changes have since had to be made. Perhaps an approach that might work in Belgium?

PANEL 1 - DATA COLLECTION

The first panel, centring on data collection, began with a podcast by HuNeeds, entitled “Quand tu dors où” (When you sleep where?). This podcast by **Gaëlle Guerrero**, a nurse and coordinator of the My Way team at **Street Nurses**, highlighted the testimonials of people who have lived on the streets as well their support workers. Gaëlle Guerrero stressed that the path to homelessness is very diverse and diffuse and that there can be no single response to this problem, as a result. The data must therefore inform political choices to offer adapted solutions to the specific needs of all homeless people in Belgium.

She then invited two panellists to join her on stage and speak. The first was Koen Hermans, a professor at KULeuven and the coordinator of the homelessness censuses that have been in Belgium since 2020. The second was Louise Paquot, a counsellor at Bruss’Help, who is responsible for Census research & Masterplan and who organises a census every two years in the Brussels-Capital Region.

Koen Hermans reminded the audience that cities need a national policy to combat homelessness. All the political levels must therefore work together to devise solutions. The MEHOBEL study, which was conducted between 2016 and 2018, aimed to develop a standardised approach for measuring homelessness in Belgium, identifying methods used in other countries and whether they could be used in Belgium. According to Koen Hermans, there are two important aspects to be taken into account in the general census of homelessness in Belgium. On the one hand, data collection is necessary in both cities and semi-urban and rural areas. On the other hand, the involvement and cooperation of the OCMW/CPAS are crucial for obtaining relevant figures. The participation of a neutral academic body is also necessary to guarantee data confidentiality.



In 2020, a first census test was conducted in Leuven. In October of that same year, a first wave of censuses was launched in four areas: Arlon, Ghent, Liège, and the province of Limburg. The next year, censuses were held in the cities of Charleroi and Namur, southwest Flanders and the Bravio zone around Vilvoorde. These censuses were needed to convince a broad range of services that potentially engaged with homeless people to cooperate: OCMW/CPAS, mutual health insurance funds, social services, social restaurants, social letting agencies, prisons, mental health hospitals, and so on. The figures were anonymised and interpreted by the academic body that supervised the project (KULeuven and UCLouvain).

The main tool for this census was the ETHOS Light typology. This can be used to determine whether people are homeless or have no place to call home. The different life situations were divided into six operational categories. Another category of people in housing at risk of eviction was also added, bringing the total to seven.

In Kortrijk, 45 services participated in this census and shared information about people in one of the living situations of the ETHOS Light typology. The census questionnaires were filled out by the worker with the homeless person, which took five to ten minutes on average. The collected information was very diverse: gender, age, nationality, period of homelessness, employment, health, etc.

In conclusion, Koen Hermans explained that these censuses help to reveal the visible part of the iceberg that is homelessness. The team is very aware of the project's limitations, however, as it is impossible to reach all homeless people. He thinks that these censuses are only part of the solution.

Louise Paquot then proceeded to present the biennial censuses that have been held in Brussels since 2008. The main interest of these censuses is that they contribute to rendering visible homeless people and highlighting the variety of their living situations. By conducting biennial censuses, the team can measure the evolution of this phenomenon. The figures provide support for combating homelessness.

In all previous censuses, the ETHOS typology was used to define homelessness. For the November 2022 census, the team used the ETHOS Light typology as the process can thus be harmonised with other methods that are currently used in Belgium. Each census requires the assistance of many workers in this sector. It is supervised by a committee made up of different actors.



Louise Paquot also presented a number of specific figures from previous censuses. The census found that 91.3% of the people who were living rough in public space were male. The number of people in emergency accommodation increased between 2016 and 2018, due to the migration crisis and the creation of the Plateforme Citoyenne (Citizens' Platform). In 2020, there was a significant increase, which was related among others to the fact that places were created and became available during the pandemic. The census found that many women were living in these COVID shelters, as a result of the increase in domestic violence during the pandemic. Finally, Louise Paquot also stressed that the figures relating to people in non-conventional dwellings also tend to fluctuate over time.

