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Homeless in Europe

A Magazine by FEANTSA



FEANTSA

**A DEMOCRATIC EUROPE?
ELECTIONS, HOMELESSNESS
AND THE RIGHT TO VOTE**

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The European elections represented a key moment for FEANTSA and its members. This June 2024 the homeless sector across Europe once again confronted recurring questions: *how can people experiencing homelessness exercise their right to vote? What changes are needed to ensure that voting is accessible to everyone? How can we motivate society's most disadvantaged, who frequently show distrust in the political system, to take part in elections?* While these questions arise during national and local elections, it is every five years at the European level that our membership poses them simultaneously.

A central theme in this magazine is the practical and legal barriers that prevent homeless individuals from voting. These include the lack of a fixed address, language difficulties, and complex registration processes. We begin with the article by Laure-lise Robben and Koen Hermans from LUCAS KU Leuven addresses the issue of voter registration for homeless individuals without a fixed address. They explore alternative registration methods used in various European countries, arguing that an effective alternative address system must ensure that people experiencing homelessness can access both social and political rights.

In her article 'Electoral Rights of EU Mobile Citizens Facing Homelessness,' Claire Morotsir from ECAS outlines the obstacles EU mobile citizens encounter in voting when experiencing homelessness, such as no automatic registration and the requirement for a fixed address.

She stresses that EU mobile citizens must be able to vote in their host Member States' municipal and European elections under any circumstances.

Ireland has tackled barriers to exercising the right to vote by updating its electoral legislation to improve access to the electoral register and encourage broader participation. Following this reform, Focus Ireland has launched the Voter Registration Drive Campaign. Louise Bayliss describes in her article how the campaign utilises the new legislation by introducing a fully online registration process and partnering with An Post to offer AddressPoint, a service that assigns a fixed address to those without a home. These initiatives not only make voting more accessible but also strengthen the democratic rights of marginalised communities.

While ensuring logistics enable homeless individuals to vote is important, fostering their active civic participation is equally significant. Paolo Scatola, a contributor to this magazine with lived experience of homelessness, advocates for this approach: 'That is why homeless people must exercise their rights. They must vote for those they believe will stand up for their rights. But that's not enough. We need to be more participatory. We must be present at housing and better living conditions demonstrations. We must be heard to improve our conditions and find a way out of homelessness.'

EDITORIAL



By **Rocío Urías**, Communications Officer, FEANTSA

This magazine explores additional topics within elections and homelessness, emphasising the importance of political parties incorporating homelessness into their manifestos during election campaigns, and the need for newly elected governments to prioritise it in their agendas.

In her article, Kim van de Wetering from Valente details how they executed a campaign to influence the 2023 Dutch elections by distributing a document outlining clear political objectives to support marginalised people to the main political parties. Following this, they produced various materials analysing how each party addressed those priorities, including combatting homelessness, in their manifestos. The response from the parties varied, with several incorporating Valente's recommendations into their platforms, demonstrating the campaign's tangible impact on shaping political discourse around homelessness.

Similarly, in anticipation of the next UK election, Homeless Link prepared a manifesto outlining four key priorities: everyone should have a home; all government arms should work together and contribute; the homelessness system should accommodate diverse needs, recognising that one-size-fits-all solutions do not suffice; and there should be sustained investment to prevent and permanently end homelessness, as explained in Nye Jones' article. These demands are relevant to other national contexts in Europe or even the upcoming European election.

Nye Jones further discusses how, in its 2019 manifesto for the national elections, the Conservative Party promised to end rough sleeping in England by the end of 2024. Despite being a bold commitment that ultimately remained unfulfilled, Jones highlights its significance for the homelessness sector. It provided a critical point of accountability and a foundation for policy engagement with the government.

Shifting the focus to the European Union, a good first step after the election would be a Mission Letter for the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights that includes the ambition to work towards ending homelessness as a priority, in line with the Lisbon Declaration signed by all EU Member States and the EU Institutions in 2021, and to continue and build on the fantastic work on homelessness of Commissioner Nicholas Schmit. The European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) provides the right framework to support Member States in their efforts to tackle homelessness. If we aim to drastically reduce homelessness by 2030, making it a rare and brief event, it is crucial that the newly elected Parliament and Commission leverage EPOCH's three pillars of work – data collection and monitoring, access to EU funding and financing opportunities, and mutual learning – and provide them with the necessary resources. What happens after this election will determine if the commitments of the Lisbon Declaration will become a reality. There is a strong momentum around homelessness in the European Union. This European election can help to turn this momentum into tangible progress.



HOMELESS AND ADDRESS-LESS? ON REGISTERING A VOTE WITHOUT BEING REGISTERED

This article discusses the challenges people experiencing homelessness face during the voter registration process, with the requirement of a fixed address frequently acting as a barrier to them accessing vital services and exercising their political rights.

The article highlights how various European countries have begun to employ alternative address systems, such as the ProxyAddress in the UK to include homeless individuals in the electoral register, but that these systems also face limitations and complexities.



By **Laure-lise Robben**, PhD student at LUCAS and Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven and **Koen Hermans**, Assistant Professor and Project Leader at LUCAS and Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven

Elections aim to represent all citizens. Yet, participating in the voting process hinges on one crucial factor: being registered in the civil and/or electoral register. In other words, voter registration often requires having a fixed address. Such voter eligibility makes it clear that, more than a location, an address is an identity: the state can reach out to citizens, identify who is eligible, and check whether you are the person you say you are. For citizens, an address allows them to access services that may otherwise be taken for granted – such as voting, or applying for social welfare or social housing. Hence, when elections are approaching, people experiencing homelessness who lack a residential address are reminded once more of their exclusion from society.

In 2023, Leo¹ became homeless. Once a holder of a modest apartment in Brussels, he found himself grappling with an escalating cascade of unfortunate events. The final straw was losing his job due to a company-wide downsizing, rendering him unable to keep up with his rent payments. Despite his pleas for leniency, the eviction notice arrived, severing his last tie to stability. While sleeping at a friend's house, the loss of his home, but also the loss of his address became palpable when he needed to apply for another job and social housing. Not having a reliable mailing address or letter collection point made it impossible for him to access vital services. The lack of a home address hinders the chances of people experiencing homelessness of ever finding a home again.² They become trapped in a Catch-22 situation called the 'Postal Paradox': homelessness persists because they cannot access essential rights and services due to a lack of a fixed address.³

1 Pseudonym

2 As mentioned in Deirdre Mask (2020)'s 'Address Book (page 250), UK, London: Profiles Books Ltd.

3 Byrne, G. (2018). The postal paradox: how having no address keeps people homeless. Retrieved from Citizens Advice in London, UK: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Post%20and%20Telecoms/Homelessness%20report%20-%20Final.pdf>

“Writing down ‘shelter tonight, no idea tomorrow’ in the address section is deemed too unclear.”

