

# ACHIEVING A NEW SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE TO ENDING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH HOUSING FIRST

A policy and practice guide

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Housing  
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Thank you to everyone who contributed information and time to the compilation and drafting of this paper. More information about the Housing First Europe Hub's partners and the examples included here can be found at:

[www.housingfirsteurope.eu](http://www.housingfirsteurope.eu)

## FOREWORD from the Housing First Europe Hub

Housing First programmes are one of the most researched social policy interventions of all time, and they are the most effective mechanism for supporting people with complex support needs out of homelessness—the very people who are most likely to sleep rough.

But, even as we celebrate our achievement of getting more and more Housing First programmes running all across Europe, we also see the total number of people experiencing homelessness continuing to rise in many countries. It is not that we are wrongly applying the principles of Housing First, since evaluations show that our programmes have a high degree of ‘fidelity’ to the model and our success rates equal or exceed the original New York projects. The problem is that as one person moves into a home, another person replaces them. This paradox has led some, particularly in the US, to argue that Housing First has failed.<sup>1</sup>

But we know Housing First programmes *are* the most effective mechanism for supporting individual people with complex support needs out of homelessness, but *individual* programmes won’t improve relationships between individual actors, organisations and governments, and no matter how much we scale up our individual programmes, they will not, on their own, shorten the age of exploitation.

To achieve those objectives, we need to take a step back and think more deeply about how our Housing First programmes relate to our overall response to housing and homelessness.

Bishop Desmond Tutu’s observation that ‘There comes a point where we need to stop pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in’ is usually used to direct our attention to prevention, but properly understood it is an injunction to look at the entire system in which people fall, or are pushed, into the river and what happens to them there.

But, if we are off exploring the whole housing and homelessness system and thinking about all the inter-relationships, surely this a distraction from our obligation to help the human beings who need a home? We need an approach which retains the practical successes of Housing First, but applies those lessons to the wider experience of how people become at risk of homelessness and then become homeless. In this we have the good fortune to be able to work with our colleagues in Finland, where Housing First has indeed become part of the overall system of housing and homelessness, and where the growth of this approach has been matched by a historic fall in overall homelessness. This experience shows us that principles informing Housing First are not just relevant to individual programmes, but can be applied to change the overall way we approach ending homelessness.

It is to help us address these questions that the Housing First Europe Hub commissioned Demos Helsinki ([www.demoshelsinki.fi](http://www.demoshelsinki.fi)), a think tank, to re-work the extensive evidence about Housing First programmes in the context of what is known about how broader systems work and how change happens. Their report draws on the now considerable experience of our Housing First Europe Hub partners across Europe, along with the well-documented Finnish achievements. The report, published in March 2022 is available on our website: [www.housingfirsteurope.eu](http://www.housingfirsteurope.eu).

The Demos Helsinki framework paper does not resolve all our challenges, it could never do that. But it does give us a framework and the tools to think about what that resolution will look like and how the proven successes of Housing First programmes can be central to achieving the overall goal of ending homelessness. The paper reinforces our intuition that Housing First is not a pre-ordained set of actions which can be simply taken out of the box and assembled in any context. There will be different ways of achieving our goals in different contexts, but all will require a clarity of vision about our destination (ending homelessness), application of the principals and the application of ‘intentional governance’.

This paper complements the Demos Helsinki framework paper and is designed to share exciting developments and inspire change. Read on to find out more about the practical ways many countries and cities are implementing Housing First so it does become part of the systems change needed to end homelessness for good.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. What is Housing First and why is it so effective in ending homelessness?

This report examines how the principles of Housing First can apply to the whole system of tackling homelessness. Before we explore this in more detail, it is important to explain the fundamentals of Housing First. Housing First was developed as a service model the US, by Sam Tsemberis (Pathways to Housing) in the early 1990s. Almost simultaneously, in Finland, starting in the 1980s, the government, local authorities, NGOs and volunteers began working to reduce homelessness. From the 2000s the government has funded programmes to reduce and end homelessness, using the principle of Housing First as an operating model, an ideology and a way of thinking<sup>2</sup>.

Housing First is a model of ending homelessness that works. It is an internationally recognised intervention to address homelessness for people with interlocking, multiple and serious needs who experience homelessness. Unlike other supported housing models, individuals do not need to prove they are 'ready' for independent housing, or progress through a series of accommodation and treatment services. There are no conditions placed on them, other than a willingness to maintain a tenancy agreement, and Housing First is designed to provide long-term, open-ended support for their on-going needs.

Housing First provides rapid access to a stable tenancy in ordinary (private or social) rented housing. From this point onwards, people's other support needs are addressed through coordinated and intensive support on an open-ended basis. These needs can include long term street homelessness, mental, psychological or emotional ill-health, drug and/or alcohol dependency, contact with the criminal justice system, experience of trauma, physical ill-health, or experience of domestic violence and abuse. The support is open ended (i.e. not time limited) and is often addressed through a multi-disciplinary team.

The Housing First Europe Hub champions and adopts the core principles of Housing First as described in the [Housing First Europe Guide](#). These are central to operating high fidelity and therefore effective models.

1. **Housing is a human right** – Housing is provided first, rather than last, without any expectation that a homeless person has to behave in certain ways, comply with treatment, or be abstinent from drugs or alcohol before they are given a home. Housing First does not expect homeless people to earn their right to housing, or earn a right to remain in housing.
2. **Choice and control for service users** – People using the service should be listened to and their opinions should be respected. Housing First users are able to exercise real choices about how they live their lives and the kinds of support they receive.

3. **Separation of housing and treatment** – Access to housing (being offered a home by a Housing First service) is not conditional on behavioural change or accepting treatment. Remaining in housing provided via Housing First does not require someone to change their behaviour or accept treatment. If someone is evicted or moves out of their home, the support continues.
4. **Recovery orientation** – The service focuses on the overall well-being of an individual. This includes their physical and mental health, their level of social support (from a partner, family or friends) and their level of social integration, i.e. being part of a community and taking an active part in society.
5. **Harm reduction** – A principle based on the idea that ending problematic drug and alcohol use can be a complex process, and that services requiring abstinence or detoxification do not work well for many people experiencing homelessness.
6. **Active engagement without coercion** – Assertive engagement is used with people in Housing First services in a positive way that makes them believe that recovery is possible.
7. **Person-centred planning** – This involves organising support and treatment around an individual and their needs. Housing First adapts to and organises itself around service users, rather than expecting someone to adjust and adapt themselves to the Housing First service.
8. **Flexible support for as long as is required** – This principle puts Housing First in stark contrast with other forms of homelessness support. Housing First providers commit to offering long-term support without a fixed end date; recovery takes time and varies by individual needs, characteristics and experiences.

There is more evidence to show that Housing First works than there is for any other intervention to tackle and end homelessness. When all aspects of the model are operating at high fidelity, it has tenancy sustainability rates at 80 per cent or higher. Studies looking at community capabilities and wellbeing also report positive outcomes in most cases. Whilst the evidence is not as developed on health outcomes, evaluations have shown that self-reported quality of life and positive feelings about recovery are generally positive amongst people participating in Housing First programmes.

