

Fighting youth homelessness in cities

Report from Eurocities' mutual learning in Gothenburg, 21-23 September 2022

In the past few years, cities have witnessed the vulnerability of many young people when it comes to homelessness. From its most extreme forms like rough sleeping to more hidden circumstances such as sofa surfing, experiencing homelessness will have long-term consequences for these young individuals. But their age also means that specific services, adapted to their needs and circumstances must be developed.

To this aim, cities have been sharing their experience and learning from each other. On 21-23 September 2022, city representatives¹ met in Gothenburg to learn from their host and inspire new approaches throughout Europe. While cities have an essential role in combatting homelessness, successful approaches often require a broad partnership with all stakeholders involved in this combat. Members of the [European Platform on Combatting Homelessness](#) had therefore been invited and contributed to the mutual learning², helping to broaden our understanding of the situation by sharing their perspectives.

Fighting homelessness in Gothenburg

The city of Gothenburg has been collecting data on the number and profile of people experiencing homelessness. Two very distinct profiles can be identified: First, single households, mostly men, who are often struggling with addiction and mental health issues. Second, families with children, in which the parents were often born abroad. They usually do not have specific social issues other than not being able to afford a home.

¹ Cities represented in the meeting: Gothenburg, Glasgow, Leipzig, Ljubljana, Lyon Metropole, Madrid, Poznan, The Hague, Vienna

² Members of the European Platform represented: Austria, Cartias, Denmark, European Commission – DG EMPL, European Committee of the Regions and Cities, Greece, Housing First Europe Hub, Ireland, Lithuania, OZ Proti Prudu

Since 2015, the city has managed to significantly reduce homelessness in Gothenburg. According to Nina Miskovski, deputy mayor from Gothenburg, this is mostly due to the implementation of a dedicated local strategy with clear objectives (the first homelessness plan dates from 2015). Another important element was the increased housing stock and allocation of flats, combined with increased counselling for finding housing. A strong contributing factor, however not in the control of the city, was the reduced reception of migrants and refugees.

To further reinforce the progress, the **2020-2022 strategy** focuses particularly on prevention (through outreach and avoiding evictions), and the availability of housing (providing housing for all homeless people, fostering long-term solutions, and mobilising the regular housing market).

Swedish definition of homelessness:

1. Acute homelessness situation (short term accommodations, hostels, shelter, rough sleeping)
2. People leaving care or treatment within 3 months and lack accommodation
3. Long-term housing solution organised by the municipality
4. Self-organised short-term insecure housing solutions (friends, relatives, sublet shorter than 3 months)

Example of outreach work

Gothenburg's homeless centre coordinates the collaboration between the city services and the NGOs. It also provides in-person information and updates a website centralising information on where to access essential services (showers, wifi, food, services for pets, clothes etc.). The centre also aims to increase the influence of beneficiaries in the planning and running of services

Even before the end of the implementation period, the city has reached its main objectives. Homelessness and acute homelessness, including of children, has decreased. More people have their own homes. And while being more successful, the city has also managed to decrease the costs of its services.

In this encouraging context, some challenges remain. Eviction rates remain too high, and many people are still leaving institutions such as hospitals, prisons, etc., homeless.

The current cost of living crisis, combined with a housing shortage, is extremely worrying and poses a clear threat to an overall positive dynamic. The

national strategy to fight homelessness, adopted in 2022, could prove key, as it sets a national ambition and foresees the national introduction of Housing First. Sweden will also play an important role at the European level through the rotating Council Presidency in 2023.

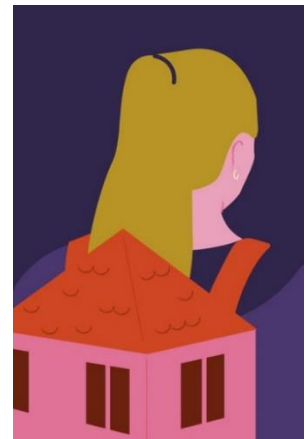
Supporting young people in or at risk of homelessness

Young people can become homeless for a myriad of reasons: relationship breakdowns with family, a partner, flatmates etc.; discharge from the health, care or justice systems; lack of affordable housing; lack of employment etc. Affordable housing and employment will always be the best way out of homelessness. However, some young people require additional support to reach that point.

