

The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

Freek Spinnewijn
FEANTSA

The Finnish policies to address homelessness are amongst the most advanced in Europe. Finland is one of the few countries that has managed to consistently reduce the number of homeless people during the last two decades. It is also one of the few countries that retains its ambitious policy targets on homelessness in spite of the current economic crisis. Below you will find some comments on the Finnish strategy to end long-term homelessness. Our comments are based on FEANTSA's toolkit for effective homeless strategies. We believe that homelessness can be addressed effectively when the 10 approaches below are integrated in the homelessness strategy.

1. Evidence-based

The Finnish strategy to end long-term homelessness is based on solid evidence – both qualitative research and reliable data collection. Finland has a long tradition in collection of statistics on the number and the profile of the homeless population, and is one of the few countries in Europe that is able to study trends in homeless over longer periods of time. The collection of data is to some extent based on estimations, and there is probably room to further develop the data collection system along the lines outlined in the European Mphasis project with a stronger focus on flow and prevalence data. Data on the scope and profile of homelessness are collected annually in the Finnish strategy and allow for an effective monitoring of the strategy.

Monitoring of progress is an essential element of the Finnish strategy. Local authorities have to report annually on the progress they make as part of their agreement with the national authorities. There is also national monitoring through a national monitoring and guidance group. An intermediate evaluation of the whole programme will happen in 2011 and more thematic monitoring happens more regularly. The monitoring seems complete and very well organised, and certainly provides enough elements to inform and steer the strategy.

This Peer Review is organised as part of the monitoring process. It is interesting to note that Finnish authorities attach much value to transnational/European cooperation, even if the Finnish strategy is a long way ahead of homeless policies of many other EU Member States.

2. Comprehensive approach

We believe that an effective approach to homelessness should have the right balance between emergency intervention, integration, and prevention.

The Finnish strategy wants to reduce the use of emergency accommodation (such as night shelters) to an absolute minimum. The traditional large hostels will all be closed, and Finland has

opted for a radical 'Housing First' approach. It is the first country in the European Union to reduce in such a drastic way shelter accommodation and replace it by supported housing. It should be noted that such an approach might not currently be possible/beneficial in all EU Member States. In some countries the most urgent need is to make sure that there are sufficient places in emergency accommodation to make sure that people are not forced to live on the street or in structures not intended for habitation. The need for traditional shelter accommodation might depend on the stage that the fight against homelessness has reached in a country. It might also depend on the profile of the homeless population. In some countries the impact of migration on the scope and profile of the homeless population is important, with a lot of undocumented migrants and failed asylum seekers amongst the homeless. For these people shelter accommodation might be the only realistic *provision*. Finland is much less affected by migration – certainly *illegal* migration – and can therefore *afford* more easily to close hostels and shelters.

Finland has opted for the 'Housing First' approach, which sees housing as an essential instrument to reintegrate homeless people in society and not as the *final* result of an integration process which addresses social, psychological and other problems while people move through different forms of temporary accommodation. FEANTSA believes that the 'Housing First' approach has a lot of potential when enough housing of adequate quality is available. One of the strong aspects of the Finnish strategy is that sufficient funding has been set aside to guarantee housing for the long-term homeless. It is not entirely clear from the information received whether the other homeless people (the episodically and transitional homeless) also benefit from the 'Housing First' approach.

The prevention part of the Finnish homeless strategy is well developed. It focuses on the prevention of evictions. That makes sense and in quite a number of countries the same focus on eviction would exist because of its direct link with homelessness. The focus in the Finnish strategy on prevention of homelessness amongst young people and prisoners is less common. It would be interesting to understand better how the prevention of homelessness amongst young people is targeted to those youngsters vulnerable to homelessness. It seems that there is a strong focus on housing in the prevention part of the strategy. It might be interesting to know if also other routes into homelessness are being targeted such as domestic violence, family breakdown, etc.

3. Multi-dimensional approach

The Finnish strategy concentrates very much on housing and social support. We have the impression that the social support provided is especially health-related. It would be useful to know if the strategy also funds activities for homeless people in the areas such as employment, education, and culture. There are some very interesting experiences in other European countries with employment and education.

The cooperation between the different competent Ministries and the different levels of policy making seems to work very well. It is also clear what Ministry is responsible for the different aspects of the strategy. The Ministry of Environment, which is responsible for housing, seems to lead the strategy. This makes perfect sense as the Finnish government opted for the housing first approach to address homelessness.