Most recent evaluations across Europe demonstrate these outcomes. Assessment of the Habitat programme in Spain shows after 18 months the housing retention rate was 96%<sup>3</sup>. In an evaluation of Housing First services in Berlin 97% of service users with experience of homelessness have sustained their tenancies and are still housed after 3 years.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.2. A Housing-led approach to ending homelessness

A 'housing-led' or 'rapid re-housing' approach to ending homelessness aims to move people into their own homes as quickly as possible and provide them with the support they need to make it work.<sup>5</sup> This type of approach seeks to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place. In situations

where homelessness does occur, housing-led models foresee a minimal amount of time spent in temporary accommodation and very few transitions before someone moves into a settled home. Housing First is one type of housing-led model, and is specifically designed for those with the highest and most complex needs.

Individual programmes delivering Housing First work well for the individuals who participate, but Housing First works best when it functions as part of an integrated, multi-agency homelessness strategy, alongside prevention, and low intensity emergency accommodation services. As chapter 2 describes in more detail, to get the full benefits of Housing First it needs to be part of a systems wide governance approach to eliminating homelessness rather than a standalone intervention addressing homelessness for a sub-group of people with high and complex inter-related needs.

Most people who experience homelessness only need a secure, affordable home and short-term support, only a relatively small proportion of people experiencing homelessness need the level of support provided by Housing First; however, a housing-led approach recognises that the principles underlying the Housing First model can and should benefit all those who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Applying these proven Housing First principles to the entire housing and homelessness system, to everyone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, is part of what we refer to as 'systems change'.

Housing-led is a whole systems approach seeking to apply the principles of the Housing First model to all those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Table 1 sets out different types of accommodation and support models and where they fit in a housing-led system which aims to eliminate homelessness as its end goal.

**Table 1. Accommodation types and their role in a housing-led system**

ACCOMMODATION TYPE	DEFINITION	ROLE IN A HOUSING-LED SYSTEM
Emergency accommodation (including self-contained hostels and nightly, paid hotels)	Emergency accommodation, often run by the State or third sector and faith-based groups, offered to people experiencing homelessness on a nightly or weekly basis.	Short term, to provide emergency shelter until settled housing is found.
Long-term supported housing	Housing scheme where housing, support and care services are provided as an integrated package for people with ongoing needs to live independently. Support is often provided on-site and accessible 24 hours a day.	Minimal role and should only be used for people with underlying health and social care needs (e.g. brain damage). The provision of this type of accommodation relates to needs outside of the homelessness system and should ideally be provided for and funded by other public services such as social care and health.
Mainstream settled housing with time limited support (social or private, rented with floating support)	Rented housing accessed via a social landlord or the private market with short term support to help people set up and sustain their tenancy and ensure they do not experience repeated homelessness. Support could be related to budgeting, setting up bills or referrals to other services.	Integral part of a housing-led system for people with low to medium support needs.
Mainstream settled housing (social or private, rented with no support)	Rented housing accessed via a social landlord or the private market.	Integral part of a housing-led system for people with no support needs.
Critical Time Interventions (CTI)  (such as hospital discharge support or other institutions, e.g. prison, care system)	A time-limited intervention to help with transition that moves through clear, time-limited phases that are agreed and appropriate for the model or programme of support.	Integral part of a housing-led system to support transitions from institutions to settled, mainstream housing. Under some circumstances, people with support needs that are not met by CTI can be transitioned to access Housing First programmes and support.
Housing First	An intervention which separates housing and support for people with complex support needs. It focuses on providing housing first and wrapping tailored support around said housing.	Integral part of a housing-led system for people with high and complex support needs.

### 1.3. Housing First movement across Europe

Research in 2019 on the implementation, strategy and fidelity of Housing First across Europe<sup>6</sup> shows the varying extent to which Housing First features in homelessness strategies, programmes, and wider health and welfare policy at local, regional, and national level.

In many cases, the research showed that Housing First was operating, but there had not been wider systemic changes to reflect the principles and lessons from Housing First. In some cases, Housing First was observed to be very distinct from other elements of the homelessness sector and existed at the margins of homelessness policy.

On the other hand, in Finland, Housing First was found to be closely integrated into homelessness strategies and programmes. In some other countries, such as Denmark or France, Housing First had become an integral part of responses to homelessness, operating alongside other services, but did not form a large element of service provision.

Whilst there are countries where Housing First is increasing more rapidly – Scotland, the Netherlands, Italy – there are some countries such as Ireland and England, where increases in Housing First programmes were happening alongside large increases in emergency and temporary accommodation – even before the Covid19 pandemic emergency response started.

#### Strategies for ending homelessness



This calls into question the extent to which Housing First expansion in isolation can achieve the systems change required to see homelessness eliminated and sustained over the long term. Although scaling up (expanding) Housing First would help address homelessness for people with high and complex needs, homelessness rates will keep rising if it is employed as a standalone solution, without being integrated into wider systemic responses to the homelessness phenomenon. Expansion of Housing First is needed across most of Europe, but cannot and should not happen in isolation. This report is designed to take the theoretical concept of a systems perspective to ending homelessness and identify the ways in which

Housing First is being used at national, regional and city levels to push the wider changes that are needed to ensure ending homelessness is part of a systemic solution.

Based on interviews with advocates and policy makers across 16 countries, the examples presented here bring to life the challenges and opportunities that Housing First can provide and has been delivering so far. Being well aware that we are far from achieving the goal, this report is designed to inspire, encourage continual learning, and drive the change that is needed to end homelessness across Europe.

## DEFINING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF HOMELESSNESS

The Housing First Europe Hub recently commissioned Demos Helsinki to undertake work on the theoretical positions and the meaning of the term ‘systems change’ in the context of homelessness. Grounding the analysis in systems thinking, the report *A new systems perspective to ending homelessness* (2022)<sup>7</sup> illustrates how seeing Housing First through the lens of governance – rather than policy – can provide us with a compass to navigate the complexity of homelessness, and teach us how to advance the ambitious goal of *eliminating* the phenomenon regardless of the situation a country may face. This chapter summarises the main concepts set out in the Demos Helsinki report, setting a framework for implementing

practice to achieve systems change. Systems change as described through the work refers to:

*A structural and operational shift  
in the governance of homelessness...  
...from a system that manages homelessness  
to one that aims to eliminate it.*

To change from a system which is designed to manage homelessness to one which aims to eliminate it, we need to move away from designing a perfect way to implement Housing First programmes and look instead at the overall approach, mindset or paradigm in which we respond to homelessness. Demos refer to this overall approach – how we think about, resource and manage our systems – as ‘governance’. The difference between seeing Housing First as one policy tool and seeing it as an approach to governance becomes clear when we look at what it would mean in practice (Table 2).

**Table 2. Housing First as policy VS. Housing First as governance.<sup>8</sup>**

HOUSING FIRST AS POLICY	HOUSING FIRST AS GOVERNANCE
From focusing on developing a “one-size-fits-all” blueprint...	...to ensuring that practitioners can learn by doing how to solve implementation problems.
From focusing on the assessment of resources needed for implementing Housing First...	...to actively bringing (local and national) key stakeholders on board.
From supplying valuable but resource– intensive policy ideas...	...to fostering the long-term commitment of politics towards <i>eliminating</i> homelessness.

The governance approach to HF enables local institutions (the housing authorities of cities, regions, countries – and their partners) to ensure that the speed and direction of change reflect their own circumstances and requirements.

Chapter 3 sets out a diverse set of contexts and application of HF as governance to inspire and learn from.

Demos Helsinki identify three governance processes that are key to leverage systems change in the field of homelessness:

- **Directionality:** nurturing long-term political and societal commitment that can provide the incentives needed to get key stakeholders to work towards eliminating homelessness;
- **Learning:** establishing processes that, while allowing for failure, are able to identify key bottlenecks that prevent continuous improvement and scale-up of Housing First implementation;
- **Capacity building:** connecting with those stakeholders that, by providing the needed flow of human and financial resources, allow to overcome such bottlenecks.

