



Housing First Public Conference Report

Housing First: How to make it work?



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On December 6, 2022, Eurodiaconia organised a public conference on the topic of Housing First, bringing together civil society representatives, service providers, policy makers and researchers on the development of successful housing-led and Housing First approaches.

During the event, we discussed what is needed to successfully implement Housing First approaches, challenges service providers, cities and Member States face, and the role of EU funding in this context. The speakers debated what policies need to be implemented at the EU level and the national level to successfully fight homelessness and how funding can be better targeted to national needs.

Welcome and Introduction

After **Anne-Sophie Wislocki, Head of Advocacy at Eurodiaconia**, welcomed the participants and addressed some opening words to the audience, **Samara Jones** from **Housing First Europe Hub**, gave a keynote speech. She introduced the core principles of Housing First as a service for people who experience homelessness and highlighted how this approach must be incorporated into a holistic system of affordable housing, welfare, and health care. Samara Jones presented the report “A new systems perspective to ending homelessness” by Demos Helsinki and Housing First Europe Hub which advocates for rethinking the homelessness governance system and looking at Housing First not as a one-size-fits-all solution but as a policy compass. It starts from the idea that no policies will work until people have a permanent and safe place of residence. Achieving an impactful decrease in homelessness requires significant structural operational change. According to Samara Jones, it is crucial to move away from focusing on emergency responses to a more holistic, multilevel governance model in the future development of homelessness policy. This system change needs to depart from housing as a human right to then providing the necessary services and support to people experiencing homelessness: shifting from managing homelessness to ending it. To achieve this system change, all actors, including social service providers, NGOs, local and national authorities need to be involved. Lastly, she emphasised the need for closer coordination and partnerships and more targeted EU funding, combined with political will and consensus, for effectively ending homelessness.

Best practices session – Successfully implementing Housing First projects

In the following best practices session, participants got the chance to listen to two experts on the topic of housing, **Nikol Žůrková** from our member **Slezská Diakonie**, Czech Republic and **Peter-Jan Heylenbosch** from **the City of Ghent**, Belgium. Both are social workers working on Housing First projects in their home countries and shared their first-hand experiences with the audience.

Nikol Žůrková gave insights about their Housing First projects and the lessons and challenges they have experienced, particularly during COVID-19. Slezská Diakonie started their first Housing First project in 2020, supporting 16 households in the first place. Since then, they improved not only the relationship with the beneficiaries taking up their services but also with municipalities, which now often support the implementation of Housing First projects after first successful experiences. Nikol Žůrková emphasised the need for closer cooperations and better connections between services and stakeholders to achieve improved services for the beneficiaries.

Peter-Jan Heylenbosch, from the Social Housing Assistance in the City of Ghent, first introduced the services his team offers to people experiencing homelessness, including Housing First projects.

He identified some challenges with implementing Housing First projects, including the communication with social housing companies, the lack of recognition of process-oriented success as well as burdensome crisis management, including staff shortages of social support workers. Peter-Jan Heylenbosch called for shifting the focus to prevention and long-term solutions and reminded the audience to not forget that Housing First is not necessarily always a solution for everyone. Lastly, he highlighted the need for individually tailored guidance for the beneficiaries instead of one size fits all systems.

Panel Discussion – Common challenges and ways forward

During the panel discussion, four speakers and experts on the topic of housing discussed challenges and ways forward on the EU level to fight homelessness. The invited panellists were **MEP Estrella Dura Ferrandis**, Member of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament and Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, **Michele Calandrino** from the **European Commission**, Team Leader of the Visibility and Inclusion Unit, DG EMPL, **Pernilla Parding**, Program Manager at the **Stockholm City Mission**, a Eurodiaconia member, and **Freek Spinnewijn**, **Director of FEANTSA**.

Pernilla Parding from the Stockholm City Mission opened the discussion by giving some insights about homelessness in Sweden, explaining that the Swedish Housing First Network educates organisations and municipalities on the implementation of Housing First projects. A lot of municipalities wish to implement these projects supported by funding from the government. However, one challenge in this context is the lack of affordable housing in the country that enables the implementation of Housing First projects in the first place. Pernilla Parding highlighted the urgent need for more support for organisations working on homelessness, particularly investment in social housing as well as training for social workers and municipalities on how to better provide housing services. Furthermore, she called for new targeted funding in Sweden to be able to cover the high demand for affordable housing.

Freek Spinnewijn, Director of FEANTSA, explained from his perspective how the situation on homelessness has changed in the past years. According to him, since FEANTSA first started promoting the Housing First approach many years ago, the mindset in the homelessness sector has changed and shifted away from public criticism, as numerous success stories evidenced the efficiency of housing first. He positively highlighted that in more and more Member States, national strategies including housing first approaches can be found. To meet the high demand of expertise on Housing First approaches, he agreed with Pernilla Parding, that more training of staff is needed alongside with good conceptualisations of Housing First projects. Freek Spinnewijn also reminded the audience that Housing First is not a solution for all people, as

needs and circumstances of people in homelessness are often more complex. At the same time, he confirmed the need to develop more prevention measures alongside with Housing First projects, as well as the need for a stronger political commitment in this regard. Lastly, it is also important to accept that there can be mistakes and to learn from them and find improved solutions. In these situations, EU funding can be a leader of change.

MEP Estrella Dura Ferrandis, Member of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament and Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs discussed the report on access to decent and affordable housing for all adopted by the European Parliament in 2021 and gave some insights on what needs to be done at the EU and Member State level to guarantee the right to housing for all. She sees Housing First as one part of housing policies, together with affordable housing for all and prevention measures that need to be implemented in order to address homelessness and housing exclusion.

According to her, one key aspect is to inform stakeholders about how to access and manage EU funds. She called on the European Commission to propose an integrated strategy on affordable and social housing to ensure that housing rights are put before market interests and effectively end homelessness by 2030. Furthermore, she explained that increasing public and social housing, and targeting it to people at risk or experiencing homelessness is a key factor to reduce homelessness. Implementing specific and quantitative measurements to assess the evolution of Member States' social policies will help giving country specific recommendations in the fight against homelessness. Overall, MEP Dura Ferrandis stated that social objectives must be put at the same level as economic objectives, a key point she advocates for with her party. Homelessness and poverty cannot be regarded separately, therefore structural changes and long-term solutions are urgently needed, particularly in exceptional circumstances as the current energy and cost of living crisis. Furthermore, filling the legislative gaps in current housing policies is crucial, especially for those who are generally not included in the housing policies, such as non-EU citizens, undocumented people, or unaccompanied minors.

Finally, **Michele Calandrino**, team leader of the Visibility and Inclusion Unit, DG EMPL, European Commission, presented the work programme of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, which is based on the three pillars of improved definition and data collection, mutual learning, and access to funding.

Under the work of the Platform, European institutions, EU governments and civil society have committed to work together towards ending homelessness in the EU by 2030. He remarked how the different housing systems within the EU are a challenge, as homelessness is tackled differently in each Member State, which makes it difficult to implement a common approach on tackling homelessness. Next year, the Platform will continue promoting the use of EU funds and supporting Member States with targeted investments to tackle homelessness.

The discussion finished with a Q&A session in which the participants had the chance to address their questions and comments to the speakers. Participants highlighted the need to invest in housing systems and closer collaborations with public housing companies across Europe, as Housing First does not work without functioning housing systems. Furthermore, the importance of agreeing on a clear and comparable definition on homelessness was highlighted, in order to then clearly define common targets and policies. Finally, participants agreed that Housing First is an important measure to end homelessness, however, it needs to come within a package that includes prevention and accessible housing for all.