



# Housing First Guide Europe

Chapter 6. Housing First and Wider Strategy

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# 1. The Strategic Roles of Housing First

## 1.1. Incorporating Housing First into Strategies to Fight Homelessness

Research shows that homelessness should not be seen as simply being the result of individual actions or untreated mental illness. Homelessness exists in multiple forms in Europe. Some homelessness does not involve people who use drugs, drink to excess or have mental health problems, but is instead linked primarily to their economic position, a wider lack of community integration, poor social support and difficulties in accessing services<sup>1</sup>. Homelessness can also vary between different groups. For example, women's homelessness is much more likely to be linked to escaping domestic violence than men's. Homeless women may also avoid some forms of homelessness service, often relying on informal relationships to temporarily find accommodation<sup>2</sup>. Women experiencing homelessness can therefore require different services from those provided to single homeless men. Some groups of homeless people, such as teenagers with experience of social work-based child protection systems, people who have been in prison and army veterans, may also require specialised forms of support.

Preventing and reducing homelessness involves a range of policies and services, including enhancing access to housing, enabling development of new affordable housing, providing preventative services and a range of other support services. Some homeless people will only require advice and perhaps some short-term support to prevent or quickly end an experience of homelessness. Others may need low-intensity support for a few weeks, or months, to help them find and sustain a home. Some may require more support for a longer period of time to either exit or avoid homelessness. Data on homelessness in Europe are often limited, but there is evidence that European countries with highly integrated homelessness strategies, providing a range of well-coordinated services, such as Denmark and Finland, have very low levels of homelessness<sup>3</sup>.

Guidance on integrated homelessness strategies is available on the FEANTSA website<sup>4</sup>. A review of the successful Finnish integrated homelessness strategy was published in 2015<sup>5</sup>. A range of discussion on homelessness strategies in Europe, including descriptions and critical evaluations, is available in the *European Journal of Homelessness*<sup>6</sup>.

## 1.2. Housing First Alongside Other Services

Housing First is not designed to act as a solution to all forms of homelessness. Nor is Housing First intended to work in isolation: it requires support from the health and social work sectors and from other homelessness services. As part of an integrated homelessness strategy, Housing First works with those people whose homelessness cannot be prevented or whose needs cannot be met by housing alone, or by housing and low-intensity support services.

The originator of Housing First, Dr. Sam Tsemberis, has suggested a role for Housing First within an integrated homelessness strategy, in which homeless people with high support needs are initially offered Housing First and those whose needs cannot be met by Housing First are then offered long-term, congregate or communal supported housing with on-site support staff or institutional care.

1 Busch-Geertsema, V., Edgar, W., O'Sullivan, E. and Pleace, N. (2010) *Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research*, Brussels, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Vid. Note 91

2 Baptista, I. (2010) 'Women and Homelessness in Europe' in O'Sullivan, E., Busch-Geertsema, V., Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. (eds.) *Homelessness Research in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA.

3 Busch-Geertsema, V., Benjaminsen, L., Filipovič Hrast, M. and Pleace, N. (2014) *Extent and Profile of Homelessness in European Member States: A Statistical Update* Brussels: FEANTSA - [http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/feantsa-studies\\_04-web2.pdf](http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/feantsa-studies_04-web2.pdf)

4 Toolkits on Homelessness Strategies: [www.feantsa.org](http://www.feantsa.org)

5 Pleace, N., Culhane, D.P., Granfelt, R. and Knutagård, M. (2015) *The Finnish Homelessness Strategy: An International Review* Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment - <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/153258>

6 <http://www.feantsaresearch.org> - *The European Journal of Homelessness* is also indexed on Google Scholar.

