



Housing First Guide Europe

Chapter 4. Delivering Housing

Nicholas Pleace

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Housing and Neighbourhood in Housing First	3
2.	Housing as the Starting Point	4
3.	Providing Housing	5
	3.1. Working with the Private Rented Sector	7
	3.2. Working with the Social Rented Sector	8

1. Housing and Neighbourhood in Housing First

There is an important distinction between being provided with accommodation and having a real home. To be a home, housing must offer:

- Legally enforceable **security of tenure**, i.e. someone using Housing First should not be in a position where they have no housing rights and can be evicted immediately without any warning and/or with the use of force.
- **Privacy**. Housing must be a private space where someone can choose to be alone without interference and can conduct personal relationships with family, friends and/or their partner.
- A space that the person living within it has **control** over, in terms of who can enter their home and when they can do so and also in terms of being able to live in the way they wish, within the usual constraints of a standard tenancy or lease agreement.
- A place in which someone feels physically **safe and secure**.
- **Affordability**, in that rent payments are not so high as to undermine the person's ability to meet other living costs, such as food and utility bills.
- **All the amenities** that an ordinary home possesses, sufficient furniture, a working kitchen and bathroom and working lighting, heating and plumbing.
- A **fit standard** for occupation, i.e. not overcrowded or in poor repair.
- **Their own place** that they can decorate and furnish as they wish and where they can live their life in the way they choose. Housing must not be subject to the kind of rules and regulations that can exist in an institution, determining how a space is decorated, furnished and lived in.

The European typology of homelessness (ETHOS) identifies physical, social and legal domains in defining what is meant by a home. The physical domain centres on having one's own living space, i.e. someone has their own front door to their own home, under their exclusive control. The social domain means having the space and the privacy to be 'at home'. The legal domain echoes the international definition of a right to housing, i.e. security of residence with legal protections (see [Chapter 2](#))¹.

The location of housing is important. However, Housing First services will not have the resources to simply pick anywhere in a city or municipality. In some locations, such as major European cities, there will very often be a need for compromise between what is affordable for Housing First service users and what would be an 'ideal' home.

Where possible, it is important to avoid areas characterised by high crime rates, nuisance behaviour and low social cohesion/weak social capital, where there is little or no 'community' in a positive sense and a Housing First service user might be subject to bullying or persecution or be at continual risk of being a victim of crime. There is clear evidence that the wrong location can inhibit or undermine the recovery that Housing First services seek to promote². More generally, it is desirable to avoid physically unpleasant locations and those without access to necessary and desirable amenities, e.g. an affordable local shop, public transport links and pleasant green space. The right kind of neighbourhood can be a determinant of health, well-being and social integration³, positively influencing outcomes for Housing First service users.

1 European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion <http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/ethos-european-typology-of-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion/>

2 Pleace, N. with Wallace, A. (2011) *Demonstrating the Effectiveness of Housing Support Services for People with Mental Health Problems: A Review* London: National Housing Federation.

3 Bevan, M. and Croucher, K. (2011) *Lifetime Neighbourhoods*, London: DCLG <https://www.york.ac.uk/media/chp/documents/2011/lifetimeneighbourhoods.pdf>

Some Housing First service users may wish to move away from the locations in which they experienced homelessness. The reasons for this may include wanting to avoid negative peer pressure from their former life. For some Housing First service users, including women who have experienced gender-based/domestic violence, there may be a need to avoid living in certain areas for reasons of personal safety and to improve their health and well-being. Ideally, housing should not be located in an area that a Housing First service user wishes to avoid.

Adequate homes must be located in an adequate neighbourhood. Avoiding areas characterised by social problems and poor facilities will help increase the chances that housing can be sustained.

2. Housing as the Starting Point

Housing is the *starting point* rather than an *end goal* for Housing First services. Housing First is very different from some other homelessness services that try make homeless people with high support needs 'housing ready' *before* they are rehoused, i.e. staircase services where housing happens *last*. In Housing First, being provided with housing is what happens *first*.

