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# Homelessness Strategies in Europe – A Review of the Literature

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‣ **Abstract** *The research underpinning this review was written in the context of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH), against the backdrop of the global housing crisis. Moreover, in the past two decades homelessness strategies were developed around the world, including in Europe. This literature review aims to present what is known to us to date regarding European homelessness strategies. It maps the different facets known as part of any homelessness strategy, including implementation, governance, prevention, temporary and permanent long term housing, monitoring and evaluation, etc.*

‣ **Keywords** *Homelessness, Strategy, Policy, Literature review*

## Introduction

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Rapid population growth combined with growing urbanisation outpace adequate and affordable housing worldwide (United Nations Statistics Division, 2019). A growing number of European countries report overrepresentation of some ethnic minority populations in their homeless population (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Meanwhile, according to research, there is growing awareness that migration may have become a structural factor of homelessness (Hermans et al., 2020).

In her political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (2024), expressed the urgent need to “address the housing crisis facing millions of families and young people” (p.18). This housing crisis is the context in which homelessness strategies were

developed during the past two decades: mainly in northern and western European countries, while the eastern countries seem to have lagged behind (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010; Baptista and Marlier, 2019). In the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness of 2021, all signatories, including all European Union (EU) Member States (MSs) agreed “to launch this platform and to work towards the ending of homelessness by 2030” (for more information about the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH); see also Leterme and Develtere, 2023).

This declaration was developed on the basis of some prior decisions and tools, including the European Pillar on Social Rights, the European Parliament Resolution of 24 November 2020 on tackling homelessness rates in the European Union, and the European Parliament Resolution of 21 January 2021 on access to decent and affordable housing for all.

The European Commission Work Programme of EPOCH for 2022-2024 states that national, regional, and local authorities will:

- Promote the **prevention of homelessness, access to permanent housing and the provision of enabling support services to the homeless**, which could, amongst others, be done by:
  - **Developing and adopting strategies** for the eradication of homelessness, according to the principles enshrined in the Declaration (European Commission, 2022, p.6).

## **A Review of the Literature: Homelessness Strategies**

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Strategic planning to address the problem of homelessness internationally has become more common as the service sector has grown more sophisticated, and as social policies in the area have become more expansive and detailed. (Pleace et al., 2015, p.23)

After United States (US) local governments failed to address homelessness properly, a 1996 paper spoke about planning a homelessness strategy as an innovation providing a continuum of homelessness care for prevention, emergency relief, and long-term care (Berman, 1996).

Recently, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024a) defined homelessness strategies “as policy documents setting out targets and actions to tackle homelessness, requiring links across policy sectors” (p.1). Strategic planning may also be defined as “a deliberative, disciplined approach to producing fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organi-

zation (or other entity) is, what it does, and why” (Bryson, 2011, pp.7-8). A definition of strategic frameworks describes “agreed goals and long-term plans that focus efforts of stakeholders towards desired outcomes” (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021, p.6, Table 1).

Planning is not enough. For its success, a plan should be implemented, so it does not end up simply on someone’s office shelf. If it does not stay on the shelf, a strategic plan which is designed by and with multiple stakeholders may help to alleviate homelessness (Lee et al., 2021).

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2021), policies for affordable housing should address four topics for planning and implementation to be effective:

1. housing governance and regulation;
2. access to finance and funding;
3. access and availability of land for housing construction; and
4. climate-neutral housing construction and renovation.

As housing systems are dynamic and change over time, governments need not only to plan and implement strategies effectively, but also evaluate them whilst adapting them to conditions that change over time.

Note that policies for affordable housing should not be dealt with as interchangeable but rather possibly including homelessness policies.

## Homelessness Strategies in Europe

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There have been at least two decades of discussions regarding homelessness strategic planning in Europe. The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) (2010) published a handbook for policy makers, which includes its policy toolkit, that tried to give some guidance for developing a homelessness strategy. Further, FEANTSA’s magazine summer issue of 2015 dealt with different aspects of homelessness strategies. Benjaminsen and Dyb (2010), as well as Pleace et al. (2015), offer reviews of homelessness strategies that were relevant at the time, while O’Sullivan (2022a; b) and O’Sullivan et al. (2023) provide some up-to-date information about some of these strategies.

