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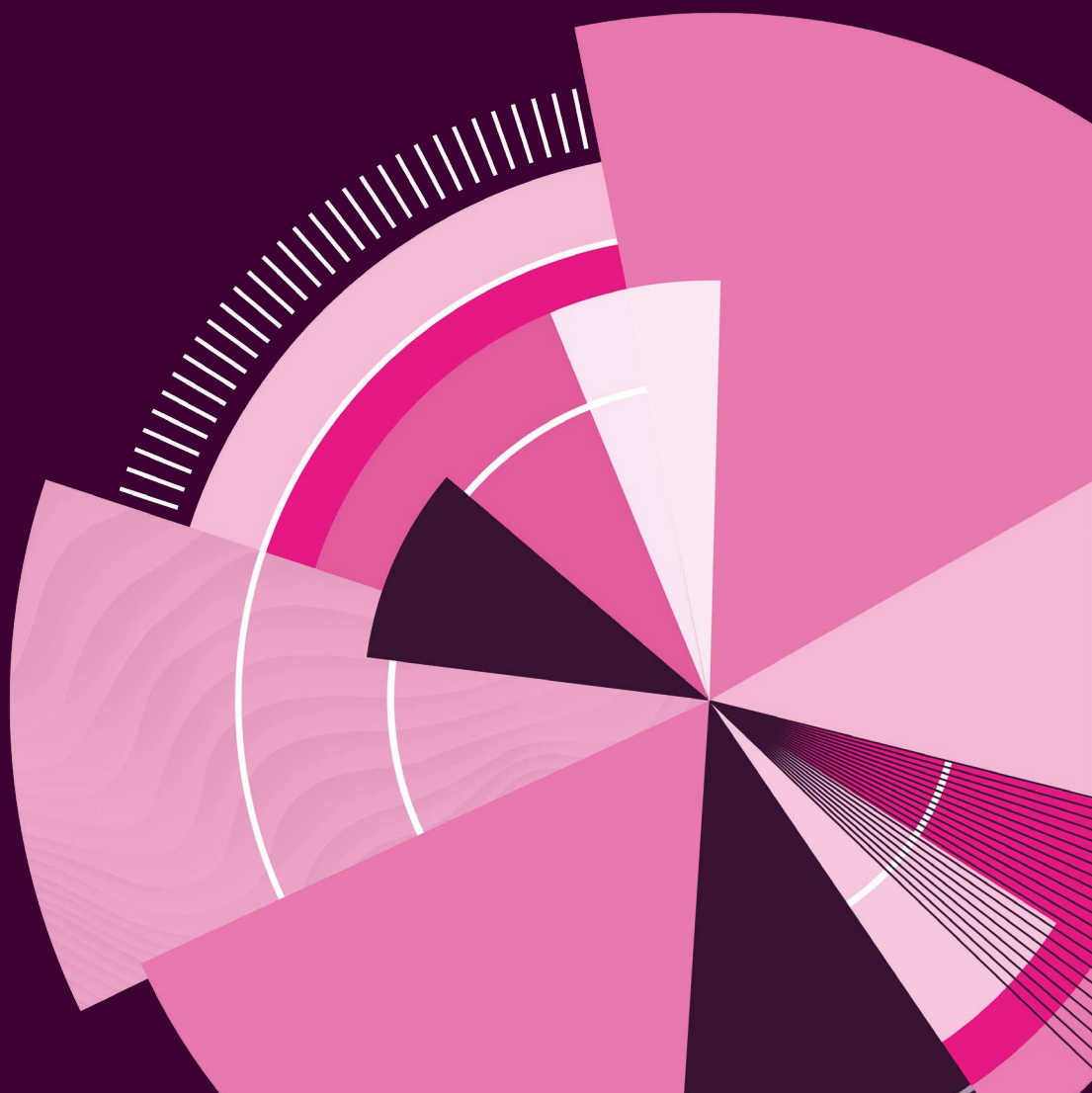
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# The Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant Research into the effectiveness of Housing First Services

Joanne Bretherton, Nicholas Pleace  
and Kit Colliver with Cheyann Heap



## **Acknowledgements**

This evaluation was one of the most challenging and rewarding in which we have been involved. The challenges centred on the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, which both significantly delayed our own plans for the evaluation and caused delays for the Housing First services being supported by the Henry Smith Charity. The rewards centred on the level of cooperation and support shown by many of the staff managing and running the Housing First services, their diligence in helping us collect data and in enabling us to undertake fieldwork. We are also extremely grateful to all the people using the Housing First services who gave up their time to participate in the research and who were willing to share their stories, experiences and opinions. In many senses this report is a collective effort which has been greatly and positively supported by the people using and providing the Housing First services that drew on the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant and which were supported by the Henry Smith Charity in other ways.

