



MPHISIS

Mutual Progress on Homelessness through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems

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**How to Improve the Information Base
on Homelessness on a
Regional, National and European Level**
Background Paper to Guide the National Seminars

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Purpose of this document

This document provides a synthesis of some of the ideas contained in the research funded by the European Commission on Measuring Homelessness (Edgar et al, 2007). The intention of the document is to provide a background for the discussions which we hope stakeholders will have before and after the MPHASIS seminar to be held in each of the 20 partner countries during the progress of this project.

The Measuring Homelessness report made a number of recommendations to improve the capacities of national authorities to collect information on homelessness which identified action required at national and EU level. These are summarised below and it is anticipated that the national seminars will be an important step in many countries to their implementation.

Recommendations to national level

1. Preparation of a national Homelessness Monitoring Information Strategy developed in consultation with all relevant Ministries and stakeholders.
2. Identify (or establish) a co-ordinating mechanism or agency for data collection on homelessness.
3. Adopt the harmonised definition of living situations and homelessness as a basic framework for data collection.
4. Adopt the set of standard core variables and their definition as a basic set of variables to be employed in data collection.
5. Adopt a national definition of services for homelessness.
6. Establish and maintain a directory of services.
7. Ensure that funding for homeless service providers requires the provision of basic (anonymised) data on clients and provide funding to facilitate this as necessary.
8. Establish a strategy for collection of data from service provider client registration systems.
9. Ensure added value of data collection for the services and homeless people.

Recommendations to EU level

10. Require Member States to develop in the framework of the streamlined EU strategy for social protection and social inclusion national strategies to combat homelessness
11. Require member States to identify progress reached with the development of national strategies and whether this incorporates a homelessness monitoring information strategy.
12. Monitor progress of Member States towards continuous client recording systems.
13. Encourage national statistics offices to adopt the harmonised definition of homelessness for data collection purposes while recognising that alternative definitions may be used for policy purposes.
14. Encourage national statistics offices to play a coordination role in the collection of data on homelessness
15. Reduce the obstacles to achieving homeless information monitoring (e.g. through the use of funding under FP7, structural funds and European research programme).

1 Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

Any consideration of the steps required to improve the information base on homelessness needs to be undertaken with an understanding of the European and national policy context within which this discussion occurs. It also requires some common understanding among participants on the nature and causes of homelessness and, in particular, on the definition of the phenomenon. This chapter aims to provide that context.

1.1 The European and National Context

The purpose of collecting data on homelessness should be to provide the information necessary to improve the provision of services in order to prevent and alleviate homelessness. The information collected on homeless people should be adequate to inform national and local governments who, in the framework of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy, should be developing strategies to:

- ◆ prevent homelessness;
- ◆ tackle the causes of homelessness;
- ◆ reduce the level of homelessness;
- ◆ reduce the negative effects on homeless people and their families;
- ◆ ensure that formerly homeless people can sustain permanent independent housing.

To implement policy objectives that aim to prevent homelessness and reduce its impact on vulnerable households requires information that reflects the reality of the process of homelessness and housing exclusion.

Thus hidden homelessness should be visible to policy makers and service providers. This means having an understanding and measurement of homelessness which includes the situation of people who live in insecure housing, are forced to move constantly between inadequate housing situations and those who are forced to live in housing which is unfit for habitation by commonly accepted norms.

If policy intends to ensure that no person should have to sleep rough then information is needed to monitor the number of rough sleepers, the number of clients of homeless services and the number of accommodation places available.

Where policies aim to ensure that fewer people should become homeless, information is needed to monitor accurately the total number of homeless households, the number living in temporary or insecure / inadequate housing and the number who are potentially homeless or are threatened with homelessness.

If the policy objective is to prevent homelessness then it is important also to have information on the number of people vulnerable to eviction and the number of people about to leave an institution who do not have a home. The prevention of homelessness also requires the provision of sustainable permanent accommodation for formerly homeless people. This requires information on the number of homeless people who gain access to supported accommodation.

The locus of responsibility for homeless policies, programmes and strategies differs between member states. Furthermore, the relationship between homeless policies and housing policies on the one hand and social welfare or support policies on the other hand also varies across Europe. Hence national, regional and local administrations all have a role to play in both the collection of data and in

the use of that data to monitor or guide policy action. While policies, in some countries, are determined at national level, the responsibility for their implementation lies at local level.

In March 2006, the Council of Ministers adopted the new framework for the social protection and social inclusion process. In this revised framework, three new EU common objectives on social inclusion were adopted including the objective of

"ensuring access for all to the resources, rights and services needed for participation in society, preventing and addressing exclusion, and fighting all forms of discrimination leading to exclusion."

Seven key policy priorities in the area of social inclusion have been highlighted by the EU countries in their National Action Plans on social inclusion (Joint Report, 2006). Priority 5 states:

"Ensuring decent accommodation: In some Member States attention is being given to improving housing standards; in others, to the need to address the lack of social housing for vulnerable groups. Several Member States are developing more integrated approaches to tackling homelessness."

1.2 Definition of Homelessness

The difficulty of defining homelessness impacts on the ability of governments to respond adequately and appropriately to homelessness. Although the understanding of homelessness varies between countries in Europe and changes over time, it is possible to identify the diverse living situations of people in a consistent manner. The European Conference of Statisticians (UNECE/EUROSTAT, 2006) makes a distinction between conventional dwellings, collective living quarters and other housing units or non-conventional dwellings (p. 23). This understanding is adapted here to provide a summary of living situations a number of which can be construed to be situations of homelessness, risk of homelessness or housing exclusion (see Figure 1, p9).

Thus while we can define and agree upon a typology of living situations and these can be reasonably consistently applied between countries, it is more difficult to define what is meant by homelessness. This is, in part, because the phenomenon of homelessness can be constructed from different policy perspectives. Thus it affects people who are vulnerable in the housing market (and can not access decent or affordable housing). However, it also affects people who live in institutions as a result of government policies (e.g. as a result of a lack of investment in community mental health services). It can also be understood to refer to people who require the support of social services. Hence it may be understood as a housing issue or a social welfare issue and it also has implications for health policies and judiciary policies.

