

# The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

Gunnar Sveri  
Norwegian State Housing Bank

Lars Marius Ulfrstad  
Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies

## Combating homelessness in Norway

Norway is probably the peer country that is most similar to Finland in the work with homelessness. Both the challenges and the solutions are comparable. Finland has been working systematically with homelessness in more than 20 years. In Norway we started 10 years ago with the Project Homeless. Experiences from Finland have been very useful in Norway. The Finnish "Normalisation model" were adopted by Norwegian cities from 2001.

## Project Homelessness 2001 - 2004

The Norwegian project Homelessness developed methods and models for housing homeless in the 7 biggest cities of Norway. The work was carried out by the municipalities in addition 3 NGOs participated with projects with relief measures in the cities. 400 long-term homeless moved into different housing units and got social support.

Most of the housing units were established in municipal housing where vulnerable households were concentrated in the same blocks. However, during the project the municipalities increased the use of ordinary flats in ordinary housing. The staff was connected to service bases in the neighbourhood, and but 24 hours service was only available the first months.

The use of small detached housing after the Danish model was in Project homelessness only developed in one city, but afterwards this has been established for a few households in all the cities.

2 years after the project, nearly all the housing units of Project Homelessness were still in use for the target group and the supportive services were still working. 50% of the former homeless were still living in their home, and 37% had moved voluntarily to a similar or better housing unit.

In addition to developing of Housing and services to the homeless, the most important result of the project was that homelessness was put on the political agenda both in the cities involved, and in the rural municipalities who learned from the project experiences. There are reasons to believe that the ending of the neglect of homelessness in itself has lead to some general improvement in circumstances of life for most homeless in Norway.

## The Strategy "The pathway to a permanent home" 2005 – 2008

Based on the experiences of the Project, a homelessness prevention and alleviation strategy was developed.

The strategy's performance targets were:

- Reduce the number of eviction petitions and evictions
- No one should be required to stay at an emergency shelter on release from prison or on discharge from an institution
- No one should be offered an emergency shelter place without a quality agreement
- No one should be required to reside for more than three months in temporary accommodation

In the period of the strategy there were projects for housing, housing support, reductions in evictions and cooperation between prisons and local communities all over the country. In addition partnership agreements were made between mental care Hospitals, drug abuse centres and the local communities. However, at this part of the job we did not have great success.

The project also contributed to cooperation between governmental and municipal bodies both on national, regional and local level. Coordination of- and cooperation between public sector organisations was a central part of the strategy.

## After the Strategy 2008

From 2008 public policy are continuing the work to achieve the Strategy's objectives. The latest Norwegian survey of homelessness (2008) showed an increase in the number of homeless under 25 years in smaller municipalities. As a result of these measures to reduce youth homelessness is to day one of the main objectives.

From 2010 there is also a special focus on a join up government approach towards 35 municipalities all over the country with particular challenges in their work on Homelessness.

## Key issues for debate at the Peer Review meeting

### The homelessness strategy

In Norway and Finland there are several similarities in homelessness strategies. As in Finland Norway has been working on integrated service approaches in the bigger cities. As Finland, Norway has been focused on release from prison and youth homelessness. Both countries have been working on a whole of government approach and integrated services both on national and local levels.

## The principle of "Housing First"

The principles of Housing first correspond in important ways to the core principles of the "normalisation model" which is the dominant ideology in the Norwegian work on homelessness. The normalisation model implies to adjust the homeless' housing and habitat so that the individual can participate in society on his own premises, rather than expecting the individual to adjust.

As in the Housing first method, the normalisation requires both housing and supporting services. In Norway supportive services can be supplied both in municipal, privately rented and self owned housing.

In spite of the public support on the normalisation principle, a significant share of the municipal measures on homelessness today has clear features of the staircase- and continuum of care approaches.

If this is generally due to municipal pragmatism in lack of sufficient housing and home based social work, a result of (negative) experiences with the normalisation approach, or different values and objectives, is not clear.

