

Good practice from Housing First services through Covid-19 and beyond

Learning from Housing First Practice Forums

About

This briefing explores some of the key experiences of Housing First services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic across the areas of multi-agency and partnership working, telephone-based support and digital inclusion. Housing First England held a series of eight online practice forums during June and July 2020. Over 100 Housing First practitioners and managers shared their successes and challenges around providing support to Housing First residents during this time.

Multi-agency and partnership working

Exploring good practice

Partnership working is integral to the Housing First model and is often cited as a challenge for Housing First teams. Housing First England produced guidance about multi-agency working, at a strategic and operational level,¹ which highlighted good practice shared by Housing First teams across the country. However, effective partnership working remains an ongoing challenge. Housing First is not only a model of housing and support, but a different way of understanding and working with people experiencing multiple disadvantage. Some describe the model as a platform for system change and as a way to challenge traditional approaches. Like any model for change, this can be met with resistance, tensions and a lack of understanding.

However, during Covid-19 there seems to have been a significant shift and, as described in MEAM's Covid-19 report, an increase in multi-agency panels/meetings, staff autonomy and service flexibility.² These findings reflect the discussions we had with Housing First teams, which centred around four key reflections.

During Covid-19:

- Non-Housing First services have been more understanding in their approach to Housing First residents. It was felt that there was generally a greater sense of empathy shown to people experiencing multiple disadvantage;
- There was an overall sense that homelessness and disadvantage were being taken seriously and had been moved to the top of everyone's priority list;

¹ <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Adopting%20a%20multi-agency%20approach.pdf>

² <http://meam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MEAM-Covid-REG-report.pdf>

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- There were more opportunities for multi-agency meetings and a general feeling that online meetings were easy to arrange compared to face-to-face meetings;
- There were fewer barriers to service access, and other professionals were prepared to be flexible regarding the support offered. There was a sense of team-work across agencies, with people sticking less rigidly to their roles and having a sense of shared ownership over support provided to Housing First residents.

Recommendations

It is possible that the good practice we have seen during Covid-19 will not continue beyond this unprecedented moment in time. However, returning to business as usual could be detrimental to the work of Housing First teams, which rely on wider health, social care and criminal justice systems forming part of an individual's support network.

Housing First advocates a new approach and those outside the housing and homelessness sector should ideally understand the key Principles and work, as much as is practicable, to enhance the offer of support to people with multiple needs. Multi-disciplinary support is crucial and recommendations beyond the pandemic include:

1. Housing First teams to arrange regular multi-disciplinary meetings and make them a standard for all Housing First residents. It may be that a blended version of both face-to-face and online meetings enable all services to attend regularly.
2. Housing First services should hold online sessions to share information about the work they do, including promoting the Principles, and give space to other agencies to share information about their work.
3. Housing is only one part of the Housing First model and community integration should remain high on the Housing First agenda. Housing First teams could consider the balance of the support they provide, with advocacy around the role of other services in the support network. Rather than always 'doing', the Housing First team can focus on 'linking' and encouraging wider support networks to be involved in supporting clients to meet their hopes, goals and aspirations.

Telephone-based support

Assertive engagement in Housing First services

Principle five of Housing First is that an active engagement approach is used. This means the onus of engagement very much rests with the Housing First team rather than the person being supported. In March 2020, the UK government introduced Covid-19 lockdown measures, which included the key message 'stay home save lives.' As part of these measures, citizens in England were advised to leave the house for only three reasons:

1. One form of daily exercise
2. Food shopping (as infrequently as possible)
3. Meeting medical needs

This lockdown had a significant impact on Housing First teams who were no longer able to see people face-to-face and there were concerns about how they would be able to engage and support people. For almost all teams, telephone-based support worked more effectively than anyone expected.

