

The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

Annika Remaeus
National Board of Health and Welfare

Marcus Knutagård
The School of Social Work, Lund University

Short summary of the Finnish homelessness strategy

In February 2008, the Finnish government adopted a programme aimed at halving long-term homelessness by 2011. Referring to the "Housing First" principle, which considers that appropriate permanent accommodation is a prerequisite for solving other social and health problems, the programme seeks to reduce and gradually abandon the use of conventional 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 have 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.

Short introduction to the Swedish strategy

The national strategy in Sweden was based on the mapping carried out in 2005 and the experience from the previous work to combat homelessness, on national level as well as on local level. A lot of knowledge and inspiration is also gained from strategies and work in the other Nordic countries. In Sweden there are also researchers that have an impact on the policy level. The Swedish government have an aim to build their policy on evidence based practice.

Since 2002, the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) has been commissioned by the government to obtain knowledge about the extent of homelessness and to develop methods for counteracting homelessness using surveys and supporting local development projects.

In February 2007, the government – for the first time – presented a national strategy for counteracting homelessness. The strategy is called Homelessness – multiple faces, multiple

responsibilities. This summer (2010) NBHW presented a final report to the government about the outcome of the strategy.

Key issues for debate at the Peer Review meeting

The homelessness strategy itself

There has to be a political will to carry out and implement a concentrated effort to formulate this will in a strategy. The strategy may be targeted to different levels of society - the state, regional and local, since the responsibility for the issue may be on different levels. A first step is to see homelessness as a separate problem area. The complexity of the problem implicates that a large number of actors and policies need to co-operate in order to achieve a common goal. Sweden has a publicly funded welfare system where society has the responsibility for measures to people living in homeless situations. The voluntary sector also has become a major role as provider of welfare services.

In order to formulate a strategy knowledge is required regarding the extent and character of homelessness. A homelessness survey provides knowledge of the factual situation. Which groups are at risk of homelessness? Which are already homeless? The most recent survey in Sweden was carried out in 2005. It is necessary that the surveys are carried out regularly, with definitions which make it possible to compare the situation over time. Today, there are major deficiencies in the surveys at the local level and a great need to find ways to gain knowledge of the local homelessness situation. With a lack of such local mappings, it is difficult to conduct local assessments, as there is not enough material to compare. From local surveys in Sweden we can notice that, for example, the number of women living in homelessness is increasing.

The Swedish homelessness strategy is designed like the other Nordic strategies in the sense that the government has allocated funds, but the responsibility to carry out and implement efforts is a municipal matter.

Sweden adopted its first strategy on combating homelessness in 2007. Norway had adopted its strategy a few years earlier.

There are similarities in the Swedish homelessness strategy in relation to the Finnish. However, there are a few important differences. In the Swedish strategy one objective is that no child should be evicted. This is the quantitatively most obvious target set by the government, besides the objective of ensuring that everyone is guaranteed a roof over his or her head. The Finnish approach is an explicit goal of halving homelessness, which is an ambitious goal, and also eliminate the long-term homelessness by 2015. The allocation of resources in the Finnish homelessness strategy is also significantly higher than the funds that the Swedish government has set aside. The Swedish homelessness strategy also lacks a target that in a more structural way develop the housing policy in order to prevent homelessness. The Swedish strategy gives priority to people who should be released from prison. Local project in some municipalities have had this as their primary goal in efforts to combat homelessness. Efforts to prevent evictions have become dominant in the Swedish homelessness policy. In the Swedish strategy there are no

specific municipalities selected for development projects. Instead it has been an open application process for the state funds.

The principle of “Housing First”: How is it understood in different national contexts?

Housing First could in a way be seen as a philosophy. From this, methods are developed, which have been evaluated. These include the Pathways to Housing. It is important not to consider Housing First as simply rhetoric. Individually designed supportive measures are needed, along with a permanent residence. It is a basic approach: permanent solutions are the best way to combat homelessness in the long-term perspective – the possibilities to make individual choices are important. The question to ask is not who can have a home of one’s own, but what is needed for the person to be accommodated with a contract. In Sweden, the contract for an apartment has become a symbolic issue. Method development is in progress concerning the factors that constitutes the Housing First model in a Swedish context.

In Swedish homelessness research “the own contract” is highlighted as an important criterion for Housing First. Then the system with the so called “secondary housing market” can be challenged. The challenge is about seeing what obstacles and opportunities that exist for its own contracts shall be offered, instead of the system with subletting contracts associated with supervision/special terms and conditions.

