
The Possibilities and Limitations of Housing-led Projects: A Hungarian example

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› **Abstract_** *The paper explores the possibilities and limitations of a fixed-term housing-led project targeting rough sleepers using an example of an on-going project in Budapest, Hungary. Firstly, the paper introduces homelessness in the Hungarian context, focusing on the lack of social housing, limited housing benefits, and the multiple barriers rough sleepers face when trying to access standard housing. The paper discusses an example of a housing-led project in Budapest, which offers housing and support services to 20 homeless people for the duration of 12 months. The paper considers the strengths and limitations of this short-term support scheme. Finally, the paper will draw on some concluding considerations on a short-term project such as this and some of the lessons to be learned*

› **Keywords_** *Housing-led, rough sleepers, short-term housing, Hungary*

Introduction

The paper explores the possibilities and limitations of a fixed-term, housing-led project targeting rough sleepers, in Budapest, Hungary. Firstly, homelessness in the Hungarian context will be discussed, followed by the barriers faced by rough sleepers in attempting to access affordable housing – at both a structural and individual level. In particular, there is a lack of social housing stock, a relatively weak welfare system for unemployed people, difficulties homeless people encounter in accessing unemployment benefits, and insufficient housing benefits. The paper will then describe a housing-led project in Budapest – which was in operation at the time of writing – offering housing as well as support services to 20 homeless people for the duration of 12 months. The paper will discuss the strengths and limitations of such a short-term support scheme. In the final section of the paper, we shall draw conclusions of what such short-term projects can achieve, and what lessons can be drawn from analysis.

Hungary – A General Context

Social and housing services in Hungary

The Hungarian social welfare system is both overly-restricted and inadequate in responding to those living below the poverty line. Many of those who are unemployed are not entitled to unemployment benefit, with some working in informal or insecure employment which negatively impacts on their eligibility in accessing unemployment benefit, and even if they do qualify. Unemployment benefit amounts to approximately €100 per month. For those who do engage in employment, the minimum wage provides only €330 per month (before tax), about €260 per month (after tax). Rising energy costs and utility prices also place an added burden for all low-income households in Hungary (Hegedüs, 2011).

In Hungary, as in many other Central and Eastern European countries, due to the mass privatisation of the public housing stock after the fall of communism, there is a lack of affordable housing. Hungary has one of the lowest rates of public housing stock among the EU28 at approximately 3%, while home ownership rates are at 88% (see Hegedüs *et al*, 2013). Public housing is unevenly distributed across the country – in some regions the social housing stock is less than 1% of all housing, especially in smaller towns. Local authorities tend to distribute the limited units available to public employees, the workers of new companies, or young couples with children. In other words, social housing is mainly targeted at what is considered to be the ‘deserving poor’, and those with children. Homeless people without children, whether single or co-habiting with others, are usually overlooked and pushed to the bottom of the housing list (see Fehér *et al*, 2011).

As a consequence, the only option for exiting homelessness is the private rented sector. However, the lack of sufficient and regular income makes it difficult for homeless people to access the private rented housing market. The minimum rent (for bedroom only) in Budapest costs €140 per month, plus a similar cost for maintenance fees. Most landlords also ask for a security deposit of two month's rent, which means that people have to pay the equivalent of three months rent upon signing the rental contract. Even if a homeless person had savings to secure a tenancy, they are unlikely to receive financial assistance to support their rental payments over time. The housing allowance available is extremely low (€10-25 per month) – and subsidises a so-called normative housing consumption allowance (based on the floor space of the home).

There are also a number of structural problems that hinder people with a low income accessing the housing allowance. Some landlords refuse to sign contracts with their tenants which leave both parties vulnerable, and can mean a speedy eviction if any minor conflict arises. Furthermore, to be eligible for a housing allowance, tenants need to register their address officially, which many landlords are reluctant to permit, resulting also in their ineligibility for other local benefits or limits their access to local amenities such as schools and kindergartens.

