



Supporting people through Housing First: the experience of social housing providers

RESEARCH BRIEFING

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Abstract

Housing First is considered as the most important innovation in homeless services, and as such is receiving increasing attention from public authorities and the wider public. Recent policy reforms in some member states attempt to introduce this model on a wider scale whilst involving social housing providers more closely. This briefing explores the issue of Housing First from the perspective of housing provider members of Housing Europe that have experience with the implementation of this model of homeless service provision.

* Produced by the Housing Europe Observatory, the Research Branch of Housing Europe as part of a series of research briefings on the ways public, cooperative and social housing providers address the key societal challenges of our times. Interested for more information or to contribute to the next editions? Feel free to contact Alice Pittini at alice.pittini@housingeurope.eu

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Introduction

This briefing explores the issue of Housing First from the perspective of housing provider members of Housing Europe that have experience with the implementation of this model of homeless service provision.

It is by no means a comprehensive overview on the Housing First model. Plenty of literature exists on this subject from experts and specialised institutions. In the European context, for instance, we highly recommend readers to refer to the Housing First Europe Hub (see text box below).

However, the Housing First model is receiving increasing attention from public authorities and the wider public, and recent policy reforms in some member states attempt to introduce this model on a wider scale whilst involving social housing providers more closely. We believe the experience of some of our members can therefore help with better shaping future policies and sector strategies in this regard, and supporting implementation in other countries.

Objectives

The ultimate goal is to help with roll out/scaling up, prevent potential backlash, identify “which pitfalls to avoid”, and help social housing providers in building arguments; for instance, as to what support and funding they need from their governments in order to successfully facilitate Housing First in their country.

Methodology

To this goal, we've asked selected members to reflect on the following questions:

- Where is Housing First implemented and to what extent does it rely on housing owned and managed by public, social and cooperative housing providers?
- What obstacles did they face (or are still facing if this is the case) with regards to Housing First?
- What are the key elements that are needed to make it work?
- What should be avoided?

The briefing is based on the responses we received as well as relevant literature and evaluations at national level as provided by our member organisations.

A brief overview¹

What is Housing First...

Housing First is ‘probably the single most important innovation in homelessness service design in the last 30 years’². This model had its origins in the US and is based on the idea that housing should be the starting point rather than an end goal. Accordingly, Housing First provides homeless persons with unconditional access to a stable home alongside intensive support. Providing housing is what a Housing First service does before it does anything else. It is also focused on improving the health, well-being and social support networks of the homeless people it works with – though all kind of support services that may be needed in each specific case.

... and what it isn't

Housing First is usually counter-posed to the ‘staircase model’ whereby a homeless person can only access housing after having completed a number of ‘steps’ designed to prepare someone for living independently in their own home. Housing First has generally proved more effective than staircase services in ending homelessness among people with high support needs (i.e. people who need significant levels of help to enable them to leave homelessness), including people experiencing long-term or repeated homelessness. Housing First is not designed to act as a solution to all forms of homelessness. Nor is Housing First intended to work in isolation: it requires support from the health and social work sectors and from other

¹ This section is based on text from the Housing First Europe Hub, unless otherwise mentioned

² <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/what-is-housing-first/introducing-housing-first/>

homelessness services. According to experts³, this model should be **part of a broader integrated strategy** towards tackling homelessness.

What kind of housing

Finding enough affordable, adequate housing in acceptable locations is in any case a key challenge [...] Housing First can work flexibly and imaginatively, but it cannot fix underlying problems with affordable and adequate housing supply and may encounter operational difficulties in any context where there is just not enough affordable or adequate housing for the entire population. '*Availability of affordable housing is a prerequisite, so is partnership with social care services providers to ensure the continuity in the chain*' – explained Samara Jones Programme Coordinator of the Housing First Europe Hub at FEANTSA⁴.

There are three main mechanisms by which a Housing First service can deliver housing: use of the private rented sector, use of the social rented sector, or direct provision of housing (by buying housing, developing new housing or using existing housing stock). In this briefing, we focus on experiences where (formerly) homeless persons have been provided a permanent accommodation in the social housing sector via Housing First programmes.

The Housing First Europe Hub

The Housing First Europe Hub was established by the Y-Foundation (Finland) and FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People), along with more than 15 partners in July 2016.

The Hub's activities focus on training, research and practice. It includes an on-line resources database with a wealth of information on Housing First for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.

Visit the hub at <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/> !

The 8 principles of Housing First



Source: <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/>

³ See for instance Nicholas Plesce (2018) Housing First alone can't solve the UK's homelessness crisis.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/14/housing-first-uk-homelessness-crisis>

⁴ Episode 3 of Housing Europe Podcast series, 'Housing First'. Available at <http://www.housingeurope.eu/section-113/podcast>

The case of Finland

Finland is leading the way in Housing First and is the only country in Europe where the number of homeless people is on the decline. This is not a coincidence. Since the 1980s, the state, volunteers, municipalities and NGOs have been working with determination to reduce homelessness. Of particular importance is that in the 2000s, the state launched and funded programmes aimed at reducing homelessness, which tackled the situation of the most vulnerable long-term homeless in particular. With the help of the programmes, organisations and municipalities have, for example, provided new housing for the homeless population and reformed the services aimed at them. The whole system was built **on the basis of the Housing First principle**. Constructing and purchasing new, affordable housing was one of the most important goals of the Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness (PAAVO I, 2008–2011). Municipalities, cities and other organisations bought and built housing but the state also supported housing production.

