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# Transitioning the Model: From Sheltering to Housing the Homeless in Ghent, Belgium

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## Gaining New Insights on Addressing Homelessness

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The city of Ghent has decided to eradicate homelessness through innovative housing solutions. A big challenge in these days of housing and energy crises. To accelerate policies to realise this intention, in 2019 the city became the lead partner of the URBACT project ROOF. During this project, innovative approaches with a focus on data collection and Housing First were exchanged between nine European cities, an advocacy trajectory was set up on a multitude of policy levels from the European to the local level, and each city developed a local action plan. Together with local stakeholders, Ghent developed an action plan to end homelessness for people with legal residence<sup>1</sup> by 2040 by making a shift from shelter to Housing (First/led) (and by better prevention). The plan was approved by the council in spring 2022. The next step is to start preparing the systemic change. This article explains both the road toward the Ghent action plan, including the principles of the action plan, to then reflect on the challenges and opportunities to make the systemic change as described in the article *A New Systems Perspective to Ending Homelessness* by Demos Helsinki.

### ***Data on (social) housing and homelessness in Ghent***

Ghent is a historical city with over 267 000 registered inhabitants, as counted at the end of 2022. It is the second largest city of the Flemish Region. The poverty rates of 2022 are quite high with an estimate of around 18.7% of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion and 13.2% with an income below the poverty threshold, which is 1 366 euros per month for a single person. In 2021, there were over 81 000 students registered at higher education institutions who were not official residents,

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<sup>1</sup> For those without a legal residence permit, Ghent has a policy to support them to get attain legal residency or to return voluntarily. In some cases shelter is provided.

but nonetheless, half of them do live in the city and occupy more and more homes for families. This is partly due to shortage of affordable student housing. The attractiveness of the city and its growth, combined with macro-economic evolutions, have over the past 15 years resulted in a real housing crisis. Both the prices to rent and to buy have risen extensively over the past decade, making housing unaffordable for many citizens. Four out of 10 of the people who rent only have one income and have to spend over 40% on rent and housing costs.

Ghent has more social housing than most Flemish cities in Belgium, but still too little to cover the needs. Ghent has a stock of 15 000 social houses (2022), whereas some 11 000 households (2022) are on the waiting list, some for more than 10 years. Consequently, more and more households rent cheap, unhealthy, unsafe, too small private houses or end up in barracks/caravans/cars or on the streets. An estimate of 1 800 people are homeless according to the ETHOS light typology (Feantsa, 2007; Hermans et al., 2021). Around half of them do not have Belgian nationality, and over half of that number are people without legal documents.

### ***From sheltering the homeless in Belgium to a more housing-oriented approach in Ghent***

In Belgium, not for profit Centres for General Welfare Work (CGWWs) provide the majority of homelessness care services. The city provides statutory social services, but also subsidises many interventions to the homeless, mostly to be framed within a staircase model. In the staircase of transition, services and supports are conceptualised as a continuum, people start in emergency drop-in services and night shelters with intensive support then go through to transitional housing units and permanent supportive housing with moderate to low levels of support (Harvey, 1998 in O'Shaugnessy & Greenwood, 2021).

For a long time, the general staircase-oriented way of treating the homeless also prevailed in Ghent through night shelters with approximately 65 beds during the year and four family units and reception centres where shelter is provided 24/7. Ghent has six reception centres, albeit with different *modi operandi*, and a shelter for women who are victims of domestic violence.

As time went by, it became obvious that this system (alone) was not going to end homelessness. It was an expensive system; people in the shelters were mostly too busy surviving to make real progress, especially those with complex problems. Often they were 'revolving door' clients, going in and out of the system, and using the same services many times. This called for the adoption of new approaches to homelessness, a gradual process that focused more on both prevention and housing. Regarding housing, Ghent started a Housing First approach in social

housing in 2004, and gained support by housing coaches in 2007. Ghent was also integrated in the experiments developed by the Belgian Government to test and evaluate Housing First (Buxant, 2018) between 2013 and 2016.

Over recent years, more housing-oriented approaches have been installed to fight homelessness. Firstly, expanding Housing First through cooperation of the social housing sector – who provide 59 social rental houses for people that are homeless or leaving psychiatric institutions or youth care – and the welfare sector who offer quite intensive guidance. Secondly, expanding the affordable housing stock through a Social Rental Agency, an intermediary organisation which rents houses from private owners and sublets them to financially vulnerable people, mainly people experiencing homelessness. In Ghent that constitutes 10% of the social housing stock for both systems. Though this situation is now evolving with the establishment of the unified social housing company that merges the different social housing companies and the Social Rental Agency. The legislation stipulates that between 20- 50% of the social housing stock is reserved for a variety of vulnerable groups, including people who are homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless.