We would also like to thank Matt James, William Jacks and Keith Anderson at the Henry Smith Charity for their forbearance, understanding and support as we worked with them to manage the effects of the pandemic on the evaluation.

We are very grateful to Dr Cheyann Heap for her help with the first stage of interviews and to Dr Kit Colliver for their help with the second stage interviews. Kit Colliver also contributed to the final draft of the report.

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August 2023

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# SUMMARY

- This report presents the results of a three year evaluation of the Henry Smith Charity Strategic Grant Programme which supported six Housing First services. Two rural and suburban Housing First projects were developed in North Wales (Housing First Gwynedd) and West Sussex (Turning Tides). Specialist women's Housing First team members were added to existing Housing First services in London (Bench Outreach) and in Leeds (Turning Lives Around). New Housing First was also supported in Leicester (Action Homeless) and Southend (HARP). A separate Henry Smith Charity programme also provided continuity of funding to another West Sussex Housing First service (Stonepillow).
- The evaluation, led by the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, centred on two rounds of fieldwork interviewing people using and providing Housing First services across seven areas, alongside monthly statistical returns for each service. As the evaluation coincided with the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic both the development of some of the Housing First services and the University fieldwork were subject to delays and modification. Seventy seven interviews were conducted and data collected on 169 people using Housing First.
- The evaluation showed Housing First was often successful in ending long-term and recurrent homelessness associated with high, multiple and complex needs, in line with the wider evidence base. People using Housing First were generally very positive, with the agility, flexibility, intensity and enduring nature of the case management and support on offer being widely praised. Housing First team members viewed Housing First as a success, confirmed by statistical monitoring.
- A key finding of this research was that the intersection of domestic abuse, gender based violence, trauma and loss, alongside the high and multiple needs of women experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness furthers the case for Housing First that is designed, managed and run by women. Adding specialist women's team members to existing Housing First services should also be seen as a priority.
- The Henry Smith Charity funding for Housing First was successful on three main levels. First, it created new Housing First in rural and suburban areas, showing that the approach can work outside urban areas in the UK. Second, it supported innovation within Housing First through the addition of the Housing First team members for women and third, it added new evidence about different forms of Housing First working in different contexts to the wider debates about the future of Housing First in the UK.
- All the Housing First services faced significant challenges in securing sufficient, affordable and adequate housing supply. All the Housing First services also faced barriers to health, mental health, addiction and social care and social work services, a key element in the successful operation of Housing First as a case management model, which were not administrative, but were about scarcity. Waits for services were so long that they could effectively be unavailable and the challenges in getting the right mix of treatment and support linked to the effects of sustained real-terms cuts to health and social care budgets, had been heightened by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Housing First needs the correct strategic integration, including sufficient core funding, strong working relationships and access to a supply of good quality social housing to work effectively.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## About this report

The University of York led this evaluation which was designed to systematically explore the outputs and outcomes of the Housing First services supported by the Henry Smith Charity and report on the overall impact of Housing First Strategic Grant. This is the main output of the research. The evaluation was originally designed to run from August 2020 to September 2023.

This report builds upon and extends the evidence and discussion presented in two earlier interim reports. Our initial, delayed, interim report in November 2021 was much more limited in scope than had originally been intended. This was because the COVID-19 lockdowns delayed both the development of some aspects of the Housing First services and significantly limited our capacity to undertake the fieldwork in the ways that had originally been planned. A more substantial interim report, drawing on extensive fieldwork which we were finally able to pursue during the course of 2022, was produced in September of that year.

This final report references and summarises the findings of the two interim reports, but is mainly based on the extensive fieldwork and data collected during the final year of the three-year evaluation. Unlike the interim reports, this final report also includes some discussion and analysis on an additional seventh service, the Housing First provided by Stonepillow<sup>1</sup> which was also supported by the Henry Smith Charity, which was added to the evaluation in 2023.

## The evaluation

The evaluation focused on a three-year strategic programme designed to explore new dimensions of Housing First, the Henry Smith Charity<sup>2</sup> Housing First Strategic Grant. The grant programme centred on supporting innovation in Housing First in a context in which most services had been piloted and developed in urban centres and followed the same broad pattern of adopting some form of intensive case management (ICM) model and focusing their attention on people experiencing homelessness who had multiple and complex needs. In practice, this had meant that existing services were focusing quite heavily on recurrent and sustained lone male homelessness, both in the sense of people making ‘frequent flyer’ or ‘revolving door’ use of supported housing and emergency shelters (i.e. repeated or prolonged stays without their homelessness being resolved) and in relation to people who were repeatedly living rough. Women were appearing in these services at higher rates than had perhaps been expected, in the context of a growing recognition that women’s homelessness had long been undercounted<sup>3</sup>, but consideration of the potential need for Housing First that was designed and run by women for women was still at a relatively early stage.<sup>4</sup>

The innovation supported by the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant was twofold. First, the grant programme supported the development of Housing First services in smaller towns and cities and in more rural areas. Second, the grant programme allowed existing Housing First services to experiment and innovate, particularly in relation to adding specific support for women experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness associated with complex needs.

