
A Proposal for a Good Homelessness Strategy

Shmulik Szeintuch

Sapir College, Israel

Introduction

This Think Piece is an extract from a larger research project entitled *Homelessness Strategies in European Union Member States – The State of Play in 2024* (Szeintuch, 2024a). It follows on from a contribution in the previous issue of the European Journal of Homelessness “*Homelessness Strategies in Europe – A review of the literature*” (Szeintuch, 2024b). Having collected the existing international academic knowledge regarding homelessness strategies, as well as having analysed the European Union’s existing national and other strategies, this proposal for a good homelessness strategy aims to give practical hands-on guidelines for those who want to develop or renew a homelessness strategy. The proposal contains all of the relevant components, which we believe are important for a good and successful strategy, and has enhanced potential for comprehensive implementation. It is intended for policymakers as well as government officials, civil society representatives, academics and people with lived experience of homelessness, and anyone else that will be undertaking the task of developing or renewing a homelessness strategy. As this proposal is based on the review of the literature, and on homelessness strategies found in the larger research paper (Szeintuch, 2024a), most of which are European, context-specific and local elements should be implemented into this skeleton to make it operational in your country, region or municipality.

The nine homelessness strategy building blocks of the OECD Toolkit (OECD, 2024), provide guidance to support policymakers throughout the policy design, implementation and management phases. The toolkit explains the relevance, operational issues, guidance, and good practices related to these building blocks, which are all represented in the skeleton presented here. In this Think Piece, we are using these building blocks, among other elements, as a starting point from which to delve into detail and offer ways to enact them.

Before outlining the elements of the Good Homelessness Strategy, some questions and issues regarding homelessness strategies are addressed below:

- What is a 'homelessness strategy'?
- Why should we have a homelessness strategy and what is it useful for?
- Who are the stakeholders that should be involved in developing a homelessness strategy in your area?
 - ... and who are the stakeholders that should be involved in its implementation?
- How can we evaluate a homelessness strategy in a more elaborate way than just measuring the reduction in the number of people experiencing homelessness?
- How can we make sure to develop a strategy that transcends governments from different political orientations, so as to not end good programmes just because the ruling party changes?
- Should there be an EU homelessness strategy?
- Does *EPOCH – the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness* serve as this EU homelessness strategy, or should there be more to it?
- When developing a homelessness strategy what are the roles of each of the different levels – EU, federal, national, regional, municipal, as well as civil society, and people with lived experience of homelessness?
 - This question is relevant for the development stage of a strategy, as well as the implementation phase, with potentially different answers at each of these stages.
- The lead agency ideally plays an enabling role and adopts effective mechanisms for multi-level governance. The level of the political lead depends on how competences are organised in each country – when local government is on the frontline but cannot tackle homelessness effectively unless national/regional government provides a genuinely enabling framework. The question is what should be the level of the political lead?
- How do we shift from emergency shelter to long-term permanent housing without reducing shelter capacity at a time when there is not enough of it, and when many of the people that need it are not eligible for permanent support?
- Even though Housing First exists in 87% of EU strategies in 2024, and housing-led initiatives in 68% of them (Szeintuch, 2024a), how do we enlarge the actual proportion of these services across Europe, whilst bearing in mind that there is no one-size fits-all approach?

Are there people experiencing homelessness who are left out of the strategy? If so – how do we bring them in?

- There is a growing awareness that migration may have become a structural factor of homelessness (Hermans et al., 2020). According to the European Social Policy Network (ESPN), experts in 35 European countries cite, “experience of homelessness may be linked to ethnicity and to migrant status [...] in more than half of the countries [...] a majority of homeless people are nationals or belong to the national majority population, although in some of them there are reports of overrepresentation of some ethnic minority populations and/or of recent rising trends” (Baptista and Marlier, 2019: 43). Therefore, it seems that where relevant, homelessness strategies should consider incorporating migrants – regardless of their administrative status.
- Further, Roma people should also be included wherever relevant. In a European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network (2023) research, regarding Roma access to quality and affordable housing in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Spain, a consensus was established that, according to the ETHOS definition, most Roma experience homelessness. The research also found that there is a clear lack of data regarding Roma homelessness. The research mentions the EU Council Recommendation on Roma Equality, Participation, and Inclusion which, in its discussion regarding access to adequate desegregated housing and essential services, calls on Member States to enact “measures to provide social support and access to mainstream services for homeless Roma people” (Official Journal of the European Union, (19.3.2021): p. C 93/10, item f).

A few pointers regarding homelessness strategies:

- Implementation is key – There is a difference between good intentions – no matter how good the strategy development and structure – and implementation.
- Permanent long-term housing supply is key in any homelessness strategy.
- Consistency is important – a one-time homelessness count, or a one-time strategy for a limited period are not enough; people experiencing homelessness need a permanent long-term strategy or strategies to end homelessness, including monitoring and data collection.

