
Editorial

The Housing First Europe Hub was established in 2016 by FEANTSA (the European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People), the Y-Foundation (Finland) and other interested partners – including housing providers, cities, organisations and researchers – who were committed to Housing First, understood as both a strategy and a policy that places *housing, with supports as necessary*, and not simply a specific programme for those with complex needs, as *the core response to resolving homelessness*. Homelessness response systems in Europe (and beyond) are largely well-intentioned sticking plasters created in response to increasing residential instability resulting in increasing numbers of people forced to sleep rough or more commonly in temporary accommodation of varying quality.

In a recent review of homelessness services in Europe, Pleace et al (2018, p.12) concluded that: “[l]ow intensity services, offering basic non-housing support and emergency / temporary accommodation, probably form the bulk of homelessness service provision in Europe.” Despite extensive critiques of the limitations of low intensity services, offering basic non-housing support and emergency / temporary accommodation as a response to residential instability, and the largely negative experience of those who reside in such facilities, it remains, as Serme-Morin and Coupechoux (2019) concisely note “oversubscribed, insecure and unsuitable.”

There is no convincing evidence that the provision of large congregate shelters for people experiencing homelessness achieves anything other than a temporary, generally unpleasant, often unsafe, respite from the elements and the provision of basic sustenance, and for a small minority, an extraordinarily expensive and unsuitable long-term response to their inability to access secure affordable housing.

Recent research has indicated that expenditure on homelessness services is increasing across the EU as a whole, as a consequence of rising numbers of households experiencing homelessness and that this expenditure remains skewed towards shelter-based and housing-ready models (Pleace et al, 2021). In part, this research identified this increase in expenditure on shelter-based services as a legacy issue, in that services were largely designed as reactive responses to homelessness, centred around the provision of emergency accommodation.

In a number of countries, a not insignificant portion of expenditure is on over-flow expenditure, that is expenditure on hotel rooms and other temporary accommodation not designed to meet the needs of households experiencing homelessness, when existing designed services reached their limits. Thus, a degree of path-dependency is evident, whereby initial investment in emergency accommodation services, can result in generating the provision of further shelter beds when the numbers experiencing homelessness periodically increase, as this becomes the default response, and in some cases the use of hotel rooms when shelters are fully utilised.

The partners in the Housing First Europe Hub are committed to reducing, ending and preventing homelessness by applying the Housing First approach across homelessness and housing systems, in effect starting with housing for people who are experiencing homelessness and ensuring that any other supports they may require are available to them to maintain that housing. The Housing First Europe Hub works with actors involved in Housing First and homelessness from frontline workers to managers to policy makers at local and national level. Over the course of our work through training and exchanges and advocacy, it became clear that we had to think beyond the ‘homelessness sector’ in order to have a real impact.

Looking to existing examples, like Finland and Scotland, where the Housing First approach has been applied as a policy and a strategy at national and local level, the Housing First Europe Hub worked with Demos Helsinki to help re-think and re-frame how to articulate this idea of systems change. Demos Helsinki provided us with a new framework in which to talk about *how* systems need to change in order to end and prevent homelessness, and what role Housing First can play in this process. Their paper, *A New Systems Perspective to Ending Homelessness* is at the core of this ongoing work on systems change and led to the Housing First Europe Hub publishing a *Policy and Practice Guide*.

The Housing First Europe Hub utilised the Demos paper’s framework for change to interview Housing First partners across Europe to determine their progress, the obstacles to changing homelessness and housing systems so that they actually reduce, end and prevent homelessness. The Housing First Europe Hub distilled the key ingredients for making the necessary changes:

1. Motivated and dedicated people – champions ready to work towards ending homelessness rather than managing homelessness; advocates ready to drive change and use their leverage to affect practice and policy and bring others along with them.

2. A change in working culture and the way that people think about homelessness is essential. A culture shift needs to underpin the transition from ‘managing’ homelessness to dedicated efforts to end homelessness. Training, network building and ongoing awareness raising are crucial to ensure that all actors – those in frontline services, management, housing provision, and policy makers and administrators across different government levels and ministries – understand how they play an important role in this new approach.
3. Structures that can anchor change and support a system designed to end homelessness. These structures include: housing, the right policies to sustain change, partnerships with relevant actors, training and knowledge building.
4. Stable and predictable funding is crucial to embedding Housing First as the lever to reduce, end and prevent homelessness.
5. Policies and political commitment both to applying Housing First to a systems perspective, and a commitment to actually ending homelessness.

The Housing First Europe Hub published both the Demos paper and the Housing First Europe Hub policy and practice guide at its first conference in March 2022, held in Madrid. The conference provided an opportunity for actors ranging from frontline workers in Housing First services to Ministers from national governments in Spain, Belgium, and the EU’s Commissioner for Social Affairs, to consider *how* to make this systems change happen.

Following the conference, various conversations between the Housing First Europe Hub, the Y-Foundation, FEANTSA and the European Observatory on Homelessness concluded that it would be useful to tease out in more detail how to make systems change in the different member states and beyond, recognising the different contexts and constraints that existed. We asked actors from the NGO sector, local and national government and researchers to engage and reflect on the two papers in the context of their own specific national experience.

Contributions from Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Ireland, Hungary, Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Italy and Sweden were received and we are grateful to all of our contributors to this special edition of the European Journal of Homelessness for their enthusiasm in responding to our request to reflect on the issues raised in the papers, and their forbearance. In addition, we sought a paper outlining the contribution that the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, launched in Lisbon in June 2021 to bring about the required systems change to work towards the ending of homelessness by 2030, and we are particularly grateful for the contribution to this special edition by Yves Leterme and Patrick Develtere on this potentially game changing initiative.

What was particularly striking in the contributions was that there is little resistance to the idea that we can and should reduce and end homelessness. There is a consensus that we do not need to let homelessness persist, and there is an increasing understanding that homelessness is caused by structural issues and dysfunctional systems, rather than poor personal decision-making by individuals, and we hope the papers in this special edition provide both inspiration and concrete examples to help bring about the system changes required to end homelessness.