

Action for Inclusion in Europe City Working Groups

Homelessness and Destitution Amongst Excluded Migrants

Improving Services for
Homeless EU Citizens
with No Recourse to
Public Funds (NRPF) in
Vienna

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Relevant Contextual Information

Vienna is Austria's capital city, one of Austria's federal provinces and its largest municipality. It is a fast growing city with a current population of 1.79 million inhabitants. As of the beginning of 2015, EU citizens accounted for 199,417 persons or 11 % of the population. Third-country nationals represented the biggest group of migrants in Vienna and amounted to 254,327 persons or 14 % of the Viennese population.¹ Austria was one of the EU countries most affected by the so-called refugee crisis and from September to December 2015, around 300,000 people travelled through Vienna on their journey to Germany or other EU countries. However, 89,127 refugees applied for asylum in Austria, a sharp rise of around 220 % compared to the previous year. The refugees were mainly from Syria and Afghanistan.

Austria's federal provinces are responsible for organising accommodation and support for asylum seekers. As a city and federal province, Vienna has a statutory duty to provide accommodation, financial support and counselling to asylum seekers. This responsibility is delegated to the Fonds Soziales Wien (Vienna Social Fund), an agency working on behalf of the City of Vienna. As of May 2016, around 21,000 asylum seekers received services from the Vienna Social Fund and incidence of homelessness amongst this group is consequently relatively low.

Additionally, the Vienna Social Fund is responsible for developing policies and delivering services in the areas of homelessness, people with disabilities and other social care.

Vienna's City Action Plan, being delivered as part of the Action for Inclusion in Europe project, focuses on Vienna Social Fund's work in the area of homelessness. The Vienna Social Fund's *Department of the Viennese Assistance Programme for Homeless People* coordinates, steers and monitors the services for homeless people on behalf of the City of Vienna. It works in partnership with and funds about 100 different organisations, including NGOs and the fully-owned subsidiary of the Vienna Social Fund, "*wieder wohnen*". Together these organisations provide over 5,500 places in flats, facilities and night shelters, and link up residents with a range of professional social support, with the overall aim of reintegrating them into the regular housing market.

Destitute and inactive mobile EU citizens are not entitled to regular accommodation services because they lack a permanent residence status, which is a condition for access to social services and support within the Viennese Assistance Programme for Homeless People. In spite of the restrictions within the legal framework, The Vienna Social Fund has made significant effort over recent years to improve basic services for homeless people regardless of their residence status. These include: extending entitlement for day centre services to homeless migrants and expanding the availability of emergency accommodation during winter months and to a lesser extent, as year-round services for the most vulnerable groups; and the establishment of a specialist counselling centre for homeless EU citizens, a facility which opened in 2011, where EU migrants are supported to regularise their residence in Austria, and provided with integration support or help with voluntary return, as appropriate.

The establishment of these new services was an important way to stabilise the situation of many homeless migrants without access to statutory services (having 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF)). In spite of the new services, the number of homeless migrants, mainly from EU countries, increased from 2013/2014 to

¹ <https://www.wien.gv.at/statistik/bevoelkerung/tabellen/bevoelkerung-staat-geschl-zr.html>.

2014/2015. The number of migrants using night shelters during the winter months increased by 1.8% in the year up to 2014/2015, with 1,740 homeless migrants using the service.

In light of the increase in the number of service users with NRPF, combined with a sharp rise in funding needs for the provision of services the question of how efficiently the existing services work for this target group has become more and more pressing. For this reason, the Vienna Social Fund decided to commission an empirical study to find out more about the needs and outcomes of this group of service users. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods. Forty qualitative interviews were undertaken with service users and 10 with experts in the field. Thirty percent of those referred to a night shelter during the winter season were included in the quantitative survey. The research report will be published late in summer 2016, and the evidence will be useful for Vienna Social Fund to inform the adaptation of existing services and/or the development of new ones.

