

## **How Greens in Government Are Tackling Homelessness**

**Article by Samir Jeraj**

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**From Helsinki to Brighton, Greens in local governments have been working to find lasting solutions to the persistent problem of homelessness, often drawing inspiration from pioneering policies from around the world and calling for a shift in understanding and response measures. Green proposals have brought about significant progress at many different levels of government, yet the current climate threatens to set back these efforts. Although the onset of Covid-19 was an impetus to find solutions, many of the policies addressing homelessness during the pandemic are temporary and thus liable to be rolled back, while funding cuts imposed by recovery policies risk worsening the situation.**

More than 700,000 people sleep rough across Europe on any given night, according to [data from the European Parliament](#). This figure has risen by 70 per cent in the past decade, as rents in cities spiralled, social housing shrank, and governments grappled with the impact of the 2008 financial crash. Millions more live in temporary housing, informal shelters, and on couches and floors of friends, family, and acquaintances.

The profile of people who are homeless varies across Europe, and it is difficult to get a clear picture as there is no cross-EU data. However, a comparison of national data reveals that some groups are more at risk than others, and that picture is changing. Undocumented migrants, who do not have access to social protection are at high risk across Europe, and make up [over half of rough sleepers in some cities](#) in Europe, such as in the Spanish capital of Madrid. By contrast, in Portugal, of the 1386 homeless people supported by the NGO Assistência Médica Internacional (AMI), [79 per cent were born in the country](#). In Austria, there is growing concern about the impact of [rising rents](#) on “middle class” people in employment. In the UK, an increasing number of [younger people under the age of 25](#) have become homeless. In Brussels, a [count in 2016](#) revealed that of the 3386 people who were homeless in the city, 35 per cent were living on the streets, 25 per cent were in temporary accommodation, and 39 per cent were living in inadequate housing.

The coronavirus pandemic has given urgency to tackling of homelessness. Governments have taken unprecedented steps to protect the homeless against the risk of infection and death. In the UK, for example, the government briefly funded the “Everyone In” programme in March 2020 to bring rough sleepers into the hotels that had emptied. By contrast, rough sleepers in Brussels were issued “[curfew passes](#)” that allowed them to stay on the streets. In Paris, Doctors without Borders found that [four in ten](#) people who were in homeless hostels were testing positive for Covid-19, with rates as high as 94 per cent in one hostel.

*“How can you stay at home if you don’t have a*

*home?”*

## **Progressive alliances for ambitious policies in Brighton**

Over the past six years, several Green “waves” have swept through countries in western Europe and brought more Greens into power at the local, regional, and national levels. These new (and sometimes older) Green and Green-led administrations are having to deal with the growing homelessness as part of their policy agendas. To do so, they have often taken inspiration from innovative approaches to housing provision, while building up emergency hostel services, creating more social housing, and seeking to strengthen the rights of people who are most at risk of homelessness.

Brighton and Hove on the south coast of England have many of the problems faced by seaside towns, which have suffered from the loss of traditional industries and now have a lot of more low-paid seasonal tourism work. It has a long waiting list for social housing, hundreds of families in emergency housing, and rough sleepers on the streets. During the coronavirus pandemic, the council has worked hard to get rough sleepers off the streets as part of the “Everyone In” scheme. The local council has been led by a minority Green Party administration since last year, and housing and homelessness are one of their priorities.

David Gibson is the joint chair of the city’s housing committee. He explained that the administration is working at different levels: increasing the supply of council housing and expanding the “Housing First” provision. “Since we took over the council, we’ve produced as many additional council homes in a year than the previous administration produced in four years,” he explains.

Under the Greens, the council has accelerated its programme of buying up housing in Brighton to add to those it has commissioned, using a mix of loans and their own money to do this. “Part of the package is that we need to tackle the supply side,” Gibson added. It is a policy that they have been able to pursue even as the construction industry ground to a halt due to the pandemic.

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As a minority administration, Gibson explained that the Greens work with councillors from the Labour Party on a joint housing and homelessness programme to pass the necessary policies and budgets, and on setting more ambitious goals.

The council has also bought several of the better buildings being used for temporary housing, with the aim of turning them into long-term housing in the future. They have recently bought a 38-flat scheme in Gibson’s ward, which means housing that would otherwise have been in the for-profit market is now being let through the council.