### ***A cry for fundamental change in Ghent***

For years, Ghent street level workers have been pointing at the lack of decent and affordable housing options for marginalised groups in society. Several actions were undertaken to confront both the local and supra local politicians with the often horrible situations poor people are living in. Furthermore, discrimination is rampant<sup>2</sup>, people experiencing homelessness face stereotyping, and despite really good results with the Housing First projects, some of the formerly homeless people have difficulties keeping their house because of nuisances, not paying the rent, or breaking the rules of social housing.

In 2017 the City of Ghent started a Taskforce Housing and Shelter together with the social and housing sector to tackle these problems. A huge challenge as the recent global issues of the pandemic and energy crisis have been making the situation worse than it ever was.

The city politicians recognised that drastic measures are needed. With the election of a new City Council in 2018, the city engaged itself to invest in a plan to combat homelessness through a stronger investment in housing and guidance and to promote and implement Housing First and Housing Led approaches to homelessness. This decision was based on research evidence, individual positive experience with Housing First, and the amount of time and means invested in guiding people from short term shelter options to housing. The scientific consensus points to a shift

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<sup>2</sup> Praktijktesten op de private huurmarkt | Stad Gent (Discrimination tests on the Ghent private rental market).

from shelter to housing as a paradigm shift (Benjaminsen, 2018). The bulk of research on Housing First exemplifies this trend. Research shows overwhelming evidence of the efficacy and efficiency of Housing First interventions. The Ghent experiments confirm this. The City of Ghent firstly appointed a civil servant to conceptualise and implement a Housing First and Housing Led strategy to combat homelessness and secondly decided to coordinate an international network of nine, mainly middle-sized, European cities to exchange knowledge and make local action plans on ending homelessness through data collection and making the shift from shelter to Housing First. This network was financed by URBACT and was called ROOF<sup>3</sup>.

### ***A politically approved action plan towards a systemic shift and ending homelessness by 2040***

Via the Taskforce, a task-specific, consensus-oriented governance model gradually came about at the local level.<sup>4</sup> A first important step was taken in 2020, when, during the ROOF project, the City of Ghent agreed to perform a point in time homeless counting with the financial and organisational support of the King Baldwin Foundation and the Catholic University Leuven. It was executed together with 35 local organisations. A milestone in our policy, as numbers can also reflect negatively on a city; also, a great cooperation between the local organisations committing to the same goal. The counting was based on the FEANTSA ETHOS light definition and shows 1 472 homeless adults and 401 homeless children, 932 of whom have legal residence. These data confirmed the seriousness of the situation and formed the basis for the action plan on ending homelessness. The goal is to repeat the count every three years in order to keep monitoring the size and the composition of homelessness in Ghent.

A second important step was creating a local action plan together with the local stakeholders, a requirement of the URBACT ROOF project<sup>5</sup>. This was also a perfect opportunity to change the mindsets of the local stakeholders toward ending homelessness rather than managing it, and toward making the shift from shelter to Housing First as the best road to achieve this. The point in time data collection formed the basis for the action plan. To develop this plan, Ghent collaborated with its housing and welfare partners (including mental health, sheltered housing, etc.), its politicians, societal organisations like the not-for-profit Centres for Social Welfare, poverty organisations, homeless shelter sector, institutions, housing actors, academics, etc. Many of whom were already a member of the Taskforce Housing and Shelter. At the city level, the departments competent for social welfare

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<sup>3</sup> [urbact.eu/roof](http://urbact.eu/roof), [roofnetwork.eu](http://roofnetwork.eu)

<sup>4</sup> This task-specific, consensus-oriented local governance model combines network, grassroots, and experimental governance.

<sup>5</sup> [urbact.eu/roof](http://urbact.eu/roof), [roofnetwork.eu](http://roofnetwork.eu)

and for housing started collaborating more closely, which was also a prerequisite. This action plan became the tool to stimulate the governance processes to realise the systems change: joint learning from the field, capacity building at all relevant policy levels, and pointing directionality bottom-up from the task-specific local governance structure to include the above local competent authorities.