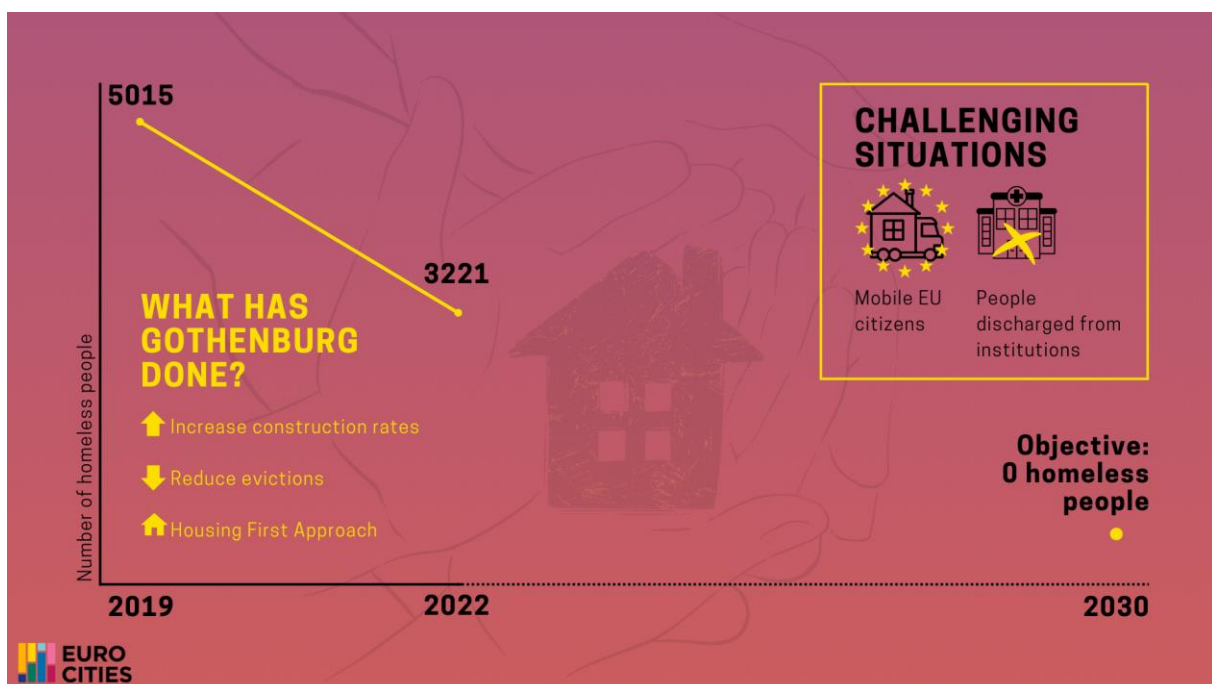
Gothenburg provides different types of services, often in partnership with NGOs from the city, to meet the young people where they are at.

Several **youth centres** act as first contact points for young people in need. The *Värnet centre* also tours the city with a bus to reach out to those who do not come to the centre. In *Pop In*, beneficiaries are mostly under 25 years old. The staff receives around 10 youngsters daily, most of whom are young migrants who arrived in Sweden as (unaccompanied) minors between 2012-2016. The main issue they express is the difficulty of finding a flat. Staff in *Pop in* makes the link with other support services and ensures follow-up, including by going to find the youngsters where they are staying.

Following a housing-led approach, the city of Gothenburg also offers solutions like **supported housing**. *BIA youth accommodation* is an example of services targeted at young people aged 16-21. Each young person benefits from independent housing, either in group building or in scattered housing, together with support from staff. Social workers do not position themselves as experts who know what is best for the young individual's life. Instead, they use the method of '[motivational interviewing](#)'. Through open questions, they try to understand and support the motives and motivation of each individual. Supported housing aims to support independence and building a healthy environment (including in terms of their relationships, working on their future, etc.). Calm and positive expectations from the social worker encourage the decrease of stress and problematic behaviour from the young person. The average stay of 1.5 years also enables the youngster to build a positive track record, often required to access a direct housing contract. Longer stays last up to 4 or 6 years. While this system provides extensive support for young people in challenging situations, national legislation prevents young people in active addiction or who are known to be part of a street gang from benefiting from this system. Many participants have however experienced this in the past. The focus of the services is then strongly put on relapse prevention through an individualised action plan.