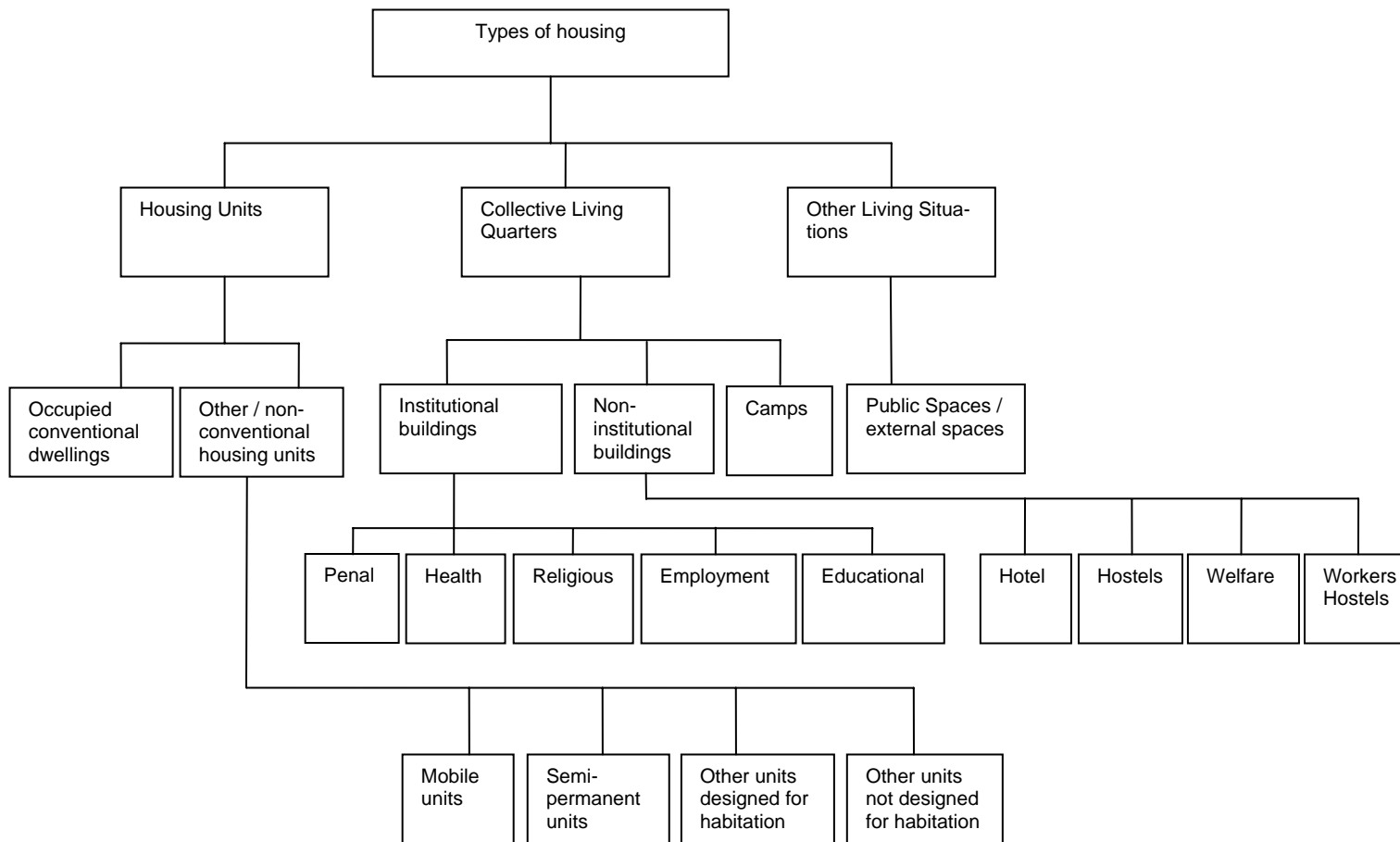
It is also difficult to count the number of homeless people since people change their living situations over time in response to changes in personal circumstances and to government actions. Equally, if the intention is to monitor the impact of policy it is sometimes necessary to count people who are no longer homeless as a result of the implementation of a particular policy initiative (e.g. investment in supported accommodation).

Hence it is possible to have a broad definition which reflects the process of homelessness as people move between different living situations. The ETHOS typology developed by FEANTSA represents such a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion. Equally it is possible to draw upon a more narrow definition of homelessness which may be essential to allow regular and consistent data collection to be undertaken. This is particularly important where the aim is to provide a comparative

measure of homelessness. The research on Measuring Homelessness (Edgar et al, 2007) identified a narrow definition that may be more suited to data collection purposes (see Figure 2, p10).

An initial step in the process of improving data collection on homelessness is to consider and adapt this definition in the national (or regional) context. It is important that the broad concepts of the definition are understood and that the conceptual basis of the construction of the definition which reflects the process of homelessness and housing exclusion is considered. It is also necessary to ensure that the operational nomenclature and terminology reflects the national policy domains. Finally, it is important that the definition is adopted by all the main relevant stakeholders. This will include all the key Ministries of government (at national or regional level). Good practice suggests that Ministries responsible for housing, social services, health, employment, the penal system and immigration may all have a role to play. It will also include the major service providers especially those whose primary funding involves public expenditure or regulation.

Figure 1 Summary Definition of Living Situations



Source: Adapted from UNECE/EUROSTAT 2006

Figure 2 Harmonised Definition of Homelessness

Operational Category		Living Situation		Definition
1	People living rough	1	Public space / external space	Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2	People in emergency accommodation	2	Overnight Shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	3	Homeless Hostels	Where the period of stay is less than one year ¹
		4	Temporary Accommodation	
		5	Transitional Supported Accommodation	
		6	Women's shelter or refuge accommodation	
4	People living in institutions	7	Health care institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing
		8	Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	9	Mobile homes	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
		10	Non-conventional building	
		11	Temporary structure	
6	Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	12	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

Source: Edgar et al, 2007

¹ The period of one year is chosen to allow consistency with UNECE/EUROSTAT Census recommendations

2 Homelessness Monitoring Information Strategies

Information is the basis for the development, implementation and monitoring of homelessness policies. Hence reliable information on homelessness is required at all levels of decision-making – for the development of strategic action, for organisational management and for project evaluation. Discussion of responsibility for action on data collection on homelessness thus needs to be considered in the context of the development and implementation of homelessness strategies at the national level. The collection of data on homelessness is most effective when it is developed as a component part of an integrated strategy to tackle or prevent homelessness. In this way the homelessness strategy informs the process of the collection of data and ensures that policies are evidence based.

2.1 Governance Issues

The current underpinnings of the European debate on homelessness strategies highlight the need:

- ◆ To develop national strategic policies on homelessness that involve all relevant stakeholders including all relevant Ministries;
- ◆ To identify mechanisms for local delivery of policy;
- ◆ To have clear responsibility for co-ordination and implementation;
- ◆ To have clear targets and mechanisms for measuring outcomes against a baseline of reliable information;
- ◆ To have evidence based policies.

A key principle, therefore, of state involvement in data collection is that it should be embedded in the framework of the (national or regional) homelessness strategy. Hence the homelessness strategy should include a homelessness monitoring information strategy. Where responsibility for the delivery of homelessness strategies is devolved to regional or local authorities then central government has a role in improving the capacity and competence of those authorities in managing the collection of information on homelessness. For example, the recent Peer Review of the Norwegian national strategy to prevent homelessness identifies that a co-ordinating agency (the Housing Bank) has been given responsibility for the co-ordination, implementation and promotion of the strategy (Edgar, 2006). One aspect of this role includes the provision of competence grants to municipalities and the organisation of regional and local networks and forums to improve the capacities of municipal authorities in delivering the strategy.

At national (or regional) level different ministries of government have a role to play both in the development and implementation of homelessness strategies and in the collection of the data required to monitor progress. In a few countries national or regional statistical offices have been involved in the collection of data on homelessness (e.g. France, Italy, Spain and Germany). While it is not necessary that the production of such data is organised and carried through by national statistical offices directly, they should be consulted in order to ensure the quality and reliability of national data.

Each stage of the implementation of a homelessness monitoring information strategy involves distinct costs that can be identified and budgeted for. The national authority needs to assess the costs for each stage of the implementation both for government and for the service providers. These costs need to be budgeted for over the time-scale of the implementation of the strategy as well as the ongoing annual revenue costs. While adequate funding is necessary to ensure the successful implementation of the information strategy the costs should be set against the direct and indirect benefits of monitoring information on homelessness.