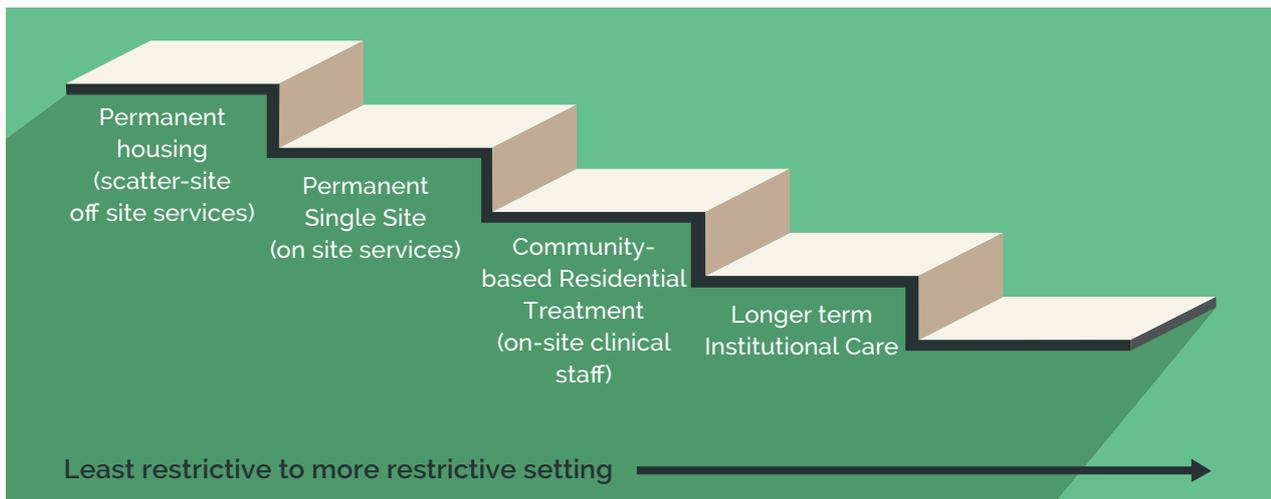


Figure 1: A 'Reverse Staircase' Strategy<sup>7</sup>

An integrated homelessness strategy might have the following kind of structure:

- **Preventative services**, offering housing advice, support and practical help with accessing housing and support services for people with higher needs who are at risk of homelessness.
- **Emergency accommodation for people who suddenly become homeless**, working in close coordination with preventative services to try to avoid any experience of homelessness becoming prolonged or repeated.
- **Lower-intensity support services for people who require some support to leave homelessness**, but whose needs can be met by rapidly providing them with housing and low-level contact with a case-management service offering limited support.
- **Housing First services for homeless people with high support needs, rapidly providing housing and intensive support**. The evidence is that Housing First will be effective in ending homelessness for most of the homeless people in this group (see [Chapter 1](#)).
- **Supported housing models offering congrate or communal housing with support staff on-site**, which can be used to provide medium and long-term support to homeless people with high support needs, whose needs or preferences are not met by Housing First.

There is some evidence that some European countries have a long-term homeless population whose needs have not been met through existing homelessness services. In countries such as the UK, there is evidence of a homeless population who make repeated or long-term use of existing homelessness services, without their homelessness permanently ending as a result<sup>8</sup>. Housing First often has the capacity to end this form of long-term homelessness, alongside helping high-need homeless people who spend very long periods of time living on the street, or in emergency shelters, to exit homelessness.

At a strategic level, the use of Housing First services can:

- **Significantly reduce levels of long-term and repeated homelessness associated with high support needs.**
- **Potentially reduce costs of long-term and repeated homelessness for emergency health and mental health services, criminal justice systems and other homelessness services.**
- **Enable homeless people with high and complex support needs to live stably in their own homes.**

<sup>7</sup> Tsemberis, S. (2013) Presentation at the Final Conference of Housing First Europe in Amsterdam, cited in Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. (2013) *Improving Health and Social Integration through Housing First: A Review* Brussels: DIHAL/FEANTSA

<sup>8</sup> Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2015) *Housing First in England: An Evaluation of Nine Services* <https://www.york.ac.uk/media/chp/documents/2015/Housing%20First%20England%20Report%20February%202015.pdf>

## 2. Future Applications of Housing First

Housing First is designed to have a specific function, to end homelessness among people with high support needs by rapidly providing them with housing and intensive support services. There is scope to expand the ways in which Housing First is used, but the basic function and role of Housing First are fixed; it is not intended for groups of homeless people with low support needs, nor as the sole component of an effective homelessness strategy.