All over Europe, different services dedicated to homeless youth are being experimented. Kate Polson, CEO of the Scottish organisation [Rock Trust](#) shared some of the services provided by her organisation. Some are an **emergency response to a situation of acute crisis** like the night stops – emergency short-term stays in a family home who volunteered their support. The range of services also demonstrate adaptability to each individual's needs, for example by providing single or shared supported accommodation, but also rent deposit schemes or live and work schemes.



Housing First for youth

Rock Trust also implements housing first for youth which is mainly aimed at young care leavers. In Gothenburg too, the success of the Housing First programme has incentivised the city to create in 2018 a small Housing First for all programme for young adults 21-27, supported through the intensive case management method.

Housing First for youth keeps the core principles of Housing First, in particular, immediate access to housing without pre-condition, individualised client-driven support and self-determination. This model defends the absence of curfews, house rules or forced engagement. This is what makes Housing First for youth a particularly good solution for young people who struggle to access services due to past behaviours.

But Housing First for youth also **accommodates the specificities of supporting a young person**. It focuses on education and employment rather than treatment. It also puts aside the idea of focusing primarily on harm reduction, with the ambition of building a good life for the young person explain Gustaf Henriksson and Malin Karlsson who are in charge of implementing the programme in Gothenburg. Relationship building is considered almost as important as housing to create a stable base for self-development. Strong, healthy relationships are indeed a big protective factor against homelessness.

Intensive case management

ICM is a form of high-intensity support in which the main professional case worker creates connections between the service user and other treatment providers outside of their service. This allows using the resources from specialised professionals while creating links with community resources.

The approach is particularly successful for people with high support needs.

Source: [Housing First Guide](#), Housing First Europe Hub

Core Principles of Housing First



Another way of adapting homeless services to the reality of young people is by allowing them to move between single and shared dwelling, changing areas etc. This pattern is indeed quite frequent among all youth groups and should not be prevented for those who have experienced or were at risk of homelessness. And as per Housing First principles, the support remains unconditional and moves with them.

The Second Chance – Partnership with Ikea

In this partnership with the city of Gothenburg, the Ikea company donates furniture and other decorations. These are then made available to homeless people when they first move into their dwelling. This supports cutting the costs of the move but also help beneficiaries to create a sense of home and ownership. The Centre Against Homelessness coordinates the pick up of products from Ikea (usually furniture that was displayed, returned due to a missing piece that can be easily replace or end-of-season products) and the delivery to the benefitting homes.

Housing First for youth has demonstrated a strong impact on the life of its participants, explains Kate Polson who also chairs the workgroup on this topic at the [Housing First Europe Hub](#). The experience of the young people is a lot more positive than in services they were previously part of. They feel more secure, stable, safe and accepted. Having the possibility to choose their home, the decoration, and some pieces of furniture gives them a sense of ownership and pride. It encourages them to maintain their home and increases their self-confidence. Having a stable base and building relationships supported them in developing aspirations for the future and making plans.

Kate Polson insists, Housing First for youth is different to supported accommodation in how it is delivered and experienced. Practice also shows that fidelity to the model is best, and knowledge of it provides stability for the young person. For this, it is important to have the right people and board and work in collaboration. In particular, the partnership between housing and support providers is critical and can have a wider impact. Knowledge of youth development and youth work skills is also essential.

Yet the implementation in Scotland did not come without challenges. These were mostly related to the housing aspect. Accessing suitable housing was a huge difficulty. A large number of people were competing against each other for the same small number of homes. More new Housing first participants were coming into the service than Rock Trust was able to house. When a higher number of tenants were being housed in the same street or even building, this created pressure on housing providers, neighbours and participants themselves. Some housing officers also were reluctant to house participants and were bypassing them or withdrawing offers of housing without consulting their manager, the participants and housing first workers.

To overcome these types of challenges, the **key ingredients identified in the implementation of Housing First for youth** include:

- Motivated and dedicated people
- Right structures, including housing
- Stable and predictable funding
- Political commitment and policies.

However, Ms Polson reiterates we cannot afford to wait for the perfect condition before making these changes. Additionally, starting with a pilot project can be the first step, but this approach is now strongly evidence-based and has been extensively evaluated. Real change is about how people work and how responses are delivered. For the Housing First Europe Hub, scaling up is about systemic change. In this context, cities play a crucial role and often take the lead.