Meanwhile, the Vienna Social Fund has identified a number of problems in the area of migrant homelessness and destitution within the city, and a need for action in the following areas:

- 1) In regular day centres, there is potential for improving communication with people from a migrant background. Firstly, the language barrier is a significant hurdle when it comes to giving professional advice and building trust. When employees with relevant language skills are not available, communication on complex issues is challenging. Secondly, the current legislation on the right of residence is not always clear. This results in social workers within the homelessness sector being unable to clearly communicate with homeless EU citizens about their rights and options. Thirdly, there is no structured dialogue between service providers supporting homeless EU citizens on the one hand, and employment/housing services on the other.
- 2) There is a lack of awareness and knowledge about the situation of homeless EU citizens with NRPF at city, national and EU levels. The homelessness sector in Vienna has a good level of awareness of destitution amongst migrants and is working on a daily basis to find solutions for this group, but other sectors, agencies and senior levels of authority across the city are less aware of the problems and are not working on the issues to the same degree. However, the crosscutting nature of homelessness requires interagency networking to find sustainable solutions
- 3) There is an unknown number of chronically homeless EU citizens with a long, undocumented residence in Vienna. They are unlikely to meet the criteria for obtaining residence status and hence, they continue to have 'no recourse to public funds'. Despite their poor prospects in Austria, they are not willing or they are unable to return to their home country because their future prospects there are even worse.

Vienna's Action Plan

The main aim of the Vienna City Action Plan is to improve the living conditions of homeless EU citizens with NRPF by improving the services provided to them by the Vienna Social Fund, and shifting from an approach focused on emergency response to a more sustainable, long-term approach. It has sought to achieve this by addressing the lack of information about the legal framework on immigration/residency and social services entitlements among service users and frontline workers; it has sought ways to overcome language barriers and has explored solutions for sustainable integration into the labour and housing market for this group. Additional aims have been to explore new housing and support options for chronically homeless EU citizens; and to raise awareness about the situation of homeless EU citizens with NRPF at both city and EU levels.

Objectives

The action plan focused on three objectives in seeking to achieve the overall aim:

Objective 1: Improving case working services

The current legal framework on immigration/residency and social services entitlements is not always applied correctly in Vienna. Hence, one objective was to strengthen the knowledge and understanding of service providers within the Viennese Assistance Programme for Homeless People on the interpretation of relevant legal rules. Another objective was to improve communication between service providers and homeless migrants by providing a video translation tool, thereby making casework more efficient.

Building on the broadened knowledge on immigration/residency and social services entitlements and on the enhanced communication, it was envisaged that improved support could be given to migrants in accessing both labour and housing markets. This is because case working would be based on greater knowledge of opportunities, including in the labour market, and on enhanced communication with the target group; enabling migrants to make more informed decisions.

Objective 2: Raising awareness of the situation of homeless EU citizens with NRPF

The second objective was to raise awareness on homelessness and destitution amongst migrants within the city administration, in order to encourage joint working between different departments and homelessness services. As part of this, it was envisaged that awareness would also be raised in order to keep the theme “destitution of mobile EU citizens with NRPF” on the European Commission’s and European Parliament’s agenda and show that cities are on the frontline when it comes to tackling this issue.

Objective 3: Developing and delivering services for chronic homeless EU citizens with NRPF

The third objective was to provide basic services (including accommodation, social support and health care) for the most vulnerable homeless EU citizens with no prospect of returning to their countries of origin.

The intended outcome of this objective was to meet the basic needs of this group whilst avoiding further inefficient public spending on public security, counselling and healthcare.

Timeframe

The first two objectives were achieved in the project timeframe, with minor modifications made to the timing of the third objective (for further information see section “Challenges and modifications”).

Awareness-raising is on-going.

Consultation

In the process of developing the City Action Plan, the following stakeholders were consulted: the Vienna Social Fund, the Head of the “Supported Housing” Department and the Head of the “Viennese Assistance Programme for Homeless People” Unit; WWO (homeless service provider and subsidiary of Vienna Social Fund), the Head of Department for Outpatient Services and Project Manager for “Migration to Vienna”; and the Municipal Department for Integration and Diversity.

During the consultations, discussions took place with stakeholders regarding the existing evidence on homeless EU citizens with NRPF in Vienna, about our involvement in the Action for Inclusion in Europe project, about other cities’ initiatives within the City Working Group and about the immediate need for action. The Municipal Department for Integration and Diversity, responsible for the integration of migrants with residence permits, was involved in these discussions for the first time. In the implementation phase,

the WWO, the NGO Caritas, the Municipal Department for Health Care and Social Welfare Planning, the Municipal Department for Family and Youth Welfare and various major European cities represented in the EUROCITIES network were consulted, in addition to the aforementioned stakeholders. The latter were asked for input on the situation of mobile EU citizens with NRPF to inform the EU level at a seminar on “Homelessness among mobile EU citizens” (see more at section “achievements and experiences”).

