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ROOF ADVOCACY TRAJECTORY

Securing the foundations before building the
ROOF that ends homelessness

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THE URBACT ROOF NETWORK focussed on ending homelessness through housing (First) and data collection. Nine European cities wanted to adopt and progress their engagement with Housing First as an evidence-based method for ending homelessness for people with complex lives. As the project progressed it became clear that a crucial prerequisite for the cities to make the shift, from rudimentary approaches to shelter to sustainable housing solutions, entailed helping change the conversation with and between policy actors. Therefore ROOF decided to engage in a process of advocacy in order to inform local, national and European policy debates ending homelessness.

About ROOF

ROOF is an URBACT Action Planning Network of nine cities across Europe. Braga (PT), Ghent (BE – Lead Partner), Glasgow (UK), Liège (BE), Odense (DK), Poznań (PL), Thessaloniki (EL), Timișoara (RO), and Toulouse

Métropole (FR) came together to explore and share housing solutions for ending homelessness. As part of this collaboration each city also drafted a local action plan grounded in their specific context in order to address their own specific city-level challenges. Across this network the partners have engaged in transnational exchange, mutual learning and continuous dialogue since Autumn 2019 concluding, at least in a formal sense, in Spring 2022. Key in the network process was the focus on advocacy and storytelling to inform the debate amongst different stakeholders.

Building the ROOF that ends homelessness

The lifetime of the ROOF project has spanned one of the toughest post-war periods in history for public authorities across Europe, with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic being particularly acute for those most vulnerable living in all our communities. The pandemic has shown, in the starkest of terms,

that housing inequality is not simply a financial concern or even an issue confined to the built and urban environment, it is an urgent and pressing public health challenge. Those people living in lower quality housing, in insecure tenancies and those who experience homelessness are all existing on a narrow spectrum united by their precarity and vulnerability. These insecurities are often experienced alongside other exclusions and vulnerabilities which further compounds the ability for people to be housed securely over the long-term.

However, housing insecurity did not start with the COVID-19 pandemic and homelessness has been a priority for policy in the European Union (EU) for some time. As we adapt to a post-pandemic situation we are now faced with new challenges which impact on the availability of housing including: the cost of living, financial consequences of the pandemic as well as the number of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine who are in desperate need of safe and secure accommodation. All of these factors – and more - constrain the housing options available.

Governments across Member States have invested considerable resources over a number of years attempting to reduce the variety of manifestations homelessness takes. The European Platform on Combating Homelessness offers the latest and strongest declaration of the EUs commitment towards this with a view to ending homelessness within the coming decade. This is a

formidable and necessary objective. The consequences of homelessness are huge for Member States including significant impacts on the health and care system, the criminal justice system, social integration, not to mention the damaging effects homelessness has for broader social inequality. As a result, providing an environment where the provision of safe, secure and affordable housing solutions is not only regarded as a human right but where policies are enacted as such should be the objective of every Member State in the EU.

But tackling homelessness is complex. In fact, complexity surrounds all aspects of homelessness. Its existence is the result of a complex interplay of processes and factors which create the social conditions within which homelessness tends to occur including: harmful social policies, poor or inadequate housing, poverty, individual histories, substances, alcohol, and violence. As this complexity combines to shape people's 'routes in' to homelessness, so too do the 'routes out' of homelessness become complex. As such it is therefore crucial that the solutions to tackle homelessness respond to this complexity.

It is clear that systemic inequalities which produce housing instability provide an incredibly challenging environment from which to tackle the complexities associated with homelessness. This is why housing-led approaches – those approaches which

seek to reduce the precariousness of housing which compounds other factors - are hugely important. However, it is not the mere provision of housing – a place where people can live, eat and sleep – which makes the difference. If we acknowledge that the homelessness experience is varied, diverse and complex it follows that supporting people through and out of homelessness can succeed only by following a personalised support approach. The value and impact of providing a diverse pool of personalised accommodation and accommodation-related support for helping homeless people cannot be overstated. Personalised support responds to how each individual lives within particular situations, in tune with their unique personal history, whilst positioned in a complex network of people and organisations. Starting from a position that homelessness exists merely because of a housing supply issue or, on the other hand, because of some intrinsic problem with the individual, is therefore doomed to fall short of eradicating homelessness.

This is why Housing First, in particular, has a prominent role to play across the EU in tackling homelessness. Housing First, as a housing model, was developed in the United States by the non-profit organisation Pathways to Housing in the 1990s. It is typically targeted primarily at those who are chronically homeless with complex needs often involving issues of both mental health and addiction. In the original model, individuals are offered permanent, independent housing without the prerequisites of sobriety or engagement

with treatment or rehabilitation and are provided with tailored, wraparound support services. This contrasts with more common models, routinely found in Europe and the United States, which are essentially variants on a ‘treatment first’ approach, where clients work their way through a series of steps and transitional housing before ‘earning’ their right to permanent housing. However, consensus has been growing among policymakers, campaigning organisations and researchers that Housing First is the most effective treatment for certain groups, as part of a suite of approaches to effectively support people into secure and stable accommodation.