The Demos Helsinki report takes **four in-depth case studies** – **France, Scotland, Spain and Finland** – to unpack the jour-

ney of systems change in each of these contexts. It highlights the diversity of how and whether homelessness is governed and the different models that have developed in these four contexts resulting from diverse strategies and the capacity of each to reshape the governance processes. These four country examples show how governance, in this context, means intentional and organised approaches to systems change to achieve change in very different ways. From the strong sustained political commitment in Finland to the more grassroots origins of Housing First in Scotland.

These governance processes can be applied at different times and levels – political, organisational, and operational – to ensure that Housing First helps systems change work towards eliminating homelessness. They give us a framework to understand and deliver systems change. The central premise is a need for a planned approach and governance model, in order to shift the systems they are situated in from ungoverned to governed.

The next chapter presents a series of examples and case studies where systems change is taking place in different forms and is being pushed forward by different actors. The chapter aims to inspire advocates and policy makers to achieve the shift they need in their own systems, and thus reach the goal of ending homelessness rather than managing it.

## A NEW SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE TO ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN PRACTICE

Across Europe, organisations, local authorities, governments, housing partners and other actors are working to apply Housing First to a systems perspective. We have gathered a list of examples (but not exhaustive) that illustrate the key ingredients of a systems approach. This chapter also shines a light on some particularly bright spots and highlights some ideas and practices that can be adopted and adapted in other contexts.

From a systems perspective, there are several key ingredients that can help bring about a successful application of Housing First:

1. Motivated and dedicated **people** to drive change forward. Leadership and local advocates make change possible in all kinds of contexts: those with favourable political or policy contexts, in tight housing markets, in places where Housing First is very new, and in Finland, which has consistently led the way, because it has not stopped innovating and improving.
2. A change in **working culture** and the way that people think about homelessness is essential. A culture shift needs to underpin the transition from 'managing' homelessness to dedicated efforts to *end* homelessness. Training, network building and ongoing awareness raising are crucial to ensure that all actors – those in frontline services, management, housing provision, and policy makers and administrators across different government levels and ministries – understand how they play an important role in this new approach.
3. Creating **structures** that can anchor change and support a system designed to end homelessness. These structures include: housing, the right policies to sustain change, partnerships with relevant actors, training and knowledge building.
4. **Stable and predictable funding** is crucial to embedding Housing First as the lever to reduce, end and prevent homelessness.
5. **Policies and political commitment** both to applying Housing First to a systems perspective, and a commitment to actually ending homelessness.

The examples in this chapter demonstrate that it is not necessary to wait for the perfect conditions to get started. Across Europe, Housing First advocates face similar challenges (e.g. lack of affordable housing and entrenched, traditional approaches to managing homelessness). Yet, these examples demonstrate that even small steps can trigger the changes we need to end homelessness.

### 3.1. Having the people to drive change forward

Housing First advocates and champions have been key to promoting and supporting the transition to a Housing First approach across all of the communities in Europe where systems change has started. In some cases, Housing First champions have started with pilot projects which provided the evidence needed to convince others. In others, the establishment of a national platform in which committed Housing First advocates can meet and learn with those who are not (yet) convinced, have proven extremely useful in creating a better understanding of the potential of Housing First as a key to systems change and for building a broader base of allies. In many of the examples throughout Europe, this is achieved through **national or regional networks** that support Housing First and are extremely effective in helping to promote the transition.

In **Finland**, the national Housing First network reinforces learning and sharing of practice and brings together all actors across different sectors. This is a forum in which trust and understanding have developed over years, and is a space for constant reflection on what it means to do Housing First day to day, how to keep the political pressure on government, (where advocates like the Y-Foundation have been instrumental), training and persistent building of affordable social housing.

In **Scotland**, coordination work is shared by two key organisations. Turning Point Scotland and Homeless Network Scotland. Turning Point Scotland are the pioneer service provider who introduced the first Housing First service to Scotland, providing high-quality, ongoing training for all levels of professionals involved in delivering and commissioning services through their Housing First Academy. Homeless Network Scotland<sup>9</sup> provides coordination to monitor progress on systems change with regular check-ins (connect moments) for the expanding network, support to local authorities to design services, and data collection of the numbers of people supported in Housing First to evaluate the progress to date.

In **Ireland**, in an atmosphere where collaboration to deliver HF was challenged by a highly competitive tendering process among non-government agencies, the Irish HF Good Practice Platform effectively brings together actors that are often in competition with one another for contracts to work together on shared training, policy formation and standards – and to argue that the Government commitment to ambitious Housing First targets should extend to applying Housing First principles to the entire homeless system.

In **The Netherlands**, the Housing First Nederland network has been relaunched to build a successful scaling up of Housing First and significant steps towards systems change. This re-launch brings together all of the actors delivering Housing First services and strives to include actors in the political and housing spheres in order to have more impact.

In **France**, **Lyon** is an excellent example of how the fertile partnership between political actors (the *Métropole*, i.e. the local authority) and social housing actors created an interesting dynamic of systems change. Here, the more reluctant service providers were encouraged to come along because their major funders were leading the charge. The Lyon Metropolitan Area

(*Métropole de Lyon*) is facilitating the process of systems shift on different levels – including training, raising awareness and exchanges – working with housing providers, local authorities, and (to a lesser extent) NGOs. The local authority has also used the Housing First Europe Hub and FEANTSA to help to support their progressive and ambitious plans to scale up Housing First. Lyon was inspired by the Y-Foundation and Juha Kaakinen's frank, honest call to others across Europe, urging them to act rather than continue to discuss and study the issue.

The alignment between the Lyon Metropolitan Area and EST Métropole Habitat (a major social housing provider), and especially the people leading both organisations and some key figures in the NGO sector, made this ambitious partnership work. Progress includes harm reduction practices being introduced in more traditional shelter models, as well as a culture shift currently taking place in the shelter sector.

In **France** more widely, dedicated experts ensured that a pilot project got off the ground and won over supporters with its success. They have purposely implemented Housing First slowly to encourage actors to come on board (with some pitfalls along the way). Once the political climate proved favourable, the careful seed-planting began to bear fruit and stood on solid foundations once politicians were ready to commit.

In **Italy**, the desire for change had always been present in the sector. Housing First provided a tool with which practitioners could bring evidence to their work, and drive change thanks to the strong data and evidence base behind Housing First. The role of the national network *fio.PSD* was instrumental: staff went in person to local territories to train people, organisations, and bring the culture shift to them. The organisation was also responsible for promoting initial bottom-up Housing First pilot projects in cities, eventually gaining the support of the central government which promoted the use of EU structural funds for Housing First.

In **Poland**, advocates engaged with the Managing Authorities of the European Social Fund in Brussels. Workers in organisations and services were keen to scale up Housing First, and have been the key drivers of this process to start and scale up the model. Good relationships and partnerships between NGOs and municipalities have been key.

Leadership can come from a variety of sources, but without it systems remain unchallenged—even when evidence clearly illustrates the drawbacks of traditional responses to homelessness. Advocates should try to overcome this by creating structures (e.g. platforms) that bring allies (and sceptics) together to find common ground. The core principles of Housing First, founded on the right to housing, choice, control and equity for people facing homelessness, need to act as a set of key values to guide Housing First leaders and advocates in their work. These core values are simultaneously very simple and easy to understand, yet they also represent a dramatic departure from how most homelessness systems currently operate. It is only by anchoring advocacy for change and new policies and practices within these core values, that we will be able to successfully move to a Housing First systems perspective.