This lack of an address will play a vital role in the upcoming local, national, and European elections. Individuals in homelessness face unique challenges in the voting process, of which the most significant reported barrier is not being enrolled.⁴ Those who do not have a main residence are often not registered in the civil, nor the electoral register. From the election officials' point of view, not being able to identify a person by their address makes it difficult to prevent voter fraud and verify whether someone is voting in the correct district. However, from the point of view of an individual in homelessness, filling in the box of one's 'residential address' is not self-evident. Writing down 'shelter tonight, no idea tomorrow' in the address section is deemed too unclear: a local connection is required – one needs to demonstrate that they reside within the territory of a municipality a majority of the time.

4 Coram, V., Louth, J., & Hill, L. (2022). Does My Vote Matter? The Electoral Behaviour and Attitudes of People Experiencing Homelessness. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 16(2), 47-71.

Yet, this local connection as a prioritisation category has been increasingly met with criticism.⁵ In many European countries, besides voting, access to shelters, social housing, or welfare provision is also dependent on this location requirement. Meeting such a requirement is very difficult for people in homelessness, known as a very mobile group: whilst some reside temporarily with family or friends, others may switch from sleeping in shelters to sleeping rough. When moving around, finding a place to stay or sleep is prioritised above remaining within a municipality's borders. Imposing a local connection thus jeopardises 'nation-wide' access to social and political rights and does not correspond to homeless realities.⁶ Moreover, it is known to be a complex procedure: the burden of proof lies with claimants, and they often lack tangible evidence of contact with shelter or care facilities. It can also be an intrusive process: applicants may be asked to show bank statements to prove their whereabouts.^{6,7}

How can countries attempt to electorally include people experiencing homelessness without an address? Some European countries have legal protocols allowing address-less persons to register to vote, by using alternative forms of identification or registration methods. In Belgium, homeless and address-less people can apply for a reference

address at a local welfare agency.⁸ This is an administrative address that allows them to receive postal mail, to vote or to use when applying for benefits. It is a unique alternative to registration systems around Europe,⁹ however, recent evidence has highlighted its restricted availability, with administrative burdens¹⁰ and a myriad of other factors affecting its non-take-up.⁷ Claimants need to meet entitlement and eligibility criteria, such as demonstrating one is actually experiencing homelessness and is so within the municipality's borders, e.g. through a statement from a local shelter. Not meeting these requirements means they remain un-registered which can cause a 'cascade of exclusion':¹¹ administrative exclusion inevitably leads to the exclusion of welfare and services¹², thereby keeping them off the radar. Investigating this reference address, Robben, Pierre and Hermans (2023)¹³ concluded that, in theory, it may have been designed to avoid the exclusion of citizens who do not meet the registration criteria, yet, in practice, there is still a significant number of people who remain administratively

5 For instance, see May, J. (2003). Local connection criteria and single homeless people's geographical mobility: evidence from Brighton and Hove. *Housing Studies*, 18(1), 29-46; Baptista, I., Benjaminsen, L., & Pleace, N. (2015). *Local Connection Rules and Access to Homelessness Services in Europe: EOH Comparative Studies on Homelessness No. 5*.

6 Planije, M., & Tuynman, M. (2013). Homelessness policy in the Netherlands: nationwide access to shelter under pressure from local connection criteria? *European Journal of Homelessness*, 7(2), 183-202.

7 Robben, L.-L., Roets, G., Wagener, M., Van Lancker, W., & Hermans, K. (2023). Including the Most Excluded? A Qualitative Study on the Address Registration for People Experiencing Homelessness in Belgium. *Administration & Society*, 55(6), 1093-1117.

8 See also Robben, L.-L., & Hermans, K. (2021). "Zonder adres heb je geen rechten". 25 jaar het referentieadres bij een OCMW voor dak- en thuislozen in België. *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Sociale Zekerheid*, 2021(4), 545-576.

9 European Commission. (2019). Peer Review on 'Access to social assistance and rights for homeless people'. Belgium, 3-4 October 2019. Synthesis report. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024&newsId=9436&furtherNews=yes>

10 Robben, L.-L., Peeters, R. & Widlak, A. (2024, forthcoming). Burdens on the gateway to the state: Administrative burdens in the registration of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 2024.

11 Chudnovsky, M., & Peeters, R. (2022). A cascade of exclusion: Administrative burdens and access to citizenship in the case of Argentina's national identity document. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 88(4), 1068-1085.

12 Peeters, R., & Widlak, A. (2018). The digital cage: Administrative exclusion through information architecture – The case of the Dutch civil registry's master data management system. *Government Information Quarterly*, 35(2), 175-183.

13 Robben, L.-L., Pierre, A., & Hermans, K. (2023). 'Without an address, you do not exist': the administrative invisibility of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium. *Citizenship studies*, 27(5), 566-583.

“An alternative address therefore needs to ensure that people in homelessness can access both social and political rights, thereby encouraging them to access voting centres.”

invisible. Another practice is that of the fictitious addresses in Italy. For instance, more than 19,000 persons live on the Via Modesta Valenti in Rome, yet, local residents would not be able to pinpoint this location. It is a ‘via fittizie’ or fictitious address that individuals experiencing homelessness can apply for at a municipality, which gives them access to rights such as social assistance, social security benefits, and the right to vote.¹⁴

Other European countries also provide alternative registration options for people experiencing homelessness seeking to access voting centres. In England for instance, people experiencing homelessness can demonstrate a temporary proof of address (e.g. an occupancy agreement of a hostel), a PO Box Address (e.g. if you have experienced domestic abuse and are not in the capacity to share the address of the

refuge) or register to vote at an address where they spend the most time, e.g. a shelter.¹⁵ However, the latter, like the Belgian reference address, requires the demonstration of a local connection: the application form¹⁶ states that they may be contacted with the question of how much time they have spent at this given address. In Ireland, for instance, only people who are placed in emergency accommodation for over six months can receive such a proof of address¹⁷ - therefore excluding a group living in short-term accommodation. The requirement of a fixed address has therefore become much more than just a means by which municipalities reach out to citizens residing on their territory; it has become a personal identifier that decides who can be included as a member of the municipality and who cannot.¹³

¹⁴ More information: <https://www.avvocatodistrada.it/faq-la-residenza-breve-guida-pratica-per-le-persone-senza-dimora/>

¹⁵ See: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voting-and-elections/who-can-vote/other-registration-options/people-experiencing-homelessness>

¹⁶ See: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f9fdf268fa8f57f35ea0996/Register-to-vote-if-you-havent-got-a-fixed-or-permanent-address-England.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://dublininquirer.com/2016/01/13/for-dublin-s-homeless-a-precarious-right-to-vote/>

How then can alternative address systems be designed to include homeless people in the electoral register, and make them more likely to vote? Outside of Europe, Marinho¹⁸ asked the same question. By studying the residents of favelas – who often do not have traditional street addresses and may be at risk of housing exclusion –¹⁹ in Brazil. She investigated the effect of providing an alternative (albeit a digital algorithmic) address on registration turnouts. By means of a field experimental survey, favela residents were offered three solutions to encourage them to vote: 1) information about online voting registration; 2) the provision of a digital address through an algorithmic proof of address designed by a private agency; 3) the provision of a similar digital address designed by a public agency. They found that all three options increased the registering and voting intentions of residents; yet interestingly, there was a tendency for these individuals to have more trust in private agencies than in public services. This raises the question of how such alternative addresses should be designed, by whom, and for what purposes.

