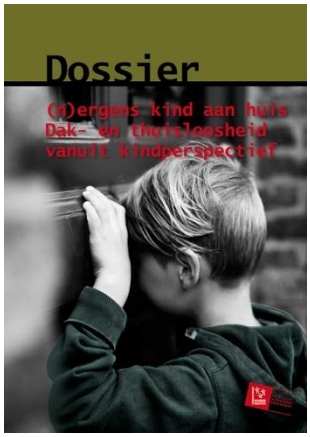
Homelessness from a child's perspective



Homelessness from a child's perspective.

What are the key elements of an effective child homelessness strategy?

Each year, hundreds of children, young people and parents experience homelessness or are forced to live in terrible housing conditions.

There are various reasons why children have to leave their homes and become homeless. They might be forced out of their homes because of an eviction order; they might have to leave because of the rent being unaffordable and/or the accumulation of arrears; sometimes they are victims of illegal evictions; they might flee their homes because of family violence – on their own or with one of their parents and/or brothers or sisters; they might stay for a while with friends before becoming literally homeless.

Homelessness has serious impact on the well-being and future opportunities of children. Frequent and forced changes of neighbourhood, schools, friends and neighbours make it impossible for a child to settle. Such changes cause physical and mental health problems. Homelessness jeopardises the future development of children. Once homeless, children become rapidly severely excluded. They become a sort of refugee in their own country.

In this paper the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner analyses the housing policy area from a child's perspective. In 2016 the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner spoke with 43 parents, children and young people who were homeless, or were about to become homeless. We investigated whether the legal framework takes into account children and adolescents. And, from a child's perspective, we analysed the data of 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' (roughly translated: 'Baseline measurement homelessness 2014') by Evy Meys and Koen Hermans.

The Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner presents in this paper figures on homelessness among children, youngsters and their parents in Flanders and Brussels, based on the 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' data and the few quantitative studies that exist.
In this paper you find many testimonials of the 43 homeless children, youngsters and parents we interviewed. The testimonials of the homeless children show that homelessness has a serious impact on the well-being, the future opportunities and the social inclusion of children.
And we present a model for a global approach to tackle homelessness among children, youngsters and their parents. The model is built around six key elements for an effective child homelessness strategy:

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- Make homeless children visible in policy plans and statistics,
- Reinforce their legal position
- Local governance and collaboration
- Child-friendly shelters and support
- Prevention of child homelessness
- Housing allocation system.

Each key element encapsulates several policy actions.

1. Flemish figures on child homelessness show up an invisible reality

> "Thomas and Kelly are living with their mother Ria, in the house of Ria's new boyfriend. Their own house had been declared unfit for habitation. The two other brothers are at boarding school and living in a youth care institution respectively. Before that, they spent time living at various shelters for homeless people, scattered across Flanders. Time and again, they had to change schools. The family has debts and not enough money to rent a home. "

1.1. Nearly one in three homeless people are underage

Sadly, Thomas and Kelly are not the only children in Flanders to find themselves without a home or a roof over their heads.

- At the end of 2014, Evy Meys and Prof. Koen Hermans published figures on the number of homeless people living in shelters for the homeless in 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid', counting some 3,730 homeless clients.1,728 children joined their homeless parents. they lived in homelessness services including night shelters and transit housing.
- In March 2017, volunteers counted in one hour 653 homeless children in Brussels. They were sleeping rough in public spaces, stayed in night shelters, lived in illegally occupied buildings, …

Bodies other than homelessness institutes too have previously flagged up the rising homelessness trend among children.

- In 2010, 28% of Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMW) found themselves dealing with more homeless families with children than before.
- In 2014, 12,958 eviction notices were filed in Flanders. One out of four notices involved children. In 2015, the Federal Public Planning Service (PPS) Social Integration (POD Maatschappelijke Integratie) estimated the total number of homeless people in Belgium at no less than 17,000 individuals .
- In 2016, the Flemish Public Housing Inspection found 2,838 people who were victims of slum landlords. 1/5 of these victims were minors. 25 children were baby's.

1.2. Most minors have been living in homeless shelters for longer than six months

The analysis of the 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' data from a child's perspective illustrated that most children had been living in homelessness situations for longer than six months. Their parents had no home of their own, tenancy agreement or registered address.

- For 26% of children, this had been the case for a period of 1 to 3 years.
- For 2%, this was 4 to 5 years.
- For 5% it even extended beyond 5 years.

Half of the children who spent time in the sheltered winter accommodation in 2014 had also used these services the year before.

- Most of the children lived in such accommodation with their single parent and their brother/sister/half-brother/half-sister (53%).
- 8% of the children live together with their single parent, but have a brother/sister/half-brother/half-sister living elsewhere.
- 34% live together with their entire family.

1.3. Over 2/5ths of the children have no prospects of a new home

Just over half of the children (57%) have some kind of future prospects. Yet, 43% have no prospects whatsoever, not even in the next three months. Of the children who do have prospects, 15% will shortly be living in a private rental home, 19% in a social house, with 5% able to return to their own home.

1.4. Causes of child homelessness? Relational and material

The analyses of the 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' data from a child's perspective reveal multiple causes for homelessness among parents, children and youngsters.

- 34% of the minors are homeless as a result of relational and family problems. 9% as a result of domestic violence.
- 35% become homeless because of action taken by the landlord (20%), such as eviction, or as a result of problems with the home or the end of the tenancy agreement (15%).
- 13% of the children are homeless as a result of the family's money problems. Other causes include: the personal problems of a parent (6%), unemployment (3%), immigration (3%), force majeure, fire, flooding (3%) and other (9%).

2. What happened?

Children, youngsters and parents talk about the causes of homelessness

In 2016, the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner interviewed 43 homeless children, youngsters and parents. The names of the parents or their own names were nowhere seen on any doorbells. They had no home of their

own, no tenancy agreement and no registered address. The central theme of the interviews was respect for the children's rights: the right to education and leisure, the right to a private life and a family life, the right to family support and a decent living standard, the right to protection against discrimination, etc.

The qualitative research set out from the idea that homelessness is largely the result of a lack of money and means. However, from the first few interviews it became clear that homelessness among children and youngsters is not a single-cause event, as was illustrated by the 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' data. Parents, children and youngsters spoke about their home being declared unfit for habitation, the owner kicking them out, the home being sold, etc. but equally about alcohol abuse, a parent in the process of radicalising, a mother who stopped looking after the children, domestic violence, constant arguing between parents.

Petra, a single mother of three, and Sofia, an eight-year old girl in a shelter for homeless families, explain.

Soaring medical expenses
"I'm on disability benefits and I'm in a collective debt settlement scheme. I've got debts because I couldn't afford the medical expenses for my little boy. My rental flat is being sold. I need to move out in a month's time. The case is being heard by the Justice of the Peace. I want an eviction procedure. That would enable me to stall things a little here, which would tide me over between here and the women's shelter. If not, I'll be out on the streets with my children." (Petra, single mother of 3)

Domestic violence
"We're here because of what happened. My dad was hurting my mum. He would hit my mum with a stretch of rope. He'd hit her on the head with a chair and stuff like that. He accidentally hit my arm. He said that my mum was with another man, but that's not true." (Sofia, primary school, women's shelter)

Some parents and youngsters report that they ran away from home by themselves as a child, without a parent, because there was too much domestic violence.