## 3.2 Training and knowledge building

Training and knowledge sharing is an effective and essential way to promote and sustain a shift to a Housing First approach. Training is not just about understanding *how* to deliver Housing First. Rather, training has and can be used to teach all necessary actors about their potential roles in transforming the system, making them advocates and champions for Housing First, and ensuring quality services and support. This kind of training is transformative for frontline workers who can be empowered to work differently, aligned with the core principles of Housing First; managers can build relationships with housing providers and civil servants to ensure frictionless delivery of services and housing; civil servants and decision makers can advocate to their peers for the changes necessary to achieve a new systems approach.

There are excellent examples of how this kind of training programme has helped to shift structures, and the culture of homelessness responses, to move towards a Housing First-based system; and there is both start-up and ongoing support from the Housing First Europe Hub for this kind of training. The Housing First Europe Hub's Train the Trainer programme was co-created to ensure a high standard of training on Housing First and systems change. Over 40 trainers have completed the programme to date, and many have established training – and other Train the Trainer programmes – in their own countries.

Housing First training plays an important role in building capacity and in expanding the pool of Housing First advocates. It is a crucial resource for systems change advocacy, because it builds widespread community support for Housing First and systems change. A wide-range of actors need to understand what Housing First is, how it can be a catalyst for change in the housing/homelessness system and how it can underpin housing and support for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Designing and delivering training to a wide range of audiences (spanning from frontline workers to civil servants, local authorities and housing providers), it can provide a first opportunity for actors to understand that they have a role to play in ending homelessness. It also matters in the long run, because ongoing training can (and should) be designed to bring actors from different sectors together.

Examples of how training can be a motor for systems change include the Czech Republic, Finland, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, France.

## Spotlight on the Czech Republic

In the **Czech Republic**, the Social Housing Platform has successfully trained more than 200 frontline workers, civil servants and other actors from a wide variety of sectors and working in different roles, by offering summer schools, local seminars and other training. Several programmes are available and provide training on different levels:

- A one-day course to introduce NGOs and their networks to Housing First and its core principles;
- A two-day training course teaching NGOs how to understand the Housing First core principles and how to integrate them in their work. This course focuses especially on changing work cultures and thinking;
- A four-day Housing First summer school, where sessions include guest lectures by international experts (HVO-Querido and Discus from The Netherlands, *Un chez soi d'abord* from France);
- A one-day course on how to deal with loneliness.

Over the past several years, the number of Housing First experts and advocates in the Czech Republic has increased significantly, and has had a positive impact on structures and policy. As a result of these training programmes, 50 staff are now working in Housing First teams, led by 15 people who were also involved in Housing First training. Housing First teams have established a network to continue learning, and to share their experiences, challenges and solutions. Furthermore, the training has had an impact on the wider system, as social workers, addiction experts, mental health experts, officials, politicians have become much more familiar with Housing First. These training programmes have helped Housing First to become a mainstream approach to solving homelessness in the Czech Republic.

Over the past two years, the Social Housing Platform has developed new courses as a response to requests from Housing First providers. The topics included: peer workers, crisis intervention, neighbourhood work, motivational interviewing, funding, and recovery. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic courses were moved online, and because they were more accessible to a wider audience, they became very popular, very quickly, even amongst university students and NGO workers who are not providing Housing First.

The impact of this training programme reaches beyond the NGO sector. Last year, the Ministry of Housing established its own training programme for civil servants on Housing First. In addition, The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs started its own webinar series on Housing First that has successfully set the core ideas and principles of the Housing First approach as a mainstream policy.

In **The Netherlands**, HVO-Querido has established a centre of excellence on Housing First to provide continuous and ongoing training to three distinct partners in Amsterdam. Ongoing training through this centre, and as linked to the Housing First Netherlands Platform, helps to ensure a common understanding of how to deliver Housing First and influence and shift structures and policy. The Centre of Expertise has translated the disruptive and unorthodox nature of Housing First into concrete techniques and working methods. This approach is attractive and innovative, and has been very effective in pushing out learning to Housing First workers and others. Trainers (experts) share knowledge from practice and provide creative tools with the aim of inspiring organisations and professionals to embrace and apply this innovative approach.

The Centre has been training on Housing First within the organisation HVO-Querido, as well as policy workers from local authorities, housing providers and care organisations. The Centre has been delivering training at local, national and international level for several years, and has had a significant impact in promoting a whole scale change in how support is provided in The Netherlands.

**Finland** is a leader in developing and providing Housing First training to all actors at all levels. The Finnish National Network on Housing First has delivered training for over 10 years, and recently ran its second Train the Trainer programme. Government support for these kinds of training programmes has enabled the network to reflect on how Housing First is working in Finland and is an illustration of the ongoing need for learning, even when Housing First is well established.

**Scotland**, another pioneer of Housing First in Europe, organises training through Turning Point Scotland's Housing First Academy. Turning Point Scotland offers three levels of training: Introduction to Housing First, Housing First for Managers, and Housing First for Practitioners. The course content is developed using Turning Point Scotland's Housing First experience, experience from the Housing First Europe Hub, and the feedback received from participants. There is also the opportunity to deliver bespoke courses and reflective practice sessions that take into account organisations' Housing First learning needs.<sup>10</sup>

Over the past few years, Turning Point Scotland has delivered training to over 500 people across Scotland. Participants come from a varied range of areas and services such as Housing First Practitioners and Managers, Housing Officers and Neighbourhood Coaches, Social Workers, Case Workers, Administrative workers, Council Elected Members. Turning Point Scotland have delivered in 11 local authority areas, the 5 pathfinder cities, as well as to third sector organisations and Housing Associations. The organisation has also been involved in the early stages of Housing First pilots as well as delivering to UK and European audiences<sup>11</sup>.

These training programmes are an important factor in promoting systems change in Scotland. Training raises awareness about what it means to apply the principles of Housing First and housing-led approaches in practice, and also provides a forum for discussion and questions. Trainers play an important role as Housing First advocates, since they interact with people who are both genuinely interested in learning and supporting systems change as well as critics. Training programmes play an additional role by providing a space in which people can ask questions about how systems change will impact their work and their clients.

In **Italy**, training has been an effective tool to raise awareness about Housing First to a wide range of actors, including frontline workers and local authorities, and has helped to drive a bottom-up approach to implement Housing First projects across the country, supported by national policy and EU funding. The Italian Housing First network (*Housing First Italia*) organises a yearly three-day Housing First school where social workers and civil servants are introduced to the model and its core principles.

### 3.3 Implementing structures to embed and anchor change

What are the ingredients for the realignment of homelessness and housing policies to result in actual and successful systems change? In addition to motivated and hardworking advocates and champions, there is a need to re-think and re-calibrate the structure that underpins the system so that people can be housed quickly and can access the right supports.

#### Housing

Access to sufficient, reliable sources of affordable, social (or private) housing remains a persistent challenge across Europe. Housing is absolutely a key ingredient for successful systems change; with some notable exceptions, many housing partners remain reluctant to actively engage in Housing First, despite strong arguments that it can be beneficial for all parties.

National or regional policies that encourage – or instruct – cooperation from social housing providers can help to shift this thinking. In Finland, the national programme to move to a Housing First approach included specific criteria for service providers to work with housing providers.

