Peer Review
in Social Protection
and Social Inclusion
2015-2016

Housing First

SHORT REPORT

Belgium, 16-17 March

Peer Reviews in social protection and social inclusion

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This Peer Review, held in Brussels, Belgium, on 16-17 March 2016, discussed Belgium's use of 'Housing First' methods to address homelessness among groups with special needs. It was hosted by the Federal Public Planning Services (PPS) Social Integration.

Representatives from ten peer countries attended: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain, together with two stakeholders: EUROCITIES, and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA). A representative from the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion participated. The thematic expert was Volker Busch-Geertsema, Association for Innovative Social Research and Social Planning, Germany.

1. The policy under review

1.1. Policy context

Homelessness is on the rise in almost all EU Member States. According to a 2010 European Barometer Survey more than three million Europeans feel at risk of becoming homeless. While EU Member States are responsible for tackling homelessness, the EU has taken policy and funding initiatives in this field. Its Social Investment Package (SIP) urges countries to take preventative measures to reduce homelessness by adopting housing-led, integrated strategies, and the recent SIP Roadmap highlights the need to study tackling homelessness and housing exclusion. There are also various European Union funding sources to address homelessness (see sections 3 and 4).

In Europe the traditional solutions for long term homeless, such as night shelters or the 'staircase' approach, in which homeless people move through a series of social supports until they are deemed 'housing ready' have proven inefficient to tackle homelessness among people with complex needs such as mental health or addiction. Some Member States successfully applied an alternative – **Housing First** – method to tackle homelessness among this target group. Under Housing First homeless people are moved into permanent housing as quickly as possible, and offered intensive social support – either Individual Case Management (ICM) or Assertive Community Treatment (ACT), sometimes also Critical Time Intervention (CTI) – in their homes whenever needed. On average, 80% of Housing First tenants retained their accommodation for more than two years, which is a good result compared to the averages in the staircase system.

1.2. Belgium's 'Housing First' Model

In Belgium, the 'right to housing' is enshrined in the Constitution. However, in 2011 it was estimated there were 50,000 homeless people in Belgium out of a population of around 11 million, with 5,000 living permanently on the street. Clearly, the normal methods to tackle homelessness – night shelters, the seasonal (winter) and staircase methods – were not meeting the needs of the chronically homeless. So in 2013 Belgium began a two-year project using 'Housing First' (HF) in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi and Liège, which was extended to 2016 with three additional cities: Hasselt, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Namur. Belgium's governmental structure required a cooperation agreement between the different entities.

This complex structure proved a bonus as it gave each city's project team considerable leeway and flexibility in how they ran the scheme. The only condition was that all teams had to focus on the target group of chronic homeless people with high and complex needs. Each city took a strong 'bottom up' approach, and networked successfully and shared experiences with other cities.

During the Peer Review examples of Housing First Belgium (HFB) and linked initiatives were presented:

Limburg – the Network Approach – for the cities involved in this province, a multi-disciplinary team from health, social and housing departments to help homeless people with a spectrum of needs.

Liège – HF uses a *Housing Catcher* to find suitable housing for homeless people, who acts as a go-between for tenants and landlords/ladies, helps with contracts, rental problems, and provides backup and security for both parties.

Brussels – Street nurses, an organisation which works in the street and in job centres to support homeless people with debt or hygiene problems or disabilities. It also works with investors to build accommodation for homeless people.

Results: HFB was evaluated by independent teams from the three regions: Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders. The teams followed 381 people from three groups of homeless people: i) 144 people who receive Housing First; ii) 137 homeless people who receive conventional (staircase) support; iii) 100 people accommodated without housing support.

Improvements in housing retention: Preliminary results showed that after a year 93% of HF tenants were still housed. People who had gone through the 'staircase method' had an 88% retention rate, and those who had not received support to find housing had a 36% retention rate.

Results showed that medically-fragile homeless people can move into and retain accommodation, provided they are given intensive support.

HF improved health: All three homeless groups had health problems. In the HF group, 11% were diagnosed as schizophrenic, more than double compared to the two control groups. 58% had addiction problems, compared to 37% in the accommodated control group and 66% in the homeless group.

The health of 60% of those in the HFB had stabilised, and actually improved in 30% of cases, with fewer hospital visits. Tenants reported a growth in their self-esteem, and took more initiative to seek skills training or occupational activities. The health of those who had been homeless for some time before finding accommodation stabilised in 40% of cases, but declined for 30% of people.

Types of accommodation: Social rented housing was the major source of accommodation for the HFB group. *Private rented housing* was also used, but was often too expensive and entry requirements (guarantees, etc.) too stringent for homeless people. Given Belgium's tight housing market, and the small sector of social housing available at short notice, more affordable, good quality housing is needed.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

The discussion focused on the following points:

Funding: where are funds available to support this approach to homelessness: how to lobby national or regional governments and access EU funding?

Fidelity: there are many different ways of using Housing First. How much "model fidelity" is needed while leaving room for innovative possibilities at the same time? Should different "bottom-up" approaches be harmonised?

