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# FROM STREET LOCKDOWN TO A ROOF OVER YOUR HEAD

## Covid-19 teaching cities valuable lessons about ending homelessness

Liat Rogel | URBACT Lead Expert for the ROOF network.



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**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS TAKEN** us all by surprise. In the blink of an eye, dramatic change came and permeated all aspects of society. Our social systems had to adapt quickly. That was also the case for each of the 9 cities participating in the European URBACT Action Planning network [ROOF\\*](#) on ending homelessness through housing solutions. It was all hands on deck to address the emergency situation of the most vulnerable people i.e. the homeless, particularly the 'rough sleepers' and people living in shelters.

Over time, the unwanted Covid-19 Pandemic

also taught the 9 ROOF cities some valuable lessons, bringing about some unexpectedly positive and surprising effects: homeless people being housed for the first time in small temporary houses, rough sleepers finally being housed after many years, use of non-traditional infrastructure to house homeless people, cross-stakeholder collaboration and a changing public opinion. After almost a year of emergency and extreme difficulty to manage street lockdown for the homeless, we can now seize one specifically great opportunity: a chance to end homelessness by reinforcing Housing First strategies.

## IT IS A UNIQUE SITUATION

when your government asks you to stay home, an impossible situation when you don't have a home to stay in. Rough sleepers found themselves even more exposed than before, unable to follow these new rules. The support services that usually help people on the streets, were unable to move around as freely as before and continue the same level of assistance during this time of crisis. Traditional homeless shelters failed to fit the rules of social distancing and

risked quickly increasing the number of Covid-19 positives. With the closing of some shelters on the one hand, and the job losses of thousands of vulnerable people on the other, the reality and scope of homelessness was literally forced into the public eye in an unprecedented way. This new level of awareness became a catalyst for rapid change in how we handle homelessness. And while some of these changes were negative, surprisingly many changes were positive.



During the early days of emergency, very little local and/or national support was dedicated directly to the homeless. To add to that, each city department was absorbed by its own emergency, leaving little space for integration and cooperation between departments.



Many social housing services closed their doors, being unable to immediately adapt to the new situation. People were not assigned to houses. Domestic violence rocketed during lockdown. Refugee camps became places of high and uncontrolled contagion.

# OPPORTUNITIES

## **WHEN RULES ARE CHANGING**

day by day, there is no real opportunity to create long-term solutions. As the need and pressure for quick action builds, some of these actions solve the immediate issues but come with a risk of investing in a bad system. Creating more beds, or implementing new

emergency shelters was necessary in many cases, but in the long term this practice may create a stronger mindset for short-term solutions. Offering homeless people temporary structures like tents or barracks, may allow them to isolate better, but it mainly serves to hide the problem and, on a

medium term, increases the amount of people in inadequate living conditions. However, some actions actually opened doors to new possibilities. The ROOF network cities discovered valuable opportunities in this time of crisis.

# The opportunity to capitalize on the rise in knowledge and awareness

*“For the first time, people realized how fast anyone can become homeless, they look differently at people on the streets”* says **Dominique Fiévez** of Toulouse Métropole. *“People who had been sleeping on friends’ couches for a long time had to leave and found themselves on the streets, sometimes recognizing their homeless status for the first time”* says **Patricia Vanderbauwhede** from the municipality of Ghent Housing office and project leader of ROOF. Having to move people quickly out of existing support services or away from streets

due to the risk of disease provided an opportunity to look at the homeless situation through a microscope. People in lesser known forms of homelessness, like ‘couch sleepers’, were forced to leave their couches and become more clearly part of the definition. Some cities, like Ghent, even provided a ‘passport’ to allow homeless people to be recognized by the police. Different services, including health, housing and social services gathered much more accurate data about the homeless community and began to share their data amongst

themselves, sometimes for the very first time. When data is more accurate, it is easier to advocate for better, long-term solutions. It is possible to create more personalized solutions and to make hidden homelessness visible. *“We took the opportunity to get to know the remaining rough sleepers better and finally, after many years, managed to bring them to accept our social services assistance and move out of the streets”* (**Jim Kearns**, Municipality of Glasgow).





