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The Pathway to a Permanent Home

**Evaluation of the national strategy to
prevent and counteract homelessness 2005-2007
Summary NIBR Report 2008:15**



NIBR

Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research

Summary

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A homelessness prevention and alleviation strategy was in place between 2005 and 2007. Five ministries were involved: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (now Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion), Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (now Ministry of Children and Equality), Ministry of Health and Care Services, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. Implementing the strategy were front line agencies, mainly the Norwegian State Housing Bank working in close collaboration with the Directorate of Health and Social Affairs (now Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation – NAV). The strategy's five performance targets were:

- Reduce the number of eviction petitions by 50 per cent and evictions by 30 per cent
- No one should be required to stay at an emergency shelter on release from prison
- No one should be required to stay at an emergency shelter on discharge from an institution
- No one should be offered an emergency shelter place without a quality agreement
- No one should be required to reside for more than three months in temporary accommodation

Following the layout of the evaluation report, this summary presents the most important findings and assessments. We begin with the first chapter to deal with substantive issues, Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 – Performance Assessment reviews various ways of determining achievements against performance targets, investigates the soundness of the methods, looks at structural factors likely to affect performance and at relations between means and ends. This methodological survey is not included in the summary. We present here simply findings and conclusions. The target to reduce eviction petitions by 50 per cent and the number of evictions was reduced by much more than 30 per cent has not been achieved. Statistics for 2004 provided the calculation base, representing the year before the strategy was put into action. Between 2004 and 2007, eviction petitions fell by 22 per cent and actual evictions by 15 per cent nationwide. Petitions and evictions are prevalent in all types of municipality, but significantly more both relatively and absolutely in the major cities. Except for Oslo and Kristiansand the large cities have seen an increase in the number of evictions.

Achievements against the other four performance targets are reported to KOSTRA (Municipality-State-Reporting, a central database on municipal activity). The figures are considered unreliable; those on the use of emergency shelters are exceptionally unreliable and have not been published by KOSTRA/Statistics Norway. The use of temporary housing measures increased overall during the strategy's lifetime. One important reason for the rise is that these questions were new additions to the reporting forms in 2004, but reporting has improved during the strategy's lifetime as well. Nevertheless, the figures filed with KOSTRA show that temporary accommodation is used in all types of municipality, and for longer than three months as well. Not only were these performance targets not met, it is difficult to determine rates of progress on any of them. Many local authorities consider the target to avoid offering places at emergency shelters without quality agreement to be of little or no relevance, and reporting is also deficient in this area.

The structural setting for the homelessness prevention and reduction strategy is a housing sector dominated by a home owners, a small, transient property market and limited social housing provisions locally. The strategy unfolded under a

favourable economic climate characterised by low interest rates. People who ordinarily would have waited before buying a home, purchased one now, boosting capacity in the rental sector in the process. Progress on target measures proceeded on the back of a thriving economy. As the strategy approached its end of life, the climate worsened. Interest rates began an upwards spiral, and the rental sector shrank fast in the major cities.

The Housing Bank's housing policy instruments, i.e., start-up loan (startlån), housing subsidy (boligtilskudd) and housing allowance (bostøtte), are increasingly used to benefit disadvantaged groups in the housing market. They aim to promote wider home ownership. The use of the start-up loan and subsidy to procure homes for the strategy's target groups is limited. The chapter reviews legislative measures aimed at facilitating efforts to reduce and combat homelessness. At a general systemic level, it is difficult to assess the immediate effect of these statutory changes on achievement rates. On the other hand, they were instituted on the basis of identified needs from working with the target groups. The right to a dwelling was not enacted in law, however.

Chapter 3 – The Strategy from a Top-down Perspective explores the roles of the various stakeholders, the views of selected stakeholders regarding performance targets, achievements and priorities, instruments and methods and opinions on strategy implementation, embeddedness and prolonging the work. The strategy facilitates significant vertical and horizontal collaboration between public and private stakeholders. Stakeholders include voluntary organisations, user organisations, private housing sector players such as landlords and developers, central and local government bodies. Collaboration is secured through partnerships or commercial agreements. Data for this chapter derive largely from interviews with the most important stakeholders, senior officials at the State Housing Bank, Norwegian Directorate of Health and County Governor's office.

