

Setember 2018

Key words: rehousing, settlement,
housing first, social intervention**The experience of rehousing the carrer d'Àlaba settlement**Gemma Izquierdo
FACTO Estrategia

At the end of 2014, the need to rehouse nine families with minors from a settlement in Carrer d'Àlaba in Barcelona provided an opportunity to simultaneously evaluate two different social-intervention models for housing families over a period of two years.

At the start of this experience, all kinds of questions were raised concerning the chances of achieving positive results with the subject group of people, who had a deeply-rooted itinerant lifestyle.

A monitoring methodology based on the Social Work Plan has provided data concerning development, trends and costs which are valuable for reaching conclusions about the experience and for considering new challenges.

1. The detonator

The rehousing experience with the Carrer d'Àlaba settlement began suddenly at the end of 2014.

Some unexpected, determining circumstances led to the urgent need for rehousing nine Galician-Portuguese families with dependent minors, attended by Barcelona City Council's Social Care Service for the Itinerant Roma Population (SISFArom)¹. This service complements the territory's social services, and its main focus is on children and covering their basic needs.

At a time when homelessness experts were debating on the pros and cons of the two social-intervention models, i.e. the 'housing first' and 'treatment first' models, the case of the Carrer d'Àlaba settlement's families was seen as an opportunity to evaluate and compare the application of both models in real social intervention cases.

For social intervention of vulnerable homeless or poorly-housed people, the Housing First model regards the availability of housing as the first step of the action plan, while the Treatment First model sees it as an achievable option once the intervention action plan has been completed, or put another way, passed.

SISFArom were aware of the profile of the families who needed rehousing, and with the aim of comparing the two intervention models, they began searching for another nine families with similar

¹ During the month of November of the year 2015 a new service, the SISFA Rom, which replaces the former Social Assistance Service for the Traveling Population of Gypsy Ethnicity (SASPI), is being operated.

characteristics who were also under the service's care, i.e. people living in the city in settlements or poor housing. It is important to understand that SISFArom is a specialised social-insertion and primary-care service, designed to apply more urgency to social intervention when there are minors involved. Consequently, it creates strong ties with the families and builds up an extensive knowledge of them.

The two groups were each formed by nine families of Galician-Portuguese origin living in settlements in the city, with similar ages and composition, who made a living from collecting cardboard and scrap metal. Both families had children at school and up-to-date health care. For two years, the eighteen families would follow either the Housing First rehousing programme or the SISFArom model (Treatment First model). The differences between the two programmes can be summarised by access to housing and the intensity of specific, exclusive social-intervention resources available for the rehousing programme, and the ones habitually available for the SISFArom programme.

2. Overcoming the myths

While the rehousing was being prepared, doubts arose concerning the real chances of success, due to the myths surrounding the subject.

The proposed radical change in lifestyle for the rehoused families and the stigmatisation the group suffers gave rise to doubts such as:

- "They won't give up their way of life, or their dwellings and belongings, and there's no room for them in the flat..."
- "They won't last long in the flat, they won't be able to adapt..."
- "Changes will come slowly..."
- "They don't know how to live in a community, they don't integrate, they have a different culture and habits, they are annoying neighbours that no one wants..."
- "They won't want to, because they won't be able to keep doing what they do; there's no room to bring materials home, they won't have anywhere to leave their vehicles and they need those for their activities..."
- "They'll destroy the flats, the furniture, the stairway..."
- "They don't want to work, and they won't be able to afford the expenses; they'll bypass the electricity meter..."
- "The kids won't go to school..."

Overcoming these myths involves establishing clear objectives, defining a methodology for the intervention and monitoring of both programmes, developing ad hoc indicators for various aspects, such as housing, economics, work, health, education, leisure, social and family situation, integration in the community and the legal situation.

The methodology and monitoring indicators were expressly developed for this rehousing experience. In the search for methodologies that are commonly accepted, that already exist and are applicable, emphasis was placed on an analysis of the following areas:

- Permanence in the programme.
- The degree of the participants' commitment to the aspects of the designed action plan.
- How well they settle in to their new home and their new environment.

However, there was a lack of specific indicators for specifically and objectively evaluating these areas.

For that reason, the indicators were designed in an effort to measure the variations that were produced, and also with regard to the above-mentioned aspects emphasised by the action plan defined for the social intervention with the eighteen families. It was also decided that the indicators

would be for the objective and homogeneous evaluation of the two groups of families: those following the Housing First programme and those following the SISFArom "treatment first" programme, although they were adapted to the various circumstances of each group.

For the rehousing programme, additional indicators were included, which concerned the start of the process and aimed to temporarily delimit the activities involved in moving to the new flat (e.g. leaving the settlement 15 days after obtaining the keys to their new home, or being properly installed in their new home after one month) or to evaluate the adaptation to new ways of life (e.g. using utility supplies properly).

