



The Housing First Europe event in Lyon



Housing First: global challenges and innovation

Alex Osmond reflects on lessons in what works from Lyons to Milwaukee

Recently I participated in a screening of the Oak Foundation-funded film *Beyond the Bridge*, covering Housing First in the US, and which I've written about on [Cymorth Cymru's website](#). Additionally, I attended a partnership event organised by the [Housing First Europe Hub](#) of the European homelessness federation FEANTSA in Lyon, France.

Both events highlighted a number of similar challenges facing Housing First across the world, but also provided many examples of innovation and good practice aimed at addressing them. The variety in these innovations was interesting to note.

The unsurprisingly common challenges include: severely restricted housing supply; resourcing issues; difficulty providing staff support; and eroding political will. Additionally, without the proper integration of other sectors (including health and the criminal justice system), Housing First is hobbled. This came up in Lyon, as did a potential method of building buy-in: if a sector can be convinced to *invest financially* in the model, it has an interest

in helping the model succeed.

Discussing the idea of sector integration led to a conversation I'd never had before: there is a balance between emphasising the need for buy-in from health, while still emphasising the primacy of Housing First as a housing-led approach that *requires more housing*, particularly social housing – thus reinforcing to those in power the need for more of it.

INNOVATIVE STORIES

I heard many unique and innovative stories during these two events. In Milwaukee, a city in Wisconsin that delivers Housing First in an exemplary way, police officers are recruited specifically to engage with people living on the streets, as well as local homelessness organisations. Hearing this, a Welsh colleague of mine pointed out how hard this would be to carry out here, given the mistrust many clients have of the authorities, but it seems to work well in the States – a hopeful sign, perhaps, given other developments around law enforcement tactics we see

in that country.

Similarly, business owners in areas with significant homelessness are informed about Housing First, and supported to signpost potential clients to services, deepening understanding and empathy on the part of a population that might show hostility to people sleeping on the streets around their premises.

In Lyon, and France more generally, a variety of innovative tactics impressed me.

Local government has the first opportunity to buy any private accommodation up for sale. By doing this, Lyon has amassed a substantive set of properties that are used for Housing First. Combined with the assistance available with rent arrears, and a ban on winter evictions (unless a lengthy court process is followed) and the picture is heartening.

This innovative spirit goes back a few years. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, 40 deliberately experimental services were set up to support complex people in different ways – we visited one of them, Zone Libre.

Zone Libre is mesmerising, melding

Housing First with a kind of French squat-punk aesthetic. A central hub provides a place for clients, with offsite housing around the city. It has no rules, beyond the French laws that already exist. We were all shocked when we heard this – but became convinced that it *works*. This kind of flexibility echoes the free-thinking approach evident in some of the strategies I've already highlighted – as would the difficulty I can envision in having the bravery to do something like this here in the UK.

We also talked about creating a definition of *genuinely* affordable housing – one that isn't out of reach to many. This kind of affordable housing is key to the continuing success of the

Housing First model, but also to the lives of many others.

INNOVATION FROM WALES

It'd seem odd if I didn't highlight an example of innovation from Wales at this point. A recent roundtable with the Pobl Housing First team in Newport highlighted the integration of occupational therapists into the service. This has worked well for many reasons, not least of which is the ability of occupational therapists to better understand 'NHS speak', emphasising the needs of clients to colleagues effectively and opening up pathways into health systems.

The issue of political will came up during both events, with examples of strong political will leading to the effective development of Housing First (recent examples in Wales, Scotland and Ireland come to mind), set against a rising tide

of populist sentiment opposing the provision of support to people viewed as 'undeserving'.

More positively, a European affordable housing plan is imminent, and there seems a real commitment at an EU level to tackling homelessness across the continent. The UK, of course, cannot formally contribute to the work of the EU, but **FEANTSA** will ensure that Housing First is given the weight it deserves, though European buy-in isn't everything.

Several attendees in Lyon discussed their positive work with increasingly populist governments – I've often said, in fact, that the people who make the longest journey to believe in Housing First can end up becoming its strongest advocates – something Dr Sam Tsemerberis mentioned at an event in Dublin last year, discussing the model's journey in (you've guessed it) Milwaukee.

Ultimately, the challenges facing Housing First and homelessness support more generally are stark and complex; solutions that work everywhere are also likely to be rare. The examples of innovation I've provided present some hope that by thinking differently, homelessness can be made rare, brief and unrepeatable.

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Milwaukee delivers Housing First in an exemplary way