Housing first represents a more precise approach than the normalisation model because it explicitly sets normal housing as a prerequisite. However, the realisation of the principle Housing first presuppose a (national) definition of "housing" or "private housing" based on both legal, social and cultural premises.

As for Norway, there seems to be a certain challenge for Finland in delimiting what is institutions (with or without a tenant agreement) and "half private" housing solutions, from private housing.

## The focus on long-term homelessness and prevention

Norway has an official objective to limit the individual use of temporary housing (shelters and intermediate housing) to maximum 3 months. However, the survey from 2008 showed that 50% of the homeless had been homeless longer than 3 months.

A well functioning welfare system is generally the best mean for preventing homelessness. Nevertheless, we do need aimed measures for transitional periods as those from child welfare to adulthood, from hospital or prison to ordinary life, and in case of divorce or family break ups.

Most long term homeless will stand in a complex set of problems that have to be addressed in order to achieve stable private housing. This requires multiple health- and social services. In Norway, overcoming the fragmented public policy making and service delivery is a major challenge. Concerning the Finnish strategy it would be interesting to know if-, and in case how they achieve an integrated and multi-dimensional approach.

### Adequate types of housing (and support) for long-term homeless people

Evaluations of the Norwegian strategy conclude that different groups of homeless need different kinds of housing solutions. However, housing means "normal housing", not shared housing or other partial private housing solutions.

Living in shared housing can under certain circumstances work out. However if too many is living together, a lot of the supportive work will have to be directed to the solving of internal conflicts rather than supplying the ADL support needed.

Integration in normal housing areas is a question at stake. Some homeless are living their lives in a way that is incompatible with a functioning social setting in an ordinary housing area. In those cases integration requires heavy support services. However, some of these homeless persons have been supplied with specially developed remote housing, some of them nearly without services. Other lives in supported housing with staff 24/7.

### Youth homelessness

Combating youth homelessness has a priority in the Finnish strategy. Homeless youths often face complex challenges, and the complexity of the challenge requires a holistic approach and individual orientation of services. Working with youth homelessness involves particular challenges on the cooperation between the following stakeholders:

- Housing services
- Health services
- Educational and vocational services
- Correctional services
- Child care department
- Integration services
- NGOs

### Intensity of services for the homeless

Most former Homeless need some kind of support in their housing situation. Often the regularity of the meeting with the social worker is more important than the intensity. Sometimes the possibility of appearing in case of emergency is the most important. In Norway different municipalities use different methods. Several different kinds of methodical social work might have good effect.

### Setting quantitative targets:

Norway has not had quantitative objectives on the reduction of homelessness or the amount of new housing for homeless. However, there has been, and still are quantitative objectives on the

reduction of evictions, and Norway has zero-visions for homelessness at release from prison and discharge from hospital.

Governance issues:

In Norway, The Norwegian State Housing Bank (Husbanken) is the institution implementing housing policy of the state. Financing of permanent Housing for homeless is integrated in the Norwegian State Housing Banks tasks. Husbanken has since 2001 coordinated the national work to combat homelessness.

## Annex - Facts about Norway

There are 4, 8 million inhabitants in Norway. About 1,1 million live in the four largest cities (Oslo – 580 000, Bergen – 253 000, Trondheim – 168 000 and Stavanger 122 000).

Norway consists of many and small sized municipalities. There are a total of 430 municipalities in Norway and the average size is 11 000 inhabitants. The municipalities are self-governed which in theory means that there are 430 ways to do things which are not obliged by law.

### The housing policy in Norway – who does what!

The Ministry of Local Government and Regional development is responsible for matters relating to housing and building policy. The Norwegian State Housing Bank is the subordinate agency and is responsible for implementing Norwegian housing policy, including preventing and combating homelessness.