The measures include, on the one side, grant strategies and, on the other, exchange of information and mutual learning between the various arenas. The strategy is theoretically grounded in a governance approach, a form of government in which central government provides the means and local councils and other stakeholders work together in networks or public-private

partnerships to promote goal achievement. Responsibility for bringing the various stakeholders together and enabling optimal performance in the various arenas is delegated to the Housing Bank. The Housing Bank builds on pre-existing networks coordinated by the County Governor and collaboration with the County Governor, but completely new networks were set up as well. Networking among local councils has offered a practical channel for sharing lessons and, not least examples of best practice. How well information was transmitted to elements of the council organisation not involved in the inter-council networks is an open question. The regional contact forums have brought stakeholders together on whose collective input results depend. One of the conclusions drawn from information provided by the interviewees is that stakeholders do not always see themselves as “owners” of the strategy, and its objectives garners varying degrees of support from stakeholder to stakeholder.

A raft of grants are available for improving housing for the strategy’s target groups. The foremost among them were the Housing Bank’s competence grant and a grant for follow-up services managed by the Directorate of Health and County Governor for the homeless and substance abusers. Both organisations, but the Housing Bank in particular, have put resources into making local councils more aware of the grants and subsidies. The Directorate’s grants were used mainly to widen the range of services, but also to develop methodology. The Housing Bank’s grants were spent on learning and competence building, and organising partnerships.

The policy instruments – grants and networks/forums – are not directly linked to target achievement, and there is no guarantee of improved performance either. The Housing Bank’s ordinary policy instruments to boost home ownership were not used to any appreciable extent for procuring homes for the homeless. The lack of dwellings is defined as the biggest hurdle going forward by our interviewees.

Chapter 4 – Local Government Survey, is based on information retrieved by a survey of local councils receiving competence building grants from the Housing Bank and/or participating in an inter-municipal network. Analyses of the data rely consistently on a fourfold division of municipalities based on population: 1) Oslo

city districts; 2) at least 42,000 inhabitants (except Oslo); 10-39,000; and 4) no more than 9,999 inhabitants.

Over half of the local councils have successfully cut back on the use of temporary substitutes (with significant or very significant cuts). A small minority tells us that they no longer depend on stopgaps at all. The average score of the municipalities' own achievement estimates is well beyond the midpoint on all performance targets. Progress was best on reducing evictions by 50 per cent. Half the municipalities and city districts operated with self-generated performance targets during the strategy. Progress on these performance targets is considered good by the councils themselves. The lack of housing is cited as the main reason for shortfalls on the strategy's national targets and locally adopted targets in the municipalities and city districts, for which home acquisitions and/or conversions are the highest priorities.

Most municipalities/city districts target both substance abusers and people with mental health problems. These groups have high priority and merit particular attention.

Of the steps and activities initiated by the municipalities/city districts under the strategy, financial counselling and advice ranks first. Four out of five local authorities have opened financial advice services. Counselling and advice on housing questions and follow-up services for homeless persons and substance abusers were in place in 77 per cent of municipalities/city districts. 68 per cent of the municipalities expanded employee competence in the area of social housing and 63 per cent set up follow-up schemes for people with mental health problems. 61 per cent procured accommodation and 55 per cent adapted pre-existing homes.

Two thirds of municipalities obtained funds under the Housing Bank's competence building scheme, and slightly less, 61 per cent, under the Directorate of Health's follow-up scheme for homeless persons and substance abusers. A significant proportion – between 30 and 40 per cent – used other government grants in connection with strategy implementation. The highest scoring government schemes was the Housing Bank's ordinary facilities, i.e., loans, grants and housing allowance. 82 per cent of municipalities/city districts report using them. In the view of the municipalities, these

schemes fit the needs of the strategy's target groups quite well. Housing allowance comes out worst, start-up loan best.

The municipalities partaking in the survey were chosen for various reasons, mostly however because they were members of inter-municipal networks. The large municipalities, with populations of >40,000, and Oslo's city districts, were more likely to take part in networking, forums, conferences and benefit from training schemes. We found systematic correlation between municipal size and participation in these arenas. We did not find a systematic relation between municipal size and assessments of the importance of these arenas to efforts to combat homelessness. The survey found wide variance in assessments, but large municipalities were more likely than small to assess competence and exchange of lessons learned as important factors.