2.2 Evidence Based Policies – Developing a Homeless Monitoring Information System

It has been argued (Edgar et al, 2007) that the homelessness strategy requires to develop a homelessness monitoring information strategy. Given the diversity of information sources that may be available, research may be needed at national level to establish the nature and use of information and how different sources can be combined or utilised in a compatible manner. This should be part of the development of the homelessness strategy.

The initial step in developing a homelessness information strategy should be a review of the sources of information available in relation to the different categories of the homeless population as well as the at-risk populations (e.g. the institutionalised and the insecurely or inadequately housed) in relation to the definition of homelessness employed for the strategy. This should involve a review of administrative sources as well as survey sources and should consider the nature, availability and reliability of the information. This review should also include the information systems employed by service providers.

The homelessness monitoring strategy should contain decisions related to the approach to be adopted to information in different component areas.

A key decision, which should involve all key stakeholders, relates to the definition of homelessness which should be clearly elaborated. This may involve a broader definition where the focus of policy is aimed at prevention since, in that context, the population at risk of homelessness will be included. In relation to data collection the harmonised definition of living situations recommended by the Conference of European Statisticians should form the basic unit (see above Figure 2, p10).

Decision is required on the services to be included in the data collection from service providers. The information strategy should also determine the approach and responsibility for the development and maintenance of the database of service providers.

Decision is also needed about what information is essential for monitoring purposes. The core variables listed below (Figure 5, p28) will probably be the essential information necessary. It is important to confirm the definition of these variables to ensure consistency in data collection between geographical areas and over time. In this context the National Statistics Office should be consulted in relation to Eurostat protocols which have been developed in order to harmonise concepts, definitions and classifications.

Clarity is needed on the type of data required for monitoring. The distinction between stock, flow and prevalence data need to be clearly understood when planning data collection procedures. For example, recording data in client registers on exit from the service as well as on entry is necessary if stock and flow information is required.

While it should be an aspiration to achieve national level data this will not always be possible or cost efficient. Phased geographical implementation may be required. Hence prioritisation of geographical coverage is a key planning decision in the implementation of data collection from service providers. In these situations it is recommended that the register of service providers should still be developed to cover the whole country. This will allow estimations to be made using supply side analysis. This will facilitate phased introduction and could allow estimates of homelessness for sub-national regions to be estimated at a national level.

The planning stages of the 2011 Census should include consideration of the use that can be made of population register data and the approach to enumeration to count the homeless population (or at least that part of the homeless population living in collective living situations and non-conventional

dwellings). Consideration should be given in Census planning to whether baseline data can be obtained for some categories of homeless people (e.g. people living with family and friends or sharing accommodation involuntarily). Equally, planning for national social surveys should consider whether retrospective modules on homelessness can be incorporated (see the module incorporated in the EU-SILC and the Urban Audit Survey).

The information strategy should also consider the value and use that can be made of administrative data. For example, court records on eviction orders, prison records on release dates or hospital records on discharge all have relevance to aspects of the definition of homelessness identified above.

It is evident that homelessness is one aspect providing an evaluation of the efficiency of the way the housing market operates. Assessments of housing need are a key component of planning in a number of EU countries. Equally, under social inclusion programmes, the provision of support to vulnerable people in order to enable them to live independently in the community also involves the use of information on clients to monitor and plan services. The homelessness monitoring information strategy should ensure compatibility and co-ordination with these related planning mechanisms.

The homelessness monitoring information strategy should then, at its core, identify the stages and procedures to implement the management of databases on service providers and client register data. The following sections summarise the procedures recommended for this purpose.

3 Service Provider Data

3.1 Service Provider Databases

A key element of research carried out to measure homelessness has been to gather data on services for homeless people and establish service provider databases. As these services are in contact with or indeed house many homeless people, they can provide crucial statistics about their numbers and characteristics, and also provide access to clients for researchers to include in surveys. To collect data on services for the measurement of homelessness, it is necessary to classify which types of services need to be considered. A database then needs to be developed to hold relevant information about them so that standard variables of data can then be gathered from their client registers or via surveys.

By reviewing examples of existing databases and directories of homelessness services that have been set up for research and other purposes in different EU countries, it is possible to propose appropriate methodologies for national authorities to create and maintain a database of such organisations, including an examination of the data items needed, and management, IT and resource issues.

As well as providing data for measurement, good service provider databases can also enable better policy making, funding decisions and planning of services to help homeless people. They can also help identify gaps in service provision, avoid duplication of services, and promote good practice and networking amongst service providers. Therefore such databases can have multiple functions and can be cost-effective and have far-reaching benefits for different audiences and ultimately homeless people themselves.

3.1.1 Existing Service Provider Databases

There are numerous examples of service provider databases of services for homeless people in different EU countries. Most have been published over the past 5 years and they demonstrate the feasibility of setting up such resources. In many countries, these datasets already go some way towards providing details of many organisations who can become data providers.

Databases/directories vary in terms of scope and quality, including around the following key characteristics:

- ◆ Purpose and audience (eg surveys of homelessness, funding registers, and/or referral tools)
- ◆ Publishers (national or regional government, municipalities or NGOs)
- ◆ Geographical scope (ie local – including capital cities, regional, national)
- ◆ Coverage of different types of services (eg specialist and non-specialist; residential and non-residential; state-run, municipal/local authority services, NGOs or private companies, etc.)
- ◆ Level of relevant details about services and fields of data researched
- ◆ Quality of data and usability
- ◆ Method of research and frequency of updating
- ◆ Availability and whether data is made publicly accessible

3.1.2 Guidelines for Developing a Service Provider Database

By looking at current examples of service provider databases, it is possible to draw up a flexible procedure with 7 stages for national authorities to create a database of services for homeless people, the first four of which are briefly outlined:

1. Assessment of any existing databases/directories based on above characteristics

As developing a database can be a major task, it is best to first establish the extent to which any such resources exist and if so, whether any existing data about services can be incorporated/re-used. It is useful to contact national and regional government and funding bodies, any national NGOs that have membership and/or co-ordination functions, research organisations, regional and local municipalities, local NGOs, and large providers of services in key cities conurbations/areas where homelessness is likely to be more prevalent. Especially if little currently exists in a particular country or area, it may be helpful to explore what resources exist in other similar or neighbouring countries.

2. Requirements and specification

A list of project requirements can be drawn up to cover the issues above (ie purpose, scope, coverage, data to be collected etc) and staffing needs (including project management, IT, research and administrative skills). Project requirements should also address: methodology for data collection, IT issues, updating of data, and access to data.

It is proposed that there should be a minimum recommended core data about services (Level 1 data) to help measure homelessness. Gathering such details for research and sampling purposes enables efficient contact with agencies, and an assessment of relevant target groups served, services provided and scope for providing data about clients to help measure homelessness. Further optional data (Levels 2 and 3) may be collated depending on the need, purpose and audience of the database. Level 2 data is more detailed information of particular relevance to referrals (e.g. charges for services, disabled access, transport, staffing levels etc) and Level 3 data is information for further analysis of service provision for homeless people (e.g. funding, quality and outcomes).