Supporting cities in developing policies to combat youth homelessness

To support more cities in developing their own solutions aimed at supporting young homeless people, participants discussed the specific challenges that some cities face in implementing these projects or policies. Together, they came up with concrete proposals and suggestions targeted for each city's situation.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SOLUTIONS

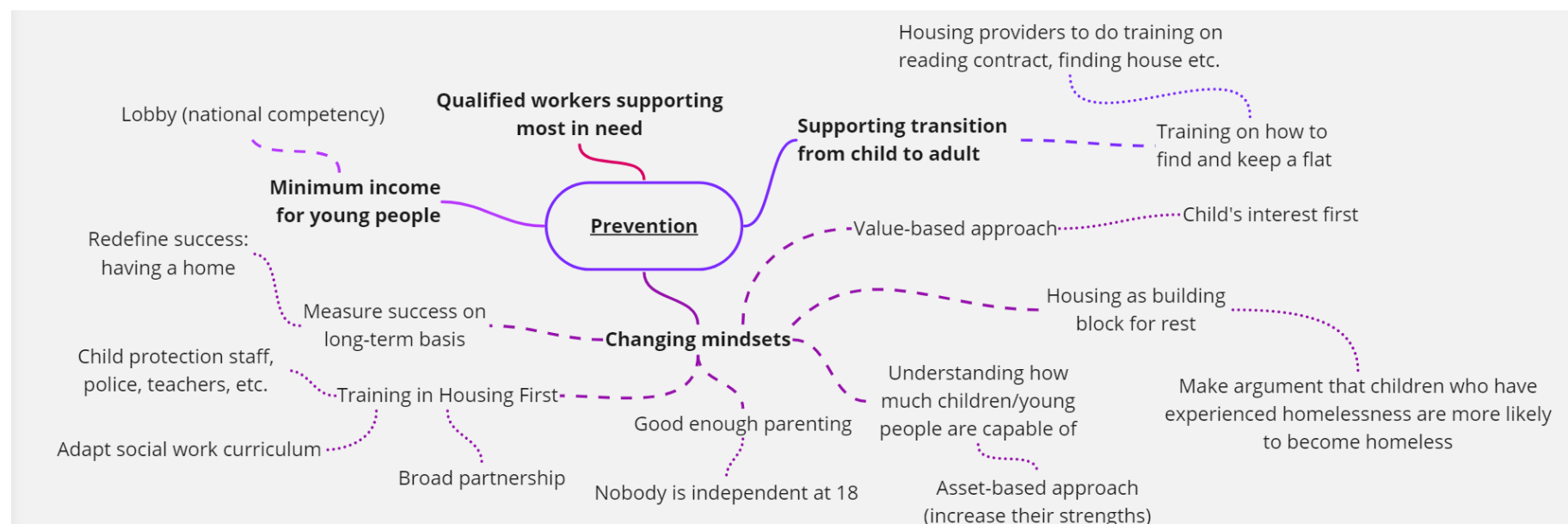
Four cities presented challenges to reducing youth homelessness. The rest of the participants suggested solutions based on their experience



How to build the resilience of vulnerable youth to prevent homelessness? – Glasgow's challenge

