

Sustainable ways of preventing homelessness (Copenhagen, 22 November 2013)

Comments paper from Finland¹

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1. Current situation in Finland concerning preventing and tackling homelessness and in particular youth homelessness

In the Finnish National Homelessness Strategy (2012–2015) one key target is preventing (youth) homelessness and developing preventive measures such as housing counselling.

In Finland third sector and NGOs have a significant role in tackling youth homelessness. For example Finnish Youth Housing Association has over 3,100 rental apartments in 30 cities and it also provides housing counselling and supported housing schemes. Also child welfare, mental health, substance abuse work, and aftercare for released prisoners organisations provide supported housing, floating support, and sub-lease apartments for those at risk of homelessness. In addition social housing has a central role, and it is to be utilised even more in the future in tackling homelessness. Y-Association and outreach youth work Vamos (Funded by Helsinki Deaconess Institute) are planning to launch a co-operation project that combines scattered housing and low threshold support.

Housing counselling services have been developed and expanded, as well as group activities targeted for young people who have experienced eviction and are applying for another apartment. The aim of these activities is to support and educate young people to have better housing and life management skills. There has been also 'housing coaching' - project for young people, where they are first settled to 'training community housing' and then to social housing, to their own rental flats. There are plans to set up a small group homes for young people with special and complex needs, although we are very aware of the problems that relate to communal housing solutions. Young people are seen to need information, 'coaching' and psychosocial support (control) in the transfer from youth into adulthood (from child welfare services into adult services) and in some cases

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communal solutions are the best way to ensure sufficient support and tackle loneliness, insecurity and isolation.

There is a national "*Preventing Youth Homelessness*" – *project* that is coordinated by Finnish Youth Housing Association, administered by Ministry of Environment, and funded by Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY). The object is to build 600 dwellings targeted to young people and to offer housing counselling services for 500 new service users. There are special targets concerning structural changes, service users and co-operation.

In Finland "Youth guarantee" has been included in the Programme of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen's Government, with a view to promoting employment and preventing social exclusion among young people. The guarantee sets out to provide all young people with realistic opportunities to pursue and complete a post-basic qualification and find employment, while ensuring that young people are not left to get stuck in a period of non-activity for too long. Housing is not yet part of the "*Youth guarantee*" programme, but different stakeholders are advocating for that. The programme is based on cooperation among national and municipal authorities, young people, business sector and NGOs.

Municipalities' social services are in key role in tackling youth homelessness. We have special, university level education programme for qualified social workers called 'youth social work' and youth work is a university discipline. It would be important to strengthen housing issues in these educations. Social workers meet young people in demanding life situation and they do valuable case management work. *Good cooperation among municipalities' social workers, social housing actors, young people and other stakeholders is one of the most important successful factor in tackling homelessness.* Homelessness work is based on long-term and confidential relations and many times asks for patience. For young people it is especially important that they can engage with the same, trustworthy workers for a long time. They need to feel themselves respected and accepted. Homelessness work needs more training programmes, attitude work, and long-term resources: apartments, housing units, tailored and innovative support models, research and skilful workers.

Special projects can only reach small numbers of homeless individuals and special target groups. In addition to these we need more affective large-scale solutions for young people in the future (like Denmark has launched) to overcome structural barriers and be able to meet the needs of great majority of homeless youth.

2. Key challenges in preventing and tackling homelessness issue in Finland and in particular youth homelessness

- In general, Finland is tackling with surprisingly similar homelessness challenges as Denmark;
- In Finland, municipalities are responsible for providing housing and necessary support services for those in the risk of homelessness. Yet, preventing and tackling homelessness requires sufficient resources and political will to invest in the excluded citizens. This is not self-evident in current economic depression and political climate that emphasises self-responsibility;
- In spite of the measures taken to prevent youth exclusion, homelessness is growing among young people and especially among immigrants. Often youth homelessness is hidden: individuals move from friend to friend or/and live with relatives. Major problem is that we do not have special crisis housing for young people;



- For young people it is extremely difficult to get access to affordable housing especially in Helsinki. At the housing market there is a serious lack of small apartments and people are waiting for social housing extremely long time;
- The unemployment rate is rising in Finland and especially among young people (15-24 years olds' unemployment rate in September was 17.9%, [7.9% in the whole population]);
- Young people are expected to live independently in a quite young age: they are "pushed" away or they themselves "pull" away from their childhood homes for many different reasons;
- It seems that for child welfare clients transition from child welfare services to adult services and to more independent living is a risky phase: many former child welfare clients end up to become homeless;
- Reaching young people and building trusting client-practitioner relationship is especially demanding when young people have been traumatised, stigmatised, neglected, abused, addicted and misunderstood. It seems that current housing solutions have difficulties to house the most needy ones with multiple social and health difficulties;
- Young people with special needs often do not have previous experiences of living independently and individuals may not have had secured childhood and do not know what a 'home' means. Thus they lack the strengths and skills to take care of themselves and their apartment. For the service system it is challenging to respond to long lasting, comprehensive and personal support needs especially if the service user is not easy to reach and hold on to, and has multiple problems such as drug use and asocial behaviour.

3. Main learning value of the presented Danish good practice for your country

- It is notable that Denmark has invested in large scale Housing First programme that emphasises the cooperation among national and local level, testing and monitoring different support methods. From Finland's point of view it is valuable to learn more about the ways Denmark has conducted evaluative research on different support methods and Housing First success factors. We have many successful small scale housing-led schemes, but lack of research-based evidence of the effectiveness and usefulness of the Housing First. It is important to develop both quantitative and qualitative research; and large-scale and small-scale research designs; to be sensitive to local innovative "good practices" and clients' voice. This is taken seriously in a research project funded by Finnish Academy "Long-term Homelessness and Finnish Adaptations of the 'Housing First' Model (<http://www.uta.fi/yky/sty/yhteystiedot/juhila/first.html>);
- *Great learning potentials* are related to the ways Denmark has applied in practice different support methods. Currently in Finland floating support is developed and strongly advocated by national and local policies and practices, but we do not have housing specific ACT-teams. In future ACT is to be used, applied and studied among people with the most severe and multiple social and health difficulties;
- Denmark has valuable experiences in scattered housing solutions that are valuable in transforming Finnish Housing First system from communal housing to more scattered. Although in some cases communal housing is the preferred solution by the client and other stakeholders. Communal housing solution can be the individual's first choice and a home without stigmatised semantics or expectations related to continuum model. Yet scattered housing is to be seen as the primary alternative;



- It would be valuable to pilot Danish models in a Finnish context. That would require detailed information and descriptions of the models and experience exchange. We need new type of models (social innovations) for preventive, outreach and intensive, ACT based housing support work;
- Finland is interested also in the future to exchange experiences and doing cooperation with Denmark in tackling homelessness and applying Housing First in a Nordic context.

