



Housing First

Guidance for Social Landlords

Let's end homelessness together

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Contents

Foreword: Call to Social Landlords	3
Introduction to Housing First	4
Benefits to Social Landlords	7
Role of Social Landlords in Housing First	9
Social housing Model 1	9
Social housing Model 2	11
Using Housing First to prevent evictions and abandonments	12
The challenges of providing Housing First	13
Further information	13
Appendix 1	14

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Foreword

Rick Henderson, Chief Executive of Homeless Link

Call to Social Landlords

Housing First is an approach that is evidenced to successfully support people with repeat histories of homelessness, who experience complex disadvantages, into settled accommodation. Research shows that 70-90% of Housing First residents maintain their accommodation, and go on to improve other aspects of their lives. The approach is popular internationally, and is an important part of the solution to ending homelessness.

The Housing First movement within England is growing, but there is still a need to make services available across the country, and this requires the provision of more housing stock. Social housing is in many cases preferable to private rented sector (PRS) housing in the context of Housing First, offering tenants better affordability, stability and flexibility, and yet only 50% of projects currently have access to social housing.

Homeless Link is calling on Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to make units available to support the growth of Housing First and its positive outcomes for individuals. By doing so, landlords can benefit both financially, and from the property management support provided by Housing First support workers.

Naturally, there are challenges to delivering Housing First; these can largely be overcome, but getting involved does require a commitment to operating slightly differently and flexibly, to help deliver a successful intervention for some of this country's most vulnerable people.

This guidance outlines the ways in which Social Landlords can get involved in Housing First, and provides information about the advantages they can secure.

We hope you will join the movement, and look forward to working with you.

Housing First England

This guidance has been written as part of Homeless Link's Housing First England project. Homeless Link is the national membership body for the homelessness and supported housing sectors in England. Housing First England is a three-year project which aims to make Housing First a viable housing option in England to support Homeless Link's vision of a country free of homelessness.

Visit our website www.hfe.homeless.org.uk and follow us on twitter @HF_England for updates.

Introduction to Housing First

Housing First is the most evidenced and cost effective housing intervention for people with long histories of homelessness, and entrenched health and wellbeing support needs. The concept of Housing First was developed in North America, but over the last decade has grown in popularity across Canada and Europe. International evidence indicates that 70-90% of Housing First residents maintain their accommodation, and make progress in other areas of their lives.

Unlike traditional homelessness models, which require individuals to progress through a series of accommodation and treatment services until they are 'housing ready', Housing First provides a permanent offer of independent, stable housing with intensive, person-centred support to enable that person to remain housed and begin recovery. The only condition placed on the individual is a willingness to sustain a tenancy. Housing First also differs to other floating and tenancy support approaches due to caseload size, with workers supporting no more than five to seven tenants.

Critically, the Housing First approach, or philosophy, is underpinned by a [set of principles \(found here\)](#), which have been shown to ensure success. Services with a high fidelity to the principles will consequently achieve the best outcomes possible.

Need for Housing First

Housing First is needed in all areas of the country in which existing services do not offer effective support to individuals experiencing multiple disadvantages. Current provision tends to be found in metropolitan areas with high levels of rough sleeping. At present, only 50% of Housing First projects have access to social housing, so both existing and new schemes would benefit from partnering with Social Landlords.

The individuals supported are likely to have long histories of homelessness and unemployment, contact with the criminal justice system and problematic substance use. They may also experience poor mental or psychological health and other physical health conditions. Experience of trauma and being at risk of domestic violence is not uncommon. The entrenched nature of these problems can make it difficult for traditional services to support individuals to become more independent – particularly with the conditions they place upon people.

Individuals who meet Housing First criteria rarely meet the criteria for their local authority social housing. Despite their support needs, they may not be considered a priority under housing legislation. There may also be concerns that they could not maintain a tenancy, and so should start to address their problems before being offered one. In some cases, an individual may have had a social tenancy previously but lost it, and been deemed to have made themselves intentionally homeless.

Housing First offers an alternative solution for this cohort, providing permanent housing as a platform from which an individual can find safety and begin recovery. Involvement in Housing First provision therefore requires flexibility and a slightly different way of operating.