Key Elements of a Good Homelessness Strategy

Below you will find some key issues and points that should be part of any good and effective homelessness strategy that may also be implemented in a comprehensive manner:

- 1. Legal framework
- 2. A human rights approach to homelessness
- 3. Mission, objectives, targets and goals
- 4. Collaboration
- 5. Implementation
- 6. Governance
- 7. Funding
- 8. Data collection
- 9. Prevention
- 10. Temporary accommodation
- 11. Permanent long-term housing solutions
- 12. An integrated approach
- 13. Time frame
- 14. Monitoring and evaluation

Below we will discuss each of these issues succinctly, and for elaboration, please see Szeintuch (2024a; 2024b).

Legal framework

The legal framework of the strategy should be stated, giving the strategy a legal basis which may be binding.

A human rights approach to homelessness

A human-rights-based approach to realising the right to housing and other rights for people experiencing homelessness should be reflected in the strategy.

Mission, objectives, targets and goals

Mission: Provide people experiencing homelessness with decent healthy lives and wellbeing.

Primary objective: Ending homelessness.

Secondary objective 1: Delivery of long-term permanent housing.

Secondary objective 2: Prevention.

Target 1: Reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness.

Target 2: Reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation.

Goal 1: Collection of data.

Goal 2: Building and securing enough long-term permanent housing.

Collaboration

The strategy should be developed and implemented in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders: different tiers of government at federal, national, regional and local level, as well as quasi-governmental and non-governmental agencies, including experts by lived experience of homelessness.

Implementation

Implementation should be at the heart of the strategy during the development stage, including clear guidance for its implementation.

Governance

Preferably one single agency should take the lead in the fight against homelessness. This agency will coordinate all the relevant agencies taking part in this fight.

It is advisable to address, from the outset, the potential pitfalls of coordination among different service providers and institutional systems in delivering services on the local level, such as social services, health services, criminal services, housing authorities, etc.

Funding

There should be significant investment in permanent housing, adequate financing mechanisms and increased budgets and funding. Funding should be appropriate and realistically able to achieve the mission, objectives, targets and goals of the strategy.

Data collection

The strategy should include a firm commitment to an on-going collection of measurable and reliable data about homelessness and available housing options.

Prevention

Strategies should be prevention oriented. This means they should strive to:

- Reduce poverty.
- Provide affordable housing.
- Reduce evictions.
- Identify people at risk of homelessness.
- Mainstream homelessness prevention across systems like welfare, health, migration, criminal justice and child prevention.

Temporary accommodation

Strategies should ensure an adequate level of temporary accommodation, ensure that shelter is dignified, and that it can fulfil its intended function as emergency, short-term provision. The length of time that people stay in temporary accommodation should be shortened, to eliminate bottlenecks between temporary and permanent accommodation.

Permanent long-term housing solutions

Strategies should incorporate a housing-led approach. This should include Housing First and/or other such programmes.

An integrated approach

In addition to prevention, temporary accommodation and permanent long-term housing solutions, homelessness strategies should incorporate an integrated approach, which brings together all relevant fields in managing homelessness while striving to end it.

Time frame

Strategies should consider committing to ending homelessness by the year 20XX. In the absence of such a commitment, strategies should state a firm timeline that coincides with clear goals.

Monitoring and evaluation

Strategies should incorporate annual or bi-annual reporting on progress, including various indicators, such as numbers of people experiencing homelessness, numbers of long-term permanent housing units built – and those converted from short-term to long-term – and numbers of evictions, etc.

Finally, a key question is for whom the strategy is being developed. In this context, the strategy developers may want to consider the following non-exhaustive list of specific target populations that may deserve special attention:

- Sheltered people experiencing homelessness
- Un-sheltered people experiencing homelessness
- People experiencing homelessness who do not access services
- Revolving door clients
- Roma
- Asylum seekers
- Refugees
- Internal EU migrants
- Undocumented migrants
- People with no legal right to reside in a certain jurisdiction
- Child welfare-involved families and youth
- LGBTQI+ people

- People with chronic health conditions and co-occurring disorders
- People with current or past criminal justice system involvement
- People with disabilities
- People with HIV
- People with mental health conditions
- People using drugs
- Pregnant and parenting youth
- Women
- Survivors of domestic violence, stalking, sexual assault, and human trafficking
- Children (younger than 12)
- Youth (age 12-17)
- Young adults (age 18-25)
- Families with minor children
- Older adults (age 55 and older)

Conclusion

Are homelessness strategies – in themselves, or as part of a wider housing strategy, anti-poverty strategy or another strategy – the way, or at least a brick on the path, to ending homelessness? This question is important also in relation to Ursula von der Leyen (2024), President of the European Commission's commitment to support Member States in addressing the housing crisis, including by appointing "a Commissioner whose responsibilities will include housing, [whilst putting] forward a first-ever European Affordable Housing Plan. This will address structural drivers, develop a strategy for housing construction, offer technical assistance to cities and Member States and focus on investment" (19).

Having a homelessness strategy can be extremely useful but is not a goal in and of itself. The mere existence of a strategy does not necessarily mean "better" policies, services or outcomes. Strategies can serve different purposes at different stages in policy cycles. For example, strategies can be used to build a homelessness system, to reform a homelessness system, to trigger innovation, to unlock funding,

and to align stakeholders and set a policy direction. Finally, some countries with mature homelessness policies may have quite “light touch” strategies because much work was done under previous strategies.

► References

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