Currently, the figures obtained in previous censuses provided the team with information about people living in public space, in emergency accommodation, in accommodation for the homeless, and in non-conventional dwellings (four out of seven categories). In 2022, Bruss'help hopes to improve the collection of raw data during a pilot phase, obtaining more information on hidden homelessness, by combining the two census methodologies. This refers to people living temporarily in conventional housing with third parties, in an institution, or in housing at the risk of eviction. Moreover, the organisation also wants to deepen qualitative data, by using a more comprehensive questionnaire, and working more broadly, with the OCMW/CPAS, accommodation for the homeless, and day centres.



DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

Koen Hermans was asked how these **figures could be used specifically** to develop policies and mobilise the results of the censuses that had already been conducted in these cities. He explained that national and local figures were important and complementary. He did not think that these censuses were revolutionary, but he felt that they did help to identify groups that had stayed under the radar up until now. In Limburg, they found almost 130 people who were staying in a mental health institution because there was no other housing solution for them. In Leuven, they identified many adolescents, resulting in the implementation of several small-scale initiatives.

The audience then asked the two researchers questions about whether the **results** of these censuses **potentially underestimated** the scope of the problem. Louise Paquot explained that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon as a whole is complicated. The idea is thus to conduct the most exhaustive census possible. Comparing what can be compared is possible, such as the evolution and regularity of some figures, given that these censuses are organised every two years in Brussels.

The researchers were then asked whether the **censuses** by these different organisations could **provide a good base for establishing an alliance**, like the one in Glasgow. For Koen Hermans, these censuses can make an important difference when it comes to influencing policy-makers on a structural level. Louise Paquot said that links were already being established in light of the progressive harmonisation of the census methods.

Finally, the audience asked Koen Hermans and Louise Paquot which advice they had in terms of **transposing these figures into opportunities for action**. Koen Hermans said that everything depended on how the figures were interpreted. You can have good policies in place but see a rise in the national figures nonetheless (he reminded the audience of the example of Denmark where important progress was made in terms of access to housing but where figures increased steadily due to different crises).

A policy's effectiveness should therefore never be solely based on quantifications. You need to interpret figures, look for the meaning behind them, to get an overall idea of the phenomenon, working with various areas of expertise. For Louise Paquot, the cooperation between the different stakeholders will definitely be instrumental in proposing the necessary structural solutions.

PANEL 2 - HOUSING

The second panel was dedicated to the main question of housing. It started with a video testimonial and a presentation by **Wanda Duhamel**, a manager of rental properties at **Street Nurses**. She reminded the audience that despite the inclusion of the right to safety and dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the right to decent housing in the Belgian Constitution, these rights are not guaranteed due to various obstacles: the lack of affordable, decent, public housing, access of undocumented people to this housing, and the control of people and their housing.

The first speaker, **Mathilde Flas**, is currently preparing a PhD in urban and spatial planning at the **University of Liège**, and is focussing on the issue of empty homes. She raised the question whether these vacant homes could become a real resource, given the current demographic growth and the need to respond to the lack of housing.

The speaker wanted to find answers to three questions, that highlight specific challenges. Firstly, the issue of the quantification of vacant homes shows that there is a lack of available data about these homes and that they are difficult to map. The estimate of 45,000 vacant homes in Wallonia thus seems to be at the low end.

The characterisation of vacant homes helps us to better understand why they are empty. This housing stock can thus be divided into three categories:

1. Vacancy due to legal obstacles (problem of succession, joint ownership, etc.);
2. Vacancy due to degeneration of the market (housing that is in very poor condition, not attractive for the market, and too expensive to renovate)
3. Vacancy due to the owner (home owner is speculating or is hanging on to this housing).

There are several solutions for mobilising vacant housing, combating vacancy, or even encouraging owners to renovate these homes and sell them. Finally, the social letting agencies offer financial aid for renovations but this is often deemed insufficient. In cases of speculation, the tax on vacant housing may help to resolve this problem but it still fails to provide sufficient leverage for houses that need renovating. The problem is the same for the administrative fine. Forced requisition by a social letting agency may be an interesting solution but the question remains whether this will be successful, given the lack of resources and staff of these agencies. Finally, a prohibitory injunction will involve other stakeholders - the courts - to put an end to the vacancy.