Securing the foundations first

Whilst the benefit of Housing First is widely accepted, whilst working with the nine cities which make up ROOF it has become clear that although few people doubt the importance of Housing First as a tool to tackle long-term homelessness there are major barriers to its implementation. These barriers largely revolve around the lack of support from key decision makers which is critical in order to make the meaningful systemic changes required.

Although the evidence about the efficacy of Housing First is well-established. Evidence itself is not enough. Policies are not always made solely on the basis of a technical-rational approach. Decision makers often point to the lack of good quality and affordable housing supply as

a key barrier to deploying Housing First in their areas, the uncertainty regarding how long support will last for making Housing First appear a more financially risky option, and a lack of available funds to support such schemes. The financial barriers are further complicated when decision makers, working within separate service areas, become focussed on which service sees the benefit from the investment. For instance, in some countries the funding for Housing First may arise from the national or local housing budgets but it is often in other areas such as the health system, criminal justice system or wider care system where the 'savings' may be realised as people use their services less or more appropriately. These split incentives between services can cause significant barriers to starting the process of designing Housing First and housing-led approaches. The barriers therefore move between the rational-technical to the political.

Recognising these challenges by adopting a pragmatic approach has been the power of the ROOF project. Overcoming these challenges through setting up an advocacy trajectory for the different policy levels has been a core focus of ROOF over the final two years of the project. The partners have worked together to distil their core learning into four key messages in order to try and engage a wide range of key stakeholders and decision makers. These argue for:

An EU Ending Homelessness Strategy by 2024/25 that includes key actions on improving housing affordability and

the quality of housing solutions

A joint monitoring system with harmonised indicators and ad hoc surveys on homelessness to help inform policy development.

The promotion of housing-led approaches – particularly Housing First – as a key method of tackling homelessness.

The need for EU Structural and Investment funds to be allocated to expand affordable housing stock and provide the personalised support to those who need it.

The partner cities that came together to create ROOF understand the complexity of homelessness, the power of data and evidence, the need for housing-led approaches, and strength of developing creative personalised services. Each partner is situated within a real-world dynamic context. The cities are each dealing with the operationalisation of the evidence about what works to tackle housing insecurity, a growing will from the EU to tackle homelessness, and increasing pressure on public services at the same time as being enmeshed in the daily complexities and occasional contradictions of policy development at the local level.

ROOF has been an incubator and accelerator of ideas about how to do what is needed in order to meaningfully, and viably, bring about an end to homelessness in the city context. However, ROOF, as a project about tackling

homelessness, has been much more than a sum of its constituent parts. Whilst the partners have indeed delivered against their workplans – almost entirely within a time of global uncertainty – it is the nature of their engagement which has defined the project. Without exception this has been characterised by meaningful mutual learning and exchanges, collaborative problem solving, and the search for solutions driven by creativity.

Working within the city context there is certainly a great deal of change that can be brought about at the local level. However, it is clear that greater impact is possible if these principles and messages are shared more widely in order to bring about the systemic change needed at the EU, national and local levels. The Lisbon Declaration has demonstrated the commitment of the European Union to take serious steps in addressing homelessness across Member States. This is undoubtedly a critical first step but it cannot on its own eradicate homelessness. Broader structural and systemic changes are urgently required in order to make the impact that is so needed. These need to look beyond homelessness to root causes in order to press national governments to take urgent actions on housing affordability and quality of housing solutions. These need to be grounded in pragmatism. At the city level the complexity of policy development, delivery and unachievable timeframes can thwart the passion and imagination that is often replete in local municipalities working in urban systems.

The ROOF experience is demonstrating that public authorities are replete with passion, imagination and creativity when it comes to overcoming challenges of inequality; these attributes merely need nurturing. Key decision-makers need to be enabled to support new ways of working – like Housing First and other innovative approaches – in order to transform housing inequality and cities across Europe. The EU – in partnership with cities and national governments – can plant the seeds to set this transformation in process. In so doing a ROOF can be built once the foundations are in place.

*ROOF aims to end homelessness through innovative housing solutions at city level. It is about making the shift from managing homelessness to actually ending it through Housing First/Led and about gathering accurate data. It is an URBACT project, running from 2019 to 2022, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. As a network of 9 European cities, ROOF develops integrated local action plans to promote and achieve the strategic goal of Functional Zero (no structural homelessness).

ROOF network cities:

Ghent (Belgium - Lead Partner), Thessaloniki (Greece), Toulouse Métropole (France), Braga (Portugal), Timișoara (Romania), Glasgow (United Kingdom), Liège (Belgium), Poznań (Poland), Odense (Denmark).

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