

Peer Review Housing First (Brussels, 16-17 March 2016)¹

Volker Busch-Geertsema

Association for Innovative Social Research and Social Planning (GISS), Germany

1. Introduction

The "Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion" Programme is carried out in the context of the PROGRESS axis² of the EU's Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). One of the aims of PROGRESS is modernising employment and social policies in the fields of social protection, social inclusion and reduction and prevention of poverty. Against the background of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Peer Reviews support the objectives of the PROGRESS programme through effective and inclusive information-sharing, exchanges on policies, good practice and innovative approaches and by promoting mutual learning.

National levels of homelessness seem to have risen in many EU Member States in recent years³ and are at an unacceptable high level, despite substantial efforts by governments and NGOs and available EU support.

2. Setting the scene – overview of related policy developments at European level

The place of fighting homelessness on the European agenda

While the primary responsibility for tackling homelessness lies with the EU Member States, a number of policy initiatives have been developed at EU level that support and complement their actions.⁴ The EU can support actions by Member States, including funding from the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) which are available for improving housing outcomes and support the integration of homeless people.

The Commission set out guidance in the Social Investment Package (SIP) and the Commission Staff Working Document linked to it – *Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*⁵ – for EU Member States on implementing integrated, housing-led, preventative homelessness policies. Specific EU actions on homelessness have been

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² For more information on the PROGRESS programme see:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1082&langId=en>.

³ See Busch-Geertsema *et al* (2014). The only country covered by this study where trend data were available and showed a decrease of homelessness during the five preceding years was Finland, where a targeted national programme using the Housing First approach has drastically reduced long-term homelessness. See also Pleace, *et al.* (2015). In 2015 a second country (The Netherlands) was reported to have found a decline of homelessness (estimates on basis of several registers), again following the massive implementation of the Housing First approach and a homelessness strategy first concentrating on the four largest cities (G4) and later rolled out to other Dutch cities as well (see The Foundation Abbé Pierre – Feantsa, 2015, pp. 62f; for the Dutch estimates see also Coumans *et al*, 2015).

⁴ For an overview see European Commission (2013a).

⁵ European Commission (2013c).



implemented as part of the SIP policy Roadmap. The Europe 2020 Strategy and the Social Open Method of Coordination (Social OMC) contribute to implementing efficient policies to combat poverty and social exclusion in Europe, including homelessness and fosters better monitoring of homeless policies and the promotion of better governance and good practices.

In the Social Protection Committee (SPC), the EU Member States, together with the European Commission, work towards improving social inclusion and protection in the EU through the Social OMC, a soft policy instrument that allows the EU to discuss important social themes. The SPC continues to examine and report on trends and policies on homelessness/housing across Europe.⁶ National social reports submitted by the Member States also cover information on key policy reforms regarding homelessness and housing exclusion.⁷ Homelessness has been the subject of many declarations, opinions, reports and resolutions in the European Parliament and other EU institutions and bodies such as the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.⁸

The approaches taken by European countries in tackling homelessness

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless, has published in 2012 an overview of homeless policies in Europe and has singled out those countries with an integrated homelessness strategy at regional or national level (FEANTSA, 2012).⁹ Such strategies are characterised – according to FEANTSA - by approaches, which are evidence-based, comprehensive, multi-dimensional, rights-based, participatory, statutory, sustainable, needs-based, pragmatic and bottom-up. Among the countries having a strategy which at least fulfils most of these requirements FEANTSA counts Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden,¹⁰ the different devolved administrations of the UK, and one region in Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia). Almost all strategies have in common that they aim at improving targeted prevention of homelessness and at providing targeted interventions for specific vulnerable groups (like young people, people with mental health problems and people leaving institutions). About half of the countries also coincide in ensuring that no-one has to live rough (for more than 24 hours) and reducing the length of time spend homeless and/or eliminating homelessness. At the time of publication of the FEANTSA report only 4 countries (Ireland, Finland, France and Sweden) explicitly prioritised access to long-term solutions. Meanwhile further countries (e.g. Denmark, Norway, Spain) have defined this aim as essential for their homeless strategy.

Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Luxembourg and Italy were singled out by FEANTSA in 2012 as having established homeless service systems but a lack of long-term strategic planning. However, in the meantime, Luxembourg has published a strategy for the period 2012-2020 and Spain has released a national

⁶ European Union – Social Protection Committee (2015).

⁷ FEANTSA (2012).

⁸ See Declaration of the European Parliament on ending street homelessness, April 2008; Declaration of the European Parliament on an EU homelessness strategy, December 2010; Resolution of the European Parliament on an EU Homelessness Strategy B7-0475/2011; Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on homelessness, CESE 1592/2011; Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Combating homelessness, 2011/C 15/08; European Economic and Social Committee Opinion 2012/C 24/07; Committee of the Regions Opinion 2014/C 271/07; European Parliament Resolution on an EU homelessness strategy, P7_TA(2014)0043.

