



HOUSING FIRST HOW TO

Tips from frontline
professionals



Supporting women

Our practice forums and events bring together frontline Housing First teams from across the country to share learning and best practice around a range of prevalent issues and specialisms, and help the development of Housing First services. The discussions inform this series of practical information, which outlines common experiences and recommended approaches.

Aims of this document

The Housing First approach is person-centred, tailored to the specific needs of the people supported and uniquely placed to allow for gender-informed working. Evidence¹ shows that women experiencing multiple disadvantage are very likely to have experienced their children in the care system, abusive relationships and psychological or emotional distress. This practice brief shares learning from the frontline about how Housing First can support women and why building knowledge around ways of working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage is important.

Who is it for?

- Housing First managers and staff teams
- Professionals working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage
- Commissioners.

I've learnt that women have different needs and it's important for me as a worker to feel like I have the right knowledge and skills to provide the best support for the women I work with."

Housing First worker

Engaging women experiencing multiple disadvantage

Women experiencing multiple disadvantage can find it difficult to build trusting relationships with others, especially those who are in 'helping' roles. Reasons behind this may include feelings of shame and disempowerment, negative experiences with help in the past, concern that the support will be short-term, or a reluctance to share their experiences of a range of abusive relationships. A reaction to trauma can result in a need to be self-sufficient and independent, which may make engagement with a Housing First team a challenge.

Here are some ideas about how to effectively engage and build trust with women on your caseload:

- Take the time needed. It may be that the 'pre-tenancy' stage of Housing First takes a little longer to build trust and for the woman to want to move into her own tenancy. Don't assume that the approach has been rejected or hasn't worked.
- Women in relationships may not want to engage with Housing First if they think it means separating from their partner. As such, Housing First teams should look to accommodate couples. It is important though to clarify the nature of that relationship; if signs of domestic abuse are present you will need to think about the relevant safety planning and safeguarding procedures.
- Be human and authentic, whilst maintaining emotional boundaries; connection is important. Find things that the woman enjoys and focus your energy on engaging her around that.
- Spend time thinking about the spaces in which you are meeting the woman. Is it safe for her? Does it promote her wellbeing?
- Understand the difference between manipulation and survival. Take a psychological approach in order to understand challenging behaviours and attachment styles. Be aware that some of the ways a woman presents may have helped her to cope through adversity in the past.

- Remember connection is important - sometimes women do not connect with their worker, so be willing to show flexibility and reassign a case to a different worker, if possible.
- Take a genuine interest in the woman's life. Explore what they are interested in and allow the relationship to develop naturally. Meeting a woman's basic needs and getting to know her can set the stage for deeper conversations e.g. about their relationships or how histories of violence and abuse are affecting them now.
- Remember that active engagement does work so keep trying and be consistent and reliable.
- Some women may be involved in sex work and it is important for Housing First workers to take a harm reduction approach by creating a safe and supportive space to talk about sex work. Provide advice on safe sex working practices and encourage engagement with health care services.

Supporting women with children

Many women accessing Housing First services are mothers and have had extensive experience of contact with Children's Services. Housing First workers often have less experience and knowledge of this sector and it can therefore be difficult to navigate when supporting a woman through these processes.

Here are some key skills development areas for teams to focus on:

- Ask the question – it is important to establish if the woman has had children.
- Take time to understand what support, if any, is currently in place or required.
- Housing First teams should undertake training to understand the basics of child protection and adoption processes. Could you contact your local social services and ask them to attend your team meeting to provide information?
- Build partnerships with social care teams (children and adults) and develop information sharing agreements. Also look to specialist women's organisations (e.g. Pause) for advice and support.
- Act as an advocate for the woman by sharing achievements and progress with social workers. You could attend meetings or make written submissions.
- When sourcing housing, take into account the woman's hopes of gaining contact with their child/children.
- If the service has personal budgets for residents, use this to support engagement between the woman and their child/children. This may be to facilitate contact, or where contact is not in place, to send a card or gift.
- Recognise the importance of taking the time to manage expectations around contact with children. These can be hard conversations and it is important not to make false promises.
- Remember that some women may have older children; they are still mothers, therefore allow space to talk about this.
- There may be grief for the loss of a child and it may be appropriate to access specialist support, such as bereavement services.