The speaker ended her presentation by reminding the audience that putting these vacant homes back on the market was not a quick solution given the time that all these measures take. It is, however, a solution that must be considered as part of a longer-term strategy. This fight must be waged at the same time as the fight against indecent housing, because they both deny people the right to housing and undermine human dignity.



Then **Cornelis Klint**, an adviser on homelessness of the **City of Leuven**, took the floor. To provide some context for his presentation, he explained the situation in terms of social housing in Leuven: the City has a waiting list of more than 6,000 households and the real estate market is inaccessible. Social housing is being built, but very slowly, and the lots that are available for construction are not being used to build social housing. Private property developers are increasingly buying up housing stock. To cope with this shortage, the City decided to take action on three levels as part of its housing strategy.

Firstly, the available housing must be increased. There are three ways of doing this.

1. Work with AG Stadsontwikkeling Leuven, the property developer which buys these buildings for people in dire circumstances and offers them for rent at a rental price that is 20% lower than the market price
2. Focus on vacant homes and force the owners to rent them out;
3. And motivate private owners and property developers to rent to vulnerable target groups, in spite of the lack of legal leverage for this.

The city also wants to provide support to people on the waiting list. Regional incentives are already available, but only after four years on the waiting list. The idea would be to allocate this after just one year on the list. Finally, the city wants to develop new social housing projects itself, in cooperation with sectoral stakeholders.

In conclusion, the speaker reminded the audience that even though any small-scale initiatives are more than welcome, a federal strategy to combat this issue is indispensable for a longer-term impact.



The third and final speaker on this panel was **Anne Bauwelinckx of Rassemblement Bruxellois pour le Droit à l'Habitat (RBDH)**. The mission of the RBDH is to gather first-line stakeholders around the table as well as draw the attention of policy-makers to current issues and produce studies and analyses about the housing issue. Anne Bauwelinckx began by reminding everyone that this crisis was not due to the availability of housing, but to the availability of affordable housing. Only 10% of all houses built in Brussels are social housing.



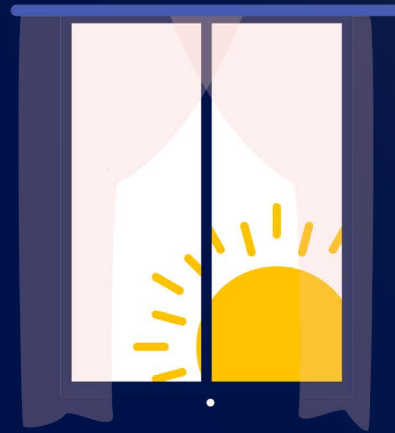
Public housing is not always necessarily social housing². There is a structural shortage of social housing, which only accounts for 7% of all housing stock in Brussels, forcing people to branch out to the private market. People spend eight to 15 years on average on the waiting list for social housing. Since 2005, the government has made attempts to boost the construction of social housing, but results have failed to materialise³.

The lack of haste in the construction of social housing can be attributed to two key factors: the duration of procedures (political decision, planning permission, tender procedure, calls for offers, etc.) and the difficulty to find land to build affordable housing. Despite the fact that these public lots exist, the RBDH has observed that there is a lack of political goodwill to turn this land into social housing, even more so in the communes in the southwest of Brussels, which have almost no social housing.

To respond to these challenges, the RBDH asks that all public land remains public and that at least 60% of the housing that is built in the Brussels-Capital Region is social housing. Moreover, the RBDH asks that policy-makers impose a rule on private property developers to incorporate some social housing in their projects. Rising rental prices on the private housing market are causing inhabitants of Brussels to spend an increasingly larger share of their income on rent, up to 70% in some cases. People are finding it increasingly difficult to pay their rent, leading to a growing number of evictions. In response to this, the notion of abusive rent (i.e., amounts that exceeded the reference values for rental prices in the region) was established in 2021. While charging excessive rent is punishable under the law, sanctions are very difficult to enforce.