Achievements and Experiences

The following achievements were made in the three subordinate objectives:

Objective 1: Improving case working services

Training sessions on the legal framework for residence status and entitlements to social services were offered to service providers. In addition, the organization “UNDOK”, a counselling centre for undocumented workers, held a seminar on the rights of undocumented workers and gave valuable information on how to work effectively with them. An evaluation of the event revealed that service providers felt better informed and better prepared for passing on relevant information to their service users. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, saying that the information received was highly relevant to service providers’ daily work and gave them helpful tips. Due to these positive reactions, the training sessions will be expanded to reach broader audiences.

In order to improve communication between service providers and service users, video translation software is being piloted over a period of three months in a number of services, including the largest day centre for homeless people in Vienna. The video translation service provides immediate access to interpreters who communicate with service users in their mother tongue. This makes communication with the client group much easier as social workers can interact without language barriers. The implementation phase started in May and it will be evaluated at the end of the pilot.

As a result of the Action for Inclusion in Europe project, the Vienna Social Fund decided to fund an Integration Manager to be based at WWO, and they started in post in June 2016. The Integration Manager is in charge of creating links between the homelessness sector and other initiatives, organisations and institutions that are working on the sustainable integration of homeless migrants into the labour and housing markets. The employment of an Integration Manager is a crucial step towards bringing together the homelessness sector with partner organisations, providing them with the support they need to take forward work on integration more broadly, and homelessness amongst migrants more specifically. The work of the Integration Manager will be evaluated after one year in order to learn lessons from the process and to inform future tasks and responsibilities for this role.

Objective 2: Raising awareness of the situation of homeless EU citizens with NRPF

Awareness raising within the city administration of Vienna began at the beginning of the Action for Inclusion in Europe project. The findings of the previous year’s internal evaluation were presented and ways to improve services for homeless EU citizens were discussed with representatives of different municipal departments. For the first time, the Executive City Councillor’s office for Social Affairs, Public Health and Hospitals was informed on a weekly basis about current developments in the winter emergency programme. This regular feedback resulted in more awareness of the issue of homeless EU citizens within the city.

As discussed in the previous section, the findings of the study on migrant service users of the winter emergency programme will be available in late summer 2016. There is an agreement with the Municipal

Department for Health and Social Welfare Planning that the report will be published at the end of 2016 to give city representatives and the public a better understanding of the current situation.

Vienna, as current vice-chair of the EUROCITIES homelessness working group homelessness, was invited to speak on the panel of the seminar “Homelessness amongst mobile EU citizens”, organized by FEANTSA and co-hosted by members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Sylvie Goulard and Alfred Sant.² The event took place on 16th February in the European Parliament in Brussels and explored what role the EU can play in supporting homeless mobile EU citizens. Ahead of the seminar, major European cities (and EUROCITIES members) were asked for their input on the current situation of destitute homeless EU citizens, the challenges they face and the expectations they have of the European Commission. This gave a valuable overview of the situation in various European cities. At the seminar, Paulina Banaś, EUROCITIES policy coordinator, highlighted that cities are at the frontline of responding to this issue. She stressed that budgetary constraints, as well as a general increase in homelessness and the current movement of refugees add to this challenge. She argued that EU institutions need to better recognise that free movement of people applies to EU citizens of all socio-economic backgrounds and that this should be reflected in policies and funding mechanisms. Our involvement in this seminar showed that there was scope for international cooperation on this issue and that it was important to keep the topic high on the European Union’s agenda.

Objective 3: Developing and delivering services for chronic homeless EU citizens with NRPF

Developing and delivering basic services, including accommodation and financial support for chronic homeless EU citizens with NRPF, was challenging given the budgetary constraints and the restrictive legal framework. However, the project has been implemented on a small scale, with further development planned after the Action for Inclusion in Europe project period. Accommodation is being provided to four families with children, who had nowhere to stay after the end of the winter emergency programme. Additional resources have been provided for intensive case working with the families. Accommodation is also being provided to a group of people in poor health condition who would otherwise be extremely vulnerable without professional help and a roof over their head. A third group of EU citizens with NRPF receiving accommodation are three single mothers with their children who are at risk of becoming homeless. The latter two initiatives are ongoing projects. The programme will be evaluated in one year to identify practices that secure positive outcomes for residents.