⁹ For an updated list of homelessness strategies and respective links see <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article430&lang=en>.

¹⁰ But see Sahlin, 2015, for a more critical review of Swedish homeless policies.



strategy in autumn 2015. Italy has recently published national guidelines on homeless policies, proposing housing-led local strategies. In Belgium some progress has also been made towards a longer-term strategy, as we can see from the Host Country Paper.

Especially the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (but also Greece) were defined by FEANTSA as being in a phase of development of effective homeless service systems. Meanwhile at least the Czech Republic has developed a national homeless strategy (Lux, 2014).

Housing First as a principle for the whole strategy was mentioned only in two of the national strategies (Denmark and Finland, see further below), while in at least four further countries Housing First experiments have become part of the national policy (France, the Netherlands, Spain and Belgium). However, we should not underestimate the predominance of urgency measures and staircase approaches (requiring stays in different types of shelters and temporary accommodation, hostels, training flats etc. in order to be made "housing ready") as the main characteristics of the traditional homeless service systems in most European countries.

Thematic links to earlier policy debate and research

Previous research about homelessness at European level

During the first decade of this century several studies on data collection of homelessness and advancing information systems about the phenomenon in the European Union were funded by the European Commission, such as the Study on "Measurement of Homelessness at European Level" (2006-2007; Edgar et al. 2007) and the "MPHISIS" project (Mutual Progress on Homelessness through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems, 2007-2009).¹¹ The interaction of welfare regimes and housing systems with a particular focus on housing exclusion was analysed in a "Study on Housing and Exclusion: Welfare Policies, Housing Provision and Labour Markets" (2009-2010; Stephens *et al.*, 2010). "Housing First Europe" (2011-2013; Busch-Geertsema, 2013, 2014) was a social-experimentation project financed from the EaSI fund testing the Housing First approach in five different European test sites and facilitating the exchange of information and experiences in five additional peer sites (for further details see below). A "Study on Mobility, Migration and Destitution" was conducted on behalf of the European Commission between 2012 and 2013, analysing the causes of destitution and homelessness among migrant populations (Regioplan, 2013). "Hope in Stations" (2010-2011, Kesselring *et al.*, 2013) and "Work in Stations" (2012-2013) were two projects, funded under the PROGRESS programme, focussing on support for homeless people in European train stations. On behalf of the European Commission a pan-European study on tenancy rights (TENLAW) was finalised in 2015 and a "Pilot project – Promoting protection of the right to housing – Homelessness prevention in the context of evictions" was conducted in 2014-2015, results are expected to be published in early 2016. A Social Protection Committee/Indicators Subgroup thematic review on access to housing and housing exclusion took place last November. An ongoing EU study examines cost-efficient housing policies in Flanders and the EU and Eurofound is about to publish results of their research on the impact of bad quality housing. New initiatives include a joint action with the OECD with a view to build a comprehensive housing database and analysis of social policies for affordable housing and housing exclusion. An EU SILC data module on retrospective homelessness episodes is expected to be tested by 2018.

¹¹ <http://www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/research/mphasis/> .



The European Observatory has published a series of small pieces of research into different aspects of homelessness, based on a questionnaire approach involving a number of national experts in selected EU Member States. The series is called "EOH Comparative Studies on Homelessness" and is available for free online (under www.feantsaresearch.org).

- 2011: Social Housing Allocation and Homelessness (No. 1);
- 2012: Counting Homeless People in the 2011 Housing and Population Census (No. 2);
- 2013: The Costs of Homelessness in Europe: An Assessment of the Current Evidence Base (No. 3);
- 2014: Extent and Profile of Homelessness in European Member States: A Statistical Update (No. 4);
- 2015: Local Connection Rules and Access to Homelessness Services in Europe (No. 5).

The next issue of this series will report about the impact of the recent massive inflow of asylum seekers on homeless services in various European countries.

Previous Peer Reviews on homelessness

There have been seven Peer Reviews with a focus on homelessness in previous years:

- 2004: UK – The Rough Sleeping Strategy, England;
- 2005: Denmark – Preventing and Tackling Homelessness;
- 2006: Norway – National Strategy – Pathway to a Permanent Home;
- 2009: Austria – Counting the Homeless – Improving the Basis for Planning Assistance;
- 2010: Finland – The Finnish National Programme to Reduce Long-term Homelessness;
- 2010: Portugal – Building a Comprehensive and Participative Strategy on Homelessness;
- 2013: Denmark – Sustainable Ways of Preventing Homelessness.

Most relevant in the context of the Belgian Peer Review are the Peer Reviews in Finland (2010)¹² and in Denmark (2013)¹³ because both reported on national strategies to reduce homelessness using the Housing First approach.

