

# LEARNING FROM PAST EXPERIENCE: NEW DANISH HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY TARGETS STRUCTURES THAT PREVENT HOUSING FIRST

A majority in the Danish Parliament has adopted a joint homelessness and housing agreement to be implemented from 2022. The agreement is a landmark approach to homelessness in Denmark, as it recognises and addresses structural factors that have prevented previous efforts to combat homelessness. Yet, it leaves out important questions that are necessary to address if all people experiencing homelessness are to benefit from the strategy.



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In November 2021, a political agreement with a plan to combat homelessness was published in Denmark. Its stated goal is to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness significantly and to abolish long-term homelessness entirely. A review of the key elements of the agreement testifies to its potential.

Combining housing and social policy, the strategy seeks to remove barriers that have previously prevented a successful implementation of Housing First at the national level. Thus, recognising and targeting structural causes, the strategy marks an important shift in the way homelessness is perceived and treated, bringing new hope that this strategy will succeed in bringing more people out of homelessness.

## TARGETING THE STRUCTURES THAT PREVENT EFFECTIVE HOMELESSNESS INTERVENTIONS

It is not the first time the parliament of Denmark has wished to implement Housing First. Efforts to put the approach into effect were introduced back in 2009 with the 'Homeless Strategy'. However, to this day Housing First has only been used to a limited extent. According to an analysis by the National Board of Health and Welfare, only 8% of citizens experiencing homelessness have received an intervention based on Housing First in the period from 2019 to 2020.

The analysis shows that providing enough permanent housing with an appropriate rent level has been a problem for the municipalities, which is where the specific homelessness efforts are anchored. In addition, a state reimbursement system has limited the financial incentives of

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the municipalities to find and offer regular permanent housing instead of allocating people living in homelessness to homeless hostels and shelters. According to Danish regulations, the state reimburses municipalities for half of the cost of the stays at these temporary housing solutions.

In combination with the lack of affordable permanent housing, this has contributed to an increase over the last ten years of the number of people with long-term stays in hostels. Statistics demonstrate that the number of people who have lived in a hostel throughout an entire year has increased by 43 per cent in the period from 2010 to 2020. This means that for a significant number of people, a stay at a hostel is a prolonged situation. A survey conducted by the National Board of Appeal shows that homeless hostels themselves assess that almost seven out of ten citizens are “ready” to move into stable housing, but that many have to wait a long time for a proper housing solution.

These are some of the systemic and structural barriers that the new homelessness strategy now seeks to do away with.

The Danish government and the parties behind the agreement intend to implement Housing First on a national level once and for all through several different measures: they plan to reduce the rent in existing public housing, build new affordable houses, reorganise the state reimbursement scheme, and create a new housing benefit clause in the Service Act that reinforces the use of the specialised housing support methods of Housing First. Furthermore, the agreement explicitly emphasises that night shelters, hostels, and other temporary housing solutions should be exactly that – temporary. Finally, it stresses the importance of proper social support in the housing-led interventions.

Key initiatives in the agreement include:

- A temporary rent reduction in 1,800 existing public housing units to which the municipalities have full allocation rights.
- Permanently reducing the rent in up to 2,250 new public housing units.
- A new provision in the Social Service Law regarding social support to citizens experiencing homelessness when they are offered housing and with the purpose of housing retention. This provision will ensure floating support services based on one of the three methods CTI, ICM and ACT.
- New reimbursement rules that dictate that the previous state reimbursement of 50% of the municipalities’ expenses for accommodation in homeless hostels is waived after 90 days. Instead, a 50% state reimbursement is introduced for the municipalities’ expenses for housing support (after the new Social Service Law provision) following a stay at a homeless hostel.
- Establishment of a national partnership with different stakeholders who will observe and discuss developments in the field along the way.

While state authorities are working on the legal texts to support the strategy, we are currently witnessing how Danish municipalities are mobilising resources to organise and investigate possible local efforts that can turn the newly adopted strategy into practice.

Hopefully, the new reimbursement rules in combination with the other key initiatives will work against the institutionalisation of people experiencing homelessness and make way for a basic human right: a home of one's own. Still, the agreement leaves out important questions that are necessary to address if all people living in homelessness are to benefit from the strategy.