Case Study

Mr S, aged 54, a Romanian citizen, has lived in Austria since 2009. After his arrival in Austria, he started unregistered work as a painter. When he had an accident at work which left him severely injured and unable to work, he had no health insurance to cover the costs of his health care and his loss of income. Additionally, he had to leave the flat he had shared with his partner due to relationship breakdown. Since then, he spent his nights in emergency shelters with little prospect for reintegrating into the labour and housing markets. After receiving accommodation and support in the project for homeless migrants with health problems, his situation improved. Thanks to the referral to a special job training (“JobStart”), he was able to get into regular, permanent employment. This allowed him to receive a residence permit and regular income. Mr. S. is now living in his own flat and is no longer dependent on services.

As mentioned earlier in this report, Vienna was faced with a high number of refugees travelling through and settling in the city in 2015/6. Whilst outside the scope of this Action Plan, with its focus on homeless

² For more information see: <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article5130&lang=en>.

mobile EU citizens with NRPF, it should also be stated that Vienna made a significant effort to welcome the new arrivals and encourage their **integration from day one** of their stay in Austria by providing a range of services, including German and integration courses and providing the opportunity to do voluntary work regardless of the status of their asylum case.

Experiences and lessons learnt

During the course of the project, it became clear that the legal and financial constraints would create barriers to increasing the support available for homeless EU citizens with no recourse to public funds. The movement of refugees arriving in Austria in September 2015 resulted in the resources being shifted to their integration process (for more information see section “Challenges and Modifications”). Therefore, the limited resources available for the relatively ‘invisible group’ of homeless EU citizens became even smaller in the light of the significant challenge the government and the city administration was facing. In spite of this, most of the City Action Plan’s aimed were achieved. One of the reasons for its successful implementation was the positive attitude within the city administration and civil society organisations in relation to the integration of newcomers. Moreover, the project confirmed once again that, no matter how restrictive the legal framework, stakeholders in Vienna act quickly and pragmatically in acute situations to avert risks facing vulnerable groups.

Another important aspect is about communication. Designing projects for specific target groups is necessary to create adequate services. However, taking care of vulnerable groups needs to be supported by a narrative that demonstrates the added value for society. This is even more important when it comes to the provision of services for persons that are perceived by the public as menace and as a threat to low income groups.

The lessons learned from the exchange with COMPAS and all members of the working group were essential for the design and implementation of Vienna’s City Action Plan. It also helped convince senior officials to apply a strategic and long-term approach rather than count on emergency solutions. In regards to our work on labour market integration, Dublin’s initiatives in this field positively impacted our approach and were influential in the process of securing funds for the Integration Manager. Gijón’s Housing First project was a good example to cite in debates about the feasibility of accommodating migrants with high levels of support needs. In terms of developing a new narrative about homelessness, Utrecht’s approach to provide opportunities for both migrants and more settled residents was helpful and will be considered for further steps. Furthermore, the discussions with the working group made it clear that there was scope for strategic litigation and the exploration of EU case law in Vienna, especially with regard to the rights of children. Last but not least, the academic input provided valuable arguments, for example, with regard to challenging the assumptions behind ‘welfare magnet theory’. Being able to rely on academic evidence that welfare provisions were not a significant pull factor for migrants facilitated the planning of new services.

Challenges and Modifications

Legal framework

In Austria like in many other EU member states, citizens from other EU countries only have access to social assistance if they can prove their legal residence under EU Directive 2004/38/EC.³ Generally speaking, this directive stipulates that mobile EU citizens must have sufficient resources not to become a burden on the social assistance system of the host country in order to have a right of residence.

³ For more information, see: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2004:158:0077:0123:EN:PDF>.

Destitution amongst EU citizens in Vienna is often linked with unemployment and/or undocumented work. As a consequence, they often do not meet necessary requirements for legal residence in Austria. The Vienna Social Fund and its services are classified as social assistance which results in destitute mobile EU citizens often not being eligible for social support from our institutions.

During the course of this project, the legal situation which allowed a limited level of discretion at the local level was overturned and consequently the legal framework only allows for the development of support for persons in acute situations. For humanitarian reasons, Vienna Social Fund decided to continue funding its services for destitute mobile EU citizens.