In some cases, adversity has led to creative responses. In Germany, the Housing First service provider DOJO Cares has partnered with the largest online real estate platform ImmoScout into the Home Street Home project, where the two organisa-

tions raise awareness about Housing First and engage small private landlords<sup>12</sup>.

In countries where social housing makes up a larger share of the housing market, some good examples can be found as well. In Finland, the Y-Foundation grew from a small NGO to becoming the country's biggest social housing and Housing First provider. Y-Foundation initially purchased individual apartments, but over time, they expanded their remit and eventually merged with a major social housing provider<sup>13</sup>. This example is a clear illustration of how organisations can help to expand the stock of affordable social housing, directly purchasing housing from the private market for the sole purpose of delivering Housing First. (It should also be noted that the work of Y-Foundation was complemented and supported by political commitment to reducing and ending homelessness, and by long-term planning to achieve clear and ambitious targets.)

In **Scotland**, HF delivery is part of Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans (RRTPs). Scotland's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) put the concept of 'rapid rehousing by default' at the centre of its recommendations on ending homelessness and transforming temporary accommodation and support. In 2018, the Scottish Government published the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan, taking forward all recommendations of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (2017/18). The Plan received cross-party support and has been followed by two progress updates<sup>14</sup>. Local authority Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans are a key delivery mechanism for the Action Plan and intended to chart a 5-year route away from reliance on temporary accommodation, and towards improved prevention and settled accommodation by default response to homelessness. Housing First provision through mainstream dispersed housing must be part of this plan and most areas if they didn't HF already had planned to implement it in the first year<sup>15</sup>.

On a smaller scale in Scotland, Housing First for Youth programmes run by Rock Trust in West Lothian engaged an enthusiastic social housing provider, Almond Housing Association (AHA), from the start. Today, AHA is an active partner in the programme. Housing workers from AHA joined training on Housing First and young people ahead of the pilot project, and are now important champions for the programme. From their perspective, the support that accompanied the young people in Housing First programmes was key to providing a sense of security and helped AHA feel involved in the programme.

In **The Netherlands**, HVO-Querido and Limor work closely with housing partners to provide housing for a growing number of Housing First tenants. These partnerships are key, but are still not close to meeting the need for Housing First apartments or the greater need for housing. HVO-Querido has worked with social housing provider Alliantie from the beginning. This support from the social housing sector has helped to convince other social housing partners by raising awareness and allaying concerns about perceived risks of providing housing for Housing First.

On top of working alongside housing partners, local coalitions created a second solid foundation for Housing First in The Netherlands. These partnerships comprised local governments, social housing corporations and organisations delivering Housing First support. These groups brought together the necessary actors to establish Housing First as a practice, starting the process of systems change.

Access to a sufficient supply of affordable, quality housing is a challenge across Europe. For Housing First projects and programmes that exist alongside more traditional approaches to homelessness (e.g. temporary accommodation, supported accommodation), finding enough housing units to meet the demand for Housing First tenants is not easy. Housing providers – both in the social and private rental sectors – are often reluctant to take what they perceive as a risk to sign a rental contract with Housing First tenants. Housing First support teams often spend a significant amount of their time looking for and securing housing for Housing First tenants; in cities where several organisations deliver Housing First projects, organisations are often in competition with each other for a limited number of apartments.

A systems approach is required to address both the demand and supply side of this problem. This can take a number of shapes and forms. For example, Finland set specific targets and goals to reduce homelessness by half, and then half again, and to increase the number of Housing First placements in social housing; additionally, new social housing developments must guarantee a certain percentage of housing units to be used by Housing First tenants. Governments have a role in encouraging and incentivising the creation of more affordable social housing, for instance by:

1. promoting the acquisition of apartments by social housing providers or NGOs;
2. providing financial incentives to build new housing stock;
3. providing loans or financial support to pay for the physical transformation of temporary accommodation into regular housing units.

Housing provision must be at the core of a new housing-led and Housing First approach. This means that financial resources, as well as time and energy, are applied to ensuring that there is enough housing on offer, that housing partners are active participants in the process, that housing benefits and funding streams for support services are aligned and are no longer linked to temporary accommodation or on-site provision of support. The goal is to ensure that the new system can offer everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness a home *first*, alongside any support they may need.

Finland has made the most progress towards this goal, and Scotland is currently implementing a promising strategy based on a strong Housing First and housing-led foundation. However, most other countries across Europe still struggle to de-couple support funding from traditional re-housing models. The lack of progressive examples is a stark reminder that in most countries, Housing First remains a pilot project which is often 'added' to traditional staircase models of temporary accommodation. This is the most pernicious and intractable barrier to systems change. The confinement of Housing First to a project status prevents true breakaway from 'business as usual' approaches to homelessness, therefore hindering the much-needed structural shift that accompanies systems change.

## Structures

How do you start to change the system? What structures can and should be shifted? What is necessary to make this happen? Across our partners and across Europe, we can find examples of this structural change at various stages of development.

In **France**, for example, structural planning and support has propelled some cities, such as Lyon, to set ambitious targets and seize the opportunity to work with all relevant actors. In 2017, the central government set up a broad call for proposals, inviting cities to design local plans to scale up Housing First and take the first steps towards systems change. The call is coordinated by Dihal, the inter-ministerial network responsible for matters related to housing and homelessness. In return to the effort made by cities, Dihal provides ongoing support, which includes:

- The establishment of a learning and sharing network in which staff from local authorities and relevant ministries come together. This has proved to be an effective tool and continues to support the cities involved in the call.
- The sharing of evaluation and monitoring tools developed by Dihal, which also supported cities in tracking their progress.

24 cities responded to the call, the most positive example being the city of Lyon (see in-depth section below). This call for proposals is an excellent example of how to work effectively with different levels of government, as well as across different ministries.

## Lyon – bringing actors together to end homelessness

The Lyon Metropolitan Area used the opportunity of the 2017 national call to bring other actors together, including housing providers and organisations. The local authority set the ambitious goal of ending homelessness by basing a new system on the principles of Housing First, and on tackling the thorny issue of how to support people in housing who do not have the legal recourse to housing or support (such as undocumented immigrants).

In addition to the ambitious goals of ending homelessness and creating more social housing, a broad, horizontal approach means that Housing First principles and practices are being adopted by traditional homeless services in Lyon. The goal is that these services change how they work with people, with the long term objective of eventually becoming housing-led. For example, the Lyon Metropolitan Area (local authority) has provided funding to make training on harm reduction widely available, and the impact is clear: L'association de l'Hôtel Social (<http://www.lahso.fr/>), a service providing staircase model temporary accommodation and support recently lifted its ban on use of alcohol and drugs.

Organisations in Lyon are slowly changing their working culture, and the idea that a home (meaning proper housing) can be a means of supporting people rather than a prize at the top of the staircase is becoming an accepted approach across organisations. Organisations and housing providers are slowly moving away from their attachment to the idea that people need to be 'ready' to live in housing, and instead, support workers are starting to accept that people can live in their own homes with support. Additionally, organisations are also slowly changing their practices with the advent of peer-workers and workers with lived experience of drug abuse and/or alcohol addiction. Support workers – even in more traditional services – have started to adopt Housing First practices, including meeting with clients outside their offices (e.g. in cafes or in clients' homes). For example, a long-standing provider of temporary accommodation, Foyer Notre Dame des Sans-Abri (FNDSA), is now working to change how they work, so that they can actually move people into housing and prevent them from being forced to accept temporary accommodation.