The Finnish Strategy placed special emphasis on long-term homelessness and aimed at the eradication of this phenomenon by 2015. During the first phase of the strategy (2008–2011, the phase covered by the Peer Review) a large amount of new apartments were constructed for the target group, partly by converting traditional shelters into apartment blocks with on-site support using the Housing First approach. This way Finland became one of the few European countries using congregate housing for Housing First projects. But scattered housing was also used and increasingly so in the second phase (see Pleace *et al.*, 2015).

The Danish Peer Review placed a specific focus on homelessness of young people. Lessons learned from this review were that Housing First was more successful at tackling chronic homelessness than the 'staircase' approach, that evidence-based programmes help leverage political support by showing – through systematic

¹² For the synthesis report of this Peer Review see Busch-Geertsema (2011).

¹³ For the synthesis report of this Peer Review see Fitzpatrick (2014).



monitoring and evaluation – how they reduce homelessness levels and related costs, that the implementation of Housing First requires a sufficient stock of affordable housing and better coordination between policy makers at different levels, with the involvement of service providers, and finally that more attention was needed to prevention and holistic responses to youth homelessness.

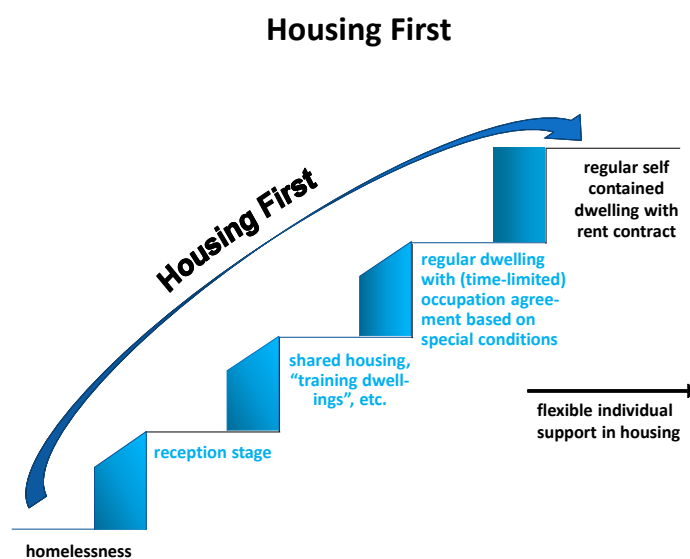
What is Housing First

Housing First seeks to move homeless people into permanent housing as quickly as possible with on-going, flexible and individual support as long as it is needed, but on a voluntary basis. It has first gained particular attention in the US, where robust longitudinal research has demonstrated impressively high housing retention rates, especially for the pioneer model of Pathways to Housing in New York. The eight principles of this model, which originally focused exclusively on homeless people with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse, are (Tsemberis, 2010: 18):

- housing as a basic human right;
- respect, warmth and compassion for all clients;
- a commitment to working with clients for as long as they need;
- scattered-site housing, independent apartments;
- separation of housing and services;
- consumer choice and self-determination;
- a recovery orientation;
- harm reduction.

As we will see further on, not all of these principles have been implemented in all projects claiming to be “Housing First”. In particular we can find Housing First projects using apartments concentrated in one or several buildings, often with support on site, so called congregate housing. We also find several projects where support is time-limited and housing is provided only under certain conditions, not as a human right. We will come back to these issues and the question of “programme fidelity” later on.

Chart 1



Source: Busch-Geertsema (2013): 17



The Housing First approach has been developed in clear contrast to approaches requiring “treatment first” and/or moving homeless people through a series of stages (staircase system) before they are “housing ready”. Housing First diverts radically from these approaches, which have been criticised for being ineffective in ending homelessness for people with severe and complex needs and having unintentional negative effects (Ridgway and Zippel, 1990; Sahlin, 2005; Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007).

Housing First in contrast to the more traditional approaches seeks to move homeless people into permanent housing as quickly as possible, arguing that housing is a fundamental right for all, and should not have to be “earned” by solving individual problems, change of behaviour etc. Support is provided to those homeless persons, who need it (so Housing First does not mean housing only), but sobriety and/or motivation to change are not requirements for getting access to permanent and self-contained housing, nor can a failure to comply with support services lead to an eviction. Compliance with normal residential tenancy laws (and accepting regular home visits) are the only requirements. An essential premise within this approach is that social service interventions can be more effective when provided to people in their own home. Choice and a feeling of security and stability regarding housing and support are important elements of this alternative strategy.