The Housing First principle produces results. In addition to benefiting individual homeless people, the principle benefits society as a whole. The savings in terms of the services needed by one person can be up to €9,600 a year when compared to the costs that would result from that person being homeless. Additionally, housing one long-term homeless person saves about €15,000 of society's funds per year. More importantly, however, is that since 1987, about 12,000 people have received a home⁵. Finland has already halved long-term homelessness by 2011 and ended it by 2015. Shelters/hostels have been replaced by supported housing units. Over the next years, the focus will be on prevention and to halve all remaining forms of existing homelessness by 2022.

> More details provided by KOVA, the Association for Advocating Affordable Rental Housing in Finland⁶

Housing is a recognized basic human and social right. Low-income people a right to live in cities, and Finland has a strategy to prevent segregation by mixing people in every residential area. The role of social housing companies is first and foremost to offer a dwelling for those in need (low and middle income people and homeless people alike). Most of KOVA's member companies are municipally owned. So, their member companies have, among others, a societal task to reduce homelessness. The Housing First approach is reinforced as a mainstream organising principle for housing and support services for homeless people.

Success factors

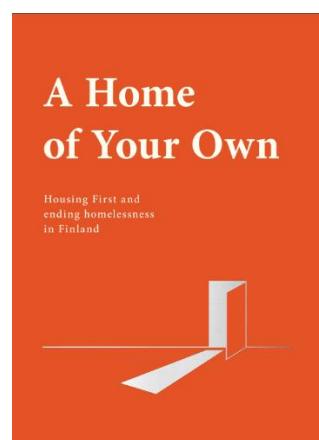
Homes for homeless people are **mixed in the housing stock** so one cannot know what kind of background each tenant has.

Social support for people is offered by the municipalities.

Wide partnership network: state, local authorities and NGOs.

Housing advice services **prevents hundreds of evictions** every year.

'Overall, reducing homelessness has been possible because we've had a political and a financial commitment on national and local level since 1985' – Jouni Parkkonen, Director of KOVA



Challenges

Urbanisation and the geography of the business life means that there is a growing need for more housing (and especially affordable social housing) in cities.

Ending homelessness is **not possible without new affordable housing**.

⁵ A Home of Your Own – A handbook, published by the Y Foundation <http://www.ysaatio.fi/the-book>

⁶ Information provided by Jouni Parkkonen, KOVA

The case of Belgium

Housing First Belgium⁷ is a federal social innovation experiment aimed to test the integration of the most vulnerable homeless people, by implementing a programme combining housing and tailored support. The State Secretary for Combating Poverty launched a three-year test phase in 8 implementation cities (Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels, Molenbeek Saint-Jean, Hasselt, Liège, Namur and Charleroi), using a grant from the National Lottery. Through this programme, HFB (Housing First Belgium) teams facilitated access to housing for over 150 very vulnerable homeless people. They then provided them with intensive support in all areas of life in order to help them retain their home and start a recovery process. An evaluation team followed the evolution of part of the tenants for two years and compared the results with people who use (or that have used) traditional services usually offered to the homeless population in Belgium.

HFB tenants have accessed public social housing due to exceptional and specific agreements. The average income of the HFB tenant is €886 per month and their main source of income is the minimum income scheme. The social housing sector presents some clear advantages: first and foremost it is financially much more affordable (€254 per month) than the private market (€443 per month). Furthermore, leases with private landlords generally have a shorter term (74% of lease agreements don't exceed one year).

The Belgian example shows that people supported through the HFB programme remain in housing: after two years, 90% of them are still in their home, they have taken ownership of their homes, and they are paying the rent (20% fail to meet payment deadlines but this is often solved by the team or a mediator). HFB practices are not expensive for public authorities and they have a long term positive impact on individuals and on society. After two years, individual costs related to hospital stay decrease by 46%. HFB support: €17.80 per night per person, vs Night shelters: €55 per night per person.



The positive impact of housing on the life of the HFB tenant is a process that takes time. The main point is that **HFB support needs to be as long and intensive as is necessary**. In particular, some HFB tenants' state of health remains very fragile. They use hard drugs and show a low level of compliance to treatment (less than 50% follow their medical prescriptions). The **HFB teams should have specific resources with regards to health/addiction**.

More generally, it is key to establish a **concerted plan to fight homelessness** involving all levels of governance in the areas of anti-poverty policy, social integration, urban policy, health, social action, well-being, housing and employment. A strong focus should also be on **preventing homelessness**, for instance by anticipating evictions and exits from youth institutions, hospitals and prisons.

