

# Eligibility and referrals in Housing First

## About

This briefing sets out suggested referral criteria and methods of identifying individuals for Housing First. It also focusses on how to create a gender-informed referral pathway and what to consider beyond the point of referral.

The aim of Housing First is to reach a group of people that existing services are unable to support effectively to leave homelessness. It is therefore important to clearly identify your target client group and referral criteria, to prevent cherry-picking those with lower needs and excluding those for whom Housing First is designed.

## Identifying the cohort

### Housing First and multiple disadvantage

Housing First is a housing intervention that includes high-intensity, open-ended support for people who have experienced repeat housing instability. The Housing First cohort would typically be described as individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Most Housing First services in England focus their resources on people who have been street homeless for sustained periods or those who have had repeated ineffective accommodation stays resulting in intermittent periods of rough sleeping. There are some exceptions however, and those involved in designing the service at a local level have also chosen to target resources at other groups who may not rough sleep, such as vulnerable young people leaving care or women who have repeated contact with the criminal justice system.

Ultimately, Housing First provides open-ended intensive support and is therefore most cost-effective when offered to those experiencing multiple disadvantage and experiencing, or at risk of, repeat homelessness. These individuals are also more likely than others to have contact with high cost public services in the health and criminal justice sectors.

### The definition of multiple-disadvantage

Multiple disadvantage (also known as multiple and complex needs) can be described as interrelated health and/or social care needs, which impact on an individual's life and ability to function in society. These may include entrenched or repeat homelessness, mental, psychological or emotional health needs, drug and/or alcohol dependency, contact with the criminal justice system, physical health needs, and experience of domestic violence or abuse.

### Estimating the need

Due to the very nature of multiple disadvantage, it is difficult to determine exactly how many people require Housing First and in England, the scale of Housing First at a local level has, to now, been very much driven by the resources available. In 2015, Homeless Link estimated that approximately 20% of those rough sleeping, or in contact with some kind of homelessness support, would benefit from Housing First<sup>1</sup> and anecdotally this seems to match the assessment of need undertaken in some local areas.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Housing%20First%20or%20Housing%20Led%20scoping%20report.pdf>

At a national level research has been undertaken to estimate the total number of people across the country that would benefit from Housing First. Research commissioned by Crisis and Homeless Link in 2018 has estimated this to be between 18,400 and 32,350 individuals across the UK<sup>2</sup>.

The traditional housing options available to people experiencing multiple disadvantage are often ineffective and although Housing First is not a panacea to ending all forms of homelessness, it does have a key role for this group. It is important to map the need for Housing First at a local level.

### Previous housing history

It is likely that suitable Housing First clients would be considered as 'intentionally homeless' due to their housing histories e.g. arrears, anti-social behaviour or abandonments. This should not exclude them from Housing First or be used to judge how successful they might be in housing again. It is highly likely that previous experiences in housing were not accompanied with the type, or intensity of support provided through Housing First. Evidence shows that there are no ways of determining, from their needs and experience, who will be successful in Housing First.

## The referral pathway: a multi-agency approach

### Why it is important to have a referral process

A referral process is important for a number of reasons:

- Housing First is a limited resource and must be targeted effectively
- The model works most cost-effectively for those experiencing multiple disadvantage
- It is an opportunity to bring support networks together and create a multi-agency approach from the beginning

It is important to communicate your process to referring agencies and manage expectations about caseload size. Where the Housing First team is small and has limited caseload capacity, it may not be appropriate to have an open and ongoing referral process.

### NDT Assessment

Some Housing First services use a quantitative measure to assess whether a person is eligible for Housing First. The index most widely used is the New Directions Team Assessment (NDTA) (otherwise known as the Chaos Index).<sup>3</sup> This assessment was developed by South West London and St Georges Mental Health NHS Trust and focusses on the behaviours of an individual across 10 specific areas:

1. Engagement with frontline services
2. Intentional self-harm
3. Unintentional self-harm
4. Risk to others
5. Risk from others
6. Stress and anxiety
7. Social effectiveness
8. Alcohol/drug use
9. Impulse control
10. Housing

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<sup>2</sup>[https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Implementing%20Housing%20First%20across%20England%2C%20Scotland%20%26%20Wales%202018\\_0.pdf](https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Implementing%20Housing%20First%20across%20England%2C%20Scotland%20%26%20Wales%202018_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><http://www.meam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/NDT-Assessment-process-summary-April-2008.pdf>

You will notice that the categories in the NDTA are not purely focussed on characteristic needs of individuals. Instead it focusses on how those needs manifest and impact a person's life. The tool enables services to establish a numerical value around the vulnerability of the person, in order to target resources at those most suitable. The maximum score across the assessment is 48 and some services will set a threshold to guide their selection. For example, a score of 35 and under would not be considered appropriate for Housing First.

It is important to note that like any assessment, there are limitations (for example it may not capture all vulnerable groups that would benefit) so the NDTA should not be used in isolation. We recommend it is used as part of a wider process for selecting clients; such as multi-agency discussions or as part of another referral system.