## LACK OF FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH, PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH, AND EU CITIZENS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

By making a joint housing and homelessness agreement, the Danish government recognises that the problem of homelessness reaches beyond social policy. Unfortunately, it fails to include important health policy perspectives. Even though many people experiencing homelessness struggle with mental illness<sup>1</sup>, neither treatment of mental illness nor psychiatric support have been included as points of attention in the agreement.

Another important shortcoming of the agreement is the fact that it does not mention people sleeping rough, many of which live in social isolation and in dire conditions in the streets. Often their contact with authorities and homeless accommodation services is sporadic or even non-existent. The strategy, thus, fails to consider and address the

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1 A national survey on homelessness by the Danish Center for Social Science Research shows that the most frequently stated cause of homelessness across homeless situations is mental illness. According to the survey from 2019, 41 per cent state that mental illness is the main cause of their homelessness. VIVE, 2019. Hjemløshed i Danmark. Link: <https://www.vive.dk/da/udgivelser/hjemloeshed-i-danmark-2019-14218/>

fact that not all people living in homelessness are in contact with the system. A social intervention with this group of people experiencing homelessness needs to be based on social outreach work in the streets, and it should be flexible, patient, and long-term in order to rebuild trust in the same system that has previously failed to help them, making it possible for the system to offer them support and housing-led intervention.

This gap between the social welfare system and vulnerable people who are sleeping rough is further complicated by legislation introduced in 2017 that has caused a de facto criminalisation of rough sleeping. These laws concern a ban on begging and camps that are 'able to create discomfort', making it possible for the police to issue fines and expel those sleeping rough from entire municipalities. Furthermore, they create ground for people sleeping rough to be punished with imprisonment.<sup>2 3</sup> This has, in our experience, made people sleeping rough afraid of the authorities, with the risk of creating further distance between them and the welfare system set in place to help them. Even though multiple actors in the field of homelessness have raised awareness of the consequences of the legislation, it is still in place to this day.

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2 According to the Danish Public Order, it is now prohibited to establish and stay in camps "which are capable of creating discomfort in the neighborhood". Danish Public Order, article 3(4) and 6(3). Link: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/1094>

3 According to Danish criminal law, begging is illegal and punishable by up to six months in prison if the person has received a warning from the police. As of 2017, the penalty for "intimidating begging" has been increased to 14 days of unconditional imprisonment for first-time offenders. Furthermore, punishment is now immediate (no prior warning) in cases where begging is committed in pedestrian streets, train stations, at supermarkets and on public transportation. Danish Criminal Law, article 197. Link: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/1650>

Finally, the strategy does not address the situation of EU citizens experiencing homelessness in Denmark.

Despite strict immigration laws and an increasingly hostile attitude towards destitute foreigners, which has characterised Danish policies in the last fifteen years, the presence of EU citizens experiencing homelessness in Denmark is a fact. Since the government has set the goal to significantly reduce homelessness, it should reconsider its position on excluding EU citizens from the same help that is provided to Danish citizens living in homelessness.

In conclusion, the initiatives in the new agreement show political awareness of the importance of a long-term, national, and cross-sectoral strategy based on Housing First. By focusing on the structural and systemic causes of homelessness, the Danish parliament recognises that the issue of homelessness cannot be solved within social policy alone. Unfortunately, it still fails to include some of the most vulnerable groups in our society, reminding us why advocacy for these particular groups continues to be necessary despite an otherwise ambitious strategy to combat homelessness.

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# SPAIN'S PLAN TO COMBAT HOMELESSNESS: AN OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE POLICIES IN THE SERVICE OF PEOPLE

Following its *Comprehensive National Strategy for Homeless People 2015-2020*, Spain is currently developing a new National Action Plan to combat homelessness. The plan seeks to incorporate lessons learnt from the past action plan, aiming to include a change of model and a sustainable and structured rights-based approach. This analysis by Patricia Bezunarte, the General Director for Family Diversity and Social Services in Spain, highlights the considerations surrounding the new National Action Plan, as well as other initiatives the Spanish government supports to combat homelessness.



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