

The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term Homelessness from the perspective of the Eurocities' Working Group on Homelessness (WGH). The WGH's model strategy for cities can be found at: www.eurocities.eu/uploads/load.php?file=Homelessness_final-AGOU.pdf. We welcome the Finnish National Programme as a very ambitious effort to address a part of strategic importance in the complex of homelessness. The FNPR is the latest link in a chain of initiatives to reduce homelessness in Finland.

The Finnish National Programme to reduce long - term homelessness was decided by the Finnish government in February 2008. The programme is aimed at halving long-term homelessness by 2011 and at ending it by 2015. It builds on the "Housing First" principle, which considers that appropriate permanent accommodation is a prerequisite for solving many other social and health problems, the programme seeks to reduce and gradually abandon the use of shelters and change them into supported rented accommodation units. Under the programme a total of 1,250 additional dwellings, supported housing units or places in care are to be created for long-term homeless people.

In order to enhance measures to prevent homelessness, the programme supports projects that procure supported housing for recently released prisoners and for young people at risk, and prevents evictions, e.g. by providing and expanding housing advisory services.

In the implementation of the programme, the Central Government cooperates closely with the country's ten largest cities with homeless populations, based on detailed letters of intent. The Central Government has set aside €80 million for covering the costs of creating new accommodation. The costs of additional personnel for support services (approx. €20.6 million) are shared between central government and the municipalities. The Finnish Slot Machine Association (RAY) contributes to the programme costs with an additional €18-20 million.

A brief assessment of the possible relevance of the policy to other countries in EU

In our opinion the Finnish National Program to Reduce Long-Term Homelessness is relevant to most European countries. It addresses an important social problem that exist in every EU country. The program is very well structured. It places the responsibility at the top, at government level as a part of the national housing policy and thus makes clear the intimate relation between ordinary housing and homelessness. The programme is based on formal agreements between the most relevant parties. In Finland they are the State and the municipalities. The partners

responsibilities within the programme are formally agreed on in detailed Letters of intent between the State and the City.

The programme is sufficiently funded, both for the production of the accommodations and for the necessary support services including the « extra costs » for staff. The latter costs are shared between the government and the municipalities.

It is also a programme with a common philosophy, The Housing First principle, which considers that appropriate permanent accommodation is a prerequisite for solving many other social and health problems. Included in the programme are efforts to reduce and gradually abandon the use of conventional shelters and change them into supported rented accommodation units.

The Finnish programme is also well focused as it engages only the ten biggest cities with homelessness in Finland and as it addresses just a part, but a part of strategic importance, of the homeless population, i.e. the long-term homeless. Further it focuses on two well defined groups: newly released prisoners and young people at risk. This is part of an important preventive dimension of the programme which also includes providing and developing housing advisory services to prevent evictions.

We think that the elements of the Finnish Programme that are of special relevance to other EU countries are:

- Structure
- All relevant parties are engaged
- Well defined responsibilities
- Ideology
- Sufficient funding
- Focussed
- Measurable targets
- Analysis of homelessness in Finland
- Research and best practises
- Development R&D

A weakness of the programme as we see it is that it does not address the gender question. There are no special systems or properties for homeless women within the programme. However the situation for homeless women – e.g. motherhood, exposure to violence and abuse - calls for special attention and maybe also special systems.

The results of the programme so far also highlight the complexity of homelessness. Even if the programme has been very successful in achieving the goals for production of accommodations

and for converting shelters, it seems not to have had the same success in achieving the goals for reducing the numbers of long-term homeless persons.

According to the statistics short-term homelessness in Helsinki has increased by over 300 people during the programme. However, at the same time the number of long-term homeless has reduced, which it can be assumed is partly due to the measures taken in the city in accordance with the programme. As much as half of Finland's homeless are in Helsinki which is why the capital is extremely important if the problem is to be successfully tackled. Reducing homelessness is made more difficult by the general situation regarding housing policy as well as structural factors: there are more and more people coming to live in Helsinki all the time, but very few new housing stock has been built. The tightening of the general housing markets affects the situation and this is not affected by the Finnish National Programme.

A brief assessment of the potential transferability of the policy under review (as a whole or in part) to other EU countries and of the likely conditions for its application or of the likely kinds of obstacles which would make it impossible to put in practice

As stated above the Finnish example meets many of the requirements for an effective national homelessness strategy:

- It is based on political commitment and parliamentary decisions on the national level. It involves the relevant Ministries.
- Responsibilities on the national level and the role of a coordinator are clarified: It is the Ministry of Environment, which also is responsible for housing policy.
- Mechanisms for local delivery of the policy are set. These are the financial incentives from the state and the letters of intent, which states tasks and obligations of national and local government in the ten largest cities.
- Objectives and a clear quantitative target have been defined and there are mechanisms for measuring if the target will be met.
- There is sufficient funding to finance the programme.

