

HOW DUTCH HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS ARE THE ENGINE FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Introduction

As delegates gather in Rotterdam for the 2026 Housing First Europe Hub Conference, the Netherlands stands at a critical historical turning point. With the formal adoption of the National Action Plan on Homelessness (*Nationaal Actieplan Dakloosheid: Eerst een Thuis*), national policy in our host country has shifted: emergency shelters are no longer the default infrastructure; Housing First and prevention are established as the national norm.

Yet, policy consensus alone does not produce accessible homes for people experiencing homelessness in a severely constrained housing market. Moving from isolated, programme-based Housing First interventions to a full-scale systems approach requires a far more structural lever.

Our mission at Housing First Nederland is twofold: driving the systemic transition toward a Housing First systems approach at the macro level, while empowering local partners to make it an operational reality on the ground. This conference provides a vital opportunity to warmly welcome European delegates to the Netherlands, establish our national context, and reframe the connection between Dutch housing developments and the broader European movement.

This essay reflects on our ongoing strategic journey. It articulates how our impatience with paper promises evolved into a fundamental awakening within the Dutch social housing sector, positioning housing associations as the true engine of systemic reform.

From frustration to action

For years, Housing First Nederland emphasised that housing associations held the essential key to ending homelessness. Yet, despite this awareness, achieving strategic momentum remained an uphill battle. At the local and operational levels, securing housing units involved constant negotiation, even where local collaboration was strong. Municipalities faced the same challenge, given the national housing shortage and competing urgent housing needs.

When the National Action Plan formally adopted Housing First as the national baseline, we expected, or at least hoped, for swift structural change. Instead, a painful gap emerged between policy and practice. While national frameworks set ambitious goals, housing policies continue to fall short amid a severe housing crisis. Realising a true Housing First systems approach demands a fundamental shift: prioritising access for those in greatest need and reclaiming housing as a core public mandate rather than a commodity or award to be achieved

Out of sheer frustration and impatience with a system that celebrated policy on paper while so many citizens remained homeless, Housing First Nederland took on a radical stance: we were done with just talking about transformation; we decided to explore providing housing ourselves, drawing inspiration from the Finnish **Y-Foundation** (*Y-Säätiö*).

Through this exploratory phase alongside a major housing association - **Portaal** - we developed the concept for “**TUIS Nederland**”. TUIS was initially designed with a dual function: on the one hand, operating as a new housing association to lease homes directly to young people experiencing homelessness, and on the other hand, serving as a support programme to guide municipalities in implementing a Housing First systems approach (*Wonen Eerst*). The city of **Nijmegen** stepped forward as our primary early pioneer to partner with us on this approach.

The turning point

Our intention to establish a separate housing association for young people experiencing homelessness acted as a major catalyst. As our joint strategic exploration with Portaal deepened, the initiative sparked a broader reflection on the roles and responsibilities of existing institutions.

Through an open and critical dialogue, we arrived at a shared insight: the challenge was not primarily the absence of a new housing provider, but how existing social housing associations could more fully leverage their scale, resources, and public mandate to address homelessness. This led to a pivotal question that shaped the next phase of the movement:

‘Why create a new housing entity to acquire homes for unhoused citizens when existing social housing associations already possess the scale, capital, and public mandate to fulfil that responsibility? Housing people without a home is already at the heart of their social mission.’

As this shared understanding emerged, the direction of TUIS evolved. Rather than establishing a new housing corporation, the focus shifted towards mobilising existing housing associations to reclaim and strengthen their fundamental purpose from within. Together, we articulated a clear moral compass: **‘People without a home must take priority over people who already have one’**.

We then deployed the TUIS programme across the five core cities where Portaal owned housing stock (Nijmegen, Arnhem, Amersfoort, Utrecht, and Leiden). In these cities, TUIS is working together towards a common goal that extends beyond Portaal’s housing stock alone:

- **Collective mobilisation:** Many other housing associations within these municipalities joined the movement, committing dedicated social housing stock.
- **Systemic target:** Municipalities and partners formally committed to solving youth homelessness, creating the structural conditions to downscale traditional emergency shelter facilities.
- **Cultural change:** Frontline professionals, managers, and policy makers are trained and equipped to adopt Housing First principles, shifting the organisational culture from risk-aversion to unconditional trust.

Impressed by the tangible results and growing momentum, national ministries, including the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), the Ministry of Housing (BZK) and the Ministry of Social Affairs (SZW), stepped in to support and finance the programme. The TUIS programme was officially scaled up into a nationwide initiative: **Startmotor Wonen Eerst Jongeren** ('Catalyst' for Housing First for Youth), now expanding this blueprint to 10 strategic Dutch cities.

In parallel, more than 20 housing associations from major cities (De Vernieuwde Stad) joined Portaal's movement. This also prompted Aedes, the national association of housing corporations, to take a more active role in addressing homelessness.

Pioneering housing associations

Across the Netherlands, pioneering housing associations are demonstrating how systemic leadership translates into practice:

- **Portaal, Talis, Woonwaarts & Nijmegen (national blueprint):** Portaal partnered with Housing First Nederland to demonstrate that allocating social housing directly to youth experiencing homelessness prevents chronic adult homelessness. This partnership serves as the operational baseline for the 10-city Startmotor rollout.
- **Zayaz & Den Bosch (de-institutionalisation):** In 's-Hertogenbosch, housing association Zayaz, the municipality, and local homeless services completely aligned their processes into a seamless, integrated approach. By synchronising housing allocation, income support and tailored 24/7 support from day one, this joint strategy enabled the permanent closure of a traditional emergency shelter facility. With this milestone, Den Bosch became the first Dutch municipality to execute the systemic shift to Housing First.
- **TIWOS & Tilburg (allocation innovation):** In Tilburg, TIWOS tackled the systemic barrier of registration-time waiting lists by pioneering emergency priority tracks, ensuring rapid access based on urgent human need rather than accumulated administrative tenure.
- **Hef Wonen & Rotterdam (metropolitan scale):** In our host city of Rotterdam, Hef Wonen works alongside the other housing associations in the city to drive metropolitan implementation, actively partnering with Housing First Nederland to embed these principles in its own operations and across the broader sector.

Operationalising Housing First simply means doing what is possible at every level today, while simultaneously building the structural conditions for tomorrow. It is precisely this combination that brings Housing First into practice.

Conclusion: Welcome to The Netherlands

Impatience and frustration, coupled with a pioneering spirit and the conviction that things can and must be done differently, serve as a powerful catalyst. For years, we negotiated, aligned, waited, and at times, we still do. Yet, looking back at everything that led to genuine success at Housing First Nederland, one truth stands out: progress only happened when we were willing to put something on the line.

Ending homelessness is not a matter of charitable tolerance or endless pilot projects. It is a matter of courage, of refusing to dodge painful conversations and uncomfortable truths.

Homelessness takes human lives. It takes real institutional nerve, especially in a climate of severe scarcity, to hold the line on a simple moral principle: *people without a home must take priority over people who already have one.*

As you join us for the 2026 Housing First Europe Hub Conference, we invite you to look beyond our national housing crisis and see what happens when partners align behind a core mission. Systems change starts when we stop treating policy commitments as a substitute for human dignity.

Let this conference be more than another exchange of polite consensus. Let it be an honest conversation and a spark that drives us and our own sectors, disrupts comfortable status quos, and builds a Europe where having a place to call home is a non-negotiable.

A warm welcome to all of you in the Netherlands

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