

EVALUATING HOUSING FIRST: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

1. PROCESS AND EFFECTIVENESS EVALUATION

1.1. Process Evaluation

Process evaluation refers to exploring how a service works. This means understanding the philosophy of Housing First. Ensuring the design of a Housing First service is fully understood—i.e. how the Housing First service is supposed to work—is a very important first step in evaluation. A key measure here is the level of fidelity (similarity) to the original Housing First model. Fidelity refers to the core principles of Housing First and the operational detail of the successful original model of Housing First.

1.2. Fidelity

Assessing fidelity is the starting point of an evaluation of Housing First. Fidelity refers to how closely a service follows the core principles of Housing First (see Chapter 2). If a service does not follow the core principles, it should not be regarded as Housing First and should not be evaluated as an example of Housing First.

1.3. Effectiveness Evaluation

The evaluation of effectiveness centres on what a Housing First service is achieving. This aspect of evaluation includes the progress that a Housing First service is making in terms of delivering the outcomes it is designed to deliver. It is also important for an evaluation to understand what the people using a Housing First service think about Housing First.

2. WHAT TO MEASURE

2.1. Use of Validated Measures

Validated measures are questions that have been repeatedly tested and found to produce consistent results. Validated measures can enhance the quality of an evaluation and mean that the results are more likely to be regarded as accurate. Validated measures can include:

2.2. Key Questions for Evaluation

Housing First has three sets of interrelated goals (see Chapter 2):

- Promoting housing sustainment and a lasting exit from homelessness (also known as housing retention).
- Enhancing the health and well-being of Housing First service users, including:
 - Mental health
 - Physical health
 - Limiting illness and disability

2.3. Housing Sustainment

Housing sustainment can be measured in three main ways:

Length of time a Housing First service user has lived in the same home. This approach has some advantages.

2.4. Health and Well-Being

There are three ways to measure health and well-being:

- Use very basic measures based on people's own judgement about how their health is and whether there are any changes in drug/alcohol use (where this is relevant).
- Using basic measures of whether someone feels they are getting better or worse, in terms of their physical health, mental health and drug/alcohol use, is very simple.
- Validated measures of social support are available, but this is an area where qualitative outcome measurement—i.e. talking to Housing First service users about their lives and level of social integration—may be the most effective way to collect information.
- Measurement of social integration must take into account the other needs, characteristics and experiences of Housing First service users. If many people using a Housing First service have ongoing, limiting illnesses, this will influence how much success can be achieved with economic integration.

Measurements of social integration might include the following:

- Social support
- Is the user in contact with their family?
- Is the user in contact with friends?
- Do they have a partner?
- Do they have esteem support, a sense they are valued by others, and what is their level of self-esteem?
- Do they have access to instrumental (practical) support from friends, family and/or a partner?
- Do they have sufficient social companionship?
- Are there people they can ask for advice and/or talk to?
- Community and civic participation
- Does a Housing First service user participate in community events?
- What are their relationships with their neighbours like?
- Do they socialise within their community?
- Do they participate in social media focused on their community?
- Do they vote?
- Do they volunteer in their community?

2.5. Cost-Effectiveness

The measurement of the cost-effectiveness of Housing First services is heavily reliant on access to good quality, detailed data. It is possible to produce estimations of cost-effectiveness, but these are less influential than detailed information that clearly shows Housing First delivering effective services.

It is important to note that cost-benefit analysis is a distinctive, highly detailed and complex form of economic evaluation which should not be confused with evaluation of cost-effectiveness.

There are two basic tests of cost-effectiveness which can be used for Housing First or other homelessness services (Pleace, N., Benjaminsen, L., Baptista, I. and Busch-Geertsema (2013) *The Costs of Homelessness in Europe: An Assessment of the Current Evidence Base*, Brussels: FEANTSA):

- Is Housing First achieving better results than existing homelessness services for the same level of spending and/or for a lower level of spending?
- Is Housing First producing cost offsets—i.e. reductions in expenditure—for other publicly funded services? For example, by ending long-term and repeated homelessness, Housing First may produce savings for emergency health services, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, the criminal justice system, welfare systems and other homelessness services.
- It is important to explore whether these savings are realisable—i.e. the reductions in long-term and repeated homelessness delivered by Housing First really do allow publicly-funded services to reduce spending.

3. HOW TO MEASURE

Planning an Evaluation

When designing an evaluation, it is useful to look at how other Housing First services (or programmes or strategies using Housing First) have been evaluated and also to look at any criticism of those evaluations. The Internet is a good source of information and resources such as Google Scholar can provide information on the evaluations that have been conducted, with access to some free resources.

Major evaluations of Housing First, which tend to be supported by large, publicly-funded organisations, often produce reports which are freely available on the Internet. Some guidance on evaluation is also available on the [Canadian Housing First Toolkit](#).

Evaluation Types

Comparative Evaluations: These include experimental or randomised control trials (RCTs), in which two exactly matched groups (ideally 100+ people each) are monitored. One group uses Housing First and the other uses existing homelessness services. Over the course of a year or more, outcomes are compared. These are costly but provide strong evidence when well-designed. RCTs have been used in France and Canada and generally report positive results.

Quasi-Experimental Evaluations: These compare one group using Housing First with another group using existing homelessness services, but the groups are not precisely matched and may be smaller. They are influential but considered less accurate than RCTs.

Observational Evaluations: These involve examining people using a Housing First service and assessing its effectiveness in addressing homelessness, improving health and well-being, and promoting social integration. While useful, the lack of comparison may weaken the results.

Resources and Objectives

It is very important to consider the resources and objectives of an evaluation carefully. This includes thinking through:

- What the evaluation is testing
- What arguments it may support
- The available time and budget
- Potential criticisms of the results

While RCTs are considered the gold standard, they are resource-intensive. Observational approaches, while cheaper and with limitations, can still be persuasive.

Who Should Evaluate?

An evaluation is more influential when conducted by independent researchers rather than by the service provider. In-house evaluations can still be valuable, but may be viewed with skepticism due to perceived bias. High-quality in-house evaluations can still influence policy and practice.

Feedback from Service Users

Evaluations should always include input from Housing First service users. Benefits of user involvement include:

- Homeless people are experts by experience—they know what support they need.
- Users provide essential insight into service strengths and shortcomings.
- Positive service user feedback strengthens the case for Housing First when paired with statistical data.
- Qualitative methods—open conversations that encourage expression—are most effective for capturing this feedback. Surveys can also be used but should include input from service users in the design phase.

Approach Based on Goals

The design of the evaluation should reflect the broader goals of Housing First:

If Housing First is new in a region, use RCTs or comparative methods to test effectiveness.

If strong local or international evidence already exists, outcome monitoring may be sufficient.

Proportional Evaluation

Evaluation should be proportionate to the scale of the service:

- Large programmes may justify expensive RCTs (200 participants: 100 Housing First, 100 control).
- Smaller services (e.g., 20 users) are better suited to quasi-experimental or observational approaches