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Peer Review
in Social Protection
and Social Inclusion

Sustainable ways of preventing
homelessness

SHORT REPORT

Copenhagen, 22 November 2013

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Peer Review: Sustainable ways of preventing homelessness

This Peer Review in Copenhagen, Denmark on 22 November 2013, discussed sustainable ways of preventing homelessness, particularly among young people. It considered the outcomes of the Danish National Homelessness Strategy, adopted by the Danish Parliament in 2008, which employs the 'Housing First' model of rapid access to permanent housing and intensive support to reduce homelessness. The Peer Review was hosted by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, Children and Integration.

Representatives from eleven peer countries attended: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Ireland, Norway, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. They were joined by representatives from two stakeholders: Eurocities and FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People). Two representatives from DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion at the European Commission participated and the thematic expert was Suzanne Fitzpatrick from Heriot-Watt University, United Kingdom.

1. The policy under review

Background

Homelessness is a persistent and serious social problem throughout the EU, and homelessness levels have been increasing in most Member States. Structural, institutional, interpersonal and individual factors all contribute to homelessness and, especially since the economic crisis, rising levels of unemployment and deepening poverty are major factors.

Young people are especially vulnerable to becoming homeless as they are disproportionately affected by rising unemployment, tightening housing markets and, in some countries, radical welfare cuts. This can make the transitions they experience when leaving school, home or care institutions difficult to navigate successfully. Substance misuse and social isolation may also increase the likelihood of homelessness for certain young people.

The European Commission is taking EU-level action and its Social Investment Package – which includes a specific Commission Staff Working Document on Confronting Homelessness¹ – stresses the need to tackle homelessness through strategies based on prevention and housing-led approaches. Other relevant EU initiatives include the Europe 2020 Strategy and its poverty reduction target; sectorial EU policy actions, especially in the domains of EU social and financial inclusion, regional, urban and rural development, migration and human rights policies; mobilising EU Funds for homelessness purposes; and various PROGRESS projects, analytical studies, thematic events and joint actions with the Social Protection Committee, such as Peer Reviews².

¹ European Commission (2013) *Social Investment Package: Commission Staff Working Document. Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*. Brussels: European Commission.

² For more information on EU activities on homelessness please visit <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1061&langId=en>

The Danish Context and Housing First

The National Homelessness Strategy was adopted by the Danish Parliament in 2008, and built upon earlier programmes aimed at strengthening social services for socially-marginalised groups. The programme followed the first national count of homelessness in Denmark which was conducted in February 2007. This mapping exercise identified 5,290 Danish citizens who were homeless in the relevant count week, including: approximately 500 people who were sleeping rough; 2,000 people staying in homeless shelters; over 1,000 people staying temporarily with family or friends; and smaller numbers in short-term transitional housing or awaiting institutional release from prison, hospital or other facilities, without a housing solution³.

Four overall goals were set in the Strategy programme:

- 1) To reduce rough sleeping;
- 2) To provide solutions other than homeless shelters for homeless young people;
- 3) To reduce the time spent in shelters; and
- 4) To reduce homelessness consequent on institutional release from prison and hospitals without a housing solution.

A total budget of 500 million DKK (65 million €) was allocated to the Strategy programme over a period of four years from 2009 to 2012. Eight Danish municipalities, representing 54% of the registered homeless population, were invited to participate in the first round of the programme, including the three biggest cities in Denmark – Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense. In a later round of funding, nine additional municipalities – mainly medium-sized towns - were selected to participate and had 30 million DKK (4 million €) allocated to them.

An overarching aim of the Strategy was to develop and test international evidence-based interventions in a Danish setting, and the decision was taken to make 'Housing First' its overarching principle. The 'Housing First' model, first developed in the US⁴, employs rapid access to permanent housing and intensive support to reduce homelessness⁵. This stands in contrast to traditional 'linear' approaches in the homelessness sector which require 'treatment first' and/or moving homeless people through a series of 'stages' before they are 'housing ready'. These 'treatment first' models have been increasingly criticised for their extremely high attrition rates and for having unintentional negative effects (by institutionalising homeless people)⁶.