Another digital alternative can be found in the UK. The so-called ProxyAddress²⁰ links the address to an individual, rather than to its location. Through a database of existing and unused addresses, it duplicates these addresses so that people can obtain a ‘proxy’. In this case, the local connection criterion is not a requirement: claimants can choose and quickly modify an address or collection point. Whereas

18 Marinho, M. O. (2023) “Addressing the unaddressed”: the effects of digital applications on the burden experienced by vulnerable citizens. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10438/34490>

19 See https://radicalhousingjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/RHJ_Issue-4.1_10_Update_Forte_151-157.pdf

20 Chris Hildrey (2019) ProxyAddress: using location data to reconnect those facing homelessness with support services, *The Journal of Architecture*, 24(2), 139-159.; more information: www.proxyaddress.org

the Belgian reference address could be a recognisable address (e.g. ‘City Centre 1’), the ProxyAddress prevents the potential risk of stigma or discrimination by using existing ‘neutral’ street names. However, in contrast to the Belgian practice, people experiencing homelessness need to actively look for social support themselves – instead of being automatically placed on the social assistants’ radar, as is the case in Belgium. Whilst alternative addresses offer innovative solutions to help people experiencing homelessness access various services, the complexity of voter registration rules can complicate their practical use.

An alternative address therefore needs to ensure that people in homelessness can access both social and political rights, thereby encouraging them to access voting centres. Casting one’s vote is not only important for empowering individuals in homelessness to raise their voice; it also deters sanctions such as the issuing of fines for failing to vote without providing a valid reason. For policymakers, including ‘homeless’ and ‘address-less’ people in the electoral register is important in ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the democratic process. Allowing flexibility in allocating voters without a fixed address can contribute to the general electoral participation of homeless people.⁴ Its importance, however, goes beyond political rights. Lacking an address perpetuates a cycle of instability. Alongside alleviating root causes of homelessness, policymakers need to address and deal with this cycle of the ‘Postal Paradox’.³ Prioritising universal access to the electoral register is important, yet, a more effective and structural approach would be to ensure that everyone has an address in the first place.

ELECTORAL RIGHTS OF EU MOBILE CITIZENS FACING HOMELESSNESS

This article discusses the challenges faced by EU mobile citizens, particularly those experiencing homelessness, in exercising their electoral rights. It highlights a range of EU directives allowing citizens to vote and run for office in their host countries but also underscores a number of obstacles such as language barriers, the complex registration processes, and a lack of awareness. The article puts forward several strategies to improve participation including better information dissemination, simplified registration procedures, and targeted campaigns.



By **Claire Morotsir**, EU Rights Manager, ECAS

Citizens of the EU benefit from certain rights which are directly attached to their citizenship, such as the right to free movement, the right to petition, or political rights that they can benefit from in the country where they reside. However, vulnerable populations, such as EU mobile citizens facing homelessness, experience obstacles in the exercise of their EU citizenship rights.

The right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal elections by citizens of the Union residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals dates back to the Council Directive 94/80/EC of 19 December 1994.¹ In a similar vein, the Council Directive 93/109/EC of 6 December 1993² lays down detailed arrangements for the exercise of the right to vote and stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament for citizens of the Union residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals. These rights are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union on the 1st of December 2009.³

In practice, this means that EU mobile citizens can choose to vote or stand as candidates in the Member State where they reside, even if they possess the nationality of another Member State. But who are these EU mobile citizens, and how can marginalised communities fully benefit from these rights?

EU mobile citizens are citizens who are originally from one Member State of the European Union (EU), whom they are nationals of, but reside in another Member State of the EU, where they stay legally but do not hold the nationality. They should not be confused with dual citizens who have the nationality of two or more Member States of the European Union.

1 [Directive - 94/80 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

2 [Directive - 93/109 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

3 [EUR-Lex - 12016P/TXT - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

Among the EU mobile community, citizens experiencing homelessness constitute a particularly vulnerable group, as they often do not speak the local language, and are unable to register due to a lack of information or the absence of digitalisation. Also, as homeless EU mobile citizens are confronted with discrimination issues, they do not receive adequate support to exercise their political rights.

As mentioned above, according to EU legislation, EU mobile citizens have the right not only to vote but also to stand as candidates both in the municipal and the European Parliament elections. This is of particular importance for two reasons.

“EU mobile citizens should be encouraged to raise their voices at different steps of the decision-making process.”

With regard to the municipal elections, in most countries, citizens of voting age lose the right to participate in municipal elections once they deregister from the municipality they used to reside in, in their home Member State. Therefore, once they leave their country of origin to move to another country in the EU, they are deprived of the right to take part in local elections.

As far as the European Parliament elections are concerned, a different yet comparable issue occurs in countries where going to the polling station is mandatory, for example when citizens need to go back physically to their home Member State to vote in person, or when they need to reach a Consulate, which might be far away from the place where they reside. In such a case, citizens may feel discouraged from exercising their right to vote, and even more discouraged to run as a candidate for the European Parliament elections.

Granting the right to vote and stand as candidates to EU mobile citizens in their host Member States should therefore guarantee that citizens of voting age can cast a ballot at both the European and the municipal levels under any circumstances. However, some obstacles remain, making it sometimes difficult for EU mobile citizens to fully exercise their voting rights, especially those in precarious situations.

According to the 2020 Eurobarometer,⁴ only 71% of EU citizens know that they can vote or stand as candidates in the European Parliament elections. Moreover, according to the flash Eurobarometer survey conducted at the request of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers as part of the Citizenship and

4 [EuroCom_ Citizenship and Democracy _2020_v4 \(europa.eu\)](#)

Democracy report⁵, 'about two-thirds of respondents (67%) correctly identify that a citizen of the EU living in their country has the right to vote or stand as a candidate in European Parliament elections. An appreciably lower majority – 55% – correctly identify that such a citizen has the right to vote or stand as a candidate in municipal elections.'

The European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) has conducted focus groups in the past years, gathering civil society, policymakers, and EU mobile citizens, to try to understand the reasons why there is a lack of participation of EU mobile citizens in both the municipal and the EU political landscapes. Through a crowdsourcing exercise, ECAS has also invited citizens to share their thoughts and recommendations to foster the political participation of EU citizens.

