



An Introduction to **HOUSING FIRST**

WHAT IS HOUSING FIRST?

In many traditional homeless services, people are first expected to demonstrate that they are 'housing ready' - meaning that they have to prove they are able to live independently or with only low levels of support - before they can access stable housing.

In Housing First, housing is the starting point rather than an end goal, supported by policies and practices that are designed to keep people in existing ordinary housing if they are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

As the name suggests, a Housing First service provides housing as soon as possible, without attaching conditions such as a requirement to abstain from drugs and alcohol. This means that people in Housing First programmes have a high degree of control over the support and treatment they receive, including whether or not to use different support services.

Did You Know?

On any given night, approximately 700,000 people are homeless across the EU.

Core Principles of Housing First

In Europe, there are 8 Core Principles on which Housing First is based. (click on the links for more information)



Why do we need Housing First?

Traditionally, homelessness has been managed as a temporary emergency, using overnight shelters, temporary hotel and bed & breakfast accommodation or by implementing emergency winter plans. Longer-term access to housing under a traditional “staircase” model (see below) has required the person to first successfully pass through a series of steps, each with conditions that the person must fulfil in order to move to the next stage, with housing as the end point.

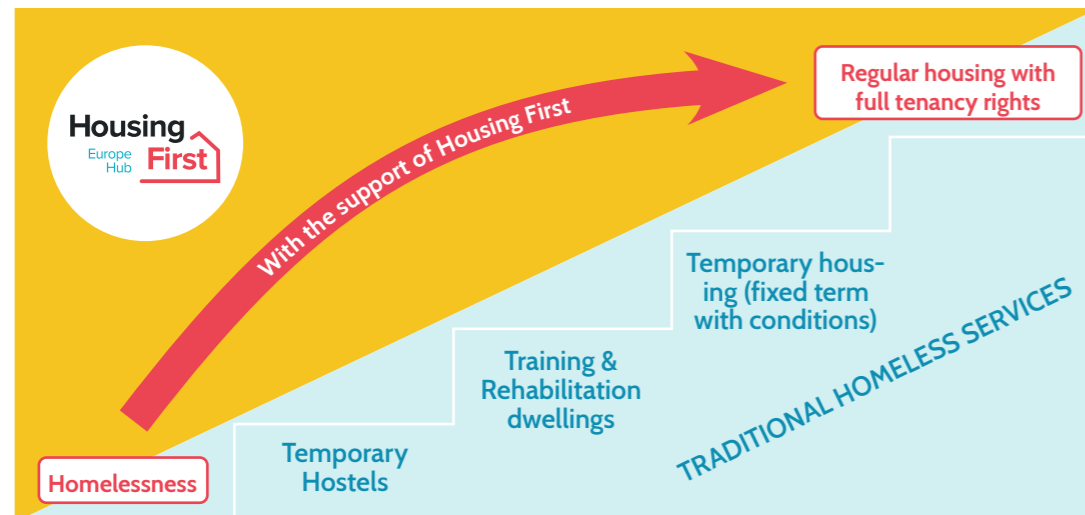
This traditional approach to homelessness services often requires the service user to demonstrate sobriety and engagement with treatment, and to be trained in living independently before housing is provided for them. In other words, housing happens ‘last’. A disadvantage of this approach is that people who with complex needs may be slow to progress through this system, and become stuck at one stage or another due to personal challenges that they are struggling to overcome in order to fulfill the criteria to pass to the next stage. This can be

very discouraging and distressing; people may lose hope that they will ever succeed in being housed, or may take their struggles as a sign of proof that they are ‘unworthy’ of housing and support, resulting in them leaving the system or refusing to engage with support and treatment services altogether.

Did You Know?

Housing First is the only current approach proven to consistently achieve a 70-90% tenancy sustainment rate in countries around the world.

Increasing evidence shows that this approach does not work as a long-term solution to homelessness and that local, regional, and national authorities should consider revisiting their systematic approach to ending homelessness.



What does work in 70-90% of cases is to start by providing the person with housing - or re-housing, as the case may be - as quickly as possible and then providing them with the appropriate support once they are housed. This high success rate - which has been consistently demonstrated through a number of studies and pilot programmes across Europe and North America - is the essence of why we support a systematic shift towards greater use of “Housing First” across Europe.

A Housing First service is able to focus immediately on enabling someone to successfully live in their own home as part of a community. This is very different from homelessness services that try to make homeless people with high support needs ‘housing ready’ before they are rehoused.

Housing First also focuses on improving the health, well-being and social support networks of the homeless people using the service.

Who is Housing First for?

Did You Know?

Housing is a human right. The [United Nations](#) defines a home as:

- offering legally-backed security of tenure,
- as affordable,
- as habitable,
- as having essential services such as power and water,
- as accessible to the people who live in it, and as located within access to necessary services such as schools and shops.
- Housing must also be culturally appropriate to someone’s needs.