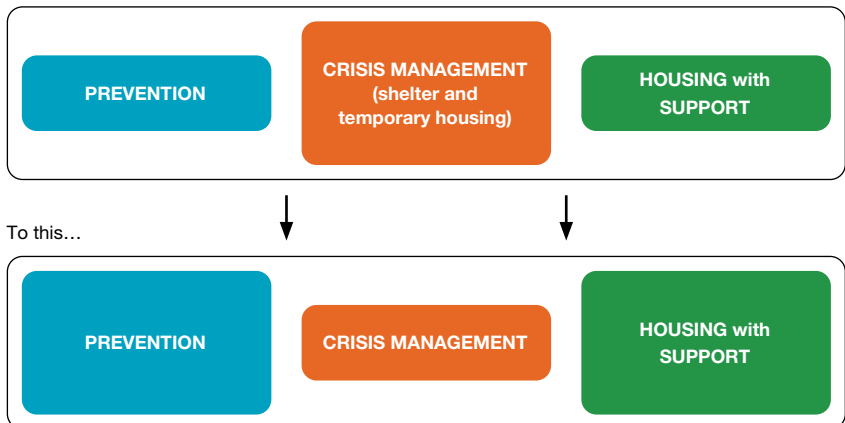
In May 2022, another milestone was reached as the City of Ghent approved the action plan to reach functional zero by 2040 through the shift from shelter to housing for those experiencing homelessness who have a legal residence permit. This was a big shift in its vision, now acknowledging that ending homelessness is indeed possible and even preferable, more effective, and humane compared to managing and even facilitating a homeless way of life. Even more so, the city chose to put a deadline on when homelessness needs to be ended.

***The action plan on how to end homelessness in Ghent by 2040***

The plan has its main focus on creating a systemic model for housing with support in Ghent. In Ghent, homelessness is currently being managed by three methods: prevention, crisis management (shelter and temporary housing), and permanent housing with support. Our future strategy is to invest more in prevention and permanent housing with support, so that we are able to minimise crisis management. Extensive research and practices around the world show that housing with support (Housing First, Rapid Rehousing, etc.) helps to end homelessness. Moreover, it helps people who have previously experienced homelessness reach more positive outcomes in terms of well-being, social integration, health, and other life domains. By maximising prevention and permanent housing with support, we can end homelessness for legal residents.

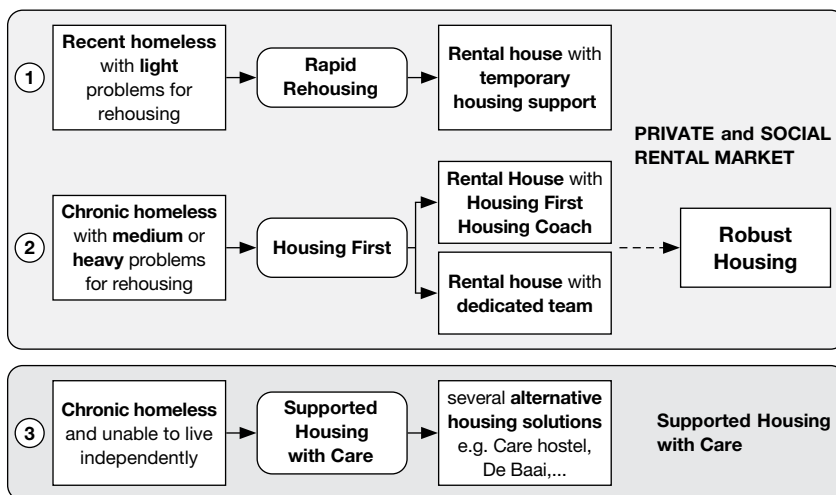
**STRATEGY TO END HOMELESSNESS**

Can we go from this...



The model for housing and support focuses on permanent housing. Shelter and temporary housing solutions are still a necessity as long as there are no sufficient, available, and affordable permanent housing solutions, but they are not part of the plan and the here presented model.

We want to deliver **three different types of housing solutions** in the future, with which we can deliver a suitable solution for all types of homeless people:



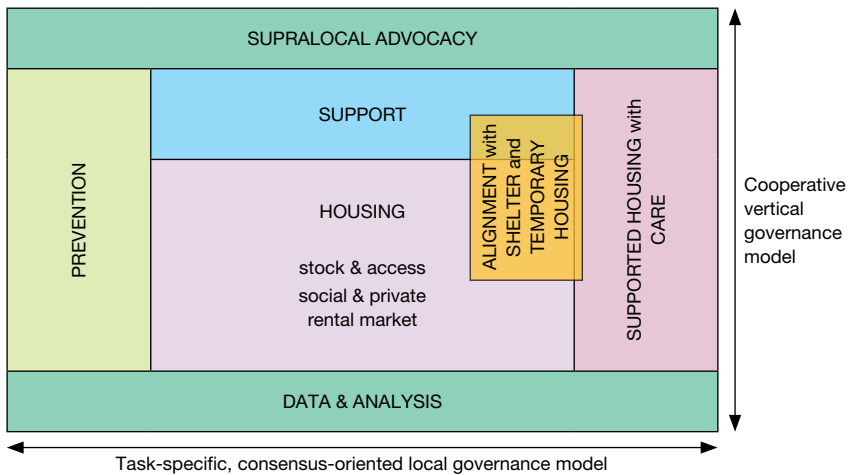
1. **Rapid Rehousing.** This contains a regular rental house (social or private) with temporary support for an average of one year. A solution aimed at households that became homeless recently (less than one year, or less than two years without substantial problems to be rehoused). It is for those households who are capable of a stable life in their house with temporary support to get income, children's education, network, etc... back on track.
2. **Housing First.** This contains a regular rental house (social or private) with support as long as needed. We divide here into two types of support: Housing Coaching for those with medium needs and a Dedicated Team for those with heavy or complex needs. Robust Housing (based on the Danish model 'Skaeve Huse'), involves housing units for people with complex social problems combined with mental health issues, addiction problems, who cannot live within the regular housing market, and are not allowed to live in residential services for homeless people because of extremely disruptive behaviour and nuisances. They often live in socially stressful environments like regular social housing blocks. The robust houses are delivering a stress-free environment, not directly connected

to neighbours, with intensive multidisciplinary support. Eleven robust houses are currently being built.

3. **Supported housing with care.** This contains a collection of housing solutions aimed at those experiencing homelessness who are not able to live in a regular rental house mostly due to physical or mental health problems. Different projects are set up from different sectors, e.g., mental health sector, disability sector, and elderly care.

The action plan provides for a gradual build-up to sustainable living for all people experiencing homelessness. During the build-up, shelter and temporary housing will be a necessary and complementary offer. Coordination between these various methods is crucial to arrive at a well-integrated and conclusive whole. An important concern of several local societal organisations.

To implement the model, we have formulated 18 actions on the themes in the figure below:



The principles of the Ghent action plan are approved by stakeholders and the council. Time to take the next steps.

***Making the shift***

It is clear that in Belgium, and in Ghent, it is time to make the shift from experimenting to upscale Housing First. A transition that requires a systemic change.

Demos Helsinki and the Housing First Europe Hub (2022) stated in *A New Systems Perspective to Ending Homelessness* that:

Given the wide scope of any homelessness system, it is apparent that systems change is not only about getting the policy design right. It is first and foremost about identifying a clear and aspirational purpose for promoting deep, structural transformation across these layers. This entails steering actors, restructuring their processes, and challenging their values. (p.5)

The article describes different ways to make the systemic change toward Housing First, what works, and what does not in different countries. The governance processes as described in the article are indeed good to follow. In the Ghent version, the local governance model, which cannot be copied from any of the described cities, is task-specific and consensus-oriented combined with a cooperative vertical governance model (a combination of the Finnish top-down and the Scottish bottom-up models).

Making the shift requires cooperation among the different political levels (national, regional, and local), among the different sectors (homelessness, housing, welfare, (mental) health), and among the different stakeholders (housing or service providers, civic associations, field workers, management, civil servants, citizens, homeless people, volunteers, researchers).

The (complex) Belgian State structure and division of responsibilities have their impact on a local level. Housing, homeless, and regional poverty policies, including the not-for-profit Centres for General Welfare Work, are responsibilities of the Flemish Region, whilst the Federal State is in charge of poverty policy and policy for the Public Centres for Social Welfare. The latter have large discretion in realising the right to social welfare on a local level. The municipalities and cities are seen as the directors of homeless policies. The City of Ghent also has separate departments for homelessness and housing, but there is close cooperation. Divided responsibilities of course make it more complex to have a uniform policy to combat homelessness.

To be able to make the shift in Ghent, the **supra local level** will play a decisive role at the level of actors, processes, and core values (three main elements of the homeless system):

1. EU needs alignment of resources and vision on ending homelessness and affordable and sustainable housing, especially since the highly mobile nature of homelessness, also between the EU Member States. Belgium can use the opportunity of being president of the council of the EU in 2024 to bring this to the next level in close cooperation with the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness.