Tinne, a single mother of three, and Maria, a single mother of one, testify:

My mother could not take care of me
"I'm used to living on the hop. I lived with a foster family from age 6 to 12. When I was twelve, I went back to my mother. But that didn't work out. One time, I even got picked up and removed from home by the Police. Since then, I've been sleeping just about anywhere I could find. At friends' homes, at the home of a lady who lived on her own. When I was fourteen, I got pregnant and I moved in with my mother-in-law." (Tinne, single mother of 2 children, women's shelter)

Youth welfare assistance stops at age 18
"When I was fifteen, I moved to live with my father in Antwerp. I kept falling out with my stepmother. I asked the CLB what I should do. I wanted to get out. I spent time at various youth care institutions. I was in Antwerp, Mechelen and Leuven. I would often run away. Went to live with friends. When I was eighteen, the Youth Court Judge said I could go. The Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) arranged a hotel room for me. I got pregnant. The Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) found me a place at a women's shelter. I have lived at three different women's shelters. From the women's shelter you are supposed to find your own flat. I'm now living in a small flat

from the Social Letting Agency and I'm being coached by a preventive supportive housing service." (Maria, single mother of 1, social house)

The latter testimonials show that homelessness affects not only adults. Nor does it exclusively affect minors accompanied by their parents. Children and youngsters run away by themselves, on their own. They flee domestic violence at home or escape from a youth care institution. Once they turn 18, when youth care assistance stops, they risk ending up on the streets. Especially when they do not have a network to fall back on.

3. What is it like being homeless?

Children, youngsters and parents talk about the many consequences of homelessness

3.1. Life changes overnight

The lives of homeless children and youngsters become precarious overnight. Their lives are turned upside down, from one minute to the next.

Here is the story of Joeri and his mother:

"It was PE class. We were finally able to go and do our PE classes in year six and then I had to leave. Yes, they came to get me from the classroom. "(Joeri, primary school, women's safe house)

"At 7 am I woke up my children. And I told them to put their favourite cuddly toy in their school bag. They went off to school. I went to pick them up there later that day." (Leen, single mother of 2, women's safe house)

3.2. No place at the shelter

Parents, children and youngsters who are forced to leave their homes or flee from domestic violence talk about their difficult path before they found shelter or a new home. Some parents, children and youngsters find temporary accommodation with friends or people in the same boat. Youngsters talk about life on the streets, where they were forced to spend time out of sheer necessity. Or parents talk about how they continued to suffer domestic violence along with their children until a place became available in sheltered accommodation.

Nora and Tatiana testify:

Waiting in fear

"On 22 August, I had my first appointment with the people at the sheltered accommodation. I had to wait until 24 November. I stayed on, living at home. In fear. My children had to stay in their room. I couldn't sleep anymore. I slept with the children. I'd decided to leave, but surely I can't be expected to go out and live on the streets with my children?" (Nora, single mother of 4, women's shelter)

Staying with friends

"We then spent some time living at Fatima's, a friend of mine here in town. I knew her from the women's shelter. My daughter and I lived at her place for two weeks. This flat too has been home to a mum who came from the women's shelter. "(Tatiana, single mother of 1, social house)

Homeless children and youngsters become refugees in their own country. Forced by circumstances, they move away from their own region because

there is no sheltered accommodation or they are unable to find a home they can afford. The security and continuity in their lives are thrown into disarray. Homeless children not only lose their home. They also leave their school, their teacher, their school friends. Shana, Thomas and Eva testify:

To start from scratch time and again
"My first school was in Africa. Then I went to my second school when we were living at the reception centre for asylum seekers, then to another school when we were living with my dad. Then it was the school at the women's safe house and now I'm attending my current school. I need to start from scratch time and again. And I need to learn things which the other pupils already know. "(Shana, primary school, transit home)

Three different cities, three different schools
"We lived in three different cities, then we went back to the first city. I then ended up back at the same school in fifth grade. I came into the classroom and everybody remembered my name." (Thomas, secondary school, lives at the home of her mother's new boyfriend)

If they manage to find a home or a place at a shelter in their own city, they are able to continue to attend the school they know. On Wednesday afternoons, they can play at their friends' homes or attend the local music academy after school in the evening, as Rebecca describes:

Able to continue to attend music classes
"At the shelter, I would go round to play at my friend's home on Wednesdays. She didn't come to play at mine. She was allowed to, but I didn't want her to. In the evening, I attended the music classes. "(Rebecca, primary school, social house)

3.3. Family life under pressure

Not every child or youngster stays with the parent who runs away or leaves the family home. Sometimes, the mother moves out, leaving the children to live at home. Some children alternate between living in sheltered accommodation and living at home. They will spend the weekends in the shelter and live at their father's place, for instance. Some children and youngsters have previously lived in a youth care institution or they end up in a youth care institution because they are homeless. Most of the children we spoke to live in sheltered accommodation with their parent on a permanent basis.

3.4. A trek with many types of homeless shelters

They talk about shelter at different types of facilities: crisis shelters, winter shelters, family shelters, women's shelter, transit flats, collective shelters.

Zaid explains:

From winter shelter to family shelter
"We were in a winter shelter and now we're here (family shelter). They don't lock the door as early in the evenings. So I can play and stay out longer. At the winter shelter, we were also able to do some arts and crafts, like making rainbow looms. They have a playroom there and we're allowed go on the computer if we like. Here, you can't. "(Zaid, primary school, family shelter)

Life in homeless shelters is not all roses and sunshine. Ideally, parents and children want to lead a family life that is as normal as can be. But because of

the collective nature of some homeless shelters, normal private family life faces considerable pressure.

3.5. Almost everything is communal

In spite of the considerable efforts of the shelters to be as child-friendly as possible – child workers, child activities, outings for the children, play equipment, making sure the children are able to take part in local activities, etc. – it is easy to see that long spells of living together in collective homeless shelters takes a toll, especially when there are barely any prospects of moving to a home of their own. Parents and children are stressed and lose heart in the face of their seemingly desperate situation. Parent and child find themselves in a constant state of transience, whereas the very things they need the most are stability and steadiness. The stress and despair weigh on the relationship between parent and child, between parent and care worker and between the residents themselves. Teenagers especially find this particularly hard. As time goes on, they want to have more of a say in their own life. They want to build an independent life for themselves, which clashes with the collective rules of the facilities at times. Families that do have some privacy, courtesy of the infrastructure of separate residential units, greatly appreciate this.

3.6. Mounting debts

Another element are the debts which can spiral out of control if the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) does not step in to cover the accommodation expenses . Living in sheltered accommodation does not come free. Parents and children pay a per diem price, which varies depending on the shelter.

4. What does the future bring?

Children, youngsters and parents talk about their dreams for the future

What do homeless parents, children and youngsters dream and what stands in the way of seeing these dreams become reality?

4.1. Dreaming of a home and a job

It comes as no surprise that a modest home of one's own holds the number one spot.

Shana and Ria:

> **Going into the living room when I want**
> "I want to have a home, and do the things we want to do in that home. For us to be able to decide whether we go into the living room or not." (Shana, primary school, transit home)

> **A home where I can stay**
> "That I have a home where I can stay and go on living. That I won't need to move again. Now I have to move again, for the umpteenth time. I've moved 22 times. And now I'm made to move out again." (Ria, single mother of 4, staying with her new boyfriend)

But it is not just a home that is on the wish list. People also need jobs to secure the future of their children. Some peace at last, with a certain future. And a life without fights, arguments and violence. To some children, this means going back to living with the whole family: mum, dad, brothers, sisters. Other children dream of a future with just one parent.

Eva testifies:

> **Never back to dad again**
> "We never ever want to go back to dad. All he ever does is hit us. And we don't want Mum to find another man either. Because I don't want another dad." (Eva, primary school, women's shelter)

4.2. Thresholds that stand in the way of those dreams

When asked about the things that stand in the way of their dreams, the parents, children and youngsters spoke out about their arduous, discouraging and lengthy search for a suitable and affordable home.