It was also decided that floating support interventions employed within this Housing First-based model should follow one of three methods, depending on the intensity of support required:

³ Benjaminsen, L & I. Christensen (2007): *Hjemløshed i Danmark 2007. National kortlægning*. [Homelessness in Denmark 2007. National mapping]. Copenhagen: SFI, report 07:22.

⁴ Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First. The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction*. Minnesota: Hazelden.

⁵ Busch-Geertsema, V. (2013): *Housing First Europe. Final Report*. Bremen/Brussels: GISS & The Danish National Board of Social Services.

⁶ Busch-Geertsema, V. and Sahlin, I. (2007) The Role of Hostels and Temporary Accommodation. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 2, pp. 67-93.; Johnsen, S. and Teixeira, L. (2010) *Staircases, Elevators and Cycles of Change: 'Housing First' and Other Housing Models for Homeless People with Complex Support Needs*. London: Crisis.

- Assertive Community Treatment (ACT): services provided by a multi-disciplinary support team comprising, for example, social workers, support workers, nurses, psychiatrists, addiction treatment specialists, job office workers, etc.;
- Intensive Case Management (ICM): services provided by a case manager offering social and practical support and help with coordinating other services;
- Critical Time Intervention (CTI): time-limited case management (9 months) giving social and practical support and coordinating other support services.

Other key aspects of the Danish programme included strengthening street outreach work and implementing a method for needs assessment in homeless shelters, and some of the Strategy funding was set aside to provide additional housing units for homeless people. In total, 457 new housing or accommodation places were provided, about a third of which were in independent scattered site housing, and the remainder split across a range of congregate, institutional, transitional or alternative ('skæve huse') forms of accommodation.

In all, over 1,000 homeless people were assisted by the floating support schemes provided under the Danish Homelessness Strategy, making it one of the few European examples of a large-scale Housing First programme.

The results were closely monitored, and were extremely positive⁷. Of those who received CTI support, 95% were rehoused and retained their housing throughout the study period, and this was also the case for 94% of those who received ACT support, and for 74% of those assisted via ICM. Amongst all of those rehoused, the overall housing retention rate was over 90%. Clients interviewed expressed relief in being rehoused and said that without the support they would have lost their housing. There was a clear finding that independent, scattered site housing works better for most homeless people than congregate housing models, and that with intensive floating support, even individuals with the most complex support needs are capable of living on their own in such housing. The second phase of the Strategy will begin in 2014, focused on 40 municipalities, which will sign contracts specifying their obligation to implement Housing First and to adopt evidence-based methods.

While the interventions implemented under the Danish Strategy thus appear to be highly successful at the individual service user-level, the overall goal of reducing homelessness in Denmark was not met. In fact, there was a 16% increase in registered homelessness over the period 2009-2013. But it is notable that results in the 17 'strategy municipalities' were less negative. In the eight initial municipalities with a full Strategy programme, homelessness increased by only 4%. In the nine other 'Strategy' municipalities, homelessness increased by 11% on average, while in the remaining 81 municipalities (which did not participate in the programme), homelessness increased by 43%.

Addressing youth homelessness

There was a particularly sharp increase in youth homelessness in Denmark over the period of the National Strategy. In 2009, 633 young people in Denmark aged between 18 and 24 years old were recorded as homeless in the count week, increasing to 1,138 in 2013 (the number of homeless under 18s remains low). Three-quarters of these young homeless people in Denmark are male, and in the larger cities a substantial proportion are first or second generation immigrants. Half of all the

⁷ Rambøll & SFI (2013): *Hjemløsestrategien. Afsluttende rapport*. [The homelessness strategy. Final report.]. Copenhagen: Rambøll & SFI.

registered homeless youth in Denmark in 2013 were staying temporarily with family or friends, another quarter were staying in homeless shelters, and 6% were sleeping rough.

The majority of young homeless people in Denmark have a substance misuse problem (58%), most commonly related to hashish consumption (50%), with 19% reporting hard drugs problems and 13% an alcohol problem. Strikingly, 51% of homeless youth in Denmark have some form of mental illness, a proportion that has increased from 35% in 2009. It was noted that, despite targeted efforts to prevent youth homelessness, structural barriers like the housing shortage, and cuts in social benefits, continue to exacerbate homelessness among young people in Denmark.

