



# Everybody needs a home

## How Finland deals with homelessness

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Instead of temporary solutions like shelters and hostels, Finland concentrates on providing permanent social housing to those in need. Although it requires significant investment, it's always more cost-effective to end homelessness rather than trying to manage it. Also, it's the right thing to do.

Housing boils down to one thing: a basic human right for everyone and not just for a select group of people. However, growing homelessness is one of the most pressing social challenges facing Europe today. Over the last decade, homelessness in Europe has increased substantially. According to the 2019 overview See FEANTSA, *Homeless in Europe. The State of Emergency Shelters*, Spring 2019.

by the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), there were at least 700,000 people sleeping on the streets or in emergency accommodation on any given night, which translates into an alarming 70% increase in ten years.

Fortunately, the situation is not uniformly bleak across Europe. Finland, for example, is one of the few countries where homelessness has been falling steadily for seven consecutive years. The latest statistics See ARA The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland, *Homelessness in Finland 2019*, 17 February 2020.

reveal that at the end of 2019 there were around 5,000 homeless people in the country, the majority staying temporarily with friends or relatives. Thirty years ago, that number was four times higher, with a significant proportion of homeless people living in temporary accommodation, dormitories or institutions. Only ten years ago, the number of long-term homelessness was three times the current figure. Significant progress has also been made with two groups in particular. Last year both long-term homelessness as well as the number of homeless young people under 25 years of age fell below 1,000 for the first time since data collection began.

## The Finnish model

The reasons behind Finland's success are manifold and largely due to persistent, dedicated work over decades. In fact, measures to eliminate homelessness have been part of



government programmes almost without interruption since the mid-1980s, when Finland first began gathering annual statistics on homelessness in order to determine the efficacy of such measures. These statistics revealed that the total number of homeless people had been halved by the 2000s, although long-term homelessness still existed (i.e. people who have spent long periods in temporary accommodation without receiving the necessary help from the existing social service system). This vulnerable group in particular needed urgent innovative solutions when planning new measures to tackle homelessness. First started in 2008, Finland's 'National Programme to End Long-term Homelessness' is a case in point and has led to the country being recognized for its 'Housing First' policies, which provide unhoused people with independent rental flats and adequate support instead of temporary solutions such as hostels and shelters.

Adaption of a photo by Lucas Marcomini from [Unsplash](#).

## **'Housing First' with Finnish characteristics**

'Housing First' remains the cornerstone of Finland's approach to homelessness, but it should be noted that the Finnish 'Housing First' model was conceived and developed independently of the 'Pathways Housing First' model in the United States. While the two models do share some similarities, there are a number of differences. For example, in Finland, the residents pay the rent themselves. In the United States, 30% is paid by the resident and the rest by the landlord or the organization that has arranged the housing. Another difference lies in how the support is arranged. In Finland, the support is offered according to the resident's needs, making use of the mainstream services that already exist in society. In the United States, a large multi-professional team is put together beforehand for treating the resident.

The Finnish version of 'Housing First' follows the core principles of Housing First as described in the Housing First Europe Guide, namely:

housing as a human right; choice and control for service users; separation of housing and treatment; recovery orientation; harm reduction; active engagement without coercion; person-centred planning and flexible support as long as required. See [\*Housing First Europe Hub\*](#), 2020.

Although these originate from the American 'Pathways' principles, their practical applications within Europe are quite different due to divergent environments and target groups.

The Finnish understanding of Housing First is very pragmatic, taking as it does a person-centred approach with two key components: housing and support. Both are vitally important, but housing alternatives and support arrangements may vary. There are two housing options: individual rental apartments in scattered housing and individual rental apartments in supported housing units. Scattered housing (i.e. normal rental apartment) is located either in social housing or in flats bought from the private market. In a supported housing unit, each resident has their own flat and on-site personnel is often available in the building, if needed. An independent rental flat comes with a rental



contract, typically for an unlimited period of time, and therefore creates a foundation for life: a home that enables independent living with all its rights and obligations. The flat is provided without any preconditions — renters do not have to earn their right to housing by proving their ability to manage their lives.

## **It's a renter's market**

The rental contract plays an important role as it is a sign that housing is meant to be permanent instead of temporary (in most countries, shelters and hostels are still prevalent). The rental contract is based on the Finnish Act on Residential Leases (1995), which stipulates that tenants have the same rights and responsibilities as any other resident. The forms of support vary according to individual needs. In Finland, current basic social and health services are meant for everyone, including 'Housing First' tenants. The model underlines the principle of normality, which means that tenants are expected to pay rent and they are entitled to apply for general housing benefit like anybody else.

General housing benefit is an important form of financial support helping people with low income to secure their tenancy. In addition, stable living conditions and practical support help enable residents to use mainstream public services instead of expensive emergency services.

If needed, personal support is provided. As housing is unconditional, so is assistance voluntary. A support plan is agreed upon with the tenant, who plays a key role and has the final say on the plan. The aim is to support the tenant in living as independently as possible. Residents are encouraged and motivated to take part in work or group activities, training, rehabilitation or community life (although participation is voluntary).

After a period of homelessness, it often takes time to settle into a new home. In order to help the residents do so, it is important to have alternative low-threshold activities, for example practical forms of work, available for everyone. Intensive multi-professional support in health and social issues is also available, especially in supported housing units.

## **An end to shelters**

A sufficient supply of affordable social housing is the cornerstone of any decent housing policy, and therefore implementing 'Housing First' is not feasible without sufficient housing options. In Finland, this includes the use of social housing, buying apartments from the private sector for rental purposes and building new supported housing units. From its very inception, the National Programme to End Long-term Homelessness had concrete goals to acquire only permanent housing options and this goal still exists today as Finland does not build (and therefore rely on) hostels or other temporary solutions.