² Several public housing projects are offered for rent at a “moderate price”, making them difficult to afford for low-income households.

³ In 2021, barely half of the housing that was originally planned under the regional housing Plan of 2005 was actually built. For a detailed analysis: RBDH (2022), Produire du logement social à Bruxelles: héritages, freins et nouvelles stratégies.



DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

During the Q&A sessions, several challenges were also highlighted. Firstly, the issue of a **coordinated policy as part of a strategy to combat homelessness** was raised. While the censuses did contribute to the **development of local strategies**, as evidenced by the case of Leuven, the **federal housing plans** are largely insufficient. This challenge also applies to **vacant homes**, where the responsibilities of the municipal, regional, and federal levels are not clear, needlessly complicating the implementation of actions and strategies.


The issue of the **mismanagement and lack of maintenance of social housing** by public social housing authorities was also highlighted. To respond to these issues, the RDBH offers technical support for renovations. The merger in 2016 of these housing authorities was mainly a solution designed to make them more professional. The speakers were also asked questions about **evictions**. The RDBH asserted its position, which is to prohibit evictions if there is no alternative housing solution, and the need to invest in the prevention of these difficult situations.

PANEL 3 – SUPPORT

Various guests from various areas of expertise took to the stage for the third panel, which focused on support to (formerly) homeless people. Coralie Buxant (director of the non-profit organisation Les Trois Portes in Namur), Adriana Costa Santos (co-president of BelRefugees), Isabella Reati (project manager at the non-profit organisation ASBL Affiliation), Peter-Jan Heylenbosch (housing coach at the public social welfare centre in Ghent) and, finally, Charles-Antoine Sibille (a psychiatrist of the mobile team of the 107 network in Brussels).

Prior to the presentations, **Filip Keymeulen**, a street worker at **Diogènes**, introduced the session by explaining which support the staff of this non-profit organisation provides on a daily basis to its clients. Diogènes mainly works in (semi-)public spaces. It is here that they meet people and try to build a relationship with them. The question of trust is central to their outreach work as the people they provide support to often feel distrust given the time they have spent living rough. Diogènes assists these people at every stage of this process, with health or family problems as well as administrative or legal problems, or migration issues. Although the staff does not have a formal agreement with other services, Diogènes meets with a wide range of stakeholders to find a solution for the homeless person. This makes it possible to understand what are the possibilities for this person to regain their rights as a citizen, offering them more stability, even if this person does not want to live in own housing and prefers to live rough.

After this, each of the speakers explained which support they provide to their clients, highlighting the diversity of existing services. **Coralie Buxant** started by explaining the many, different services that “**Les Trois Portes**” offers: a shelter for men and women, Housing First service, day-care, etc. Her presentation mainly highlighted the support paradigm, as part of empowerment methods. Recently, the non-profit organisation decided to overhaul its support, changing the way it worked with homeless people, choosing to focus on the resources they have as well as on the resources that staff can rely on to find solutions. When asked about the tools that are needed for such a changed approach, Coralie Buxant stressed how important it is to offer a secure environment for workers and be a social laboratory so everyone can test new support methods.



Next, **Adriana Costa Santos** took the floor. She also discussed the evolution in the support provided by **the Citizens' platform for aid to refugees**, which was established in Parc Maximilien in 2015 to offer material assistance. Since then, the platform has developed around two main pillars: offering adapted reception solutions, on the one hand, with the direct involvement of citizens, which leads to the second pillar and which consists of contributing to a change in perception and political and societal attitudes to migration. Adriana Costa Santos highlighted the development of reception and assistance approaches, which are citizen-based. The citizens become direct actors of change, helping to build relationships and promoting social cohesion.



Isabella Reati, meanwhile, outlined a different approach to support, with people being rehoused through **Housing First** projects. This support was developed based on the finding that rehoused people were often isolated, felt disengaged, had very little social contact, and few friends and family to rely on. They sometimes suffer from low self-esteem and have a distorted relationship with society, the collective. The non-profit organisation is thus concentrating on the social reintegration progress, on the individual and collective level.