To rent a home on the private market, you need capital to start you off. Without a lump sum you cannot afford to pay a deposit on the rent. They encounter discrimination on the private letting market: because they are coloured, Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) clients, or single parents with three children. There is a shortage of social houses. They are on a waiting list, but they do not know how long for.

Rachid and Mona:

> **You really need a starting capital**
> "You can't save up, you can't do anything. What you really need is starting capital, to get you off to some kind of start. For a home, you need to have a rent deposit. You don't always have that, right? Some landlords turn you down if the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) pays the rent deposit. They do not want anyone who is touch with the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW)." (Rachid, young adult shelter)

> **As soon as they mentioned my name**
> "Everywhere you go, you see homes, homes. And then everybody tells me: 'I just don't get how you can't manage to find a home. We're seeing nothing but homes.' No one believes you. Doctors and pharmacists where I went cleaning, started phoning round themselves. As soon as my name and situation were mentioned, the owner's tone of voice changed. The doctors and pharmacists said: "I never expected it to be this bad." (Mona, single mother of 3, transit home)

The statistics from the Housing Support and Research Centre (Steunpunt Wonen) illustrate the scope of the problems outlined by the parents and the children.

- 31% of tenants on the private letting market bear housing costs that are too heavy.
- This figure goes up to 65% among the poorest tenants .
- The average wait for a 3-bedroom home exceeds three years .

5. Multiple vulnerabilities of homeless children demand a global approach model

The children, youngsters and parents who participated to the research show that homelessness has grave consequences for children. Several times they change neighbourhoods, schools, friends and neighbours. Each time, they have to start again. It compromises their physical and psychological well-

being, their health and development. It shapes their future. Homelessness not only affects their right of housing, but also their other rights such as right of privacy, friends, leisure, school. Minors live in the shadow of adults, their legal representatives. They become refugees in their own country.

Homelessness among children is a "both/and" story. Therefore several have to be taken. This includes housing and rental policy, issues with housing and malpractice on the rental market, preventive approach to evictions, poverty reduction, tackling domestic violence, …

There is need for a global approach to tackle homelessness among children, youngsters and their parents. We are calling for a global approach model that is built around the following key elements for an effective child homelessness strategy:

- Make homeless children visible in policy plans and statistics,
- Reinforce their legal position
- Local governance and collaboration
- Child-friendly shelters and support
- Prevention of child homelessness
- Housing allocation system.

5.1. Make homeless children visible

As a group and as individuals, homeless children and youngsters are insufficiently visible in regulations and policy plans on homelessness and on housing and rental policy in general. In some cases, minors do not even get a mention or they are subsumed as part of the group of people, users, tenants, clients and homeless persons. Sometimes they appear as 'child of', as 'child dependant' or as 'family member'. Other times, they are hidden behind the exceptions provided by the policy for specific target groups.

Yet they exist. Figures from the Flemish public administration show that children and youngsters accompany their parents in winter shelters, in the transit homes run by the Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMW) and in the shelters set up by the Centre for General Welfare (CAW). Figures for Brussels show that they are sleeping rough in public spaces, staying in night shelters, living in squats, etc. The interviews show that not every child or youngster is accompanied by his parent. Sometimes children and youngsters abscond on their own to escape the violence at home and end up sleeping in the homes of people they meet by chance.

Focus on homeless children in policy plans

We are calling for a greater focus on the impact of national, Flemish and local policy on the right to housing of children and youngsters, especially if they are homeless.

Homeless children as an explicitly vulnerable target group in policy plans

We are calling for more attention to homeless families, children and youngsters in policy objectives. It is crucial that children and youngsters be specified in these objectives as a target group.

There is the Cooperation Agreement of 12 May 2014 on homelessness, which bundles this divided and scattered attention. The Agreement lists the separate contributions of e.g. the Federal Government, the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community. Flanders too is devising a global approach to counteract homelessness.

The Flemish steering committee on homelessness prepared a global approach. The steering committee is made up of welfare actors, housing actors and their competent departments and ministers' offices.

Yet both plans lack explicit focus on homeless children

Expansion of European strategy

We support the European strategies to combat and prevent homelessness:

- No one should be forced to sleep rough against their will because of a lack of suitable shelters.
- No one should be forced to spend time living in sheltered accommodation for longer than necessary because there is no possibility of moving on to housing, supported or otherwise.
- No one should be discharged from an institution (such as a hospital, psychiatric institution, prison or youth detention centre) without aftercare and a solution to their housing situation.
- No one should be evicted from their home because of a lack of guidance and rehousing opportunities.
- No young adult should be made homeless because they become independent.

We are also calling for a sixth objective to be included:

- No one who is underage should be made homeless through a lack of availability in the Youth Welfare services or a lack of guidance and rehousing opportunities.

Children's rights guarantee

We are calling for a children's rights guarantee to be conducted as part of new regulatory initiatives on housing policy. This children's rights guarantee is to establish the impact policy decisions have on the lives and rights of children.

Statistics on homeless children

How many children, youngsters and parents need a home? Who requests a bed in a night of winter shelters? How many children are involved and how swiftly are they able to move on to a home? How many actual evictions are carried out (each year) and how many children are involved in these evictions? Where does the family end up living? Do the children find a school quickly? Do the interests of children play a part in the decisions of Justices of the Peace in allowing evictions?

Policy areas directly concerned

Ideally, statistical data should be systematically gathered, from all policy areas directly concerned, such as housing, welfare, justice, social integration, poverty, or from frontline bodies such as the Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMW), the Centre for General Welfare (CAW), social agencies and social housing organisations, Justice Of The Peace Courts.

Policy areas indirectly concerned

But equally from policy areas that are indirectly concerned, such as education and youth welfare. The testimonials of the parents, children and youngsters demonstrate the importance of gathering statistics from bodies that are indirectly involved.

5.2. Reinforce children's right to housing

Housing is a fundamental right. Also for children. Nonetheless, children and youngsters live in the shadows of the adult world. Minors are legally incapacitated. They depend on their parents for their standard of living. Through their parents they have access to income support, homeless shelters, the social rental market. When parents lose their home and become homeless, this also applies to their children. The right to housing needs to be reinforced.

Ratify article 31 and include it in Flemish legislation

Article 31 of the Revised European Social Charter protects the right to housing, setting out that governments need to put in place measures to prevent and reduce homelessness.
The Government needs to keep housing affordable for people who do not have enough means. It should promote access to suitable housing. In 2004, Belgium ratified the Revised European Social Charter, but rejected the clause on the right to housing.

Appoint a Commissioner for Housing Rights as requested by the Flemish Housing Council.

This Commissioner should review the Government's housing policy for compliance with the fundamental right to housing. He should monitor the housing policy, report to policy makers and serve as an ombudsman to resolve individual complaints about violations of the housing law.

Recognise children's rights in tenancy regulations

Private rental home

Underage youngsters who have the power of discernment and enough money have access to a private rental home in Flanders.

- In theory, minors are legally incapacitated, which means they are unable to sign a tenancy agreement by themselves. If they do sign a tenancy agreement with a private letter, the agreement is not automatically null and void. This requires recourse to the Court, which must find that the agreement is disadvantageous to the youngster.
- If the parents die, underage heirs may continue the private tenancy agreement in principle. The owner is then required to observe the statutory procedures if he is looking to terminate the tenancy agreement.

Social houses

Minors have less access to social houses.

- Being of legal age is one of the admission requirements to qualify for a social house, except when dealing with emancipated minors or 17-year olds under a preventive supportive housing service.
- If a single parent dies, the underage youngster is barely protected. The social letter is free to demand that the home be vacated, one month after the single parent's death, even though the minor grew up in the social house.