> More details provided by VVH, the Association of Flemish Housing Companies⁸

In general there are three main ways through which homeless people can get access to social housing in the region of Flanders:

- general allocation of social housing based on waiting lists ('many people on the waiting lists are indeed at risk of homelessness but we don't know it')
- 5% of the stock can be allocated through a 'shortcut' process, to deal with very problematic/ urgent situations (including homeless people but not only), and VVH are considering an increase to 20%
- Housing First initiative (and similar ones) which have a preferential channel

Furthermore, social housing companies in Flanders also do a lot of work on prevention of evictions, which is

⁷ Housing First in Belgium: It works! Results and invitation to fast track the exit from homelessness. Available at WWW.HOUSINGFIRSTBELGIUM.BE

⁸ Information provided by Bjorn Mallants, VVH

very important in terms of the impact it can have on homelessness.

There have been several Housing First initiatives over time, but a couple years ago there was funding from the federal government to implement it in a more structured way and on a larger scale. Associations working with the homeless population first looked at the social housing sector as a natural partner in this programme. As a consequence, **most Housing First projects are actually based in social housing (75% of all HF initiatives)**.

Success factors

*'The Housing First programme has been an **absolutely positive experience**'* – Bjorn Mallants, Director of VVH.
In the view of social housing companies, the following elements are of fundamental importance:

Selecting the right profiles of homeless people: Housing First is mostly for people with a very long history of homelessness.

Making sure there is support in place: this means there has to be a network around the client that provides help if needed/wanted. VVH asks that welfare organisations guarantee support through a network around them. In the beginning, there seemed to be no clear commitment from them and this made social housing providers reluctant – but in this case, there was a real network put into place and it worked.

A large share of social housing is in big apartment buildings. This means that support networks should not only empower people to live by themselves but also to **help solve problems with neighbours** when they happen or even better prevent them.

Challenges

Some obstacles still remain which make it hard to scale up the Housing First programme: the need for housing is very high and it is increasing - particularly among the very lowest income - following social and demographic trends. **Current levels of investment in the sector do not allow to fulfil this demand.**

In the current situation where there is only have 6% social housing, every choice that is made in favour of a **specific target group** limits the chances for other groups to access the sector. This creates tensions.

The case of Austria⁹

In 2006, the Vorarlberg region of Austria launched a strategic housing-oriented policy (which included Housing First) and was based on a **co-operation platform between regional authorities, social NGOs and all three limited-profit housing associations** (LPHA) that operate in the region. This platform, called "**Soziales Netzwerk Wohnen**" (**Social network housing**) is referred to as a good practice model of housing inclusion.

At present, there are **nine active HF programmes in Austria**, seven of them with major (or even exclusive) participation of LPHAs on the landlords' side¹⁰. "HF Programme" refers to the official cooperation at regional level between one (or several) social NGOs with one (or several) housing providers on the long-term provision of a certain number of dwellings for HF clients. The number of dwellings within a regional HF programme varies from 20 up to 1,500. In total, there are **about 2,000 dwellings in Austria reserved for HF clients** (2018), the majority of which are delivered by LPHAs. As the spatial concentration of HF units can result in being disadvantageous, they are usually dispersed through apartment block buildings. While most HF dwellings are delivered through existing stock and at the lowest price segment, **there exist LPHAs that regularly provide a handful of HF units in their new construction projects**.

While generally HF programmes address all persons and households in urgent need of housing, the experience in Vienna has shown a **high representation of women and children**. The prospect of an apartment

⁹ Information provided by Gerlinde Gutheil-Knopp-Kirchwald (GBV, the Austrian Federation of Limited-Profit Housing Associations)

¹⁰ GBV-Survey on social initiatives among LPHA, November 2017

via HF seems to be especially attractive for women who are otherwise often confronted with “hidden homelessness”. The affordability of the proposed flat is a precondition for HF, as well as the client’s willingness to take on the rights and responsibilities of being a tenant.

Evaluations of different HF programmes in Austria report a **high overall success rate, with 75% - 95% of participants holding on to their homes after several years**, which is in line with international experiences¹¹ (Busch-Geertsma 2011, L&R Research 2015, BAWO Workshop 2018). However, there is no continuous strategic monitoring or evaluation using indicators that would allow a comparison between programmes or within the total housing stock (e.g. rent arrears, fluctuation, evictions). Such monitoring could help to share the experiences and to calculate the potential risk for housing associations when engaging in HF programmes.

Success factors

Good partnership with social NGOs and clear division of labour: LPHA is landlord and manager of the building, social services to the client are delivered by social NGO.

The **continuity of co-operation** between housing provider and social NGO: One principle of HF is that the client decides on the intensity and duration of assistance by social work.

A **good social mix** within a housing estate, meaning the number of dwellings dedicated to HF clients has to be in a good proportion to the overall size of the project.

The existence of a regional co-ordination platform for “urgent housing affairs”, where representatives of the social welfare office, social NGOs and social housing providers work together is seen by some housing providers as helpful. However, others prefer the direct co-operation with social NGOs without intermediary institutions.