The role of a home in Housing First has been described as providing ontological security. This is an academic idea, but it can be summarised as someone feeling that their life is secure, predictable and safe - the opposite of what is experienced in homelessness, where nothing is secure and both immediate and longer-term risks are everywhere⁴. For Housing First service users, having their own home is designed to help them return to, or begin, a normal life. One American academic has described the role of having a home in Housing First in the following way:

“Having a 'home' may not guarantee recovery in the future, but it does afford a stable platform for re-creating a less stigmatised, normalised life in the present⁵.”

Alongside being designed to deliver a permanent exit from homelessness, a home has **the following roles in Housing First:**

- **A home is the starting point of social integration.** Having a home returns, or introduces, Housing First service users to a central part of having a normal life: having their own home. Housing First emphasises the role of housing in beginning a process in which a homeless person with high support needs lives *within* a community and society and is no longer excluded from it by lacking a home of their own (see [Chapter 3](#)).
- Being on the street, or in another insecure place, heightens both the perception and reality of being at physical risk. Emergency and communal homelessness services may also feel and be unsafe. **The right home provides both security and predictability.** Someone using Housing First knows they have somewhere to sleep and it will be safe.
- **A home provides a safe and stable environment that improves the effectiveness of treatment** that Housing First service users may opt to use. Sustained experience of trying to provide effective treatment for mental and physical health problems, or help with drug and alcohol use has shown that when someone is living on the street or in homelessness services, the effectiveness of treatment is *undermined*. If health services are to be effective for homeless people, the first step is to ensure they have somewhere to live in which they are warm, dry, have regular meals and are not subject to the extremes of stress that can accompany homelessness⁶.
- **A home brings control over life.** Having a home allows someone to exercise privacy, to socialise and to have a space in which to develop and maintain a partnership. Having a home enables someone to live in the way they want to, something that is not possible when in a communal

4 Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. (2013) *Improving Health and Social Integration through Housing First: A Review* Brussels: DIHAL/FEANTSA. Vid note 94.

5 Padgett, D. K. (2007). There's no place like (a) home: Ontological security among persons with serious mental illness in the United States. *Social Science & Medicine*, 64(9), 1925-1936, p. 1934.

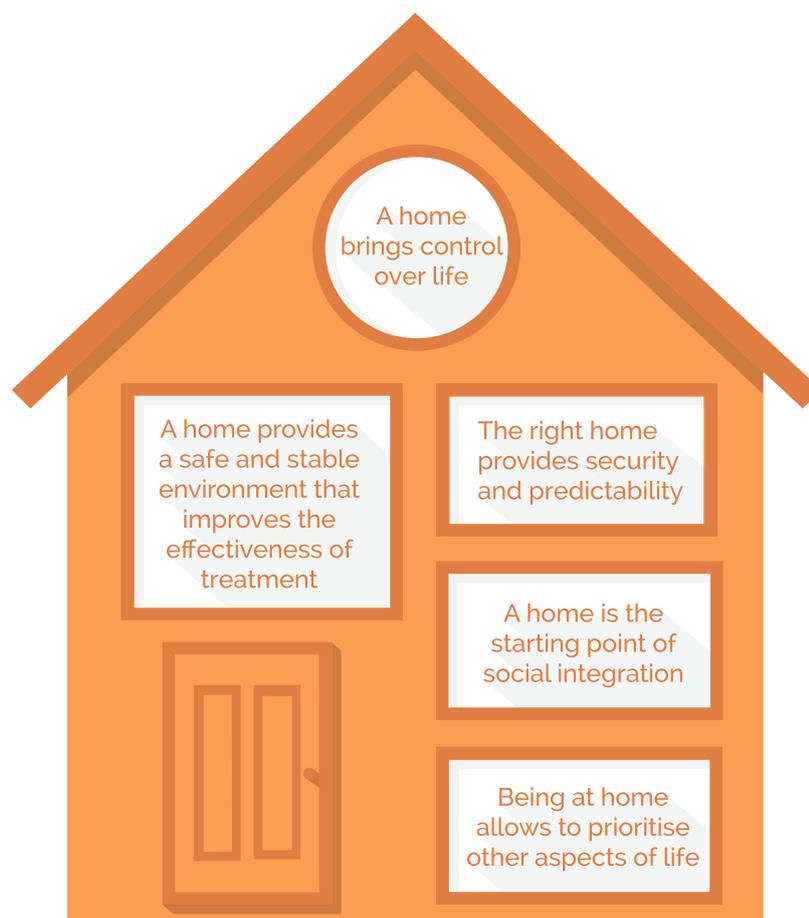
6 Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. (2003) *Delivering Health Care to Homeless People: An Effectiveness Review* Edinburgh: NHS Scotland. <http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/425-RE04120022003Final.pdf>