Youngsters' right to housing in a social house needs to be reinforced. As under private tenancy law, their right to housing must be recognised and observed. With the death of a single parent, why not allow the youngster to continue to live in the social house, supervised by a recognised organisation or a preventive supportive housing service?

Access to social house from a child's perspective

To qualify for a social house, candidate tenants need to comply with certain requirements. For example: owning no property, having an income lower than a maximum limit, being of legal age, speak Dutch or face a fine, be registered in the municipal register of residents or the foreign nationals register and, under certain conditions, be on an integration programme (or be prepared to enrol for or having been on such a programme).

With the exception of the legal age obligation, most minors comply with the requirements. This includes minors with a migration background. They attend Dutch-speaking schools. Flanders is investing in their integration.

We are calling for a greater focus on access to and the right to housing from the child's perspective. We deplore the conditional approach to the right to housing.

How is the best interest of the child recognized in the Justive of the Peace

The Belgian and Flemish laws and regulations do not provide any statutory safeguards against eviction. However, the law does allow Justices of the Peace to rule on postponement. Depending on the severity of the exceptional circumstances and the interpretation by the Justice of the Peace, the risk of child homelessness may or may not influence the decision to delay an eviction.

There is need of a clear and unambiguous recognition of the child's best interests in the interpretation of 'exceptionally serious circumstances' by Justices of the Peace. Review how Justices of the Peace interpret the laws and regulations. This review should serve as the preface to the preparation of laws and regulations aimed at protecting children and youngsters against homelessness as a result of evictions.

5.3. Child's perspective demands a robust local housing and welfare policy

Refugees in their own country

The lives of homeless children and youngsters are precarious. Their lives are turned upside down overnight. The security and continuity in their lives are thrown into disarray. They move away from their own area because they are unable to find a decent home or shelter. They not only leave behind their home, they also leave their school, their teacher, their school friends. They become refugees in their own country.

If they find a home or a place at a shelter in their own town, they can continue to attend the school they know. They can keep their hobbies and continue to see their friends on Wednesday afternoons. If the shelter or their new place is located in a different town, they need to enrol at a new school, sometimes in the middle of the school year. Homeless children sometimes change schools repeatedly in just one school year.

Some parents give up their job when they are forced to move away from their own area as a result of being made homeless, as they are unable to cover the distance between the shelter and their place of work.
Parents are concerned when they are forced to relocate to a different town or city as they are reluctant to jeopardise the ties with their own town. They are afraid that they will lose their ranking on the waiting list for a social house. They are frightened to lose whatever financial aid and material assistance they may be getting from the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) if they are forced to turn to a different Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) by relocating elsewhere.

Local authorities can make a difference

Towns and cities play a major part in the right to housing of families and children and in protecting them against homelessness. For example:

- Local authorities implement the Flemish ambitions to expand the social housing stock. They are required to provide extra social houses, homes for sale or land development projects in their territories within a set period.
- They have to monitor the quality of the housing stock in their town or city. They are responsible for rehousing residents living in substandard homes. The mayor should make efforts towards this.
- Through a Housing Desk (Woonloket, Woonwinkel) municipalities support their residents and people with the most critical housing needs.
- Municipalities prepare housing policy plans. These plans set out strategic and operational objectives and associated actions and budgets.
- They ensure consultation, mutual coordination and collaboration with the municipal executives, the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) and various local housing actors, such as Social Letting Agencies.
- In the allocation regulations, municipalities and intermunicipal partnerships can assign a social house based on the local connection, the housing needs of specific target groups and the living conditions and social life in Social Housing Companies (SHM).
- Local authorities are responsible for delivering winter shelters. Whether or not together with the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW), the Province, the Centre for General Welfare (CAW) or other organisations, municipal executives deliver transit homes, winter shelters and night shelters.
- To counteract lack of protection and to promote access to fundamental rights, local authorities operate their own local social policies.

Local authorities need to play more to their strengths

From a child's perspective, we can only encourage the local emphasis in the housing policy. This prompts local authorities to find local solutions for the homeless children and youngsters in their municipalities. If they find a suitable home or a place at a shelter in their own municipality, they are able to rely on continuity in their education. Their ties with the local neighbourhood, school and friends remain intact.

Homelessness in local housing and welfare plans

Local housing and welfare policy plans, as well as local child poverty policy plans, can set out strategic and operational objectives, along with associated

actions and budgets to the benefit of homeless families, children and youngsters.

Local housing and welfare consultation on homelessness

From the perspective of homeless children and youngsters, we cannot stress enough how important smooth cooperation is between the homelessness services, the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW), local policy, social housing organisations and letting agencies, youth welfare, education and youth policy. The prevention of homelessness and rehousing of homeless families could be a permanent item on the agenda of the local housing consultation meetings and the local social policy consultation meetings. Thanks to this concertation, local authorities are able to act in response to acute housing problems and work towards a more structural approach to child homelessness, so that they do not lose continuity in their right to education, suitable housing and welfare.
Various towns and cities are showing that they are able to make a difference through cooperation and consultation. Antwerp has set up its own housing-welfare steering committee. Kortrijk is developing a regional strategy against homelessness. Genk is putting together the housing and welfare actors within its 'local social policy: housing' body to jointly act to prevent homelessness. Sint-Niklaas supports socially vulnerable families with a LETS group to prevent homelessness. Gent created a taskforce 'No child has to sleep rough' (Geen kind op straat).

Strengthen Housing Support Centres and Social Support Centres

Towns and cities have Housing Support Centres and Social Support Centres which can show homeless families the way to assistanc, shelters and a decent home.

Permanent local efforts to deliver shelter in crisis situations

Families and children who are forced to leave their homes due to poor quality rely on efforts by the mayor and their local executive aimed at rehousing them.
The testimonials of parents and children show that these efforts are not enough in themselves. Homeless families and single youngsters come up against a shortage of transit and emergency shelters. They try to stay with friends and acquaintances, spend time living on the streets or try to endure the domestic violence.

Ideally, local authorities should expand their shelters in crisis situations and facilitate fast turnover to a decent home.

Local authorities need to be able to rely on smooth collaboration with and assistance from other policy levels

Local authorities have many instruments to prevent homeless children from becoming refugees in their own country. But they cannot do this alone. Local authorities need to be able to rely on the support from other authorities.

Bring local authorities around the table

Every level of governance needs to assume its responsibilities within the scope of its powers to protect children and youngsters against homelessness. No single administration is able to shoulder the full responsibility of the policy for homeless children by itself.

Strong local protection against child homelessness can succeed if local authorities meet around the table to prepare Flemish and national plans to combat homelessness. They will have the opportunity to clearly indicate what is needed to prevent child homelessness. They can identify the biggest challenges in helping parents, children and youngsters in crisis situations, and what is required to promote fast-track exits from sheltered accommodation.

Give local authorities financial support in their homelessness policy

Local authorities can call on Federal and Flemish resources to protect children against homelessness. With Flemish resources they can realise a social housing policy and a local social policy. Federal resources can be used to offer parents, children and youngsters social services. But that is not enough to develop a strong local homelessness policy for parents, children and youngsters.
The testimonials of children, youngsters and parents show that they move away from their local areas because they are unable to find sheltered accommodation or decent homes in their own municipalities.

Ideally, towns and cities should be able to rely on structural resources to design a strong local homelessness policy. Through the Municipal Fund, Flanders is in a position to incentivise local authorities to make the protection of children and youngsters against homelessness into a reality.