Lyon is working towards grand goals to increase housing supply and make their system housing-led, and in the meantime, they are also encouraging the traditional sector to adopt the core principles of a Housing First approach to innovate their practices and support.

At national level, the interministerial coalition Dihal is charting a longer-term view and is reflecting on how to change the funding and financing policies which make it an administrative challenge to de-couple support from traditional accommodation and shelter structures.

## Effective cooperation across different departments/ ministries/sectors

Structures can change, but this change needs guidance and governance. Most homelessness and housing systems across Europe are spread over multiple ministries, as well as various levels of government, from central and regional to local level. In some cases, actors may wish to change how they work, to apply the Housing First principles across different areas of work, but can find their hands tied by existing policy frameworks or traditions.

In order for structures to shift, it is often the funding structures which need to be changed to make it easier for services to deliver support to people in housing, rather than linking the support workers to specific physical structures.

## Some bright spots to consider

In **Spain**, there is a move to improve the coordination between regions and different policy areas. It may be difficult to convince all of the levels of the role they can and should play in the scaling up of Housing First. Leading NGO HOGAR SI has set up a multi-actor space (*espacio multiactor*), where stakeholders from various levels of government (national, regional) and third sector organisations come together to learn about Housing First and discuss how it can best be implemented throughout the country.<sup>16</sup>

In **France**, homelessness responsibilities are often shared between multiple levels of government, which makes it complicated to work with many actors (NGOs, local authorities, the State). An additional challenge in this context is the high number of migrants in the homeless population, because they

are the responsibility of the Internal Affairs Ministry. Structural changes are on the way in France to make it easier for the SIAOs (*Services Intégrés d'Accueil et d'Orientation*, Integrated services to guide people to housing, support and shelter) to effectively connect people with housing. Up to now, it was difficult to make this work. The SIAOs will now have the means to be able to carry out their original goal and support people to access their right to housing. This is a clear signal that a housing-led approach should be embedded in all responses to homelessness and housing crises that arise. By redefining how the SIAOs can and should work, and by reinforcing their mission to connect people to housing solutions, France is making an important realignment of its homelessness, housing and migration systems.

In **Scotland**, Homeness Network Scotland has developed tools and provides support for local authorities to make sure that Housing First is being scaled up and triggering systems change<sup>17</sup>. In partnership with Indigo House and Social Bite, guidance<sup>18</sup> on Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans for local authorities was developed to help them transition to a Rapid Rehousing approach of which Housing First forms a smaller component. RRTP guidance is clear that Housing First should be the first and “default” housing option for homeless households with multiple and complex needs who traditionally “may not consider (or be considered for) mainstream housing as an option”.

### 3.3. Accessing funding to achieve long term change

#### EU funds as catalysts for systems change

While not a source of long-term, sustainable funding, the European Union's structural funds can play the role of catalyst for systems change. EU Funds can kickstart pilot projects which can lead to municipalities and other levels of government taking up Housing First. However, dependence on project-based EU funding is not sustainable in the long term; gaps between calls mean that staff cannot be hired on a permanent basis, and the administrative burden makes the projects very difficult for organisations to administer. The complicated time-table for applications – or influencing the priorities for funding streams – can also be a challenge. The new funding period for the EU Funds (and in particular the ESF+) which runs from 2021 to 2027 include policy priorities that make funding for Housing First more accessible. There is a more specific and explicit focus on ending homelessness in terms of funding for support services (primarily under the ESF+) as well as for building and renovation of existing buildings (ERDF).

The EU Funds can be used by national and regional governments, as well as organisations, to start systems change. This initial financial support can be instrumental for Member States that are planning for the longer term and are committed to making real systems change. The Housing First Europe Hub has recently published a guide on how to access these funds: [www.housingfirsteurope.eu](http://www.housingfirsteurope.eu)

Housing First advocates from government and organisations can use this new impetus from the EU to ensure that funding is directed at interventions which support policies that promote a Housing First and housing led approach.

#### Some bright spots

In the **Czech Republic**, the European Commission and the Czech Managing Authority for EU Funds were convinced to push for Housing First and to make it a mainstream approach. The results of the first pilot project – over 90<sup>19</sup> of users successfully housed after one year<sup>19</sup> – helped to convince ministry officials. Once it was made clear that there would be money for Housing First and scaling up, the Platform for Social Housing provided support to the new Housing First teams. The Ministry of Housing in fact took this on themselves, which was a very important step, because the government now feels ownership and sees Housing First as part of its work.

EU funding was instrumental in all of the Housing First programmes in the Czech Republic (with the exception of the City of Prague). The programmes that were piloted in Brno were amongst the very first to pilot and evaluate (with randomised control trials) Housing First for families, as well as for individual tenants. The success of the Brno pilot project, combined with several factors including: a push from the European Commission, the support of the Czech Managing Authority (for EU Funds) and the Ministry, as well as the expertise of Housing First advocates, meant that €6 million – a very substantial amount – was made available for more than ten new Housing First programmes, intensive training, evaluation, and sharing of good practice. The Systems Project, coordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, was also influential: this project involved 16 cities testing draft legislation for social housing. This project is a tangible example of how significant EU funding can be at national and local level. As part of this project, the City of Ostrava was awarded the EU's Regio Star award<sup>20</sup> in 2018 and is only one of the many best practices in the Czech Republic. The success of these programmes meant that policy makers, the media, professionals working in various sectors, as well as NGOs were able to see the direct results of Housing First and understand its potential impact on policies and legislation.

In **Italian** small cities, from 2016, EU funds brought financial incentives to many and promoted housing solutions and Housing First in place of shelters. The funds could only be used towards more permanent housing solutions. fio.PSD, the national network of homeless services and founder of Housing First Italia, conducted crucial advocacy work in these territories, working with local authorities to try and convince them to switch to a housing-led approach. This work was essential in promoting culture shift as well. fio.PSD also facilitated inter-territorial exchanges among local authorities. Italy successfully used the EU-led FEAD and ESF programmes to finance services for homeless people.

In **Spain**, funding from the Covid-19 Recovery Fund is set to kick start a project (run by HOGAR SI and Provivienda) that focuses on shifting from shelters to housing-led solutions.

Projects funded through these resources, set to last three years, will include two programmes (called ‘innovation projects’) where NGOs partner up with 12 public administrations to carry out deinstitutionalisation, with the ambition to transform systems by reducing beds in shelters and transforming them into housing units for Housing First. The length of time that people need support (which is unpredictable and may be life-long) is a challenge. It is important to demonstrate that for some people in Housing First, independence and autonomy (and lower levels of, or no support) is possible.

## National funding is essential and can have a dramatic impact

Predictable, sustainable funding is necessary to achieve a transition to a housing-led approach. Across Europe, governments will need to commit to supporting this transition by changing *how* funding and financing is provided to housing and support services, as well as providing initial and ongoing resources to facilitate the transition. Transition funding will be required for: transformation of existing temporary accommodation into permanent housing options; workforce development and training of staff providing housing, support, health and other services; to ensure that we actually see a reduction in the number of people who become homeless, as well as monitoring and evaluation tools to measure the impact of this new approach.

Governments across Europe have consistently used strategies to try to marshal responses to homelessness. The best example, and one of the very few examples where homelessness has actually been reduced, is Finland. Successful national plans (PAAVO) over the past 10 years have seen Finland transition its funding models to promote Housing First services in normal social housing. In order to ensure this transition happened, and to prevent the continued use of temporary accommodation alongside the Housing First approach, the Finnish government signed agreements with local authorities which stipulated that funding and contracts would only be awarded to services providing support to people in their homes (i.e. Housing First). In order to be eligible for government contracts to provide services, organisations and local authorities had to demonstrate that they had changed and moved to a housing-led approach.