Homelessness and rough sleeping in Hungary

There are two definitions of homelessness in the Social Act of 1993, both of which are narrower than in most EU member states. Firstly, those who are either roofless or sleeping in homeless services are considered homeless, and secondly, those without a registered abode, or whose address is either a homeless facility or other public institution. As such, people living in overcrowded, substandard accommodation, or who are 'sofa surfing' are not officially recorded as homeless. According to the ETHOS typology of homelessness, homelessness in Hungary is defined in relation to categories 1 to 3 (i.e. public spaces, night shelters, and other homeless shelters).

This paper focuses on housing programs for rough sleepers, most of whom fall under the category of ETHOS 1, but also those living in various forms of inadequate housing such as non-residential buildings and temporary structures (ETHOS 11.2 and 11.3), in forested areas, city parks, or derelict buildings (ETHOS 12.1). Each year, a survey of homeless people is undertaken in several towns across Hungary (see Fehér, 2011a for more details). In February 2013, the survey enumerated 6 706 homeless people sleeping at a night service and 3 087 people sleeping rough (3 166 and 1 057 in Budapest, respectively; see Győri-Szabó-Gurály, 2013). As the survey does not reach all homeless people, combined with the fact that rough sleeping in some jurisdictions is treated as a legal offence resulting in people sleeping rough in hidden locations (Misetics, 2010), the actual number of rough sleepers is likely to be greater.

Specific schemes to assist rough sleepers

Initiatives aimed at resettling homeless people have a long history in the European Union, particularly in countries like the United Kingdom (Crane *et al*, 2012). European adaptations of the Housing First philosophy have proven successful in Denmark, Holland, Portugal and Scotland (see Busch-Geertsema, 2013). Similar programs have been developed more recently in Hungary and other Central and Eastern European countries, where the system of provision for homeless people still operates using the ‘staircase’ model of provision (see Sahlin, 2005), despite the documented limitations of such an approach (Fehér *et al*, 2011).

Since 2005, the Ministry of Social Affairs has made some funds available for homeless services to enable service-users to secure move-on accommodation using housing allowances. This entails a housing allowance of a maximum of €860 per person, to be paid over 12 months, in a tapered fashion. The housing allowance can cover rent, deposit and in some cases, renovation costs. Homeless people also receive floating support during this period, with a minimum of at least one support session each month. Rough sleepers are not excluded, but people with histories of sleeping rough only form a minority of participants. Annually, between 200-300 homeless people – most of them sleeping at shelters or hostels -move out in the Central Hungarian region, (Budapest and its surroundings) (see Fehér *et al*, 2011: Table 13), while between 2005-2008 more than 2000 homeless people received housing allowance in the whole country.

In 2008, the above mentioned program was ceased across most of the country (excluding Budapest and the Central Hungarian Region), in an attempt to ‘motivate’ service providers to submit proposals for “The Social Renewal Operational Programme (TÁMOP) 2007-2013”, co-financed by the European Social Fund. The main aim of the Program was “to increase labour market participation”, with objectives like “improvement of the human resources”¹ – in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty. Homeless people were one of the many target groups mentioned.

The subprogram TÁMOP 5.3.3 (“Supporting Project Aimed at the Social and Labour Market Reintegration of Homeless People”) which targeted homeless people specifically, gradually shifted its focus from the reintegration of homeless people in general (calls of 2008 and 2010) to those sleeping rough (2011 and 2012). This was in parallel with the shift in both local and national politics towards the criminalisation of rough sleeping; the most visible form of homelessness (see Missetics, 2013). Initially, all homeless people could take part, receiving housing allowance and floating support. Subsequently, only those accessing hostel accommodation

¹ Hungary’s Social Renewal Operational Program 2007-2013 was accepted by the Commission Decision No C(2007)4306 on September 13th, 2007. See: http://www.nfu.hu/download/2737/T%C3%81MOP_adopted_en.pdf

could apply so as to incorporate those sleeping rough to a greater extent. Even though initially the emphasis was on labour market reintegration, at least 50 percent of those participating in the project needed to move out from services using the housing allowance, and at least 80 percent of those having moved out were successful in sustaining their accommodation, once the support had terminated.²

Table 1: Data of TÁMOP 5.3.3 projects from 2008 and 2010.