First of all, it appears that in most Member States, during the registration process upon arrival, little to no information is provided concerning voting rights. Furthermore, requirements to register on the electoral roll of host Member States are often available in the language of the host country only. It appears that online or offline information is not communicated; neither in English nor in the most widely spoken language of the EU mobile community of each Member State. Therefore, newcomers cannot easily access information concerning the registration requirements and do not feel involved. Additionally, civil servants are often not able to express themselves in any other language, leading to confusion for EU mobile citizens who wish to raise questions about their political rights.

5 [Flash Eurobarometer FL528 : Citizenship and democracy - Data Europa EU](#)

Language issues also concern political parties who do not always take the time to ensure that their manifestos are translated and available in different languages.

In certain Member States, the complexity of registration requirements both at the town hall and on the electoral roll does not allow EU mobile citizens to fully enjoy their political rights. The absence of a streamlined process across Member States may lead to confusion, especially for highly mobile citizens. The administration burden is even more complex for the European elections, as citizens need first to deregister from the electoral lists of their home country, in order to be able to register on their host country. The aforementioned shows that there is a lack of cooperation between local authorities to ensure that EU mobile citizens have a clear understanding of registration processes on both sides of the border, even in cross-border regions.

Registration issues, furthermore, have a particularly negative impact on the political participation of EU mobile homeless citizens. Indeed, most Member States do not offer automatic registration on the electoral roll upon arrival in the host country. According to the study on homeless migrants and EU mobile citizens in Europe from GIS Bremen⁶ 'Mobile EU citizens experiencing homelessness often find themselves in a vicious circle and bureaucratic maze where various actors point to each other and from which it is almost impossible to escape without external support and/or an authority taking ownership.' Moreover, the study on obstacles to participation in elections commissioned by the European Parliament⁷ adds that more than half of EU Member States impose an obligation for non-national EU voters to register themselves separately on the electoral roll. This means that voters who have not registered 'cannot vote or that they have to go through higher hurdles of voting'. The complexity of registration formalities combined with the lack of support from local authorities, prevents EU mobile citizens facing homelessness from engaging in the local political landscape.

⁶ [EJH_18-1_A03_v02.pdf \(feantsaresearch.org\)](#)

⁷ [*Obstacles to participation in elections and the exercise of voting rights, inside the E.U. \(europa.eu\)](#)

“As homeless EU mobile citizens are confronted with discrimination issues, they do not receive adequate support to exercise their political rights.”

Precise data on the percentage of people facing homelessness among the EU mobile citizens community is missing. However, as mentioned in the PRODEC press release from December 7th 2021:⁸ 'in Barcelona, 27% of the rough sleepers interviewed by Arrels in November 2020 were EU migrants, a larger percentage than the overall mobile EU citizens living in Barcelona; in Stockholm, only 21% of the respondents to the 2020 Stadsmission survey among homeless mobile EU citizens had a Swedish Social Security number⁹; in Brussels, 63% of the homeless mobile EU citizens supported by DIOGENES in 2020 were irregularly residing; and in Münster (Germany), 88% of the homeless mobile EU citizens interviewed by BISCHOF-HERMANN-STIFTUNG at the end of 2020 have experienced homelessness for at least 6 months.'

This illustrates that in some European cities, the percentage of EU mobile citizens facing homelessness is high. Among this group, a lot of citizens are facing the destitution of their rights because of registration issues. Indeed, citizens who are having trouble registering at the town hall in their Member State of residence, are de facto deprived of the right to exercise any voting rights.

Furthermore, the results of the focus groups conducted by ECAS have shown that the EU mobile community is diverse and may concern different regions or language communities. There is a lack of precise data and statistics on the percentage of EU mobile citizens actively using their right to vote in the European and municipal elections in their host Member State, which makes it difficult to target specific groups to reach out to ahead of electoral periods. Campaigns should be adapted, taking into consideration the level of knowledge of the local language, and the level of digitalisation of the targeted group.

8 [PRODEC_November_Infosession_Press_Release.pdf \(feantsa.org\)](#)

9 [Personal identity numbers | Skatteverket](#)

On a general note, surveys on the reasons why there is such a low engagement of the EU mobile community in the political landscape of their host countries should be conducted to have a better understanding of the reasons why citizens of voting age do not make use of their political rights. Special attention should be given to citizens in precarious situations, including statistics on EU mobile citizens who are unable to complete their registration process at the town hall and are therefore deprived of the rights derived from their EU citizenship, including the right to vote. In order to target disengaged citizens and raise awareness accordingly, a better understanding of the level of engagement of underrepresented communities within the EU mobile citizens population would be necessary.

Finally, EU mobile citizens should be encouraged to raise their voices at different steps of the decision-making process, through consultations or crowdsourcing exercises. Involving all EU mobile citizens, including marginalised communities, outside of electoral periods, would help to gain a better understanding of the political landscape of the host country, and, at the same time, encourage citizens to make use of their right to vote and stand as candidates in municipal and European elections when the time comes.

HOW THE NEXT UK GOVERNMENT CAN ENSURE A HOME FOR EVERYONE

This article discusses the issue of homelessness in the UK, exploring both the Conservative Party's promise to end rough sleeping in England by 2024, as well as looking at various other measures that a future UK government could take to tackle the issue. The article highlights the impact of the pandemic on the government's 'Everyone In' scheme on reducing homelessness and highlights the failure of the Conservatives to fulfil this promise due to the cost-of-living crisis and general government inaction.



By **Nye Jones**, Campaigns Manager, Homeless Link, UK

In its 2019 manifesto, the Conservative Party made a bold promise. They would end rough sleeping in England by the end of 2024.

Their record up to that point amplified the boldness of this promise. Rough sleeping has risen dramatically since they formed a Government in 2010, peaking in 2017 with 4,751 people estimated to be sleeping rough in England on any given night, a 168% increase when compared with 2010.


Despite this, many people within the homelessness sector allowed themselves to be encouraged by the commitment. It gave accountability, something to hold on to when working with the Government on policy. Then the pandemic hit and the Government's 'Everyone In' scheme, which paused the conditions which gatekeep access to housing, saw a huge fall in rough sleeping practically overnight. By 2021, the number of people estimated to be sleeping rough on any given night had fallen by nearly 50% compared with the 2017 peak. Maybe we could actually dream of no one sleeping rough by 2024.

But the cost of living crisis, coupled with Government inaction following the ending of the 'Everyone In' scheme, sadly meant the dream stayed a fantasy. Rough sleeping rose by 60% between 2021 and 2023. If it keeps rising at the same rate the figure for 2024 will rise above the 2017 peak.