Scale of Housing First

Housing First is not a panacea and may not be the best solution for all people who become homeless. The aim of the [Housing First England](#) project is to promote this solution for people experiencing complex disadvantages whom existing services have been unable to support effectively. The numbers supported by Housing First presently are small, therefore the number of homes required tends to be relatively low in any given area. However, supply is not meeting demand within existing Housing First services and stock is needed across the country to ensure the approach is available to this cohort as needed, regardless of location.

A scoping report we undertook in 2015 estimated that Housing First would be appropriate for approximately 10-20% of people sleeping rough or in contact with services for single homeless people. The exact figure is difficult to quantify due to a lack of data. However, we do know the scale of existing Housing First services, which typically have the capacity to support 10-20 tenants. Services that have been in operation for longer periods may have larger caseloads.

There is also the potential for Housing First to be offered to people who may not be accessing traditional homelessness services but are in contact with the criminal justice sector and health services. It is estimated that there are 58,000 people in the UK experiencing multiple and complex disadvantages. So, while the current scale of Housing First is relatively small, the possibilities for it are great, and we are already learning of the approach being used with women offenders and young people.

CASE STUDY: Threshold and the New Charter Housing Group

Threshold is a housing, advice and support charity operating in Greater Manchester, and is part of the New Charter Housing Trust Group. It has been delivering a Housing First service for vulnerable women experiencing multiple and complex disadvantages since 2015. The women it supports have histories of offending and substance misuse. Most of the women have been victims of domestic violence in the past, and many (but not all) continue to be at risk from abusive relationships.

Threshold's access to a range of social housing units from New Charter, alongside their provision of refuges, has enabled them the flexibility required to offer women the accommodation of their choice and, if they are fleeing domestic violence at this point, to successfully support them to move away from their partners into safer new homes. If needed, the residents are also able to move again to an alternative home because of this model.

Cost of Housing First

- **Accommodation costs**

Rent is usually covered by Housing Benefit / Universal Credit with any top up or service charges being paid directly by the tenant. The tenant is also responsible for any utility bills.

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- **Support costs**

Housing First support is generally commissioned by a local authority. In some cases funding has also come from Public Health, Clinical Commissioning Groups and Police and Crime Commissioners. A few Housing First services do not receive statutory funding and are instead funded by trusts and foundations.

Housing First contracts usually incorporate funding for additional costs related to the use of this approach. These include personal budgets (to enable the tenant to purchase belongings they require for their home), expenses for activities to engage the residents and staff travel.

Benefits to tenants

The international evidence base for Housing First is vast and robust. Despite the context or method of the research, the outcome trend is the same. More information about the efficacy of Housing First can be found on [our website](#) but in general:

- around 70-90% of people sustain their tenancy
- many see improvements in mental and physical wellbeing
- drug and alcohol use does not get worse
- there are reductions in anti-social behaviours and contact with the criminal justice system
- there is more effective contact with other services

Benefits to Social Landlords

Whilst Housing First is hugely beneficial to people who are homeless, there are also many benefits to social housing providers:

- **Housing management**

Because they provide intensive support to each individual, focussed on assisting them to sustain their tenancy, Housing First services often undertake many elements of housing management. The Housing First teams inform the individual of their responsibilities and rights as a tenant, before and once they are housed.

The support workers usually visit the tenant in their home on a regular basis. This means that any structural or maintenance issues within the property are identified and the tenant is supported to notify the landlord. Regularly attending the property also enables the team to quickly address any problems of anti-social behaviour both towards, and from, the tenant. They also discuss 'door management', ensuring that any problematic visitors are kept to a minimum.

The support workers often have a mechanism in place to act as a point of contact for the resident, their neighbours and the housing provider, to help alleviate any concerns or issues as soon as they arise.

- **Rent payment support**

The intensive support provided through Housing First ensures that rent arrears are a rare occurrence. Support workers will actively help the individual to set up and maintain the necessary benefit claims to ensure that rent and other bills can be paid. Due to the trusting relationship usually established with the tenant, the support worker is likely to become aware of any issues with rent payments, and will take steps to address this and liaise with the housing provider, before problems escalate.

