

THE ROTTERDAM APPROACH: TAKING CHANGE SERIOUSLY

When I got the house, I thought, 'wow'. I simply felt like a human being.
– Silvano (19 years old)¹

In October 2026, the Housing First Europe Hub Conference takes place in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. This is the right moment to explore two interconnected key elements of the Rotterdam Housing First approach, Wonen Eerst O10. The first element is that the perspective of the citizen is always the lead perspective. The second element is that Wonen Eerst is a paradigm shift and needs to be handled accordingly. This essay describes how this works in Rotterdam.

Just one focus: what's the citizen's own perspective?

The municipality of Rotterdam started its Housing First approach in 2019, focusing on a small target group: citizens aged 18-23 experiencing homelessness - unsheltered, roofless.... Firstly, professionals working in the sector, and Rotterdam City Council Aldermen (Councillors) felt that young people experiencing homelessness were not well helped by the support that the municipality provided. Secondly, a Dutch television programme called Het Rotterdam Project demonstrated much better results in helping people experiencing homelessness than the municipality itself did. The municipality decided to adopt elements of the approach used in that television programme and started "Project O10". Project O10 consists of three elements: providing young people experiencing homelessness with a home, a network, and a budget to make things work. Every action is aimed in one direction: the future the young person wants for themselves. Where did the young person want to be in six months, or a year? This may seem like a banal question, but it is not always the case in the Netherlands for young people experiencing homelessness. This focus on the citizen's own perspective was key to the new approach.

Rotterdam started with ten young people. The number increased in the following years because Project O10 was a success. The first participants were asked at the start and at the conclusion of the Project O10 pathway to assess how they felt about their lives². Over the course of Project O10 the average result - indicating satisfaction or a feeling of well-being, increased from an average of four out of ten, to eight out of ten.

A little less conversation, a little more action pleas

The success of Project O10 left everybody wanting more. In 2025, the municipality and partners decided to broaden the approach to other citizens. Starting with necessary improvements to the City Service Center (Centraal Onthaal) - which is the place where

¹ Quote from 'Eindrapport Project O10 – De jongeren een jaar later', OBI gemeente Rotterdam (2022).

² The exact question that the youngsters got: What mark would you give your life right now? (Welk cijfer geef je je leven op dit moment?)

Rotterdam citizens experiencing homelessness could go for help, the City worked to respond to the recommendations from Project O10. However, there was a great deal of improvement and work to be done: the department of Centraal Onthaal struggled to manage the demand for support from people in need.

Centraal Onthaal adopted the Housing First approach with its own twist - in line with a famous Rotterdam phrase: "*niet lullen, maar poetsen*" ('stop talking and start working'). Without making too many plans or involving too many people, they started their working with this new approach. Case by case; a bit under the radar, too. The approach at Centraal Onthaal was named Wonen Eerst O10.

Beyond a roof

Housing First is an approach for people are homeless. The standard approach in decade-sis that people need to prove a lot first, before the system them 'ready independently'. This long and out of homelessness through bureaucratic procedures and pathways. This serves no one: the mental condition of the person gets worse, these procedures cost a lot of public and it increases the pressure on the already scarce labour capacity.

Housing First turns this way of working upside down: a person provided a house as soon as possible. From that point can rebuild their lie.

Why is this fundamental?

Putting the citizen's perspective at the centre was not difficult for professionals who worked with Wonen Eerst O10 and Project O10. There had been a tradition of working with the "de Doorbraakmethode" which had a focus on the needs and concerns of the individual in question. What was hard at times was maintaining that focus when implementing the solutions that the citizens needed. In organisations that are essentially supply-driven, such as the municipality of Rotterdam, the system is not designed to or amenable to adapting to meet a citizen's needs. At the start of Project O10 Rotterdam appointed navigators ('procesregisseurs') to facilitate the process. These navigators ensure citizens in Wonen Eerst O10 and Project O10 can access what they need. They work with the housing corporations to access housing, they work with the benefits system so the citizen is able to pay their rent, and so on. In short, the navigators handle the bureaucracy to smooth the path for Housing First. At the start, the navigators especially felt it was hard to stay focused on the citizen's perspective. The navigators found it challenging to manage the bureaucratic obstacles, since the systems and departments they were working with, had not adapted their own way of working.

Housing First as a paradigm shift

This is where the second key element of Rotterdam's Housing First approach comes in. It is not just a new way of working for committed and enthusiastic professionals. It is a paradigm shift: putting the citizen's perspective at the centre and providing housing to people experiencing homelessness as a starting point. In fact, it's a completely different way of working than the standard adhered to in recent decades. In short, the terms paradigms and paradigm shifts were introduced by philosophers Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos. A paradigm means a shared framework of assumptions. We all function within these paradigms. They define our routines, perspectives and roles. But when a paradigm doesn't serve us anymore, we might shift to a new one. In this regard, Housing First can be seen as a paradigm shift. It changes the starting assumption from housing as the 'outcome' of recovery to housing as the 'basis' for recovery.