Available evidence for the Housing First approach in Europe and elsewhere

In 2013 results of a European Experimentation Project testing the Housing First approach in five European cities (Amsterdam, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow, and Lisbon) funded by the European Commission as “Housing First Europe” were published.¹⁴ For four of the five cities – those which were following the Housing First principles more closely than the fifth – housing retention rates at the end of the evaluation period have turned out to be very high.

Table 1: Housing retention rates in Housing First Europe test sites

	Amsterdam	Copenhagen	Glasgow	Lisbon	Budapest
Total number of service users housed	165	80	16	74	90
Unclear cases (death, left to more institutional accommodation, left with no information if housed or not etc.)	23	16	2	6	n/a
Basis for calculation of housing retention	142	64	14	68	n/a
Positive outcome (still housed)	138 (97.2 %)	60 (93.8 %)	13 (92.9 %)	54 (79.4 %)	29 (< 50 %)
<i>Still housed with support from HF programme</i>	122 (85.9 %)	57 (89.1 %)	13 (92.9 %)	45 (66.2 %)	0
<i>Housed without support from HF programme</i>	16 (11.3 %)	3 (4.7 %)	0	9 (13.8 %)	29 (<50 %)
Negative outcome (lost housing by imprisonment, eviction, “voluntary” leave into homelessness etc.)	4 (2.8 %)	4 (6.3 %)	1 (7.1 %)	14 (20.6 %)	na

Source: Busch-Geertsema (2013): 59

¹⁴ See the final report of this project Busch-Geertsema (2013) and an article summarising the results (Busch-Geertsema, 2014). The five local evaluation reports which formed the basis of the European report are all available at http://www.giss-ev.de/files/giss/upload/Pdf/Housing_First_Europe_reports_gesamt.docx .



Furthermore, a large number of local evaluation reports of Housing First projects have been published up to date and the Housing First approach has been tested in a wide range of different national and local contexts across Europe. Apart from the local evaluation studies which were the basis of the Housing First Europe report¹⁵ several evaluation studies were published more recently on a range of Housing First projects in England (Pleace and Bretherton 2013; Bretherton and Pleace 2015), on a Housing First programme in Dublin (Greenwood, 2015), a project in Vienna (neunerhaus, 2015) etc.

Evidence is also available from a large national pilot of Housing First in four French cities (Lille, Marseille, Paris, and Toulouse) with the most robust evaluation scheme in Europe, using a randomised controlled trial, (Estecahandy, 2015) and a Housing First programme in Spain (Bernad *et al*, forthcoming).

All evaluations report very high housing retention rates. In France housing retention after one year was over 86 %, in Spain 100 % after 6 months, in Vienna 98 % after 3 years, Dublin used another measure and found that after 12 months Housing First participants had spent over 67 % of their time in stable housing, compared to only 5 % for a comparison group.

There are a range of further European countries, where Housing First is tested at the time of writing, including Italy, Norway, Poland, and Sweden.

Only two European countries have gone beyond testing the Housing First approach in a few projects and have based national strategies against homelessness on the principles and the philosophy of Housing First. Both countries have already been subject to European Peer Reviews (see above). In Finland the national strategy aimed (rather ambitiously) at eliminating long-term homelessness by 2015.¹⁶ This aim was not fully reached, but long-term homelessness has been reduced considerably and – as mentioned above – Finland is one of the very few European countries reporting a decrease of overall homeless numbers in the years preceding 2015. Denmark has used Housing First on a large scale in the Danish National Homelessness Strategy from 2009 – 2013 and more than 1,000 homeless people have been rehoused in Housing First projects under this strategy.¹⁷ Recently there were further statements in favour of national or regional homelessness policies following the Housing First principles, e.g. in the Netherlands and in Spain.

The world's largest and most robust national test of Housing First was conducted in Canada, called At Home/Chez Soi with a budget of about 75 million EUR (\$110 million CAD). Housing First was tested in five Canadian cities (Moncton, Montréal, Toronto, Vancouver, and Winnipeg), involving more than 2,000 homeless mentally ill participants for two years in a randomised controlled trial (1,158 in Housing First, 990 in treatment as usual). Similarly as in Dublin, housing retention was calculated in percentage of time spent in stable housing. Over the two years of the study, participants in Housing First spent an average of 73 % of their time in stable housing compared with only 32 % of those in treatment as usual. During the last half year 62 % of Housing First participants were housed all of the time and 22 %

¹⁵ Wewerinke *et al.* (2013), Benjaminsen (2013), Johnsen with Fitzpatrick (2013), Ornelas (2013), and Fehér and Balogi (2013). Note that the final evaluation report of the Glasgow project was published separately and later (Johnsen, 2013).

¹⁶ See Busch-Geertsema (2011), and Pleace *et al.* (2015).