	Budapest		Countryside		Total
	2008	2010	2008	2010	
Number of Projects	4	1	11	2	15
Number of Homeless People Involved	167	45	471	35	638
Percentage of those Receiving Housing Allowance	65.0	50.0	60.5	100.0	70.7
Percentage of those Maintaining Housing after the End of the Support	79.4	10.0	96.6	50.0	84.5

The first two calls for proposal of TÁMOP 5.3.3 had proved a failure (see Fehér 2011b). Originally, based on the popularity of the previous housing support scheme, the support of 90 projects all over the country had been expected, with the budget available slightly under €10m. However, service providers feared the complexity of the projects, as well as the possible consequences of failing to reach the expected targets, perhaps relating to factors beyond their control. Proposals had to involve at least 15 homeless people, while many smaller service providers, especially from the countryside had managed to move out 10 or less individuals on average each preceding year. The restrictions on participants were stricter than in the case of previous housing programs,³ which resulted in the positive selection of those who had not been homeless for long and who had the least problems. The financial conditions were also more rigid: the housing allowance could not cover the deposit or the utilities of the rental, only the rent itself. Landlords were expected to submit an official bill for the rent, which proved to be a major obstacle across most projects. As such, in many cases homeless people could not move to independent, integrated accommodation, but were forced to reside in workers' hostels, hotels or B&Bs.

² Homeless people could receive housing support for a limited time of 6-12 months. The indicator of success was for tenants to be able to pay rent and bills of the house for an additional 1-2 months (the longer the support; the longer the sustainment).

³ To be eligible for the housing allowance, homeless people needed to have an official income that could not exceed 150% of the minimum salary, had to be working on improving their skills and employment potential, had to cover some of the housing expenses themselves, had to agree to save a small amount of money each month, and had to try continue a successful tenancy once the floating support has ceased.

Eighty percent of those receiving housing allowance were expected to be able to sustain their housing without support after the project was finished – if service users had not been able to continue their tenancy, service providers would have had to pay a penalty by reimbursing part of the funding from the project. To maintain a low-risk strategy, organisations often offered housing allowance for the minimum duration: 6 months, because in these cases, ‘success’ meant having to keep their tenancy only for one additional month. Moreover, failure to sustain tenancy was often not something either organisations or service users could control: if someone had become ill for a longer period of time (thus unable to work or finish training) or had died, it was considered as a failure. Due to the re-organisation of the National Network of Job Centres, they had been unable to pay companies willing to hire homeless people for several weeks, leaving service users without an income. In sum, the first construction of TÁMOP 5.3.3 had proved both unsuccessful and unpopular, in that the 18 projects only used 33.4 percent of the budget that was made available about €3.3m, so the rules subsequently were revised and eased considerably.

In the calls for proposals of 2011 and 2012, the re-integration of those sleeping rough was considered a priority, and the title of the program has changed to “Enhancing the Employability and Social Reintegration of Homeless People Sleeping Rough.” This could be done in a variety of ways, with housing only one of the solutions, and importantly, success was no longer measured by continuation of tenancy after the project was over. The call for proposals specifically mentioned Housing First and housing-led approaches, although funding was also available for issues around social inclusion within existing services. The whole budget available for projects was €6.8m, and as some of the 24 projects are still on-going, the allocated budgets are not yet published, nor do we know how many homeless people will be involved.

An Example of a Housing-Led Project in Budapest

Aims and targets of the Independent Housing Project

In this section, one of the on-going TÁMOP 5.3.3 projects in Budapest will be described, with a particular emphasis on its housing-led characteristics, success rates so far, and strengths and limitations. The project was run by BMSZKI (Budapest Methodological Centre of Social Policy and its Institutions) – the largest homeless service provider in Budapest which operates several services ranging from outreach work and health services, to shelters and hostels for single people, couples and families with children. The ‘Opening to the Street’ project aims to reduce the number of rough sleepers and enable their social integration by improving their employment prospects and promotes independent living. The

project was launched on 1st March 2013 and continues until the end of August 2014, supporting a total of 120 participants – all of whom are former rough sleepers (for at least 30 days) who were residing in Budapest city and its surrounds. Four-fifth of the participants have been supported in securing accommodation in one of BMSZKI's institutions, while the remaining one-fifth (20 participants) received floating support in independent housing. This latter component of the "Opening to the Street" project will now be discussed in detail.