## The opportunity to work in new integrated ways

*"It is in periods like these that you can recognize what works good and where the cracks are", says **Tom Rønning** from the City of Odense. "We had to solve problems together, even between departments that usually look after different aspects. The challenge in our city was not so much the users (homeless people) but the networking between the health and the social department as well as the police. We are more prepared now to work*

*collaboratively". After the first wave, in which many departments and services each tried working out a solution on their own, it became clear that integrated work was necessary, especially when faced with the threat of a second or third wave. In many cases the health, social and housing departments collaborated for the very first time. For example, housing companies reviewed their rent and eviction policies to*

*avoid overloading services that were already at capacity and unable to host more people. New emergency centers opened, offering a combination of health and social services, like in Thessaloniki and Braga. "We are collaborating better with the police, informing the homeless about the available services for food or accommodation" (**Andreas Karadakis**, Municipality of Thessaloniki).*



# The opportunity to capitalize on community involvement

In many cities, average citizens showed enormous solidarity and activism in helping others. Initiatives were created to bring groceries to the elderly or offer food to those in need. For homeless people, offers arrived both on the housing market (as mentioned above) and on volunteering to prepare food or check on high-risk individuals

whenever possible. In some services, as it got more difficult to guarantee hygiene, homeless people themselves were involved in turns, helping to keep needed spaces and services up and running.

Direct community involvement is key to change perception. When people hear the stories first hand they become more open to different solutions.

Liège and Timisoara both shared how people often may be upset about giving homeless people a home when also other people are in need. Homeless people are often seen as lazy or helpless, dependent on drugs and alcohol. Bringing people closer may help in advocating for long-term housing solutions.







## The opportunity to use non-conventional spaces

The crisis came at a heavy cost for tourism, leaving entire hotels and other recreational structures completely empty. Lacking beds and enough space for safety, some cities, like Glasgow and Ghent, began renting rooms from hotels and using them instead to host homeless people. This humane solution has allowed to quickly make sure that people are safe, but has also opened up the idea of using services and spaces that are not often used beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. The private sector's mindset may change after their first experience collaborating with social services.

The same also goes for private, short-term rental apartment owners. In some of the cities, like in Thessaloniki, the offer of such services became a threat to affordable housing in general, not only for the homeless population. During this pandemic period, it became easier to reach out to these private owners and ask if they would rent their apartments for affordable prices, with a generally positive response. Some private owners even, like in Liège, spontaneously called the city council themselves to offer their apartment to people in need. Other resources were

re-orientated: *"We realized it wasn't possible to open our large winter shelter, as in previous years, as we couldn't guarantee social distance and health control in it. The municipality had some unused mobile houses that were supposed to be used at schools, with schools now closed, they gave us the opportunity to house the homeless. For the first time we used small units, for 2-3 people. This may be a good beginning to adopt permanent housing solutions".* (**Angela Ciupa-Rad**, Municipality of Timisoara)