Efficiency and cost effectiveness: do measures aim at cost savings or having a more efficient way to tackle homelessness? How should it be evaluated?

Prevention: what measures are needed to prevent people becoming homeless to start with?

Access to housing: should people from HF be settled in congregate or in scattered housing? What are ways to increase the housing stock?

Scaling up: as HF has proven effective, how can it be scaled up to a national level, and how can mutual learning be shared between EU Member States?

3. Key learning elements

- **Funding**: As Housing First is still at an early phase, it requires special financial support. This may mean lobbying regional or national authorities for funds, which is time consuming. At the same time there are EU funds to support policy innovations: European Social Fund (ESF); European Regional Development Fund (ERDF); and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).

- **Fidelity**: While countries/cities have the flexibility to decide how HF should operate, there must be some general principles. The basic tenet is that *Housing First* works well in housing the long-term chronic homeless who have severe needs. It is *complementary* to other methods of solving homelessness, and should not necessarily replace them, though the principles of Housing First might be relevant for all services.

- **Evidence-based concepts**: an important element of the HFB programme is evaluating the results at the local level to test HF's value compared to other methods of reducing homelessness. Using evidence-based methods in research and implementation was underlined as a key for further developing HF programmes.

- **Cost efficient but not necessarily cost saving**: HF has proved to be a cost-efficient way of housing homeless people with special needs. However, while it may reduce other budgets, such as health, this saving is not necessarily passed onto welfare or housing budgets, since they usually operate separately. But one could claim that more importantly it makes a positive improvement to the lives of the people concerned, helping their social inclusion, and contributing to society in general.

- **Prevention**: More work and innovative approaches are needed to prevent vulnerable people becoming homeless, using increased 'floating' support services. There should be more means to prevent eviction.

- **Access to housing**: Homeless people prefer to be housed in 'scattered' housing in an ordinary environment rather than in 'congregate' housing. The issue of overcoming social isolation remains a crucial task for the accompanying services.
  Improving the access to existing housing including social housing for homeless people and making the best use of the private sector are essential. Social rental agencies and other mixed tenures might play an important role. On a more general theme, tackling homelessness requires increasing the housing stock, for example through building more social housing.

- **Scaling up Housing First**: Since HF has shown good results, one should consider going beyond 'experiments' at local level to 'scaling up' to the national level and linking with other services to reduce homelessness on a broad scale. This could include producing manuals and offering training. However argueably scaling-up should not mean using HF for all homeless people, lower support need homeless people might better be helped through other schemes.
  Given the intensity of the support services required it implies a mind shift away from the traditional 'staircase' model. Promoting this approach and providing more guidance at EU level could shorten the scaling-up period.
  FEANTSA is developing a Housing First Guide Europe and a 'hub', which goes live in June 2016. This will enable all those involved in housing-led strategies and projects to share knowledge and ideas.

- **Needs assessment**: Further analysis of needs in order to encourage flexible and adequate design of services is required as well as more research, e.g. on cost-effciency or conditions for successful Housing First programmes. Both could feed in an overall strategy with clear goals.

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to EU priorities and initiatives

This Peer Review on Housing First Belgium (HFB) related to three main EU policy tools: EU 2020, with its targets and flagship initiatives; the Social Investment Package, and the use of Structural Funds.

The aim of the **Europe 2020 strategy** is to create smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. This Peer Review could contribute to achieving the goal to reduce the numbers of those at risk of poverty by 20 million by 2020. This is a tall order as austerity measures have increased the number of those in poverty from 116 million in 2008 to 122 million in 2014, so poverty now affects 24.4% of the EU-28 population. Nevertheless, HFB has shown it can reduce poverty and social exclusion by helping the most marginalised group of homeless people to stay in the accommodation into which they were rehoused.

The second key policy instrument is the **Social Investment Package (SIP)**, with its emphasis on investing in people to build a strong Europe, and which considers preventing and tackling homelessness should be an important priority in this context. The European Commission Staff Working Document *Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*, published within the context of the SIP is critical of the traditional 'staircase' model, as it 'threatens to prolong long-term homelessness'. It suggests using housing-led strategies such as Housing First, which it says 'not only deliver more positive outcomes for homeless people but can also be cost-effective in comparison with more traditional staircase approaches'.

The most recent policy roadmap to implement the SIP flags up the need to study and disseminate information and good practices about effective policies at EU level to help Member States reduce homelessness and housing exclusion.

Finally there was considerable emphasis at the Peer Review on the important **role of EU Structural Funds** in supporting initiatives such as Housing First to support marginalised groups of the population. The European Social Fund (ESF) of which 20% is earmarked for fighting poverty and social exclusion; European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which might be used to enlarge countries' housing stock; the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the new urban initiative. These all support innovative ways to tackle homelessness, and could be used to 'scale up' Housing First. However, there were also reports about barriers experienced at national level to using these funds for this purpose.