Further, there are some documents dealing with homelessness strategies in specific states and regions. Most of these examine existing strategies, whilst some others deal with their absence. Some examples include papers about **Portugal** (Baptista, 2009; 2013; 2018, Ferreira Martins and Ferreira, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2010), **Portugal**

and Ireland (Baptista and O'Sullivan, 2008), **Ireland**, (Baptista et al., 2022; Gavin, 2010), **Finland** (Kaakinen, 2015; Pleace, 2017; Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009), **Spain** (Baptista, 2016; Bezunartea, 2022; Rodilla and Lopez, 2023; Ruiz Bautista, 2010), **Poland** (Olech and Rogozińska, 2010; Wygnańska, 2009), **Norway** (Edgar, 2006; Halseth et al., 2022), **Denmark** (Benjaminsen and Kamstrup, 2010; Skovlund Asmussen and Maini-Thorsen, 2022), **Czechia** (Dutka, 2022), **France** (Uhry, 2015), **Germany** (Maretki, 2022), **Greece** (Pertsinidou and Soulele, 2015), **Hungary** (Bakos and Ghyczy, 2010), the **Netherlands** (Hermans, 2012), **Serbia** (Cirkovic and Terzic, 2010), **Sweden** (Sahlin, 2015), **Scandinavian Countries** (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008), **Flanders** (Beyers, 2015; Hermans, 2017), **Wales** (Dalton, 2022), and **Scotland** (Anderson, 2007; 2019). Further, there are 35 national reports which are part of the 2019 study of national policies by the European Social Policy Network (ESPN).

Norway and Finland seem to offer very good examples – though not the only ones – of dealing with homelessness in Europe. In Norway, the State Housing Bank (Husbanken) has had a crucial coordinating responsibility for implementation of the national strategy (Edgar, 2006). A Husbanken analysis recently noted that “the reduction in the number of homeless people is a result of national cooperation and a long-term integrated strategy for housing and support services” (Halseth et al., 2022, p.21; see also the whole FEANTSA Magazine spring issue that deals with national homelessness strategies). Many strategies were drafted in the past two decades in the EU. However, this did not happen in all EU Member States, and not in all regions of the Union.

### ***Key Events and Documents Underpinning European Union Homelessness Strategies***

Some important events and documents may be spotlighted in relation to EU homelessness strategies in the last two decades. These will be noted below and include 1) The Consensus Conference (2010); 2) A study of national policies by the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) (Baptista and Marlier, 2019); and 3) The Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (2021):

1. The Consensus Conference on Homelessness took place in Brussels in 2010. It was an event of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU and sought to establish an evidence-based consensus on how to advance in tackling homelessness in Europe. The outcomes of this Conference include very extensive documents, of which we would like to present here only briefly. Some European Journal of Homelessness papers also exist that delineate, as well as examine and critique, the Conference (see some contributions in the 2011 Special Section on the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness in Volume 5, Issue 2 of the Journal).

The Conference jury concluded that homelessness strategies can both prevent people from becoming homeless and ensure quick provision of long-term solutions for those who are experiencing homelessness. The Jury further expressed a need for an ambitious EU homelessness strategy that would frame the development of Member States' national and regional strategies and enhance progress in the fight against homelessness (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010).

Bearing in mind the question of whether an EU strategy on homelessness should exist (see Fitzpatrick, 2011), the Conference jury recommended some elements for an EU homelessness strategy. These EU level elements may also be relevant for the development of national and regional strategies (see European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010, pp.22-24).

2. The study of national policies by the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was published in 2019. Experts from the ESPN were asked by the European Commission to examine evidence, policy approaches, and overall strategic frameworks addressing homelessness and housing exclusion and assess their effectiveness. The outcomes of this request include a synthesis report (Baptista and Marlier, 2019) and the 35 national experts reports mentioned above.

Like the Consensus Conference conclusion, ESPN experts also spoke of an EU homelessness strategy, mentioning the European Parliament's resolutions from 2011 and 2014 urging the European Commission to develop such an all-encompassing EU strategy that could support Member States in their fights against homelessness. In 2013, the Commission called on Member States to develop national strategies, as part of the EU Social Investment Package (Baptista and Marlier, 2019).

Baptista and Marlier (2019) report that 16 Member States have national, regional, or local homelessness strategies. Key elements include housing-led and/or Housing First services, prevention, monitoring, funding, and multi-level and multi-sectoral governance structures which enhance cooperation in policy and delivery. Finally, they note some systemic causes which limit trajectories out of homelessness and housing exclusion. These include lack of affordable housing, poverty, unemployment, as well as insecure employment, and problematic social protection – including low levels of welfare benefits. When attempting to develop a homelessness strategy, it is worth consulting the synthesis report's recommendation to countries as well as EU level recommendations (Baptista and Marlier, 2019, pp.18-22).

