

Norway 2006

National strategy to prevent and tackle homelessness

Short Report



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

The Peer Review was held in Oslo on 7-8 September 2006 and hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. In addition to the host country, eight peer countries participated in the review: Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Also taking part were stakeholder representatives from the Vienna Social Fund and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), and representatives from the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

A national strategy to combat homelessness was launched in Norway in 2004, with strong cross-party support in parliament. Due to run until 2007, it is intended to achieve three primary objectives and five specific targets:

Objective: Prevent people from becoming homeless.
Targets: Number of eviction applications to be reduced by 50 per cent, and actual evictions by 30 percent.
Nobody shall have to spend time in temporary housing upon release from prison.
Nobody shall have to seek temporary housing upon discharge from an institution.

Objective: Contribute to improving the quality of overnight shelters
Target: Nobody shall be offered overnight shelters without there being a quality agreement.

Objective: Help ensure that homeless people receive offers of permanent housing without undue delay.
Target: Nobody shall stay for more than three months in temporary housing.

The strategy puts strong emphasis on coordination between the different ministries and other agencies concerned. It also encourages cooperation with relevant non-governmental organisations. Compared to previous policies, it focuses more strongly on the prevention, as well as the elimination, of homelessness. The Peer Review centred on this strategy and its transferability, in whole or part, to other European countries.

Proportionately, homelessness is quite limited in Norway, which currently has a total population of about 4.6 million. Surveys show that there were 6,200 homeless people in 1996, 5,200 in 2003 and 5,500 in 2005. Three-quarters of them are male, and their average age is 35. 42 per cent of homeless people are not in immediate need of overnight shelter, as they lodge temporarily with relatives or acquaintances. Only 11 per cent of the homeless have no history of substance abuse and/or mental illness. Homelessness is still mainly a big city problem, although medium-sized towns are beginning to account for a larger share of the total.

The body responsible for coordinating the Norwegian strategy is Husbanken, the Norwegian State Housing Bank. Established in 1946 to tackle a post-war housing shortage, Husbanken has increasingly concentrated in recent years on helping the more vulnerable groups within the housing market. Since 2000, it has been officially responsible for coordinating work against homelessness. Although largely a top-down initiative by the national government and parliament, the Norwegian strategy relies mainly on local implementation by the municipalities. To ensure this, some "hard measures" are available (legal provisions, guidelines on the use of central government money, earmarking of funds). However, there is a strong reluctance to use these powers as a way of obliging municipalities to comply. Rather, the emphasis is on "soft measures" (funding and loans, networks and forums for communication, training, good practice awards and cooperation protocols). This is known as the "enabling approach" – the municipalities are provided with the means to do the job, including grants both from Husbanken and from the Directorate of Health and Social Affairs to build local competence and quality in tackling the homelessness issue.

In 2005, the relevant ministries signed an agreement with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) on measures to prevent and combat homelessness. Collaboration projects include one for contacting and assisting people threatened with eviction and another between the local authorities and the correctional services to prepare housing for people released from prison. Networks, forums and peer reviews are held for the cities and municipalities. These are important for exchanging ideas, communicating knowledge and maintaining focus on the strategy. Husbanken provides grants for home buyers, start loans for those who have difficulty raising capital and housing allowances designed to help people to acquire a home and keep it. This individually oriented funding is administered through the municipalities. A grant to the municipalities themselves can be provided by the Directorate of Health and Social Affairs, with the aim of strengthening or developing social support to homeless people or drug addicts.

Transferability

- Participants all agreed that a **“housing first”** approach is desirable – i.e. tackling homelessness within the wider context of ensuring adequate housing for all. Housing agencies and environment ministries also have a part to play in combating homelessness, which is not just a social issue.
- It was generally agreed that **some of the Norwegian “soft measures” are transferable**, without raising issues of funding. Local forums on the Norwegian model could spell significant progress in other European cities, and this is something that might be promoted by the European Commission.
- **Quality standards** for accommodation and services are important and need further discussion, but international standards would be difficult to set, due to the big differences in available resources. An additional problem in some countries is that accommodation of the “night shelter” type has, in theory, been abolished. It would be difficult to impose official standards for something that is no longer supposed to exist.
- On the issue of **phasing out “temporary accommodation”**, it first had to be noted that the phrase means different things in different countries. The aim should not be so much to phase the accommodation out as to shorten the length of time that people stay in it. So the bottlenecks between temporary and permanent accommodation should be eliminated as far as possible.
- The idea of specifically addressing the accommodation needs of **released prisoners** was a new one to many participants. They would take this point home with them for further reflection on how to tackle the issue in their own countries. Most participants agreed that previously institutionalised people are at particular risk of homelessness.
- All agreed that **it is possible for even the most marginalised people to be empowered** and to improve their lives. The Norwegian strategy is seen as a successful example of this approach.
- The Norwegian emphasis on **preventive measures** against homelessness was another issue to take home for more consideration.
- The setting of **targets** for the reduction of homelessness met with varying degrees of scepticism, depending on the scale of the problem in the country concerned. The important thing was to measure the progress achieved, and targets could always be adjusted if they were found to be unrealistic.
- The idea that landlords should give the social services advance notice of **evictions** proved controversial. No consensus was reached on this point, and there were doubts about the legal implications in some countries.
- The role of Husbanken was admired, and there was agreement that **one single agency should take the lead** in the fight against homelessness in each country. This would not pose any particular problems for countries with federal structures or autonomous regions, as the single agency could be constituted at the level appropriate to each country’s structures.

- **Political commitment** is an important factor in the Norwegian strategy, but would be more difficult to secure in some other countries. Mainstreaming might be one way forward, by including the housing issue within strategies on other questions.
- The Norwegian strategy is very well funded. As **limited resources** are a problem in some of the other countries, this could make it difficult to transfer completely the Norwegian experience. One suggestion was to take just some parts of the strategy and at least start with local and may be less comprehensive pilot projects.