Challenges and Concerns

Within the **“cost rent” scheme**, which is obligatory for LPHA, a maximum of 2% risk reserve may be calculated for vacancies, rent arrears and other contingencies. The financial situation of some housing associations doesn’t allow an increase of rent losses or vacancies; therefore, there is some limit for the share of tenants with a potentially higher risk in this regard. High rent arrears would provoke a complaint by the audit.

One concern of housing providers is the **loss of a responsible contact person from the social NGO partner** after the HF client has ended his social service contract. This concern could be faced via long-term co-operation contracts but they do not exist in all programmes.

Quotas for one specific target group reduce the stock within the “normal allocation” of social housing and therefore potentially provoke distributional conflicts.

The case of England

The Housing First approach has been used in England since 2010 – there are now around 35-40 locally developed services in addition to three large scale pilots recently funded by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Provision of Housing First in England is slowly growing, and the recent additional £28m funding from the Government will lead to further provision in Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region, and the West Midlands. Despite this growth, there is still some way to go to develop a wider understanding of what Housing First is – and isn’t – and how it fits in alongside other

¹¹ Busch-Geertsma, V. (2011): Housing first – housing plus. In: Festschrift 20JahreBAWO. Wohnungslosenhilfe von A bis Z; and L&R Sozialforschung (2015): Housing First – Pilotprojekt, Begleitende Evaluierung der Umsetzung. Endbericht; Workshop on “Housing First in Austria” at the 2018 BAWO Conference, Villach, May 2018

homelessness services.

> More details on housing associations in England

To respond to this concern, Homeless Link also published the report 'Housing First England: Guidance for Social landlords'¹². It outlines the ways in which Social Landlords can get involved in Housing First, and provides information about the advantages they can secure. It is illustrated by concrete case studies from the social housing sector.

Furthermore, the National Housing Federation, representing housing associations across England, has together with Homeless Link produced a guide on Housing First¹³. The guide includes a summary of the Housing First approach, an overview of the main housing association concerns and a response to these concerns from Homeless Link.

In 2018, the Federation completed a survey of its housing association members to learn more about how many housing associations deliver Housing First, and what the sector thinks of the model. This identified four main **concerns about Housing First**:

Housing First is seen as a one-size fits all approach: while respondents were generally positive about Housing First as a solution, there was concern that it should not be seen as a 'silver bullet'.

Housing First is limiting social housing stock: as is central to any conversation about homelessness, supply of housing was a significant concern expressed by respondents. This included not only the issues of limited numbers of one-bed homes in certain areas, but also the role of nominations agreements meaning that housing associations had little flexibility over how their stock is used. It should be highlighted that currently about 57% of Housing First providers source housing from the private rented sector, 61% from social housing and 11% use their own stock (whereby almost 40% pf services use accommodation from more than one source). Many projects aim to use a mixture of private and social tenancies.

Support funding for Housing First is risky: there were similar levels of concern over access to support. It was felt that Housing First was risky and the potential impact of support funding being cut or removed would be devastating. Others highlighted how the need for robust support funding would also mean a need for greater partnership working across housing associations, local authorities and local health bodies.

Housing First doesn't help with social isolation: linked to the need for security around support funding, there was also a concern about the impact on the home and/or the local community. There was a sense that current staff might not have the expertise to assist people with very high support needs who are at risk of being isolated, and a worry that other local residents may struggle.

Responses

The document recognizes concerns expressed by survey respondents as valid. The resources required for Housing First, and potential challenges for all involved, are not to be taken lightly. However, Housing First is a cost-effective intervention for some of the most vulnerable members of society and that it is making a huge difference to people's lives in England.

Responding more specifically to the concerns raised above, the report identifies some success factors:

Housing First works for people that, due to their needs and behaviours, may struggle to engage with other forms of support. It will not be an appropriate solution for all people who have experienced homelessness, and provision of Housing First **should always sit alongside good provision of other services such as hostels and supported housing.**

It is key to **offer non-time limited and intensive holistic support** to assist formerly homeless persons to maintain their tenancy and begin recovery.

¹²https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Housing%20First%20Guidance%20for%20Social%20Landlords_0.pdf

¹³<https://www.housing.org.uk/resource-library/browse/housing-first-a-short-guide-for-housing-associations/>

Social isolation is certainly an issue, and some residents may invite acquaintances and friends to stay with them to deal with this. When this becomes problematic, the **support from the Housing First team can assist in addressing it**, and encourage the individual to find other ways of integrating in their community.

Continuity of funding is necessary. There are understandable concerns about the longevity of support funding when considering when to offer housing to a Housing First client. Many pilot projects go on to receive longer-term funding, however it is precarious. We encourage services to undertake robust monitoring and evaluation and to consider innovative funding models. Should funding end, there is an expectation that the commissioner and provider will ensure that support is available for the resident from another agency.