¹⁷ See Benjaminsen (2014), and Fitzpatrick (2014).



some of the time whereas only 31 % of the control group were housed all of the time and 23 % some of the time.¹⁸

A recent literature review in the European Journal of Homelessness lists 184 publications about Housing First between 1990 and 2014 (Raitakari and Juhila, 2015). Meanwhile a substantial number of additional publications have been added, especially with the results of the Canadian programme being published widely.

FEANTSA plans to publish a Housing First Guide with an overview of existing approaches in Europe and guidance for the implementation of Housing First services across Europe. Publication is foreseen for mid 2016.

Debates about the Housing First approach in Europe

The Jury of the European Consensus Conference, organised under the Belgian Presidency in 2010 discussed both the Housing First approach, as a model for serving homeless people with complex support needs as well as broader strategies following the Housing First philosophy. It recommended to test the Housing First service model in European contexts and *"given the history and specificity of the term 'Housing First'", the Jury recommended to use "'housing-led' as a broader, differentiated concept encompassing approaches that aim to provide housing, with support as required, as the initial step in addressing all forms of homelessness". Accordingly the Consensus Conference Jury called for a *"shift from using shelters and transitional accommodation as the predominant solution to homelessness towards 'housing led' approaches. This means increasing the capacity for both prevention and the provision of adequate floating support to people in their homes according to their needs."* (European Consensus Conference, 2010: 14, 16).*

While it has been widely acknowledged that the vast majority of Housing First participants with complex needs show high housing retention rates (in most projects over 80 %) there have been some debates about the more mixed results in terms of further social integration. A number of authors have argued that outcomes of Housing First projects in relation to dimensions of social inclusion and recovery such as reduction of addiction, improvement of mental health, integration into employment or something meaningful to do, overcoming social isolation etc. were *"underwhelming"*.¹⁹

Given the complex needs of most of the users of Housing First services, it might be unrealistic to expect any quick and widespread progress in respect of further social inclusion.²⁰ Changes in quality of life might need much more time than covered by usual evaluations of two or three years maximum and for some people *"relative integration"* might be a more realistic goal. As Johnsen and Teixeira (2012: 190) note, *"Housing First proponents regard stable housing to be a platform from which the (often long and complex) process of recovery from mental illness, substance misuse and/or social isolation might begin (Tsemberis, 2010b; Henwood et al., 2011), not as a remedy to any or all of these problems per se"*.

On the other hand a number of Housing First project evaluations report positive effects on health, well-being and social integration, not for all participants, but for a majority of them²¹. From the Housing First Europe project it was reported that 70 % of Housing First service users in Amsterdam had reduced their drug use, 89 % told interviewers about improvements in their quality of life and 70 % about improvements in mental health. In the Housing First project of Turning Point

¹⁸ Goering *et al* (2014: 17); on the results of the Canadian programme see also Aubry *et al* (2015).

¹⁹ McNaughton and Atherton (2011); see also Pleace (2011) and Johnson *et al.* (2012).

²⁰ Busch-Geertsema (2005); Johnsen and Teixeira (2012).

²¹ For a summary see Pleace and Quilgars (2013).



Scotland in Glasgow, drug/alcohol use had stabilised or reduced in most cases. In the *Casas Primeiro* service in Lisbon, around 80 % of the participants reported a positive impact on their stress levels, nutrition, sleeping habits and on physical and mental health. While the evaluation in Denmark showed a more mixed picture, 32 % of the service users were assessed by social workers to have reduced their use of alcohol, for 25 % an improvement in mental health and for 28 % in physical health was reported.²² Improvements of physical and mental health for some, but not all participants were also self-reported from England, Ireland and Spain; the evaluation in France showed a significant reduction of stays in hospital for Housing First tenants after one year.²³

Some Housing First projects report improvements in social integration: For example among participants in the *Casa Primeiro* Housing First project in Lisbon almost half stated that they had met people at a restaurant or coffee shop, 71 % felt at home in the neighbourhood and more than half reported a sense of belonging to their community.²⁴ In the evaluation of nine Housing First projects in England the proportion of participants being in contact with their family almost doubled after receiving Housing First services and substantially more participants felt fairly strong or strongly connected to their neighbourhood after moving in their new homes.²⁵ However social contacts and family contacts were the items, which had the lowest scores in a list of possible improvements of quality of life in the case of the Discuss Housing First project in Amsterdam. *"Almost all customers experience improvements in their living situation (91 %), general quality of life (89 %), daytime activities (79 %), and resilience (79 %). A majority also experiences an improvement of their physical condition (73 %), mental condition (70 %), substance abuse (reduction of substance abuse) (71 %), finances (70 %), house-keeping and self-care (68 %), and relation with own children (67 %). Almost half of the customers find that family contacts (51 %), (feeling of) safety (49 %), and social contacts (44 %) have not changed."* (Wewerinke et al., 2013: 22).