It is important to note that while there are services that draw on the ideas of Housing First, for example using ordinary housing and *low-intensity* support services to help homeless people without high support needs (sometimes called housing-led or housing support services), these are *not* Housing First. The use of such services predates the introduction of Housing First in Europe. It was sometimes argued that Housing First represented nothing new in some European countries, because these services already existed. However, there can be important differences in the core principles, the intensity and duration of support between these low-intensity services and a Housing First approach.

Widespread use of Housing First has potential implications for some existing homelessness services. It is not the case that Housing First can or should act as a replacement for all existing homelessness services, because Housing First is only designed for one group of high-need homeless people. However, there is clear evidence that Housing First outperforms some existing service models for ending homelessness among people with high support needs (see [Chapter 1](#)). In some cases, for example in Finland, homelessness service providers have changed the way in which they provide services, moving from staircase models to Housing First and have seen improvements in service effectiveness as a result<sup>9</sup>.

### 2.1. The possible future uses of Housing First include:

- **Preventative use of Housing First.** Housing First can be employed as a means to resettle people with high support needs who are leaving institutions such as psychiatric hospitals, prison or long-stay supported housing. Some US services work with people leaving psychiatric hospital who are assessed as being at high risk of homelessness or have a history of homelessness<sup>10</sup>.



- Using specialised models of Housing First for particular groups of homeless people. This is another area that can be explored at strategic level. For example:
  - **Homeless women with high support needs.** There is evidence that women with high support needs can often experience homelessness in different ways from men, particularly in their avoidance of services and their use of informal and sometimes precarious relationships to keep themselves in accommodation<sup>11</sup>. Housing First, by providing homeless women with high support needs with their own homes, should be more accessible than some other forms of homelessness service, in which women may not feel safe. However, the experiences of women, which may include high rates of gender-based/domestic violence and other abuse, mean that there is a case for the development of specialist Housing First, staffed by women with specific training. In Manchester in the UK, Threshold Housing has developed a Housing First service for homeless women with high support needs who have had contact with the criminal justice system<sup>12</sup>.

9 Pleace, N., Culhane, D.P., Granfelt, R. and Knutagård, M. (2015) *The Finnish Homelessness Strategy: An International Review* Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment - <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/153258>

10 Tsemberis, S.J. (2010) *Housing First: The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* Minneapolis: Hazelden.

11 Mayock, P., Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015) "It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing...": The dynamics of women's unresolved homelessness *Housing Studies* DOI:10.1080/02673037.2014.991378

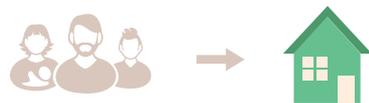
12 <http://www.thp.org.uk/services/housing-first>



- **Young people with high support needs at risk of homelessness** may also require specific forms of support. Again, this is because their needs, characteristics and experiences may differ from those of other groups of homeless people<sup>13</sup>. For example, young homeless people remain disproportionately likely to have had experience of social services, foster and children's homes and to have had negative experiences during their childhood.



- **Families with high and complex needs can be supported by Housing First.** There are specific needs here which centre on a Housing First service not just supporting an individual, but also being able to understand and support positively an entire family, including children<sup>14</sup>. The needs of these households around mental health problems, drug/alcohol issues and poor health, may be similar to those of lone homeless people, but different forms of support may be needed when an entire family is being supported by Housing First.



- **Former offenders with high support needs** may also require specific support when they leave prison. This is another example of how Housing First might be tailored, or adjusted, to meet specific sets of needs. Another example might be the use of a specialised model of Housing First for homeless people with high support needs who have experience of military service.



### 3. Making the Case for Housing First

Several European governments, for example **Denmark, Finland, France and Spain**, have decided to adopt and test Housing First as a cornerstone of their **strategic responses to homelessness**. In other European countries, the policy response to Housing First has been more uneven<sup>15</sup>. At EU level, the report by the Jury at the 2010 European Consensus Conference on Homelessness recommended consideration of Housing First and related services in tackling homelessness<sup>16</sup>, a position shared by the European Commission<sup>17</sup>.