Next, **Peter-Jan Heylenbosch**, a Housing First housing coach with the **City of Ghent**, explained how he provides support to people who are rehoused thanks to cooperation between the public social welfare centre of Ghent (OCMW) and the social letting agencies. The latter make available 41 housing units per year. In this case, support provided in tandem with the social workers of the City of Ghent. As a result, the roles are divided between a more financial, administrative side, and the social workers, and the more generalist approach of the housing coaches. Good communication is vital in this tandem approach. The diversity of the services offered by the City and the OCMW is also often mobilised by the coaches.



Finally, **Charles-Antoine Sibille** and his team offer support to **people who live rough or in very bad housing conditions and who have been in and out of mental health hospitals**. They have the time and are good at listening to all the challenges that are associated with living on the fringe. Their approach centres on the person's rights. The idea is to build a relationship with the most isolated people. When asked whether he had any tips for workers on how to provide better support for people with mental health issues, Charles-Antoine Sibille insisted that mutual trust is everything and that social workers should adopt the same attitudes that they usually do, i.e. not judge people and not assume that they know all about their situation.

Following these brief presentations on various ways of providing support, several questions were put to each speaker, raising the many challenges in terms of support that need to be highlighted.



Firstly, when discussing the many different obstacles that professionals have to deal with, there are a number of important elements that stand out: the need for a comprehensive review of the system which is not limited to evaluations of the institutions but also takes into account actions as a whole. The need to create a welcoming culture by cultural spaces, institutions, and also citizens. This would give people an opportunity to reintegrate into society. It is equally important to pay attention to how people came to this point, in order to tailor the available services to their reality.

Secondly, the issue of working in networks when providing support, which was often used by our speakers, also led to a series of reflections. The importance of setting aside differences in terms of values, missions, and approaches and focusing instead on the needs of the person. The need also to avoid multiplying the places where people need to tell their stories time and again, which can be traumatising and stigmatising. This could be avoided by better cooperation between services. **Coralie Buxant** is in favour of maintaining a generalist service, which refers people to other more specialised services for specific issues rather than giving in to the temptation to specialise and thus compartmentalise services. She also asked which role the authorities could play in encouraging services to work together as part of a more formal, systematic approach.

Thirdly, the speakers were invited to share their opinions on the lack of perspectives (e.g. the housing crisis) and the saturation of services. In this context, one solution they suggested was to reduce the workload of social workers, by creating new professions, such as housing coaches, mediators, etc. to free up time.





DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

The audience Q&A session also raised a number of issues. Firstly, the **challenge of solitude** that people who are rehoused experience is a reminder that the **services and initiatives offered to these people must be diverse**, so that everyone can find a solution that suits him/her, that he/she can endorse.

A second challenge that our speakers find important is the **self-sufficiency of services** and the separation between the people receiving support with whom the teams have connected. In this context, the speakers stressed how difficult it is to close cases. The potential to reopen a case at any time may offer a solution in this case, facilitating this process. **Working in networks and entrusting and handing over a case to other services under common law**, which will not disappear but will become resources for the people receiving support, may also contribute to reassuring teams.

Our panellists were also asked to give their opinion on the **need for an interfederal plan** to coordinate their actions. They all agreed that each city or town has its specificities. Having local policies that take these specificities into account is therefore vital but you also need an interfederal framework. All the levels of power are involved.

Finally, and in conclusion of the third panel discussion of the day, the speakers were also asked to share their thoughts on proposals for **establishing a broader partnership/alliance**. This question also yielded some interesting answers: working on prevention together, thinking about which actions we can potentially set up, without additional resources, taking the time to analyse and model what is done for an objective review of practices, building bridges between justice and support, and, finally, **strengthening social and epistemic justice**.