The Swedish homelessness research has also, like in Denmark; emphasized the importance of stimulating municipalities applying scientifically based methods. The importance of local evaluation is noted, also local conditions in terms of opportunities for assistance, the housing market composition and other relevant factors. Some attempts have been initiated in Sweden. One of the challenges related to Housing First from a group of long-term and active abuse is the issue of harm reduction, which is inevitable. It is currently too early to comment on the experience gained from these trial projects, but projects to be evaluated over a longer period of time is paramount.

In Sweden, there is still temporary accommodation. The goal must be that so few people as possible do live there, and to stay there as short a time as possible. Finland’s approach inspires raising goal.

In Sweden temporary accommodation is mainly seen as part of an outreach. Homeless people who do not have contact with society, or people who are at risk of becoming homeless can be reached and get help and support. An important starting point based on available research, however, is the need of minimizing a system that requires the relocation of several housing options with various types of temporary housing. Another important objective of the discussions on the introduction of the Housing First programme in Sweden has been user participation. In efforts to combat homelessness, it is necessary to actively take advantage and see the importance of people’s own experience of homelessness as an important source of knowledge. The approach is based on the idea of user-driven innovation.

Countries which have large groups of people living in vulnerable circumstances must be supported by countries that have more knowledge about homelessness and have experience of policy decisions that have long-term negative consequences.

The focus on long-term homelessness and prevention: Is it an adequate focus?

Focus on both long-term homelessness and prevention is adequate. The consequence is that the work has to focus both on preventing the group of homeless persons to increase and to provide support to the group with the greatest needs. Studies from Swedish substance and addiction services show that there is a rather small group of people that requires a great deal of the resources. Gender based statistics should be presented, where it is possible. Research shows that there are differences on a number of variables when it comes to the needs among women and men who are homeless. This knowledge should be apparent in the activities offered women and men. There is also a high risk that homeless women are not visible in the surveys carried out.

Adequate types of housing (and support) for long-term homeless people: what is needed and

What has proved effective?

This is primarily a housing policy issue - access to cheap and available housing is a key. Research shows that such a permanent solution as possible is most effective, with appropriate support facilities added. Continuum of care cannot be dismissed if it is given to people who are in addiction treatment. The research also points out the benefits of Scattered housing with an optional personalized support. Large housing projects for specific groups generate other problems than they were intended to solve.

Intensity, type and duration of support needed for sustainable re-housing of long-term homeless people: What are the experiences in Finland and the Peer Review countries?

Today, there is knowledge about how to design support for people who live in different vulnerable situations (abuse, mental illness, immigration, children and young people). The user requests should be more visible in the debate. The individual's choice is an important source. In a strategy, the role of the different actors should be described. It will make a structural work easier. Monitoring of the activities offered is needed. Research is needed that highlights the impact of the intervention. The knowledge has to be increased regarding the individual's way in and out of homelessness. It is also important to give the change time. It is much easier to define a relapse as a failure than consider it as a step in an effort to remove obstacles to recovery. People with personal experience of homelessness, who are active in giving supportive measures should be highlighted and taken into account, where providers of supportive measures may be discussed.

Setting quantitative targets: What are advantages and disadvantages of target setting?

A strategy without measurable goals may be a first step and seen as a preference. But to be followed up, the strategy should contain measureable goals. It is difficult if there are no indicators that measure homelessness. Questions to be answered are for example: What is the best possible level? What is possible to achieve within a specific time limit? In the Finnish work to combat homelessness some milestones are reached.

Governance issues

The role of different stakeholders (who needs to be included for developing an effective homelessness strategy?)

Many actors have a responsibility for homelessness issues. In Sweden, the state has the overall responsibility but it is the municipalities at the local level that transform policy into action. The work is governed by the Social Services Act. In many municipalities, the voluntary sector are involved and play an increasingly important role both as providers of services but also as an actor to raise questions and create public opinion. Homelessness is about housing so of cause housing policy is very important, both on national and local level.

Implementation at local level (role of letters of intent versus alternative models)

Letter of intent is a model of interest compare to the more traditionally project model.

Focus on ten largest cities

Focus on the largest cities or the cities that have the most severe problems are adequate.

Role of the EU

The EU has a role to play. FEANTSA has paved the way for European cooperation. EU Structural Funds can be a tool that supports research and monitoring of implementation efforts. One Sweden experience is that local projects have limited effects when it comes to combating homelessness in a long-term perspective. The situation for a number of individuals may be improved, but other methods are needed in order to change the structure. Finland and Denmark have tried to make agreements between central and local governments on implementing changes. These two countries have invested a lot of resources. In the field of addiction treatment Sweden has tested the same model. In our country we now are working to consolidate knowledge through local and regional agreements.