homelessness service or emergency accommodation - in which all living space is shared - or when on the street.

- o When housing needs are met, it becomes possible to **prioritise other aspects of life**. Housing First shows that life can get better by delivering a settled home and actively engages Housing First service users with the idea that their health, well-being and social integration can also improve. This in turn encourages them to engage with treatment and support services.

A service that does not offer what can be clearly recognised as a home cannot be regarded as Housing First. Emergency or hostel accommodation with shared sleeping space, or that offers only a partially private living space, that is not self-contained, is not Housing First. Equally, a service that allows staff to simply walk into the home of a Housing First service user, or which gives them a key to the door of that person's home, which they can use without permission, is not Housing First.

[Chapter 3](#) describes the range, extent and organisation of the housing support provided by Housing First services.



3. Providing Housing

Housing First service users are able to exercise choice in using treatment (see [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 3](#)) and should also be able to exercise choice about where and how they will live. Obviously, housing options will be subject to what is available and what can be afforded by Housing First service users⁷, but generally speaking,

⁷ In some cases, Housing First services will pay rents for service users, in others, rental subsidies are provided via welfare systems.

Housing First service users should expect:

- To be able to **see housing before they agree to move into it**.
- To be offered **more than once choice of housing**, i.e. they should be able to refuse offered housing if they wish without there being any negative consequence for them. In practice, a Housing First service may face challenges in finding ideal housing. This will need to be made clear to each Housing First service user, but there should be no expectation that being offered only one or two choices is sufficient. Housing First should never withdraw an offer of housing and support on the basis that someone has refused one or more offers of housing.
- To have the **financial consequences of having their own home clearly explained to them** and to have the opportunity to discuss this. Before moving into their home, Housing First service users should understand what their financial obligations will be and how much money they will have. In some European countries, which pay a basic income to anyone who is unemployed, someone may have less *disposable* income when housed than when living in emergency or temporary accommodation for homeless people (because they have additional living costs).
- To have **some choice with respect to the location** of the housing that they are offered.
- To be offered some **flexibility around how they choose to live**, i.e. someone may wish to live with a partner, friends or with other people, rather than on their own in an apartment. Some Italian Housing First services, for example, will support families and some English services will support couples (see Italy Country [Fact Sheet](#), UK Country [Fact Sheet](#)).

There are three main mechanisms by which a Housing First service can deliver housing:

- Use of the private rented sector
- Use of the social rented sector (where social rented housing exists)
- Direct provision of housing, by buying housing, developing new housing or using existing housing stock.

The challenges faced by a Housing First service may include:

- **Finding enough affordable, adequate housing** in acceptable locations in high-pressure housing markets (where housing demand is very high). Any area with high economic growth is likely to be a challenging place to find sufficient housing of the right sort. The type of housing available in some rural areas (a relative absence of smaller apartments) may also present a challenge.
- Where **social housing** is available, it may be **targeted on groups other than people who are homeless**, or it may be subject to high demand.
- There may be problems with the **availability, affordability and quality of housing in the private rented sector**.
- Both social and private sector **landlords may be reluctant to house formerly homeless people** with high support needs. There are concerns that people who have been homeless will present management problems, such as getting into disputes with neighbours, or failing to pay their rent.
- **Housing First service users sometimes cannot access sufficient welfare benefits to pay the rent**. This is more of an issue in European countries that have limited welfare systems than in those with extensive welfare systems, where various forms of housing benefit or minimum income benefit pay all or most of the rent for very low income/vulnerable groups. In countries with more limited welfare systems, Housing First services may need to find income streams to help pay the rent for their service users.
- It is possible to create new housing specifically for Housing First but **the costs of development (building new housing) or renovating/converting** existing housing are considerable. Buying housing is also an option, but while this *may* be cheaper than building or renovating, again, the costs may be too high for this to be a realistic option.

- o **NIMBY (not in my back yard) attitudes** linked to the stigmatisation of homeless people which may lead neighbourhoods to try to stop Housing First services from operating in their area. Housing First services may need to work with neighbouring households, providing information, reassurance and if necessary intervening if a Housing First service user has caused a problem (also intervening if a neighbour is behaving unreasonably towards a Housing First service user).
- o Housing First can work flexibly and imaginatively, but it **cannot fix underlying problems with affordable and adequate housing supply** and may encounter operational difficulties in any context where there is just not enough affordable or adequate housing for the entire population.

Housing First is meant for homeless people with high support needs. The need that Housing First services have in terms of numbers of housing units will often be *relatively* small. Although data on European homelessness are incomplete, it appears that, even in a major city, a Housing First service would probably *not* require hundreds of homes⁸.

3.1. Working with the Private Rented Sector

There are various ways in which Housing First can employ the private rented sector as a source of homes. A successful use of the private rented sector includes:

- o **Careful inspection and checking of apartments/flats** to ensure that the standards and location are suitable.
- o **Checking that tenancy arrangements are correct** and that a Housing First service user has the full protection of the laws that cover security of tenure. In some countries, tenancies in the private rented sector will be longer and more secure than in others.
- o **Affordability checks**, centring on current and likely future rent levels being at a level that will allow other essential costs to be met. Where a Housing First service requires a financial contribution from a service user, the affordability of this contribution must be subject to regular review. Any expected financial contributions also need to be clearly explained to a service user before they agree to accept a home. Some Housing First services require a 30% contribution of income towards rent. In some countries, this is not practical, as the Housing First service user may have a very low income and the Housing First service itself will need to pay or subsidise the rent. In other countries, the welfare system will pay all, or most of, the rent for a Housing First service user, meaning that the Housing First service either only has to make a small contribution to housing costs, or has no direct housing costs at all.
- o **Negotiation and discussion with and education of private rented sector landlords** and/or agents representing one or more private sector landlords. It should not be presumed that all or most private rented sector landlords will be unsympathetic or unwilling to work with a Housing First service. Experience from some Housing First services shows that at least some private sector landlords will be prepared to work with Housing First services out of a sense of civic responsibility⁹.
- o **Offering a housing management service** to private landlords. This can be a powerful incentive. A Housing First service can offer to guarantee that rent will be paid and that any management issues, such as neighbour disputes, will be dealt with and perhaps also to undertake the maintenance, repair or renovation of housing. If a private landlord effectively has to do no more than collect a guaranteed rent, potential worries about making their housing available to homeless people can often be overcome. Some Housing First services offer to be directly responsible for a tenancy, subletting to a Housing First service user, so the service, rather than the Housing First service user, is legally responsible for any problems with the tenancy.

⁸ Busch-Geertsema, V., Benjaminsen, L., Filipovič Hrast, M. and Pleace, N. European Observatory of Homelessness. FEANTSA Brussels (2014) <http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/extent-and-profile-of-homelessness-in-european-member-states-a-statistical-update/>

⁹ <http://www.shp.org.uk/story/housing-first-provides-stability-chronically-homeless-people>

- o **Offering a financial incentive** to private rented sector landlords. This is a possible strategy, but experience in some countries, for example Finland and the UK, has shown that private rented markets tend to react to financial incentives for housing homeless people by increasing rents¹⁰.

