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Shifting the system

*Housing First as
the path forward*



HOUSING FIRST EUROPE HUB
ADVOCACY PAPER

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The Housing First Europe Hub

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

Since then, the Hub has grown into a broad coalition of over 45 organisations, including cities, government ministries, housing providers, and researchers across 15 countries.

The Hub exists to make Housing First the default approach to homelessness in Europe. It promotes this shift through advocacy, training, research, communication, and support to practitioners. Its mission is clear: to end and prevent homelessness by driving a systems change rooted in Housing First principles.

Together, the Housing First Europe Hub and FEANTSA are at the forefront of a growing movement to make housing a right, not a reward, and to shift European homelessness policy toward evidence-based solutions that work.

This advocacy document is aimed primarily at local authorities who may be unfamiliar with the Housing First model or unaware of the benefits of integrating it into their strategies and action plans. It also targets national and European policymakers, including ministers, MPs, and MEPs who are in a position to act on the recommendations outlined.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 What is Housing First and why does it work?

Ending homelessness means tackling not just the lack of housing, but the complex needs that often come with it. People who are chronically homeless often face overlapping challenges: mental health struggles, substance use, trauma, poor physical health, or experiences of violence and abuse. Traditional homelessness services often expect people to move through a system of temporary shelters, treatment programmes, or transitional housing before qualifying for a permanent home. This creates barriers, and it often fails.

Housing First turns that model on its head. **Instead of requiring people to be “housing ready,” Housing First provides immediate access to stable, permanent housing with no preconditions beyond agreeing to a standard tenancy.** Once housed, people receive tailored, flexible, and long-term support based on their needs. Support is voluntary but proactive, coordinated through multidisciplinary teams, and available as long as it’s needed.

This approach is particularly effective for people with long-term or repeated experiences of homelessness, those most likely to fall through the cracks of conventional systems. By giving people the security of a home first, Housing First allows them to rebuild their lives with dignity and stability.

The Housing First Europe Hub promotes high-fidelity implementation based on eight core principles that ensure the model stays true to what makes it effective:

- Housing is a human right
- Harm reduction
- Choice and control for service users
- Active engagement without coercion
- Separation of housing and treatment
- Person-centred planning
- Recovery orientation
- Flexible support as long as is required

“Rather than being required to complete a series of ‘steps’ to access housing, someone in Housing First service leaps over the steps and goes straight into housing.”

1.2 Current policy landscape: what Europe is (and isn’t) doing

Across Europe, governments have recognised the urgent need to address homelessness but policies and approaches still vary widely, and progress is uneven. Many systems continue to rely on emergency responses and temporary shelters, rather than permanent housing solutions.

In recent years, there has been a growing political will at the EU level to shift this paradigm. The **European Platform on Combatting Homelessness**, launched in 2021, marked a step forward by encouraging Member States to commit to ending homelessness by 2030. However, turning that commitment into action depends on adopting proven approaches like Housing First at scale.

The upcoming **EU Affordable Housing Plan** presents a key opportunity. It aims to support the construction and renovation of social and affordable housing, creating a potential bridge between housing policy and homelessness strategy. But to truly address homelessness, these investments must go hand-in-hand with Housing First programmes and services.

“Housing First achieves an average tenancy sustainment rate of over 80% across Europe.”

2. KEY CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE HOUSING FIRST IMPLEMENTATION

While Housing First has a strong evidence base and growing support across Europe, its full potential is far from being realised. There are **four key structural barriers** that continue to limit its impact and scale.

2.1 Affordable Housing shortage

Housing First depends on access to ordinary, affordable housing, but across Europe, this is increasingly difficult to secure. Rising housing costs, shrinking public housing stocks, and competition in the private rental market mean that Housing First providers often struggle to find suitable homes.

In some countries, affordable housing is concentrated in disadvantaged areas, which can undermine long-term integration and wellbeing. Without structural solutions to the housing crisis, scaling Housing First remains a challenge.

To learn more, read our paper on [Unlocking Housing for Housing First!](#)

2.2 Lack of integration into National Homelessness Strategies

Despite its proven effectiveness, Housing First is still not fully embedded in national strategies to combat homelessness in many EU countries. Often, it is treated as a niche or experimental approach rather than a central policy tool.