Avoid big variations between local authorities in their homelessness policy approaches

When interviewed, parents and children talked about differences between local authorities. They take on discussions with local authorities to claim their rights. The material assistance and service delivery in one town differs from what is offered in the next town. Children and youngsters who grow up in a city have a greater chance of finding shelters than children and youngsters who live in a village.

The Federal and Flemish governments need to make sure that parents, children and youngsters can bank on equal protection against homelessness. Wherever they are growing up, they need to be able to rely on equal treatment and respect for their rights. Support centres, platforms to swap ideas and practices, statements of intent, supervisory and complaints processing mechanisms and robust monitoring can contribute to ensuring the equal protection of children and youngsters against homelessness.

5.4. Child friendly shelters: what is required?

Child-friendly shelter ≠ long term shelter

For parents, children and young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, a rapid solution must be found: a crisis shelter, foster home, women's refuge or transit housing. Parents, children and young people can turn to such shelters.
Due to the shortage of suitable housing, parents, children and young people often remain in the shelter facility longer than planned. Some parents and children have been in the same shelter facility for more than a year. Others talk about even longer periods of shelter. They have passed through a variety of shelters and still remain in a shelter.
Long periods in a shelter take their toll, particularly if there is little prospect of outflow. Parents and children suffer from stress. They become despondent at the seemingly hopeless situation that they find themselves in. Stress and despair weigh heavily on the relationships between parent and child, parent

and social worker and the residents themselves. Tensions mount. And debts accumulate if the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) fails to intervene. Parent and child find themselves in a situation of continual impermanence, when what they really need is stability and continuity.

Seeking a balance between communal shelter, family life and privacy

The shelters attempt to steer the home life of parents and children along the right lines. Parents and children are expected to adhere to the house rules, which differ in each infrastructure and shelter facility.
Shelters with separate housing units offer significantly more space for parents, to help them shape their family life with the children.

The collective interest demands that parents, children and young people follow the daily structure. For example: they make arrangements about the cooking and cleaning, respecting each other's privacy, and they make arrangements about bed times and using their own rooms during the day.

Not all parents and children find it easy to follow the rules. The parents and children must set their own habits and family life aside for the sake of the group or collective interest. In principle, the parents remain responsible for their children's upbringing. Living in a group under a set of communal rules can put pressure on parental responsibility and the freedom of decision which that entails.
Many shelters endeavour to satisfy the needs of parents and children via participation sessions. They seek a balance between communal and individual family interests. They attempt to resolve misunderstandings and tensions between residents and social workers.

Night and winter shelters are not suitable for children

Night and winter shelters are not suitable for children. Nor are they intended for them. They offer ‘bath, bed and bread’ only. Their opening hours are not suited to the life of a child. In night and winter shelters, parents, children and young people live side by side with homeless people who have a variety of problems.
Yet, some night and winter shelters open their doors to children in urgent need and endeavour to satisfy their requirements.
This they do, for example, by providing additional activities and opportunities for play and by aligning their opening hours to the daily routine of children. Parents and children are grateful for the shelter, particularly if the support is friendly and the street the only alternative.

Particular attention must be given to teenagers in shelter facilities

Many shelters go to great lengths to consider the rights of children, particularly if the shelter facility is intended for parents and children.
A suitable school is sought immediately. A garden with playground equipment is provided. Children's trips and activities are organised on a regular basis. Birthdays are celebrated without exception. A children's social worker is provided. A play room is provided, with toys and craft materials. Volunteers offer practical support for parents and children or organise activities. Contact is sought with the absent parent or children in order to facilitate visits and the right to contact.

Some shelters have clear experience of baby, toddler and child care. But sometimes they are less prepared for teenagers, and the teenagers

themselves sense this. Teenagers want more say in the way that their lives are organised. They rebel against rules and arrangements which are suitable for young children but not for them. They want more freedom and autonomy. They have a greater need of privacy, and, like all teenagers, they want to stay up later or to socialise with their friends after school.

The cost of sheltering is high

A stay in a homeless shelter is not free of charge. A family's accommodation costs can quickly mount, exceeding 80 Euros a day at times. Some facilities charge a daily shelter fee per child. Parents sometimes take on additional debt to fund the family's stay in the homeless shelter. They often have no money to spare for their children's birthday or Christmas. Some don't even let their children play outside for fear of incurring additional medical expenses. Not all children from the same family are able to attend school or school trips due to the additional costs involved.

Internet not always provided

Homeless children, youngsters and parents frequently complain that there is no internet in the shelter. Children and young people require a computer and internet connectivity for school tasks and recreation. They use the internet to keep in touch with friends and family.
And parents use the internet to search for a job, or a home or to stay in touch with support services.
Many shelter facilities do provide parents and children with internet access, thanks at times to the persistent complaints from the residents. In other facilities, parents and children attempt to make use of another parent's internet service.

Policy steps towards child-friendly shelters

From shelter to housing-orientated solutions

Finding a suitable housing-orientated solution for homeless parents, children and young people will call for a paradigm shift:

- A firm commitment to the prevention of eviction.
- The shortest possible provision of shelter-based care for homeless parents, children and young people.
- The rapid sourcing of suitable housing.
- Investment in additional housing for homeless parents, children and young people. Experts are calling for 5,000 additional properties for homeless people.

We would also argue for a local housing-orientated approach to tackle the homelessness of parents, children and young people. Children must not become refugees in their own country.

Housing-First projects for single parents in complex situations?

Housing First projects are primarily intended for chronically homeless people who require intensive support as the result of a complex situation. The basic idea is to offer a home first and then provide intensive assistance and support. Children are often indirectly involved.

Some single mothers, we interviewed, speak of the numerous problems they face. They suffer from severe psychological issues, stress and anxiety. Many have lost all self-esteem as the result of persistent, domestic abuse. They are in receipt of psychiatric counselling and on medication. Their children receive support from youth care workers. The situation of homelessness, the debts

associated with this and the weak standing of the parent in the rental market are a cause of enormous stress.

Does the capacity exist to extend the Housing First projects to single homeless parents facing these types of complex problems? Housing security is an essential precondition to enable these parents and children to start working on the complex issues.

Shelters which maximise the right to family life and privacy

Shelters must give families as much as privacy as possible. Both in terms of infrastructure and in terms of agreements and rules.

- Find an infrastructural set-up which optimally supports the right to family life and privacy.
- Achieve a balance between parental responsibility and that of the facility itself.
- Organise peer review sessions on how the shelter facility can maximise the right to privacy and family life. How far does the parent's responsibility go and how can facilities lend parents their full support when it comes to assuming that responsibility? Attempt get the parents, teenagers and children involved.
- And, where meaningful, go for peer review sessions with employees from other types of facilities, such as childcare, home-based family workers and centres for childcare and family support. How do they support parental responsibility to the full?

Seek alternative night and winter shelter facilities for families and minors

Night and winter shelters are struggling with a changing reality. The homeless population is becoming younger. Shelters frequently issue warnings over the lack of sheltered accommodation via the press. They demand additional shelter and housing facilities for parents and children, after the winter shelters close their doors.

What is needed is a paradigm shift from a shelter-oriented approach to a housing-orientated approach. If night and winter shelters are to remain then alternatives, which respect family privacy and open and close in line with the daily routine of school children, must be provided for families and minors.

Validate experience through child scans

Women's shelters, women’s safe houses and family shelters have years of experience in childcare. And young adult shelter facilities are used to caring for young people. The time is ripe to validate this experience through a child scan.
The child scan can made to cover a variety of children's rights. For example, it can scan the way children’s rights are respected. For example the right to free time, to contact with the parent, to parenting support, to participation and to have a say.
The way in which shelters accommodate children and teenagers might also be an element of the scan. Does the facility take inspiration from other types of facilities? Does it consult and exchange staff with the Youth Welfare Agency? This sort of exchange would certainly prove fruitful when it comes to sheltering teenagers.