In Portugal, use of the private rented sector by Casas Primeiro in Lisbon has been reported as delivering very good results, with almost every Housing First service user reporting¹¹:

- o A **sense of control** over their living space.
- o That they had **privacy** in their home.
- o That their home was a **tranquil place**, somewhere they could find peace and quiet.
- o That their home had **all the facilities** they needed.

Casas Primeiro also reports that many, though not all, Housing First service users living in private rented apartments also felt at home in their neighbourhood.

In London and elsewhere in the UK, experience of using the private rented sector for Housing First is much more mixed, for the following reasons:

- o **Insecurity of tenure.** Most private rented housing is let on short-term (six or 12 month) tenancies. These tenancies provide some protection from eviction, but once the period covered by the tenancy ends, there is no legal protection. This means that someone with a 12-month tenancy in the private rented sector has no legal protection if they are asked to leave after 12 months.
- o **High rents** in some places in the UK, which make all but the cheapest private rented housing inaccessible to someone claiming welfare benefits. Better standard housing in more attractive locations was unaffordable for Housing First service users.

3.2. Working with the Social Rented Sector

Social housing does not exist in one single form in Europe and is not universally available¹². In this Guide to Housing First, social housing is defined as housing which is built with a subsidy, from government and/or from charities/NGOs, that offers security of tenure and adequate housing at an affordable rent.

There are various ways in which Housing First can employ the social rented sector as a source of homes:

- o Realising that while the social rented sector can play an important role in housing homeless people, this is not necessarily the only concern of social landlords¹³. Social housing can have a wider remit than ending homelessness, including regeneration and strategic management of housing markets. It may be necessary for Housing First services to carry out negotiation and advocacy, and the case management of an application to a social landlord.
- o Accepting that social landlords may have the same reluctance to house formerly homeless people with high support needs that exists among some private sector landlords. Social landlords may be worried that housing management problems may arise from Housing First service users, ranging from neighbour disputes through to rent not being paid.
- o Being prepared to offer housing management services to social landlords, e.g. guarantees that rent will be paid and that any issues such as neighbour disputes will be handled by the Housing First service. This might be particularly important when someone using Housing First has previously been evicted by a social landlord.

10 Wilson, W. (2015) *Households in Temporary Accommodation (England)* House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 02110 www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn02110.pdf

11 Ornelas, J., Martins, P., Zilhão, M.T. and Duarte, T. (2014) Housing First: An Ecological Approach to Promoting Community Integration *European Journal of Homelessness* (8.1), 29-56 - <http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Housing-First-An-Ecological-Approach.pdf>

12 Whitehead, C. and Scanlon, K. (eds) *Social Housing in Europe London*: LSE. - <http://www.lse.ac.uk/geographyAndEnvironment/research/London/pdf/SocialHousingInEurope.pdf>

13 Pleace, N., Teller, N. and Quilgars, D. (2011) *Social Housing Allocation and Homelessness Brussels*: FEANTSA - http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/feantsa_eoh-studies_v1_12-2011.pdf

- Engaging with allocation systems covering multiple social landlords, where these exist. All the social landlords in a city or region may be part of a shared system where eligible people make a single application for housing which is simultaneously received by all landlords. Housing First service users may need support in using these kinds of systems, which may be online.
- Establishing a working protocol, or agreement, that makes a minimum number of suitable homes available each year. For example, a social landlord might agree to supply 5% of all vacancies to Housing First service users over a three-year period. With large social landlords, for example a municipality or NGO providing all or most of the social housing in a city, the percentage required might be lower.
- Reaching a formal agreement that Housing First service users get additional points or weighting in social housing allocation systems. This could be the allocation system for a single social landlord or it could be additional points in a choice-based lettings system covering multiple social landlords.

Do not forget to view the [videos of Unit 4 \(Part1, Part2\)](#) to further your knowledge on how housing can be provided for Housing First Programmes in different contexts in Europe.

For more information and details, contact:
info@housingfirstguide.eu