This limits its reach and risks reducing it to isolated pilots or local experiments instead of a systemic shift. **When Housing First is not embedded at the policy level, it lacks the coherence and coordination needed to operate at scale.**

“PREVENTING AND REDUCING HOMELESSNESS INVOLVES A RANGE OF POLICIES AND SERVICES, INCLUDING ENHANCING ACCESS TO HOUSING, ENABLING DEVELOPMENT OF NEW AFFORDABLE HOUSING, PROVIDING PREVENTATIVE SERVICES AND A RANGE OF OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES.”

2.3 Short-Term funding models

A major barrier to the sustainability of Housing First is unstable funding. In many cases, services are financed through short-term pilot or project-based funding, often from local governments or NGOs. This makes it difficult to plan for the long term, retain experienced staff, or build robust service models. Long-term, flexible financing mechanisms are essential to give Housing First programmes the stability needed to support people over time.

2.4 Sticking to the shelter model

In many countries, **the dominant model of homelessness support is still based on shelters and transitional housing.** Moving beyond this system toward Housing First requires a shift in mindset, one that sees housing not as a reward, but as a basic right and starting point for recovery.

Institutional resistance is common, especially where existing shelter systems are well-established, politically entrenched, and tied to longstanding funding streams.

Shelter-based models also continue to be used because they appear cheaper in the short term. But this perception doesn't hold up when the broader costs of long-term homelessness are considered.

People stuck in homelessness – especially those with complex needs – **often cycle through emergency services, hospitals, psychiatric care, and the criminal justice system.** These repeated crises come at a high public cost. At the same time, traditional staircase services themselves are often expensive and fail to resolve homelessness for those with the most serious needs. By contrast, Housing First has been shown to achieve better long-term outcomes, while also reducing the strain on public systems, making it not only more effective, but also more cost-efficient in the long run.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Affordable Housing shortage

✓ Redirect public investment toward permanent housing solutions

Governments should reallocate funding currently directed toward building or maintaining temporary shelters and invest instead in the expansion of affordable, long-term housing. This includes prioritising permanent housing over transitional models and supporting the conversion of temporary accommodation into stable housing units.

✓ Bring vacant properties back into use

Public authorities can take stronger action to increase housing supply by enforcing regulations on vacant or underused properties. Strategies may include acquiring empty buildings for conversion into social housing, offering incentives for private owners to lease unused units, or supporting NGOs and housing providers in purchasing existing housing stock.

✓ Ensure Housing First is prioritised in EU Housing Policy

The upcoming EU Affordable Housing Plan presents a key opportunity to embed Housing First as a strategic priority. The European Commission should explicitly link investments in affordable housing to the fight against homelessness, and encourage Member States to integrate Housing First in their housing and social inclusion plans.

Lack of Integration into National Homelessness Strategies

✓ Integrate and fund Housing First as a National Programme

Housing First should be recognised and funded as a core component of national homelessness strategies, not treated as a short-term pilot or experimental project. Governments must formally embed Housing First into housing, health, and social policy frameworks, with clear implementation targets, responsible actors, and long-term investment.

✓ Strengthen National Networks of HF

Governments should support national Housing First platforms that connect service providers, housing sector, public authorities, health sector, and homelessness sector. These networks are essential for promoting fidelity to the model, sharing good practices, and aligning local implementation with national goals.

Sticking to the shelter model

✓ Invest in phasing out shelters and transitioning to Housing First infrastructure

Governments should follow the example of Finland, where large-scale investment has been made to close traditional shelters and repurpose them into permanent housing solutions. This includes converting existing shelter buildings into Housing First residences or shifting to the use of scattered-site apartments, which promote better integration and independence.

