

Action for Inclusion in Europe City Working Groups

Homelessness and Destitution
Amongst Excluded Migrants

Housing First in Gijón

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Relevant Contextual Information

The municipality of Gijón is situated in Northern Spain, in the region of Asturias, a region which has suffered deep industrial decline. Gijón's population is 278,294, of which 257,015 are within the city's urban limited, and 21,279 in its rural areas.

The city's migrant population is small, but diverse, with residents coming from 130 countries. A total of 15,446 migrants live in the city (5% of the total population), 6,826 mobile EU citizens and 8,620 third country nationals. Interestingly, the city's migrant population is decreasing due to the recession in Spain and the high rate of unemployment (currently 24%), which has forced some migrants to return to their country of origin or re-migrate.

Gijón Social Services Foundation meets the needs of 20% of the city's population, providing a range of services, including some aimed at its migrant communities:

1. An integration strategy

A municipal strategy with the aim of integrating migrants into the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the city.

2. Information service for migrants

An office providing specialist advice and information to migrants, in areas such as: access to social services, health services, legal advice (including immigration advice), employment, education and leisure/arts activities.

3. Active Inclusion Network

Gijón City Council coordinates and funds a group of organisations working with homeless migrants. In 2010, it set up an Active Inclusion Network to bring the organisations together in order to develop and deliver improvements to services

that are funded by the council's social services foundation. A number of organisations are involved in the network, including Asociación Gijonesa de Caridad, Fundación Albergue Covadonga, CESPA Fundación, Fundación Siloé, Cáritas, Banco de Alimentos, Mar de Niebla, Cruz Roja, Asociación Albéniz, Voluntariado Vicenciano. The network has several functions, including monitoring activities taking place in the city, coordinating procedures, sharing information and expertise and strategic planning, including dealing with the fallout of the economic downturn in Spain. The network is made up of two committees



that each focus on strategy and operational concerns. The Housing First project to be developed as part of the Action for Inclusion in Europe project will be overseen by the Active Inclusion Network.

Gijon's Action Plan

Gijon City Council decided to develop and deliver a radical new approach to its homelessness services as part of the Action for Inclusion in Europe project. The Housing First programme has the overall aim of providing independent housing to the most excluded homeless people within the city, in particular those that have been sleeping rough for extensive periods of time and those with mental health problems, substance misuse problems and/or disabilities. The development of the approach has been underpinned by evidence from other countries, including those of Dublin, that have demonstrated positive outcomes for services users of this substantially new and innovative approach to homelessness services. The programme to be rolled out in Gijon will be available to all residents that meet its eligibility condition and no explicit restrictions will apply to the city's migrant residents.

Gijon's approach to date has been the more traditional 'staircase' model. Moving to a Housing First marks a significant shift in approach in which homeless people are provided with accommodation from the outset without conditionality attached to continuity of service and giving them the freedom to make decisions about their own lives rather than follow a path proscribed by the authorities and/or NGOs.

Objectives

The overall aim of the action plan is to provide access to independent houses for homeless people experiencing social exclusion, distributed in different areas of the city, as an essential step towards their reintegration into the community.

The specific objectives of the project are as follows:

- To supply individual flats/houses as a permanent form of accommodation
- To provide floating support and information to residents
- To provide support to residents to live independent lives, in particular giving them tools so that they use resources effectively
- To facilitate their integration into society with the support of coordinated social, health and education systems

Ten houses will be provided in the first year along with floating support from professionals. The houses are almost new and are being refurbished to a high quality standard. For subsequent years, we plan to introduce a further three houses per year in order to increase the sustainability of the project and extend its impact in the long-term.

Beneficiaries of the Housing First project

Users of Housing First will need to meet a number of criteria to be entitled to the programme, however it is open to people irrespective of their immigration status (including those with irregular status) and to those with mental health problems, substance misuse problems or disabilities, unless it is assessed that they cannot live independently. Those eligible for the project must:

- Be over 18 years old.

- Have been living for three or more years in the streets.
- Not have an income over the 'social salary' of €442 (those receiving the social salary will contribute 30% of it towards the housing costs)

Project beneficiaries will be decided by a panel consisting of one representative from each of the organisations involved in the Active Inclusion Network.

Additional support for migrant residents

Professionals in the city provide specialist support to migrants with their immigration documents and in relation to their integration into the labour market. Additional support is provided to children and families to help them integrate more fully into society.

Commissioning process

The project was developed in consultation with an external organisation – the Rais Foundation - with expertise on Housing First. This involved developing a call to tender for the management of the Housing First project based on a thorough and expert understanding of the programme. An NGO has been chosen to deliver the programme on the basis of the open call to tender.

Timing

The project commenced in June although residents will move into the properties in August. From June to August, professionals working on the project are receiving training from the Rais Foundation and project beneficiaries will be selected by the Active Inclusion Network panel. The Rais Foundation will provide continued support to the project throughout and will conduct its evaluation.

Consultation

The Housing First project was presented to Gijon Councillors in the Autumn of 2015, and they subsequently reached an agreement, approving the project and providing the necessary budget to develop and deliver the work. Members of the Active Inclusion Network were consulted on the project concept and design, which fed into the documentation presented to the City Council.

Achievements and Experiences

Implementing a radical new approach to homelessness services has been a major success during the course of this project. This involved getting political approval from across the parties that form the council, agreement from a diverse group of organisations that participate in our Active Inclusion Network, and the project design for which we commissioned Rais Foundation to provide assistance. The tendering process for the delivery of the project has been successfully completed and we managed to secure the support of the regional government, who have agreed to contribute to the costs of the houses and additional support provided. This is testament to the broader support of the concept we are championing.

Impact

The project has had a profound impact on the Social Services Foundation's way of thinking and its method of approaching work with homeless people. Further, the decision to implement this radical new way of working is underpinned by an evidence-based approach, which is a positive direction for the city.

Evaluation

An evaluation plan, including an appropriate methodology, has been put together and Rais Foundation will carry this out over the initial period of the project. We hope to learn about the benefits and challenges of the project through this process in order that improvements can be made in the future.

Challenges

One challenge we faced in developing the project concept was how to deal with potential criticism of a Housing First model of support in the context of a housing shortage within the city. There were also concerns in regards to integration and community cohesion. We decided to provide the accommodation within communities in such a way as to maximise possibilities for integration, and accompanying it with a wealth of information provided by partner organisations to allay any fears residents may have about what we are trying to do.