Rough sleeping is just the tip of a broader homelessness iceberg. In England, over 100,000 children are currently growing up in 'temporary' accommodation. This accommodation, which local councils are duty bound to supply, is often squalid and overcrowded. Despite being labelled 'temporary', families may stay there for years with no sign of permanent housing.

However, there is no reason why anyone should be homeless in England. So now, with a general election promised by Rishi Sunak in the second half of this year, at Homeless Link we are calling for whoever forms the next Government to take action to end all forms of homelessness.

Our [Manifesto to End Homelessness](#), written following consultation with many of our member organisations across England, sets out four key asks of the next Government.

 **We believe a home for everyone is not only possible, but essential for a healthy, harmonious society."**

EVERYONE HAS A SAFE, SECURE, SUITABLE HOME IN WHICH TO THRIVE

According to an analysis by the charity Shelter, there's been an average annual net loss of 24,000 social homes since 1992, meaning there are now 1.4m fewer households in social housing since 1980. This lack of secure, genuinely affordable housing pushes people into an extremely expensive and insecure private rented sector, from which evictions have been the number one cause of homelessness in recent years. Therefore, the next Government should commit funding to build 90,000 social homes per year for the next 10 years.

EVERY ARM OF GOVERNMENT WORKING TOGETHER AND PLAYING THEIR PART

Homelessness is an issue that cuts across many different sectors, with a decision taken in one space often having a knock-on impact on another. In recent years, partnership work has become the norm in the homelessness sector, but unfortunately, this is not the same in government.

For example, between August and October 2023, the number of newly recognised refugees sleeping rough after leaving asylum accommodation tripled following sudden changes from the Home Office regarding the move-on period from asylum accommodation. This is one of many examples of government departments working in silos, with one department not considering the huge ramifications of a policy in terms of homelessness. That's why the next Government should adopt a cross-government strategy to end homelessness, led by a new task force directed by the Cabinet Office, with representatives from across government.

“It's not rocket science, it's simply about creating more secure, affordable homes and making sure services have the resources they need to support people into them.”

A HOMELESSNESS SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR ALL

Over recent years, the homelessness sector has increasingly recognised the need for a diverse range of services to best meet people's specific needs. From female-only spaces, to offering immigration advice to people with restricted entitlements, solutions to homelessness are never one size fits all.

The impact of tailoring support to people's needs can best be seen through the results of Housing First schemes. Our [research into the long-term social impacts of Housing First](#) found that, over a period of three years, residents reported significantly reduced mental and physical health needs, while the number of people engaged in anti-social behaviour nearly halved and residents were less likely to require emergency health services.

Therefore, the next Government must ensure there is a diverse network of services available, and that sustainable housing options are accessible for every person who experiences homelessness. As a minimum standard, these services should embed person-centred, trauma-informed care.

SUSTAINED INVESTMENT PREVENTING AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS - FOR GOOD

The Government's £2bn investment in homelessness and rough sleeping over three years was welcomed by the homelessness sector as a sign it was serious about meeting its 2024 target. However, the cost of living crisis significantly reduced the funding's value in real terms.

At the same time, homelessness funding is too often characterised by short-term contracts that leave providers without security and needing to constantly use resources to bid for further funding. With this in mind, the next Government should commit to reviewing all spending across the government linked to homelessness, and replacing the existing piecemeal and short-term funding structures with a long-term, ring-fenced homelessness support fund, designed to flexibly adapt to local and individual needs.

CAMPAIGNING IN THE RUN UP TO THE ELECTION

These four asks are not outlandish, but realistic commitments a government dedicated to ending homelessness can make. It's not rocket science, it's simply about creating more secure, affordable homes and making sure services have the resources they need to support people into them.



It's been great to see so many homelessness organisations unite behind these asks as part of our ['A Home for Everyone'](#) campaign. Our recent ['Mass Lobby' of Parliament](#) saw over 90 organisations come together under our banner of 'Ending Homelessness Together', with speeches from the Homelessness Minister, Shadow Homelessness Minister and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for housing. Homelessness organisations also engaged over 70 MPs as part of the day.

But the work doesn't stop there. From now until polling day we will be supporting our member organisations to influence parliamentary candidates across the country, with the aim of making sure that whoever forms the next Government prioritises ending homelessness.

Homelessness is often a deeply traumatic experience that ripples through people's lives and those of the people around them. People experiencing homelessness have worse mental and physical health, are more likely to misuse substances and have a far lower life expectancy than the general public.

At the same time, allowing homelessness to continue comes at a great cost to the taxpayer, with spiralling temporary accommodation bills forcing many councils into bankruptcy and huge swathes of public money going straight into the hands of private landlords.

It doesn't have to be this way. We believe a home for everyone is not only possible, but essential for a healthy, harmonious society.



FOCUS IRELAND HOPES NEW ELECTORAL REFORMS CAN SUPPORT THEIR GOAL TO END HOMELESSNESS IN IRELAND

This article discusses Focus Ireland's aims to end homelessness in Ireland by leveraging recent electoral reforms made by the Irish Government. Through the launching of a 'Voter Registration Drive', Focus Ireland hope to empower people experiencing homelessness to engage politically and turn out at the upcoming local and EU elections. The article also highlights Focus Ireland's '4 Asks' of candidates in the upcoming elections – such as recommendations for building social housing, tailoring housing to needs, prioritising long-term homeless, and prioritising children's welfare.



By **Louise Bayliss**, Campaign Coordinator, Focus Ireland


INTRODUCTION

Ireland currently has a record number of people experiencing homelessness. The latest figures show that there were 13,841 people homeless at the end of February 2024¹, which sadly includes 4,170 children. Focus Ireland believe that by working in collaboration with politicians and using evidence based research, we can reverse this trend and work towards our goal of ending homelessness.

In a move towards a more inclusive democracy, Ireland has recently enacted innovative changes to its electoral legislation, aimed at enhancing accessibility to the electoral register and fostering greater participation in the democratic process. The reforms help to streamline the voter registration process, and also establish an Electoral Commission, an independent body which will offer unbiased information and ensure fairness and impartiality on elections. Focus Ireland is particularly pleased to see that the reforms simplify the voter registration process for people experiencing homelessness.

VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVE CAMPAIGN

To capitalise on these reforms, Focus Ireland has launched the Voter Registration Drive campaign. The campaign has two main objectives: to empower individuals and give agency back to people experiencing homelessness, and to create real political change to help end homelessness. The launch of the campaign was hosted by An Post in the historic GPO building and speakers on the day included Mike Allen

 The campaign has two main objectives: to empower individuals and give agency back to people experiencing homelessness, and to create real political change to help end homelessness.”

¹ Monthly Homelessness Data, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, March 2024.

– Director of Advocacy and Research at Focus Ireland, Anna McHugh
– Head of Corporate Communications at An Post, and Art O’Leary – CEO of the newly established Electoral Commission. James Flanagan (20), a Lived Experience Ambassador for Focus Ireland also spoke at the event. He had recently registered at a registration drive and spoke about the simplicity of the process. He also stressed the importance of empowering people to use their vote to affect real changes to end homelessness and to engage with all marginalised groups.