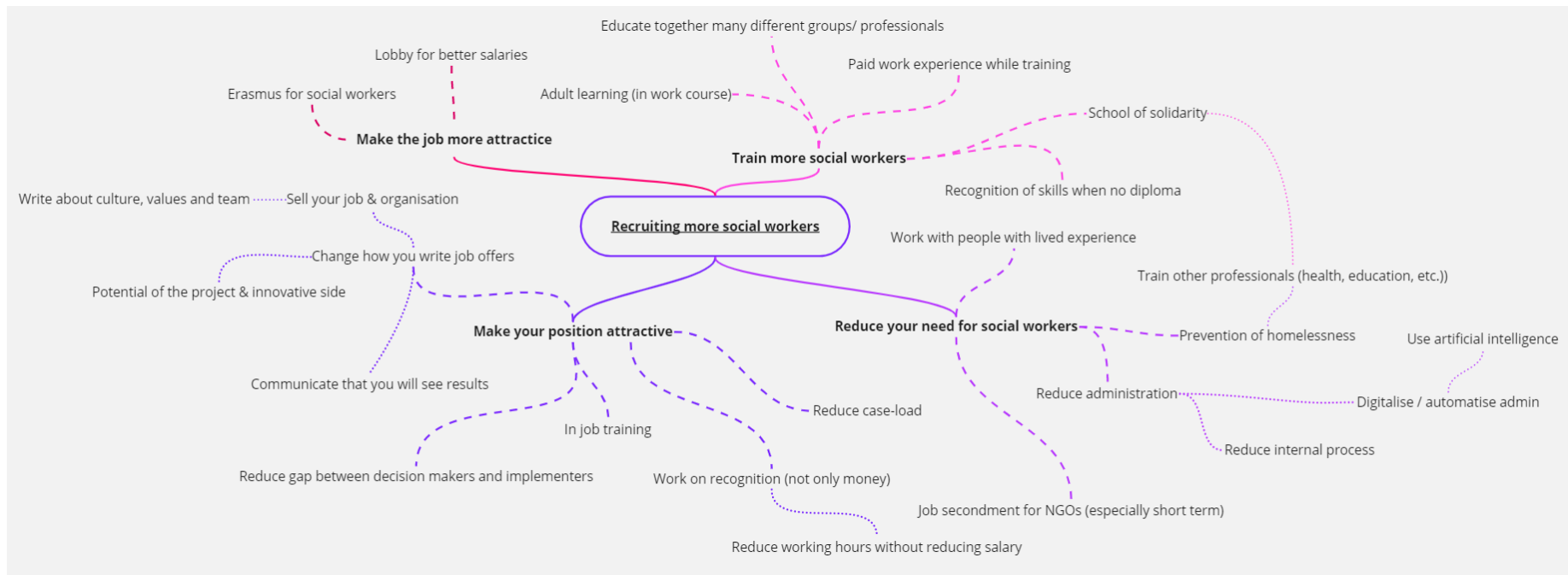
Despite a broad partnership to implement ambitious progressive policies, Glasgow has the second highest rate of homelessness in Scotland (9,8 per 100,000 inhabitants). In 2021-22, 21% of all statutory homeless applications were under 26 years old, and 48% were women. There is no single cause for youth homelessness, but the main technical reason for their situation is family relationship breakdown. Vulnerabilities are often multiple and reinforce each other (adverse childhood experiences, substance misuse, exploitation, cognitive impairment, etc.)

In its work, the city of Glasgow has developed specific pathways for young people to adapt to their age and developmental stage, integrating gender-sensitive practices and trauma-informed support. But Glasgow's ambition is to support young people as early as possible to prevent any homelessness spell which would have lasting damaging consequences on the young individual's life.