Similar upward trends in the scale of youth homelessness have been noted in a range of other European countries⁸, with young people disproportionately affected by high rates of unemployment and shortages of affordable housing in many EU Member States, and in some cases are also the target of radical welfare benefits cuts. Networks of specialist services for young homeless people are underdeveloped in a number of EU Member States, so that young people often end up inappropriately accommodated in adult shelters⁹, and many young homeless people are relatively 'hidden' as they tend to avoid these services and 'sofa surf' around friends and relatives.

Young people aged 18-24 comprised around one quarter of the clients assisted under the Danish Housing First programme. While results were not quite as positive for this group as for those over 25 (63% were rehoused and retained their housing, as compared with 88% of older clients), the Housing First model was shown to allow successful resettlement of young people. In the same way as with homeless adults over 25, 'scattered' housing seemed to work better than 'congregate' housing for young people, as the latter could lead to negative environments marred by conflict and substance abuse. Thus this Danish experience provided the first firm European evidence that 'Housing First' also works for young homeless people.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

- Can the Housing First model or its elements be transferred between countries with different social systems? It has been successfully implemented in the US, which has little social welfare, as well as in welfare-state based European countries. But can lessons learnt be transferred to Central and East European Member States where resources are very constrained and social services less developed?
- How can we muster support for a Housing First programme in a climate of fiscal austerity and in the context of a growing ideological emphasis on self-reliance and self-responsibility?
- What are the benefits of different forms of accommodation: shelters, scattered housing and congregate housing, and how can we obtain sufficient affordable housing to deliver Housing First, particularly in pressurised housing markets?

⁸ <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article705&lang=en>

⁹ Stephens, M., Elsinga, M., Fitzpatrick, S., van Steen, G. and Chzhen, Y. (2010) *Study on Housing and Exclusion: Welfare Policies, Housing Provision and Labour Markets*. Brussels: European Commission.; Fitzpatrick, S. & Stephens M. (2013) 'Welfare regimes, social values and homelessness: comparing responses to marginalised groups in six European countries', *Housing Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2014.848265.

- How can we change the mind-set of staff in homelessness, housing, health, addictions etc. services so that they fully support the Housing First Strategy?
- How can we build up the political will and commitment at the national and local levels to push through the changes required?
- How can we reach and identify the target group, particularly vulnerable young people, in order to prevent homelessness?
- What support, housing, educational, employment, and leaving care programmes should we establish to prevent vulnerable young people becoming homeless?
- What experiences do Member States have with effective social interventions for young homeless people?
- What are the specific problems faced by homeless migrants and asylum seekers?

3. Key learning elements

- The Housing First model is very effective at enabling individuals with complex support needs to exit homelessness, with housing retention rates of over 90% demonstrated in both Denmark and a number of other European countries. This points to independent, scattered site housing with intensive floating support as the appropriate 'default' intervention for this group. While in the Danish case, this scattered housing was mainly provided via the municipal sector, elsewhere it may be necessary to provide incentives for private landlords to boost available housing stocks.
- Other housing forms (i.e. congregate housing) should only be used for those homeless individuals who (repeatedly) do not succeed living on their own even with intensive floating support. For this small minority, it is important to have other options such as high-quality supported accommodation, and in some cases radical alternative models such as the 'skæve huse' idea pioneered in Denmark may be useful.
- The holistic ACT model of floating support seemed particularly effective for those with the most severe support needs, which suggests that its use should be considered even in other highly developed welfare systems with strong mainstream support services.
- The Danish experience indicates that Housing First-based models may be as appropriate for young people aged 18-25 as they are for older age cohorts, though there may be a need for further methodological refinement to optimise their effectiveness with this younger age band.
- Achieving a culture change away from a 'treatment first' approach to tackling homelessness can be a long and challenging process, requiring intensive work across a range of relevant housing, homelessness, health and welfare sectors, with a continual focus on organisational development and implementation. Training and mutual learning are needed to achieve the necessary 'mind shift' at all levels within relevant organisations. Such training could be at EU level or pursued in the form of transnational cooperation.
- It is important to bear in mind that, while Housing First offers a combination of housing and support that facilitates very high levels of sustained exit from homelessness, many challenges still remain in the lives of people with long histories of homelessness and marginalisation, and broader interventions and support are most often needed to promote their social integration and quality of life.
- For countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the possibilities for implementing Housing First models in the immediate future may be remote, given both the financial and political constraints they face. However, exposure to the experience of countries such as Denmark may help them to avoid the mistakes that north-

western European countries have made in investing in institutional solutions to homelessness that then have to be dismantled as poor practice.