Figure 3

LEVEL 1 DATA	
Organisational details	
Name of organisation/service	Those organisations that have multiple services may need differentiating and separate entries.
Contact address and details (telephone, fax, email, website)	May be admin or head office address rather than service itself. Some addresses are confidential and some services are telephone only.
Referral address and details (telephone, fax, email)	If different from above. NB this data is required if details are to be published for referral purposes
Geographical location of service	Town, city, municipality, region or other relevant geographical area.
Type of organization	Specialist homeless or non-specialist service, and whether municipal, NGO, private, etc.
Client details	
Target and client group	Including age, gender, etc, and any restrictions.
Area served	Some services, especially hostels and day centres, may not restrict provision of services to a particular area. Different organisations may also serve a variety of different but overlapping areas (eg those based on geography, municipal boundaries or the remit of funding bodies).
Service details	
Purpose/intention of service	e.g. emergency, interim, transitional or specialist accommodation, day centre, outreach service, etc based on classification of services used
Access criteria	e.g. directly in person or agency referral, appointment or drop-in, etc.
Period of stay	Intended maximum length of stay for accommodation services.
Support provided	This may be a freetext description and/or may involve a system of codings to designate various support provided.
Opening hours/staff cover	Opening hours for non-residential services, staff cover for accommodation.
Style of accommodation	e.g. numbers of dormitories, shared or single rooms, or flats.
Number of bedspaces	Total number
Resident access to accommodation	e.g. curfews or if residents have to be out during the day.
Occupancy levels or usage	Average occupancy levels for accommodation services, number of services provided per week and/or numbers and types of client groups using services

3. Resources and funding

Estimating costs of establishing different sized databases of services for homeless people shows the relative affordability and cost effectiveness of doing this, particularly after initial set up costs.

To set up a small database and research details of 50 services, it would take an estimated 4-5 weeks work (24 days), and need up to about 2 weeks of staff time (7 days) annually to keep the data up to date and maintain the database.

For a medium sized database of 500 services, set up costs in terms of staff time would be about 4 months full-time work (79 days), and about 5 weeks of staff time annually (27 days) to keep the data up to date and maintain the database.

For a large database of 2,500 services, set up costs would involve an estimated 56 weeks of staff time (282 days) or, for example, 3 staff working full time for 4 months. Approximately 5 months of staff time (94 days) would be needed annually to keep data up to date and maintain the database.

To publish a service provider database in online and/or printed format would involve some additional costs and these too have been estimated.

4. Project tasks and timetable

The following are the main stages in developing the database and content, some of which can run concurrently:

- ◆ Specify data structure, codings and fields in terms of length and whether free text or not
- ◆ Research and build database of contacts for researching services and for inputting service details
- ◆ Devise research tools (eg questionnaires, telephone interview schedules)
- ◆ Carry out research (eg mailings of questionnaires) and chase non-respondents
- ◆ Write and edit entries about services

If the database is also to be made available in printed directory or online format, then additional tasks include website build and test, build of book production database or use of desktop publishing to create a printed directory, printing the directory, and launch of directory and/or website, marketing and distribution.

Depending on the scale of the project, format and staffing available, it would usually take a minimum of 3 months to develop a database and collate and input data about services. If the data is to be made available in printed format, then about another 2 months (making a total of 5 months) would be required for developing book production systems, book production itself and printing. If the data is to be made available online, a total timescale of around 6-8 months would be required to design, build and test a basic but searchable online database of services.

The final 3 stages are:

5. Utilisation/dissemination of the database

6. Updating the data

7. Evaluation of the database

3.1.3 Conclusion

Following these guidelines can help the successful establishment of a database of services for homeless people that will then underpin gathering standard variables of data from surveys and the client registers of service providers. Setting up a service provider database can be even more cost effective if it is made available for referral and other purposes to benefit service providers and homeless people themselves.

It is of considerable benefit to use, where possible, any existing sources of data and taking a staged approach (i.e. prioritising developing databases for capital and other major cities and conurbations) towards developing national datasets which require more significant resources.

Whilst national public authorities will be required to at least back, if not contribute significant funding to, the development of a national resource, they may not wish to carry out the task directly themselves. Instead, they may wish to commission an agency (whether a research institute/ consultancy, NGO or similar organisation) that has the necessary direct knowledge of homelessness provision, and required IT and research skills.

3.2 Client Register and Recording Data Systems

3.2.1 Introduction

Many service providers hold information on their clients or service users in computerised client recording systems or databases. These systems have been developed over time for different purposes and using different computer technology. Some client registers have been developed from existing paper based systems while others were developed from the outset as computer based databases. Our research found many examples of client recording systems in use and they are becoming increasingly prevalent. We believe this trend will continue and will provide in many cases the most fruitful way of collecting data from service providers in the future.

3.2.2 Service Providers and Data Collection

NGO service providers for the homeless are organised in different ways on the regional and national level and this has – at least in some countries – an important impact on the availability of harmonised client register systems. For national organisations with local branches it might be much easier to standardize the details and methods of client registration than for organisations on the regional and national level which are based on membership of relatively or completely independent local entities or which function as an umbrella organisation.

Client data is collected for different purposes such as to document the process of support and service provision, of to provide information for funding authorities, the public and (sometimes) scientific research. Some – but not all - systems are constructed to serve all purposes at the same time. In some cases the requirements by funding authorities have been the driving force for implementing standardized client registration systems.

3.2.3 Client Registration Systems

Examples of client recording systems that were studied and analysed in the research include:

- ◆ Regas and Clever client record systems (Netherlands)
- ◆ Dublin Link Client Recording System (Ireland)
- ◆ Link (UK)
- ◆ CHAIN (UK - London)
- ◆ Common Monitoring System (UK -Scotland)
- ◆ Supporting People Client Record System (UK - England)
- ◆ AG STADO Basic Data Set (Germany)
- ◆ SAW Tellus system (Belgium)
- ◆ NewPeopleVison (Czech Republic)
- ◆ Naděje EK system (Czech Republic)

3.2.4 Overview of the Systems Reviewed

The review of client record systems in operation in different countries illustrated the range of issues to be considered by national authorities in developing methodologies to collate or aggregate statistics on homelessness using client registers. This section outlines the lessons learnt from these systems that can inform the proposed methodology for national authorities.

Responsibility for developing the system

The role of the relevant national authority in developing systems differs largely in relation to the extent to which participation in the system is made compulsory.

Where participation is compulsory, the development of systems is normally funded by the relevant central government ministry. This has meant that key issues of data definition and data protection can be determined at national level. However, this approach needs to be considered in conjunction with the needs of the participating agencies that need to be consulted during the system development. It is also less flexible in allowing systems of data capture to be incorporated into the agencies own needs for management and planning information.

Where participation is voluntary, the approach has normally been for the relevant ministry to subsidise development, or just to focus on the aggregation of data from systems developed outside of government control and to fund the analysis of this aggregate data.

Services covered by the systems

Client record systems often cover different service types. A specific problem is the high turnover of clients in short term and low threshold services. Often there is not enough time and staff available to collect data from people who might only stay one or two nights, some of these services will also have a principle of anonymity to provide services for people who have no legal papers or feel deterred by the administrative procedures of other services. This may also be related to funding issues and also to problems of data capture and duplication of data that need to be resolved to collect accurate profile information on this category of service user. However, the fact that some systems collect this data illustrates that it is possible to resolve these issues. Only a few systems been used to collect information from women's refuge shelters for domestic violence. This again is often an issue of funding and policy rather than of the logistics of data capture. While additional factors need to be considered in relation to data privacy and access (see below), there are no distinct technical issues to prevent application of client record systems to this category of service user.