Increasing numbers of refugees

Austria, along with many other EU countries, saw the large movement of refugees across its territory in 2015/16. Due to its geographical position, Austria was an important hub for many refugees on their way to Germany and the Scandinavian countries. From September 2015 to January 2016, around 300,000 persons were on transit through Vienna, and it was therefore necessary to provide emergency/transit accommodation, and social and medical support. Many refugees, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, stayed in Austria and this resulted in a rise in the number of asylum applications. In 2014, 28,027 asylum applications were submitted in Austria, rising to 89,127 in 2015. Within a few months, the City of Vienna had to quadruple its provision of accommodation for asylum seekers. The refugee crisis required huge efforts from a range of stakeholders. Additionally, thousands of volunteers from across the city provided social and medical support, many of them at railway stations welcoming new arrivals or helping those in transit. This expression of solidarity with the migrants was cited by many as evidence of a “welcoming culture” in Austria, including by the governing Social Democrats in their regional election campaign. Although the Social Democrats won the regional elections in October 2015, the right-wing FPÖ gained 31% of the votes, which was their best ever election result. This suggested a shift and/or a strong anti-migration sentiment had emerged, which is often expressed in public discourse by fear of losing employment and pressure on services, and creates challenges for city authorities. Due to the shift in focus and resources towards the refugee crisis and away from the problems associated with destitute mobile EU citizens, the objective of integrating mobile EU citizens into the city’s labour market will be addressed at a future date.

Modifications

Due to the acute accommodation needs of homeless EU citizens with severe health problems and for families with children after the winter season, the objective of providing housing support for these groups was brought forward to May 2016 and future expansion will be considered beyond the project period.

Future plans

Publication of the report on Vienna’s winter emergency programme for migrants is planned for the end of 2016. The study will provide an in-depth analysis of how to respond to the needs of service users and will provide a strong evidence base for planning services in the future. The questions of employability of destitute mobile EU citizens and opportunities to prevent destitution will be considered and solutions will be taken forward by the Integration Manager.

Improving Services for Homeless EU Citizens with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) in Vienna

Destitution among mobile EU citizens is still a pressing issue in the city of Vienna, which is, for example, reflected in the high demand for shelter in this winter season. As a reaction to these developments, the Vienna Social Fund and its partners provide an unprecedented number of night shelters and additional capacities in counselling services and street work. In the light of this rising demand, the objectives of last year's action plan remain topical. Here is an overview of ongoing activities with reference to last year's objectives.

Objective 1: Improving case working services

Video translation has been tested as a tool to make counselling more efficient. The pilot phase in Vienna's largest day centre proved to be successful: the handling of the software is easy, the connection with the interpreters is fast established, front field workers find it a useful tool to improve communication with the service users. Due to this positive feedback, the software might be used in other outpatient services.

The preliminary report by the Integration Manager shows that there is a huge demand for inter-sectorial networking to take forward the integration of (formerly) homeless persons with a migration background. In a first step, the Integration Manager evaluated the integration demand for migrant families and the additional information social workers need to be able to improve the support for their clients. Education (language, vocational training) and employment were the most relevant themes reported by service users and social workers. The Integration Manager is establishing ties with relevant services and mainstreams the gathered knowledge to homeless services providers. The pilot phase ends in June 2017. A final report will give evidence of the outcomes and added value of the project for the homeless sector.

Objective 2: Raising awareness of the situation of homeless EU citizens with NRPF

Activities in this field are ongoing on different levels. Homeless services providers and decision makers in social planning were informed about the findings of the study on migrant service users of the winter emergency programme. The report reveals the various profiles of service users, their needs and expectations. It also makes clear that the work force potential within this group is – contrary to expectations – less relevant although most users wish to find an employment. However, their health situation often makes it difficult to find a job. For more details see the full report [here](#) (in German).

Objective 3: Developing and delivering services for chronic homeless EU citizens with NRPF

4 out of 4 families with children were able to be housed in supported accommodation or on the regular housing market thanks to the additional resources provided for intensive case working. The families had been stranded in last season's winter emergency programme and had not been able to find sustainable housing solutions. In the light of the rising numbers of service users – families with children and single persons - in this winter emergency programme, finding alternative accommodation until the end of April remains a huge challenge given the tight housing and employment market. Acknowledging homelessness among destitute EU citizens as a year round issue, the Vienna Social Fund is exploring ways to expand counselling services for this group and looking for long term solutions for families with children. Parts of these initiatives are concrete plans to fund a facility for single mothers with children with lived experiences of domestic violence run by the NGO Caritas.