This is also the place to reiterate the European Pillar on Social Rights, the European Parliament Resolution of 24 November 2020 on tackling homelessness rates in the European Union, and the European Parliament Resolution of 21 January 2021 on access to decent and affordable housing for all

3. The Lisbon declaration on combatting homelessness, signed on 21 June 2021, launched EPOCH – the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness – in the context of which this paper is written.

## **Key Issues and Points of an Effective Homelessness Strategy**

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Below we elaborate on various issues that are relevant for an effective homelessness strategy, as these arise from the literature.

### ***Legal Framework***

Ending homelessness is not possible without a sufficient legal framework to support the implementation of homelessness strategies. The European Social Charter already provides a strong foundation for national legislation. (Kaakinen, 2010, p.38)

The legal framework for action against homelessness is important for any related strategy. In Norway, for example, it was built based on the Social Services Act (1991) within the framework of a national housing policy, in which municipalities were encouraged to develop strategies for providing housing support (Edgar, 2006).

### ***A Human Rights Approach to Homelessness***

A legal framework with an effective and human-rights-based approach to realising the right to housing for people experiencing homelessness should be reflected in a strategy based on these principles. Finland's constitutionally enshrined programmatic right to housing, together with its homelessness strategy, offer a progressive realisation of the right to housing, even if this right may not be enforced through the courts. Another different example is Scotland's legal right to housing, which is enforceable through the courts (DesBaillets and Hamill, 2022).

The International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights enshrines the right to housing. Article 11 (1) recognizes "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions" (United Nations, 1966, p.4). While abiding by a human rights approach to homelessness, the unequivocal mission is to end it – as housing is a human right. This should not remove the responsibility of managing homelessness and doing the best we can with anyone currently experiencing homelessness until we achieve our mission (for more information about a human rights approach to homelessness, and a wider range of international legal instruments to achieve the right to housing, see Housing Rights Watch).

Note that even though we specifically mention and elaborate here regarding the right to housing, human rights go beyond housing to include other rights like dignity, freedom from degrading treatment, and others.

### ***Mission, Objectives, Targets, and Goals***

Strategies, as well as academic and other professional literature, are full of possible strategy objectives, targets, and goals. Having examined many strategies and a great volume of the relevant professional literature, our evaluation is that the **mission** of any homelessness policy is to **provide people experiencing homelessness with decent healthy lives and wellbeing**. We presume that different documents confuse these terms – mission, objectives, targets, and goals, and allow for this confusion here. In order not to obscure anything with a possibly vague mission, and make proper government intervention possible (see Coyle, 2024), we propose below a detailed tier-based plan based on the literature where, for the sake of this paper, the mission is at the top, served by the primary and other objectives, as well as targets and goals.

Based on this assessment we can conclude here that in 2024 it seems that an agreed **primary objective** of a homelessness strategy that would enable the mission mentioned above is to **end homelessness**; (the jury of the Consensus Conference called for ending homelessness to be the long-term goal underpinning an EU homelessness strategy – European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010). The **secondary objectives** to support ending homelessness should include the **delivery of long-term permanent housing**, and the **prevention** of homelessness (see the relevant sections below: especially *permanent long-term housing solutions* and *prevention*). Within this framework **one important target** of a strategy that may serve as an indicator to determine how successful we are in achieving the strategy's objectives should be to **reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness** (see for example Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010, regarding success measurement of strategies in pp.133-134). **Another target** may be to **reduce the time that people experiencing homelessness spend in temporary accommodation before they go on to permanent accommodation** (see the relevant sections below: especially *permanent long-term housing solutions* and *ending homelessness*). **Two main goals** that may support the main objective are the **collection of data** – including homeless counts (regarding these issues see Develtere, 2022; Hermans, 2024), as well as to **shift from emergency shelter as the predominant response to homelessness toward the provision of adequate levels of long-term, permanent housing-led, including Housing First, services**, while building more such permanent housing opportunities (see for example Boone et al., 2021).