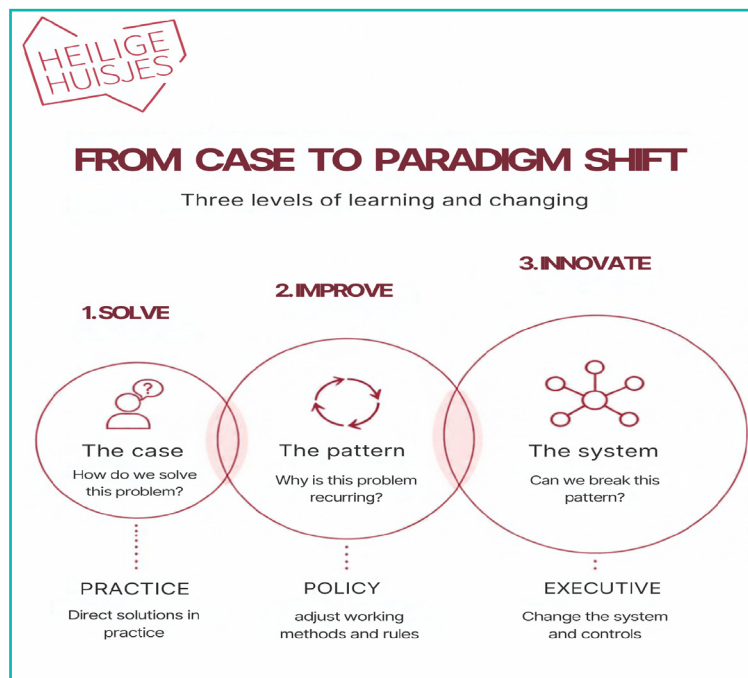
In Kuhn's terms, a paradigm shift asks organisations to replace familiar routines, perspectives and roles, rather than merely improve existing practice. Such a transition takes time and produces friction. Lakatos added that such shifts rarely happen overnight, but unfold gradually as a new approach demonstrates it can solve what the old one could not. That is why Rotterdam supports professionals, policymakers and leaders in putting this transition into practice, using action research to identify recurring obstacles and develop lasting, structural solutions.

Shifting in the right direction

So how does this work? From the start of Project O10 the municipality teamed up with Heilige Huisjes, an action research organisation focused on housing. The action research is at the core of the Wonen Eerst O10 approach, because it points out where we – as professionals, as organisations – need to shift.

Every action research project in Rotterdam starts with the navigators. Heilige Huisjes works with all the navigators to identify obstacles and recurring patterns. It all starts with the citizens. Any obstacle that a citizen faces will need a solution, but not every obstacle is a pattern. When obstacles recur, we call it a pattern. Every six weeks navigators prioritise these patterns: which patterns need a solution most urgently, in the shift to Wonen Eerst? For every topic that has been prioritised, an action research project starts. We gather the necessary professionals and form an action research group. This group identifies the obstacle, investigates possible solutions and formulates actions. The project focuses on small steps with quick results. Some topics we have worked on recently include undiagnosed intellectual disabilities of people experiencing homelessness and cooperation and communication with other departments, such as the benefits or debt departments.

Rotterdam's action research method is structured from the bottom up: the starting point is always frontline work. But solutions aren't always found on the ground. So, when necessary, we involve team leaders, managers, policy officers or the aldermen. Because that is what helps the navigators to get the best results for citizens.



Perspective and paradigm: an essential combination

In Rotterdam, we've learned that just focusing on the citizen's perspective is not enough: navigators and other professionals can't get it done when the systems around them stay the same. Therefore, professionals need to be aware that the shift to Wonen Eerst is a paradigm shift. The other way around, just focusing on Housing First as a paradigm shift without centring the citizen's perspective, will not work either. The citizen's perspective is the compass: without this as a guiding focus, as an indicator of direction, we cannot move forward.

Shifts take time

In Rotterdam, this dual approach works well. Of course, there is still a great deal that needs to be fixed, no matter the approach. For instance, Rotterdam struggles with staff shortages, partly due to labour market shortages in general. There's no quick fix for this and it is largely beyond the influence of Wonen Eerst O10. We are also well aware of the fact that we have not yet reached all of the professionals required for the solutions recommended by the action research projects. There is a clear link to the 'stop talking and start working' approach Rotterdam started in Wonen Eerst O10, but that there is still a lot of work to be done.

This is not unexpected. Kuhn claimed that paradigm shifts in science can take decades. That is not the timeline most professionals have in mind when they embrace a new way of working, but it does put things in perspective. Wonen Eerst O10 and Housing First make such a great difference to how the municipality solves homelessness, so of course, we would love to make the necessary changes immediately. But changes like these take time, and a great deal of work. It's important not to get dispirited by the obstacles we find on the Housing First path, because we need those obstacles. We need to learn from them, because finding solutions and ways through, mean that we are successfully shifting to our new paradigm.

Marit Lüschen

Sources: 'Eindrapport Project O10 – De jongeren een jaar later', OBI gemeente Rotterdam (2022).