A “considerable success” for Gibson and the Green administration is the expansion of “Housing First” homes from 20 to 60, with more in the pipeline. Based on the approach pioneered in New York in the 1990s, Housing First emphasises getting people into stable housing and meeting their holistic needs for support such as mental health or addiction on an ongoing basis. This is a complete reversal of the prevailing thinking that people should have addressed these issues before they can access housing, which is near impossible when someone is living on the street or in insecure housing.

The expansion is fortuitous for Brighton and Hove, as many of the people being sheltered in hotels due to the pandemic are exactly the people for whom Housing First can help. However, without increased funding from the central government and with the prospect of the ban on evictions in England being lifted (the ban has now been extended until May), Gibson predicts the council will still find it challenging to house everyone in need. “There’s this problem in the long run that at the moment, without funding, we haven’t got a prospect of resolving.”

## **Bureaucratic barriers undermine Amsterdam’s local solutions**

In Amsterdam, the Green-led administration is facing similar challenges with their central government, explains Marijn van der List who is the GroenLinks (Green Left) spokesperson on homelessness in the city. As the capital city, homelessness is particularly acute and the local government has had to respond to Covid-19. “It’s quite contradictory that we were told to ‘stay at home’ but how can you stay at home if you don’t have a home?” she observes. Locally, the lack of available housing causes blockages throughout the homelessness system, “you would like people to get a house as soon as possible to start their lives again or with a little bit of help, or step by step doing it on their own again, but there are no houses,” she explains.

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central government*

At the national level, anti-immigrant policies passed by successive governments mean many undocumented people are homeless and cannot access services. Marijn first became involved in politics, resisting policies such as denying undocumented people the right to a shelter and a fair asylum system. “Cities were always providing shelter in some way to people without documents,” she explains. There is currently a national shelter programme running in five local governments, including Amsterdam, and the Green-led administration there has added funding to expand the shelter capacity. It provides 24-hour shelter for around 500 people together with support for their asylum cases. They are also working with other parties to look at a “city ID” card for residents of Amsterdam, including undocumented people, modelled on efforts in New York, Paris and other European cities to ensure some basic rights such as access to bank accounts and access to state buildings.

Van der List is frustrated that efforts by local governments are not being matched by policy change and support from the central government on the causes of homelessness and on funding for mental health services. “Sometimes I find it very hard to look at the numbers

we spend on this system, where we try and help people once they hit the bottom, because if you're 'too well' you're not helped," she says. Long waiting lists for housing and local connection rules on access make it more difficult for people who have had to move around a lot. The Dutch welfare system also discourages house-sharing by cutting benefits to people who share a home, including parents with adult children. These are policies developed at a national level that create challenges for local governments. "You can't solve everything as a city," says van der List.

## **Greens in Finland - leveraging power in government to shift policies**

Finland is already a leader in reducing homelessness. In 1987, there were around 18,000 rough sleepers. Their strategies throughout the 1990s and early 2000s used the "staircase" approach where, in theory, a homeless person moves from street to shelter, to temporary housing, and eventually to permanent housing. However, the staircase approach failed to tackle long-term homelessness. In 2007, the government and municipalities like Helsinki embarked on their own Housing First policies: 1250 homes were built or made available in Finnish cities to people who were long-term homeless by converting existing shelters accompanied by intense support around their health and social welfare. In parallel, the government improved its efforts on prevention and continued to build more general needs social housing. By 2017 the number of people who were homeless was 6600 - it now stands at 4600. It is in stark contrast to other parts of Europe, such as the UK where there has been an increase of 141 per cent in the past ten years.

As part of the agreement with the five parties that form the government, the Finnish Greens negotiated including the target of halving homelessness by 2023 and eliminating it all together by 2027. The current minister for environment, climate and housing responsible for making this happen is Green MP Krista Mikkonen. The government has introduced a new Homelessness Cooperation Programme between the state, municipalities, service providers and NGOs. This program focuses on providing funding and support for municipal work on homelessness.

Alongside this, the government is steering through legislation to make housing counselling statutory. This would make it a requirement in every municipality and bring together services, enabling them to intervene to prevent evictions and negotiate issues such as rent debt.