### ***Collaboration is Key – From Development to Implementation and Beyond***

Homelessness will not disappear completely because of a collaborative strategic plan's design, but much headway can be made towards strategically and collaboratively alleviating this social ill. (Lee et al., 2018, p.374)

As an 'intractable' (Eide, 2022), 'wicked' (Brown et al., 2012) social problem, homelessness should be granted "an innovative, collaborative, government-led response" (Lucas and Boudreaux, 2024, p.146). As no stakeholder can solve it on their own, a strategic plan designed by and with multiple stakeholders was noted as the factor that may help alleviate homelessness (Lee et al., 2018). The collaboration among manifold stakeholders has been shown to be crucial for the success of a homelessness strategy. This is true for the different stages of the strategy – from the development stage all the way through to implementation, as well as monitoring and possible adjustments to the strategy. Research regarding Finland and Norway shows that collaboration is the infrastructure upon which strategies are developed and implemented (Edgar, 2006; Halseth et al., 2022; Pleace, 2017).

Relevant stakeholders may include different tiers of government at central, regional, and local levels, as well as quasi-governmental and non-governmental agencies, that undertake strategic planning that involves a multi-person effort supplying many different types and degrees of inputs (Edgar, 2006; Lee et al., 2018; Pleace, 2017). One specific stakeholder group which has been shown to be crucial in this strategic process are experts by lived experience of homelessness (Dalton, 2022; Pleace, 2017).

### ***Implementation***

Once plans are launched, communities can struggle to sustain the momentum needed to do the actual long-term work of implementation. (Buchnea et al., 2021, p. 25).

Some plans simply stay on someone's office shelf, as not all plans are actionable (Lee et al., 2018); they may end up as a mere 'paper strategy' (Owen, 2015). For the development stage to not end up as an end in itself, implementation should be at the heart of a homelessness strategy from the outset. Even when a homelessness strategy has already been developed, often there is little guidance about factors contributing to its being that strategy which constitutes lasting positive impact and change. This is sometimes due to lack of resources and knowledge that are needed for the implementation stage (Buchnea et al., 2021). Manifold stakeholders are also part of the implementation stage of any strategy, and there is growing awareness of the need to address complex problems arising at this stage (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010).



Although a strategy may be developed and lead at the national or regional level, implementation is mostly coordinated and enacted by lower levels of government, which themselves involve more new stakeholders for the implementation stage (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010; Buchnea et al., 2021; Edgar, 2006). Success and failure may be determined by a “complex interplay of responsibilities, resources, organisation and social practices at the local level, including the structural context of the availability of affordable housing” (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010, p.136). Therefore, great attention needs to be given to implementation so that all the resources that were put into the strategy are not lost. Obviously, adequate funding is a condition of successful implementation, as may be seen in the ‘funding’ section below.

### ***Governance***

Effective implementation is based on improved governance. Most papers written about homelessness strategies include mention of the proper governance mechanisms needed in their implementation.

Three elements prove to be particularly useful in improving governance in the area of homelessness and housing exclusion where responsibilities are shared between different levels of government and NGOs: *leadership* by the main public authority in charge of homelessness and housing exclusion policies; *participation* and consultation of relevant stakeholders in policy design and implementation; and *consensus* on the agreed strategy (Council of Ministers, 2010, p.83).

There is a strong voice that one single agency should take the lead on any homelessness strategy (Edgar, 2006; Martin et al., 2023), or agencies (Pleace, 2017). These agency or agencies need to get involved and form agreements with a wide range of stakeholders inside and outside government (Edgar, 2006; Martin et al., 2023; Pleace, 2017). This was found to be imperative in all nine homelessness strategies analysed in two different European welfare regimes (Benjaminsen et al., 2009).

Robust political commitment is crucial to a successful strategy. The varied political and institutional stakeholders need to commit and take upon themselves shared responsibility for the development and implementation of the strategy (Baptista and Marlier, 2019; European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010) (for more information see also the 2009 issue of The European Journal of Homelessness dealing with governance). As ending homelessness is unlikely to be achieved in a single political term, political commitment needs to be able to withstand changes in government (for example, the unique Danish agreement regarding homelessness among political parties inside and outside of the government).

## ***Funding***

Successful policy needs to be backed by sufficient financial resources and eradicating homelessness is no exemption (Ivanković Knežević, 2024).

“We have strong empirical evidence which shows that ending homelessness is possible, it is realistic, it is ethically justifiable, and it is also economically viable” (Kaakinen, 2010, p.38). ESPN experts report some positive as well as problematic points related to the funding of homelessness strategies in 35 examined countries. Some of the positive points include significant investment in permanent housing, adequate financing mechanisms, and increased budgets and funding. Some of the barriers to adequate funding were found to include reductions in funding of course, as well as absence of funding mechanisms within the strategy, short-term financing models, and threats to national-level funding due to the end of international financial support (Baptista and Marlier, 2019).