Some of the key positives of telephone-based support included:

- Residents being more proactive in making contact with their worker;
- Support being offered more regularly (mostly daily) compared to face to face support, helping residents to feel a greater sense of connection with their worker;

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- Telephone calls would typically last longer than a face-to-face interaction and were less focused on achieving certain tasks. They allowed the resident and worker to chat more generally about their interests, helping to build relationships;
- With reduced face-to-face contact it was felt that residents had been more self-sufficient and proactive in problem-solving;

Overall teams were surprised by the effectiveness of telephone contact and where it might have previously been viewed as a poor alternative to a face-to-face meeting, teams feel a more blended approach would work better in the future.

However, telephone-based support did not work for everyone, and some practitioners felt that a small number of people suffered without face-to-face contact. The concerns that were reported included people not being able to engage well on the telephone, which led to a lack of contact and growing concerns about the person's safety and wellbeing. Another concern was being unable to visit residents at home, as seeing their living environment was considered a key indicator of how the person was managing and of the stability or otherwise of their mental health.

Good practice examples

Housing First services were incredibly creative in finding solutions to the restrictions of Covid-19 lockdown.

Types of support provided:

- Delivering support outdoors, such as going for a walk or sitting in the park (when restrictions were eased);
- Taking chairs to have socially distanced chats in the person's garden (described by one team as 'the care chair');
- Sending postcards;
- Setting up WhatsApp Groups between residents;
- Encouraging clients to engage in different activities such as decorating (seemed particularly useful for people who would usually beg and needed to fill their time in)

Team working and support:

- Setting up 1-2-1 reflective practice;
- Finding flexible ways to show people around properties, having virtual tenancy sign-ups to allow for continued move-ins;
- Where teams have had members of staff who were shielding, they have changed the team structure dividing outreach and support tasks and office-based tasks accordingly

Recommendations

1. Telephone-based support is valued as a genuine way to connect and engage with Housing First residents and should continue beyond Covid-19.
2. Housing First residents should be asked about their preference for telephone or face-to-face support to enhance their choice around engagement;
3. Housing First teams use a blended approach of face-to-face and telephone-based support when engaging with the people they support. To maintain engagement teams should book in a weekly informal telephone chat with residents; even where there is no specific task or to focus on.
4. For those residents where telephone-based support is less effective, Housing First teams should prioritise face-to-face support.

5. It may be possible for Housing First teams to reduce face-to-face contact to encourage residents to be more autonomous in decision-making and problem-solving. The Housing First worker can focus more on linking people to the support needed rather than taking a more active 'doing' role.

Digital inclusion

Assertive engagement in Housing First services

It was felt that digital inclusion had not been prioritised previously. During Covid-19, teams have gone to monumental efforts to support residents around digital inclusion to maintain ongoing contact and connectivity throughout the pandemic. Some good practice examples include:

- Sourcing and providing devices for residents. This was a challenge for many teams due to funding issues and a lack of availability of items such as smart phones, tablets and laptops, which were in very high demand during the pandemic. However, teams were creative in re-profiling budgets (for example reduced staff travel expenses used to pay for devices) or asking large companies for donations;
- Providing internet connectivity for residents either through dongles or ensuring that internet was installed in the residents' homes;
- Upskilling residents in how to use their devices, including installing apps such as WhatsApp, which helped residents to connect to workers, friends and family.

It is true that this has not been possible for all, but the vast majority have seen improvements in digital inclusion over this period. As a result, teams felt strongly that this should be included as a necessity in Housing First delivery going forward.

Recommendations

1. When moving into a new tenancy, Housing First teams should consider installing the internet as an essential utility just like gas, electricity and water (if the resident chooses this).
2. Usually most services provide the people they support with a basic mobile phone that does not have internet connectivity. To enhance digital inclusion, teams can provide smart phones to allow for more diverse communication e.g. through WhatsApp and Zoom.
3. In addition to smart phones, some residents may significantly benefit from a tablet or laptop. Consideration about use of personal budgets and ongoing internet costs, as well as potential risks should be considered.³
4. The use of the internet, devices and apps is now part of day-to-day life. Time should be spent supporting the resident to increase their skills and confidence in this area.

³ See our guidance on personal budgets:
<https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Personal%20budgets%20briefing.pdf>



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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