The national government sets goals, proposes housing laws and regulations and provides funds for loans, grants and housing allowances through the Housing bank. The Housing Bank is therefore a very important partner in this work. The Housing Bank's main focus is to assist and support the municipalities in their work to combat homelessness. This is priority number one for the Housing Bank.

The municipal authorities are responsible for planning the local housing structure as well as necessary infrastructure for housing construction. Municipal authorities have a key role in the work on homelessness because they are - according to the Social Security Act - responsible for ensuring that disadvantaged groups, including the homeless, are provided with adequate housing.

Last but not least: The civil society, NGOs and CBOs are very important partners for the authorities. With their experience and ideas – and also recourses - they push the agenda forward, are agents for change – and are also, many of them, doing important work in the field.

### Statistics

One of the main goals for Norwegian housing policies has been that everyone should be able to own their own home. According to the statistics, 76 per cent of Norwegians do so. The public renting sector is modest. Only about 19 per cent all together rent their home. And what we may call “the social housing marked” – rental housing owned by the municipalities - only covers about 4 per cent of the total housing market in Norway.

### Housing allowances, loans and grants from the Housing bank

#### *Housing allowances*

Housing allowance is an important and targeted instrument for helping those who have difficulties in the housing market. Housing allowance allows these groups to establish decent homes and

represents security for those who already have a home. Recently, the Norwegian Parliament adopted a governmental proposal which improved the Housing Allowance Scheme considerably. After the proposal 45 000 – 50 000 new households are entitled to apply for housing allowance. This is in addition to the 100.000 households who already receive such support. When fully implemented, 1 billion NOK in addition to the present 2.4 billion NOK will be allocated to housing allowances through the State Budget.

#### *Start-up loans*

“Start - up loans” through the Housing Bank, are available to young people and vulnerable groups to help them buy their own homes. Start-up Loans are issued by municipalities to households that have difficulties in entering the local housing market, and may also be granted to households with a large debt burden in order to enable them to keep their homes.

#### *Grants for rented accommodation*

The Housing bank also awards grants for rented accommodation. In order to enable local authorities to increase the number of rental dwellings, the Housing Bank were supposed to give grants to 3000 new rented homes in 2009. And to encourage greater efforts to assist the most vulnerable, the Government allows the Housing Bank, in special cases to provide housing grants covering up to 40% of the total expenditure on certain types of accommodation. This is the case when the local authority has to provide service to the inhabitant, such as for substance abusers and other seriously disadvantaged groups.

#### *Competence Grants*

The housing Bank also provides “Competence Grants”. In 2008 the Housing Bank provided 160 such grants for both smaller and larger projects, mostly to municipalities and NGOs; users and interest organizations. We try to encourage the grants receivers even further by giving an award every year for the best initiative to combat homelessness.

More information can be found in English on the Ministry of Local government and regional development website at [www.regjeringen.no](http://www.regjeringen.no) and The Norwegian state housing bank at [www.husbanken.no](http://www.husbanken.no)

## Annex - Surveying homelessness in Norway

### Background

Norway has conducted four nationwide homeless surveys. The first survey was conducted in 1996 based on the model used in a 1991 Swedish survey. There were a number of good arguments in favour of copying the Swedish survey: The method had already been designed and tested. Generally speaking, Norway and Sweden have the same welfare system, and it could therefore be assumed that both the method and the definition of homelessness were transferable. In 2005, Denmark adopted largely the same definition and method. Thus there are three Nordic countries with reasonably comparable figures for, and profiles of, homelessness.

Norway has repeated the survey three times: in 2003, 2005 and 2008. The figures for 2008 were published in June 2009. Together these four surveys constitute a time series with comparable figures.

### Design and method

The method is quantitative data collection based on a questionnaire. The design describes the overall approach and organisation of the survey. The respondents in the study are bodies that have, or are assumed to have, contact with homeless people. This requires a two-step study: step one is a survey of the respondents and step two is the respondents' registration of the homeless people they have contact with or are aware of.