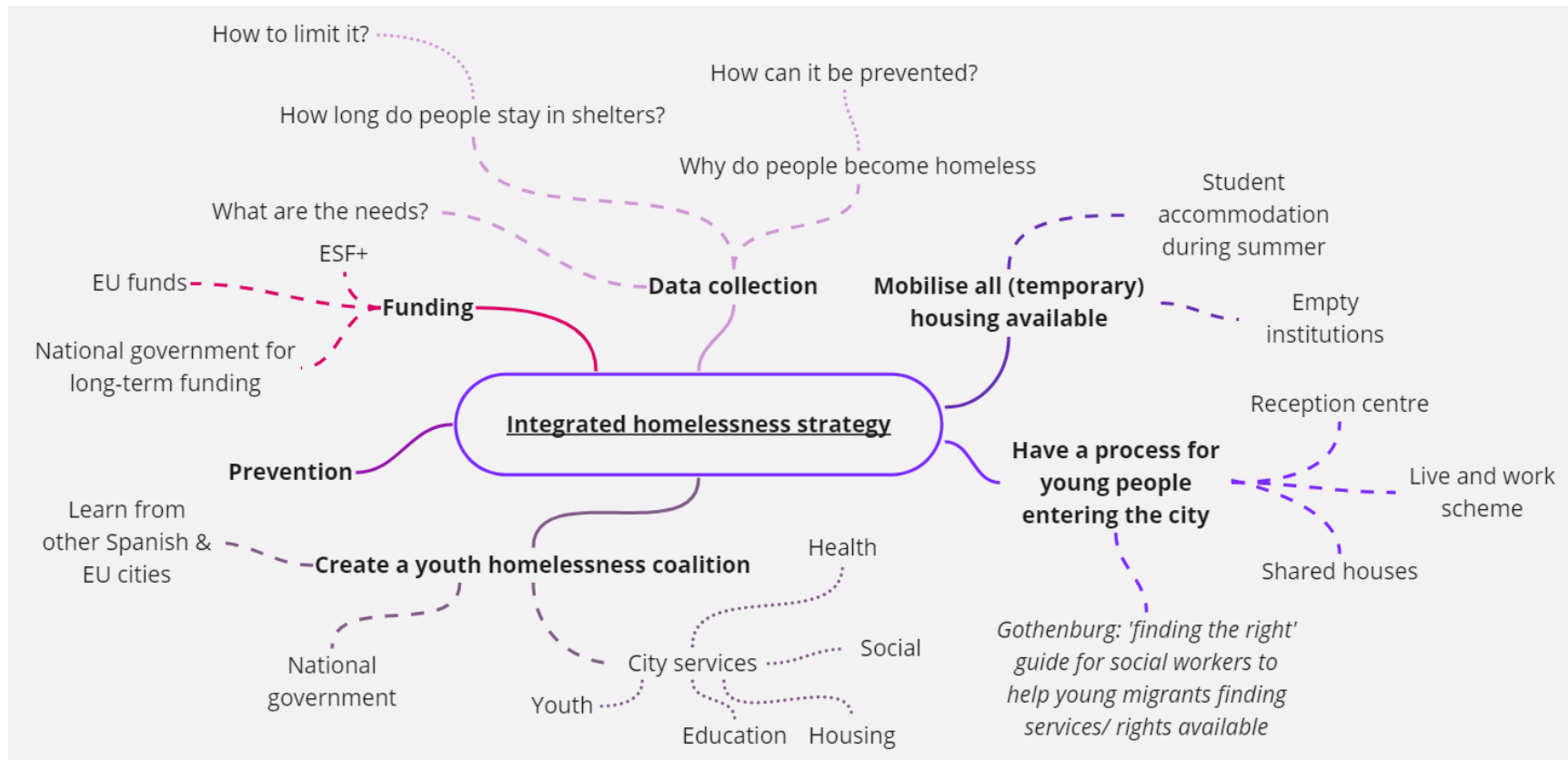
How to attract, recruit and train social workers on homelessness? - Lyon Metropole's challenge

Young people 18-25 years old are particularly fragile on the labour market as well as in terms of housing. As part of Lyon Metropole's strategy to fight homelessness through Housing First, Lyon developed a targeted action called 'Logis Jeune' (dwelling for the youth). 50 young people leaving the child welfare system get access to a flat and support as long as they need. The Metropole also experiments with the creation of a minimum income for people under 25 in the hope of avoiding the direst situation. The challenge in implementing many of the services has to do with difficulties in recruiting social workers needed to manage the support. The training and education of social workers mostly don't lie within the competencies of the city thus limiting Lyon's options to act. Additionally, the covid-19 crisis has strained a lot of the people working in this field and left a generalised feeling of exhaustion and lack of recognition (including financial).



What should be included in an integrated strategy to combat youth homelessness? – Madrid's challenge