This project aimed to provide 20 service users with financial and social support in securing and sustaining independent housing. The framework of the project had been primarily set up based on the main results of the evaluation study of the Pilisi Forest Project, a previous housing project for rough sleepers (See Balogi and Fehér, 2013a and 2013b). Participants were encouraged to choose the type of living that best suited their current needs, and if required, case-workers could provide assistance finding appropriate accommodation. The following types of housing could be supported:

- renting an apartment,
- renting a room (in shared accommodation),
- worker's hostel or
- renting a trailer.

The Independent Housing project adheres to Housing First principles and aims to include as many Housing First components as possible, insofar as was possible in the socio-economic and service provision context. The biggest difference from this project to Housing First principles was that in this project, the floating support was time limited – provided for one year only. In the beginning of the project, case-workers received ad-hoc training on the Housing First approach and its results in the US and Western Europe. This training included reading and translating the Housing First Manual (Tsemberis, 2010) in addition to reviewing various research articles, translated into Hungarian. Based on these, the project staff prepared their own housing first guidelines. As time progressed, monthly team meetings and case discussions ensured that questions related to Housing First could be discussed to enable a deeper understanding of the model among case-workers. One of the support workers spent a 6-week internship at the Housing First project of Turning Point Scotland, Glasgow, so as to learn more on the day-to-day running of a Housing First project, all of which was later shared and discussed with colleagues upon returning to Budapest.

Throughout the course of the project, on-going independent evaluation procedures are carried out, including participatory observation of case-worker team meetings, examination of client case studies and client focus groups. These focus groups are held on three occasions: first at the beginning of their tenancy, again 6 months later in the middle of the project and finally when housing support runs out at the twelfth and final month. At the time of the writing of this article, the first two focus group discussions have already been conducted. In the following we explore themes and quotes from data collected.

Financial background and social support

For participating service users, a monthly housing support up to approximately €133 per month for 12 months is available. If necessary, this amount can be supplemented once by approximately €100 per person to purchase new or second-hand furniture, and an additional €167 per apartment to buy basic household appliances (e.g. cooker, microwave oven, refrigerator, washing machine, etc.).

My name is I.P., I was included in the project in May 2013, or before that, but we managed to find an apartment in May, in the 7th district of Budapest. This program is ideal for us, because we are two [a couple], and the landlord was willing to take us without a deposit, so we could sign the contract. Now we do not have to pay any bills, or anything else. Because our support is doubled, it is €260, so it covers all our costs.

Service users living in independent housing are also supported by case-workers who regularly visit them for pre-arranged appointments. The 20 participants are supported by 4 case-workers, each in charge of 5 participants. All case-workers are employed part-time (20 hours a week) in the project on top of their regular work (a full-time job in one of BMSZKI's institutions). They can also link in with other specialists and service providers if necessary. They are required to meet their service users six times each month. Case-workers provide participants with mental health counselling and life skills guidance sessions, and set up individual development plans and personal goals. Individual plans are developed across several meetings with the client and according to intensive social work principles, individual case plans can be altered or modified over based on the decision of the team. Following the principles of Housing First, participants are free to choose what areas of their life they want to work on – their only obligation is remain linked in with their case worker and pay their share of housing costs in cases where the housing allowance support does not cover it all.

Apart from housing support, participants are offered to choose either between *employability preparations* or *employability strengthening activities* – as this is the main criterion of TÁMOP.

Employability preparation activities include the following:

- competency-development (ranging from working on social skills, computer literacy, creative skills, English language classes, or literacy)
- addiction counselling
- psychological or psychiatric counselling
- independent living skills

Employability strengthening activities involve activities such as:

- employment training
- participation in active labour market programs
- job-seeking counselling
- supported employment

After the 12-month period with financial support and development, service users take part in a 6-month follow-up period carried out by the same case-workers.

