

Housing First: addressing the concerns

A short guide for housing associations

18 October 2018



Housing First is an approach to providing housing and support that prioritises access to stable accommodation over the requirement for an individual to first address any other support needs they have.

It is an approach that is receiving increased recognition, but there are some concerns about it, largely based on misconceptions about what it is, and isn't.

Homeless Link and the National Housing Federation represent hundreds of organisations that support people who have experience of homelessness and rough sleeping. We have combined our expertise to write a paper on Housing First that covers:

- [a summary of the Housing First approach](#)
- [an overview of the main housing association concerns](#)
- [a response to these concerns from Homeless Link](#)
- [conclusion and further resources.](#)



What is Housing First?

As homelessness has risen, so has interest in solutions for ending it. Housing First is one such solution. With an impressive global evidence base, Housing First is now part of mainstream conversations about what ending homelessness looks like.

Provision of Housing First in England is slowly growing, and the recent additional £28m funding from the Government will lead to further provision in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, and the West Midlands.

Despite this growth, there is still some way to go to develop a wider understanding of what Housing First is – and isn't – and how it fits in alongside other homelessness services.

Homeless Link summarise Housing First as:

- a cost-effective support model for people with severe and multiple disadvantage
- services that adhere to the [seven core principles](#) to ensure they are effective
- not the only solution to ending homelessness, it should be part of a range of options
- an approach that has been used in England since 2010 – there are now around 35-40 locally developed services in addition to the three large scale pilots recently funded by MHCLG.

More information, research, evaluations, guidance and case studies can be found on [the Housing First England website](#).

What are the concerns about Housing First?

In 2018, the Federation completed a survey of its housing association members to learn more about how many housing associations deliver Housing First, and what the sector thinks of the model. This identified four main concerns about Housing First:

1. [Housing First is seen as a one-size fits all approach.](#)
2. [Housing First is limiting social housing social.](#)
3. [Support funding for Housing First is risky.](#)
4. [Housing First doesn't help with social isolation.](#)

In the section below, Homeless Link provide a response to each of these concerns, and outline some of the misconceptions that have led to them.

For reference, the results from the Federation survey are:

- In total, 141 organisations responded.
- Of these, 16 stated that they delivered Housing First.
- 44 respondents said that they hadn't heard of the model.

1. Housing First is seen as a one-size-fits-all approach

Summary of the concern

While respondents were generally positive about Housing First as a solution, there was concern that it should not be seen as a 'silver bullet'.

Although many organisations recognised that Housing First is designed for a specific cohort, there were still concerns that this cohort might experience isolation, and that any changing needs should be met.

Homeless Link response

Housing First works for people that, due to their needs and behaviours, may struggle to engage with other forms of support. It will not be an appropriate solution for all people who have experienced homelessness, and provision of Housing First should always sit alongside good provision of other services such as hostels and supported housing.

Housing First sees housing as the stable base from which people can address their wider health and social needs and critically offers non-time limited and intensive holistic support to assist them to maintain their tenancy and begin recovery. [Most people with complex needs have experienced long histories of trauma](#) which impacts many aspects of their life. This can explain why Housing First, as opposed to other interventions, works better for them.

Misconception: Housing First means providing a tenancy without adequate support

There is often a misconception that Housing First means providing a tenancy without adequate support. This isn't the case, and support provided by Housing First services is vital to the success of the approach. Availability of intensive support that is open-ended, flexible and personalised is integral to Housing First provision. Staff should have a caseload of no more than seven individuals.

Internationally, we know that Housing First ends homelessness for approximately eight out of ten people, however [there is no way of determining who will succeed and who won't](#). Services that adhere to [the seven core principles of Housing First](#) achieve better outcomes than those that have less fidelity to the model.

Across England, Housing First is being used effectively for men and women experiencing the severest forms of multiple disadvantage. Services have been established for a variety of cohorts, not just rough sleepers, and there are some specifically designed to work with vulnerable women.

Services are generally provided to those deemed to be the most vulnerable and in the most chronic need. Many services use [the Chaos Index](#) to determine which of their community is in most need of Housing First.

Survey quote

"It has a role to play in helping to reduce homelessness, but it needs to be seen as part of an overarching approach to the problem."

"Housing First does not entirely remove the need for traditional supported housing for people at their most vulnerable who require 24 hour support."

2. Housing First is limiting social housing stock

Summary of the concern

As is central to any conversation about homelessness, supply of housing was a significant concern expressed by respondents.

This included not only the issues of limited numbers of one-bed homes in certain areas, but also the role of nominations agreements meaning that housing associations had little flexibility over how their stock is used.

Homeless Link response

Services across England use a variety of housing for their clients.

[Homeless Link research](#) has found that 57% of provider's source housing from the private rented sector, 61% from social housing and 11% use their own stock. Most teams support people to live in self-contained units, but there are some examples of shared housing being used when people have wanted to live together.

Residents should be offered the same tenancy as anyone else in that kind of property and licenses should be avoided. Licenses do not provide the feelings of security and responsibility that enable people to begin rebuilding their lives.