In **Finland**, the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA) plays an important role in implementing homelessness policies by awarding subsidies, grants and guarantees related to housing construction. For example, ARA provides:

- A state guarantee and interest subsidies for building social housing;
- Investment subsidies for renovations and adaptations to ensure that housing is suitable for people who are homeless, who live with a disability, or who are students. This subsidy covers between 10-50% of the incurred costs to refurbish or renovate housing;
- Grants for housing advice services which are instrumental in providing support to people in Housing First, and ensuring prevention by supporting people who may be at risk of becoming homelessness<sup>21</sup>.

Governments can help by supporting cities to make the transition. In **France**, for example, the 2017 national call for proposals was extremely helpful in motivating cities to leverage those and other resources to start the process. Funding was provided by Dihal to create new roles for local Housing First policy coordinators. People hired into these positions act as ambassadors to bring actors together from different sectors, ensuring a link with the local authority and with the national network on Housing First. The call provided a framework for France to establish goals and objectives for reducing homelessness and promoting the change to a housing-led approach. To support the cities and actors on the ground, Dihal developed and shared a monitoring framework to make it possible for cities to start the transformation of their systems.

Likewise, governments can and should build consensus and momentum for the transition to housing-led and Housing First-based systems. In **Scotland**, one of the outcomes of a national taskforce (HARSAG)<sup>22</sup> charged with assessing how to better address and solve homelessness were translated into a plan to scale up Housing First as the first step towards systems change. Part-way through this process, Social Bite, a social enterprise, played an interesting role of market disruptor. Social Bite ran a major event to raise public awareness about ending homelessness, raising €3 million. Working together with Social Bite, the Scottish government used this influx of interest and money to move forward with its plans. A number of cities became “Pathfinder cities”, and were used to demonstrate and then replicate how Housing First and Rapid Rehousing could become the foundation of a new approach. The success of these Pathfinders led the Scottish government to call on all local authorities to develop local plans to move to a Housing First and Rapid Rehousing model. The initial funding from government and Social Bite provided a crucial impulse to this process, and sustainable funding is still needed to maintain progress and fully achieve the systems change that has so successfully started.

## 3.4. Galvanising policy and political will

Housing First advocates work hard to bring people together and build cooperation and understanding of Housing First in order to get actors and political leaders on board. In many countries in Europe, Housing First advocates have successfully influenced political leaders to make strong commitments to a housing-led and Housing First approach with a goal to end homelessness. These are important first steps to galvanising policy and legislation changes that are needed. It is essential to align policies at local, regional and national level to set and achieve ambitious targets for reducing, ending and preventing homelessness. Legislation and policy need to underpin Housing First in order to make a real lasting impact, or Housing First will remain a separate programme rather than act as a trigger for systems change. Some countries are currently rolling out new homelessness strategies that include elements of these necessary legislative changes.

It is important to remember that while cities, regions and countries across Europe will face different challenges, we can learn from and adapt successful policies and practices. Political commitment to actually ending rather than managing homelessness is a crucial driver. We see progress where there is political leadership (at local, regional or national level) and effective partnerships with relevant actors in the NGO, social housing and other sectors.

Securing political support at national level takes time. Political leaders and civil servants need time to understand how to bring about change to entrenched practice and policy. Over the past 10 years, in addition to Finland, countries like Scotland, France, and Denmark have taken stock and made significant changes to their policy frameworks.

## Using funding opportunities to plant seeds and grow interest and support from political leaders

National support often comes rather late in the game, which unnecessarily delays progress. There are opportunities for political leadership on systems change and Housing First which

many governments do not take. For example, the priority areas of EU structural funds (ESF+ and ERDF) can include financial support for Housing First and housing-led projects—both in terms of financing support and rent for housing.

Housing First advocates have had to work very hard to convince their governments as well as the Managing Authorities to direct funding to these priorities. Examples from Spain, Italy, France, and Poland demonstrate that it is complicated and technically difficult to tap into the EU funds, but that it can help galvanise political support when successful. In **Poland** specifically, EU funds were used to start a pilot project, and included an obligation for the municipalities to continue the programmes beyond the pilot phase. In Warsaw and Gdansk, the commitment to the Polish Housing First implementation model will now be included in local legislation. Unfortunately, it is important to note that at the birth of the project there was absolutely no policy support for Housing First on the national level. The EU Funds (ESF) did not mention Housing First as an objective, so Polish Housing First advocates negotiated this directly with the Managing Authority. Their efforts were able to unlock funding that could be spent on transnational cooperation to learn about Housing First from advocates across Europe.

### Jumping off points to build the case for a shift to a Housing First and housing-led approach

**Scotland** is currently leading the way in terms of moving towards a full systems approach for ending and preventing homelessness. Drawing on lessons from Finland, as well as the long tradition of Housing First in **Scotland** as pioneered by Turning Point Scotland, there is clear political commitment to a robust framework strategy to move away from traditional responses and focus on Housing First and rapid rehousing across the country. Thanks to remarkable leadership from the Scottish Executive, coupled with support from key NGOs like Turning Point and Homeless Network Scotland, as well as a growing group of allies amongst local authorities and housing providers, Scotland is making real and important progress. Key lessons from this example include: taking the time to assess the issues; bringing all actors around the table in a series of conferences and events, to break barriers between different sectors; providing training through the Housing First Academy to ensure that all relevant actors understand what Housing First and systems change mean in practice; giving local authorities the autonomy and the responsibility to create and implement plans to change their local systems; monitoring progress and impact; providing funding to make the transition possible.

### Not all strategies work the first time around

**Denmark** was an early adopter of Housing First as a response for people who needed intensive support. However, despite investment in training and general support for the Housing First approach, Denmark has not seen the systems change that the government had hoped for.

Over the past two years, the government consulted with a wide range of actors to identify *why* Housing First had not become the default response to homelessness. The result is a new homelessness and housing strategy based on a multi-stakeholder approach (based on collaboration, cooperation, exchanging issues, problems, solutions). This strategy is a first in that it

integrates Housing and Social Affairs ministries for the first time. This means that, for the first time, homelessness is recognised as both a social and a housing issue. Civil servants in the Social Affairs ministry believe that this was the barrier preventing progress, and that the new strategy will be far more effective. Using a 'carrot and stick' approach, Denmark will underpin this shift with strong political commitment and new legislation that will encourage and shift funding to Housing First support. By reducing the funding to municipalities for shelters to a maximum of three months, the government will encourage municipalities to find alternative housing solutions such as Housing First. The strategy will also shift the funding away from shelters over the medium term, to ensure that more people get Housing First support. A new task force will provide support for this transition, and local authorities that move people from shelters to housing with Housing First support will receive a 50%<sup>4</sup> rebate on the cost.

Like France, Finland and Scotland, Denmark has recognised the importance of establishing a national partnership to bring together housing providers, local authorities, stakeholders on the field, shelters, and citizens. The platform will play a key role in monitoring progress, and will have power to put pressure on politicians to collect more data, and provide annual progress reports.

