

HOUSING FIRST AS A PLATFORM FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Before we'd even heard of Housing First at Turning Point Scotland, we knew that the homelessness system in the UK, as it was, wasn't working. It was a deficit-based system that required people to meet particular criteria to qualify for services, to prove that they were 'housing ready' before being offered a stable home and to navigate a maze of disjointed services. As highlighted in the 2019 Hard Edges report¹, the complexity of this system particularly disadvantages and excludes people with the most complex lives and highest support needs. The system is hard for most people to navigate – and it can be a traumatising experience in the best of circumstances.

However, for people who have more support needs and who have been let down in the past, it can be an impossible barrier that prevents people from getting help.

When Turning Point Scotland (TPS) brought Housing First to the UK in 2010, in a small, self-funded pilot in Glasgow, we did so because we wanted to demonstrate that there was a different way to work with people who were being failed by our existing services.

Housing First allowed us to work in a more person-centred way, coordinating wrap around and unconditional support for as long as someone needs it. We proved that, with the right support, the vast majority of people can live in an ordinary home as part of their community.

Housing First is now well embedded in Scotland and in many parts of the rest of the UK. Housing First operates in 26 (of 32) local authorities across Scotland, with an estimated 2,336 Housing First tenancies since 2021. National statistics show that Housing First is maturing in Scotland in a variety of ways, with a growing number of children staying in Housing First tenancies, either full or part time; a growing number of new tenancies; and around 400 households in a 'step down' or 'stand down' phase,² meaning they are able to step away from support (while leaving the door open to return if needed). Waiting times from referral to Housing First to moving into a permanent tenancy are also slowly becoming shorter and tenancy sustainment rates at 12 months have remained very high at around 85%.

However, Housing First still primarily operates as a service, a programme, in every area that it's in. As a service, Housing First can – and does – coordinate wrap around support from other services. This eases people's paths and helps them to navigate their way through a complex, uncoordinated system. This support helps to create good outcomes for people in Housing First but it is not helping to fill the gaps in the system nor making any meaningful change to how the wider system functions.

At TPS, we'll continue to help people we support in Housing First to navigate the system. But developing and embedding Housing First services made us realise that we needed more than another new service solution, we needed systems change. We want to move from Housing First being a single service helping some people to navigate a complex system to changing the system itself to fit around people's needs and expectations. And we recognised that in order to do this, we needed to approach the challenge from outside of services.

¹ Hard Edges Scotland: Mapping Severe and Multiple Disadvantage. Heriot-Watt University. Commissioned by Lankelly Chase and The Robertson Trust. 2019. Available at: <https://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/media/xqfjr4sq/hard-edges-scotland-full-report-june-2019.pdf>

² The 'step down' process involves agreement from the tenant and lead support worker that support is no longer required, and a regular check-up process is agreed so that support can re-engage if required. The 'stand down' stage occurs when Housing First support is no longer required. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-first-monitoring-reports/pages/1-april-2025-to-30-september-2025/#_edn4

Over the years, we have talked about the importance of ‘fidelity to the approach’ and how we cannot think that the job is done when Housing First is introduced. As we delivered Housing First we touched, bounced off or grated against other parts of the system that helped or hindered us. We realised that we could not change the system by just introducing a new service or approach, rather, we had to focus on how that service interacted with the wider system and, in turn, how the system interacted with the service and the individuals supported by Housing First. We moved from thinking about fidelity to a Housing First approach, to thinking about systems fidelity³ and how well the system supports Housing First. A few years ago, we started thinking about how to move this even further – to a whole systems approach where we are aiming to transform the wider system of public services so that it functions better for everyone.

Changing a Complex System

Scotland is often recognised as having some of the best homelessness legislation in the world. Once someone becomes unintentionally homeless, the local authority has a duty to offer temporary and then settled accommodation and to provide housing support if needed. However, perhaps because these rights are so strong, we don’t put as much emphasis on preventing the crisis of homelessness before it happens.

There are welcome changes on the horizon. Last year, the Scottish Parliament passed the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025,⁴ which brings several new prevention duties to both local authorities’ homelessness teams as well as, crucially, agencies outside of housing and homelessness. The new ‘Ask C Act’ duty requires public services like health and education to ask about homelessness or risk of homelessness and then act within their powers to prevent homelessness.