The role of evidence, particularly good quality evidence that systematically compares Housing First with more orthodox homelessness services, has been fundamental in encouraging the use of Housing First in North America. A good standard of evidence has enabled Housing First to draw attention from

13 Quilgars, D., Johnsen, S. and Pleace, N. (2008) *Review of Youth Homelessness in the UK*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation - <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/youth-homelessness-uk>

14 Jones, A., Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. (2002) *Firm Foundations: an Evaluation of the Shelter Homeless to Home Service*, London: Shelter. - [https://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/39521/Firm\\_Foundations.pdf](https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/39521/Firm_Foundations.pdf)

15 FEANTSA (2012) *On the Way Home? FEANTSA Monitoring Report on Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe*. Brussels: FEANTSA - <http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/on-the-way-home-feantsa-monitoring-report-on-homelessness-and-homeless-policies-in-europe/>

Fondation Abbé Pierre/FEANTSA (2015) *An Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe: 2015* - <http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/an-overview-of-housing-exclusion-in-europe-2015/>

16 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=88&langId=en&eventId=315&furtherEvents=yes>

17 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9770&langId=en>

European governments and homelessness service providers and attract interest from international organisations like the European Commission and the OECD. Of course, not all the evidence for Housing First is universally viewed as being of good quality and there will be those who remain unconvinced that the evidence shows that Housing First is a model to pursue. Nevertheless, good quality research that clearly shows success in ending homelessness for high-need people and relative cost-effectiveness, will remain important in making the case for Housing First.

**In Sweden.** Lund University has been actively promoting the idea of Housing First with homelessness service providers and policy makers<sup>18</sup>. **In Italy,** the Housing First Italia group<sup>19</sup>, a collaboration between service providers, municipalities and academics, operating under the auspices of fio.PSD, has also been promoting Housing First. The grassroots, or ground-up, advocacy and discussion of Housing First can help put this important innovation that reduces homelessness among people with high support needs, on the policy agenda. Collaborations between service providers and universities, like in Sweden and Italy, combine professionals in service delivery with professionals in evaluation, which enhances capacity to lobby effectively for Housing First by collecting strong evidence.

**In England.** Homeless Link, the federation of homelessness service providers, have developed Housing First England<sup>20</sup>, a programme designed to promote Housing First at policy level and as a model of good practice, starting in 2016. Again, this is a collaborative effort, closely reflecting developments in Italy and Sweden.

Housing First is successful because of **the way in which support is provided** but it is *equally*, perhaps even more, successful because of the **emphasis on rapidly providing a home**, and so removing a person from homelessness and the risks and uncertainties associated with homelessness (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 3](#)). There is research evidence that, while coordination of services within an integrated homelessness strategy produces a more effective policy response to homelessness, nothing can ultimately overcome a shortage of affordable, adequate housing. Housing First is important as an innovation, but it is also important because it draws attention to the central role that housing must play within a strategic response to homelessness<sup>21</sup>.

Housing First is also significant because **it fractures assumptions about the nature of homelessness and the people who experience homelessness**. It shows that homelessness is not as simple as behaviours and attitudes that need to be changed; in fact, it is a successful service response that supports and enables recovery but does *not* demand behaviour change or use sanctions to force change. By rapidly providing housing, recognising the shared humanity of homeless people and respecting their choices and encouraging recovery, Housing First ends homelessness (see [Chapter 1](#)).

**Watch the videos on 'Why is Housing First Strategically Important?' and 'Scaling-Up Housing First'**

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18 <http://www.soch.lu.se/en/research/research-groups/housing-first>

19 <http://www.housingfirstitalia.org/en/>

20 [www.homeless.org.uk/hfengland](http://www.homeless.org.uk/hfengland)

21 Pleace, N., Culhane, D.P., Granfelt, R. and Knutagård, M. (2015) *The Finnish Homelessness Strategy: An International Review* Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment - <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/153258>

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