One out of four municipalities/city districts have planned strategy actions without putting them into effect. They comprise in the main various housing projects. The reason for suspending them tends to be the state of the municipal economy. Two projects were shelved after protests from neighbours.

The Housing Bank is the municipalities' preferred partner, followed by agencies in one's own municipality/city district. The County Governor and Enforcement Commissioner come third and fourth. After them, in order of mention: health enterprises; police; child welfare authorities; correctional and probation service. One out of four municipalities worked with property developers/managers and private rental businesses. One in every five municipalities/city districts worked in league with voluntary organisations and user organisations.

The social services have overall management responsibility for combating homelessness and improving conditions for the target groups. In the major cities and city districts of Oslo it is the housing agency that oversees the work, however. The scope and content of the responsibilities of the alcohol and drug addiction services vary by municipal category. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation (NAV), home care and health services have few responsibilities in this area. According to most municipalities combating and preventing homelessness is very firmly or firmly embedded in the departments responsible for the target groups.

Collaboration on homelessness and target groups within municipalities/city districts could be better or much better according to all respondents in the three largest municipal groups. Responses from the smaller municipalities diverge somewhat. Combating and alleviating homelessness and working for the good of the target groups are firmly embedded at the managerial level in the municipalities/city districts. Overall, embeddedness in the administrative departments has not progressed as much as the service departments, and least of all within the political leadership.

One way of measuring embeddedness is to look at the eventual continuation/discontinuation of measures after the end of the strategy. In the majority of the larger cities (91 per cent) and Oslo city districts, fixed duration schemes were continued beyond the strategy. Nearly half of the medium and a third of the small municipalities also decided to keep measures active. There is, however, reason to doubt the responses of the small municipalities. Half of them answered ‘don’t know’ to the question of continued activities. Continuation largely involved turning temporary personnel positions funded under government grants into permanent ones.

Fewer municipalities extended non-fixed duration measures installed under the strategy than fixed duration measures. Half the respondents gave a “don’t know” response, possibly indicating low likelihood of establishing permanent action during a scheme’s lifetime, and a choice by the municipalities to set up measures initially up as pilot strategies.

All municipalities and city districts have planned practical action to combat and alleviate homelessness. The most important measure, and most prevalent in the municipalities, is procurement of accommodation for disadvantaged groups. Strengthening service delivery, building competence and improving internal municipal/city district collaboration are also high on the list of planned measures. The most prevalent form of funding is a combination of government and municipal moneys. Funding remains uncertain for some of the initiatives.

Chapter 5 – Municipality Study: Case Study was carried out in three municipalities, “Fjord Village”, “Regional Town” and “City District”, that is, a district of Oslo. These three cases are diverse in

terms of geography, size (number of inhabitants), management model, social housing policy challenges and responses to and implementation of the strategy locally. The three case municipalities were chosen because they had all had some success implementing the strategy. They identified groups at a disadvantage in the housing market and the difficulties facing them.

The three municipalities rank the various strategy goals differently. The national objectives, in the perception of Fjord Village, are insensitive to municipal needs insofar as they establish a general priority to procure housing for disadvantaged persons and persons released from prison or discharged from an institution. City District and Regional Town worked to achieve all five of the performance targets. In addition, all three adopted targets of their own. City District and Regional Town had done this before the strategy came on line, while Fjord Village started working on its local objectives during the strategy's lifetime. Self-devised objectives are particularly sensitive to the circumstances in the municipality. Some are responses to particular problems. The case studies corroborate the findings of the survey: performance is slightly better on the locally designed objectives than the national.

During the strategy's lifetime, activity in the three municipalities grew in pace and scope. Funding options used varied slightly. Fjord Village received funds from the Housing Bank and Directorate of Health; Regional Town procured most of its funds from the Directorate of Health, some from the Housing Bank, and some from its own treasury; City District was funded by the Housing Bank, Directorate of Health, own treasury and other actions not initially connected with the strategy. A problem facing them all is the lack of housing for the groups targeted by the strategy. Fjord Village solved this problem, and knows of no one still in need of social housing. Regional Town and City District have waiting lists for social housing, and lack adapted housing for people with special needs.

