"In the Netherlands, we have a good vision, we have plans. What is holding us back from achieving them?" ask Jules van Dam and Guusta van der Zwaart in their article. While trying to answer, they consider how Covid-19 measures improved quality standards of homeless services and how these should feed into the approach to ending homelessness in future.

HOMELESSNESS IN THE NETHERLANDS:
A HOUSING-LED STRATEGY WITHOUT HOUSES

By **Guusta van der Zwaart** and **Jules van Dam**, Boardmembers, Stichting De Tussenvoorziening

In recent years, there have been several developments relating to the housing of homeless people in the Netherlands that are worth sharing. Since the publication of the latest figures on homelessness in September 2019, we have seen a revival of interest from central government in tackling the problem. The message that homelessness had more than doubled in 10 years, from 18,000 in 2009 to 39,000 in 2018, got the much-needed attention of the government. With constant public focus on the subject, and with the good will of the state secretary and advice from the RVS (the government advisory council), a policy turn was made.

The RVS explored strategies to help tackle homelessness and advised using homes to end homelessness. This was a turning point in the chosen strategy that had previously mainly been based on healthcare or social care solutions. A housing-led strategy was born. The secretary of state for social affairs decided that 10,000 extra homes should be made available for homeless people within a few years and extra funding became available to support them: €200 million for 2020/21. Extra funding was also provided for alternative housing solutions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became abundantly clear that government advice to stay at home and avoid public places was impossible for homeless people. This underlined the need for housing solutions. The result of providing extra shelter spaces in hotels during COVID-19 proved that homeless people could recover more easily in a comfortable and suitable environment. One of the very few good things that resulted from COVID-19 was the provision of extra funding to improve the shelters. Night shelters became places where you could stay 24 hours a day. Dormitories were sometimes refurbished to accommodate 1 or 2 people. Fewer people were allowed in each shelter due to social distancing rules, and more shelters were opened to get everyone in. The extra money came from central government's COVID health funding. Unfortunately, this was not structural, but ad hoc funding. Most cities could not and would not reverse most of these improvements after the temporary decline in homelessness during the first phase of COVID, because of the effect on homeless people.

The extra measures showed that if they were treated well, in a peaceful environment, people started making plans for their future themselves. The conclusion: a helpful environment helps.

It is now more accepted that recovery starts with a home and customised care. Following the example of central government, local governments are adopting the housing-led strategy and making plans for their cities. So far so good, you might say. Unfortunately, in 2021, because of the large number of homeless people and the blocked housing market, new shelters are needed and being opened. They are considered very temporary, and are therefore sometimes low quality, with the excuse that 'we now have a housing-led strategy'. This situation forces us to look at the 'housing-led' plans we made earlier in 2020, and why they are currently not delivering.

In a recent study (by Guusta van der Zwaart, *Escaping the maze of homelessness*),[1] the central research question was just that: we have a good vision, we have plans. What is holding us back from achieving them? A comparative case study of the four main cities in the Netherlands (G4) presents the reasons behind this. The main conclusion is that we are tackling homelessness from the wrong governmental domain. Housing solutions cannot be provided through the health departments of local or central governments. This is where we made a fundamental mistake, which needs to be rectified. Rules,

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1   Uit het Doolhof van Dakloosheid, 2021.

regulations and building planning is lagging behind for this group, because housing-led strategies are not integrated in the right domain. Homeless people are not considered a significant group and restrictive legislation on sharing homes is being maintained.[2]

Another problem is the overall shortage of houses in the Netherlands. The latest figures show that in Holland we need at least another 1,000,000 houses for the next 10 years, including 300,000 for social housing and 40,000 for homeless people. An important lesson from recent years is that you cannot have a housing-led strategy without enough houses and the right focus. It's as simple as that. You cannot solve homelessness with social programmes alone. We must focus on housing, so we need the Department of Housing to be involved. In fact, this department should be driving the solution.

We see two other things occurring. Lack of focus: in the Netherlands, many of the government's tasks are implemented decentrally. This means that each local government can make their own plans as they see fit. This results in huge differences between cities with respect to policy and outcomes. We see that housing-led solutions are not the core of most policies. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a right to housing linked to ending homelessness. In most governmental housing visions, this group is therefore not included, or only as a vulnerable group that is given a house in combination with care. Some homeless people need the last option, but it does not apply to everyone.

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2   The main restriction is the so-called 'woningdelerskorting' (home share discount). When two or more people are sharing a house and are both living on social benefit, they must face a serious reduction in the benefit, because they are considered to split the costs and need less money. Experts in Holland see this as an important reason behind the growing number of homeless people. Parents are sending their children out of their houses.

> "Shelters must be considered an emergency measure, not a permanent strategy and the quality standards that proved so helpful during COVID must be maintained!"

The development in the homeless population in the Netherlands shows a shift for part of the population from the 'care' group to a group that needs little support, just a room or an apartment. We see more and more working people in our shelters, who have become homeless because of a divorce, a problem with their parents, or because there is a waiting list of over 10 years for social housing. They also need a

home to restart their lives, some help and supportive communities to get them back on their feet. This just requires good housing planning. Year after year. For years to come.

The Netherlands was once a leading example in Europe with 30% of all new houses being reserved for social housing. Holland did have a problem with homelessness, but fortunately it was less serious than in most other European countries. We think our large stock of social housing is certainly an important reason for that. Unfortunately, over the last 10 years the government implemented a market strategy in the field of housing, which neglected social housing and resulted in a loss of focus. This meant there was hardly any space for new social housing. Our Ministry of Housing was abolished and central planning and objectives on housing were abandoned. This is an important reason for the doubling of the number of homeless people in the same ten years.

The final conclusion from this study is that executing plans is difficult in the Netherlands. This is because of our decentralised government, as described earlier. Working in network structures slows us down. The homeless problem is fragmented and scattered over variable government domains, causing loss of focus on the problem. One respondent said: 'Every opinion slows us down'. This is a good illustration of the current situation in the Netherlands.

So, what can we do about it? It's not rocket science. Firstly, the lack of focus on social housing is the cause of many of the problems. We need to restore our focus and strategy. Because 30% of no housing is nothing. Secondly, we must make sure that vulnerable groups are considered a main concern in the housing strategies. Make it part of the agreements, regulations and plans. Find a way to incorporate the right to housing in the approach to homelessness. And provide a sufficient budget for housing solutions and support for homeless people. Thirdly, the different government domains should connect so that the problem can be effectively tackled. The government must strive for a comprehensive vision and a Ministry that really has the power to coordinate. This could be the new Ministry of Housing. At the start of this century, we managed to get more than 10,000 people off the streets in just a few years, coordinated by the Ministry of Finance. Central focus and steering help.

Fourthly, the housing-led vision tends to slip away under the pressure of the housing crisis. We see that vulnerable groups in need of housing are quickly compared and seen as competing with each other. For example, refugees and homeless people. This is not helping. Housing is needed for everyone. We need a good housing strategy for all.

For the homeless, a housing-led solution must be prioritised by all NGOs and government authorities, local and central. Until we have enough new homes for the homeless, we will unfortunately need extra shelters for the next few years. However, they must be considered an emergency measure, not a permanent strategy, and the quality standards that proved so helpful during COVID must be maintained! Fortunately, NGOs are speaking up about this. Nobody wants to return to the large dormitories we had before. In some cities, plans are therefore being made for temporary houses instead of shelters, which is even better.

We were able to get most people off the streets at the beginning of this century. We did it with focus and a central campaign. Let's just do it again.