Policymakers have a responsibility to develop adequate strategies that include proper mechanisms enabling access to finance and funding (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021). Claiming this responsibility, the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) in the European Commission and the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) are co-leading a dedicated working group on access to finance, set up in May 2023, in order to implement the *workstream on funding* as part of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness (Ivanković Knežević, 2024).

## ***Data Collection***

The planning and implementation of measures that aim to eliminate homelessness is not possible without reliable basic information based on research and an understanding of homelessness as a phenomenon. Regular revision of policies is necessary and most effective with a sound understanding of homelessness. (Kaakinen, 2010, p.36)

Data collection is at the core of successful homelessness strategies as all the literature we examined shows. In addition to the Finnish example cited above (Kaakinen, 2010), which includes a firm commitment to collect measurable and reliable data about homelessness and available housing options, the Danish and Scottish strategies also share this commitment. In both cases, governments adapted strategies to reflect research findings and data collection, thus making their strategies more successful (Jones and Archer, 2015). Further, in 2022, the German Federal Government undertook their first enumeration of people experiencing homeless (see [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Soziales/Wohnungslosigkeit/\\_inhalt.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Soziales/Wohnungslosigkeit/_inhalt.html)); regarding homelessness data collection at the

EU-level see Hermans (2024) as well as the full special edition of the European Journal of Homelessness regarding measuring homelessness in Europe, Volume 14, No. 3 from 2020).

### ***Ending Homelessness***

As an unequivocal conclusion drawn from the Finnish experiences it can be stated that eliminating homelessness is an entirely feasible and realistic objective. It requires persistent, systematic work, which is not possible without an extensive political consensus ranging from the national to the local level. Building an extensive political consensus is not self-evident, it requires strategic initiatives where the active role of relevant state officials and NGOs is crucial. Political legitimacy also prepares the way for the acquisition of financial resources. Moreover, eliminating homelessness is not even a major economic cost if we consider the financial savings that result from the elimination of homelessness. (Kaakinen, 2010, p.36).

Strategies should aim to eliminate, as far as possible, the bottlenecks between temporary and permanent accommodation, thus striving to solve the problem of homelessness rather than manage it (Edgar, 2006). ‘Managing’ homelessness includes reactive solutions, often targeted at the most extreme manifestations of homelessness and focused mainly on temporary accommodation and emergency interventions, keeping people experiencing homelessness within the ‘homeless system’. Whereas ending homelessness is a realistic objective (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010).

There will always be people who become homeless – because of, for example, natural disasters, fire or flooding, arriving in a new area, or fleeing violence. Homelessness strategies should incorporate measures to prevent homelessness while ensuring solutions for those who end up experiencing homelessness. It is important to understand that in the foreseeable future there will always be a need for emergency services. However, these services should be the gateway to permanent accommodation within a reasonable time frame (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010). In the eradication of homelessness, a balance should be found between the prevention of homelessness and the excellent services provided to those experiencing homelessness, as long as it is impossible to stop the in-flow (Kaakinen, 2010). Finally, when aiming to practically end homelessness it is not enough to perfect our services, which may rectify other systems’ failures while keeping people housed. Rather, we should ensure we end the conditions that allow the perpetuation of homelessness across multiple systems (Gaetz and Buchnea, 2023).

While striving to end homelessness it is important to note that the cycle has gone from managing, to solving, to managing and solving homelessness.

### ***Prevention***

To decrease the need for managing homelessness and to make a big step toward solving and ending homelessness, prevention emerges as a crucial element of 35 countries' homelessness strategies (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Preventing homelessness includes the reduction of evictions (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010; Council of Ministers, 2010; Kaakinen, 2010). A former Dutch strategy focused on evictions and people leaving institutions as main triggers of homelessness (Hermans, 2012). According to the evaluation of the Finnish strategy – which may be considered as an example of successfully tackling homelessness at the strategic level (Pleace, 2017) – prevention needs to identify people at risk of long-term and recurrent homelessness (Kaakinen, 2015).

The provision of affordable housing and reducing poverty may be the most crucial interventions to prevent homelessness (O'Sullivan, 2022b). In this respect, mainstreaming homelessness by including housing issues within the strategies of other policy areas such as housing strategies and anti-poverty strategies may be useful (Edgar, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2022b). In any case, homelessness strategies must be prevention-oriented in order to enable proper trajectories towards ending homelessness (Mackie, 2023; see also Gaetz, 2020).