Recruitment of service users and finding accommodation

As mentioned before, the primary target group of the “Opening to the Street” project consists of former rough sleepers. Applicants to the Independent Housing Project element were also required to demonstrate a history of rough sleeping through providing a recommendation form filled by any outreach team operating in the territory of Budapest and its surroundings. Outreach teams were informed about the project in advance, and asked to provide feedback on service users to BMSZKI’s Housing Office. The application period was open until such time as enough participants had joined the project. Participants were chosen on a first-come-first-serve basis and only one applicant was turned down as all places had already been taken. Two workers of the Housing Office joined the Independent Housing Project as case-workers. Initially, they helped applicants find suitable housing that best suited their needs. From the four options offered all service users chose to move to rented apartments or rooms. This preparation phase lasted only for an average of one month – a period of time which both service users and case-workers found too short.

At the time of writing, there were 19 service users involved in the Independent Housing Project. Ten people moved in with their partner (also supported by the project, meaning that there are 5 couples participating), a further six people chose to share their accommodation with a friend (in one case, with a friend of the opposite sex). The remainder (3 people) moved into rented rooms on their own. Many service

users of Independent Housing found that by “doubling up” with a friend or partner in their accommodation, their financial capital was greater, thus enhancing their chances for maintaining their accommodation over time. Furthermore, options are limited for homeless couples due to a shortage of service accommodation for couples resulting in long waiting lists.

Experiences of independent housing

As mentioned above, the preparation phase (i.e. finding adequate housing for participants) lasted for a month only. This tight deadline put pressure on service users and case-workers alike. Difficulties in finding adequate accommodation within a tight timeframe included:

- finding an apartment/room with rent and utilities that could be afforded, given the relatively low financial subsidy
- finding an apartment/room where the landlord agreed to forgo two-month deposit in advance
- finding an apartment for former rough sleepers in terms of prejudice of landlords.

Though some service users did engage in searching for their accommodation, usually case-workers engaged more intensively in this preparatory process, due to their better local and practical knowledge in searching for accommodation. Case-workers reported that they were extremely overloaded during this period, and described how it took dozens of phone calls and several visits to various accommodations before securing a tenancy. This was exacerbated by the absence of a list of low-budget rentals available, nor was there an established stock of housing units owned by landlords who were open to letting to such a vulnerable target group. The case-workers arranged appointments with the landlord, but in some cases, landlords did not even show up, or the apartment had already been rented out (it was felt that when some landlords met the client, he/she decided not to let the apartment to them and so used this as an excuse). In other cases, the accommodation was substandard and inferior to how it was listed in the advertisement. In some cases, the client requested that their homeless history would not be disclosed upon meeting the prospective landlord. However participation in the Independent Housing project and its financial support was always described in detail to landlords. Both service users and case-workers feel that presence of case-workers at the first meeting had the most convincing impact; their involvement played the role of an unwritten, or symbolic, guarantee to landlords.



The beginning was a bit difficult, because the landlord was unwilling... to tell you the truth, he had said we could not rent the apartment first, but then he called back a few weeks later to say he had changed his mind. The truth is, he had been afraid of giving to homeless people. But then at the end he was very disappointed, I mean in a positive way, he was pleasantly surprised.

After having made a good impression on landlords, they had to be convinced of letting the apartment/room without supplying a security deposit – as already mentioned, the norm is an upfront security deposit of 1-2 month's rent. Finally an agreement was made with most landlords, that since the project cannot provide a monetary security deposit, furniture and household equipment equivalent of the amount of security deposit could replace it – which in case of arrears, landlords can therefore “inherit” the items. In the few cases where conflicts arose between the landlord and tenant, landlords expected staff to take their side or pay their “damages”, which was not possible from the project budget. In a small number of cases, the rental was secured through personal connections: one woman moved back to her previous landlord, while a family rented the flat of their case-worker's friend. Due to the structural problems, the private rental system is not well regulated in Hungary, leaving both the tenant and the landlord vulnerable. Most landlords, as a consequence, prefer to rent their apartment to someone they know or to someone recommended to them by someone they trust.