Housing First is for people experiencing homelessness - or who are at risk of becoming homeless (e.g. people due to be discharged from institutions such as hospitals, child protection, prisons, etc.) - and provides them with both housing and support which is tailored to their needs and situation. Support can range from helping people to access mainstream systems such as welfare benefits, housing allowances, debt counselling, skills training (or re-training), up to more intensive levels of support which may include treatment for substance addiction, psychiatric, mental and physical health and recovery, among others.

Housing First services have proven to be particularly effective with people experiencing long-term or repeated homelessness who, in addition to other support needs, often lack social support (such as help from friends or family) and are not part of a community.

The Housing First approach can also be adapted for specific groups/needs within the homeless population. For example, young people have different needs to those of adults and there are specific Housing First programmes designed to use the same baseline Housing First philosophy in a way which better addresses the needs of young people, known as ‘Housing First for Youth’.

Frequently Asked Questions

We already have a number of social services for homeless people, why do we need Housing First?

Though typically a small segment of the homeless population, the people experiencing homelessness combined with additional complexities are generally the least-well served by traditional homelessness response models. The combined nature of their challenges is both more complex and more resource-intensive to address. People in this group are the most likely to have frequent contact with costly government services such as hospital accident & emergency departments, emergency response units including paramedics and police, and even judicial and prison services.

In many countries, such as Finland, the UK, and France, engagement with Housing First services reduces the frequency of contact between people experiencing complex homelessness and emergency services. As a result, it can be a more cost-effective means than some traditional homeless response services. In many cases, people in Housing First programmes are able to access regular social, medical and other services, often with the help of Housing First teams and support workers.

What are complex needs?

The term 'complex needs' describes ongoing, persistent, inter-related health and/or social care needs, which have an impact on a person's wellbeing, quality of life, and ability to function in society.

Complex needs include, but are not limited to:

- Repeat homelessness - including repeat homeless service use and/or living in substandard, over-crowded housing, or 'sofa surfing';
- Mental, psychological or emotional health needs;
- Substance dependency (i.e. drugs, alcohol);
- Contact with the criminal justice system;
- Physical health limitations or needs;
- History or experience as a victim of domestic violence or abuse.

Is Housing First only for people with complex needs?

Housing First can work for anyone who is homeless, but not all people who are homeless need such a high level of support. For many homeless people - such as people who have recently been made homeless - ensuring access to suitable, affordable housing is what is needed. The advantage of a Housing First approach is that the support provided can be tailored to the person's individual needs. Some people will need ongoing support, whereas others will only need high-intensity support for a shorter period of time.

What is 'Housing First for Youth'?

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) is a rights-based intervention for young people who experience homelessness, or who are at risk of becoming homeless. It is designed to address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults by providing them with immediate access to housing that is safe, affordable and appropriate, and the necessary and age-appropriate supports that focus on health, wellbeing, development, life skills, engagement in education and employment, and social inclusion. For more information, please see our [programme model guide for HF4Y](#).

Why separate housing from treatment?

Housing and treatment need to be delivered separately. This is crucial for both the service that is delivering support and the Housing First tenant. In some traditional homeless services, people can be evicted or threatened with being thrown out of their temporary accommodation if they do not agree to the conditions attached to treatment and support.

By separating treatment and housing In Housing First, people can feel secure in their homes.

This separation also makes it easier for service and housing providers, as they can deal with any issues around the housing (payment of rent, issues with neighbours, etc.) separately from other support programmes. All Housing First participants are treated as regular tenants and therefore must agree to follow the rules of their tenancy.

Why is stable housing so important?

Not having a stable, secure and suitable home can cause significant stress and anxiety for individuals experiencing homelessness. The short-term nature of many programmes and supported housing offers come with a sense of built-in stress, as people will be worried about what will happen when the 6 or 12 or 18 month programme and support come to an end. This can lead to low self-esteem, lack of trust in support services and an unwillingness to seek treatment which can help the person to recover. Under these conditions, the effectiveness of support and treatment may be vastly reduced and/or inconsistently delivered, as the service user may be more focused on seeking security than on pursuing recovery. Offering treatment and support services within a context where the service user feels safe and secure - in control of both their environment and level of engagement - allows these supports to be delivered more consistently and more effectively.

If a person needs to move to a new apartment, the Housing First support moves with them. This helps to provide a sense of stability as the tenant knows that they will not be abandoned by the programme and end up homeless - a common fear and source of stress - and the tenant can therefore focus on their recovery, knowing that they will be supported for as long as is needed.

Are there any expectations of Housing First tenants?

People using Housing First are expected to follow the conditions of their lease, or tenancy, in the same way as any other person renting a home would be, with support being provided to enable them to do this. Housing First services also expect there to be regular contact between someone using their service and a support worker, for example at a weekly meeting, which includes checking whether there are any problems with their home.

What happens if the service user accepts housing but refuses treatment?