PANEL 4 - PREVENTION

The Prevention panel discussion opened with a presentation by **Julien Perriaux of the Assisted Housing service of the public social welfare centre (CPAS) of Saint-Gilles**. Their mission is to prevent evictions, and ensure autonomy and housing retention. The Assisted Housing service is notified by the registry of the Justice of the Peace every time a request for eviction is filed in the commune. The service then informs the tenant about the procedure and helps them prepare for this. Depending on the case, they will contact the landlord to negotiate a payment plan or a delay, encourage the tenant to hire a solicitor, contact the CPAS to request assistance with the debt, etc. If eviction is inevitable, the police or the bailiff will contact the service on the day of eviction. The Assisted Housing service also offers legal and administrative advice. The users have a multitude of profiles, and different needs: mental health problems (paranoia, agoraphobia, Diogenes syndrome...), excessive debt, social isolation, lack of self-esteem, addiction... In conclusion, Julien Perriaux stipulated that the psychosocial, budget and administrative support provided by Assisted Housing is a complementary service, provided on top of the curative work. It is not sufficient as a stand-alone service. Instead, it requires certain indispensable structural resources, such as access to enough transitional and permanent housing units.



Eric Vreven of CAW Limburg was next to speak and he discussed the preventive work that he conducts within his service as part of the CABRIO project. After having established that several people did not have access to existing social services to find housing, three regions in Limburg joined forces, forming a multidisciplinary team that could provide mental health care, help people live autonomously, social assistance, housing support, and care for drug users. The principles of outreach work, that is unconditional and also adapted to their situation, underpins everything the team does. The team also acts as a mediator between clients and landlords (private, social letting agencies...), shelters, service managers, and practical support for debt management. The CABRIO project also works with the beneficiary's direct neighbours as part of the implementation of this preventive approach, to ensure housing retention.



The speaker suggested that the requisition of empty buildings and alternative forms of housing might provide important leverage for giving homeless people access to housing. In terms of prevention, it seems crucial that services intervene at the earliest possible stage in eviction procedures. The housing counter that these services offer is a vital gateway for people who have questions, ensuring they can request information. But this information should also be clearer so clients understand it. In his conclusion, **Eric Vreven** pinpointed two elements that he thinks are indispensable in the prevention of homelessness: have sufficient affordable housing and higher salaries, so people can afford housing.

David Praille of the Rassemblement Wallon pour le Droit à l'Habitat (RWDH) then presented the exploratory study on evictions in Wallonia. While there are three forms of evictions (judicial, unlawful (without legal right) and administrative (in case of unsanitary living conditions), the RWDH's study highlighted a grey area, which includes forced departures and informal evictions. Many people are homeless, albeit without having been evicted: after staying with family or friends, or in an institution, or when a tenant leaves housing after a revocation without alternative housing. Over the past eight years, Wallonia has seen a marked increase (x 2.5) in tenancy judgements. The RWDH has observed that seven out of ten judgements relate to the failure to keep up with rental payments, with average arrears amounting to 2,300 euros (three to four months of rent on average). These debts may double or triple during the proceedings (due to procedural costs and the accumulation of unpaid rent during the procedure). A series of escalating factors unfortunately also don't help: the lack of access to useful information, the fact that tenants do not have legal recourse, different practices between public social welfare centres, the lack of the tenant's active participation in the proceedings (in half of all cases, the tenant never appears in court), the significant role of stakeholders, and the absence of rehousing solutions. Conversely, this finding also serves to identify a series of de-escalating factors, i.e. access to information, interventions by support workers, support, intervention of a third party, the presence of the tenant during legal proceedings in court.

David Praile said the lack of data about evictions was a major obstacle for the sector. While a census is underway in Brussels (BRUHOME project), this type of data collection is non-existent in the rest of Wallonia. However, studying these proceedings which have a “funnel effect” in more detail would definitely be beneficial: only a small number of the pronounced evictions effectively go ahead. In some cases, solutions are found, but in others, a whole set of tenants disappears during the proceeding, and there can be no certainty as to whether they have found better housing. Among this group, a number of people have no place to call home. After an eviction, rehousing solutions are usually very uncertain. A study by the Fondation Abbé Pierre showed that 30% of evicted households found an immediate solution, 30% had to wait six months, and another 30% waited up to 1 and even two or more years to be rehoused. Evictions from rental properties thus have a lasting impact on households. The speaker stressed the lasting destabilisation of households: as they become more vulnerable, their living conditions also become more critical. **David Praile** invited the audience to reflect on the continuum between the eviction and the fact that you don't have a place to call home. Evictions contribute to making people feel that they are locked in bad housing, with people having to go through several evictions during their lifetime, sometimes even consecutive evictions. While this causal link has not been sufficiently explored in a quantified way to date, the RWDH thinks that preventing evictions can nevertheless be a way of reducing the flow of homeless people.