In common with many countries, homelessness in Finland is concentrated in cities and particular in Helsinki, where housing costs have risen beyond people's ability to pay. The Finnish Greens in Helsinki hold the vice-mayor positions on health and social care along with housing. They have worked to integrate different services to help people with multiple and complex needs such as homelessness, addiction and mental health, and are also proponents of "Housing First" as a principle in their housing policies. In contrast to the New York model of Housing First, tenants in Finland pay the rent entirely themselves (drawing on the benefits system) and the relatively well-funded health and social services mean there is less of a need for the large multi-agency support meetings used in the US.

## **Progress and prospects at the EU level**

The issue of spiralling housing costs in cities is something Dutch GroenLinks MEP Kim Van Sparrentak has been working on in her role as rapporteur for the EU Parliament on access to decent and affordable housing for all. The rapporteur draws up a report which recommends new EU legislation to the parliament which is a key stage of the legislative process in the EU. Van Sparrentak's housing report has taken a year to put together and covers a broad range of issues such as affordability, homelessness, discrimination, speculation, investment in public housing, and evictions.

The main recommendation of the report was creating an EU level target of eliminating homelessness by 2030, and the Greens/EFA group in the parliament are running a petition in support of this goal. However, Van Sparrentak believes that while governments stick to austerity policies, this will be difficult to achieve. "Homelessness is not a fact of life, it does not have to be considered as one," she says, highlighting the success in Finland. "There are solutions that exist, if we dare to invest in them, and if we dare to take a different approach to social support." She adds that there is a lot of support for tackling homelessness in the EU and that there are steps that can be taken to enable national and local governments to take action, and to tackle the root causes such as speculation.

The work builds on the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted by the EU Commission in 2017. Principle 19 is about housing assistance and homelessness, and mandates the EU to work on the issue. The Commission published its action plan at the start of March, and while it does not go far enough, it is an important step. Alongside this are plans to launch a "collaboration platform" in June for EU states to work together and share information on homelessness. The EU can also play an important role in improving the quality and availability of data along with developing a common set of concepts and policy language for homelessness.

Van Sparrentak's report also calls for all EU member states to have a homelessness strategy, with the EU providing coordination, and that the main solution is providing permanent secure housing – basically a roll-out of Housing First across Europe, the MEP explains. Intersectionality is another key part of the Green approach to homelessness, with specific attention being called for to meet the specific needs of groups such as LGBT youth and women, particularly as the range of people who are homeless has become more diverse. One area where the Commission could take stronger action, according to Van Sparrentak, is on the criminalisation of homelessness. In Hungary for example, sleeping rough is a criminal offence something which breaches EU law.

The big challenge, and where the EU could potentially have the most impact are the underlying causes of the rise in homelessness. Austerity policies mean there is now a 57-billion-euro gap in investment in affordable and social housing across Europe, this is happening alongside the privatisation of public housing and deregulation of private rented housing. "What you see is a lot of people falling between the cracks in the social housing market and the private rented market," Van Sparrentak explains. They are neither able to access a dwindling social housing stock nor afford private rented housing. While national governments hold much of the power to tackle homelessness, the EU can play a role in it too by supporting national and local governments. EU fiscal rules currently focus heavily on balanced budgets and eliminating deficits, which does not allow for the level of investment needed in housing and other infrastructure. These rules, however, have essentially been

suspended until 2023 due to the pandemic and could inspire a generous attitude towards investment to help EU economies recover.

On a broader level, the EU can help tackle housing speculation. Big institutional companies such as Blackstone have bought up housing and used the value of the homes and the stream of rental income to borrow and buy up more housing. What the arrangements mean in practice is that these companies can earn money from the resale, rental income, and borrowing against both of these through bonds. The EU can use its powers on banking and financial rules to have an impact, drawing from existing policies and ongoing research. “This is one of the big stories in what is driving up prices and is causing the housing crisis,” says Van Sparrentak. In 2019, the then UN Special Rapporteur on Housing and the Working Group on Business and Human Rights wrote to Blackstone outlining their concerns about the role of the company in the financialisation of housing. Blackstone robustly defended itself in response.

The scale of homelessness is likely to grow in cities and beyond as governments decide on how best to respond to the economic damage created by the pandemic. In the UK, the government has already signalled that it will likely embrace another set of austerity policies and cut public spending. This will undermine progress made by local governments to tackle homelessness through building social housing and Housing First-type policies. They will put future generations at a greater risk of becoming homeless. Greens can play a vital role in resisting these trends at a national and European level while making a difference locally where they have power.

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