An effective homelessness strategy must be evidence based. In Finland the 'Group of the Wise' has the role to produce the evidence and to develop creative ideas on this basis and also out of their own experiences in the field. Some of the main elements of the strategy are supported by research evidence at European and international level even if more research is needed. It seems obvious that to reduce long-term homelessness access to appropriate housing has to be made available to this group. Furthermore, there must be adequate support matching the needs of the target group and measures preventing homelessness. But the questions remain about what is the most effective type of housing for specific groups of homeless persons and about the effectiveness of different types of support.

The task of eliminating long-term homelessness by 2015 and of converting shelters into permanent housing might be of high interest for other EU countries, which have also decided to follow a "Housing First" approach. There are still a lot of questions concerning the role of shelters and transitional housing within a "Housing First" system. How to avoid risking persons ending up in the street with nowhere to go. It might also be of learning value for those countries, which are still developing staircase systems and might consider redirecting efforts into providing permanent housing and adequate social support instead.

The transferability of a homelessness strategy to other EU countries and the need to adjust it to national and local circumstances depends on a number of factors, such as size and government structure of the country, the welfare regime, level of social protection and structure of social and health services, the structure of the housing market, the profile and number of homeless people.

A note of any important questions about the policy that are being raised and debated in stakeholders organisations

The Finnish policy as such has not been discussed in the Eurocities WGH. The focus of the discussions in the WGH has been on outlining a model for structuring the services to homeless persons within the cities, "The Integrated Chain Approach."

The "integrated chain" is a 'whole systems approach' that refers to the city's role in developing a range of commissioned services working together under a common strategy that seeks to support homeless households in their progress to the optimum level of independence and social inclusion. Within the "chain" there should be a range of services to meet the diverse needs of homeless people. The specifics of the "integrated chain" vary with local conditions, yet many of the measures which are put in place in the different cities are very similar. There are greater similarities between the integrated chain approach and the staircase model or the continuum of care model than with the more orthodox Housing First models. But there are also elements that are common with the principles of the Finnish National Programme even if there still are shelters within the "integrated chain approach". We think that the outcomes from the Finnish Programme will be of great value for promoting quality of accommodation and the principles of Housing First into the development of strategies in other European countries.

Within the "integrated chain" approach, the services should follow some guiding principles. In particular, they should demonstrate:

- Respect for the service user
- Strong evidence base for commissioning that includes aggregated quantitative data and qualitative information from service users and front-line staff
- Focus on reconciling accommodation, health and social needs
- Support for people to reach their optimum levels of independence
- Client focused support plans that are shared between agencies to provide seamless services
- Comprehensive responses to multiple needs including health care

- The allocation of accommodation and support in relation to need
- Strategic framework that relates funding to performance
- Strong performance management of agencies' contribution to meeting strategic objectives
- The development of a consensus to legitimise strategic leadership and communication of agreed aims
- Continual improvement of the quality of services and the buildings they are provided from.

Some of these principles will not be of the same importance in a system based on Housing First principles while others are still relevant.

There is recognition amongst the members of the EUROCITIES WGH that the prevention of homelessness is a primary aim. Allied to this is an understanding that homelessness is not simply resolved by increasing the supply of accommodation. To be successful, cities need to address the causes of homelessness and repeat homelessness and monitor the effectiveness of interventions.

The social, political and economic context within which homelessness occurs varies substantially across countries and between individual cities. The different conditions can lead to obstacles in the implementation.

The WGH has listed some challenges and obstacles to a successful approach against homelessness:

Policy related obstacles: A lack of central control, coordination of policies and services can cause problems for the implementation of an integrated approach to fighting homelessness. The disregard of prevention must also be mentioned.

A precondition for successful social inclusion is that the relevant stakeholders are in a position to cooperate with the social policy institutions and organisations. In order to make this cooperation possible, conditions must be created by public institutions and NGOs that meet the needs of their target groups.

The Finnish National Programme is a good example of how to overcome these obstacles.

There are also target-group related issues

There are various reasons for the loss of accommodation, the most frequent are changes in economic conditions (e.g. job loss, divorce, heavy indebtedness). Psycho-social problems – increasingly among younger people – are a further contributing factor towards homelessness. Stronger emphasis on the preventive work with young people to reduce the risk of drug abuse and criminality is needed. Due to the limited opportunities of city administrations to influence mainstream social trends, local support measures can only be seen as a supplement to national social policies.

The Finnish National Programme is a good example of a national policy targeting many of these questions.

The WGH has underlined that gender specific issues and needs must be better understood and and services developed. This is not dealt with in the Finnish National Programme.