### ***Permanent Long-Term Housing Solutions: Housing-Led Approaches Including Housing First***

Many OECD and EU countries promote Housing First and other housing-led approaches for people experiencing homelessness (OECD, 2024a). A Norwegian strategy seminar document includes the agreement of all seminar participants that Housing First is a desirable approach, and that the length of time that people stay in temporary accommodation should be shortened to eliminate bottlenecks between temporary and permanent accommodation (Edgar, 2006). Almost two decades on, the Norwegian Husbanken analysis states that the long-term strategic work that took place during this period focused more and more on cooperation across welfare provision fields, as well as management levels between ministries and municipalities, and was always underpinned by the housing-led approach (Halseth et al., 2022).

In their 2010 literature review of homelessness strategies, Benjaminsen and Dyb found the Housing First paradigm in almost all countries and their strategies. Further, the successful Finnish strategy has been based on Housing First (Kaakinen, 2015), and ESPN experts reported in 2019 an increasing shift toward housing-led and Housing First services in integrated strategic frameworks, with a growing

presence in Europe of housing-led services, including Housing First (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Respondents to the research questionnaire in Szeintuch (2024) stated that 87% of EU strategies include Housing First (95).

“By letting evidence ‘guide’ policy, proponents [of Housing First] argue, the only obstacle becomes something like ‘political will’ needed to fund that policy to fruition” (Lucas and Boudreaux, 2024, p.163). While this may be true to some extent, researchers argue that this is questionable. Maybe the failure to end homelessness is due to other factors, such as Housing First evidence not being as conclusive as it may seem, definitely not for all homelessness populations (Lucas and Boudreaux, 2024).

Further, others caution that while Housing First ethos and general principles are key and should inform all dimensions of an effective homelessness strategy, it may not be enough for a functional strategy. The challenges they note to its success include “lack of housing supply, inadequate access to mental health, health and social care systems, and a welfare system that cannot meet the costs of adequate housing and prevent after housing cost poverty” (O’Sullivan et al., 2023. P.47).

Finally, it should be noted here that the

Finnish applications of the Housing First model are not particularly faithful to the original American model. The most important issue in the Finnish homelessness policy has been loyalty to the most important principles of the Housing First philosophy, which are permanence of housing, the principle of harm reduction and the right of the customers to make choices with regard to support services. (Pleace, et al., 2015, p.13)

### ***Time Frame***

In 2015, the UN’s Agenda for Sustainable Development pledged to end poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1) by the year 2030. It also pledged to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (Goal 11), while ensuring access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services and upgrading slums (11.1). Having noted these UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Lisbon Declaration signatories agreed to work toward ending homelessness by 2030. Since then, some European homelessness strategies have adopted this time frame. Generally, it is a common practice to attach a time frame to a strategy.

However, a word of caution is in order here: time frames may be important and so is the commitment to end homelessness in European Member States by 2030; however, as the Finnish example shows us, even successful endeavours may take substantial time, including potential failures of not reaching their set goals in the exact given time frame.

At one time, the Finnish Government set the target of eliminating long-term homelessness in Finland entirely by 2015 (Kaakinen, 2010). As we know, although the numbers have decreased, there are still people experiencing homelessness in Finland in 2024, and the current end-date for eradicating homelessness in its strategy is 2027 (see Kaakinen, 2023).

This word of caution is against the frustration that we may encounter when nearing 2030 if the homeless population does not equate to zero in all Member States. As the Finnish exercise shows us, it is essential to maintain a long-term commitment and to adapt, even if specific goals are missed. Otherwise, there is a risk of generating frustration and losing political commitment.

It is important to bear in mind that the objective of ending homelessness has been playing an important role in guiding thinking and action, and at the same time has become a widely accepted, socially important, and worthy cause. Further, the international literature shows that striving toward ending homelessness is an economically sound investment (Kaakinen, 2023).

One may encounter advice to “give the ‘ending homelessness’ talk a rest” (Eide, 2022, p.150). However, we believe that while maintaining a human rights approach to homelessness, as delineated above, we do not have the privilege to do this.

### ***Monitoring and Evaluation***

The jury of the consensus conference called for annual or bi-annual reporting on progress (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010). The ESPN synthesis report called upon countries developing homelessness strategies to enact efficient monitoring and assessment tools and ensure regular reporting mechanisms (Baptista and Marlier, 2019).