Prevent debt as the result of a stay in a homeless shelter

Article 18 of the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe lists the general obligations for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. One of the obligations is ‘the provision of protection and

support services', such as women's safe houses, family shelters for parents and children, and the necessary social, administrative and psychological support. The Explanatory Report 45 to the Convention defines this support and stipulates that protection and support services should preferably be free.

> **Explanatory Report on Article 18 Istanbul Convention:**
> '120. Lastly, paragraph 3 requires Parties to the Convention to ensure that the available support services are made available to vulnerable persons and address their specific needs. (...) Parties should make these services available to victims independently of their socio-economic status and provide them free of charge, where appropriate.'

Despite the protocol between the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) department of the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities and the Support Centre for the Centre for General Welfare (CAW), parents continue to encounter a lack of intervention by Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMW). Social workers do their utmost to make financial intervention possible. Where the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) believes that the family has the funds it does not make a financial contribution. The result? Shelters are left in a difficult financial position and this has a knock-on effect on parents, children, young people, social workers and the shelter itself.

The government must review its funding of shelters for parents, children and young people. If the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) does not contribute financially, the parents incur debts to pay for their stay and are forced to remain in the shelter facility due to the shortage of suitable and affordable housing.

Free internet

We advocate the provision of internet in each and every shelter. It helps parents and children in their search for information. Internet access must go beyond an hour on the computer in the social worker's office. Why not guarantee internet access in every room or studio?

5.5. Prevention of child homelessness

The analyses of the 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' data reveal multiple causes for homelessness among parents, children and young people (see p. 3).

To tackle homelessness among children, young people and parents, the causes of homelessness must first be addressed.

Poverty

Homeless families and young people often live in poverty. Their income - typically state benefits - is too low. They may carry debt, as well as unpaid fines and bills. This can lead to rental arrears and loss of the family home.

Research shows that child poverty in Flanders continues to rise. In 2013 it was 11.19%, one year later 11.38%, and by 2015, 12.01%. Children with a migrant background are at the greatest risk of poverty. The poverty risk of those born outside the EU is five times higher than average.

Protection against homelessness starts with a poverty policy

Protecting children and young people against homelessness starts with protection against poverty and protection against an inadequate standard of living. In order to prevent violations of various rights, parents and children in poverty must be able to secure appropriate support and basic services.

The children's rights perspective requires a structural approach to poverty

Both the Flemish Poverty Reduction Action Plan (VAPA) and third Federal Poverty Reduction Plan actively monitor child poverty and the housing issues of those living in poverty.
We regret, however, that the VAPA does not do more for the protection, provision, participation and the preferential rights of children.
A children's rights framework provides *protection rights* that protect children and young people against behaviour or living conditions that are detrimental to their development or well-being. Such as violence, discrimination or homelessness, for example.
Provision rights oblige the government to focus within the poverty policy on development opportunities for all children. Children must be able to secure basic facilities for this purpose. Access to health care, education, suitable housing, social security or family support (social security, family allowances, child-care services) is essential for their development.
Participation rights and preferential rights imply that every child must be able to participate in school, their local community and society in general. The government must ensure equal access to facilities for all children and young people. If such equal access is unavailable, then children must still receive preferential rights to enable the full enjoyment of their rights nonetheless. These additional rights ensure that children can participate equally in society, including homeless children or children who are at risk of homelessness.

Preferential rights for homeless children

We request a more structured approach to poverty that is consistent with the aforementioned children's rights. The government must have a structured approach to combating exclusion mechanisms and should focus on preferential rights in order that homeless children, like all other children, can continue to participate in society.

Debts

The 'Nulmeting dak- en thuisloosheid' data reveals that 59% of children have a parent with debts.

- 20% have debts of less than 2,500 Euros
- 14% have debts of 2,500 to 4,999 Euros
- 16% have debts from 5,000 to 9,999 Euros
- 7% have debts from 10,000 to 14,999 Euros
- 15% have more than 15,000 Euros

Humanise the debts

The testimonials from parents and young people reveal that small debts and fines can rapidly mount. A parking fine of 15 Euros grows to a debt of 500 Euros. A young person's rail ticket fine grows to a debt of 3,000 Euros. A mother testifies that she was in debt because she could not pay her son's school fees and medical expenses. Out of a fear of the consequences of their debts they sometimes remain in homeless shelters for longer.

A more humane and targeted approach to debt is required. Rapidly rising interest and collection costs must be prevented.

Preserve the child perspective in collective debt settlements

The aim of a collective debt settlement is to initiate legal proceedings and settle debts via a repayment plan, enabling people to continue living in dignity and to receive protection from creditors.

Children's testimonies reveal that parents, children and debt mediators are not always on the same page when it comes to basic necessities. Are PCs and the internet 'essential' to a dignified life in today's society, or not?

An investigation is required into collective debt settlement and how this is applied. How do repayment plans give shape to the protection of a dignified life? As the impact on the lives of children is so immense, the child perspective must be addressed in addition to that of the adults concerned. Because children are involved in one in four cases.

Eviction

12,958 eviction procedures were initiated in Flanders in 2014. Children are involved directly in one in four cases.
Not every case leads to an eviction. Indeed, researchers estimate that only one in four is actually carried out.

Flanders operates a number of projects to prevent evictions. A number of cities offer parents and children at risk of homelessness additional support of an preventive supportive housing service. And several preventive housing guidance measures have already been built into the system. Other projects include initiatives incorporated in the Flemish policy on poverty. Flanders also established the Fund for the Prevention of Evictions in 2013 and intends to investigate additional options in the future.

More preventive housing guidance needed in the private housing market

From the child perspective, support of a preventive supportive housing service is crucial. It allows parents and children to continue to depend on their home, school and friends, as well as their connection with the local community. Parents were initially dismissive of guidance to prevent eviction. They saw the guidance as an additional form of control and interference. However, they were won over by the intensive, participatory and flexible approach of the preventive supportive housing service.

A recent survey conducted by the Flemish Housing Company (Vereniging van Vlaamse Huisvestingsmaatschappijen) reveals that fewer procedures are initiated in the social rental market than the private rental market. On the whole there is about 1 procedure per 100 social rental homes a year, compared to 2.4 per 100 private rental homes. 79% of actual evictions take place in the private rental market.

It is essential to develop a system of regular preventive housing guidance and pay greater attention to the need for preventive housing guidance in the private rental market.

Go for a widespread and integrated development of preventive supportive housing support

Examples from other European countries demonstrate that on average preventive supportive housing support is 7 times less expensive than eviction, shelter and rehousing and that it can successfully prevent eviction. Especially if the guidance begins early, if it is available to private and social tenants alike, if the guidance is intensive and flexible in terms of time and not limited to an informative letter, if it is multidisciplinary where required (focus on life skills, budget management, debt mediation, administrative support, tackling under-protection) and if the relevant guidance services are adequately resourced.

In Sweden, local social services are obliged to visit the family and provide support as soon as rental arrears begin to accumulate.

- It is essential to develop regular preventive housing guidance.
- It is also important to take an integrated approach to preventive housing guidance and to take the children into account.

Fund for the Prevention of Evictions

The Fund for the Prevention of Evictions offers solace for families in arrears with their rental payments. Is the family unable to pay the rent? Are they three months or more in arrears? And are they unable to pay the repayment plan ordered by the court? In such cases a rental guarantee for the landlord can prevent a court eviction. Landlords can pay to join the fund on a voluntary basis. In return their rental income is guaranteed.

