



Denmark 2005

## Preventing and Tackling Homelessness

Neighbours to New Public Services. Not in my Backyard



on behalf of

 European Commission  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





For the past ten years, small and decentralised units have replaced an increasing number of major institutional service offers for mentally and socially disadvantaged groups in Denmark.

The closing down of institutions and centralised treatment facilities has increased the need for local residential and treatment facilities. These could include supportive residential accommodation for various target groups, rehabilitation and reintegration facilities, shelters, activity facilities, etc.

Many of these facilities are located in close proximity to residential areas. Neighbours and residents in nearby areas often protest, with varying intensity, against having decentralised facilities placed in their neighbourhood.

The press often covers the reactions of neighbours. However, the coverage lacks in-depth accounts of how the neighbourhood relationships progress once the facilities are established and in the subsequent years. A Danish research project has studied eight of these new neighbourhood relationships.

The study involves four residential accommodation facilities for mentally ill people, three treatment facilities for drug misusers and a reception centre for the homeless.

One of the study's overall questions is whether resistance from neighbours is a fact to be accepted or whether counties and local authorities can do anything to counter such resistance.

Another question is how the new neighbourhood relationships develop in practice.

The study shows that insecurity decreases considerably once local residents have become acquainted with their new neighbours. However, the differences also show that this is not a certainty. There seem to be combinations of local areas and user groups where despite some reduction the facilities still cause considerable insecurity in the community. The study has been unable to specify the exact causal relations, but some neighbours refer to the unfortunate behaviour of some individuals. Moreover, statistically, some of the neighbours' current attitudes seem to be tied to a strong original resistance against the establishment of the service.



When an area's previous behavioural norms are broken, resistance and insecurity may persist and end up pervading the entire service.

When the neighbours were asked to give an overall assessment of the neighbourhood relationship with the various service facilities as experienced today, an essentially neutral picture emerged. Sixty-two percent of respondents belonged to this group; however, there were also groups with more value-laden attitudes.

### **Neighbour protests have several causes.**

A. Insecurity and uncertainty about the target group's future behaviour is the predominant, though not the only, reaction to most of the facilities. The neighbours were especially insecure as to whether crime and drug abuse rates would increase in the area; they feared unrest and vandalism and worried about children in the area, and some also feared a drop in property prices. Several neighbours also expressed fear of subsequent upgrading or change of target groups once the places had been approved for the given use.

B. The experience of not having been informed in due time, not having been heard or not having had any influence are also important arguments among protesting neighbours. The study showed that to a considerable extent the neighbours expect not only to be informed but also to have an active say in the decision. This may be because the neighbours feel they have compelling arguments for an alternative location. In other cases, neighbours do not want a different location but simply want a say in the conditions for placing a service in their area.

C. Protests may be founded on preconceived notions regarding a different use of the buildings in question, e.g. as a local cultural centre, kindergarten or housing for the elderly.

D. Concerns about the future appearance and use of the building in question and any neighbouring recreational areas constitute the fourth main category. Neighbours may fear an imposing new building, or have negative expectations about how the building will be maintained after the specific target group has moved in.



Opponents and/or neighbours who initially felt insecure about the new facilities make up the majority of respondents in key areas A and B.

On the one hand, this stems from negative expectations of the building's target group and, on the other hand, serves to express dissatisfaction with the public authorities' information procedures and disappointment at not having had any influence on the decision to establish the offers. In addition, 60% of the same people feel insecure about and resistant to the establishment of the facilities and request more information. However, a relatively large number of neighbours share this dissatisfaction with the information provided, although they neither felt insecure about nor opposed new neighbours.

Vandalism, drop in property prices, damage to recreational areas and new buildings are also some of the reasons provided.

When asked specifically whether they had actually encountered any of the troubles they had feared, the neighbours answered that some trouble had arisen but only to a modest extent. Between 40% and 50% of the neighbours had expressed fear about higher crime rates, greater numbers of drugs and syringes in the area, more disruptive people in the area and danger to the area's children.

In practice, as few as between 6% and 13% of the total neighbour group have experienced this kind of trouble, while 18% think that more people "hang around the neighbourhood".

However, it also appears that neighbour resistance does not remain at the same level once a day or 24-hour treatment programme has started. Once the neighbours have become used to meeting users or residents, maybe even got to know some of them, resistance dissipates.

At times, resistance even turns into active support of the new neighbour. However, this depends on how the service in general integrates with the community.

The following guidelines can be given for good neighbour relations:



- Open house events in connection with the move in, including holding of other events on a regular basis.
- The physical settings, including the surroundings, must be nice and presentable.
- As far as possible, neighbours' requests for fences, access routes, etc., should be considered, and any noise nuisance should be minimised.
- The neighbours must find it easy to communicate with the services, if they need to – for example, if a neighbour is being bothered by a user or knows about other problems of which the management and staff should be aware.
- Written information to neighbours, providing names and addresses of contact persons.
- Appointment of a contact group that represents the neighbours and acts as their spokesperson.

What are the neighbours' subsequent attitudes?

- Insecurity dropped to 10-16% after the facilities were established, and the feared trouble had largely failed to materialise.
- Most neighbours feel neutral towards the offers concerned, now that they have experienced at first hand the neighbourhood relationship with these offers.

Forum for Quality and Development in Public Services: *Neighbours of new public services*, September 2003.