Strong partnerships are needed to ensure that people are supported effectively in order to remain housed and begin recovery. Funders, housing providers and support providers need to think holistically, flexibly and work effectively together. For social housing providers this will mean ensuring that everyone in your organisation understands the approach, and that good service level agreements are drawn up with the support provider when agreeing on operational practices and procedures.

The case of France

In the case of France, it's important to highlight that 'Housing First' can be used to refer to different programmes, with a narrower or broader approach depending on the policy framework.

1) In France there was a first experiment called '*un chez soi d'abord*' that ran between 2011 and 2016. The pilot programme was carried out in Grand Lille, Marseille, Paris and Toulouse. The approach – in line with the Housing First model - was to give homeless people living on the streets a home and put in place a multi-disciplinary support. In total, **about 353 people were housed** and accompanied by housing first professionals. Housing units were mainly in the private rental sector (whereby the association would act as intermediary in the lease contract) but also, depending on the city, in social housing – especially in Paris where private sector rents tend to be very high. Beneficiaries consisted mainly of people who spent over four years living on the streets, all of them suffering from severe psychiatric conditions and/or addiction.

Over 85% of the programme participants were still in their homes and followed by HF teams after 4 years from the programme start, and they also showed decrease in symptoms and **better quality of life**. The programme also represented a **useful model for cooperation** between different stakeholders active in the fields of healthcare, social, care, 'prevention of addictions' and housing. It is estimated that the programme cost about 14 to 15 thousand euros per person per year, **which is lower than the cost of traditional approach**. Key to this positive impact were the support put in place, the **multi-disciplinary team, access to a range of services, respect of individual choice with regards to the type and location of accommodation and the type and pace of support services**. However, some challenges were identified. Access to affordable housing units with a permanent rental contract remains limited. Only 15% of the people treated have taken over their own rental contract. In many cases it remains necessary to lease through an association that can guarantee payment of the rent. Furthermore, **securing employment remains a challenge** for many of the programmes participants.

As a follow-up, the plan is for 20 housing first projects for a total 2000 units to be deployed in the main cities/metropolitan areas in France between 2016 and 2023 based on the pilot 'chez soi d'abord'.

2) Besides the 'chez soi d'abord' programme, **a broader plan has been launched to increase access to housing for people at risk of homelessness and housing exclusion** (beyond those with high support needs that were targeted by the pilot project): the **5 year 'logement d'abord' plan 2018 - 2022**. So far 24 local authorities are involved in implementing and testing the plan.

The government considers that as shelters and emergency accommodation solutions are swamped and no longer manage to act as a first step in access to housing. In this context, the plan focuses on two axis: a prompt response to particularly urgent cases and investing on a range of long-term solutions with ordinary

or adapted housing for people facing difficulties. More concretely, the plan includes:

- 40 000 ‘very social’ housing units produced per year from 2018 onwards
- 10 000 places in sheltered homes over 5 years for persons in social exclusion
- 40 000 places to be made available over 5 years in the private rental sector through social rental agencies.

Besides the two abovementioned programmes, to which social housing providers contribute significantly, there are **initiatives within the social housing sector** which combine the provision of housing and support services.

The programme '**10,000 Logements accompagnés**' (10,000 HLM supported housing units)¹⁴ was launched in 2014, and it's currently in its 6th edition. The Ministry for Territorial Cohesion and the confederation of social housing providers Union Sociale pour l'Habitat launched in 2018 a new¹⁵ call for projects with an aim to help households facing multiple economic and social difficulties access and keep permanent housing. The focus is on developing innovative responses thanks to adapted social support, and strengthened partnerships between social housing organisations and associations. Target of the programme are tenants in need of additional support. This includes a range of diverse situations: people affected by autism, victims of domestic violence, persons with mental health problems, those living in institutions, people facing isolation and those living on the streets, children separated from their parents or whose safety is at risk.

> More details provided by Union Sociale pour l'Habitat¹⁶, the national union of HLM federations in France

The objectives of the ‘logement d’abord’ plan cannot be achieved without a sufficient stock of affordable housing. The issue of **lack of affordable housing is a major problem especially in certain areas, notably in Ile de France**, where the concentration of different groups of population facing difficult situations creates an ever increasing unmet demand.



At the same time, implementing the Housing First programme **needs to go hand in hand with support to shelters and in coordination with this policy**. Since September France has adopted a national plan against poverty but the latter doesn't deal with housing/accommodation in general: policies should be more consistent and coordinated

The level where housing first is implemented is necessarily the **local level, and it requires partnership between different actors on the ground**. Making sure the **necessary support is available** remains the most important element to the success of this programme.

‘The programme of 10,000 units of supported housing that has been carried out really works and it is recognised by all actors involved. It is a key priority for the HLM movement and it must be further developed and funding secured for it to continue in the future’ – USH.

¹⁴ See: Le logement Hlm accompagné: Les démarches des organismes http://www.paca.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017_10_ush_logementaccompagne8_bis.pdf, and Le logement Hlm accompagné: Premiers enseignements http://www.paca.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017_10_ush_logementaccompagne8.pdf

¹⁵ Over the past editions (... since 2014), 150 projects (for a total of about 6,000 HLM supported housing units) have been financed.