The positive developments are often attributed to what Padgett (2007) and others have referred to as *"ontological security"*: Housing provides the basis for constancy, daily routines, privacy and identity construction. And as Padgett (ibid: 1934) notes as well: *"Having a 'home' may not guarantee recovery in the future, but it does afford a stable platform for re-creating a less stigmatised, normalised life in the present."*

The results were generally less positive in the areas of engagement in paid employment and managing financial problems. The vast majority of Housing First participants in most European projects remained unemployed and poor, having to cope with very restricted resources. There are structural reasons for this: the barriers between formerly long-term homeless people with complex problems and employment are often significant and subsistence benefit schemes mostly provide only a rather meagre basis for living.

Another issue of debate is the preference of the pioneer of Housing First for scattered housing and a rejection of congregate housing with on-site support as a type of accommodation, which is not providing the same sense of normality than a flat in a regular house with a mix of neighbours. Sam Tsemberis (2010a: 22)

²² Busch-Geertsema (2012).

²³ In the Housing First Europe project all evaluators were asked to report about any differences regarding the gender of service users, but none of them could report any firm results, given the relatively low number of women participating (Busch-Geertsema, 2013: 70). Gender and age specific requirements are still an issue for further research and consideration.

²⁴ Ornelas (2013: 41-43).

²⁵ Bretherton and Pleace (2015: 42 and 44).



recommended to “limit leases to 20 % of the units in any one building” and states: “In this model, clients don’t move into a ready-made unit of a housing programme – they move into their own apartments in the neighbourhood of their choice. Clients are quick to recognise and appreciate the enormous difference between these two approaches, and they become immediately invested in keeping their apartments and turning them into their homes.” In the Housing First project in Copenhagen both options (congregate and scattered housing) could be tested and there was a clear preference of most participants for the latter. The European report concluded “The results from Copenhagen suggest that congregate housing should be reserved for those few persons who do either display a strong wish to live in such an environment or have not succeeded to live in scattered housing with intensive Housing First support.”²⁶

In Finland there was a clear reason for building a number of apartments in congregate housing when implementing the National Homelessness Strategy. The old shelters were to be abolished and literally thousands of new flats were needed for rehousing long-term homeless people in relatively short time. So it was a logical consequence to convert the shelters into apartment houses for homeless people. However the Finnish Peer Review mentioned some of the risks involved if large buildings would be exclusively used for homeless people: “disadvantages, including but not limited to: segregation from a normal neighbourhood, stigmatisation of their address, extremely high concentration of households with severe problems, probability of conflicts arising from this concentration, special and costly security regulations, and restrictions on tenant’s freedom and autonomy” (Busch-Geertsema, 2011: 33). There was a risk that apparent solutions at present would become the problems of the near future. Similar risks are theorised in a critical reflection about the approach of “Common Ground” which is also using congregate housing with on-site support, but with a mix of formerly homeless and non-homeless tenants (Parsell *et al.*, 2014). Clapham (2015: 217), writing about the variety of types of supported housing, also criticises the congregate models with support on site as contrary to home.

However, there were positive experiences reported from the Finnish experience with congregate housing (Pleace *et al.*, 2015) and there needs to be a more differentiated debate about the acceptable size of congregate housing for formerly homeless people. Evaluations in Germany show that projects of 12 or 16 housing units exclusively used for permanent housing of formerly homeless people in regular apartments have not displayed any of the negative consequences described further above (Busch-Geertsema 2002; Busch-Geertsema *et al.* 2016). And there are also alternatives combining the offer of support and a place for meetings and common activities nearby (for people feeling lonely and isolated in scattered flats) and the individuality of scattered apartments, like the core and cluster model (see Clapham, 2015).

Another issue of debate is the risk that with growing popularity of the Housing First approach many existing services just use the label but don’t implement the approach and do not follow the basic principles. This is the case for example with projects using time limited contracts and transitional housing, providing time-limited services, making preparation in a staircase-like system (or “housing readiness”) a condition for access, requiring abstinence from their participants, combining housing and support (so that people have to leave when they do not accept the support provided or when the funding of support has run out) etc.²⁷ It is also the case for approaches which severely restrict choice or are providing housing

²⁶ Busch-Geertsema (2013: 8).