In recent years Finland gained a great deal of international attention for converting night shelters and short-term hostels into housing units. Despite their long history, these temporary forms of accommodation were not a permanent solution to chronic homelessness. An important part of the Finnish approach has been to convert shelters and dormitory-type hostels into supported housing units in order to minimize the use of temporary accommodations. Within a few years, the number of shelter and hostel places



decreased significantly See Y-Foundation, *A Home of Your Own*, 2018 . Some of the existing shelter/hostel buildings were converted into supported housing units in which each tenant has an independent flat and rental contract. With 250 beds, the last big hostel in Helsinki was run by the Salvation Army but was renovated in 2012 and now consists of 81 independent apartments with on-site personnel. The move away from temporary solutions such as hostels has completely transformed homelessness in Finland. It has also brought clear improvements in areas such as public safety.

## **Collaboration is key**

This approach works best when adopted nationally, which demands widescale collaboration between all relevant stakeholders on local and regional levels. Simply put, combating homelessness depends upon shared visions. Measures to implement the Programme have led to clear results but requires cooperation at multiple levels. From the very beginning, there was strong shared political will between the parties to find new solutions to homelessness and therefore the focus of the national strategy was clear from the start. This common national policy made it possible to establish a wide partnership between the state, local authorities and NGOs. The roles of each stakeholder were also clear: The Ministry of Environment co-ordinated the national programme; respective city authorities provided housing and were responsible for the implementation at the local level. The new ways of thinking and the shift in mindset needed to adopt a new work orientation, which has been promoted by a national development network, bringing together practitioners from NGOs, cities and parishes, as well as people with lived experience of homelessness.

## **An ounce of prevention**

During the past decade, work on homelessness has improved in terms of its content and more attention is being paid to the well-being of the residents. Those without homes have gained permanent ones as well as received tailored help that addresses their needs. The power of communities has been put to use in support work, too. After a long period of homelessness, a supported housing unit may offer a safe place to practice daily household skills and pathways to participation in group activities. Low threshold activities and neighbourhood work, such as meeting neighbours and maintaining the safety and cleanliness of the residential area, have also been established as means of promoting integration.

The Finnish experience has also shown that combating homelessness has to go beyond the provision of homes and support for unhoused people. There also needs to be substantial invest in the prevention of homelessness. An international evaluation of the Finnish Policy Programme See Nicholas Pleace et al., eds., *The Finnish Homeless Strategy. An International Review*, 2015.

in 2014 recommended that work on prevention should be strengthened still further, and the third national programme on homelessness focused entirely on the subject. Housing advice services were developed to prevent evictions, and cities and housing providers offer low threshold services to allow for easy and accessible help and guidance.

Despite the great improvements achieved in housing the unhoused, the situation requires constant monitoring in order to identify and deal with new challenges as they arise.



Certain segments of the unhoused, such as women who are at risk of domestic abuse and violence, require special consideration. Statistics from 2019 See ARA, *Homelessness in Finland 2019*.

reveal that the percentage of women among the total number of unhoused has grown despite a decrease in the number of women receiving homelessness assistance. Since 2003, the share of single women without homes has risen by 7%, with women representing 26% of all unhoused people in 2019.

*Our Pink House is a symbol of hope and a wish for a better future. Refugees, immigrants and voluntary women wrapped a house with pink crocheting patterns upon the invitation of New York-based Polish crochet artist Agata Oleksiak and the Kerava Art Museum in 2016-2017.*

## **Do the right thing**

It is our strong belief that everyone should have a home of their own. Having a place to live is not only a human right but also a basic social right, and Housing First is without a doubt the best approach to tackling homelessness. Extensive research shows that at least 80% of tenants in Housing First are able to sustain their housing.

It is often said that 'Housing First' is a viable solution only in countries that can afford it. While it is true that it requires a significant investment, there is ample evidence from many countries that it is always more cost-effective to end homelessness rather than trying to manage it. See, for example, Ympäristöministeriön raportteja, *Asunnottomuuden vähentämisen taloudelliset vaikutukset*, 2011[unsure how useful this is for Eurozine readers as it's in Finnish]; Stephen Gaetz, *The real cost of homelessness: Can we save money by doing the right thing?*, 2012.

Furthermore, an end to homelessness not only makes financial sense, it is also the right thing to do from a humanitarian and ethical perspective. The claim that a lack of funding in most European countries is an obstacle to providing affordable social housing is either an understatement or a conscious misunderstanding. It is simply a matter of political pressure and will. To lead a decent life, the unhoused need homes. This social problem has such an obvious and simple solution and could be easily solved with requisite political will.

Although the general state of homelessness globally is grim, there are nevertheless some positive developments. There is a growing awareness that adequate housing is a basic human right. 'Housing First' has been gaining ground in Europe and there are currently at least 16 countries (in addition to Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia) running projects and pilots. In some countries, there are even national plans for scaling up the programme. However, progress is still very slow. In many countries, such as the United Kingdom, despite the increased understanding of the role of affordable social housing and an eagerness to proceed, the lack of such housing remains a major obstacle.

## **Looking ahead**

The post-COVID-19 world will present certain unforeseen challenges. It is evident that we will face a global economic recession, which always disproportionately affects low-income



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and poor people the most. It remains to be seen whether inequality and homelessness will be allowed to increase. As permanent and affordable housing become increasingly necessary in order to end homelessness, will building and construction work play a crucial role in creating economic activity and economic recovery? A programme such as 'Housing First' cannot end homelessness alone but has a better chance to do so when combined with affordable social housing, which is undoubtedly the most important, effective and sustainable structural measure in preventing homelessness.

The time to act is now!

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