2. Belgium and the regions need to choose ending homelessness and affordable and sustainable housing as a priority in order to be able to tap into European funds (e.g., ESF+). Affordable housing is a prerequisite to make the most out of European means (e.g., for employment).
3. Belgium and the regions need to take the initiative to build a unified national Housing First approach together with experts, regions, cities, and stakeholders. The main principles should be: aiming to end homelessness, based on the fundamental rights to housing and privacy which cannot be met through shelters or temporary accommodation; building on the experience of the past Housing First experiments in the cities, based on shared principles and values; set for different groups of people experiencing homeless, with a clear ownership and division of tasks and budget among the different sectors. This requires an alignment of the federal and regional competences and policies, i.e., alignment with the Flemish Action plan to prevent and combat homelessness and homelessness 2020-2024 with a clear aim to eradicate homelessness.
4. Belgium and the regions need to facilitate and coordinate the transition from shelter to Housing First.
  - Coordinate the different levels:
    - o Identify political, organisational, and operational obstacles to make the shift and find a way to solve them together.
    - o Install and coordinate a partnership between levels, sectors, and actors to discuss progress regarding policy, funding, and actors.
    - o Provide training for the different stakeholders.
  - Align legislation of the different political levels and write and change legislation where needed, e.g., making Housing First a part of the national and regional housing and welfare/poverty/health strategy.
  - Develop a policy of incentives: subsidising the conversion of existing shelters into supported housing arrangements (a carrot); enforcing Housing First-only procurement for both shelter and housing services (stick).
  - Establish a supra local or even Belgian foundation aimed at building affordable housing specifically for the homeless (cf. the Finnish Y Foundation).
  - Provide and help look for funding:
    - o To make the transition on a local level (to change business models, new approach for field workers, convert buildings), including for staff.

- o To consolidate Housing First for the long term, with sufficient housing and support.
- o Through partnerships on the different policy levels and between sectors and actors.

Affordable and sustainable housing and adequate guidance in housing remains a big challenge to realise. In Ghent there is a clear aim to end homelessness by 2040. To put this high on the political agenda, different strategies have been used: data collection, advocacy, influencing by showing the advantages of a shift in homelessness policy from other research results, the use of the international ROOF network to show the international support in housing based solutions, involving supra-local, national, and European stakeholders such as MEP's and the Commissioner that are responsible for social affairs, and continuing the work we started with the ROOFTOPEU2022.

The city and relevant stakeholders are for the most part convinced that housing the homeless is the way forward and ending homelessness can be reached. However, having political support and the action plan is only the beginning. The foundations are laid, but the concretisation and effective implementation of the action plan is the crucial and probably most difficult step. It is also necessary to get the necessary funding, to create sufficient and affordable housing, and to have quality support to guide the people in housing.

To be able to make the shift on a **local level**, the city of Ghent itself will have to:

1. Coordinate the implementation of the Ghent Action Plan;
2. Find substantial financial investments for the different actions of the Action Plan to begin within the next legislature of the Local Government (2025-2030). The biggest financial needs will be: scaling up prevention, provide housing to people who cannot live independently because of their addiction and mental health issues by making residential institutions more inclusive and/or by creating a care hostel, scaling up housing support and the creation of dedicated teams, scaling up robust houses and join the set-up of a preferably supralocal or even national Y-Foundation type of organisation which can develop affordable and qualitative housing which is one of the Achilles heels in deploying the action plan, and further scaling up of prevention. All of which are a big challenge in times of crisis and rising inflation. The selection of the cases in the article shows us that there is a need to look for funding outside of the city's budget, e.g., by partnering up with different societal organisations or companies, organising fundraisers, private investors, etc.

3. Prepare the actual systemic shift by taking similar actions as the supra local level:
  - Continue advocacy stressing both the economic advantages of this shift and the realisation of human dignity and human rights for the homeless in Ghent;
    - o On the different policy levels, and
    - o With all the relevant actors such as the people who work in the shelters and housing first, mental health care, welfare, people experiencing homelessness, the social housing company, etc.
  - Identify local political, organisational, and operational obstacles to make the shift in Ghent and find a way to solve them together, where needed by adjusting local rules and regulations;
  - Initiate and coordinate a local partnership between the actors of the different sectors;
  - Guide the local transition process;
  - Organise training;
  - Earmark its local subsidies; and finally,
  - Persevere.

## Conclusion

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Ending homelessness is possible, definitely in middle sized cities and even at country level. Making the shift from shelter to Housing First is key, though challenging. It requires more housing and more support long term, but just as much a temporary investment in the transition itself. To this end, all political levels need to cooperate and make efforts, in all directions and together with the stakeholders from the different sectors. Through task-specific, consensus-oriented local and cooperative vertical governance, based on mutual respect and recognition of all stakeholders' specific expertise, the transition can be successful in Belgium. What it takes now is a mix of good coordination, a supported Housing First/led vision, aligned policies and resources, earmarked Housing First subsidies, sufficient long-term capacity for housing (e.g., through a Y foundation-like vehicle), support, and learning, with extra resources for the cities and local actors to make the actual transition.

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