

## **This much I know: What I learned so far about how to end homelessness**

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FEANTSA is 36 years old. In that time, homelessness has gotten worse in most European countries. Paradoxically, we know more about how to end it than ever before. Translating this knowledge into change is difficult, more so in some places. FEANTSA has the privilege of working with people across Europe who are striving to change the status quo on homelessness. Drawing on their collective intelligence, we propose 12 learning points on ending homelessness:

### **1) Be clear about what ending homelessness means.**

The best way to conceptualize and communicate seems to be making homelessness rare, brief and unrepeatable. Defining a “functional zero” level is too blunt and technocratic, likely to generate resistance and skepticism. Whilst it has been used for chronic homelessness in the US, it is hard to imagine how it can be applied to more prevalent situations like sofa surfing.

### **2) Attitude is at least as important as process.**

Making progress towards ending homelessness requires pragmatism and opportunism. It is important to take steps towards the end goal, and to allow for some failure. Policies and services should be based on the rule rather than the exception. When discussing Housing First, it is striking how often concern about the minority for whom it does not work eclipses that about the majority for whom it does. Attempting to anticipate all problems and exceptions results in unnecessarily complex solutions. The most effective attitude is to do what seems likely to work, then adapt as needed.

### **3) Collecting data and monitoring progress are not the same thing.**

We need timely and accurate data on the number and profile of people experiencing homelessness. However, they do not tell the whole story. They do not necessarily capture policy (pro/re)gress. For that, we need indicators in addition to the total number of homeless people at a given point in time. Policy progress may be happening even when the number of homeless people is increasing. For example, the proportion of exits to housing may be increasing as entries increase. We need to recognize such progress, not least to ensure buy-in from the policymakers responsible for it.

### **4) Solving homelessness takes time.**

It is an illusion to think it can be done in one or two political mandates. That is why consensus across the political spectrum on how to do it is key – at least on the basics. The Finnish experience indicates a timeframe of 15 to 20 is necessary. Taking a longer-term view avoids setting policymakers up to fail. This is crucial, otherwise trying to end homelessness becomes a risk not worth taking.

### **5) Political commitment does not necessarily depend on popular support.**

In Finland, a group of “wise people” appointed by government determined that homelessness should be ended, and set out a vision for achieving it. Public opinion was not a factor. Shaping public opinion on homelessness is difficult, resource-intensive, and likely to fail. Energy and resources may be better channeled to convincing key stakeholders about the right course of action. There is a risk that we conflate communication for fundraising with awareness-raising for

advocacy. Of course, fundraising is important, but the messaging that gets people to donate is not necessarily that which supports effective policies.

#### **6) Migration matters.**

Dysfunctional migration policies are currently an important cause of homelessness. Many newly homeless people are migrants. Advocates for ending homelessness need to address this head on, which has implications for our approach to ending homelessness. Homeless policies cannot remedy the flaws in migration policies. Not having legal residence generally blocks the route out of shelter. In several countries, even accessing shelter is (increasingly) difficult for those without legal residence. In this context, homeless organisations should defend access to shelter for everyone who needs it. We cannot oppose shelter and housing as simplistically as in the early days of Housing First. Homeless organizations may also need to develop more proactive positions on migration policy. They have a crucial role to play in reporting on the reality of homelessness amongst migrants. The sector faces a tension between providing services to public authorities on the one hand and acting as non-governmental organisations with humanitarian values on the other. Live debates about what role the homeless sector should play in enforcing return is a stark example. Our impression is that the homeless sector can ill-afford to lose its moral authority and must be clear about its red lines.

#### **7) Prevention is better than cure, except when it isn't.**

The policymakers and services responsible for homelessness have been designed to address homelessness once it has occurred. It is often easier to get traction with homeless services and the government departments responsible for them than with anyone else. Calling for prevention can sometimes be a tactic to dodge taking urgent action for those who are currently homeless. Nonetheless, ending homelessness requires prevention. It needs to happen in the fields of housing, welfare, health, migration and institutional release. A pragmatic approach could be to distinguish clearly between the interventions needed to prevent homelessness and those needed to respond to it. We can propose two interconnected but distinct strategies. Advocacy tactics and audiences for each will be quite distinct. Integrating a prevention focus in migration policies will be difficult, but is critical.