An example of the need for monitoring was lately portrayed by an Auditor General's report on chronic homelessness in Canada, which found that the government agencies responsible for the homelessness strategy “did not know whether their efforts improved housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness or chronic homelessness” (Auditor General of Canada, 2022, p.7, 5.22). Even though it spent about 1.36 billion Canadian dollars between 2019 and 2021 (40% of the total amount committed to the programme), the lead government agency “did not know whether chronic homelessness and homelessness had increased or decreased since 2019 as a result of this investment” (5.23). Further, the audit found that another lead agency could not account for the beneficiaries of the strategy's implementation, and finally it suggested there was minimal accountability for reaching the strategy's target. As a result, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts (2023) of the House of Commons in the Canadian Parliament made

recommendations to ensure that the Office of the Auditor General's recommendations are adequately followed, and that those organisations which were audited provide progress reports to the committee.

It seems there are no formally established and standardised impact evaluation methodologies for homelessness intervention programmes, particularly in the European context. Further, it seems there is no consensus on the best outcome variables that would measure homelessness interventions (Rodilla et al., 2023).

When monitoring and measuring results and the impact of a homelessness strategy, quite a few issues may be checked. Some examples of such indicators include the numbers of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, households in hostels, evictions, repeat homelessness, people supported to independence, and people sustained in independence, as well as the number of people who were prevented from experiencing homelessness and the duration of homelessness (Munslow, 2010).

Clear and realistic objectives, targets, and goals may serve as a useful monitoring tool. These may be adjusted as needed (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010; Edgar, 2006; Hermans, 2017). In any case, a robust theoretical framework is crucial for an effective evaluation (Rodilla et al., 2023).

## **Mutual Learning and Transfer of Policy Between Countries**

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The Lisbon Declaration signatories acknowledge

The need for European policy support and coordination to promote progress, notably through mutual learning and support to collaboration. (p.4)

"Municipalities, regional authorities and national governments routinely search for inspiration and solutions to their policy challenges abroad" (Blanc et al., 2023, p.749). On the one hand, policy transfer can be an excellent trigger for innovation and learning. However, on the other hand, there are drawbacks to policy transfer, including governments trying to legitimise domestic decisions by considering the transfer a 'silver bullet' in addressing domestic policy failures.

EPOCH Practice is EPOCH's mutual learning axis and aims to enable mutual learning and policy transfer, including regarding homelessness strategies, between EU Member States.

The first and most important lesson we can learn in Europe, and hopefully transfer from Finland as a Member State, is that ending homelessness is a feasible task. Speaking of drawbacks, transfer of homelessness policy from Finland to other contexts is not necessarily straight forward due to factors such as Finland's size (with a population of less than six million people) and it being a rich country (Pleace, 2017).

Having highlighted the need for caution in the consideration of effective policy transfer from one country to another, the Norwegian seminar participants advocated homelessness policy transfer while noting the possible constraints of this endeavour, such as different forms of governance, structures of the housing market, profiles of homelessness, as well as resources that should underpin any homelessness strategy, that may influence the varying quality of such strategies in different countries (Edgar, 2006).

Finally, in the context of EPOCH, the European Commission invited the OECD to produce a policy toolkit that will help Member States to develop their own homelessness strategies (Leterme and Develtere, 2023). As the OECD includes Member States of its own, the scope of which is wider than that of the EU, this toolkit's influence transcends that of the EU (see OECD, 2024b).

## Non-European Examples of Homelessness Strategies

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With over two decades of developing homelessness strategies, European countries have a lot to give through international mutual learning and policy transfer outside of European borders. They may also benefit from non-European homelessness strategies and their development processes. Some examples are delineated below.

One such relevant country is **New Zealand**. A New Zealand parliamentary report advanced in 2016 the creation of a national strategy to end homelessness, stating “many local government organisations already have these and they are effective at ensuring there is concerted action to reduce homelessness” (New Zealand Parliament, 2016, p.13). The creation of this strategy was one of the recommendations of this document. The Aotearoa/New Zealand homelessness action plan was published in 2019. The first phase of the plan (2020-2023) aimed to prevent and reduce homelessness.

In neighbouring **Australia**, there have been a couple of national strategies – in 1992 and 2008. In 2024, the Government is developing a 10-year national housing and homelessness plan with state and territory governments (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023a). At the end of 2023, the consultation stage was over and a summary report of the consultations was published, as a step on the way to publishing the plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023b).

The **Canadian** 10-year homelessness strategy *Reaching Home*, which was launched in 2019, was also developed through extensive community and expert consultations (see Gaetz and Redman, 2019). It aims to reduce chronic homelessness nationally by 50 percent by 2028. The programme's directives detail the funding mechanism and eligible activities.