### Multi-agency meetings

Many Housing First services decide who to accept onto the caseload through discussions with partner agencies. This helps to identify individuals accessing multiple agencies including those that may not be known specifically to homelessness services but who are vulnerably housed. Agencies involved include, but are not limited to:

- Police and probation (both Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) and National Probation Service (NPS))
- Local authority housing and homelessness teams
- Community Mental Health (CMHT) and other specialist psychology and psychiatry services
- Adult Social Care
- Drug and Alcohol services
- Teams working with frequent A&E users
- Outreach teams
- Other Third Sector organisations

In most cases a local decision-making group is already in operation (e.g. a task and targeting group, or multiple needs/homelessness forum), and in other cases a new group might be set up to discuss referrals (e.g. a steering group or stakeholder panel).

Groups may already have an identified list of individuals that are discussed on a regular basis and the mechanism for partner agencies to raise awareness of other people where appropriate. In both cases it is highly likely that the majority of individuals considered for Housing First will be well known to most stakeholders who will, over many years, have had varying degrees of contact with them.

Some may think this indicates a 'failure first' approach in which the resource is provided to people who are perceived to have failed in the past. It is important to realise that until Housing First is scaled up we must target resources to those most in need and unfortunately that tends to be people for whom other services have been unsuccessful. As your resource increases you can offer it to a wider group of people including those you may predict would struggle in other types of supported housing.

## Gender-informed referrals

### Identifying 'hidden homeless' women

We know that women come into contact with services in different ways; not all will rough sleep or access homelessness supported accommodation. The Agenda briefing on Homeless Women<sup>4</sup> explains that women are often hidden because they:

- make efforts to hide away when sleeping rough, such as sleeping on buses
- find alternative unsafe arrangements through 'sex-work'
- remain in abusive relationships to maintain an accommodation option.

To ensure that your service is accessible to women in need we recommend:

- Diversifying referring/partner agencies to include women-specific services. This may require partnership building outside of traditional multiple needs services, and should include organisations such as women's centres, refuges and children's services.
- If there are a disproportionate number of men to women being identified, referred or supported, explore why this might be and look to identify vulnerable women that may benefit from support.
- Where appropriate, make direct contact with women's prisons and create a referral route with prison probation and Through the Gate teams.
- Many eligible women may have partners and should not be excluded for this reason. Ensure your referral criteria allows for couples (see our briefing on supporting women and couples<sup>5</sup>).
- Offer training to services within existing partnerships around identifying 'hidden homelessness'.<sup>6</sup>

## After Referral

### Introducing Housing First to potential clients

We do not recommend that Housing First is discussed with an individual until it has been decided that they are a suitable referral. This reduces the risk of disappointment in individuals who may have been wrongly referred but equally means that the service can be offered in a way which aligns with the key principles of the approach.

Giving people choice and control is one of the key Housing First Principles<sup>7</sup> and this should begin at the point at which the individual is offered the service. Although an effective referral process may have identified a suitable individual for Housing First it is essential that assumptions are not made about whether or not that person would like to be part of the Housing First service. It is common for individuals to be suspicious of the offer or mistrustful of the staff, so Housing First teams use an active engagement approach; working persistently and consistently to build rapport whilst also balancing the wishes of the individual. Although individuals may initially refuse the offer, this should not be taken at face value. Services have found that it can take time to build trust, and that despite what might be said initially, people do change their minds.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Agenda-Briefing-homeless-women-Jan-2019.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/HFE%20supporting%20women%20frontline%20briefing.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2018/feb/27/women%E2%80%99s-hidden-homelessness>

<sup>7</sup> <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/resource/principles-housing-first>

## The pre-tenancy period

While there are minimal pre-requisites to accessing Housing First, it is important to establish whether or not the person wants to access the service and take on a tenancy. The initial period of engagement can take time whilst you explore and discuss what having their own home looks like for them. Those developing and delivering services should recognise the importance of a 'pre-tenancy' period – the time between the point of referral and securing appropriate housing – and should build this into mobilisation planning to manage stakeholder expectations. A number of key points to consider:

- There is no set time period for pre-tenancy work. It could be 2 weeks or 6 months and should be at the pace of the individual. (It is therefore useful to consider success as the number engaged not just the the number housed).
- Building a trusting relationship is key. This is likely to be a longer process if the Housing First worker is unknown to the individual. It is important to remember that the individual is likely to have experienced many difficult relationships with professionals in the past.
- Ideally, a tenancy should not be pre-selected for the individual – they should be included in the process as much as possible to ensure that the property meets their requirements (as far as is practicable), and that there is no pressure to move people into a property quickly. You may offer them temporary accommodation if they need to wait for a suitable home.
- If, after a sustained period of active and creative engagement, the person decides they are not ready for a tenancy, then a decision may be needed to make the case 'dormant' with ongoing efforts to check-in with the individual and an open offer for them to access Housing First in the future.
- Ensure that case updates are provided to the multi-agency group so that the whole support system understands the process of the Housing First service. It might be useful to refer to Housing First England's guidance in multi-agency working for Housing First.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/resource/guidance-toolkits>



## What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## Let's end homelessness together

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