

A note on social innovations for accessible housing for older people in Finland

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M-L. Luoma, M. Henriksson, M. Vaarama. A note on social innovations for accessible housing for older people in Finland. Gerontechnology 2016;15(4):243-244; doi:10.4017/gt.2016.15.4.009.00 Finland is facing a rapid ageing of population and the rise in life expectancy. The projected share of 65+ population will increase significantly. It is estimated that by the year 2030, one million accessible apartments are needed to meet the demand of growing number of older population. Accessible housing and living environment, access to health care and other services such as shops, bank, public transportation and leisure services are important for daily functional ability and quality of life in later life. To tackle the challenge, the Finnish Government has set up a cross-sectoral development program for the years 2013-2017. So far actions are taken to: develop the accessibility of housing, increase the awareness of future needs of older people, create novel operating models, steer the new housing production and renovation of the existing housing stock, and to improve the co-operation between public, private and non-governmental actors in the field. Also some emerging housing models are developing.

Keywords: accessible housing, social innovation, Finland

In Finland, the projected share of 65+ population will increase from the current 19% to 26% by the year 2030, and of that people 80+ will almost double from 5% to 9%¹. Especially the number of older women living alone will increase. In the year 2012, a total of 34.4 percent of people over 65 years old lived alone.¹ In Finland, it is estimated that by the year 2030, one million accessible apartments are needed to meet the demand of growing number of older population.

The Finnish challenge is to ensure sufficient amount of accessible apartments, accompanied with the necessary services and new technologies to facilitate autonomous and safe living at home and homelike settings for older people in Finland. Older persons have different needs and resources, so multifaceted solutions are needed.

POLICY ACTIONS

The Finnish national goal is that by the year 2017 a total of 91-92% of people over 75 years of age would live at home, when currently the amount is about 90%² This is in accordance with the notion that most of the older people are living, and wish to live in their own homes as long as possible³. The Finnish Government's development program aims at creation of 1 million accessible dwellings by 2030 by building new and renovating old ones, and by developing the infrastructure and services around the residential areas.

The four key objectives are⁴:

- (i) Raising the awareness of individuals to anticipate their future housing needs; guiding and steering new building and renovation of existing housing stock; renewing the financial support system for these;
- (ii) Accessibility of dwellings is a priority: accessibility will be promoted and supported and availability of repair grants is enhanced. Accessibility of detached houses in new housing construction and the sense of community in residential areas will be improved;
- (iii) Diverse combinations of housing, services and residential environments will be developed, and the role of new and personal assistive technologies, enterprises, NGOs and voluntary actors will be strengthened;
- (iv) A systematic model for local co-operation in municipalities will be co-created in collaboration between the experts of social welfare and health, housing and technology, NGO's, customers and housing companies.

PERFORMANCE RESULT

According to the midpoint evaluation in 2015⁵ the program had succeeded in: raising the general awareness of the needs and benefits of accessible housing in later life, bringing different actors together, creating active interaction between the diverse interest groups, clarifying distribution of responsibilities, and developing new operat-

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ing models and means to enhance independent living in old age.

As to concrete examples, during the years 2013-2014, a total of 316 retrofitted lifts were added to current housing stock, and financed as much as 50% of the total costs by the state grants. In the year 2015, grant decisions of about 30 million € were directed to this action. Related to the above, in 2015 the government has allocated 15 million € for renovating the housing of older and disabled persons. The housing benefit system for renovation of apartments was renewed, and the amounts of money increased. Investment grants for the development of housing for persons with memory disorders and frailty were increased.

Further, a toolkit for evaluation of needs for housing improvements was developed for use in municipalities. Also a self-evaluation tool of accessibility was developed for use in housing companies, accompanied with guidelines on how to include the renovations in their long-term plans. Additionally, information on models and costs of diverse solutions to improve the accessibility were provided, and a research project on models of co-habitation in later life was prepared for the Finnish Government. The Environmental Ministry's website⁵ describes in more details the initiatives and steps that have been taken to reach the goals set in the housing program.

The program has also initiated some interesting innovations for community housing. In Helsinki, a project brings people with memory disorders

and young homeless adults to live together⁶. In Jyväskylä, a co-housing model offers an alternative for nursing homes⁷. Social innovations to tackle with social isolation and to combine housing, services, technology and stimulant living environment are a major goal in the program for the years 2016-2017.

Future challenges remain. Raising awareness of the key audiences will continue to be a crucial part of this program to reach the set goals. The technological development as well as the ongoing process of digitalizing the services must be considered and integrated in the future of accessible housing increasingly. For meeting the program objectives, the current economic situation and the austerity policy bring uncertainties as more should be achieved with less resources.

CONCLUSION

Housing and living environment are important for everyday life and wellbeing of older people. Finnish government wants to ensure safe living at home and homelike settings in old age also with frailty and small income. The government has taken successful actions to endorse the independent living and promote accessible housing and healthy living environments in order to enable active senior years. Efforts should be made to include indicators of the accessibility of housing also in the Global Age Watch Index⁸ International databases should be investigated to find out what information is available, and initiatives should be made so as to get indicators on housing included in their data collection in the future.

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