

# SANDsiger



SAND's working group on alternative housing has been on a tour around Denmark to view some of the various types of alternative housing. The term covers everything from flat shares to little individual houses as the above.

## Alternative Housing

Alternative housing might look like a recipe for success when it comes to housing for the homeless. However, it's important to remember that it's not only a question of money and providing a roof over someone's head.

By Stig Badentorph and Carsten Sørensen, SAND Copenhagen

The term alternative housing covers various types of accommodation: Individual housing units, flats and/or house shares. What they do have in common is a so-called 'social caretaker' who is on the premises a certain number of hours every week, and the fact that each tenant has his own regular contract.

In SAND, we support the construction of more types of alternative housing. We believe it is a relevant and decent offer to the homeless, and generally people are very happy with their houses.

Alternative housing is often presented as the golden answer to everything when it comes to combating homelessness. A substantial amount of money is granted from the state – so what is the problem?

### The financial dilemma

Governmental grants have previously been approved (twice...) but they

have not been used. Are the conditions for acceptance of a state grant too expensive for the local authorities? They are for example required to provide the site, and this can be expensive in the larger towns and cities. Furthermore, the local authorities become economically responsible for the project after a certain timespan.

What is therefore required is a complete solution, where the involved parties don't prioritise their own present and future economic situation.

SAND therefore requests and requires the political parties responsible for the Alternative Housing grants to deregulate the grants, so that there can be built as many housing units as possible, and not, as at present, that the money is returned, piecemeal each year, to the shared grant pool, from where they will be re-allocated to the same purpose yet again.

### Not in my backyard...

Another problem is that the local authorities don't even apply for the

grants, for who wants a "homeless village" as their neighbour? Prejudice quickly rears its ugly head, even though the fact is that "alternative neighbours" are no more messy or noisy than "normal" neighbours. Information for and enlightenment is therefore a must. It is a well known fact that the housing units people are most happy with are those close to town. It simply doesn't work if the units are established in the middle of nowhere. There is also the question of whether the local authorities are even willing to accept homeless within their borders. So, even though alternative housing looks great on paper, and is a concept that the majority would agree is a good idea, it loses a lot of appeal when it is suddenly just on the other side of the back hedge. Success in establishing alternative housing for the homeless has however, been achieved by the simple process of entering into a dialogue with the future neighbours. There are several good examples of well functioning communities, especially when →

The Plan for the Homeless:

# From Pavement to Parliament

The Minister for Social Affairs wants to eradicate homelessness. SAND and many more homeless visited the Ministry, to share some good advice on how to create an effective plan.

By Per Ernstsén, SAND Copenhagen

Cameras clicked and flashes blazed when SAND, together with other homeless, crossed the threshold of The Ministry for Social Affairs. Özlem Sara Cekiç, SF's shadow Minister for Social Affairs, had taken the initiative to that the service users themselves could be a part of the discussion on the Government's Plan for the Homeless.

## The Plan for the Homeless

The Minister listened to our good advice and the debate flowed. Both politicians and the local authorities agreed that the service users should be included in the entire process if the plan were to have any real meaning. This holds true both with regards to The Ministry, and to the local authorities. It is, after all, the homeless themselves who are most qualified to come with a suggestion for what works, if one really wants to combat homelessness.

## Onwards and upwards

One of the recurring elements of the discussions was the question: when is one ready to move on from the various housing forms? And how to ensure the transition goes as smoothly as possible. In SAND's opinion, you

are only able to create a real home when fully ready. This is not necessarily the case after four months. Many of the participants also expressed that it is crucial that the local authorities are involved from day one; whether it be social care, financial support and/or the establishment of a functioning social network

It is unfortunately the case that not all the involved parties have understood that one can not build a home without financial support, and therefore allocate little or zero financial aid for establishing one's home. It is also often the case that one cannot receive housing benefit or social support afterwards,

The local authorities also tend to forget that the camaraderie that is to be found in the various housing forms or on the street doesn't come with a house...