#### **8) Social housing should house homeless people.**

Social housing is a scarce resource. Allocation systems should take account of the urgency of housing need of the applicant. At least part of the allocations should be reserved for people who are homeless. To respond to rapidly increasing homelessness, a larger share of allocations could be reserved for homeless applicants for a limited period. The statutory duty of local authorities to house homeless households in the UK is arguably an example for the rest of Europe to follow. The rate of allocations to homeless households is relatively high. The challenge is that local authorities no longer have the capacity to execute that duty, leading to exploding temporary accommodation budgets, out-of-area placements and gatekeeping. One solution might be to work closely with local authorities and housing associations to build a case for new social housing, conditioning some finance on reserving units for homeless households. Another might be to develop specialist housing associations like the Y-Foundation.

#### **9) International cooperation is not a luxury; it helps make change.**

Over the last decade homelessness has become a policy issue at transnational level – UN, OECD and EU. We should further develop a transnational framework for policy exchange and monitoring. It can be a source of learning and allow for transnational comparison. A visit to Helsinki has acted as a gamechanger in many contexts. An international perspective can help to inject creativity into domestic policies and services and be an anti-dote against cynicism.

#### **10) Housing First cannot be all things to all people.**

Homeless people need housing. housing-led responses, including Housing First are the way forward. The evidence that Housing First works is overwhelming. The question is how to bring it to the necessary scale. This is a question of tactics. Experts agree that Housing First has the potential to change the way homelessness is tackled. But it seems difficult in the real world to jump from Housing First as an experiment to systematic change. There is a lot of debate and skepticism about what systemic Housing First means. It is not clear where the “system” starts or ends, and nobody feels directly responsible for it. Maybe it is smarter to pitch Housing First as a well-defined programme and then rely on its catalytic effect. This makes it easier for policy makers to embrace and fund it. If enough Housing First programmes get funded, Housing First becomes de facto a mainstream policy intervention. Systemic change is likely to scare policymakers away. Furthermore, Housing First is a package of housing and support. Many homeless people do not need (much) support. Presenting Housing First as the solution for everyone can lead to a dilution of the support, which undermines effectiveness and/or to a dearth of solutions for those without support needs.

#### **11) Showing is better than telling.**

Whenever possible, homeless organizations should model change to demonstrate that it is possible. This might involve testing new interventions or showing what others have achieved. The spread of Housing First in Europe is a case study in how impactful this can be. One useful way of demonstrating success can be to focus on smaller cities. It is often easier to make progress in less tense housing markets. Housing First is more likely to work. The homeless sector needs more success stories, and smaller cities can help provide them.

#### **12) Don't marginalize shelters.**

Shelters seem too often excluded from or marginalised in policy debates on how to solve homelessness. They seem to operate via parallel networks with policy makers to ensure the proper financing and operating of shelters. If we want to make real progress towards ending homelessness, the shelter sector needs to be centrally involved in policy-development. Shelter is growing in most countries and is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Furthermore, it is a diverse sector. Advocates for change sometimes seem to attribute an excessive share of responsibility for the status quo to homelessness organisations. “Traditional services” seem to be the target of more criticism than the for-profit providers of shelter beds like hotels. A serious reform agenda must engage with the sector to determine what its future should be.

These 12 points come with a warning that we need to adapt to a new political reality in Europe. Increasing **populism**, shrinking public budgets, growing social needs, etc have major implications for the fight against homelessness. In the US, homeless people are increasingly being blamed for their situation by the government, and evidence-based programmes like Housing First drastically cut. In the current climate, we have to ensure that our proposals to solve homelessness do not fall

on deaf ears. We need to pitch homelessness as a deserving cause and strengthen the cost-benefit argument without of course denying reality.

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