At the heart of the Voter Registration Drive campaign lies a commitment to political mobilisation and social change. By mobilising a sizeable and powerful voter bloc, comprised of people with lived experiences of homelessness and people at risk of homelessness, the campaign aims to elevate homelessness as a top priority on the political agenda. Through active engagement with the democratic process, people who have experienced any form of housing precarity, can assert their agency and demand accountability from elected officials.

Focus Ireland will support political engagement by offering policy recommendations that we believe will make a difference to ending homelessness and will also better support people currently experiencing homelessness. Focus Ireland will remain apolitical during elections, but we will empower voters to meaningfully engage with candidates and to use their vote to support policies that would align with our common goals.

Ireland uses an electoral system based on proportional representation with a single transferrable vote (PR–STV), ensuring that every vote cast matters. Expanding access to political participation, we believe, will lead to a more inclusive society that recognises and supports the needs of all citizens and a future where every voice is heard, and every vote counts.

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

One of the most significant changes involves the simplification of voter registration through the offering of an online process. Previously, registration procedures for inclusion on the electoral register involved deadline dates and it were further complicated in cases where individuals had no permanent address at which to receive the registration form. This meant that a person who missed the initial deadline, would need to register on the supplementary register and to do this, they would need to provide proof of identity and address a local police station. The cumbersome bureaucratic procedures were a major barrier for voter registration for people experiencing homelessness, especially given that they had no fixed address to provide. This was a severe form of disenfranchisement for marginalised people, excluding those most in need of state services from the democratic process.

The implementation of The Electoral Reform Act 2022 has massively improved the registration process. The simplified online registration process has made registering to vote more accessible and allows staff to support people to register online. The only requirements to use the online process is for someone to provide:

1. **A Personal Public Service Number (PPSN).**
2. **An email address.**
3. **An Eircode (postal code).**

Eligible residents can register to vote anytime up to 15 days (excluding Sundays and Public Holidays) before an election or referendum. This online process allows us to host voter registration drives throughout the country, with staff and volunteers available to assist potential voters.

There is still a paper registration process to support people with digital literacy issues, but for expediency, Focus Ireland's campaign will generally use the online process. We will also be facilitating paper forms for those people who may need to be included on the special voters, anonymous, or postal list.

For people without a permanent address, they can use the paper format and use an ERF2 form, which allows them to register in the constituency where they spend most of their time, even if they do not have an address there.

ADDRESS POINT SERVICE

We want to support people to help them use the online process and collaborated with our national postal service, An Post, to do so. An Post, has played a pivotal role in this by creating the AddressPoint service. AddressPoint is a free service that provides a fixed address to those without a fixed home. It enables them to receive regular post, access essential services and crucially, provides an Eircode which we can be used for online voter registration. A person can choose a post office within the area that they spend the most time in, and they will be registered to vote in this constituency.

LOCAL ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN

As we continue to register voters in the run up to the Local and European elections (June 7th 2024), Focus Ireland is also launching a Local Elections campaign with a set of '4 Asks' of candidates. These four key policy proposals have the potential to make a significant difference in

addressing the root causes of homelessness and provide meaningful solutions to those affected.

1. Building Sufficient Social Housing:

The first ask calls for each Local Authority to build enough social housing to meet the demand outlined in the social housing needs assessment. This fundamental step addresses the shortage of affordable housing, a primary driver of homelessness. By increasing the supply of social housing, authorities can provide stable, long-term accommodation for vulnerable individuals and families, reducing reliance on emergency shelters and temporary accommodations.

2. Tailoring Housing to Household Needs:

The second ask emphasises the importance of building housing that meets the specific needs of households on the waiting list. This approach recognizes that homelessness affects individuals and families of all sizes and compositions. By ensuring that the type of housing constructed reflects the diversity of households in need, authorities can optimise resources and provide suitable accommodation for everyone, regardless of family size or composition.

3. Prioritising People experiencing Homelessness:

The third ask focuses on allocating a fair proportion of new social homes to individuals who have been trapped in homelessness for extended periods. Ireland has seen an increase in the building of social housing units, but this has not yet resulted in a reduction in the overall homeless numbers. This targeted intervention would mean local authorities would include homelessness as part of their allocation policies, rather than solely focusing on the time an individual or family has spent on the social housing list. By prioritising those who have experienced long-term homelessness, authorities can ensure that resources are directed towards those most in need of assistance.

4. Putting the Best Interests of the Child First:

The fourth ask underscores the importance of prioritising the best interests of children in decisions related to homelessness assistance. Children are among the most vulnerable members of society affected by homelessness and their well-being should be paramount in all policy decisions. By prioritising the needs of children, authorities can ensure that families experiencing homelessness receive the support and resources necessary to safeguard the welfare of their children and mitigate the negative impact of homelessness on their development.

CONCLUSION

Collectively, these four asks represent a comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness in Ireland. By addressing both the immediate needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness and the underlying structural factors contributing to the crisis, these policy proposals have the potential to affect transformative change. Focus Ireland believe that by empowering people to vote and by offering policy recommendations during election campaigns, we can drive the political agenda to ensure that ending homelessness for all is an achievable goal.

“By increasing the supply of social housing, authorities can provide stable, long-term accommodation for vulnerable individuals and families, reducing reliance on emergency shelters and temporary accommodations.”

COMMUNICATIONS, ELECTIONS, AND HOMELESSNESS

This article discusses the work of Valente, the Dutch national association for organisations aiding vulnerable individuals, such as people experiencing homelessness. It looks, in particular, at Valente's work during the 2023 elections in the Netherlands, in which the group advocated for homelessness issues, producing materials and evaluating political parties' stances. It also examines how Valente emphasises its clients' voices in policy-making, believing their stories resonate and drive change, as exemplified by a recent impactful exhibition of clients' portraits.



By **Kim van de Wetering**, Communications Advisor, Valente, The Netherlands

COMMUNICATIONS, ELECTIONS, AND HOMELESSNESS

Valente is the national association in the Netherlands for organisations that provide help and support to vulnerable people, such as people experiencing homelessness, people experiencing domestic violence, and people in assisted and sheltered housing. Our goal is to represent their interests. Valente's members reach out to more than 150,000 vulnerable people on an annual basis. Since 2019, I have worked as a communications advisor at Valente, working in a Public Affairs team alongside several policy advisors, the director, and a communication officer to develop the communication strategy to bolster Valente's lobbying efforts.