<sup>1</sup> <https://stonepillow.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.henrysmithcharity.org.uk>

<sup>3</sup> Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) *Women’s Homelessness: European Evidence Review* Brussels: FEANTSA.

<sup>4</sup> Quilgars, D., Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2019) *How to Deliver Housing First for Women: Learning from Threshold Housing First, Four Years On* York: University of York.

The evaluation used a mix of wholly anonymised monitoring of service activity, which was supplied by the Housing First services to the researchers, and extensive interviewing with the people using Housing First and the people who were managing and delivering Housing First. In the final phase of the evaluation, interviews were also conducted with representatives of partner agencies, including local authorities, centring on their views on the role and impact of the Housing First services. The research involved:

- 46 in-depth interviews with people using the seven Housing First services, 18 of which were conducted in the first round of fieldwork in 2022 and 28 of which were conducted in the second round in 2023.
- 23 in-depth interviews with staff and managers running the Housing First services, seven of which were conducted in the first round of fieldwork in 2022 and 16 in the second round of fieldwork in 2023.
- Six stakeholder interviews across the different areas in which the Housing First services were operating, conducted during the second round of fieldwork in 2023.

Nine of the people using Housing First interviewed in 2022 identified as women and most of the respondents were in early middle age (in their 30s and 40s). In the second round of interviews, ten people identified as female and again respondents tended to be in early middle age. All the people using the Housing First services had experienced sustained or recurrent homelessness and all had presented to the services with multiple and complex needs. In most instances – though not all – needs around mental health, addiction and alcohol use were all simultaneously present and, in some cases, but again not all, there had been protracted and repeated contact with other homelessness services and, in a few cases, with the criminal justice system.

The first round of fieldwork did not include the Housing First provided by Stonepillow, which was added to the research after the first round. As noted, Stonepillow, while supported by the Henry Smith Charity and included in this final report, was not originally one of the services supported by Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant on which this evaluation was focused.

The second stage fieldwork was also more extensive because the Housing First services were bigger and had reached a steady state of operation. During the first stage fieldwork in 2022, the Housing First services were still in a process of catching up on their original timetables and

plans which had often been delayed by the effects of the pandemic and lockdown.

These 77 interviews across and around the seven Housing First services involved some respondents more than once. In some cases, people using Housing First in 2022 were interviewed again in 2023 and, with some exceptions like HARP, the staff teams who were interviewed in 2023 often contained the same people as they had in 2022. This said, around two-thirds of the interviews conducted in the 2023 fieldwork were with people who had not been interviewed before.

Everyone who participated in the interviews was guaranteed anonymity, in that they were asked if their views could be quoted but not in a way that might identify them or their organisation. This approach was taken to enable those providing, working with and using Housing First to feel as free as possible to express their opinions, knowing that their views would not be reported back in any form that might identify them or, where relevant, their organisation. Ethical approval for the fieldwork was secured through the University of York's ethics committee.

The Housing First services were all asked to provide monitoring data over the course of the evaluation. A simple, totally anonymised, spreadsheet return was devised. The reporting worked by each Housing First service giving the people using their service an identifier which was always used in the returns, but that identifier was made up by the service and had no information that could possibly identify an individual within it. Only data with the identifiers was shared with the University, meaning there was no way in which the data being shared could be tracked back to an individual. Data collection began in January 2021 and continued until the end of May 2023, covering a period of 29 months (2.4 years) in total. Data were not always supplied on a continuous and reliable basis by all the Housing First services throughout the evaluation period. Some encountered difficulties with staffing loss and changes that created breaks in data collection, others were not actually operational when data collection began at the start of 2021, but in several cases (see Chapter 5) a continuous block of monitoring data covering a considerable period was available.