# The opportunity to promote long-term solutions, based on housing

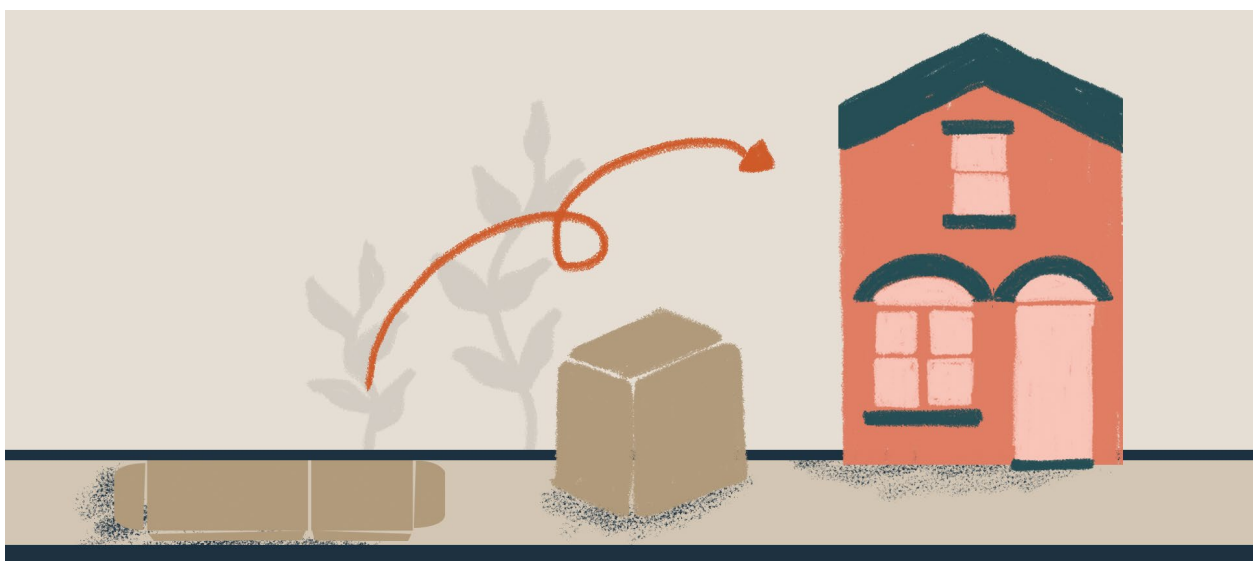
The ROOF cities that had already adopted long-term solutions, and in particular Housing First, perceived the emergency in very different ways. Odense for example, actually required very little changes in its service offering, especially concerning their support system. In Glasgow, the already reduced number of homeless people still on the streets finally became a matter of the past. Passing through hotel rooms first, to then enter social housing. It is a great opportunity to promote more permanent

housing services to the homeless and make sure people have their private spaces and the support needed.

The urgency to take people off the streets helped to develop quick and dedicated solutions: *“A couple (approached by social services) said they would go to the shelter only if they could be together (our shelter is usually separated between male and female) so we created a special room for them”* (Ana Ferreira, Municipality of Braga).

**Steven Vanden Broucke**

(City of Ghent), tells how they created a 24h care hostel and housed 15 people that got temporary housing with social support. *“The interesting thing is that we gave a solution to the most vulnerable among the homeless, people with complex problems that were not willing to be housed before this moment. We learned that we can create temporary solutions quickly but we also have good hope that this will lead to reinforcing and speeding up the process towards structural housing”*.



# How to seize the momentum?

## **MANY OF THE ROOF CITIES**

are still in emergency mode, with basic functions of the system trying to stand tall. There is a common challenge in making sure that some of the emergency solutions do not become permanent, while turning good examples into a motor for change.

**Milton Friedman**, 1976 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, said: *"Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I*

*believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable."*

The ROOF network aims to think long term and act quickly now that we know more and are more aware, as data collection becomes more accurate and as hidden forms of homelessness become visible. The ROOF network will grasp the opportunity and the push given by this crisis and will continue to work towards

Ending Homelessness.

Each of our cities acts and advocates today that it is time for all actors (politicians, civil servants of different departments, community, public opinion, private housing market, service workers, homeless community) to rethink social policies now, shifting from sheltering to more structural solutions like Housing First, and creatively or directly find the resources towards affordable housing for the different homeless groups.

# IT IS TIME TO

**Recognize different types of homeless people and not just look at the tip of the iceberg.**

**Evaluate the community around us as a valuable resource, including the homeless community.**

**Work together, with unprecedented collaboration between the health, housing, social and economic departments.**

**Creatively or directly find the resources towards affordable housing.**

**Rethink social policies, shifting from sheltering to a more structural solution like Housing First.**

**Implement national and European policies pushing towards ending homelessness.**

This article was written based on constant exchange and dedicated interviews with 9 European municipalities, participating in the URBACT ROOF network.

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\*ROOF aims to end homelessness through innovative housing solutions at city level. It is about making the shift from managing homelessness to actually ending it through Housing First/Led and about gathering accurate data. It is an URBACT project, running from 2019 to 2022, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. As a network of 9 European cities, ROOF develops integrated local action plans to promote and achieve the strategic goal of Functional Zero (no structural homelessness).

ROOF network cities:

Ghent (Belgium - Lead Partner), Thessaloniki (Greece), Toulouse Métropole (France), Braga (Portugal), Timisoara (Romania), Glasgow (United Kingdom), Liège (Belgium), Poznan (Poland), Odense (Denmark).

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