Youngsters or young adults: particularly vulnerable

Young adults are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, particularly when no longer eligible for youth care on reaching adulthood. Once they become adults young people in youth care institutions lose the protection of youth care and are left on their own.

The testimonies of the parents and young people reveal that it is not only young people, but also minors, who can end up on the streets alone. Children run away from parental abuse and violence. They stay with their friends, or even strangers or squat in empty apartments. Some children find their way into youth care. Others live in youth care facilities, but run away several times or don't come back after a temporary stay at home.

Flanders is endeavouring to take preventive action in protecting juveniles and young adults against homelessness.

- In crisis situations, minors can register at a crisis centre. In urgent cases, they can secure a crisis bed for seven days in a youth care institution or a foster home of the crisisnetwork. They are then assessed to see if they require further support from youth care.
- Flanders focuses on Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW). Young people aged between 17 and 21 can fall back on CBAW, which is organised by youth care.
- After leaving youth care, young people can call on the Centre for General Welfare (CAW) for Assisted Independent Living (BZW) or for young adult care services.

However, numerous challenges remain.

A buddy to guide the transition from minor to adult

> 'No young adult should become homeless as a result of the transition to independence.'

With this objective Europe is emphasising the additional vulnerability of those reaching adulthood.

Young people must benefit from a buddy during their transition from minor to adult. Young people should ideally turn to a Youth Advice Centre (JAC) for such support. Youth Advice Centre (JAC) assistants build bridges between a stay in a youth institution and an independent life. They steer young people to the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW), the Centre for General Welfare (CAW), or other essential amenities and support services.

Increased focus on CBAW and BZW

The shortage in Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW) means that young people sometimes have to wait until after childhood before receiving Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW), but due to their adulthood their application assistance starts at the beginning again. Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW) and Assisted Independent Living (BZW) services report a shortage of suitable housing in the lowest rental segment, so that it is taking too long before young people receive assistance. Young people bemoan the fact that they only qualify for Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW) at the age of 17.
We request that the government actively monitor this shortfall in Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW) and Assisted Independent Living (BZW).

CBAW and BZW for young people under the age of 17?

Young people can only gain access to social housing if they are in receipt of assistance from an accredited service, such as Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW). Assistance is not available until the age of 17. Whilst the social housing does not set age limits, support services do.

We request that the support services review this 17-year age limit. Particularly as Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW) is the most sought after form of support for young people, such as pregnant teenagers, and they obtain access to social housing only if they are in receipt of assistance.

Address the shortage of housing for young people in receipt of assistance

Young people in receipt of assistance from a recognised service are given priority access or fast tracked for social housing, as are homeless parents and children. Despite this priority, young people and young adults continue to encounter a shortfall.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence is one of the major causes of homelessness from a child's perspective. During the interviews children attest to violence between their parents. They would like to intervene. Sometimes they are the victim themselves.
Mothers also talk about the violence to which they are subjected. Some mothers are beaten physically and psychologically. The police have typically been called to the home on several occasions. Social workers were aware of the violence in the family. Youth care was engaged and monitored the children's interests.

Since 2001 the various levels of the Belgian government have coordinated their efforts to protect women and children from domestic violence. The police, prosecutors and magistracy, medical sector, social services, education and coordinating bodies all play a key role in tackling partner violence.

- Since 2001 the nationwide action plan against partner violence has combined the actions of these parties.
- On 14th March 2016, Belgium ratified the Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Henceforth, the nationwide action plan falls within the framework of Belgium's obligations under the 'Istanbul Convention'.
- Partner violence has been a criminal offence in Belgium since 1997. Under the regulations the victim takes priority over the family home. Offenders may be issued with a restraining order which removes them from the home.

- Children, young people and parents can call the 1712 hotline in Flanders with any questions. 1712 is an advisory service for anyone who comes into contact with violence.
- Victims of violence are also entitled to guidance from the Centres for General Welfare (CAW), which assist victims, offenders, couples or the entire family. The aim is to make the situation safe, stop the violence and prevent its re-occurrence.
- Parents and children can turn to women's safe houses and women's shelters if they wish to escape, or to seek safety, or are unable to find shelter elsewhere.
- Awareness campaigns continue to alert children, young people and adults to the fact that violence is unacceptable.
- Projects such as Protocol of Courage and CO3 streamline the cooperation between safety (public prosecutor, police), local government (city and province) and support services (Centre for General Welfare (CAW), Centre for Mental Healthcare, Child Abuse Trust Centre, Youth Support Assistance Centre).
- A Family Justice Centre merges these services under one roof and works with a multidisciplinary team of professionals on an integrated approach. Various life domains are involved: medical care, housing, parenting support, legal aid and debt mediation.

Yet, despite many efforts at all levels of government, parents and children continue to fall victim to domestic violence. Indeed, 40,000 cases of partner violence are reported to the police each year.
The testimonies of the parents and children in the perception survey speak for themselves.

Women's safe houses are of paramount importance

A lack of access to refuge houses means that parents and children are forced to endure the violence until a place becomes available. Parents and children without a support network have nowhere to go if they wish to escape. Thanks to the school principal, Dutch language teacher, the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training and the police, isolated parents and families can find their way to a Centre for General Welfare (CAW).

The government may never underestimate the importance of women's safe houses, women's shelters or family shelters. They help to prevent distressing family dramas, even if this is difficult to prove. The safety and support they provide gives parent and child the opportunity to recover. And they can gradually begin to build a life free of violence. It is important to ensure that parent and child never have to wait too long for shelter.

Victims of domestic violence have priority over the family home

The regulations give the victim priority over the family home. Offenders can be placed under a restraining order or removed from the property. Yet it is typically the parent and child who give up their home when they are the victim to partner violence. Not one parent mentioned during the interviews the priority allocation of the home to the victim or removal of the offender from the property.

Where the rights of the child are concerned, these two legal provisions present opportunities. They prevent parent and child from becoming refugees in their own country. And parent and child keep their home, giving the children continuity in their daily lives. However, the application of these two provisions is in need of further study. Is the regulation or its application inadequate? Do parent and child continue to live in fear? Do they lack the necessary protection when the two provisions are applied?

5.6. Housing allocation system

Access is difficult despite accelerated access to social rental market

Hurdles in the rental market

It comes as no surprise. The children and parents, we interviewed, dream of a home of their own. It needn't be a mansion. Their own modest property will more than suffice. A place where they can feel at home, create a warm family environment and build a secure future.

Unfortunately, they have been searching for this for a very long time. Parents and young people speak of their unfruitful search for suitable and affordable housing. They continually encounter barriers which impede their access to housing.

Without starting capital it is impossible to pay the deposit on the private rental market.
They also experience discrimination in the private rental market: because they are foreign, or a Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW), client or a single parent with three children.
There is a shortage of social housing. They never know how long they will be on the waiting list.
Research form the Housing Support and Research Centre (Steunpunt Wonen) confirms the difficult position in which vulnerable parents, children and young people find themselves on the rental market.

- 31% of tenants on the private rental market have excessive housing costs. The figure rises to 65% for the poorest tenants.
- Single parent families (22%) and couples with children (19%) are over-represented on the waiting list.
- The average waiting time for a three-bedroom house is more than three years.
- Houses in Flanders have generally become more compact. From 2001 to 2013, the proportion of medium-sized (55-84 m²) social housing rose from 27% to 58%. And the total available supply has risen from 27% to 40%.

Parents and children who finally find a home after a long period of waiting are extremely grateful. They get to begin a new life. They get to build a family life, and the parent-child relationship comes into its own again. Children can invite their friends home and establish ties at school and in the local community. A moving allowance enables the family to purchase the furniture they need.

