

1. SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT *HOUSING FIRST*

This is a brief summary of the report *Housing first - opportunities and obstacles to implementation in Norway*. The report was prepared on behalf of the Norwegian State Housing Bank during the period from October 2011 – February 2012. The main purpose of the report has been to identify opportunities and obstacles for the implementation of a Housing First model in Norway. Throughout the project Rambøll has emphasized Tsemberis' model, developed through the project "Pathways to Housing", in which consumer choice in housing and supporting service is central.

In conjunction with the project there have been conducted two workshops in which Norwegian municipalities, the Norwegian State Housing Bank, The Norwegian Directorate of Health, and a researcher has helped to identify the obstacles and the opportunities for Housing first in Norway and for Norwegian municipalities. In the period between the two workshops, Rambøll has conducted case-studies in three municipalities, in order to investigate the extent of the obstacles identified in the first workshop.

The project has particularly emphasized three elements of Housing first:

1. Access to housing

An important part of Housing first is to get participants quickly into a separated, permanent home. The residence is based on consumer choice, where the participants' preferences for location, among other things, will be considered. If the participant says no to the first option he or she is offered, this should not lead the person back to being on the waiting list for residence, or cause the loss of supportive service. The apartments used in Housing first ought to be integrated in ordinary living environments, where program participants do not occupy more than 20 percent of the apartments in one building.

2. Approaching the participants

At the core of Housing first lies the service provider's respect, warmth and compassion for the participants. At a basic level it's about how the service providers approach the participants, the language they use, what signals they send and whether they take the time to listen to what the participants has to say. The method of Housing first is recovery-oriented and should be focused on consumer choice in both housing and services provided for the participant.

3. Organization of supportive service

Housing First is based on use of a team with multidisciplinary expertise. This means that different types of professionals must be represented in the supportive service team, or be offered to participants through cooperation. The supportive staff must also have authorizations to carry out the services the participants want and need.

The key obstacles and opportunities identified for the implementation of the Housing first in Norway are further summarized according to the aforementioned topics.

1.1 Obstacles to a good implementation

Access to housing

Gaining access to housing is a major challenge in the sector of Norwegian municipalities, which is already experiencing pressure on public and private rental housing. Long housing queues in municipalities both delay settlements, and also prevents the freedom of choice in housing and location in public housing. In the private housing market there is a widespread skepticism among landlords, this is identified as one of the reasons why the disadvantaged groups often end up back in the housing queue.

In addition to considering that use of municipal housing potentially hinder integration in ordinary living environments, Rambøll finds public housing to be a challenge in terms of the municipality's ability to quickly adapt to the continuous shift in social housing needs. Few municipalities have empty public houses, and thus are dependent on the private market to settle those who do not get offered a place in the public housing market. Another challenge occurs when the occupant is no longer dependent on supportive service and has to move out of the house, which challenges the requirement in Housing first that residents can continue to live in the same housing, with the same lease, even after program participation.

Approaching the participants

A challenge with today's supporting service is that the many people involved in providing support possess different skills, and are spread throughout the different sectors in the municipalities. There is rarely one staff member or one team assigned with a dedicated responsibility to follow up the individual homeless on every supportive service area, and the shared responsibility between the various municipal units can easily lead to neglect of responsibility. This decreases the staff members capability to follow up each homeless.

Rambøll consider that one obstacle to the implementation of Housing first is the different values and methods that exist between service providers, both among and between municipal units, and between municipalities. Through interviews we saw that the idea of consumer choice was more unfamiliar for some people than for others. To settle the homeless with ordinary leases, in an ordinary living environment, was also perceived as an alien and frightening thought for many service providers.

Organization of supportive service

A central challenge for the implementation of Housing First is the institutional barriers. Most important in this respect is the difference between regional health services and local municipalities. The distinction between those two involves goals, visions, and understandings of concepts in supporting service. Another challenge is that the work originates from different budgets. With this different budget discussions arise about who should pay for which initiative or activity.

Many Norwegian municipalities have a fragmented social housing organization which challenges the fact that the supporting services for the homeless are spread across several municipal units and disciplines. A particular obstacle to the implementation of Housing First lies in the fact that some service providers do not have permission to do more assignments than they are held responsible to do. This prevents the ability to customize the support to resident needs, and to act quickly.

1.2 Opportunities for a good implementation

Access to housing

In order for municipalities to gain better access to housing, there are opportunities in both the public and private market. In the provision of public housing, municipalities can use the ten percent rule to a greater extent than today. The rule allows municipalities, counties and the state the right to own up to 10 percent of apartments in housing associations. The rule gives opportunity to achieve a better distribution and integration of municipal housing.

To better achieve access to housing on the private market Rambøll identifies that the key success lays in the municipality's opportunities to create a good reputation amongst private landlords. This means that the municipality gives the guarantees needed if the housing is damaged, or rent not paid. It also means a tighter supporting service for the residents, and for the staff to be there when things happen. The landlord and neighbors can be seen as a resource if the municipality exercises increased availability and call options when the landlord / neighbors have any concerns.

Approaching the participants

Fundamental for Housing first is the values provided in the supporting service. Enabling an implementation requires an awareness of the fundamental values and mindset in Housing first to all of the staff that will provide any kind of service for this group. This is a demanding process which will take time. Thus, there are some possibilities identified in the Norwegian context.

A pilot project involving some selected municipalities and some dedicated people will be an important step to achieve a Housing First model in Norway. It is important to point to good examples, also in Norwegian municipalities, for more people to have faith in the model. The good examples are also central in the long term, by implementing the work to several municipalities and to other homeless people.

Good results and experiences in recovery oriented methods can further be obtained from the ACT project implemented in Norway. Combining this methodology with Housing first may help to illustrate good examples of implementation. Staff members from ACT will also be able to assist with both technical and organizational capabilities based on the experiences of the project.

Organization of supportive service

The organizational challenge of fragmentation and lack of dialogue, both within and outside the municipalities, should be seen in perspective to the opportunities that exists in an implementation of Housing First. First and foremost, the implementation should be anchored in national welfare ministries. Through an established consensus on approach and mindset, the signal to the municipalities will be more uniform.

One possibility in the municipalities to ensure coordination of supportive service to each homeless is to use Individual Plan (IP). Proper use of IP requires that the homeless will be actively involved in as the "owner" of the plan. A new law requires the municipalities to prepare an individual plan for citizens with a need for prolonged and coordinated services, and this may prove to be an incitement for a possible pilot project for a Housing first model in Norway. Furthermore, it is important that the personnel is dedicated and have authorizations to carry out personalized and recovery-oriented services to the citizens.