Although Housing First is growing in popularity, the caseloads of services tend to be small, so acquisition of properties isn't as much of a challenge as you may expect. Homeless Link's research has found positive and negative aspects to both social and private tenancies, and many projects aiming to use a mixture of the two.

Misconception: Housing First leads to rent arrears

There have been concerns raised about the approach, especially for landlords. Concerns about anti-social behavior, rent arrears and failed tenancies are understandable and while these issues do arise, it is actually quite low as the intensive support available to people, in addition to preparation work before someone takes on a tenancy, means that if problems do arise they can be addressed quickly, usually by the Housing First support team. Across England, most services are successfully supporting almost all their clients to maintain tenancies.

Housing should be affordable and of good quality. As most Housing First residents may continue to require welfare benefits for many years, the rent should also fall below the Local Housing Allowance to ensure they can afford it in the long term.

Housing First workers do a great deal to support people to maintain their benefit claims, which can increase security of income to potential landlords.

Survey quote

"Complex problems will not go away just because somebody is housed; they will go away only as part of a wider, more holistic package of support that is targeted to meet the specific needs of the individual".

3. Support funding for Housing First is risky

Summary of the concern

There were similar levels of concern over access to support. It was felt that Housing First was risky and the potential impact of support funding being cut or removed would be devastating.

Others highlighted how the need for robust support funding would also mean a need for greater partnership working across housing associations, local authorities and local health bodies.

Homeless Link response

Most services are currently funded through local authority Housing Related Support budgets, and some areas are exploring more innovative funding mechanisms such as pooled budgets and spot purchasing.

Housing First support is usually provided by homelessness support organisations with experience of supporting people with such complex needs. They will work closely with wider stakeholders, such as neighborhood/housing officers and other agencies, to support the individual. Most of these teams use an intensive case management approach – the Housing First worker acts as a lead service navigator for the client and point of contact for the social landlord and other agencies.

We recommend that services are developed and funded locally to ensure commitment around sustainability.

There are understandable concerns about the longevity of support funding when considering when to offer housing to a Housing First client. Many pilot projects go on to receive longer-term funding, however it is precarious.

We encourage services to undertake robust monitoring and evaluation and to consider innovative funding models. Should funding end there is an expectation that the commissioner and provider will ensure that support is available for the resident from another agency.

We have undertaken [research on commissioning](#), which we hope will influence central and local government to consider innovative funding methods and longer-term contracts.

Survey quote

“Providing intensive support for homeless people to sustain their tenancies is critical to provide housing associations the confidence to rehouse people with complex needs. Often we do not have the necessary resources to provide intensive support and therefore partnership working will greatly assist in sustaining tenancies for people with more complex housing needs.”

4. Housing First doesn't help with social isolation

Summary of the concern

Linked to the need for security around support funding, there was also a concern about the impact on the home and/or the local community. There was a sense that current staff might not have the expertise to assist people with very high support needs, and a worry that other local residents may struggle.

One respondent suggested that research is needed to better understand the impact of Housing First on the wider community, as well as the individual.

Some respondents also raised concerned about the potential for social isolation of those being supported by Housing First services: *"People who have been homeless have reported feelings of loneliness when initially rehoused. It is important that people are responded to as individuals by respecting what is important to them. Any policy can undermine this unintentionally by being too directive"*.

Survey quote

"Concerned at the potential negative impacts on the neighbouring community if not properly supported. We have previously re-housed street homeless people and their homes have then become hubs for other street homeless because the promised support from other agencies evaporated upon housing."

Homeless Link response

Social isolation is certainly an issue, and some residents may invite acquaintances and friends to stay with them to deal with this.

When this becomes problematic, the support from the Housing First team can assist in addressing it, and encourage the individual to find other ways of integrating in their community.

Quite often, the Housing First workers will have conversations about isolation and anti-social behaviour before the individual moves into the property, supporting them to consider how they will manage these issues and to consider the consequences.

Anecdotally, we've heard that stigma towards individuals can exacerbate concerns from neighbours, and it is important to be aware of the vulnerability of Housing First clients not only potential issues they may create.

Survey quote

"You can expect some resistance from local communities particularly if candidates cannot settle in an area".

Conclusion and further resources

The concerns expressed by survey respondents are valid. The resource required for Housing First, and potential challenges for all involved, are not to be taken lightly. However, we know that Housing First is a cost-effective intervention for some of the most vulnerable members of society and that it is making a huge difference to people's lives in England.

Housing First requires a leap of faith from all involved in developing and delivering services. Because of this, strong partnerships are needed to ensure that people are supported effectively to remain housed and begin recovery. Funders, housing providers and support providers need to think holistically, flexibly and work effectively together.

For social housing providers this will mean ensuring that everyone in your organisation understands the approach, and that good service level agreements are drawn up with the support provider to agree operational practices and procedures. This includes alternative support arrangements if the Housing First service is unable to secure funding in the future.

To find out more about how you can get involved in Housing First, you can read our specific social landlord guidance and Tips from the Frontline briefing, [available on the resource section of our website](#).