



Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion and Assessment in Social Inclusion

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# The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

Short Report



On behalf of the  
**European Commission**  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



The peer review took place in Helsinki, on 2-3 December 2010. It was hosted by Finland's Ministry of the Environment.

In addition to representatives from the host country (Finland), officials and experts came from Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Latvia, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia and the Netherlands to assess the Finnish situation and provide information on their own national systems. Contributions also came from two stakeholders: FEANTSA and EUROCIITIES. The thematic expert from the Association for Innovative Research and Social Planning (GISS) in Germany and a European Commission official from the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities participated prominently in the exercise.

## **1. The policy under review**

In Finland, in 1987 there were over 18,000 homeless people. Now the figure is some 8,000. This considerable decrease is due to several earlier reduction programmes by the Finnish Government. The current programme focussing on a radical reduction of long-term homelessness covers the ten municipalities with the largest number of people without their own home. Whereas previously, individuals were first given accommodation in shelters, before moving to supported flats and finally to independent premises, now they are able, under the programme, to move straight to independent flats without having to climb through the system. Over the years, there has been a large increase in the number of independent flats for the homeless. In Helsinki, over 2,000 are scattered throughout the city. At the same time, the number of shelters has decreased.

In 2007, a working group, known as the Group of the Wise, drew up a programme to eliminate long-term homelessness by 2015. It identified three weaknesses in the previous homelessness reduction strategy: support measures often did not meet the needs of the long-term homeless; implementation of the preferential treatment to help them was slow; and insufficient support was being provided. The two elements in the Finnish definition of long-term homelessness are the length of time without a proper abode and people with chronic health and social problems.

The aim of the new programme, which runs from 2008 to 2011 is to radically change the previous system. It adopted the "Housing First" principle as its philosophical starting point, having first come across it in a Swedish report. This operates on the basis that appropriate accommodation is a prerequisite for solving other social and health problems, in contrast to the staircase approach where an individual has to demonstrate their ability to be rehabilitated before receiving accommodation. The programme concentrates on the most vulnerable sections in the homeless population. It also reflects the principle in the Finnish constitution that citizens have a right to privacy – something which is not possible in traditional shelters.

The programme's main elements are: secure permanent accommodation with a tenancy agreement; turning conventional shelters into supported, rented units; avoiding eviction by providing housing advice services and financial support; drafting plans for individual rehabilitation and services; guidance in use of normal welfare services; and peer support and community building.

The intermediate results have been highly positive. The initial goal of producing 1,250 flats has been surpassed. Overall funding is greater than was originally intended. An important factor in achieving this has been the financing from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Health and the 130

employees that provide support services in the ten cities participating in the programme. Success is also due to the letters of intent with the cities. These contain concrete implementation plans making it possible to know exactly how many new flats will become available during this period. Emphasis is given to the fact that former homeless people have a rental agreement of their own.

Among the challenges ahead is the development of a new programme for the next period so that the final aim of ending long-term homelessness can be achieved. One problem is a real lack of affordable rental housing stock in the metropolitan area. The new programme will continue to concentrate on the long-term homeless, but will also include certain target groups such as young people with drug problems, former prisoners, immigrants and homeless people with debts. During the first programme, units were built with heavy support personnel. This involved fairly expensive costs for the municipalities. In the next period, there will be more emphasis on flexibility, optimising support and encouraging people to do more themselves. The programme will not be just about housing and providing services, but also focus on rehabilitation and employment so that individuals can have a meaningful life.

The timing of this peer review is propitious. A new homelessness reduction programme is being prepared for 2012 to 2015 and the results of the evaluation meeting will feed into the exercise. At the same time, as Peter Fredriksson from the Ministry of the Environment pointed out, when working intensively on a policy for a long time you can become a prisoner of the past and find it difficult to be self-critical. It is always important to have critical input from outsiders. Finally, new working methods are appearing and there is far wider debate on how to organise housing solutions and support services. This constant dialogue can give birth to a productive exchange of good ideas and practices.