- A particular crisis of youth homelessness seems to be developing in many European countries, as a result of young people bearing the brunt of the economic crisis, affordable housing shortages and welfare cut backs. Such problems are increasingly affecting even countries like Denmark with developed welfare states and sophisticated homelessness interventions. There is often a lack of specialist accommodation and support provision for this group. This requires a focused response at both national and EU levels.
- A three-pronged approach to preventing youth and other forms of homelessness is likely to be most effective, comprising:
 - primary prevention – such as welfare support measures which reduce general societal risks of homelessness, especially housing benefits;
 - secondary prevention – targeting support on those with specific risk factors, such as institutional backgrounds or an early school leaving age;
 - and tertiary prevention – 'harm reduction' measures which ensure the rapid rehousing of those who are homeless and prevent its re-occurrence¹⁰.

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020

EU2020 is a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and two of its **key targets** are to

- a) **combat unemployment** by getting 75% of 20-64-year olds into employment by 2020;
- b) **fight poverty and social exclusion**. Homelessness policy is further contributing to another of the flagship initiatives: the **European Platform Against Poverty**, launched in 2010, which includes a strand on fighting homelessness, particularly among young people and migrants.

The lessons from Denmark's success in tackling homelessness amongst those with the most complex needs are highly relevant to the Europe 2020 strategy. All European structural and investment Funds will contribute to implementing the Europe 2020 priorities and objectives, and in particular the European Social Fund will be a key instrument to overcome the social consequences of the economic crisis. The Social Inclusion Package¹¹ focuses quite heavily on homelessness, and one of eight accompanying 'staff working documents' is dedicated to this¹². It is particularly relevant to note that the SIP stresses the importance of investing in early intervention to make it possible to avoid the consequences, and the costs, of homelessness.

This offers a very favourable context to take forward measures to prevent and address homelessness across Europe, particularly in those Member States where significant political weight is attached to European policy imperatives. These results from

¹⁰ Busch-Geertsema, V. & Fitzpatrick, S. (2008) 'Effective homelessness prevention? Explaining reductions in homelessness in Germany and England', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 2: 69-95.

¹¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044&langId=en>

¹² European Commission (2013) *Social Investment Package: Commission Staff Working Document. Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*. Brussels: European Commission.

Denmark add to the growing weight of evidence that, within the Europe 2020 Strategy and homelessness-related actions taken in the context of the SIP, there should be a strong emphasis on Housing First and broader 'Housing-led' approaches, and a move away from more traditional staircase, congregate and treatment-first approaches.

It is also important to make better use of EU funds to tackle homelessness. The European Social Fund could be used to fund better access to social services and to set up Housing First models, while European Regional Development Funds could be used to enlarge countries' housing stock. These funds can play a role in 'scaling up' Housing First to a pan-European level, and the European Semester's architecture could be used to monitor Member States' policies. Member States are currently designing their operational programme for the European Social Fund 2014-2020 and it will be important to take advantage of the Danish experience to ensure that the programmes get a strong social inclusion dimension. Other EU Funds, such as European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, are also available to finance actions to further better social integration of homeless people, including improved access to quality services and social housing. Another European financial instrument which can be used to upscale the national homelessness strategies is the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived.

With respect to the growing crisis of youth homelessness in particular, the single most important priority is to resist restrictions on access to welfare benefits and services for young people. The current EU focus is mainly on youth employment rather than housing. The Social Inclusion Package advocates investing in children and inclusive education, while other relevant policy areas include health and inclusive development. However, the Commission is preparing a document on youth inclusion, which includes housing. The EU's Youth Guarantee, in which Member States committed to ensuring that young people up to 25 receive a high quality offer of a job, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed, could be extended to better address the needs of marginalised and homeless young people, and consideration could be given to an EU Aftercare Guarantee.