The number of respondents has increased by around 40 per cent since 1996 and the last survey (2008) involved 1,292 respondents. The respondents can be categorised into the following main categories: social services, housing services, child welfare services, health services (substance abuse rehabilitation and mental health services are the most important), correctional services, police and district sheriffs, temporary provision for homeless people and crisis centres for women. The respondents are local authorities, national agencies and private bodies (mainly NGOs). Social services are a typical example of a local authority respondent group; the Norwegian Correctional Services is a national agency, while health services encompass both local authority and national respondents.

The definition and operationalisation of homelessness is part of the research design. The definition consists of two elements. The starting point is that people are without owned or rented housing. *In addition* homelessness is delimited to the following situations: The person lacks overnight shelter, lives in temporary provision, is in prison or an institution and is going to be released or discharged within two months, or the person is temporarily living with friends, acquaintances or relatives. People who permanently live with close relatives or next of kin are *not* regarded as homeless.

The survey is a cross-section study. It records the number of homeless people at a given point in time. The registration of the homeless people in all four of the surveys was carried out in the last week in November/first week in December. The registration is done by the respondents filling in a questionnaire for each homeless person they know of in the relevant week. The questionnaire contains the following groups of questions: some background questions, questions about where



they live and questions about the length of homelessness, health, addictions and - introduced in 2008 - debt, loss of income, and situations associated with eviction/loss of housing. The scope of the questionnaire has to be limited, both because a number of respondents fill in a large number of forms and because many of the respondents have limited knowledge about the people they are registering.

All of the forms are returned to the research institute conducting the study. The great number and breadth of respondents means a number of people are registered two or more times (10-12 per cent in the four surveys). Some personal characteristics are registered on each form (initials, *day* of birth and *year* of birth, but not month) with the permission of the Norwegian Data Inspectorate. The only purpose of these is to identify duplicates. This information must be deleted at the end of the project, with the exception of year of birth.

The consent of the homeless people being registered is not obtained. Some personal data is classified as sensitive and partially identifying information. This means that the respondents must be given a dispensation from their professional duty of confidentiality.

The last step involves organising the data set and analysing the data. One time consuming part of this is identifying duplicates. The software picks out the forms with identical personal characteristics (see above). These are manually checked before one confirms whether or not it actually is a duplicate. Norway has 430 local authorities and a representative sample has been taken from smaller local authorities. The number of homeless people in the whole country is calculated on the basis of this sample. A weighting factor is incorporated for the non-response of respondents. Together this results in a figure for homeless people in the whole country. The data set has a large number of units (homeless people). However, the number of variables has been limited, which also restricts the opportunities for analysis. The introduction of a number of new questions in 2008 resulted in more material and provided an opportunity for more advanced analysis techniques than before.

### Methodological challenges in the data collection

Generally speaking, one of the major challenges in surveys is a to obtain a sufficiently high response rate. Expanding the respondent sample, as has been done in the four surveys, increases the risk of respondents not responding because one is including an increasing number of respondents who have little contact with homeless people. One can also see that the non-response rate in these groups is high, while the local authority social services, which have the most contact with the homeless and register the most, have a response rate of around 90%.

The actual registration work is a big job for the most important respondents, especially for the social services in large cities. It is therefore important to try and gain support for conducting the surveys from local authority managers, as well as the management of the Norwegian Correctional Services and health enterprises. Experience shows that the response rate will be highest in those places where the work with the homeless is embedded in the local authority's political and/or administrative leadership.

One may not actually reach all of the homeless by registering the homeless via the support systems during the registration week. However, the actual design of the research, going through

the support systems, entails a limitation of the definition of homelessness. People with a housing problem who resolve it themselves are thus not counted as homeless. However, it is probable that the registration does not capture absolutely everyone it would be reasonable to count as homeless. Experience from four surveys provides a good indication that the utilised research design and method provide a good picture and a representative cross-section picture of homelessness in Norway.