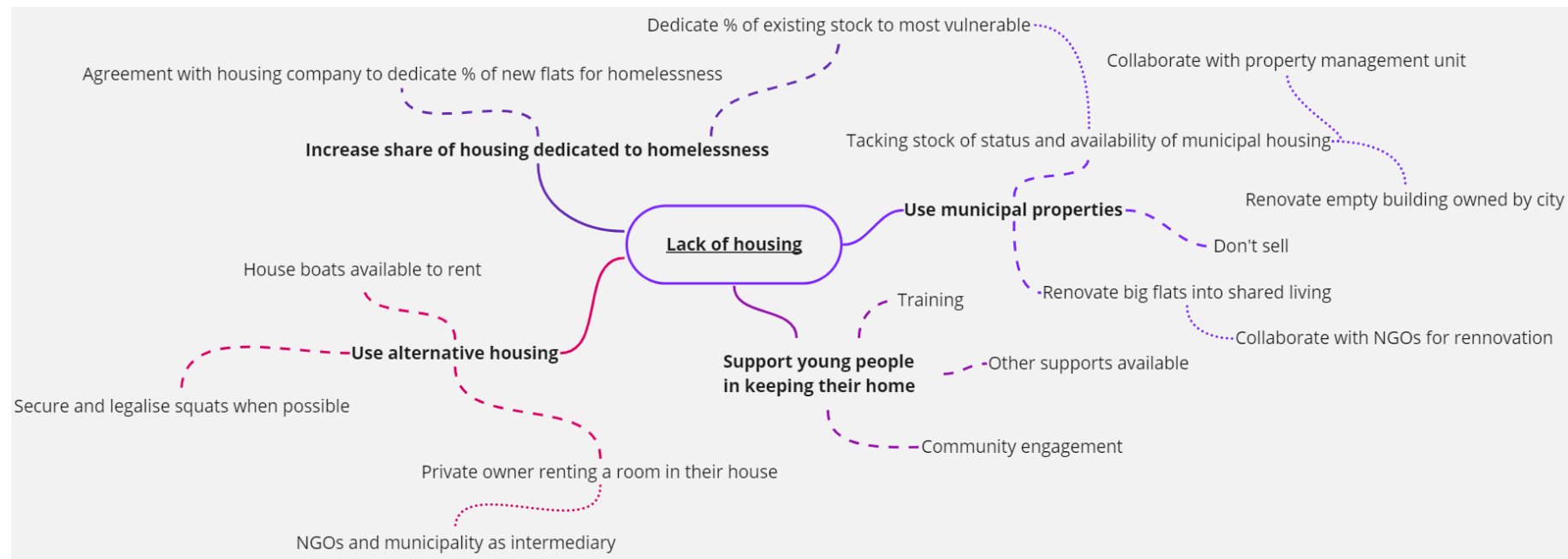
Although homelessness levels were previously stable in Madrid, the consequences of the covid-19 crisis have led to losses of employment, housing and the exhaustion of social protection for many people. Young people were often hit hardest. To combat this situation, the city is in the process of transforming and specialising the different resources. This will be reinforced under the next integrated local strategy, for which Madrid was looking for recommendations.



How to find sufficient dwellings to implement Housing First for youth principles? – The Hague's challenge

In The Hague, youth homelessness (18-27 years old) is a particular acute challenge. The dire housing market crisis pushes many young people, especially care-experienced ones, into homelessness. This combines with their lack of strong social support network and their mental health issues. As a consequence, homelessness levels of young people are not declining despite combined national and local support being made available.

The city has been convinced by evidence in favour of the Housing First model, in particular for young people, but is struggling to access enough housing to implement it. They are therefore looking for recommendations on what is possible while they invest in building new housing. On average, it takes 7 years for a new building, and recent and future builds could be further delayed by the current difficulties in finding the necessary materials.



The role of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness in supporting cities in the fight against homelessness



Ambitious action to end homelessness can only be successful if drafted and implemented in a broad partnership with all relevant stakeholders. This is one of the objectives of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness which was created through the [Lisbon declaration](#) which set the aim to end homelessness by 2030.

Michaele Calandrino, team leader on homelessness at the European Commission – DG EMPL, which coordinates the Platform and Mikko Aaltonen, representative of the committee of regions and cities in the Platform and representative from Tampere city council joined us to discuss how this Platform can support cities in their work against homelessness.

The covid-19, while having had a significant negative impact on the lives of many people, also showed greater support for homelessness after decades of little progress, underlines Calandrino. Many countries are currently developing dedicated national strategies, which will be particularly important in the current context of stagflation and of the war against Ukraine.

But funding homelessness services remains a challenge for many cities. Aaltonen highlights that while the EU budget has understandable limits, it must become easier for the local level to access EU funds. This issue is not limited to local authorities confirms Calandrino, who announced the creation of a working group on financing within the Platform. The Commission wishes to diversify the types of funding available (beyond grants) to develop more demand-driven instruments and encourage combining available funding (in particular ESF+, ERDF, RRF & Invest EU). Hannover has for example developed a successful project under Invest EU to build 640 social housing units for 60,000,000€.

Eurocities will continue to collaborate with the Commission and the Platform members to support cities' capacity to mobilise EU funding and provide feedback on their relevance and accessibility for implementation on the ground.



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