- **Reducing costly evictions**

An eviction and re-letting of a property can cost Social Landlords almost £6,000, including the cost of written-off rent arrears ([Shelter, 2012](#)), with some research putting the cost at over £8,000 ([Friends Provident Foundation, 2010/11](#)). However, Housing First can reduce the risk of a costly eviction, as the support that the tenants receive decreases the likelihood of an individual abandoning their accommodation, and can help to reduce the exacerbation of any activities which may lead to a loss of their tenancy.

Research shows that Housing First is a cost effective option for the local community and the public purse; we continue to gather evidence from our discussions with Social Landlords already involved with Housing First and will update this guidance in future should information emerge on housing-specific cost effectiveness.

- **Changes to welfare benefits**

Welfare reform poses several challenges to Social Landlords. However, offering accommodation to people eligible for Housing First services may help to overcome some of these challenges.

- Most individuals under 35 who do not have children will only be entitled to claim benefits for housing costs up to the **Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR)**.

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However, individuals over the age of 25 with histories of accessing homelessness, rehabilitation or other support services are exempt from the SAR and can claim for a one bedroom LHA rate. This is also the case for former prisoners subject to multi-agency public protection arrangements and care leavers under 22 years old. Individuals who fall into one of these groups are likely to be eligible for and in need of the support offered by Housing First.

- The **1% reduction** to social rents is likely to have a significant impact on both general needs and supported housing provision. With shortfalls in income, some existing business models are likely to be unsustainable. Social Landlords that also provide care and support could adopt the Housing First model where appropriate, moving away from congregate supported housing to providing individuals with their own tenancies and the intensive support package.
- **Benefit Cap:** The Benefit Cap does not apply to those claiming Employment and Support Allowance or Personal Independence Payments, which include many people who are eligible for Housing First, due to the complexity of their needs.
- Some of the expected issues faced in the transfer to **Universal Credit** claims may be overcome through the intensive support offered by Housing First teams. Support workers have an understanding of the system and can provide on-going support with money management as well as setting up and maintaining claims.

- **Social purpose**

Housing First will align with the social purpose of most social housing providers. It is an approach that can help some of society's most vulnerable and excluded people who experience the most extreme poverty. Individuals supported by Housing First have low incomes and are unable to access good quality homes in other ways. Housing First aims to integrate isolated people into their community, to develop their social networks and to help rebuild their lives

Role of Social Landlords in Housing First

On the most basic level, Housing First is fairly simple. There are two main elements: stable, good quality housing and stable, good quality support. There are two ways in which Social Landlords can join the movement to provide Housing First in England:

1. **You are a general needs housing provider without any support provision:** partner with a voluntary sector organisation that is delivering, or planning to deliver, Housing First support but does not have access to social housing tenancies.
2. **You are a general needs housing AND support provider:** develop your own Housing First service to meet the needs of an identified cohort in your area.

It should be noted that social housing is, in many cases, more beneficial than PRS housing in the context of Housing First for several reasons (see Appendix 1).

As mentioned previously, housing providers must be committed to the different way of working required by Housing First in order to support individuals successfully and to benefit themselves.

The following section gives further information for each approach and includes case studies of Housing First in England where social housing is being used. There are only a limited number of examples operating across the country to draw information from currently, but as we continue our discussions with services and learn of other successful models, we will update this guidance.

Social Housing for Housing First – Model 1

If you are a Social Landlord providing general needs housing and with no, or limited, experience of delivering supported housing (especially to people experiencing complex disadvantages), you can still offer homes to people supported by Housing First services by forming partnerships with service providers.

You may want to consider getting involved with a service that is already up and running, or helping to establish a new service. In addition, should think about whether you would prefer to be the main housing provider for a specific Housing First service or to offer a handful of allocations to one or more projects – either way the number of units will be relatively small.

Where social housing is used in Housing First services, allocations are either made via the local authority (subject to allocations policies or local agreements around use of allocations for Housing First), or directly between the support provider and Social Landlord. There is currently no official mechanism that matches Housing First services or residents to social housing providers, but the recommendations below advise how you can identify contacts.

As social housing is often preferable to PRS accommodation for Housing First projects, existing services are likely to welcome the offer of a partnership, even if they are currently using PRS housing, as are any parties hoping to establish a new service.

It should be noted here that all Housing First support providers are well established organisations, which have been rigorously assessed for financial viability and other risks in order to receive statutory funding.