Software system development

Two distinct approaches can be identified in the development of software systems for such registers of client information.

First, data is extracted from commercial systems that have been developed and are commercially sold for social service case management or housing management. This is the case in the German approach and also formed the basis of the original inception of the Dutch Regas system. These systems allow the client information to be extracted for analysis either through the use of an extract program or by access to a specific module within the program.

Second, there are systems developed specifically for the purpose of data capture of client information or for client monitoring purposes. These include systems developed in-house by NGOs (e.g. SAW and Nadeje), those commissioned and paid for by Government (e.g. Supporting People), and those commissioned by NGOs from software houses - exemplified by the Dutch Clever system and

the UK and Dublin Link systems. They are characterised by being bespoke systems that allow add-on modules to meet the user's requirements.

Functionality

Programs need to ensure that ease of data entry does not compromise data quality. The systems reviewed are either windows based or web-based interfaces that use drop-down menus and radio buttons to allow pre-coded data entry. Secondly, programs can enhance data quality by allowing for data validation and error reporting at the data entry stage. Many of the programs examined also allow a second level of validation at the point of data export when staff at the central data processing centre can resolve data issues with the inputting agency staff. Finally, programs provide facilities to export data in agreed formats.

Data Protection

While all the systems conformed to national data protection requirements the approach to this varied, especially in regards to aggregation of data at the national level. The German system is the most rigid in allowing only aggregated data to be exported for analysis at national level. This greatly inhibits the analysis and use of the data. All other systems allow for individual level records to be analysed by the use of anonymised data routines. Unique identifiers can be generated by the system, or by the creation of a unique number (based on some combination of surname, initial, gender and date of birth). None of the systems reviewed here used the national identity number or insurance number as the unique identifier though this approach is employed in some other systems.

The problem of double counting exists, particularly where no unique client identifiers are used. For measuring prevalence and flow it is almost impossible to exclude double counting of the same persons without unique client identifiers. A number of techniques are used to anonymise and protect individual identity, so that data extraction is made compatible with data protection rules and with justified interests of service users that their personal data are not misused.

Although there is a robust data protection framework across Europe which doesn't present an insurmountable barrier to information sharing; in some national contexts, this will be a major issue to overcome.

Data Quality Assurance

Data collected in this manner is often criticised because of a suspicion that the use of a large number of people entering data will lead to inaccurate and unreliable information. Data quality and integrity needs to be assured.

First, the software program itself can ensure a level of accuracy and consistency in data recording. This can occur at different stages. At the data input stage error prompts during data entry, validation algorithms and automatic error reporting prior to data posting or export can eliminate missing data or invalid entries. The program can also require certain key fields to be complete prior to data export. At this stage the issue is to balance ease of data entry with robust checks of key fields. Programs also provide context sensitive help systems.

Second, where data is exported to a central processing unit more robust validation algorithms can be employed. This requires a relatively high level of staff resources to check and reconcile errors with the supplying agency.

Third, data monitoring and trend analysis can also assist in reporting back to the users who are inputting the data. Thus regular reporting on fields that are incomplete or inaccurately recorded, as well as statistical analysis and comparative analysis can be used to improve performance.

Fourth, direct contact with agency staff is essential. The monitoring approach described above is usually combined with staff training, manuals of guidance, newsletters and user groups. Most systems also provide help-desks to resolve specific issues. Web-based systems supplement these approaches with on-line help systems.

Data Export

The systems reviewed demonstrate a wide range of approaches to exporting the data to the central processing unit. Paper based returns (with central data processing) is accommodated in the Czech and the UK systems though this is increasingly uncommon and the most time-consuming and costly approach. Electronic data transfer should be a standard approach for new or updated systems since the widespread accessibility of computer resources and technology ensure this is the most cost effective route. Electronic data transfer can be accommodated by several routes but again the review suggests that web-based systems using standard XML protocols are now commonly employed in new or updated systems. This approach has the benefit that software does not need to be installed in data providers systems since on-line data entry is the basis of data collection. However, the review suggests the requirement to employ dedicated staff to receive and check electronic data prior to processing and analysis.

Data Analysis

Using individual records rather than pre-aggregated data allows the most flexible approach to data analysis at national level as only access to individual records allow cross-tabulation across any of the variables collected. This needs to be combined with an appropriate geography for analysis (linked to census and/or administrative geographies).

3.2.5 Implementation

Review of the approaches adopted in different countries indicates a number of stages or phases in the implementation of client record systems. This phasing is to be regarded as critical to the successful development of such systems

- ◆ Phase 1 Planning
This phase involves consultation with service providers. This may include a survey of the specific client record and management software systems in use. It will also involve consultation with key agencies in relation to the data items and data definitions to be employed. This phase will also require the decision on the management structures to be adopted to maintain the systems and appointment of the national co-ordination team to undertake the development and implementation.
- ◆ Phase 2 Development
This involves the development of software systems and / or the specification of standard data interchange formats. This will also involve piloting and testing systems. At this stage the preparation of detailed documentation, guidance manuals and training materials is carried out.
- ◆ Phase 3 Implementation

This also involves pre-launch training and publicity. This will often need to be regionally organised and possibly targeted separately at different types of provider agency (e.g. homeless agencies and domestic violence refuge shelters).

- ◆ **Phase 4 Management and Updating**

As well as ongoing systems for hosting, data backup and system support, management, monitoring and performance review structures are required to ensure the system is properly and efficiently administered and meets the agreed terms of reference.

Finances, resources and budgeting

The cost of implementing data collection from client register systems involves consideration of two distinct issues – the overall implementation of the approach and the creation of the software or data collection and aggregation system.

Each of the four phases of implementation described above has an associated cost. It is impossible to provide exact costs for each phase since this will in part depend upon the number of service providers in each country and the degree of co-ordination required between central government and regional or local authorities. It also depends whether the national authority intends to carry out the implementation or to outsource the tasks. The latter approach is to be recommended.

The development of software to allow for the national database or data analysis also depends upon the approach adopted in each country. The main options are summarised as follows:

Option 1 Using Existing Software Systems and Data Extract Protocols

In Germany an aggregation tool had to be developed to extract aggregated data from a number of different software systems which were already in use among NGO service providers for the homeless. The development of this tool was commissioned from an institute and cost approximately €50,000. Annual adjustments of the software have to be financed separately. Every year the recent version of the aggregation software tool is sent to service providers who participate in the national data collection. In 2004 about 120 services have received the extraction software and 56 aggregated data sets were to be processed and brought together into a national data base. This annual process costs about €5,000 to €7,000 depending on the number of service providers participating. As an increased participation is the aim the annual costs will rise substantially in future.

These costs do not include the costs of personnel at BAG W committed to manage the data collection, coordinate the discussions and decisions about necessary changes regarding the basic set of variables and other aspects of data collection and do the data analysis. At least a continuous part time if not a full time staff post is needed to manage the data collection on the national level.