The Finnish strategy seems to be based on strong inter-agency working. The different organisations providing services to the homeless seem to be on board. In many countries the providers of hostel accommodation are the single most important stakeholder in the fight against homelessness, and their role is seldom questioned. They often lead policy development in the area of homelessness and set the agenda. It is interesting to note that in the Finnish strategy providers of homeless hostels are involved, but they are expected to transform themselves and to radically change their role and working method. In the housing first approach there is no/minimal role for hostels. It would be interesting to get more information on how the providers of hostels lost control over homeless policies in Finland and how it became possible to set the closing of hostel accommodation as a target.

4. Rights-based approach

The Finnish constitution includes the right to housing. The right to housing is enforceable for people with severe disabilities or when child welfare is in danger. Finland also ratified relevant international human rights treaties which include the right to housing such as the revised Social Charter of the Council of Europe. Although the right to housing is not necessarily the driving force behind the homelessness strategy in Finland, it seems that there is a sufficient housing rights framework to underpin the strategy. There are only very few countries, such as France and Scotland, that go further than Finland in making the right to housing enforceable.

5. Participatory approach

All relevant stakeholders are involved in the design and implementation of the strategy. The limited population size and the relatively simple administrative organisations of Finland make a participatory approach easier.

The importance of participation of homeless people at the level of service provision is generally recognised. The participation of homeless people in policy design and evaluation is more contested. It seems that in the Finnish strategy there is not really any direct participation of homeless people. Maybe there is some through organisations like No Fixed Abode? The Finnish stakeholders might want to improve the participation of homeless people, and learn from countries where participation is more developed such as Denmark or the UK.

6. Statutory approach

It is not entirely clear from the information received whether the Finnish strategy to end long-term homelessness is enshrined in legislation or whether it is an ordinary decision of the current government. In countries without statutory policies on homelessness, there is a risk that public intervention on homelessness depends too much on the goodwill of the government in power. It seems that the cities involved in the Finnish strategy do so on a voluntary basis. There seems to be no statutory duty upon local authorities to develop homeless strategies, such as exist in countries like Scotland for instance. The involvement of local authorities is organized by means of letters of intent. It is unclear how secure and sustainable the mobilisation of local policy makers

can be when there is no obligation to address homelessness. It is of course possible that there is a tradition of independence of local authorities (as is the case in some other Scandinavian countries) and that therefore a statutory obligation for local authorities was unfeasible. In spite of the lack of a statutory obligation, the involvement of local authorities seems to be well developed. Also the commitment of the national authorities has been solid during the last few decades even if there seems to be no specific piece of legislation in relation to homelessness.

7. Sustainable approach

The Finnish strategy seems to be well resourced, and the funding comes from a diverse range of partners. The substantial input from the Slot Machine Association is particularly interesting, and probably unique in the European Union. It would be useful to understand better why the Slot Machine Association is involved, and to find out if similar associations in other countries could be mobilised around the issue of homelessness. The requirement of co-funding from the local level helps to integrate the fight against homelessness as a genuine part of local social inclusion policies. The funding is available for both investment in housing and in social support. Sufficient funding has also been made available to convince the providers of traditional hostel accommodation to convert their hostels into supporting housing. It seems that the funding plays an important role in the creation of a consensus amongst all relevant stakeholders to get involved in the strategy. It would be interesting to know if the high levels of funding are sustainable in the future years – especially in the context of the current economic crisis. Most countries are reducing public budgets in the social area – also for the fight against homelessness. Is there a danger that something similar might happen in Finland, and could it jeopardise the continuation of the ambitious strategy? The housing first approach is probably cheaper in the longer run, but if the introduction of this approach takes longer than anticipated the financial resources might get reduced. It would be interesting to know if Finland makes use or intends to use the financing facility in the ERDF for housing of marginalised groups. 3% of the ERDF funding could be allocated to this facility.

There is not much information about the political support and the support of the general public for the Finnish strategy and the cause of homelessness more in general. It seems as if the strategy is so technical that it has become the territory of specialists. There might be a risk that basis for an ambitious homeless strategy disappears without strong political backing and sufficient awareness of the general population on the urgency and nature of the problem of homelessness. Maybe there is room to improve the communication/publicizing of the homeless strategy? Finnish stakeholders including public administration and NGOs have for many years put the Finnish homeless strategy forward as an example to follow for other European countries in the context of the Inclusion OMC, which might help to keep the pressure on the partners involved in the strategy to deliver. It is unclear if such publicity campaigns also take place in Finland.

8. Needs-based approach

The Finnish strategy is based on a thorough understanding of the needs of homeless people – specifically the long-term homeless. The strategy combines the housing first approach with well-developed case management. We have the impression that the Finnish stakeholders are well aware of the challenges of the 'Housing First' approach on the organisation of social support.