Political support is crucial and is the result of sustained advocacy from Housing First supporters. In **The Netherlands**, Housing First advocates have successfully effected a major culture shift in how services are conceived and delivered. Starting in 2015, an initial national homelessness strategy gave cities the opportunity to adapt the Housing First to their own local context. This local approach meant that organisations delivering Housing First could build partnerships and evidence, and over time, win over political leaders. As a result, support for the Housing First approach has become ingrained and now underpins policies in all major Dutch cities. In Amsterdam, Housing First advocates have worked to create a collective sense of responsibility to ensure a housing-led and Housing First response to all vulnerable people who have urgent housing needs. The result of this hard-fought commitment to cooperative working is political support from the city. To achieve this goal, the local authority, housing providers and healthcare providers have drawn up working agreements in consultation with clients and the organisations providing support. What is still needed, however, is a strong national policy, and national political commitment to tackle the lack of affordable housing which has meant that temporary accommodation still coexists alongside housing-led and Housing First approaches.

### Combining a 'top-down' with a 'bottom-up' approach

Despite the complicated policy context in **France**, there is a general feeling that the central government is committed to the Housing First and housing-led approach. Political support for Housing First in the country is both top-down (led by the central government) and increasingly also bottom-up, driven by advocates from the local level. This dual approach is proving successful, since neither approach will work well without the other. High level political support coincided with well-prepared plans and the evidence from Housing First pilot projects previously conducted, and is now translating into the difficult task of unpicking funding arrangements that are linked to temporary accommodation structures.

We can look to the city of Lyon to see how dedicated civil servants and political leaders at the local level used the opportunity presented by the central government's framework in the 2017 call for proposals. At city-region level, political commitment to reducing homelessness and tackling the thorny issues of how to support people who do not have full access to social rights and benefits, has galvanised a complete re-think of how homeless and housing services are designed and delivered. Projects to acquire more housing have been developed through cooperation between social housing providers and the local authority. For example, the local authority has the right of first refusal when buildings come up for sale: the city can now encourage social providers to take these opportunities, and in some cases, even acquire the buildings themselves for use as Housing First and housing-led purposes.

### Tailored advocacy and persistence pays off

Tailoring arguments for different political actors has been very effective. In the **Czech Republic**, the Platform for Social Housing built the case to make ending homelessness the goal over the course of the past six years. Successful pilot projects in four cities brought local political leaders and other actors together to look for the best solutions, inspirational processes and strong cooperation between social services and municipalities. The Social Housing Platform developed tools (e.g. a toolkit on the systematic solution to housing poverty) that proved successful in the Czech context and which can be adapted to other countries and cities. Over time, political leaders were persuaded by key arguments: the financial efficiency of the housing led approach; a focus on families, children, and older people; changing the narrative around homelessness to reduce persistent stigma and promote housing-led and Housing First as good public health policies (particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic) that respect human dignity. Political leaders took these arguments onboard, and the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs have now 'mainstreamed' a housing-led and Housing First approach and is driving policy and practice forward.

Political leaders at the local level are on the front lines and often find themselves caught between an increasing demand for Housing First and housing-led support, but without the means or the jurisdiction to change the policies and structures that

are contributing factors to homelessness. Some cities have taken significant action – within their remit – to make changes. For example, in the Czech Republic, the city of Prague is working with Housing First advocates to shift policy. Drawing on the experience that key Housing First advocates have built up over the past five years of developing and delivering training, evaluations of pilot projects and learning from international partners, Prague is implementing innovative working methods and supporting Housing First and housing led teams. A combination of political will and a significant supply of municipal (local authority owned) housing stock has led to the creation of the largest and most complex systems approach to ending homelessness in the Czech Republic. The Platform of Social Housing brought the know-how and several experts together, along with the City of Prague's Councillor for Housing, more than 15 service providers and in cooperation with the city boroughs. Together this diverse set of actors have established a system that can offer Housing Options; a crisis fund, a social rental agency and other policies now in place are the result of hard work over the past few years. This progress is impressive, however, many of these positive changes rely on political will, and if there is not a commitment to longer term sustainability of local systems to respond to and end homelessness, any progress is at risk at the end of each election cycle. Housing First advocates in Prague can look to Brno, which had made significant progress, but had policies reversed when a new local government was elected.

In **Austria**, current policy development sees the Social Affairs Ministry committed to a national strategy with Housing First. This strategy includes support of the national social housing fund. Advocates cite the Covid-19 pandemic as a trigger for the new strategy. The head of the national social housing association, the Ministry for Housing and the director of BAWO (a service provider network) recently jointly announced a set of Housing First projects, for example, the 'Coming Home' (zu Hause ankommen) project. This project, financed by the ministry of social affairs, aims at building a network of NGOs and not-for-profit building contractors in order to further establish Housing First in (for now Eastern and Southern) Austria. The project will provide 600 people affected by the economic fallout of Covid19 with a new home until April 2022 and is also as a way to build a strong foundation for the practice of Housing First in the long-term.

## CALL TO ACTION

The last two years have taught us that bold ambition on homelessness is possible. They have also exposed the danger of short-term measures that simply manage the worst forms of homelessness. We hope that homelessness advocates, governments, NGOs and others reading this report are inspired not just to imagine, but to start organising an alternative future where homelessness is solvable by design, using the principles of Housing First to do so.

As the examples throughout the report have shown, this is not about doing the same thing everywhere and expecting the same results. Perhaps the most important lesson from the extraordinary breakthrough in Finland, is not that we should all attempt to precisely replicate their model. Instead, it is to find our own path in our context, based on a shared analysis that a housing-led approach can unlock future success.

This is an urgent task. It is urgent because every day that homelessness persists it ruins lives. It is also urgent because we now know that simply delivering Housing First as a discreet programme, to a select cohort of people, is insufficient.

The Housing First Europe Hub has been on its own journey to understand the limits of simply 'scaling up' Housing First, however brilliant those individual programmes continue to be. Our mission is to support organisations and governments to end homelessness by also applying the principles of Housing First to whole systems.

We want to help local and national governments to make the right policy choices, and at EU level there exists a special opportunity to embed this approach within the European Platform to Combat Homelessness.

We also want to challenge and support housing and service providers to make a transition, so that all services are delivered against the principles of Housing First. Human rights, choice and control, and the other tenets of Housing First are directly applicable to every intervention to prevent or tackle homelessness.

A successful transition to this housing-led approach requires a change in culture and thinking: changes in how we work, how we train and support our workforce; changes to funding regimes; changes to the way people access housing; and much more besides. As we have seen in this report, this culture shift can emerge in different places, but the important and unifying factor is that the shift is intentional and sustained over time.

Ending homelessness is totally achievable if we grasp this opportunity to do things differently. People experiencing homelessness deserve nothing less.

## ENDNOTES

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## About the Housing First Europe Hub

The Housing First Europe Hub is a European partnership of organisations, housing providers, foundations, governments, national Housing First platforms, cities and experts working together to promote the scaling up of Housing First and to transform existing systems so that we can end and prevent homelessness in Europe.

We support this effort through:

- **TRAINING** – for service providers, local authorities, governments, housing providers, etc.
- **PARTNERSHIP** – we work with partners and associates to advocate for and support the implementation of Housing First as a means to end homelessness across Europe. We support national and regional Housing First networks as they share practice and knowledge for developing and scaling up Housing First.
- **RESEARCH** – As Housing First is strongly evidence-based, ongoing research is crucial to developing, improving and innovating the implementation of the Housing First approach.
- **COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE** – where practitioners can exchange knowledge and experiences with one another to help improve the outcomes for service users.

For more information, please visit:

[www.housingfirsteurope.eu](http://www.housingfirsteurope.eu)