Option 2 Developing CRS Capture Software

UK / England

The Supporting People Client Record System was based upon a client record form specified by the ODPM (now the Department of Communities and Local Government) following consultation with local authorities and service providers.

The Centre for Housing Research in Scotland is contracted to develop, test and implement the software and then to maintain the database, analyse the data and produce regular tables and to maintain a website for the system.

The system was developed over a six month period and has been maintained since 2003. The database includes a register of service providers from whom the data is collected (currently around

30,000 services). Data is provided directly to around 140 local authority subscribers. Approximately 200,000 new clients are recorded through the system each year of whom 54 % are homeless (using the harmonised definition). The staff costs for the system are summarised in Figure 4. Additional IT equipment and office costs were also incurred.

Figure 4 Costs for the Development of a CRS Data Collection System

Development Phase (1)		FTE STAFF
Director	Oversight of project	30 days
Project manager	Implementation of project	40 days
Project Officer	Implementation and research	100 days
IT Programming	Software development, pilot and testing	100 days
Research Assistant	Assistance on users needs and related tasks	60 days
IT assistant	Programming, guidance manuals etc	40 days
Annual Maintenance Costs		
Management	Project manager and assistant project manager	1
Research, Data analysis and publications	Research Assistant	1
IT maintenance and web-site	IT Programmer	1
Data Quality Assurance	Data Quality Assessors	4
Data Processing	Data Processors including electronic and on-line data systems	4

Note (1) Since this was a short term contract all staff were employed on a part-time basis or full-time staff were allocated for the defined periods. Hence the time is expressed in *days employed on this contract*.

Option 3 Adapting an existing system (Link)

Ireland

The initial costs of developing the Link client recording system on which the Dublin Link system was based are estimated at having taken about two person years of development time. Work involved drawing up requirements and consultancy with prospective users, specification, system design, programming, testing, and training users of the first system. However, costs for implementing further Link systems are substantially reduced. The costs for implementing a Link system can be broken down into 3 main elements:

1. Initial system development design and programming

Adaptation and development of the core Link system requires payment of a one-off licence fee of between €4,000 and €12,000 depending on the size of the system (number of providers covered)

2. Initial system build costs

This involves one-off development costs for system build and implementation (over a period of around 3-6 months). It also involves working with users to promote the system and train and support staff. Build costs vary from €8,000 to €20,000 depending on the size of system.

3. Ongoing annual running and support costs.

Once the system is set up, there are annual costs for hosting and support varying from €5,000 to €15,000 depending on the size of system. There may be additional IT development costs depending on any new developments required to the system.

4. Data from Population Registers, Censuses, Surveys and Other Services

This chapter discusses the issues involved in utilizing information from a range of official government sources to provide a more accurate or detailed profile of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Administrative data is compiled by different Ministries and agencies of government in order to manage services financed by government or provided under statute. This data often provides important information regarding people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Equally information is collected by government for the whole population or samples of the population utilizing survey or related methods.

These data sources may be classified into distinct types:

- ◆ Administrative data (e.g. records held on prison population)
- ◆ Surveys of sub-groups of the population (e.g. household survey)
- ◆ Data on the total population (e.g. decennial census or population register).

4.1 Houseless Population

Using the definition of homelessness provided above (see Figure 2, p10), this section considers the use that can be made of administrative data provided by health institutions and penal institutions. The Edgar et al report (2007) describes the unique situation of the Danish (good practice) model where information on the population of all institutions provided under statute (e.g. §91, §96 and §101 of the Social Welfare Act subsequently amended by legislation in 2007) is recorded in a national database from client identified records on a continuous basis. This section considers the more limited aim of using administrative data on specified populations to provide national or regional figures on the scale and profile of homelessness. This issue is important for two reasons. First, people leaving prison and people with a mental illness represent significant proportions of the homeless population in many EU countries. Second, policies focussed on prevention of homelessness rely upon administrative data to monitor policies and to target the implementation of effective prevention initiatives.

4.1.1 Health Institutions

This is the most complex aspect to consider and is dependent upon specific policy and governance structures affecting health care in individual countries. In principle two situations occur:

- ◆ Long stay health institutions: for example mental health and drug or alcohol addiction centres. In these situations people may remain in the institution due to a lack of adequate housing and/or related support in the community. The problem is to monitor the number and type of client who fall into this category.
- ◆ Mainstream hospitals: where people can not be discharged due to a lack of appropriate housing (or social or medical support) in the community. For example, people experiencing acquired brain injury resulting from an accident or stroke. (*This is not intended to incorporate those requiring long term residential care such as the elderly or people suffering from alzheimers or related conditions of aging).

4.1.2 Prison Institutions

Surveys of the homeless population clearly identify that, in many countries, a significant proportion of homeless people have been imprisoned in the recent past. Policies aimed at prevention identify prison discharge protocols as a key aspect of policy and research has confirmed that action in this regard is effective in prevention (and is cost effective).

4.2 Census and other Surveys

National censuses and household surveys can be used as a source of information for some categories of homelessness. They can provide information on the those parts of the population who live in institutional situations, those who live temporarily with family or friends or in accommodation provided for the homeless, those living in overcrowded conditions or in unfit or non-conventional dwellings.

A distinction needs to be made between countries that employ a register based population census and those that adopt a survey based (decennial) census. In several countries (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Netherlands) the traditional census questionnaire survey has been replaced by registers as the sources of population and housing censuses. The existence of a Central Population Register (CPR) with a unique national identification number and a dwelling register with a unique identification key is used to establish a link between dwellings and persons in register based countries. Germany and Sweden plan to move fully to register based censuses and some countries have, or plan to adopt, a mix of traditional censuses and registers (including Austria, Belgium, Latvia, Slovenia). France has adopted a 'rolling' census (INED, 2006). The remaining countries retain traditional questionnaire based surveys.

In theory it ought to be possible to count the number of people living in different types of institution and people with no usual place of residence from central population registers. In Finland, the Population Register is fully integrated to the postal system (and other national registers). This means that changes in postal address are automatically recorded. Further, every person must be registered to receive benefits and public health services. As a test for this study, the Finnish Register was interrogated in November 2006 and indicated a total of 26,519 people with no usual place of residence. Of this number are a group of people whose location is unknown (Group 903, 8,424 people). This will include people who have moved abroad or who have 'vanished into thin air'. This leaves a total of 16,674 persons who lack permanent housing (Group 901). However, that figure is almost double the number counted in the annual Housing Fund Survey as homeless. While the Housing Fund survey may be understood to under-estimate the number of people living with family and friends, further research would be needed to reconcile the two sets of figures. For other countries using register based systems it seems to be rather more difficult to provide counts of people not residing in conventional dwellings. This clearly is an issue beyond the scope of this study but is one that merits further investigation.

Countries utilizing traditional questionnaire based surveys can provide information on inadequate and non-conventional housing. However, they could also adopt an enumeration process to include homeless people; the Australian Census provides information in this way. France and Lithuania are examples of countries, in Europe, where census surveys are used to count people sleeping rough.