These new duties will hopefully help to shift focus, as well as resources, towards earlier prevention of homelessness. Perhaps more importantly, we hope they will also encourage cross-sector working and investment to prevent homelessness, emphasising that preventing homelessness is everyone’s business – and that it also will translate into costs savings, not only for homelessness services but also for their own services.

Housing First gave us the platform to start talking about how the system worked, or rather, how it didn’t work for people experiencing homelessness. We were able to highlight how Housing First services can effectively coordinate support, wrapping support around an individual, often by physically bringing people from different services (health, justice, housing, etc.) around the table. We also highlighted that this coordinated approach was crucial to the success of Housing First. Housing First helped to show how, when these services work in a coordinated and person centred way, people are much better supported and the system is able to respond more effectively.

Using Housing First services as an example, we could highlight where people and services bumped up against one another, where the system supported people and where there were gaps in prevention work that can push people into crisis. While Housing First gave us the insight, what we were talking about was not fidelity to a service model or even systems fidelity to Housing First, it was about a whole system approach to change.

³ As wonderfully explained in <https://demoshelsinki.fi/publication/housing-first-a-new-systems-perspective/>

⁴ Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, asp 13. Scottish Parliament. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2025/13/contents>

Whole Systems Approach in Fife

Fife is a local authority just north of Edinburgh on the East coast of Scotland. It has a population of about 375,000, making it the third largest local authority by population in Scotland. Fife faces some of the most significant homelessness pressures in Scotland. In 2024/25, the Council recorded over 2,600 homelessness applications, more than 480 children living in temporary accommodation and a repeat homelessness rate of around 4%⁵. Local analysis identified relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, eviction, poverty, rent arrears, mental health challenges and substance use as key drivers of housing instability. Many households experiencing homelessness were known to multiple services long before crisis point yet support was often fragmented and difficult to navigate.

When Turning Point Scotland was looking for a local authority partner to explore using a whole systems approach to prevent homelessness, we chose Fife because we found energy, enthusiasm and a degree of bravery to challenge the status quo and 'lift the lid' on their own services. Both Turning Point Scotland and Fife Council jointly funded the project, establishing joint buy in and leadership. Beginning as a high-level concept without a clear plan of action, the Whole Systems Approach Fife has gained a greater clarity and developed significantly over the last two years. The programme seeks to transform how services work together by ensuring the system follows the individual, rather than expecting individuals to navigate complex services themselves. Housing, health, social work, education, criminal justice, community safety, third-sector organisations and people with lived experience are brought together in working groups and quarterly learning cycles around a shared goal of preventing homelessness through early intervention.

How are we changing systems in Fife?

Through the Whole Systems Approach work, Turning Point Scotland set out to work with Fife to explore how we can use our experience and lessons from Housing First to make wider systems change. We didn't want to try to make system change from within a service, we wanted to work at a more strategic level, to ask questions and make changes to the strategic direction of the system itself, rather than from within single services.

Changing the system to support Housing First to flourish was part of the remit, but there were so many other elements that had to be considered. Both partners have committed financial resources as well as significant time to the partnership. Key to the success of this approach has been the bold leadership from Fife Council as well as Turning Point Scotland to recognise what is going well within the system, what needs to improve and a willingness to implement processes to make that change happen. Our inception report,⁶ written by our learning partner, Indigo House, identified key elements of our approach:

- **Homelessness is complex and cannot be solved by a single housing service approach;** it needs a multi-disciplinary approach as many different public and community-based services interact with a household during their homelessness experience/s.