The last speaker on the prevention panel was **Patricia Vansnick of the non-profit organisation “Passage pour les sortants de prison”**. This newly created non-profit organisation (2018) was formed because it became clear that there was a distinct lack of support for people who were released from prison. To date, no such service was available in the Namur region to provide support to this audience. The initiative was taken in the wake of the publication of the Namur memorandum “La fin du sans-abrisme, c’est possible”, and takes its inspiration from the Housing First model without actually rolling out a Housing First approach. The organisation starts by considering transitional housing as the basic premise for social reintegration. The non-profit organisation therefore provides the person leaving prison with accommodation under an 8-month contract that can be extended, guaranteeing accommodation at a moderate price and a transitional rental contract - which allows the person to maintain his rights as a homeless person on the waiting lists for social housing. The objective is then to offer support to this person during the social reintegration process (registration with the CPAS, the municipality, etc.) and to promote the connection with the Namur network, to contribute to the development of a sustainable dynamic. The non-profit organisation now has five volunteers and four rented flats, which were made available by two public service housing authorities in Wallonia. It develops partnerships with various services of the psycho-medico-social network of Namur. Patricia Vansnick insists on the importance of establishing a connection with prisoners and the people who provide support to them before and after they leave prison. Contacts with the CPAS, for example, can be established before their release, as soon as they have a date. This initial contact is a first step towards the organisation of their release. The network approach also led the Namur-based organisation to work with different services in Namur (First in Street Support Assistant - FISSA, health network, housing managers, Médecins du Monde/ Doctors of the World, etc.).

Ensuring an overlap between a dwelling becoming available and the installation of an applicant is just one of many challenges, which include the financing of rental vacancies, the co-development of an adequate support system as desired by the person, support in the face of loneliness and anxiety caused by the return to freedom, continued requests for a change in the situation of detainees as they leave prison and the development of this type of system. The main challenge today is to ensure that the prisoner is genuinely considered as a citizen, that he or she has a valid identity card during his or her incarceration. Patricia Vansnick insisted on the virtuous circle that is set in motion when things have been put in place upstream, before the person's release from prison, to anticipate on all the administrative necessities and to ensure that support is already established at the time of release.

DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

The Q&A session with the audience was a good opportunity to insist on the **importance of cooperation and a network approach involving the different services that provide support** to homeless people, whether they live rough or have just been released from prison. The speakers stressed how important communication is as well as the exchange of information between stakeholders in various sectors and areas of expertise, but also with the person concerned.

CLOSING DEBATE

The day ended with a closing debate between **Alain Maron (Minister of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for Health and Social Action)**, **Nina Roox (Adviser to Nicole de Moor, the Belgian State Secretary responsible for Asylum and Migration)**, **Céline Nieuwenhuys (General Secretary of the Belgian Federation of Social Services)**, **Joy Verstichele (Coordinator of the Vlaams huurdersplatform)** and the philosopher and economist **Joël Van Cauter (a Fellow of the Itinera think tank)**.

The discussions revolved around several of the issues that the speakers and the audience identified throughout the day. Our panellists suggested several approaches for combating homelessness. From the outset, Housing First was put forward as a solution that merited being developed further, despite the structural obstacles that it encounters: the lack of available housing and the status of the target audience, which, for the most part, consists of undocumented people, “without the right” to housing.

This last observation led to expected questions about migration and regularisation. Some consider that mass regularisation is essential if we want to extend rights to people in an irregular situation, who account for 50 to 70% of homeless people in Brussels, and thus combat homelessness. Although politicians do not seem to consider this measure an option, giving undocumented people rights, to a work permit, for example, was one of the solutions raised.

This question also extends to the issue of European homeless people, who cannot be deported and who do not wish to return to their country, but who do not benefit from social assistance and who are therefore particularly vulnerable.