Population censuses are now undertaken annually in France (since January 2004). The census counts homeless people living in hostels in the same manner as it counts all other "communities". Night shelters are a separate category and so should allow a count of this part of the roofless population. However, long-stay homeless accommodation is lumped together with other forms of long-stay community accommodation like old people's homes. For rough sleepers, collaboration with voluntary groups (including FNARS) and close involvement by local councils and survey enumerators have helped reduce the risks of multiple counting and omissions. Also, the roofless population (rough sleepers) in municipalities of under 10,000 people are surveyed in the same year as the rest of the town's population (i.e. once every 5 years). For municipalities with populations of 10,000 and over, approximately 8% of the municipality's homes are surveyed each year, and the roofless are surveyed every 5 years over the entire municipal area. The homeless are enumerated as a matter of principle: the homeless are French citizens like any other and must also be counted (all those that can be interviewed personally fill in the same census form as the rest of the population).

In Lithuania the 2001 Population and Housing Census is the single data source on the number of people living in a public space. Information about rough sleepers included gender, nationality, age, education. No more information about roofless people was produced after 2001.

5 Harmonisation Issues

5.1 Core Variables

An information strategy on homelessness will usually not just attempt to monitor the number of homeless persons, but will also aim at collecting and providing further information on their profile. In order to make meaningful comparisons between different sets of client data, on the local, regional, national and international level it is absolutely essential to agree on a certain minimum of variables which are collected in the same way. Even without full coverage of the homeless population, a set of harmonised core variables would enhance the understanding of homelessness and of the changing profile of the homeless population. The study on Measuring Homelessness (Edgar et al, 2007) proposed a core data set with a restricted number of variables which should be collected all over Europe using the same definitions and which should provide the basis for information about the profile of homeless people in Europe.

This core data set should inform about

- ◆ basic demographic characteristic (age and gender),
- ◆ about nationality and migration background (country of birth),
- ◆ composition of homeless households,
- ◆ their accommodation situation (immediately before service period and at time of data collection),
- ◆ the duration of (current) homelessness and
- ◆ the reasons for (last) homelessness.

A list of those variables and data items recommended as core variables is presented in Figure 5 (p28) of this synthesis report. Reasons for selecting those variables as core variables are their importance for providing information about the profiles of the homeless population, but also their availability in (most) existing registration systems (which usually collect much more data than these). A key criterion for their selection is that it should be relatively easy to harmonise the definition of these items for European data collection purposes. However not all of the items are recorded by all existing systems and there will still be a need for change of definitions on the national level in a number of cases.

Such a restricted list of core variables increases the feasibility of data harmonisation. While developed mainly for accommodation based services, the variables can also be used as a core data set for client registration at non-residential services for the homeless and can also guide the definition of variables employed in surveys. For some of the variables there might be more missing data than for others, although systems to improve and ensure data quality can have a substantial effect on the number of non-responses and missing data.

Figure 5 Proposed Core Variables

Variable	CORE
Demographic Characteristics: Age and Gender	
Age	Date of birth
Gender	Male/Female
Nationality / Migration background	
Nationality	Country of citizenship
Country of birth	Country of birth
Household / family characteristics	
Household structure/ living situation	Alone living without child(ren), alone living together with child(ren), couple living without child(ren), couple living together with child(ren) Other type of household
Housing characteristics	
Previous accommodation, night before entering service and current accommodation situation (at date of counting)	Living Rough (public space / external space) In emergency accommodation (overnight shelters) In accommodation for the homeless (homeless hostels, temporary accommodation, transitional supported accommodation) Living in crisis shelter for domestic violence Living in institutions (health care, prison) Living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing (mobile homes, non-standard building, temporary structure) Sharing with friends or relatives (due to homelessness) Homeless and living in other types of accommodation Not homeless
Duration of (current) homelessness	Less than 2 months; 2 to under 6 months; 6 months to under 1 year ; 1 to under 3 years; 3 to under 5 years; 5 years and longer
Reasons for Homelessness	
Reason(s) for last period of homelessness as defined by the homeless person (several answers possible)	Landlord Action (eviction) / Mortgage repossession End of contract / unfit housing / lack of housing Relationship breakdown / family conflict / death Loss of job / unemployment Violence Personal (support needs / addiction / health) Financial (debt) Discharge from institution / armed forces Immigration Force majeure (fire, flood etc). Other reasons

Source: Edgar et al, 2007

A second set of non-core variables was also recommended. The collection of such information (for example on support needs) using the same definitions across Europe would also be important to add value to existing data sets and to allow more comparative analysis to be undertaken. However, for some variables it will take time to harmonise definitions and to reach a European wide consensus. Furthermore information on some of the items is less common in existing client registration systems

or it is more controversial whether such information is really needed. The collection of non-core items should therefore be optional for national authorities.

The proposed non-core variables comprise data on

- ◆ main activity,
- ◆ source of income,
- ◆ highest educational attainment, and
- ◆ the main areas of support needs.

The latter would also provide some additional information on contributing factors to the reasons of homelessness reported as a core topic.

Figure 6 presents the variables which were recommended by Edgar et al (2007) to use as harmonised non-core variables in data register systems and surveys on the national level.

Figure 6 Proposed Non-Core Variables

Variable	NON-CORE
Economic characteristics	
Main activity	Paid employment (non subsidised), Subsidised employment, sheltered employment Voluntary work, School or training Unemployed (but able to work) Retired Long-term sick/disabled
Source / type of income (several answers possible)	Income from paid employment Pension for old-aged or severely handicapped Income from minimum subsistence scheme Other types of welfare benefits Educational grants Income from begging, sex working Other types of income No income at all Indication of main income source
Educational characteristics	
Highest educational attainment	Highest Educational attainment (coded to ISCED level)
Support needs/Problems	
Physical health	Disability (y/n) Other physical health problems (y/n)
Mental health	Mental problems (no, suspected, diagnosed)
Addiction	Alcohol (no, suspected, diagnosed) Drugs (no, suspected, diagnosed) Other substances / gambling etc. (no, suspected, diagnosed)
Financial	Debts (y/n)
Occupation	Lack of occupation/training (y/n)
Safety / violence	Experience of domestic abuse (y/n)

Source: Edgar et al, 2007

Both lists do not include information on outcomes and service use, although such information is highly valuable and increasingly required to evaluate the effectiveness of services in alleviating homelessness. However for the time being it is rather difficult to define harmonised procedures to collect such information because of the variety of support systems and client registration approaches. For systems which are recording information at service entry and at exit of service a general recommendation would be to make it possible to compare the situation before and after service for a number of variables. It might be necessary and feasible in the medium term to include variables on outcomes in the list of core variables. This aspect of outcome management is an area that merits specific research.

5.2 Harmonised Definitions

In the framework of the MPHASIS project the feasibility of using the proposed variables should be tested further and if necessary recommendations should be developed on how to harmonise varying definitions of some of the variables. Coordinators of national meetings will be asked to answer a questionnaire if information on the recommended variables is already collected for homeless people in their country and how existing obstacles for using the proposed variables might be overcome.

In some cases information on the local level might be much more detailed and it might nevertheless be possible to extract information for core variables from the existing data. Where information on the core variables is not yet collected (or the definition differs) it should be possible to adjust data collection systems accordingly without great effort, but possible implementation problems and obstacles should be addressed.

The use of outcome indicators should be discussed as well at national level. Are there any efforts to evaluate outcomes of homeless services on their users and how could client register data be used for this purpose? Are there examples of good practice for measuring outcomes which could provide a basis for a recommendation of harmonised variables?