Those who were going to live alone decided to look for a room rental (i.e. a room in shared accommodation). The support could cover the expenses of a rented room, with shared bathroom and kitchen, and in some cases landlords were residing in the same building. Rented rooms are located in the outskirts of the city, usually in detached houses. Couples, friends and a family had better chances in finding an independent apartment, usually with a single room, than in the more central districts.

I have settled in, I have been here for a couple of months now. It is not bad, it is a big house with a garden. The landlord has rented the upstairs to a couple of people. For a while I had shared my room with two other people, at times, there had been 20-25 tenants.... I accepted that, we accepted that. But two weeks ago I could move into a room on my own. And now it is really the way I want it to be. I am alone, I am single, so now this is fine for me, it is actually quite big. I have problems with the furniture, I shall buy some new things. I get along with my flat mates, we don't have problems.... I have an OK relationship with the landlord as well, I am his favourite, his little boy, his great-grandchild. He brings us cake sometimes.

Service users reported that time pressure rushed them into making an important decision too quickly, and they were forced to take the first or second apartment offered. However support workers say that service users were not aware of market

prices and found each apartment unreasonably expensive. Following the procurement of accommodation, furniture and household equipment needed to be bought and moving had to be arranged.

Most service users still recall their first night in the dwelling as a euphoric experience and that they 'could not believe it'. Apart from one participant who had spent so long on the streets that she struggled to adapt to living in her new apartment, everyone else was happy in their new surroundings. The husband of the female service user who could not settle into her accommodation had been taken to prison, and in his absence, she felt lonely and isolated initially and used to visit her earlier company on the street. The rest of the group got used to the tenancy quickly.

We live in a two-room apartment, with a kitchen, bathroom, toilet. It has everything. I don't know how big it is, but it is big. I pay €130 as rent. But I had known the landlady for long, which was helpful. We had lived in a forest for two years.... I was very strange to move in to an apartment first: there was electricity, I even feel like crying now, thinking back, what it was like to be inside a house. Having a bed! We had had a bed before, but it was always wet from the rain. I had often thought we would not live until the next day. That we would freeze to death. I have heard about people who froze. And it had felt as if we had been sleeping outside, on snow.... We were overjoyed when we were offered to move to rented accommodation.

According to tenants, most apartments have some issues (e.g. thin walls, problems with the heating, bed bugs, not well-equipped, etc.), but they still feel satisfied with their new circumstances. One single person had to share his room with strangers for some time (the landlord moved some people to his room), but finally the issue was resolved and he could move to a separate room. Many tried to make their accommodation more homely and comfortable. The nature and intensity of the service users' relationships with their landlords varied, and was largely determined by where the landlord lived. If he/she lived in the same building, naturally they had regular contact with their tenants. In other cases, they usually meet once a month to collect the rent and utility fees. In one case, the relationship with their landlord is particularly close: the landlord is a neighbour, they sometimes have drinks with their tenants (who are a couple), and they borrow money from each other or exchange items to on another. Apart from exchanging pleasantries, service users do not have much contact with their neighbours.

One of the most significant challenges service users face is staying financially afloat. Only half have a regular income, either from legally-registered or unregistered employment. Six are on disability pension or regular social benefit. However those with a regular income may also have difficulties in managing their finances for example some have to repay personal loans, other spend a disproportionate

amount of money on cigarettes, or alcohol and forgo their food purchases as a result. Since throughout the project period, utility bills are covered by the housing support, a special emphasis has to be placed on the development of household skills. Midway through the project, there is an emphasis among case-workers to teach their service users to become more independent with regards household expenses. They are introduced to social services in their neighbourhood, and are encouraged to turn to these for assistance, while they are welcome to use the mental health services of BMSZKI as long as needed.