The great thing about my position is I'm involved in all of Valente's dossiers and so can make connections – which was challenging when I was brand new in this trade, but after five years and obviously, with a lot of input from my colleagues, this has gotten easier. And it's what drives me, delving into this vast and intricate subject matter, to understand the interconnection between various parts, issues, legislation, and so forth. People who need the government most are being ground down by it. I'm not a politician, policymaker, or lawyer, but I strive to make a difference in society from my position and to the best of my specific abilities.

ELECTIONS AND HOMELESSNESS

The nature of homelessness in the Netherlands and the public and political views on it are shifting. Where it was once seen as a health-care issue concerning mainly elderly white males with psychological and/or addiction problems, it has become – as in much of Europe – a housing issue with a strong economic aspect. The homeless demographic is younger and ethnically more diverse, there are more homeless women and girls than before, and their problems are often solely related to housing and finances, not psychological issues. That being said, there remains a lot of prejudice against homelessness and many systemic hindrances and political choices that make it hard to solve and prevent homelessness in the Netherlands.

The 2023 elections in the Netherlands provided an opportunity for political parties and candidates to address pressing social issues, including homelessness, in their platforms and agendas. Valente, as the national association for organisations providing help and support to vulnerable people, including people experiencing homelessness, took the initiative to raise awareness and advocate for policies addressing homelessness during the 2023 elections.

As voters considered their options and priorities, Valente's campaign sought to highlight the importance of addressing homelessness as a critical issue that requires attention and action from elected officials. Our campaign aimed to ensure that the position of people in a vulnerable position in our society remained a priority for policymakers and politicians during the electoral process. By engaging in advocacy efforts, Valente sought to influence public discourse and policy decisions concerning these issues, advocating for comprehensive strategies that address its root causes and provide adequate support to those affected.

Through communication and advocacy efforts, Valente aimed to ensure that homelessness remained a central topic of discussion throughout the electoral process, encouraging candidates and parties to propose meaningful solutions and commitments to address the issue. We made several communication products for our campaign: a pamphlet with five key points, five videos with our policy advisors explaining these key points, an analysis of the twelve largest political parties, a visual of this analysis, tips for client participation in the elections, and three client testimonies on their views regarding elections and the importance of voting. We made a landing page with these aforementioned products together with news and stories of clients illustrating the need for better political choices.

Overall, Valente's 2023 campaign on Elections and Participation served as a platform to advocate for the rights and well-being of homeless individuals and to push for policy changes that would lead to tangible improvements in their lives.

THE CAMPAIGN IN DETAIL

The five key points we focused on for the elections were: stop domestic abuse, empower vulnerable people, combat homelessness, prevent debt and poverty, and facilitate participation. We decided on these five with our team, but the choice was obvious; I can't think of any issues posing a greater problem for society as a whole. It's precisely the people dealing with these issues who deserve the greatest effort from politicians - more than is currently the case.

We sent our pamphlet with these five key points to all the preparatory committees to use for their election programme. Quite a few of them responded, thanking us for our input. Some of them sent us a draft version of the text they had prepared for their election programme. We asked our members, should they be active in a political party, to raise the issue with their programme committee.

“Our campaign aimed to ensure that the position of people in a vulnerable position in our society remained a priority for policymakers and politicians during the electoral process.”

When the respective election programmes were published, we read the election programmes of all mentioned parties with our entire team and compiled the paragraphs about our topics. This allowed us to evaluate them in comparison to each other and provide our members, clients, and other voters with clear information about the plans of these political parties. We also made this document available on our website and distributed it with a visual. The visual is something I'm very enthusiastic about: a table with twelve political parties and how they score on our five key points. The election programmes add up to hundreds of pages, but our visual made it possible to discern a party's position on five very important social issues. It was not our goal to influence voting behaviour, if that were even possible, and there is also not one party clearly the best for socio-economic themes. These are wicked problems we are dealing with.

The selection of parties included in our table was based on the party's size and consistency in our House of Representatives. After publication, two parties sought to be included in our visual, but we could explain to them how this was our final selection based on objective criteria.

We had produced something similar to this visual before, presented as a bingo card with chips for parties that had something about these topics in their election programme. They could score from 0 to 2 at that time. This time we've added a third to it. We're already pleased if a party includes one of these topics or groups in their programme, which was rewarded with one heart. Then there are parties that have plans along the lines of 'there's room for improvement here', or 'we're going to work on it'. But what our members and citizens grappling with these issues really need are concrete plans with a clear beginning and end, clear objectives, and integrated into existing structures. We've tried to represent this with three hearts. You can see that there aren't many.



INPUT AND IMPACT

The outcome of the election was somewhat of an earthquake that we had not expected. However, I don't believe there is more we could have done to impact the overall outcome. Political parties are still in the process of forming a government and there is no real expectation whether they will be able to form one. What this means for the issues of homelessness, domestic violence, or mental health, we have no real clue.

That said: the European Union represents a form of cooperation which offers chances for improvement and change for the better. This is why we will support our members with information how to involve people who are receiving help from shelters with the upcoming European elections. Keep raising awareness about these issues, continue facilitating healthcare organisations in their service provision and advocacy, and keep informing clients about their rights.

CLIENTS' PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

We know that people experiencing homelessness do not always vote, for example, due to practical reasons or distrust towards the government. *Do you discuss this with clients? How does voting work practically if you are homeless (election date, polling card, ID, polling station location)? Do people with a temporary address receive their polling card on time? We posed these questions to our members and invited them to discuss with their clients about the right and opportunity to vote. For this purpose, we provided them with some informative and practical tips – for example, about handing over the polling card, proxy*

voting, assistance in the polling booth for those with disabilities – with references to organisations that focus on the accessibility of elections. Some of our members decided to offer their shelter buildings as polling stations to literally decrease the distance between voters and the location where you can vote.

We also encourage clients to also make their voices heard at the ballot box. Together, they represent around 100,000 votes that can contribute to a better society.”

As part of the campaign, we've highlighted the voices of clients, including testimonies on their views regarding elections. There are three reasons why I interviewed clients. Firstly, we make an effort not to just talk about clients but include them in our policy and lobby. These are the people who know the issues inside out because they have lived it. Not only do their voices deserve to be heard, but they are indispensable in tackling these issues.

We also encourage clients to also make their voices heard at the ballot box. Together, they represent around 100,000 votes that can contribute to a better society. Personally, I believe that the government should primarily focus on vulnerable citizens – knowing that when they are in a better position, it benefits everyone in the Netherlands. If the clients of our members speak up, perhaps there will be a coalition agreement and policies that enable this.

And third: stories stick. They resonate. I see this in all our communication activities. On our website, personal stories are the most read, social media posts about them get the most shares and likes, and politicians (people in general) understand cold data and information much better when it's given a face. Last summer, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport made it possible for nine portraits I had taken of clients to be exhibited in the lobby of the ministry building (with a QR code to their stories). The exhibition was opened prior to a discussion on complex legislation, funding, and client flows. One of the individuals I had portrayed was present and invited to share his story. From my colleague who attended the subsequent meeting, I heard that all the faces and stories had a tremendous impact, and the discussion was truly conducted with the people behind the numbers in mind. I found it to be a beautiful initiative, and a very hopeful example of the difference you can make in society with good use of communication.