6 Implementation Issues

This chapter considers some of the implementation issues to be considered if national authorities are to improve the information base on homelessness. In some countries this will involve building the capacity for data collection overall, while in other countries it may revolve around improving the administrative geography of information analysis and in yet other countries it will involve extending the scope of data to include sources not currently tapped.

6.1 Developing a Homeless Monitoring Information Strategy

In Section 2 above the issues of the Governance of Data collection were discussed. These issues can be summarized in relation to:

1. Development / Planning

Decisions on who is responsible for data collection on homelessness and other aspects of social exclusion and housing will involve a range of government departments. All the key ministries should be involved in this process.

2. Implementation

Depending on the definition of homelessness and housing exclusion adopted, the implementation of a homeless information strategy can be undertaken using different models. This should though include the collation of information from service providers may best be achieved by the methods described in the report (Edgar et al, 2007).

3. Funding

Appropriate budgets are required and the implementation should be realistically budgeted and planned for.

The report discusses a range of issues involved in improving data collection on homelessness in the context of developing a strategic approach to monitoring homeless information. These issues are summarized here as the key stages involved.

Figure 7

Stage	Action	Description
1	Consultation	Involve all relevant stakeholders in the statutory and voluntary sectors
2	Definitions	Agree a definition of Homelessness Develop harmonised operational definitions of variables
3	Information Needs	Use the Strategy on Homelessness to identify what information is needed and where priorities lie to improve data collection
4	Review of Information Sources	Identify what information is available and review its usefulness for policy development and evaluation
5	Data Protection	Ensure appropriate protocols exist for data protection and anonymisation of information
6	Time-table of Implementation	Plan the implementation (especially where phased introduction is required) to ensure the needs of stakeholders are met
7	Service Provider Database	Prepare and maintain a database of service provision
8	Client Data	Implement a strategy to collate and aggregate client register data from service providers
9	Administrative Data	Ensure administrative data, registers and surveys can be captured to inform policy analysis
10	Combining Information	Establish joint protocols to eliminate double counting and harmonise operational definitions Standardise systems of unique identifiers and methods of anonymisation of data Identify appropriate geographies for analysis

6.2 Management of Data Collection

Key principles in the management of data collection on homelessness can be described which should underpin the process of developing a homeless information strategy.

1. Successful implementation and maintenance of data collection systems require mechanisms of consultation and review involving all relevant stakeholders. The appropriate stakeholders need to be identified in each country but will probably include both service providers and all the key ministries of government as well as representatives of regional and municipal government.
2. National collation of client record data from many suppliers, and regular reporting at the relevant geographies, requires a range of skills and a team approach. These skills include project management, user training and consultation, database management, data quality assurance, programming and data analysis. While different approaches are evident in different countries it is necessary to have a dedicated team for this project whether this is provided in-house or is out-sourced. The team should be responsible for all aspects of the process not simply data processing or analysis.
3. In all countries national standards exist for data protection. European and international standards also exist for database management systems, for example, in relation to the

management of external data and the use of structured query languages (SQL)². These standards should apply equally to information from service providers and they need to be specified for national compliance prior to data collection.

4. United Nations and Eurostat protocols have been developed in order to harmonise concepts, definitions and classifications in social surveys. The draft UN protocol on Statistical Integration as part of National Statistics Code of Practice promotes standards for the harmonisation of classifications (geographical, social and economic), statistical units (family, household, dwelling), definitions (standard concepts and variables). These harmonised concepts and definitions of variables should be adhered to in the development of data collection procedures and protocols for homeless data and national statistics office should be consulted on this issue. Equally Eurostat is developing harmonised Key Social Indicators and data collection procedures should reference these indicators where possible.
5. Intuitively (and evidentially) data collection is best achieved where the person entering the data can understand a direct payoff to him/herself, to the client or to the organisation. Hence data extracted from systems linked to casework management and/or organisational management are more likely to return good quality information. Software systems should incorporate reporting functions that facilitate organisational management information as well as data collection.
6. Database management systems should be developed in the context of a clear policy on client confidentiality that is easy to understand, explain and apply. That policy needs to be reviewed on a regular basis.

6.3 Barriers

The problem of counting the homeless is often presented as a technical problem. However, research has shown that most of the technical problems can be resolved and the main problem is all too often the lack of political will, inadequate funding, unclear structures of responsibility and weak management structures.

A range of technical issues are addressed in the report and we review how these have been tackled in existing systems. Perhaps the most critical aspect of the success of a system in collecting client record data is the approach taken to guarantee data quality. Different approaches to data quality assurance are in evidence and there is established good practice in this respect. The software is critical to data quality. The ease of use of data entry menus is of course essential but needs to be combined with appropriate validation routines and error checks. The agency responsible for data entry, cleaning and analysis needs to develop data quality assurance procedures and structures involving all staff. This will involve regular management monitoring procedures and reporting. Finally, training of staff in the provider agencies is essential and can be achieved using traditional training as well as e-learning techniques.

Technical problems related to the use of different or incompatible operating systems are reported in some countries but are relatively minor and have been overcome. The increasing use of online systems will reduce the significance of this issue. Where problems are caused by insufficient funding the necessary resources have to be made available by funding authorities. National governments as well as authorities on the EU-level might need to provide support where structural and technical problems still exist.

² ISO/IEC 9075-9:2003: Information technology – Database languages – SQL – Management of External Data (SQL/MED)

The problem of double counting exists, particularly where unique client identifiers are not used. Our report explains how this is dealt with in surveys. For prevalence data and flow data it is almost impossible to exclude double counting of the same persons without unique client identifiers. Such identifiers are recommended and a number of techniques are presented about how these identifiers can be anonymised and protected, so that data extraction is made compatible with data protection rules and with justified interests of service users that their personal data are not misused.

If services are not provided exclusively to homeless people (but for a wider range of clients) it is necessary to isolate the data of homeless clients from those of other clients. For this purpose clear information is needed in order to distinguish those clients who are homeless from those who are not.

Finally, we identify a range of management issues related to the development and implementation and extraction of data from client record systems. Although it is acceptable for different software systems for registering client data to use different variables, it is important that the core variables are consistently defined. If a variety of client register systems are used by services for the homeless it takes time and resources to harmonise the variables and make systems compatible at least to an extent that allows the extraction of a basic set of data variables. Examples are quoted from Germany and the Netherlands to show how this can be done.

A specific concern to be addressed is the extent to which data can be captured in accommodation services such as emergency or low threshold hostels. These services are normally characterised by a process of direct access rather than referral and by a high turnover of clients. They are often also characterised by serving a client group with more difficult problems (e.g. drug or alcohol dependency or illegal immigrants with language problems). Often there is not enough time and staff available to collect data from people who might only stay one or two nights. Some of these services will also have a principle of anonymity to provide services for people who have no legal papers or feel deterred by the administrative procedures of other services. Data requirements could be reduced for these types of services in order to get at least a minimum of information about turnover and occupation rates. Examples from a number of systems used show, in practice that it is indeed possible to get reliable data from low threshold services as well as outreach services.

The lack of continuity of staff and a lack of training is another management issue which has to be dealt with in order to secure reliable data. As we have seen, good client registration systems do not require a lot of specialised knowledge, but there is a need for proper training and (on-line) support for those working with data registration systems. The costs of such support have to be taken in account and covered by authorities funding the services.

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