²⁷ For further examples see Pleace (2011): 118.



with very limited or no individual support on offer. To prevent “window dressing” and a drift away from the original model (resulting in lessening of its effectiveness by diluting or distorting it) several authors have called for fidelity assessments and the pioneers of Pathways to Housing in New York have even published a “Pathways Housing First Fidelity Scale”.²⁸ This is not an easy debate because it is pretty clear that when transferring a well-functioning model from one local or national context to another adaption to this context is necessary (Keller *et al.*, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2012). Of the five projects tested in the framework of Housing First Europe none was an exact replica of the Pathways to Housing model in New York. In some ways the European projects could even be said to be more advanced in relation to some critical aspects of the Housing First approach. So a number of European Housing First projects use direct tenancy contracts instead of subcontracts where the main contractor would be a service provider. Furthermore in a number of European projects the weekly visit is not a strict condition as it is in the original model (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013). Social housing is more often used than in the US, because in a number of European countries it is less stigmatised and better accessible than elsewhere. While there is consensus that support on offer has to be rather intensive, there are questions about the necessity to have multidisciplinary teams, if e.g. psychiatric services are well developed and cooperation is smooth and easy in case of need. So fidelity to the key principles is important, but adjustments are necessary and may not reduce the effectiveness of the model (see also Greenwood *et al.*, 2013; Bretherton and Pleace, 2015: 65 ff).

Some authors emphasise that Housing First is an approach for a small group of chronic homeless people with particularly high support needs and can be integrated into the existing range of services as “part of the menu” whereas others argue that Housing First requires a change of paradigm which is also relevant for other homeless groups, departing from staircase systems and provision which primarily focuses on emergency measures. *“It would be useful to test and evaluate the effectiveness of services following the same principles for people with less severe needs and for strategies implementing the Housing First philosophy in broader “housing led” strategies, and in strategies promoting de-institutionalisation on a broader level by combining ordinary housing with support.”* (Busch-Geertsema, 2013: 89).

Housing First schemes and other types of supportive housing have also been criticised as part of an agenda of “advanced liberalism” using “responsabilisation” (Hansen Löffstrand and Juhila, 2012) in a paternalistic way asking for a change of behaviour and sanctioning “bad behaviour” ultimately by a reduction of choice. In response to such criticism a recent article argues convincingly *“that supportive housing is positioned as a significant intervention to not only house disadvantaged groups, but rather as an optimistic mechanism to directly improve disadvantaged people’s lives. The article argues that when coupled with long-term housing, a weak form of paternalist welfare for people who have experienced chronic homelessness can be justified.”* (Parsell and Marston, 2016).

Last but not least there is a debate on the costs of the Housing First approach. It must be emphasised that Housing First is not a low-cost service. In the US the implementation of Housing First was greatly facilitated by arguing that nevertheless chronic homelessness and treatment as usual imply far higher costs, especially when the costs of health services and of the criminal justice system are taken into account. So Housing First was praised as a service, which would save a lot of money. In recent years the evidence base got more differentiated and showed that

²⁸ <https://pathwaystohousing.org/research/pathways-housing-first-fidelity-scale-individuals-psychiatric-disabilities>; see also Stefancic *et al* (2013).



Housing First does not always save money, especially when homeless people are served whose support needs were not as intensive as the group with the highest need and the highest use of external services when homeless. However, *“there are alternative reasons to look at Housing First and one of these is the case for regarding Housing First as a cost effective service model, rather than necessarily being a cost saving model. Some American research has argued that while housing-led approaches to reducing homelessness like Housing First may not, in overall terms, save very much (or any) money, their greater effectiveness in ending homelessness means there is a powerful case for using them. Homelessness is a situation of unique distress and if it is prolonged or repeated, the potential for damage that it can cause an individual is very great. This links to the wider point about what homelessness services are for and what their place is in society. While there are reasons to explore costs and cost savings, the case for Housing First and other homelessness services is always ultimately a moral one, about being a society that does not tolerate, often very vulnerable people, experiencing homelessness.”* (Bretherton and Pleace, 2015: 61)

3. The Housing First programme in Belgium

The Belgian test of the Housing First model started in September 2013 and was originally foreseen to last for two years and covering the five largest cities in Belgium (Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi, Ghent, and Liege). Housing First Belgium (HFB) was constructed as a bottom-up project, initiated by public and private actors in the five cities and supported by national government and the National Lottery (which provided the funding). In 2015 the experimental period was prolonged for another year until June 2016 and three new middle sized cities (Hasselt, Genk and Sint-Truiden) were included in State funding for HFB. The evaluation also includes tenants data from another intervention in several cities, so that together 11 implementations have been covered by the experiment in 2016.

As we can see from the Host Country Paper (footnote 13), *“in keeping with the bottom-up process (...) no guidance was given to the local teams about the implementation. It is the local realities (expertise already present, specific target group, available means) that guided the implementation of Housing First at each site.”* This is a fundamental difference to national schemes in France and Canada, which had more guidance at national level and were more directed “top-down”, though always adjustments to local conditions were needed. The second fundamental difference is that in Belgium – in contrast to the experiments in France and Canada – the national Housing First experiment was not a randomised controlled trial but the group receiving Housing First services (144 persons in the 11 implementations) was compared with two other groups (not randomly selected), namely homeless persons with conventional support (137 persons) and those who were accommodated (without housing support) after a long term (100 persons).