A PERSONAL REFLECTION BY PAULO SCATOLA

This personal reflection delves into the experience of encountering homelessness in Portugal, emphasising the fundamental rights and challenges faced by those without stable housing. It discusses the role of NGOs and projects like Housing First in addressing homelessness and enabling civic participation. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the homeless population is also highlighted, along with the solidarity shown during the crisis. The piece underscores the importance of exercising rights, including voting, and calls for increased participation and advocacy to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness.

By **Paolo Scatola**, Expert by Experience, Portugal

*I'm walking in a city I've known for many years. I got lost.
Will I be free? Only those who don't know the way are lost...
I decide to walk ahead...*

I have seen a very significant increase in people experiencing homelessness in Portugal. There is talk of a 70% increase in the number of people who are homeless - but these people do have rights!¹

Is it in one's own right to ask for help? I am referring, of course, to people experiencing homelessness who beg on the street. Stigmatised by potentially dangerous habits – ‘he is probably just another drug addict’, or ‘someone asking for money for alcohol’. Alcohol that, for many, is consumed to forget a life story – a story unknown to most.

Everyone, everyone! We each have a life story. This story, which for millions of people, scattered around the world, began to be told under "a roof" of a decent dwelling with all the basic conditions for the survival of the human being itself in a more united Europe and Portugal... Portugal, a country represented by ten million people. Perhaps realistically speaking eleven million people, because we can't forget foreigners, which makes me quite happy. Welcome! But what saddens me is the delay in legalising those who need it most, to be able to enjoy their civic rights and, thus, be able to fight on an equal footing to build a better life!

¹ Bastos, J. P., Moleiro, R., & Miranda, T. (2023, October 20). Os sem-abrigo aumentaram 78% em quatro anos: são mais de 10 mil, entre homens, mulheres, jovens, idosos, estrangeiros, famílias inteiras. *Jornal Expresso*. <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2023-10-19-Os-sem-abrigo-aumentaram-78-em-quatro-anos-sao-mais-de-10-mil-entre-homens-mulheres-jovens-idosos-estrangeiros-familias-inteiras-e109bfba>

As far as people experiencing homelessness are concerned, they live in a country that has in its constitution the unquestionable right to a decent home, but where, unfortunately, not everyone has this right. Whether due to ignorance, weariness, or even lack of faith, I don't know. The only certainty I have is that a percentage are completely alien to certain existing laws and rights available to them.

But all is not lost! There are NGOs, such as GAT and Crescer, among others, that tirelessly fight to improve the lives of every person experiencing homelessness: to raise awareness of the importance of exercising a civic right guaranteed to everyone. It can change everyone's life. I am talking, of course, about the right to vote in all democratic elections in Portugal, but it is very important not to forget the European elections.

**“Because on the street,
only homeless people, no
matter how many rights
they had, were left out.”**

From my own experience, I refer again to NGOs, such as GAT and Crescer projects such as Housing First - a house for all! In this case, as in others, of course, funding is the key! Mediation: public services, charities, this whole package is important. Hence, technicians, and street teams, work tirelessly to make everything work in the best possible way, without ever forgetting to remember how important it is to exercise civil rights.

Honestly, it is precisely in this area that I am concerned! The almost total lack of interest in elections among homeless people. It is important not to forget that in a homeless situation, discouragement is always present. Serious psychiatric illnesses, sometimes chronic, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc. also not forgetting alcohol and drug dependence, unfortunately, a growing phenomenon (which, in my view, not even the most sceptical will be free of this same phenomenon). It is important to remember that alcohol, a legal, cheap, and easily accessible drug, unfortunately with an increase in users of this harmful "drug" when used in excess. Although, I remind you that not all people experiencing homelessness have problems with alcohol or drugs.

Projects such as Housing First help many people experiencing homelessness to cope with their addictions with excellent results. Many of these people could get the support bases to be able to see how good it is to live again, that it is possible to be happy and "fly" again.

In one of the most difficult times on our wonderful planet, I am referring of course to the "monster" called COVID-19. These were difficult times for a huge portion of the 8 billion inhabitants. At a time when traumas and paranoia came to the fore. But now at home. Because on the street, only homeless people, no matter how many rights they had, were left out.

I don't want to be unfair; I want to show that I am proud of my country, Portugal. Who did a great job and, in some cases, bordering on excellence. But it didn't. Many people experiencing homelessness couldn't find a place in shelters. Others, of course, preferred to stay on the street. In tents, building arcades, tents built with cardboard and wood, etc. They complained that the conditions were not the best, which proved to be true in some cases.

“We need to be more participatory. We must be present at the demonstrations for housing and better living conditions. We must be listened to in order to improve our condition and get out of homelessness.”

At a time when some homeless people were saved by the R.S.I. (Social Integration Income). I don't want to discuss its low value in terms of the poverty limit, I can't ignore it either, that it was an amount that helped a lot in that phase when it felt like we were watching a movie about the end of the world. One of the few good things about those times was to hear animals again in the deserted cities of people and cars, and even to see some that we only saw in zoos.

I also must remember the work of the NGOs that supported the people who did not have a place in the shelters with food, blankets and clothing, medication, and accompaniment to health services.

And the individual people who at that time, without anyone on the street asking, also helped with food, blankets, and clothing. Everyone seemed to have more solidarity.

Of course, with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, this solidarity disappeared, and the problems came back with more force. The best example is the housing crisis in Portugal.

That is why homeless people must exercise their rights. They must vote. Whoever they believe will stand up for their rights. But it's not enough. We need to be more participatory. We must be present at the demonstrations for housing and better living conditions. We must be listened to in order to improve our condition and get out of homelessness.

Cover art by Tievh.

'Grass on the Lake'

by Settern, participating artist in the Creative Space, Riverside

420x297mm

Acrylic on paper, 2024

"It's very subconscious. My art is inspired by what calms me. A merging of my visual experiences in nature. My support system turned out to be an illusion. I have had to start from the beginning and I'm alone and have not found resolution. I have no security yet. The art group has saved my life. I wouldn't still be here if it wasn't for Studio 5." Tievh is from northwest England.

About Cafe Art: Café Art is a social enterprise with a goal of becoming self-sustaining. Café Art aspires to represent a positive approach to a topic that can often be negative. The enterprise brings together artists from almost all of London's homelessness organisations to showcase their work for the public to enjoy, as well as encouraging and creating an opportunity for them to earn a meaningful income. Café Art is a social enterprise with charitable objectives, with all profits going back into building the business. One of their goals is to help raise further public awareness & empathy towards people affected by homelessness.

Find out more: cafeart.org.uk

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