CASE STUDY: London Borough of Lewisham and local Housing Associations

Building on an established partnership between Lewisham local authority and the charitable and voluntary sector in addressing rough sleeping and the support needs of the most complex clients in the borough, Housing First, provided by Bench Outreach, has been in operation since 2014, enjoying incredible success and now housing over 25 clients.

In order to provide a permanent solution to the challenges faced by these individuals, a small allocation of social housing has been provided to the scheme.

Accommodation is sourced in partnership with the allocations team of Lewisham Council and the Housing First Support Team to ensure that the location and parameters of the property are in line with the client's needs, and quotas are arranged with partner registered providers to ensure an array of properties can be considered. Bench Outreach has Service Level Agreements with the providers around their interaction, and the local authority underpins this support with alternative assistance should a placement fail.

Housing providers feel that they have benefited from the intensive support provided to the residents, which helps with housing management and ensuring that rent payments are met.

In Oxford, Cambridge and York, the local authorities also allocate social housing tenancies for people who are supported through Housing First.

Recommendations for implementing this model:

- Build partnerships with local authorities and service providers to establish whether a Housing First project is being planned, or is needed, in the areas where you have stock. If you need assistance in finding contacts, email joanne.prestidge@homelesslink.org.uk.
- Find information about existing services, and the accommodation they are using, on the [Housing First England website](#) and get in touch with them directly. Services that are currently using the PRS may welcome the offer of social housing options.

Social Housing for Housing First – Model 2

If you are a Social Landlord that also provides supported housing services, you may like to develop your own Housing First service to meet the needs of individuals in your areas of operation. This will involve:

- Sourcing funding for the Housing First support team either from local authority commissioning, trusts and foundations, or internal funding resources. Ensure that the support team design and delivery aligns with the [Housing First principles](#) and provider guidance.
- Making arrangements within your organisation (between general needs housing and supported housing departments) for access to a number of units and increased flexibility in policies and procedures relating to this service.

You may like to use the [Housing First England website](#) to help you with additional background research on the approach and to contact existing services and housing providers to learn about how they have implemented the model. If you need assistance in finding contacts, email joanne.prestidge@homelesslink.org.uk.

CASE STUDY: Home Group; Threshold and New Charter

Home Group and Threshold are Social Landlords which provide general needs housing alongside care and support services.

Home Group received funding from North Tyneside local authority to pilot a Housing First service to meet local need, and accommodation was supplied from Home Group's general needs housing stock. Currently supporting ten individuals, the scheme has been so successful that the local authority has committed to funding it for the next three years.

Threshold, part of the New Charter Housing Trust Group, provides Housing First across three local authorities in Greater Manchester. The service was initially funded through internal reserves and housing is provided from across New Charter. Currently 12 women are being supported, some of whom were previous residents of the New Charter Group but required a higher level of support to sustain housing due to the multiple disadvantages they experience. (See case study on p.6).

Type of tenancy

Individuals supported by Housing First should receive the same type of tenancy as anyone else accessing your stock. Many social landlords offer an initial probationary or starter tenancy of 12 months, with a view to a longer-term tenancy being offered following this. Ideally, for a fixed-term tenancy, the tenure should be as long-term as possible to increase stability and security. While the individual property offered to Housing First residents may change at the end of a tenancy, or based on individual circumstances, the offer of a home should be permanent. Residents are expected to meet the conditions of their tenancy agreement. However, we recommend that landlords, Housing First teams and local authorities (when involved) have clear agreements in place on the action taken should a tenancy be at risk or fail, and that these should align to the [principles of Housing First](#).

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Service level agreements

Feedback from current housing and support providers suggests that strong partnerships and collaborative working are necessary to improve service provision, and mitigate risks. Housing and support providers will benefit from having service level agreements, or other protocols, clearly detailing how both agencies will work together. Good communication between Housing First workers and housing officers will improve the way in which a tenant is engaged and supported to maintain their tenancy.

Using Housing First to prevent evictions and abandonments

The Housing First model is primarily used to end long-term or repeat homelessness. However, the approach also has the potential to be offered to those experiencing complex disadvantages who are already living in social housing and at risk of becoming homeless, although we are only aware of it having been used in this way in two cases in Brighton and Hove to date. Where residents with multiple support needs are having difficulties with tenancy management, putting their tenancy at risk, Housing First support could be used to help an individual to overcome these issues. Social Landlords could factor this in when considering either of the above models and may wish to direct additional funding towards Housing First teams as part of a preventative measure to help people to sustain their tenancies and to avoid potentially high-cost evictions or abandonments.