## **2. The key issues**

After detailed discussion over one and a half days between the host country and peer reviewers of the Finnish national programme to reduce long-term homelessness, there was general agreement on the following salient points:

### **Ambition**

Finland has had a housing led approach for many years and earlier programmes have achieved a lot by more than halving homelessness over ten years, so that only 1,460 individuals are either in shelters or on the street on a given day (in many countries these are the only homeless people counted at all). The country is now even more ambitious and is looking to eliminate long-term homelessness completely.

### **Aim**

The aim should be to reduce, solve and prevent homelessness instead of administering it. It is always cheaper and better, even for countries which are not particularly wealthy to keep homelessness as low and short as possible.

### **Housing First**

The term, however it is interpreted and despite the different opinions on its essential elements, is an interesting concept. It is one that should be tested and implemented more frequently in different countries. There is a role for the European Commission to look at the different projects, share experiences and examine the risks and the various strategies to tackle problems which

could be combined with it.

### **Support**

Housing First is not just about housing alone. It is about combining access to housing with different kinds of support. Not all people need support. It is important to assess those who do. All people need housing. Wealthy countries with well-developed services will have a smaller number, but a greater share of homeless people who will need support than those with less developed or less generous welfare states. Homelessness does not affect just those with drug or complex problems.

### **Commonality**

Housing First has certain common elements. It includes privacy, having one's own door key, reducing shelters, and providing individually-tailored support for those who need it. There is scope for both high and low intensity support. The former can be provided in various settings, but there is still a debate on which is the most adequate for different homeless groups and on the respective merits of off and on-site support.

### **Strategies**

A growing number of homeless strategies now exist. There are more of these in the wealthier northern and western European countries, but they are becoming more common in southern Europe. Wealth is useful in devising strategies, but it is not a precondition.

### **Other factors**

An effective strategy to tackle homelessness has to be evidence-based, comprehensive, multidimensional, participatory, sustainable, means-based, pragmatic and include all stakeholders. Clear political will is necessary as is a mechanism between central and local government. Identifiable and measurable objectives should be set.

### **Challenges**

There is still room for improvement in devising accurate measuring mechanisms at both European and national level, although clear progress has been made in the last five to six years in developing strategies to tackle homelessness.

### **Finland**

Finland's experience in addressing homelessness confirms that key elements are access to housing, basic support provision and people should have enough money either from employment or the welfare system to be able to pay for their housing.

### **EU consequences**

There is an appetite for more exchange of information on strategies to address homelessness. Potential exists for the European Commission to encourage sharing of knowledge on issues such as staff training, exploration of Housing First approaches in different countries, examination of costs and benefits comparisons and promotion of exchanges between public administrations.

### 3. Lessons, conclusions and recommendations

The European Commission representative acknowledged he had heard calls for initiatives in certain areas such as social experimentation projects and cost-benefit analysis across member states. Pilot projects in Member States already under way could help in this respect. Despite very different starting points in different countries, these can all be accommodated within the Housing First concept. He noted the importance of continuous learning as policies are fine-tuned and issues raised during the meeting surrounding homeless young people and migrants might be suitable for future Peer Reviews.

Summing up on behalf of the hosts, Mr Fredriksson focused on five main points.

1. The host country had listened attentively to the various elements that had been suggested should be part of the new programme. This would need to be enlarged to take account of the existing housing stock which has been established and the need for different kinds of housing and support care.
2. It is right that the long-term homeless remain the main target of the next Finnish programme.
3. The next programme should include a multidimensional policy encouraging individual initiatives, social rehabilitation and efforts to help people find work.
4. A home can be seen as an important platform for housing and social work as a whole. This does not apply just to the homeless, but also to the elderly, for instance. Housing First can provide elements for more general thinking.
5. It is necessary to address the structural changes in the housing market. Without access to affordable premises from existing stock it will be impossible to achieve the programme's objectives. The speaker wondered whether it would be possible to develop a new social incentive so that private and non-profit owners would be ready, along with other stakeholders, to take a larger share of the homeless population, particularly for people that require less support.

In a final intervention from the floor, a strong plea was made for concrete follow-up to the suggestions that had been made over the two days. These should be presented to the European Commission which should use its resources to develop the various initiatives proposed and, if it decides not to take them further, should be required to explain why.