It would certainly be helpful to learn more about the selection of the three groups, but from the evaluation we can already see that the group receiving Housing First services had a much longer life-prevalence of homelessness than the two other groups. It is also stated that the health of the Housing First group was extremely fragile and that among those housed in the traditional way less people were diagnosed with schizophrenia (though even in the Housing First group only 11 % had such a diagnosis, compared with 5 % in the other two groups), less people had addiction problems (37 % against 58 % in the Housing First group; but the homeless group still showed a higher proportion with 66 %), and less people had a dual diagnosis (20 % against 30 % in Housing First and among the homeless group). The evaluation shows that the traditional system serves predominantly



those with shorter periods of homelessness and with less severe health problems, so chronic homeless people were not well served by the traditional system.

Once more the evaluation in Belgium has confirmed that even those homeless people with severe and complex social and health problems were able to retain their tenancies when being provided with housing directly from the street and with adequate support. After twelve months 93 % of tenants were still housed, a very high percentage of housing retention. There are indications for an improvement of self-esteem (but no data are provided) and regarding the health situation of the HFB participants data show a stabilisation for about 60 % and improvements for about a third of them while for more than half of the homeless group health had deteriorated.

From the Host Country Paper we also learn that social rental housing was a major source for housing the HFB group and that efforts have been undertaken by HFB teams to find new ways to secure affordable and good quality housing. Given the tight housing markets in many Belgian cities and the large demand for a rather small sector of social housing on the one hand and quick access to housing as one of the fundamental preconditions for the implementation of Housing First on the other hand, this might be an important point for further discussion.

From the policy documents quoted in the Host Country Paper it appears as if Housing First is seen as a new "part of the menu" in homelessness services. Other parts are the winter shelters, reception structures for people in crisis and "innovative projects". There is also a lot of concern about cooperation of different levels and different sectors of the welfare state. Perhaps it needs to be emphasised that in order to "gradually replace the 'management of crisis' as the default operating mode, with durable and stable solutions based on a 'housing led' approach" (p. 13) access to long term, affordable and quality housing is an essential element. Therefore it will also be of specific importance to convince the authorities responsible for housing policies of such an approach. Reports about the efforts on regional levels to integrate the housing sector in future policies against homelessness show that this imperative has been well understood, but the remaining obstacles should not be underestimated.

4. Conclusions

There can be no doubt that Housing First is a promising innovative approach to end homelessness for homeless people with complex support needs. Even before it has been tested in Belgium the evidence base across Europe and overseas was abundant that the vast majority of the target group is able to sustain long-term housing with support of Housing First services. The Belgian Housing First programme has confirmed that once again. It will be of special interest if authorities in Belgium succeed in doing the next step of scaling up Housing First as an important service throughout the country. Priority access to housing for homeless people will be an essential precondition for reaching this aim.

5. Issues for debate

- Is the Belgian Housing First scheme a national test or (give the bottom-up approach) rather a series of local case studies? What are the details concerning the selection of participants, the procurement of housing and support etc.?
- How is it possible to secure the principle of "support provided as long as it is needed" in time-limited pilot projects?
- Housing First implies a change of paradigm. Housing is provided first and not last in the process of support, a change of power balance is inherent (the service user



has the key!) and the role of support workers is quite different from traditional approaches. How does a bottom-up approach handle the need for cultural change involved when working with the Housing First principles? How can (could) existing barriers to such cultural changes in Belgium and in other countries be overcome?

- Why do we have to test the Housing First approach again and again, after so many successful experiments with implementing Housing First in different local and national contexts? What are the barriers for transferring it from one EU-country to the other?
- What is known about the cost-efficiency of the Belgian programme and are there any plans to balance the costs with those of the shelter system and to introduce a shift from shelters to Housing First approaches?
- How can the Housing First approach be scaled up at a national level? How can mutual learning between EU Members States be facilitated in this respect?
- *"Housing First is nice, but where is the housing?"* How to organise access to housing in tight housing markets? Are "housing detectors" successful in facilitating access to affordable housing? Are sliding contracts, nursing homes and sheltered housing possible options for the Housing First approach?
- *"Housing First – What's Second?"* How can services further improve social integration of re-housed homeless people and their integration into employment?
- Housing First – only for a small group or a philosophy base of a broader approach?
- Are there gender and age-specific requirements in Housing First projects?
- How may the Housing First approach be transferred to countries with less favourable welfare systems?
- Debates about the legitimacy of priority access to permanent housing for homeless people are particularly relevant in those countries with a general shortage of affordable housing, given the housing needs of many other groups in the society, seen as more "deserving". How do proponents of Housing First react to this discourse and what are their main arguments?



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