Results to Date

The project tries to emphasize labour market integration – both as a source of income and as offering a meaningful activity. While earning money seems to be the most important factor for service users, in some cases meaningful occupation has also become a factor, for example to overcome loneliness (in the case of the woman whose husband had been imprisoned) or to be somewhere safe (in case of a woman suffering from dementia whose husband started to work and he feared for his wife during the hours he was not at home). All service users could take part in 30 hours per week voluntary work whilst receiving a financial “reward” – which, after taxes is the equivalent of the minimum wage. Voluntary work also served as a gateway to stable employment – those who wanted to take part in the employment project could prove that they are ready by turning up on time and carrying out tasks in voluntary work. Five participants of the Independent Living Project were accepted in the Protected Employment Scheme, and were offered either full-time or part-time employment based on their skills, capacities and wishes. While their contract lasts for 8 months, there is the promise of a permanent contract for those who prove that they are ready and able. The employment is at its midterm at the time of writing, and 3 people are still working. One person has left because of health problems and the need for hospitalisation, while another has found a new job with a higher wage.

I work in the carpentry workshop here. I have had this job for two months. I do not earn much now, but I have been told that if I work well they shall keep me on. But I get by. I don't need to pay anything for housing, I don't have any special needs, I don't have a wife to spend money on, I don't drink. I don't do anything, I go home and sleep.

Focus group discussions and accounts of case-workers show that service users have already experienced development in several aspects of their lives. Due to safe housing (i.e. not exposed to elements and other dangers on the street), heating and hot water, participants with a shorter history of rough sleeping already have visible signs of physical well-being. Some of those (especially older participants) with a

longer history of homelessness suffer from chronic diseases, but participation may help them to get adequate treatment and to stabilise their illness. Participants highlighted the feeling of security upon being housed. With this safe background they regained an improved sense of self-esteem and self-respect. Many of them have also become more competent in their knowledge of their rights and entitlements, particularly with regard to issues related to their rental contract or other rules of the project.

One important outcome is that participants, by and large, do not consider themselves homeless any more. They started to feel responsible for their lives, became more optimistic for their future, and are thinking about how to sustain their tenancy in the long run. Furthermore, volunteering and participation in supported employment has allowed some to feel like they have a stake in society again. However, due to mental illnesses and a longer history of homelessness among some of the service users, they struggled to become accustomed to the stability provided by adequate housing and struggle to make plans and are more anxious about the future.

Drop-outs

At the time of writing there were altogether 19 service users in Independent Housing. The project was launched with the participation of 20 service users, after which time one couple dropped out due to domestic violence that had affected their tenancy. The case-workers involved feared for the safety of the woman if they were to move them to another rented accommodation. So in this way, the couple was not expelled from the housing-led project as way of 'punishment', but it was a decision that was felt would be in their best interests. They accepted to move to a hostel together, where they were surrounded by staff and other residents, which reduced the violence between them. Moving to a hostel also meant that they could avail of all the same supports as they had while in Independent Housing. Due to the heavy workload of the case-workers, they were handed over to the team working in the hostel. A single woman was selected to take their place, but she also dropped out later on due to lack of co-operation and continuous violation of house rules previously agreed with the landlord. Even though she agreed not to host other family members in the apartment overnight, she kept housing three of her relatives despite several warnings from the landlord. Her landlord held the case-worker responsible, who felt that after several incidents of breakdown of trust, he would not support the client in moving into another tenancy. She was referred to a temporary hostel and her case was handed over to the team there. She did not move to the hostel and instead she disappeared from service contact.

Another man was admitted to the project to replace the couple – a service user’s husband whose wife had been part of the project since the beginning. He had spent 4 months in prison, but before he started his sentence, he made sure that his wife was safe and off the streets. As there was an empty space, he was invited to take part in the project. He moved in with his wife and took up supported employment.

A male participant, with a long history of psychiatric distress, moved in with his friend whom he used to stay with on the streets. They moved into a one-room apartment and shared the room. A few months later, their relationship broke down, so he decided to move out suddenly and not return to the apartment. He would have preferred to be hospitalised, but all psychiatric departments turned down his request as he had already stayed there before and they could not help him. Finally he moved to a temporary hostel where he met some old drinking friends. He is still in regular contact with his case-worker and is welcome to return to Independent Housing. In this respect he is not an official drop-out yet, even though he no longer resides in Independent Housing.