The range of indicators used for monitoring both groups include:

- The dwelling (new home or poor housing) in terms of functionality, habitability and also maintenance.
- Economic management, measuring the use of tools received during training (monitoring the recording of income and expenses and compliance with the spending schedule).
- Training and work placement, which evaluates monitoring the work and training schedule, looking for work, successfully finding work.
- Health, especially in the children, and the levels of nutrition, hygiene and health in the family.
- Education, which measures the children's progress at school and the parents' compliance with the schooling agreements.
- Socio-educational leisure, which seeks the children's integration into after-school, neighbourhood and summer-camp activities.
- Social-family aspects, which measure satisfaction with the change of lifestyle or their willingness to change their lives, according to the group of families, as well as their applications for aid, in terms of both number and amounts.
- The local network, with aspects that include good relations with neighbours and the use of neighbourhood services and resources.
- Juridical and legal aspects, especially in terms of dealing with accumulated fines arising from their cardboard and scrap-metal collection activities.

The defined methodology evaluated the indicators for each family every month, and this included encryption to safeguard the personal details of the participants, allowing individualised monitoring of the action plan. It also added data obtained for each group in order to evaluate developments in the application of each social-intervention model, i.e. Housing First and Treatment First. Six-monthly monitoring reports were produced showing the results of these parallel projects.

This monitoring system applied by the SISFArom team during the two years of social intervention provided data on development, trends and costs which were valuable in terms of reaching conclusions about the experience.

The intensity of support for rehoused families through the use of specific resources during the first months was shown to be vital for the intervention. Through group training programmes and in situ individual interviews and support, it was possible to carry out the necessary preparation of the families prior to their change of dwelling.

Things that might seem commonplace or easy, such as signing a rental contract, dealing with the first bills, living in a flat that isn't on the ground floor or no longer living at all times with a community that goes beyond the nuclear family, all require continued support so that families can successfully deal with them, until after a few months, the adults achieve self-sufficiency.

The differentiated resources for rehoused families consisted of a team of two specialists in social and family work, kept stable for the two-year period, as well as initial aid concerning the change in dwelling, such as expenses arising from the move, the rent and acquisition of new furniture, which mostly occurred in the first year.

The impact of these resources on the budget were evaluated differentially in the first and second years, taking into account their stable or temporary nature. During the first year, the total expenses of the additional technical team and the initial aid accounted for 24% of the budget which would be necessary if an alternative, temporary accommodation solution in a hostel had been chosen for the families. In the second year, the additional technical team for the rehoused families was maintained, while the economic aid for changing to the new accommodation was limited to a rent subsidy and, very occasionally, utility supplies, which means the real impact on the budget was reduced.

The habitual aid for all families under the care of SISFArom is another matter, and was therefore available to both groups. That aid is to help families with expenses such as schooling, transport and clothes. In this case, the difference in developments with the economic aid applied for by the two groups is significant, both in the number of applications and the amounts. For the families in the rehoused group, the intensity of applications was high for the first six months of the programme, but it then showed a downward trend, indicating that the families were progressively achieving self-sufficiency in managing their resources. By contrast, for the families in the SISFArom programme, the applications were stable throughout the experience, with normal seasonal changes during the year, without any sign of improved family management.

When we broaden the focus to include all the areas evaluated by the indicators, during the first year, we see nearly all the families in the two groups evolved positively, although this process was faster in the rehoused families. For example, it can be seen that the rehoused families had an expenses schedule, regularly interacted with other parents from the school and used neighbourhood services.

The influence of the children is noteworthy, including immediate changes, as a positive factor for integrating the adults into their new surroundings.

One aspect that needs to be improved is following work training and work placement schedules, which was deficient in both groups of families, and shows the need for a specific programme in order for them to achieve self-sufficiency in terms of employment.

The second year was a stage of necessary stability, in which the achieved development was consolidated, and there were very few changes in either group of families.

3. Two years later

If the current situation of the rehoused families is analysed, it is easy to conclude that the associated myths have been overcome:

- They left behind their caravans and belongings voluntarily.
- No families have abandoned the rehousing programme.
- The families' adaptation to their new homes and their visible surroundings was achieved in five months.
- They have become integrated into their community of neighbours, the neighbourhood and their school.
- The employment part of the programme still has to be developed, but the families pay for their housing and utility supplies.
- The flats and the furniture are in perfect condition and complaints from neighbours have been anecdotal and unjustified.
- The children's attendance at school is normal.
- They have found a new place for interacting with their former community in the settlement, maintaining their ties.

Therefore, the dwelling is shown to be an anchoring point that accelerates the development of the action plans, improves the achieved results and makes them long-lasting, although the availability of this type of housing is a challenge in itself.

After two years of the programme, the experience can only be evaluated positively.

Some of the most relevant aspects worth mentioning include the satisfaction of the rehoused families in having become integrated into a new community and a new way of life, the experience this has provided for the SISFArom social intervention team, which was totally involved in the project and had the chance to validate the methodology, and lastly, the challenges that this rehousing experience has revealed in terms of the evaluated social intervention models, with an eye to tackling them on future occasions.