Domestic abuse and safety planning

Women accessing Housing First services are very likely to have experienced violence and abuse, making them much more vulnerable to experiencing domestic abuse, and other forms of violence (known as VAWG – violence against women and girls). [The Principles of Housing First in England²](#) state that ‘individuals have choice and control’, so women accessing Housing First have the right to choose the relationships they wish to be in, however unhealthy it may look from the outside.

It is important for Housing First teams to support a woman’s choice regarding their relationships, while balancing this with effective safety planning and safeguarding practices around domestic abuse or any VAWG she may be experiencing.

- Language is important. For example, it can help women to engage in support by referring to safety planning rather than risk management. Make it a collaborative process where possible.
- Women often want to protect their relationship and find it difficult to share information about their abuse. We know that this group of women can find it difficult to identify their experience as abuse, or it may simply not be their greatest priority for support at that time. It may be that they also use violence in their relationships.
- We recommend that you build relationships with the police and other agencies and establish information sharing agreements so that safety planning is robust and takes account of all circumstances.
- Talk about control and support women to notice the signs e.g. isolation from support networks, over-the-top jealousy, or a partner being dismissive of her wants and needs.
- Housing First teams should share their practices with other agencies by attending team meetings, or holding events, promoting and creating consistency around safety planning and safeguarding approaches.
- Be creative and consider what activities might build enough confidence for the woman to spend an hour away from their partner.
- Try to establish a regular routine – a specific time that is safe and away from their partner where reflective

chats can happen. Or meet where the woman is likely to be on her own, for example primary health care appointments.

- If the woman’s partner is also a Housing First resident, we recommend that they have a separate Housing First worker.
- Consider who holds the tenancy. Is it possible for the tenancy to be in the woman’s name or in joint names? Can a multi-agency exit plan be established with the woman so that in the event that she wants or needs to leave, all agencies are able to make that move happen quickly and smoothly?

Women's stories

Reliable engagement

For women working with the Threshold Housing First project, reliability and consistency was seen as one of the key elements to success. Women respond well to this level of care and when trust is built, real change can happen.

“ They always get back to me, a lot of services where they say ‘we will do this, we will do that’, you just get passed from pillar to post – but when they say they are doing something, they do it... I’ve had a really hard life and nothing has ever been seen through, basically, but with them... They have not let me down once...I’ve been passed around from pillar to post, no-one has really helped me at all... they pass you to one person and that person will work with you, and they will leave and another person will come along, and you end up explaining it all again, then they say they will do this and then 3 weeks later you are on the phone and asking if anything has been done and they are like, ‘Oh, I’m just getting round to it’.”

Service user³

Working with children's services

A service working in the North West had supported a woman for several months following a prison release. During this engagement, the woman discussed her children but had no information about what was happening, having been in prison for long periods in the past. The Housing First worker was initially not sure how to approach this, but over a few weeks gently asked questions to better understand the situation and was able to contact Children's Services and build up a clearer picture. Over a number of months, the worker was able to mediate information between the woman and the social worker and supported the woman to engage in meetings. The woman is now exchanging letters and cards with two of her children and is feeling hopeful that she may be in a position to have face-to-face contact at some point in the future.

Staying safe

A woman being supported through a Housing First project was subject to significant sexual exploitation from her partner. When things escalated and she felt at real risk, she would contact her Housing First worker to ask for help and on two occasions even contacted the police. Unfortunately, she always retracted her statements to protect the partner she felt so in love with and multi-agency teams were unsure of the best way to safety plan. Over several months, the Housing First worker continued to raise safeguarding concerns and following an admission to hospital the police became more involved. A named female officer was allocated to the case as the central point of contact for all agencies, built up a relationship with the woman and made regular visits to the property to gather information about the sexual exploitation activities. Police involvement enabled more effective information sharing and built a more robust body of evidence for the police to act upon.

Further information

Housing First England

www.hfe.homeless.org.uk

Housing First England: Resources for women

www.hfe.homeless.org.uk/resource/housing-first-women

1. Hidden Hurt: violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women, Sara Scott and Sally McManus DMSS Research for Agenda, January 2016
2. The Principles for Housing First, Housing First England Homeless Link, November 2016: www.hfe.homeless.org.uk/resource/principles-housing-first
3. Evaluation of the Threshold Housing First Project for Women Offenders Interim report, Deborah Quilgars and Nicholas Pleace Centre for Housing Policy University of York November 2016



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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