The challenges of providing Housing First

Delivering Housing First in line with the model's [core principles](#) does pose some challenges to housing and support providers, around the needs of the individuals being supported, and due to some systemic difficulties. However, Housing First outcomes remain successful, with creativity and flexibility overcoming any barriers or issues.

Reports of rent arrears and anti-social behaviour are surprisingly low, although they cannot be ruled out. The wrap-around support provided goes a long way to ensuring a tenant can maintain their benefit claims and adhere to their tenancy agreement, as well as helping tenants to reduce the likelihood of receiving unwanted visitors. Tenants are reminded that the only condition placed on them is that they must want to sustain a tenancy, and the intensive support and collaborative, flexible working of service providers and landlords generally helps them achieve this.

There may be occasions when an individual needs to move from the property they have been housed in. This could be because they are being targeted by neighbours or previous associates, or their behaviour is causing complaints. However, Housing First is about giving people a permanent offer of housing, so while they may make mistakes, the system needs to be flexible enough to offer them another property if needed. Equally, there should be scope for an individual to refuse an offer (or offers) of a property they do not feel will be suitable for them, as is the case in general needs social housing.

A final challenge to consider is the length of funding contracts for support. The Housing First principles determine that support should be open-ended and available to someone for as long as they need it. Funding for support provision tends to be contracted for no longer than five years at a time, with the average being two to three years. When applying for funding, or working alongside a service provider, therefore, it is necessary to ensure there are plans in place to provide the person with alternative support should the Housing First service come to an end. This is also the case for services being piloted.

Further Information

More information about Housing First can be found on the [Housing First England website](#). Over the course of the project we will be developing a new range of practical tools and resources.

We encourage anyone interested in the approach to join the movement by signing up for our newsletter. You'll be first to hear about opportunities to meet other members of the network, regional and national events and the publication of new resources.

To be put in contact with other members of the movement, or with any other queries, email joanne.prestidge@homelesslink.org.uk

Appendix 1. Why social housing works for Housing First

There are four main reasons why social housing is, in many cases, more beneficial than Private Rented Sector (PRS) housing in the context of Housing First:

- **Cost**

There are numerous challenges to sourcing housing from the PRS, particularly in areas of the country where the market rental cost and Local Housing Allowance (LHA) are different. The PRS also requires an individual to provide a deposit and rent in advance, in addition to any fees charged by the agency or landlord; an individual on benefits does not usually have access to this money. For these reasons, other tenants competing for the property may be more desirable. Social housing is affordable, usually within or close to the LHA rate, and generally requires less money to be paid in advance, even though more Housing Associations are moving towards a rent in advance model in preparation for Universal credit.

- **Stability**

The PRS does not offer a great deal of stability to tenants – particularly those with a low income. Rising rents mean that those claiming welfare benefits may be ‘priced out’ of their home once their assured shorthold tenancy expires, and will need to find other accommodation. Although instances of anti-social behaviour and rent arrears are reportedly low in Housing First, if an issue does arise, a private landlord may be less tolerant or flexible than a social housing provider. And in areas where the LHA rate does not meet the market rent, Housing First tenants are forced to move away from their support networks to find suitable accommodation. Social housing offers more stability in tenancy length and location, and more tolerance should problems arise.

- **Quality**

In some areas of the country, accommodation in the PRS that falls within the LHA rate can be poor quality. Due to the lack of regulatory standards, properties can be extremely small and in dire condition, with maintenance issues going unrepaired for months. Social housing is regulated and usually of a better quality.

- **Flexibility**

Occasionally, a situation may arise in which a Housing First tenant needs to move from their current home to a new one. This may be due to problems occurring in the area they are living or with neighbours, or where risks mean they need to move to a different location for safeguarding purposes. The volume of properties in a social housing provider’s portfolio can enable these transitions to take place more smoothly, reducing the negative impact on the landlord and the tenant.



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless or who live with multiple and complex support needs. We work to improve services and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

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