CONCLUSION

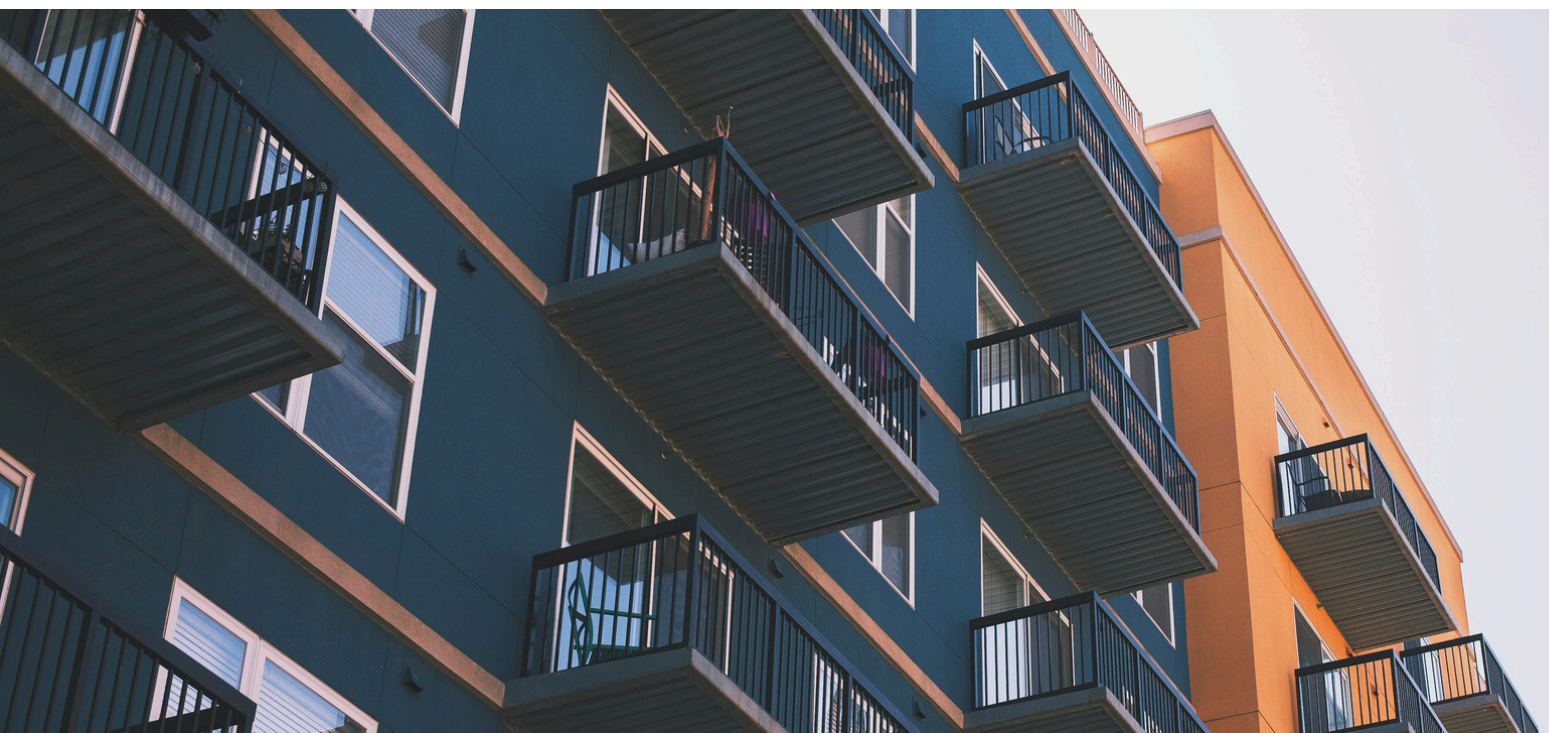
Based on the key challenges identified, the Housing First Europe Hub partners have outlined the recommendations presented above to ensure that Housing First is fully integrated into national homelessness strategies and the EU Affordable Housing Plan.

As highlighted throughout this advocacy paper, we believe that **a systemic approach is crucial in shaping effective public policies to combat homelessness.**

To truly end homelessness in Europe, Housing First must be at the core of social, housing, and health policy. As the European Union shapes its future policy and funding framework, it must embrace evidence-based approaches that place human dignity and housing rights first.

As part of the EU's commitment to the European Pillar of Social Rights, ending homelessness and ensuring access to housing must be central to its broader poverty-reduction agenda. The Lisbon Declaration clearly outlines the **goal of ending homelessness in the EU by 2030, a target that is only achievable if structural solutions like Housing First are properly implemented.**

Civil society, municipalities, and lived experience experts play a key role in the shift toward Housing First, ensuring implementation is rooted in real needs, not only policy goals. Their contributions are essential to creating sustainable and inclusive housing solutions across Europe.





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