All three case municipalities installed a follow-up service. The design and degree of incorporation in the ordinary services vary. What the three municipalities share is a flexible set of services adapted to the needs of the users. They differ in that sense from ordinary home care services. Regional Town, for instance, adopted

a more standardised approach to its follow-up services, provision of which is managed by the mental health care unit. All three municipalities offer daytime activities. The strategy does not exactly prescribe activities like this, but as most users are unemployed the municipalities consider extended services as an important aspect of a holistic approach. The case municipalities are more likely than the average survey municipality to view the Housing Bank's provisions, with their emphasis on the start-up loan and housing allowance, as less responsive to the strategy's target groups.

Strategy integration technically and administratively involves several units and agencies and seems rather fragmented in all three municipalities. Fragmentation can be construed as beneficial and as detrimental. A negative construal sees services for the strategy's target groups as extraneous to and out of sync with the "ordinary" responsibilities of the municipality. In this scenario, the action or service remains on the outside of ordinary service delivery, and is discontinued when project funding dries up. While the users need a flexible response, flexibility is likely to exacerbate fragmentation in municipalities with a flat organisation structure. Fragmentation, viewed positively, however, expresses an ability to address the varied needs of the persons involved. The development of special services or dedicated housing follow-up system could enhance the service's visibility and underpin its justification. The degree of political support varied widely among the three municipalities.

Municipalities were not required to join networks as a condition for the release of grants, but the three case municipalities were members of experience-exchange networks. They had also – altogether – entered into collaborative agreements with the correctional and probation service, health enterprises, "local" labour and welfare organisation and enforcement commissioner. Two had set up a local labour and welfare organisation office. Here, however, reorganisation has impacted negatively on social housing efforts.

All three municipalities worked with private developers, and Regional Town and City District worked also with private residential landlords. The strategy encourages municipalities to work closely with voluntary and user organisations. Only City District followed this advice and worked extensively with the

voluntary sector during the strategy's lifetime. Regional Town invited voluntary sector organisations to do specific work. Fjord Village worked closely with user organisations, less with voluntary organisations.

Chapter 6 summarises performance enhancing factors and inhibitors. The chapter also discusses and justifies a raft of recommendations and alternatives for the work ahead. In brief, the recommendations are as follows.

On the basis of the evaluation, work in relation to performance targets 1 (reduce eviction petitions and evictions), 2 (avoid stopgap remedies following release from prison/institution) and 3 (no one should need to live more than three months in temporary accommodation) should continue. Given the harsher housing market climate from mid 2007, especially in the major cities, efforts should be redoubled and new approaches adopted to secure achievements so far and progress further.

The Housing Bank's funding arrangements could be adapted to meet the needs of a wider section of disadvantaged individuals in the housing market than is the case today. It would exceed our mandate however to assess how this could be examined and accomplished in practice.

The Housing Bank should step up its efforts to inform local authorities about the bank's ordinary portfolio of social housing options, i.e., start-up loan, grant and housing allowance, offering advice and information on the ability of the schemes to help particular groups of disadvantaged home seekers.

There should be a set of criteria for separating emergency accommodation (shelters) from provisional housing for a longer period pending a permanent solution. Rather than standard quality agreements, guidelines on acceptable standards of provisional housing should be formulated. The three month ceiling should not be changed.

We recommend compiling a set of criteria on provisional accommodation, that is, the circumstances in which provisional lodgings are appropriate and the length of time involved pending normal housing arrangements. The personal plan (*individuell plan*) should be used to organise transition to a permanent home.

The evaluation shows a need for a supervisory authority which monitors local authorities' statutory duty to procure housing for people and households unable to do so themselves. Control of provisional accommodation (shelters) and temporary housing should be strengthened pending permanent housing to ensure compliance with intentions.

It would be advisable to retain a focus on the most disadvantaged groups – substance abusers and people with mental health problems. Expertise and services developed during the anti-homelessness strategy are the most important aids in the municipal service portfolio for these groups. Indeed, in some areas they are the only aids.

Risk assessment criteria should be widened to young families, persons and households for whom homelessness is a real threat in an increasingly tighter housing market.

Opportunities for collaborative governance should be strengthened centrally, regionally and locally enabling a more coordinated push to achieve targets and engaging with the individual client. Multi-level governance offers a way of involving various bodies and players in efforts to combat homelessness.

We recommend letting the follow-up service for the strategy's target groups develop into a dedicated service in the sense of giving it space to define itself as a specialised area. The follow-up service could be eventually incorporated into the home care services should that be necessary.