
Finnish but not yet Finished – Successes and Challenges of Housing First in Finland

Juha Kaakinen and Saija Turunen

Y-Foundation, Finland

Introduction

In 2008, the Government of Finland decided to implement a national programme to end long-term homelessness (PAAVO I 2008-2011). The programme was targeted at people experiencing long-term homelessness - people who had been homeless for over one year or recurrently homeless during the last three years and with serious social and health problems. The target group consisted mainly of the most vulnerable group of people who were staying in temporary accommodation in shelters and hostels or sleeping on the streets.

The programme was based on the Housing First philosophy, which means providing, unconditionally, a person experiencing homelessness with an independent rental flat with their own rental contract and support if needed and wanted. As the programme was built on the provision of permanent housing, it had direct consequences for the shelter sector. It was through this national programme that a process of renovating and converting the existing shelters and hostels into supported housing was started. This structural change was mainly accomplished between 2008 and 2011. Since then, PAAVO I has been followed by other national programmes targeting homelessness: PAAVO II 2012-2015 which also focused on long-term homelessness, AUNE 2016-2019 focused on prevention, and the current cooperation programme 2020-2022 aims to halve the number of people experiencing homelessness by 2023.

It can be argued that a systemic change in the Finnish homelessness policy and service system has been accomplished. Homelessness in Finland has decreased continuously since 2013. This is particularly noteworthy as Finland suffered from a serious economic recession in 2008 leading to high unemployment and economic problems which normally result in the increasing risk of homelessness. Also, the trend of homelessness in Finland in recent years has differed markedly from the all-European trend. For example, the vast majority of people experiencing home-

lessness in Finland stay with friends or family and, according to the statistics, the number of people sleeping on the streets is low. The total number of people experiencing homelessness and who live alone has decreased by 45% since the beginning of the first national programme in 2008, and by 75% since 1987 when the data on homelessness was first collected. On an individual level, the latter means almost 13000 permanent homes, and in many cases, new beginnings.

The success of the Finnish model has been attributed to an integrated strategy. But is it possible to distil those elements of the Finnish model that have worked well and those failures or missteps that should be avoided in the future? This article is a preliminary exercise for that kind of analysis.

Ending Homelessness by 2027

The successes and failures can be analysed on two main levels: policy level and service level. Undoubtedly the greatest achievements have been on the policy level. Since 2008 there has been a strong political consensus on the importance of tackling homelessness in a radically new way. All governments, despite different political coalitions, have agreed to continue programmes to end homelessness. This political consensus has enabled the implementation of Housing First as a national policy and has secured sufficient funding, especially during PAAVO-programmes 2008-2015. Funding has been targeted especially for housing investments and for increasing support work in cities.

The implementation of the PAAVO programmes was a showcase of wide partnership and collaboration between several state authorities, ministries, cities, and NGOs both on local and national levels. Implementation was based on letters of intent and contracts between the State and big cities. This meant that there was a shared understanding of common goals and a very practical plan for execution which had a direct impact on the service level. The role of the Ministry for the Environment in coordinating and steering these national programmes cannot be underestimated.

The current Government has an even more ambitious goal. The aim is to halve all types of homelessness by 2023, and to completely end it by 2027. Although Housing First is now mentioned in the Government's programme for the first time, the role of the State is much lighter and there is no actual national coordination or leadership. The responsibility has been transferred to the municipalities which now implement and develop Housing First according to their own plans without the synergy of the national level work as seen on the previous programmes. This may be reflected in uneven development on the service level in programme cities. In addition, there is no ear-marked funding for the support services. This development may, unfortunately, endanger the goals set in the Government's programme.

On a service level the renovation and conversion of shelters and hostels into supported housing with individual flats and on-site support has had a profound impact on the landscape of the homelessness services. The almost total disappearance of traditional temporary accommodation, such as hostels and shelters, has induced a real systemic change. This renovation has also shown that it is possible to find an active, progressive role for traditional organisations like the Salvation Army, and the fear of losing bed places and jobs proved to be unfounded. For example, the Salvation Army now has a labour force four times greater to provide support services than they had in the shelter and hostel system.

These single site supported housing units have proved to be an integral part of the housing options for people experiencing homelessness. These buildings have provided around 20% of all housing options during PAAVO programmes, whereas scattered flats in the private or municipal rental sector have been the main option all along. These supported housing units have proved to be important in providing intensive support for those who need it. Buildings vary from size between 16 to 125 flats. Smaller units might form a tighter community whereas bigger units provided a fast solution for prolonged problem of homelessness. All units are in good locations, normal surroundings among services, and close to public transport. Experiences from these units have shown that to achieve a well-functioning, rehabilitation orientated community, it is the service attitude of the on-site personnel which plays a more important role than the size of the unit, as demonstrated by the Salvation Army when replacing the security staff with support workers. One rather unique phenomenon related to these single-site units has been the development of environmental work with neighbourhoods. The work responds to any concerns the neighbourhood may have and creates working relations with people living near the unit. The Helsinki Deaconess Institute, in particular, has developed this work form systematically.

The support in the Finnish Housing First model is based on the idea of combining intensive case management with the use of general basic social and health services. This idea has, however, been over-optimistic as the accessibility to the services has not always been adequate, nor sufficient, to meet the support needs. Life situations of people experiencing homelessness may often be complex and this should also be taken into account when municipalities are tendering for housing services. For example, problematic substance use is deeper and human tragedies more severe with the increased use of designer drugs. This poses a challenge for support services. Competitive tendering should not overly tie down or limit the work with residents. It is also evident that developing support in scattered housing has not been systematic enough. To develop and provide tailor-made support simply requires more resources.

We are also acutely aware of the need to develop answers to providing adequate housing and support for those who fail in Housing First. This group, which has been labelled the '10-20%', is without a doubt the common development target in all countries implementing Housing First. Fortunately, the focus has finally started to shift. Instead of trying to find reasons for the failures from individual characteristics, more emphasis is being put into looking at faults at the structural level.

Although in Finland we have a long timeline of reasonably reliable statistics on people experiencing homelessness, we are still in the early stages of collecting systematic data on the other aspects, especially on the effectiveness of services. To assess and organise adequate support, there is a need for more specific information on a client level about the actual housing arrangements and their permanency. In particular this information is needed for the largest group of people experiencing homelessness – those who are living temporarily with friends and relatives.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to end on a positive note. It is clear that one of the main reasons for the decreasing trend in homelessness in Finland is the successful work on prevention, about which a couple of measures need special mention. The most important structural element of prevention has been the increase in affordable social housing supply, especially social housing targeted at young people under the age of 30. This youth social housing was an integral part of the PAAVO programmes. Furthermore, the development of the housing advice services have been phenomenal and has successfully prevented extensive evictions. Finally, Finland has long traditions in the development of measures against homelessness in a number organisations and projects. This work is most often done in cooperation between numerous actors, highlighting the involvement of people with lived experience.