¹⁶ Information provided by Virginie Toussaint and Juliette Furet (USH – Union Sociale pour l’Habitat)

The Case of Ireland¹⁷

Housing First projects have been active in Ireland since April 2011 when the **Dublin Housing First Demonstration Project** started operating. This initial pilot involved a small number of specialist homeless and housing NGOs along with statutory partners with the overall project led by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE). This project initially identified and targeted 23 long-term rough sleepers.

The concept of Housing First was integrated for the first time in mainstream policy responses in Ireland from February 2013 in the **Homelessness Policy Statement** issued by the then Minister for Housing. In late 2014, the DRHE awarded Focus Ireland and Peter McVerry Trust the contract to deliver in partnership the Housing First Regional Service in Dublin. This project was initially expected to run until 2017 with a target of 100 tenancies, however, it was extended by two years until 2019 and the overall target increased to 300 tenancies.

As of April 2019, the project had created over 310 tenancies with a tenancy sustainment rate of 86.8%. The next phase of the Dublin Housing First project will increase the total amount of tenancies to 605 and will be delivered by Peter McVerry Trust in partnership with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive.

In order to ensure that Housing First moved beyond the Dublin project and smaller pilot initiatives in some regional centers, the post of **National Director of Housing First** was created. A further purpose of the national director role was to drive a national implementation plan and a scaling up of Housing First across Ireland and to ensure a consistent delivery of the model regardless of the agency delivering it.

In September 2018, the first **National Housing First Implementation Plan** was published by Minister for Housing, setting out specific targets for each local authority to achieve by 2021, with at least 663 new Housing First Tenancies to be delivered across Ireland. This means that every local authority in Ireland has a target for the period 2018-2021 to deliver Housing First.

Access and Barriers to Housing

The delivery of housing stock for housing first programmes in Ireland have come from three separate strands. That provided by non –profit housing associations or Approved Housing Bodies, that provided by Local Authorities and that sourced from the private rental market.

For the majority of the time that Housing first has been delivered in Ireland there has been a **significant shortfall in the provision of housing** across all three streams. However, since the launch of the overarching housing and homeless strategy Rebuilding Ireland in 2016 there has been a significant growth rate in housing supply albeit from a relatively low base. As of May 2019 there are **increasing concerns around the affordability of housing that is built by the market, for acquisition for social housing or for renting from investors for social housing tenants**.

A significant barrier to the delivery of Housing First in Ireland is therefore the **availability of apartment units for single persons**, who make up the vast majority of those targeted by Housing First in Ireland. In the first quarter of 2019 just over 600 new apartments of any description of tenure were completed across Ireland. Unfortunately, the majority of these are the top end of the rental market and inaccessible for Housing First participants. This is somewhat offset by a very active housing association sector in Ireland which has recorded two very significant years of growth and in 2018 provided 40% of all new social housing stock in the State.

What are the key elements that are needed to make it work?

The post of National Director has had a particularly positive impact including in the area of housing delivery. The national Director is able to liaise with local authorities, the national housing agency, and housing

¹⁷ Compiled by Pat Doyle, CEO of Peter McVerry Trust and member of the Irish Council for Social Housing.

associations to ensure that they factor into future developments the need for housing first units. This increases the likelihood that the targets set out in the national implementation plan can be achieved. It is also vital advocacy voice for the needs of single person households more broadly.

While there is still a long way to go to secure improved access to health care systems for Housing First participants there is constant progress in this area and the buy-in from multiple Government departments and agencies should see the National Implementation Plan be delivered in full by 2021.

What should be avoided?

There is some cause for concern around fidelity drift and rebranding of existing homeless support and housing programmes as Housing First. This dilutes the Housing First model, can damage the concept and can undermine its overall success and further roll out. The post of National Director should help reduce this risk in Ireland.

The case of the Netherlands

Since the new Housing Act of 2015, rules have been drawn up regarding the method of cooperation between housing corporation, municipality and tenants' organization and performance agreements between the parties are made. They can include agreements about the outflow of clients from social shelter and protected housing to social rental homes. Recent analysis¹⁸ shows that this theme has been addressed in more than a third of the agreements between municipality and corporation, while prevention of eviction through the use of debt assistance is already included in two thirds of the agreements.

Initiatives within the social housing sector

Besides performance agreements, and in many cases even without such agreements, **housing associations often have their own projects and policy** regarding the topic. Overall, '*the majority of housing associations have contact with the local government about housing homeless people and sometimes have their own policies as well to deal with the problems. In general, the availability of homes is a key issue*'¹⁹. Several members of Aedes (the Association of Housing Corporations) are working on housing first projects. One example²⁰ is the Alliantie social housing organisation in Amsterdam which houses approximately fifty homeless people live in normal homes in the Amsterdam Discus project, a collective initiative of the Alliantie, together with a regional mental health care institute and an institute for social care. The housing first approach has proven to give very good results in this case – more than three quarters of the participants in the project still have a dwelling after five years. The care is considerably cheaper than similar care in an institute for supervised accommodation. Most importantly – the participants in the project, formerly homeless people, are extremely satisfied.