The need for more financial means and more recognition of social work were also raised during the debates.

Unsurprisingly, structural causes that are an obstacle to any hope of improvement were also highlighted during the discussions, such as the housing crisis, the lack of public housing, the reduction of the public share in several sectors such as energy or health, etc.

The lack of affordable housing on the private market, or public and social housing, obviously remains a major challenge. The solutions that are suggested seem to be considered insufficient, or insufficiently exploited.

The need to provide a structural response to the housing crisis by building more public housing or the allocation of part of the available housing to the homeless was raised repeatedly during the discussion.



The difficulty of the Belgian political context and the distribution of competences between the different federated entities was seen as an obstacle to the formulation of a coordinated policy to combat poverty. The implementation of a global policy, to be agreed at all levels of power, and the need for better collaboration between these different levels was also mentioned.

The closing statement, meanwhile, focused on the real need to broaden perspectives and gather stakeholders that work to combat poverty and homelessness, as well as labour and property market players, which both play an instrumental role in inducing poverty.



GENERAL CONCLUSION

While the title of this conference was “From dream to reality: Ending homelessness in Belgium”, in this conclusion we want to take an inverse approach, that does justice to the extremely fruitful exchanges and the crucial themes that were addressed during the conference.

THE CURRENT REALITY

It would be easy to compile a list of grievances after this conference of all that is not working as it should in the welfare state in Belgium with regard to the objective of ending homelessness. However, as we saw, for each difficulty that homeless people encounter, there are also actors in the field who have developed support methods that are more respectful of people and closer to their reality.

The services have been diversified and have led to forms of (self-)coordination and cooperation within a network.

Starting from the approaches that were implemented for the most part by associative services, we now clearly have a welfare mix between public and associative responsibilities. The authorities have supported, and also encouraged, this professionalisation, reorganisation, and innovation in the field.

If we compare the sector in Belgium today with the situation as it was in the mid-1990s, you finally get an idea of the huge transformation of field support.

While there are several upsides to all this progress, people working on the ground have observed an increase, diversification and complexification of requests for assistance, support and social protection. The number of homeless people has increased, their trajectories have become more complex, and their potential social integration remains uncertain and precarious. For some people without the right documents, all that remains is humanitarian aid, minimal life-saving medical care, and hope for a better world. Reality has some very cruel aspects, something that those who work on the ground are all too well aware of.



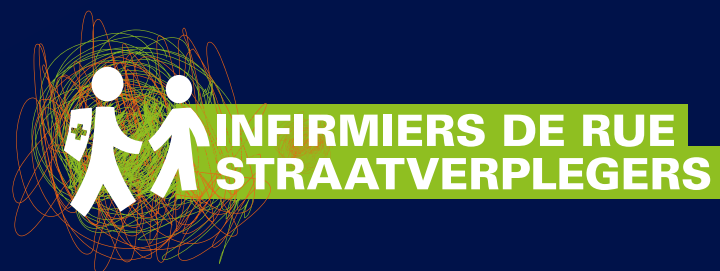
THE DREAM

We think that the one thing that all the people and services that participated in this conference have in common is a strong desire to provide aid and bring about structural change in the situations of these people, so they too can consider themselves citizens like you and I, who have access to and can exercise their rights.

By working on improving knowledge, focusing on prevention and early remedial action, providing adequate support in line with the person's needs and wishes, collaborating, and better adapting the actions of the various services so they can contribute to societal change in all their diversity, the dream of ending homelessness can become a (not too distant) reality.

Having the most competent homelessness sector possible is not enough, other levers are also necessary. Structural, intersectoral and interministerial action, by drawing on the levers of our social protection, in our health system, relying on aspects that could make housing affordable and accessible, creating new approaches for offering support, administrative and legal procedures so people can fully enjoy certain rights. This requires thinking in terms of an alliance to rebuild a more inclusive, welcoming and protective world for all citizens. There is still a lot of work to be done, and if one thing became apparently clear during this one-day conference, it's that there is a tremendous amount of energy, creativity and "healthy rage" that needs to be shared and conveyed.





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