It seems that structural constraints pose barriers to developing and implementing homelessness strategies at the federal level in the federative constructs of Canada (DesBaillets and Hamill, 2022) and Australia (Martin et al., 2023). The **US** is another federal government that built a federal strategy. All In: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, which was published in 2022, aims to reduce homelessness by 25 percent by 2025.

The US Federal Government, through the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), has been acting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to prevent and eradicate homelessness. It has been doing this whilst initiating and leading what would become a global trend of moving from the linear model to Housing First, which lies at the forefront of the US Government's mission to end homelessness. It may be argued that this mission was set due to a combination of the rise of Housing First and the onset of the 2009 global financial crisis, while historically, US federal homelessness strategies revolve around three main areas: funding increases, Housing First prioritisation, and strategic revisions (Lucas and Boudreaux, 2024). While in the US the lack of affordable housing has been found to be the main driver of homelessness, its supply was found to be a primary solution to it (Batko and Culhane, 2023). A paper dealing with the homelessness strategy of the US state of Utah may also be found (Svedin and Valero, 2020).

## **A European Union Homelessness Strategy**

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The Commission [is called] to propose an EU Framework for National Homelessness Strategies. (European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2020 on tackling homelessness rates in the EU (2020/2802(RSP)), Item 8)

Over the years there have been quite a few calls for an EU homelessness strategy that would underpin Member States' national and regional strategies. The European Parliament called for it in 2008, while the network of independent experts on social inclusion of the European Commission asked for such a strategy in 2009. These calls propose that an EU strategy would focus on data collection, monitoring, and mutual learning. A similar call came from the Committee of the Regions in 2010, emphasising the role of local and regional authorities (Spinnewijn, 2010).

According to the jury of the Consensus Conference,

An EU strategy on homelessness should go beyond monitoring and reporting, and deliver a package of activities to support the development and sustaining of effective national/regional homelessness strategies. In accordance with the key elements of national/regional strategies set out by the 2010 Joint Report [...], this means promoting integrated approaches and good governance; building

capacity for data collection within Member States; developing and promoting knowledge and best practice in relation to housing-led approaches; promoting quality services; and developing EU level responses to the growing problem of homelessness amongst migrants. (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010, p.23)

The jury goes on to set out the mechanisms to achieve this.

The ESPN synthesis report also calls for the development of an EU approach

To support Member States in ending homelessness, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, and informed by a set of key principles: knowledge sharing and transnational exchange, research and innovation, a common reference framework, and appropriate funding. (Baptista and Marlier, 2019, p.22).

Following the Consensus Conference jury, ESPN experts also called upon the EU to develop a homelessness action plan that takes migrants into consideration.

Finally, on 13 December 2023 the European Economic and Social Committee called on the European Commission to

Draft a proposal for a new multiannual work programme as soon as possible and in close collaboration with all stakeholders, making use of the European Social Fund Plus and the European Regional Development Fund to fund housing solutions for homeless people.

## Conclusion: An Integrated Approach

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Ending homelessness is only possible in the context of an integrated approach encompassing all relevant policy areas such as social policy, housing, health, employment, education, training, and migration etc. This includes taking account of the gender dimension of homelessness in the context of gender mainstreaming. (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010, p.12)

Housing, which arises from this literature review as a crucial facet of any solution to homelessness, cannot and should not stand alone. This is especially true when, whilst striving to achieve an end to homelessness, it must still be managed as there are still people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness strategies should incorporate an integrated approach that brings together all relevant fields (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2010). Such fields may include **health, mental health, social care and assistance, welfare, unemployment, education, skills, migration, and criminal justice systems** – including **criminalisation** and **imprisonment** (e.g., Benjaminsen

and Dyb, 2010; Edgar, 2006; Hermans, 2012; Marezki, 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2023; Pleace, 2017; Skovlund Asmussen and Maini-Thorsen, 2022; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021). These add onto the key issues discussed above including prevention, temporary accommodation, and permanent long-term housing solutions.

We will end this literature review by posing some questions laid down by Benjaminsen and Dyb (2010) regarding the organisation of complex interventions:

How are problems of coordination among different service providers and institutional systems – social services, health services, criminal services, housing authorities, etc. – tackled locally? Do the national strategies provide new initiatives for handling such issues? Are new requirements set in the case of people leaving institutions such as hostels, hospitals or prisons? Are services for the homeless integrated into mainstream social services or are there parallel support systems? Does the extent of municipal responsibilities make a difference? How do the national strategies deal with such issues – and what lessons can be learned from comparative research at the local level? (pp.136-137)

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