Most importantly, about two years ago, corporations, municipalities and reception centers have joined forces to allow people from social relief or protected living to move on to an independent home with adequate guidance. This was implemented through the '**Weer Thuis!** (Home again) action program²¹, an initiative of Aedes, the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), the Salvation Army and the Opvang Federation (also on behalf of RIBW Alliance and GGZ Nederland).

The program in its first phase ran until the end of 2018. The initiators are in talks to be able to continue and

¹⁸ https://www.opvang.nl/files/Monitor_prestatieafspraken_2018.pdf

¹⁹ Comments provided by Sander Koomen, AEDES

²⁰ <https://dkvvg750av2j6.cloudfront.net/m/6c2c81c93f5a9522/original/Brochure-Aedes-Dutch-social-housing-in-a-nutshell-examples-of-social-innovation-for-people-and-communities-2016.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.aedes.nl/artikelen/klant-en-wonen/bijzondere-doelgroepen/maatschappelijk-opvang/resultaten-actieprogramma-weer-thuis-elkaar-begrijpen-vormt-de-basis.html>

expand the program after 2018, and expect to work with a maximum of ten new regions in 2019. *Weer Thuis!* is now becoming part of the Multi-year agenda for protected living and social relief of the government.

Success factors

An evaluation has been carried out of the eight pilots leading to some tips²² on the most important aspects:

Understand each other: the context of each stakeholder, how they work, what are the rules that apply, challenges

Carry out a joint analysis: how many clients are involved? What is the housing requirement? And set up a "matching point" or a broker role for a suitable match between the client, a home and the required care.

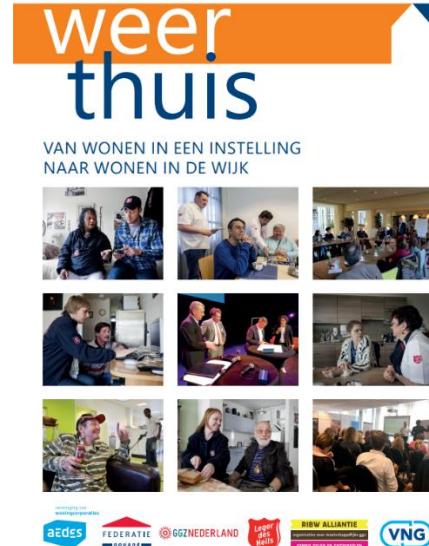
Start on time: when a client enters, what does he need? Everything should be ready to access a suitable home and the support that is needed

Ensure that clients settle well in the neighborhood and make sure that there's no concentration of one target group in a housing complex

Municipalities within a region should agree with each other on how to distribute clients

Customer experiences are a good starting point for improvement: the story of clients, what do they encounter?

Litigation agreements are a useful tool: about resolving problems, such as nuisance, old (rental) debts and the prevention of new debts



The case of Asturias, Spain²³

The Housing First programme in Asturias (Spain) uses public housing for its implementation and is coordinated by the housing department of the regional government. The beneficiary of the programme is the Housing First tenant, meaning that they sign a rental contract and have rights and duties that come with being a tenant. The necessary networking and organisational work is done between two administrations at different levels (local and regional government) as well as social entities.

Currently, Housing First programmes are taking place in four cities within the region and, while always following the Housing First model, each city has the agency to decide with which social entity to work. The first phase began at the end of 2016, targeting 19% of the homeless population. The second phase will be completed in May 2019, extending to 41% of the homeless population.

A particularly successful example of housing first within this programme happened in a rural town of 3,800 inhabitants, at the initiative of the town mayor and a network of neighbors who wished to give a stable home to two homeless individuals who had been living at a railroad stop for over ten years. Local inhabitants were greatly involved e.g. helping with furnishing of the house and accompanying the new tenants to leisure activities. This rural Housing First project was awarded with the first good practices prize

²² <https://dkvvg750av2j6.cloudfront.net/m/79efd331683de661/original/Publicatie-resultaten-Weer-Thuis.pdf>

²³ Information provided by Fermin Bravo Lastra (government of Asturias) and Maria Montes Miguel (AVS - Spanish association of public housing providers)

for public housing which is promoted by the regional government in the 2018 edition.

Success factors

Commitment by the administration and the body responsible for housing

Network with administrations and social entities

Work to break the stigma of homeless people

Help Housing First tenants tell their personal stories. Society has to see them not as “ex-homeless” people, but as persons with their specific history, most often about overcoming adversity

Challenges

Coordinating with several local administrations, the regional government and social entities

Social stigmatisation of the homeless population and its possible negative effect before the start of a new programme

Housing First is still an exception in most of Spain. Furthermore, in most other cases in Spain it's usually an NGO that rents a dwelling and then sub-lets it to a former homeless person and provide support services.