There are budgets made available for the retraining of staff. The professionalism of staff is one of the most important factors defining the quality of the services for homeless people. It would be interesting to know a bit more about the content/focus of the staff training – is it focused on soft skills/interrelation skills or/and on hard skills/technical skills. The Finnish stakeholders are aware that the needs of the long-term homeless are diverse and that the solutions will have to be diverse as well. The focus on social innovation is interesting and quite unique in Europe. The results of the innovation projects will be relevant/interesting outside Finland as well.

9. Pragmatic approach

Finland has quite a long history of combating homelessness in an integrated and strategic way compared to most other EU member states. From the start of the first Finnish strategy, the Finnish authorities have made sure not to create too high expectations. The targets set have always been ambitious and achievable at the same time. The long term goal has always been to end/solve homelessness, but sufficient intermediary targets were set to reach this goal. The Finnish approach to homelessness shows that it is possible to solve homelessness, but that sufficient time has to be allocated. The realism of the Finnish authorities has allowed to sustain a political momentum on the issue of homelessness. There is a risk that if the targets are set too high and the timeframe to deliver is too short, that the political momentum disappears from the moment it become clear that the targets will not be reached.

10. Bottom-up approach

The local authorities are essential partners in the Finnish strategy. The main cities in Finland all develop local homeless strategies in cooperation with the central administration. Targets are set which are adapted to the local context which seems to be different in the cities involved. Local authorities seem to be aware of the urgency of the problem of homelessness and their important role. The financial responsabilisation for part of the local homeless strategy seems to work well.

Homelessness is predominantly an urban problem, but rural homelessness is an issue of growing concern in some Member States. The problem of rural homelessness is less visible and less concentrated than urban homelessness, and therefore more difficult to address effectively. It is not clear from the information received whether rural homelessness is an issue in Finland and how it is addressed. It could be necessary to widen the partnership to a wider group of local authorities and/or to get the regional level of policy making involved in the strategy.

Cooperation with all relevant stakeholders is as important for policy design as it is for policy implementation. The local level seems the most relevant for policy implementation. It is not entirely clear from the information provided whether relevant stakeholders such as the social housing sector or the social support sector are well enough established in all cities involved in the strategy. The voluntary homelessness sector for instance seems to be concentrated in the urban area around the capital Helsinki. It would be interesting to know how the expertise and knowledge of this sector is used to address homelessness in other parts of the country, whether there is some organized way to exchange experiences/best practices between cities.

Lessons for Europe

- Finland is one of the European countries that changed the overall aim of public intervention on homelessness from *managing* homelessness in the shelter system to **ending homelessness**. There only a handful of other European countries that are committed to solving homelessness (or at least aspects of it). There are a few more countries which have an integrated strategy against homelessness, but which have not had the courage/possibility yet to commit to ending homelessness. There is a growing transnational dynamic between public administrations in these countries (still fragile) which helps them to keep/raise the ambitions. Also the EU has become more active and ambitious in the fight against homelessness. In the Joint Report 2010 the EPSCO Council agreed that all countries should developed integrated strategies. The European Parliament asked for more EU ambition on homelessness already in 2008, and a Written Declaration which is currently open for signing asks for an EU strategy to support member states to end homelessness. In this context, the European Commission - as motor/initiator of the EU Anti Poverty Strategy - should encourage public administrations from other countries to get involved in European cooperation on homelessness. The European Commission should develop a framework for such cooperation and build on the expertise of the Finnish authorities and their interest to play an important role at European level. The focus on public authorities would be very important to make cooperation on homelessness at European level sustainable, but links with the other stakeholders such as NGOs (via FEANTSA) would obviously be necessary.
- Growing number of countries are interested in the **Housing First approach** to homelessness. Finland is probably most advanced in implementing it. The European Commission should build on this interest across Europe and the expertise of Finland (see also the innovation projects) to promote the housing first approach European-wide. This is in line with the strong emphasis of the EU on social innovation/social experimentation in the social area (see Agenda2020). It could also be easily linked with the new financing facility in the ERDF for housing interventions for marginalised communities (up to 3% of ERDF).
- There is much scope for improving the **quality of services** for the homeless across Europe. Training of staff is an important element in this. The focus of the Finnish strategy on staff training can serve as an example. The European Commission should - maybe in cooperation with Cedefop - look into the added value of an EU initiative on staff training in the homeless and *neighbouring* sectors on homelessness. This is in line with the strong focus on *skills* in the EU2020 strategy, and would respond to a demand in most Member States.