Who are successful participants and why?

In the following section, experiences drawn from the Independent Housing project will be discussed. Success of participants was dependent on the particular financial and time framework of this particular project. According to case-workers’ accounts, one of the most important success factors is employment potential. Those able to work have a chance to gain a regular income and sustain their tenancy in the long-term. People on disability pension or other type benefits, however, cannot usually sustain independent living without adequate housing support. Another factor is the length of homelessness history. A majority of service users reported incidents of rough sleeping ranging from a few weeks to several months. Some participants slept rough for a decade and got accustomed to this kind of lifestyle – and so, their re-integration to the housed community was more challenging. Addiction and mental health problems are also important factors. If addiction has a negative impact on work or their mental health, psychological counselling is provided for the participants; though to date, not many people expressed much interest in engaging in therapy despite encouragement from case-workers.

Though one could assume that couples are in a more favourable position than single participants, particularly in a financial sense, case-workers reported that couples experience new type of problems, conflicts and issues between many couples, who had to adopt new coping strategies to adapt to their new housing situation. Beneficiaries of Roma origin can be in a more difficult situation in succeeding than others, as many of them have faced discrimination from landlords and employers.

Lessons Learned: Possibilities and Limitations of the Project

While there are obvious strengths and possibilities of the project, and most service users are very satisfied with the improvement of their living circumstances, the fact that participation and support offered by the project has a twelve-month limit has definite drawbacks. Both case workers and participants mentioned that they felt the time pressure at all stages of the project, from getting people involved in the project, to finding the best housing option, and getting the contract secured and signed within six weeks. This left many participants feeling that they had not chosen the best housing option, and some remarked that they would probably have to move when the project funding was over and find something cheaper. While many participants might not be familiar with the real costs or rent and bills in Budapest in 2013-2014, having had more time to look around might have provided them with a more accurate overall picture of what was available in the housing market. Support workers felt that their work would have been easier had there been a list of low-cost rentals or landlords available.

Interestingly, while at the first discussion, shortly after having moved in, most participants seemed rather anxious about how they would sustain their tenancy in the long-run, with one exception, all were rather optimistic at their mid-term group meeting. Several people have found employment, and have learnt how to budget their income. Some even started to put some money aside each month to have a financial reserve in case it would be needed. However, case-workers are not always so optimistic about their clients' prospects. Even in those cases where sufficient income has been secured, should an unforeseen event occur (illness or unemployment), the lack of available social support could endanger independent living. While the type of intensive support offered by case-workers might not be necessary after one year, the support of participants will be handed over to local social centres, where staff carry a case load of anything between 50-150 service users. Should someone move to a different neighbourhood, however, their support will be handed over to a case-worker in another service.

Most participants feel that their lives have improved since their participation in the project, which is a positive factor. However, participants with more chaotic behaviour were generally not accepted to the project. It can be said, then, that fixed-term housing-led projects are more appropriate for those with less severe problems and support needs, and it can still have a positive impact on those with more severe support needs. In other words, participation of even those with the most complex needs can at least improve, or prevent the decline of their health, as well as offer them decent housing, even if it is only on a temporary basis.

Conclusion

Fixed-term housing-led projects, although limited, demonstrate some benefits in a social context where homeless people with complex needs have no alternative options. Evidence shows that housing and social support that only lasts for 12 months can be meaningful, and trigger positive changes for those with histories of rough sleeping, even those with chaotic backgrounds. If participants can secure an adequate income (whether from employment or some sort of pension), they can maintain their housing once the financial support ceases, while their social care can be transferred to mainstream support system. Couples generally have a higher success rate than single people, although they also face unique challenges. Fixed-term housing-led projects might not be adequate, however, for those with more complex needs – but they might not be harmful, either, if they can offer a more intense support than what would normally be available to homeless people otherwise. However, such small scale projects cannot replace affordable housing schemes, and even though lessons can be learned, they should be adapted into mainstream housing and social services.

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