Concerns

Work with a local network on issues of training and visibility (seminars, meetings, etc.). Results tend to be better where this does occur

It is necessary to improve the participation of the beneficiaries

Look for stable financing methods for NGOs outside the Spanish Contracts Law over time that affordable housing is ensured for all.

Innovative practices in CEE: housing first programmes in Ostrava and Budapest

Ostrava

The city of Ostrava in the Czech Republic identified 10,000 people who were in housing need e.g. people living in substandard or insecure housing and in socially excluded areas. The City, working in cooperation with municipal districts, actors from regional and national level, NGOs, and an energy provider (due to persistence of energy poverty), with funding from ESF – pursued the pilot project “A Place to Call Home”. It involved the renovation of 105 apartments with five set aside for emergency accommodation. The project incorporates elements of Housing First, such as employing social workers to help households in establishing themselves in their new homes, with different levels of support being offered depending on the individual needs and requirements. The long-term goal of the city is to create a fully functioning and robust social housing system with the potential to be up scaled at national level.

Budapest

Organisation Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület ('From Street to Apartments', ULE) have a goal to introduce the concept of a Housing Agency, more specifically a Social Rental Agency, to Budapest. The main motivation being that 15,000 people are estimated to be homeless while there are 90,000 empty private properties (plus 4,000 empty municipal properties). This initiative could help matching those in need with available homes. The organisation has a strong focus on homelessness, and so will use elements of the Housing First approach. Rental contracts are long-term and secure and tenants are provided with employment possibilities alongside receiving intensive social care. ULE also advocate for change in social and housing policy in Hungary, including a rehabilitation of the social housing system, so that affordable housing is ensured for all.

Summary – checklist for successfully implementing Housing First

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Support | <p>Engage fully. It emerges clearly that a key point for the success of this type of programme is the long-term commitment that intensive and holistic support will be guaranteed when and for as long as it is necessary.</p> <p>Housing First cannot be merely the direct provision of permanent housing to a formerly homeless person. Instead, it must be thought of as support from a multi-disciplinary team that is available for as long as is needed.</p> |
| Partnership | <p>Build partnerships. To reach the integrated approach that is needed for Housing First, partnerships are needed at the local level including actors involved in social integration, urban policy, health, care, well-being, housing and employment.</p> <p>Housing First cannot be a ‘solo mission’, especially with inadequately or untrained support workers or housing professionals.</p> |
| Funding | <p>Secure consistent long term funding. The model has proved to be efficient and can bring long term savings to the public purse – but the necessary funding needs to be available (for services provision as well as for the beneficiaries themselves if they are to be able to afford keeping their homes).</p> <p>Starting a Housing First programme with uncertain or incomplete funding is risky. A number of Housing First projects have collapsed, not because they did not deliver, but because dedicated funding ran out, with detrimental effect.</p> |
| Affordable housing | <p>Make sure that enough affordable, adequate and secure housing is available. This should be a key priority and a prerequisite for policies designed to tackle homelessness, including Housing First.</p> <p>This may require looking at all available resources including in the private sector. However, social housing providers have often proved to be better placed as partners in HF programmers in terms of costs for tenants, security of tenure, quality/location of the dwellings and the public interest mission of the sector.</p> |
| Broader strategy | <p>Understand that Housing First should be “to be part of an integrated homelessness strategy to be truly effective”.</p> <p>Housing First cannot work in isolation and therefore policies should be better coordinated to make sure this goes alongside other forms of support for homeless people and preventive measures (e.g. support vulnerable persons and households living in their homes, programmes to reduce evictions, accompany people leaving institutions, etc.)</p> |
| Community | <p>Keep social mix/diversity in the social housing neighbourhoods and promptly tackle (or better avoid when possible) conflict among tenants, in order to avoid stigma and segregation. Working with a Housing First team can help supporting formerly homeless people not only in living independently in their homes but also in integrating in the community and handling issues such as neighbor disputes.</p> <p>Don’t concentrate Housing First tenants in, for example, the one apartment block, in isolation from essential facilities, services, and indeed other demographics i.e. their community, neighbours, friends.</p> |

Conclusions

Although social housing has a wider remit than ending homelessness, and social mix is key to avoid residualisation and stigma, the sector can play an important role in housing homeless people, including by taking part in Housing First provision.

To support its members, Housing Europe has produced this briefing presenting the experience of housing providers from four European countries and highlighting challenges and concerns as well as responses and success factors.

These can be summarised in the ‘checklist’ on Housing First above, which address housing providers as well as services providers and policy makers involved in this complex approach. A constructive dialogue among all actors involved is absolutely necessary and the social housing sector should be clearly identified as a key partner.

Housing Europe is keen on supporting its members in exchanging on this issue and accessing the wealth of available research and resources which have contributed to prove the importance and effectiveness of this approach. Evidence shows there is still a long way to go to make sure Housing First is implemented on a wider scale and we hope to contribute to the dissemination of this model.

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On the same theme: Listen to Episode 3 of **Housing Europe Podcast** series, ‘Housing First’. Available at
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