## Part of the Discussion

Another central theme was the importance of involving the service users themselves. And when you look around the various councils it does not actually look too bad. In Aarhus, service users were involved in local strategy planning. In Odense, it has been suggested that the service users are active participants e.g. through the local Council for Socially Marginalised

People. In Frederiksberg and Copenhagen the local authorities have promised to involve the homeless in the process of combating homelessness, and in improving conditions for the homeless.

The then Minister for Social Affairs, Karen Jespersen, ended the meeting with a suggestion that the parties should meet regularly to discuss The Plan for the Homeless. SAND, of course, accepted this proposal with pleasure, and furthermore stated that they will happily be part of the local work that lies ahead. It is after all, our life we are talking about. ■



## Calendar

Date:	Arrangement:	Time:	Place:
2.11	Committee meeting SAND	10.30-15.00	TAMU, Rytterkasernen 15, Odense
3.11	Working Group meeting: Communication group	10.30-15.00	TAMU, Rytterkasernen 15, Odense
4.-5.11	Foundation course I		Brandbjerg Højskole
12.-13.11	Social Manager II		Brogården, Middelfart
25.-26.11	Foundation course II		Brandbjerg Højskole

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De hjemløses landsorganisation

# The Plan for the Homeless

## – does it really help?

There is no doubt that we need to rethink our approach here in Denmark if we seriously want to combat homelessness.

By Ask Svejstrup, Head of Secretariat, SAND

The proposed homeless strategy challenges the existing system, which desperately needs renewal. But it also involves a risk for doing more harm than good. When a citizen becomes homeless in Denmark today, the typical response is to enroll that person in one of the various housing forms (shelters) for the homeless. Here the staff engage in helping the homeless person to begin to sort out the problems that have led them into homelessness. It is typically a heady cocktail of alcohol, drugs, divorce or financial problems, though the internal relationship between these factors is a mystery.

When a person crosses the threshold of a shelter, they basically have to start a new life. This furthermore requires the individual learn basic life skills again; how to control one's appetite for booze and drugs, how to manage one's economy, and the various everyday tasks and chores.

When the person has hopefully learned all this again, they are 'fully fledged' and can 'leave home', in theory at least.

The Proposal for the homeless consists of a new way to see efforts towards the homeless. It entails making housing the fundament for all efforts for the homeless; 'Housing first' approach. The homeless must be rehoused as quickly as possible, and this must be combined with unlimited intensive help and counselling: Housing first – but not housing only. This can range from drug counselling, to psychological help, to medical care, to help with everyday things etc. The premise here is that a single concrete thing in one's life i.e. a home, gives one the possibility to let the skeletons out

of the closet and address the problems that led the individual to a life on the street. This is a completely radical way of organising the effort.

This was discussed at the "User's Bazaar" in 2009: The answers were legion. The relatively long term of residence now available at a shelter has a calming effect on one's life, and gives time to tackle one's problems plus the staff are there to help and support.

The very fact that it is difficult to adapt to the new and hopefully stable life was one of the major arguments against altering the present situation, and simultaneously an argument for not focusing on housing as the core of the effort.

However, there were also those who thought that the actual awareness of the, after all, temporary nature of a shelter, is a strong argument for establishing the homeless in their own home from the very get-go, and then support them so that they stay there...

There were not many, however, who believed that the necessary grants to allow people to remain in their homes will be granted. In that light it is of course quite ridiculous to pursue this avenue. On the other hand, the vast majority of homeless dream of having the opportunity of having their own homes. This speaks strongly in favour of the 'Housing first' model. There was no doubt among the participants that this new method gives one a solid foundation and sets the stage for taking responsibility for one's life again. Furthermore, the biggest plus is apparently that one can determine one's own lifestyle, which is hampered in the various types of shelter; staff are employed to keep an eye on you. It is SAND's experience that, if various options are offered to the homeless with regards to housing, abuse treat-