- **A whole system approach is one where the individual's needs are met and the whole system follows the individual involving a range of services and organisations;** it shouldn't be up to the individual to have to navigate and follow different services and processes.
- **There is an integrated and coordinated approach to meet individual needs, no matter where and how the person interacts with the system.** All services have a responsibility to collaborate and communicate to better meet individual needs.
- **Any change to the system needs a collective learning approach, stepping back from the day-to-day processes to understand the linkages and barriers in the system.** This means working across services/organisations to reflect, learn and adapt to coordinate change.
- **A whole system approach does not mean wholesale change to the whole homelessness system at one time.** It means exploring promising opportunities, starting small and building on these opportunities to influence the whole, but it does need all relevant services and organisations to be involved.
- **Whole system change requires a change in culture and attitudes so that organisations and staff are continually looking at the needs of the individual rather than a set process.** Change may be ongoing and iterative as staff are empowered to identify areas for change.

One of our initial actions was to employ two Community Navigators to work with people in the community to help them navigate the system and, crucially, to highlight barriers that people are facing. Our aim was to have the Community Navigators help to identify, fix and then bring issues to the steering group to close gaps in the system. One of the first gaps they identified was around housing and homelessness advice for students at the local college. The Navigators soon made links with the college and started to provide drop-in sessions, providing housing advice and assistance when needed. Our next steps are to ensure that the college guidance team have the knowledge to give advice and develop the links they need directly with the local authority. The Community Navigators will then be able to step away, leaving college staff with the skills, experience and connections that they need. We think this partnership approach, with partners that are truly open to change, will provide a blueprint for implementing the incoming Ask and Act Duties.

We also set out to explore how we collect and analyse data. We convened a working group to look at rough sleeping and Out of Hours presentations, finding that there were people sleeping rough that were previously uncounted and that, even within the local authority Customer Service team, there was a degree of misunderstanding about how temporary accommodation was allocated out of hours. To respond, we put a new rough sleeping reporting form⁷ in place. Now, when rough sleeping is reported, a member of the Communities team visits the location and, if they find a person, will offer support and assistance where required. We also clarified with key staff how the allocations process works for temporary accommodation out of hours.

To gather more real-time information, we have started to follow a small number of households through their homelessness journey. This approach will help us to better understand individuals' experiences of the homelessness journey and how and where it can be improved from a whole systems approach. Our aim in the future is to use these live case

studies as a catalyst to developing an engaged group of lead professionals in a service development group from other areas of the system that have historically not engaged with homelessness.

We were also selected as one of 15 national homelessness prevention pilots, helping to shape implementation of Scotland's new Ask and Act prevention duties through the engagement of 16 different organisations and teams. The project is now supporting partner organisations across housing, health, education and community services to identify housing risk earlier and intervene before homelessness occurs.

When we started the Whole Systems Approach project, we committed to working with our partners over a long period. We recognised that change does not happen quickly and committed ourselves to a longer-term project of at least three years. We also recognised that even big problems don't always require large-scale solutions. Small, iterative changes can make a big difference.

What does a systems approach for Housing First look like?

When we think about success in Housing First, we tend to think about number of tenancies, waiting times, and tenancy sustainment rates as well as personal outcomes like stronger relationships, better wellbeing and reduced substance use.

When we think about what a successful system looks like, it's when services across sectors recognise their role in preventing crisis at the earliest opportunity, know what they can do to help and step in to do it. It's when the system itself is designed in a way that helps people to avoid becoming homeless and to act earlier, before harm is done. Systems change is a hard thing to measure. In our work in Fife, we've engaged a learning partner to help us to evaluate our work, as well as act as a critical friend, challenging our approach and helping us to stay on track. They produced an inception report⁸ last year looking at how our work started. This included an evaluation matrix to help us to measure the outcomes and impact of our work. In April next year, our learning partner will produce another report examining what we have achieved and how we got there. We hope to show that taking a whole systems approach, inspired by Housing First, has a positive impact on how the system operates and, most importantly, people's individual outcomes. Much like Housing First, we hope that this small, self-funded pilot will demonstrate how to take a whole systems approach to ending homelessness with earlier prevention and more joined-up systems.

We know that Housing First works incredibly well because of its flexibility and ability to adapt to a person's needs. We'd like to see a system that can be just as flexible and adaptable in every case. We'd like to see a system that seamlessly works to prevent homelessness whenever possible and otherwise to ensure that it is rare, brief and unrepeatable.

Heather McCluskey
Innovation and Practice Lead – Homelessness and Prevention

Nicky Miller
Head of Homelessness and Prevention