Accelerated allocation and policy initiatives

Nevertheless, homeless parents can count on an accelerated housing allocation with a Social Housing Company (SHM). This is a mandatory priority for Social Letting Agencies (SVK). Young people in receipt of support from a recognised service for assisted independent living, such as Contextual Assistance for Autonomous Living (CBAW) can claim the same priority treatment. Flanders grants Flemish rental subsidies and rental premiums to families who fall victim to uninhabitability declarations or have been waiting for social housing for at least four years.
In 2009, Flanders decided to substantially expand the number of social housing rental properties and distribute them more evenly. Hence the target: 43,000 additional homes by 2020. Over the years, both the number of rental properties to be provided and the deadline have changed. The target is now 50,000 additional homes and the deadline has been postponed to 2025.

Policy steps towards rapid housing allocation

Tackle discrimination in the private rental market

Parents and young people experience discrimination in the private rental market. The word 'OCMW' (Public Social Welfare Centre) discourages owners. Those with a foreign name or single parents with children have more difficulty in gaining access to the private housing market. Tenants struggle to save the money for the rental deposit.

Flanders developed an action plan to prevent discrimination in the housing market. Providing information, raising awareness and presenting other lines of thought to change behaviour are essential steps in the action plan. On the other hand, sufficiently powerful policy instruments must also be developed in order to combat and sanction discrimination.

Address rental deposit problems

Parents and young people can approach the Public Social Welfare Centre (OCMW) for a contribution towards their rental deposit, in the form of repayable support. Whilst many Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMW) are willing to offer this support, like the tenant, they typically encounter landlords who are opposed to tenants on benefits.

The government developed a rental deposit system which eliminates the obstacle of the rental deposit. The idea is for Flanders to advance the deposit which the tenant pays directly to the landlord. The tenant then refunds the deposit to Flanders.

Focus on financial subsidy of the rent

Families that have been on the waiting list for social housing for long periods of time or that are victims of an uninhabitability declaration are entitled to a financial contribution from the Flemish state towards their rent, in the form of a rental premium or rental subsidy. Landlords can fall back on a rental guarantee.

Research shows that the number of applications for the financial contribution is rising. The majority of rental subsidy requests are from people and families who have been homeless. 2,091 people who had previously been homeless applied for a subsidy in 2014. This figure rose to 2,929 applications in 2015. 52% were approved in 2014. To date 29% have been approved in 2015. We cannot tell how many children or young people have been affected by these applications, approvals and refusals.

We believe that a Flemish contribution towards the rental costs is essential in supporting the most vulnerable parents, children and young people. It is a way of addressing the quadruple vulnerability of children. It allows families and young people to search for housing in their home town or city, rather than being forced to move away. A Flemish financial contribution would allow families and young people to continue paying their rent and offer landlords the guarantee of rental payments.

Are 50,000 social housing units sufficient?

On 31st December 2014, there were 158,795 social housing properties in Flanders. This figure represents 5.8% of all housing in Flanders. The vast majority, 95%, belong to Social Housing Companies (SHM). 434 social housing properties belong to the local authorities and 98 to the Flemish Housing Fund (Vlaams Woningfonds). Social Letting Agencies (SVK) rent 7,792 homes on the private rental market.
In 2016, the Housing Support and Research Centre (Steunpunt Wonen) calculated that more than 90,000 families were on the waiting lists of the

Social Housing Companies (SHM) and Social Letting Agencies (SVK). Will 50,000 housing units by 2025 be sufficient? The 'progress test' concludes that while the Flemish targets will be achieved the municipal targets will not. The Belgian Court of Audit warns that some of the targets will be reached through a transfer of existing city housing.
We support the request of the Housing Support and Research Centre (Steunpunt Wonen) to increase the target of 50, 0000.

Extend the powers of the SVK

Research show that Social Letting Agencies (SVK) are successfully housing homeless families. In 2014, they allocated 2,141 homes. 60% of these were to homeless families. They are also succeeding in increasing their stock. In 2014, Social Letting Agencies (SVK) had 7,792 private homes at their disposal. This had risen to 8,025 by November 2015. The basic support which the Social Letting Agencies (SVK) provide to tenants clearly inspires confidence among private landlords, which in turn benefits homeless tenants.

The testimonials also illustrate that tenants can rely on support from a variety of welfare parties. Homeless parents, for example, receive comprehensive support (budget, administration, household skills), regardless of whether this is in combination with a temporary contract for a transit home. If no serious problems arise the temporary contract is switched to a standard contract, and the support is gradually phased out.

Make rental price SVK income-related

The rental price for a Social Letting Agencies (SVK) home is independent of your income. The rental price is negotiated with the owner and is below the market rate. While tenants are entitled to a rental subsidy it does not offset the rental difference with a Social Housing Company (SHM) home.

Strengthen the SVK's

We back policy plans to support and strengthen the Social Letting Agencies (SVK).

- Social Letting Agencies (SVK) are more responsive. They draw on all existing homes on the private rental market. Parents and children need not wait for new homes to be built.
- Social Letting Agencies (SVK) have everything needed to ensure that homeless children are not forced to move away and can continue to attend their own school.
- This basic support, coupled with the link to the various welfare services, offers sufficient guarantees to both owner and tenant.
- We request that the government provide additional support for Social Letting Agencies (SVK) in their search for potential social housing with multiple bedrooms. The average waiting time for a property with two or three bedrooms is more than three years.
- We share the concerns of the Flemish Housing Council as regards the inequality between tenants of Social Letting Agencies (SVK) and the social housing companies.

Create clarity in the waiting lists

We request that the government create clarity in the waiting lists, particularly for homeless parents and children, or parents and children who are at risk of homelessness. Parents do not want to lose their place on the waiting list as a result of moving to another municipality because of a lack of shelter facilities in their home town.
The government must examine how homeless families and young people can access accelerated allocation by revising the waiting list system. The Flemish Housing Council proposes a combination of chronology and pressing need for housing.

Demand for social housing with multiple bedrooms for homeless families

There is a need for more social housing with multiple bedrooms, for a variety of reasons.

- There is an acute shortage of larger social houses. An increasing number of parents, children and young people are homeless or are at risk of homelessness.
- The number of newly formed families with several children is increasing.
- The social housing market is at risk of evolving towards medium-sized homes. Large families have a minimum waiting time of three years.

Encourage alternative forms of housing

On 15th October 2015, the Flemish Parliament adopted a resolution to facilitate new forms of housing. In this resolution the Flemish Parliament asks that the Government of Flanders work on alternative and innovative housing concepts.

- The Flemish Parliament considers co-housing, community houses and other forms of communal living to be of equal value.
- The Government of Flanders must define these and amend the regulations accordingly: A new regulatory framework must be defined. Regulations must be revised if they prevent or make communal living more difficult. Research into financial stimuli is also required.
- Potential obstacles must be identified at each and every administrative level.
- The spatial capacity for communal living must be investigated with no reduction in quality or safety.
- Specific communal tenancy agreements must be introduced and, in consultation with the federal government, consideration must be given to what it would take to introduce to the municipal civil registry a separate address per individual family residing in communal housing.
- The Flemish Parliament asks that the Government of Flanders encourage pilot projects which attempt to incorporate communal living as a new element in the social housing policy.
- Citizens must then be informed of communal and innovative housing schemes.

The Government of Flanders has developed regulations to make these alternative and innovative housing concepts possible.

We support the efforts made in this area by the Government of Flanders. Alternative and innovative housing concepts offer plenty of opportunity. Such as for young people, who wish to stand on their own two feet and who may or may not pursue assisted independent living. Or for homeless parents, children and young people, who, thanks to the test environment, can now enjoy the benefits of these housing concepts.