A right to housing with no preconditions means that housing and supports are separated. Housing provided via Housing First is not conditional on behavioural change or accepting treatment. Housing First tenants must agree to meet with their Housing First worker on a weekly basis (at least) but have the ability to discuss and decide where and when that meeting will take place. Rather than in a social support worker's office, Housing First residents might meet their support workers in a cafe, or go for a walk, or invite them to their homes.

For a person to remain successfully housed, it is important to build a relationship with that person based on trust, where the person themselves feels that their needs are listened to and that they have control over their degree of engagement with support services. To achieve this, there is a strong emphasis on choice and control for service users, through active engagement without coercion. This means that while service users are actively encouraged to engage with the help they need, it is never a condition that they do so in order to keep their home.

Building trust in this way, through positive and ongoing dialogue can help service users to believe that recovery is possible, which may ultimately lead to them choosing to accept support that will help them to do so. The timeline for recovery is not universal and is frequently non-linear. By removing the stress and uncertainty of not having a stable and safe place to call home, a person can begin to focus more fully on their recovery, which facilitates treatment, rather than hindering it.

Where does housing for Housing First come from?

Housing can come from:

- Social/Public housing
- Private rental agreements
- Rental agreements using a non-governmental (NGO) intermediary; whereby the NGO has a long-term contract with the landlord or building developer, the tenant then sub-lets the property from the NGO.
- Social Rental Agencies

Who covers the cost?

In most European countries, homeless people who are eligible for Housing First are also eligible for social welfare and housing benefits. Often the funding is combined from different streams of support, e.g. housing benefits, health-care support for treatment, etc. These benefits can be used to cover the cost of rent and support. Some Housing First programmes are funded by foundations and other project funding, which allows them to work with people who do not have recourse to public funds.

We don't have enough housing available - how can this work in my community?

Whilst it's true that there is a shortage of suitable housing in many places across Europe, this does not mean that there is no housing to be found, and may instead mean that alternative solutions to identifying suitable housing are required. Housing First is a pragmatic approach to people who would otherwise sleep on the streets or be in temporary accommodation. Whilst an overheated housing market dominates some of Europe's capital cities, in many large to medi-

um-sized cities, the numbers of people who are homeless and would need Housing First support are quite manageable. It will be more difficult to find enough housing in larger capital cities.

Housing First and Covid-19

As the coronavirus crisis forced people to 'shelter in place' and 'stay at home', cities and governments took rapid measures to ensure that people were not forced to sleep on the streets. Many overnight shelters and some temporary homeless accommodation do not provide sufficient space for people to be sufficiently distant from each other, and the risk of spreading a virus is high in over-crowded spaces. Housing First can be seen as an effective health intervention to prevent the spread of Covid-19 as people are able to live in their own homes and follow government guidelines regarding social distancing, and self-isolating in the case of infection.

Many homeless people have underlying health conditions and are particularly susceptible to being infected with viruses, such as the coronavirus that causes Covid-19. Housing First can help to protect people's health and prevent further spread of such viruses, now and in the future.

Read more

- [Housing First Europe Guide](#)
Nicolas Pleace
(available in 10+ languages)
- [2019 Housing First in Europe: An Overview of Implementation, Strategy, and Fidelity](#)
Housing First Europe Hub
- [THIS is Housing First for Youth - Europe: A Program Model Guide](#)
Stephen Gaetz
(available in English & French)
- [A Home of Your Own Handbook](#)
Y-Säätiö/Y-Foundation

The Housing First Europe Hub

The Housing First Europe Hub is home to a European network of organisations, housing providers, foundations, governments, national platforms, cities and experts working together to promote the scaling up of Housing First as an effective systemic response to homelessness across Europe.

We support this effort through:

- **Training** - for Housing First service providers, governments, housing providers, etc.
- **Research** - as Housing First is strongly evidence-based, ongoing research and pilot testing are crucial to developing and improving the delivery of the approach.
- **Community of practice** - where practitioners can exchange knowledge and experiences with one another to help improve outcomes for service users
- **Membership network** - we work with our Founding and Associate partner organisations to advocate for and support the implementation of Housing First across Europe. We also support national and regional Housing First networks as they share practice and knowledge for scaling up Housing First

Interested in joining the Housing First Europe Hub as an Associate partner?

Associate partners should agree to commit to the core principles of Housing First, as set out in the Housing First Europe Guide, and be engaged in or working towards scaling up Housing First in their community. Associates have access to all Hub services including:

- All communication including the website and newsletter;
- Access to Train-the-Trainer courses and other activities;
- The option to include their logo on the Hub website;
- Invitation to all events, workshops etc., organised around the annual Steering Group meeting.
- The opportunity to co-produce tools with the Hub through participation in work clusters;

For questions, or to apply to become an Associate to the Housing First Europe Hub, please feel free to reach out to one of our Programme Coordinators:

- Samara Jones: samara.jones@feantsa.org
- Taina Hytönen: taina.hytonen@ysaatio.fi



Stay informed

To learn more about **Housing First in Europe** and the **Housing First Europe Hub**, visit www.housingfirsteurope.eu.

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