ment etc., then one is more likely to be able to find a solution that actually works, and leads the homeless out of homelessness. By building more housing intended for the homeless and increasing support from key workers a new possibility is created. It is SAND's hope that this practice may make it easier for homeless who are rehoused to get the support they need. The inherent danger of changing the present policy may be that there exists a hidden agenda. In The proposal for the homeless it is not exactly difficult to see what this could be. People have to be moved through the system as quickly as possible. The official standpoint is no doubt that one should be ready for the next step, but it is not beyond the bounds of imagination that certain shelters consider it more of a rule than a guideline that one should move to the next step after 3-4 months. There have always been cases where a service user is told "You've been here long enough - time to move on mate". Nowadays there are just more that are told this.

If people are moved on from a shelter (whether they want to or not) then this results in a lower number of "covers". Show me the local politician that wouldn't reduce the number of available places if the number of "covers" goes down.

Keep an eye out for what's going on out there, and don't be afraid to speak out. ■



# Welcome to SAND's newsletter!



By Ewald Pohle,  
chairman, SAND

You are holding a copy of a special edition of SAND's monthly newsletter – SANDsiger. A couple of articles have been translated to give you an idea of the content and topics of the newsletter.

The name – SANDsiger – directly translated means 'truth teller' or 'SAND says...'. The name is chosen

– not because we tell the only truth about homelessness in Denmark, but one of them; the perspective of the service users. The name was also chosen because SAND does have a lot to say! Hence the other meaning of the Danish words.

The news letter was launched in July 2007. It comes out every month, 2500 copies in all, and is sent to all the inhabitants of various forms of housing for the homeless in Denmark.

One of the reasons for launching the newsletter was to give the service users a communication platform of their own. It is our stories, our points of view. It is also a means by which we can remind all the other home-

less people throughout Denmark that SAND exists and we are speaking their cause too.



→ the "homeless" feel part of the local community. It is unfortunately the case, that, the closer one comes to the capital, the harder it becomes to get the surrounding communities to accept the "alternative types" who are, after all, basically human beings with the same need for acceptance from their fellow man as anybody else.

SAND are also concerned about the lack of support after the homeless is installed in his new home. It can be remarkably hard to live in alternative housing. The units can lie quite close to each other, "common areas" are just that, and you have to get on with your neighbour, and be able to

discuss everyday "problems" such as how loud the music can be turned up, or where dogs are allowed etc. And if you feel low yourself it can be really tough to contain other people's problem or quirks. Conflicts can easily escalate, so it simply isn't enough to have a social worker who is only present two hours a week. A far greater deal of support and "follow-up" is required. The last thing one wants is that alternative housing merely becomes a dumping ground for people with serious problems, in the middle of field in the middle of nowhere.

## **Solutions and Co-operation**

No unified answer can be identified.

Alternative housing must always be based on the needs of the individual. In Finland a project is underway in which the sheltered housing gradually develops into "normal" housing. The presence of staff is gradually decreased, but should the need arise, they will still assist.

At the moment of writing, SAND's working group for alternative housing is on tour throughout Denmark, gathering fresh ideas and contributions. SAND also considers it of utmost importance that politicians avail themselves of our expertise in this field, so that much more alternative housing can be built. ■

## The Plan for the Homeless

Strategy for homeless people – As an aspect of the 2008 rate adjustment pool agreement, the government and the parties supporting the rate adjustment pool allocated DKK 500m for the period 2008–2011. The goal of the strategy is to reduce and ultimately eliminate homelessness in Denmark. The decision is based on a mapping of homelessness in Denmark, mapping of housing and residential facilities for homeless people and the local authorities' assessment of the need for more housing, etc.

*Four long-term goals have been formulated under the strategy:*

- to reduce the number of homeless people living on the street;
- to find solutions for young people other than a place in a reception centre;
- to limit stays at reception centres to 3-4 months; and
- to solve homeless peoples' housing problems before they are discharged from treatment institutions/hospital or released from prison.

Source: [www.ism.dk](http://www.ism.dk) (The Danish Ministry of Social Affairs)