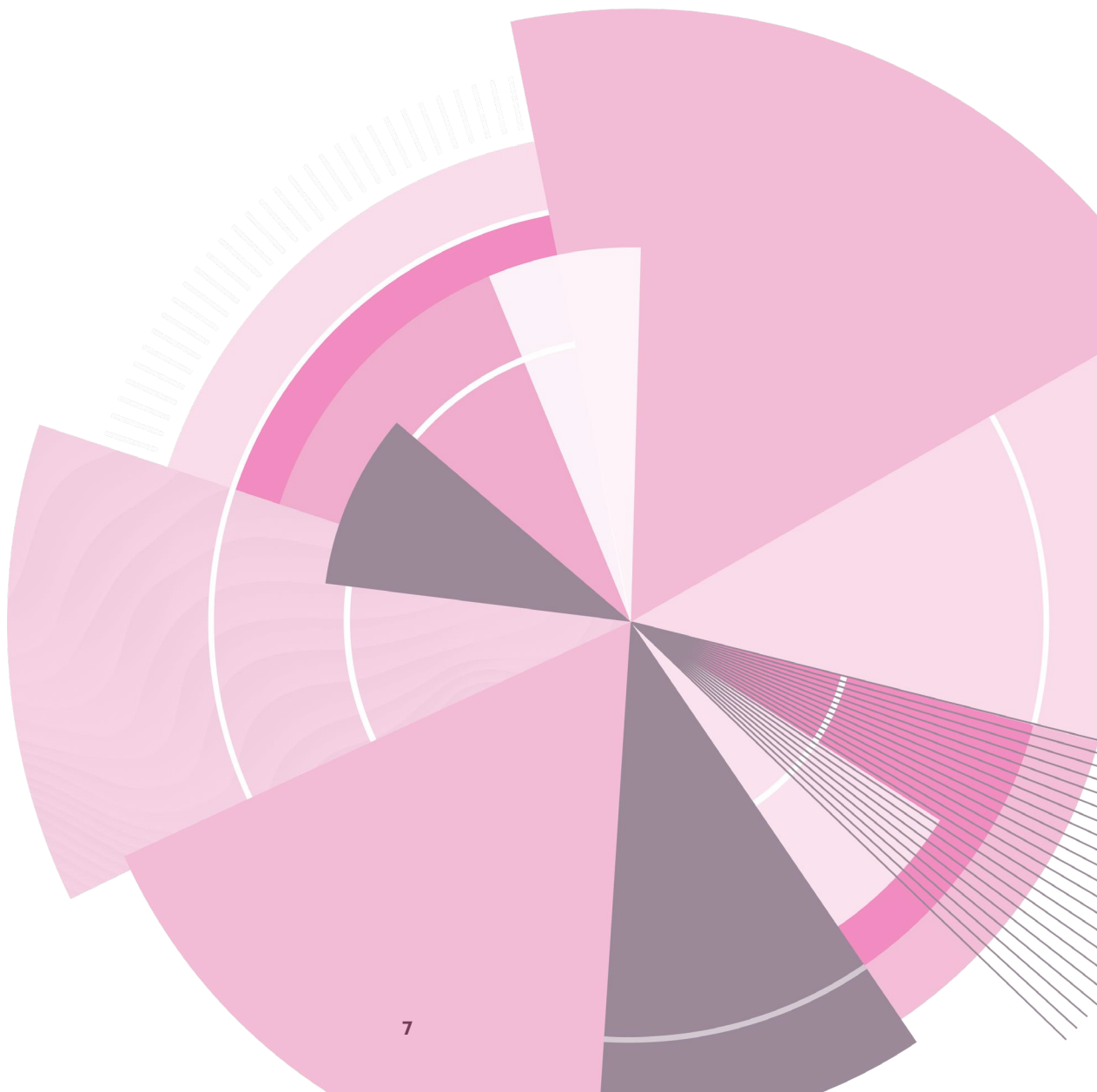
The evaluation was originally designed to run from August 2020 to the Autumn of 2023 with smaller scale fieldwork taking place on a more frequent basis with the people using Housing First services. The COVID-19 lockdowns necessitated reorganisation into two main blocks of fieldwork which were the focus of the September 2022 interim report and this final report.

## Overview of the report

This final report summarises and refers to the findings presented in the September 2022 Interim report alongside reporting the results from the second stage fieldwork. The statistical analysis from the September 2022 Interim report is updated, presenting all the monitoring data that were supplied by each of the services over the course of the evaluation.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief discussion of what Housing First is and how the concept has changed as the approach has become mainstream. This is followed by a brief portrait of each of the seven Housing First services which have been encompassed by this evaluation. Chapter 3 looks at the experience

of delivering Housing First from the points of view of the people managing and delivering the services and also encompasses the views of the Housing First projects from key stakeholders, such as local authorities. Chapter 4 centres on the lived experience and viewpoints of the people using Housing First and what they thought about the seven services and the ideas underpinning Housing First. The fifth chapter looks at the results of the anonymised monitoring and explores the ways in which the Housing First services have expanded and changed over the course of the evaluation. Chapter 6 discusses the main conclusions from the evaluation and chapter 7 presents a series of policy and practice recommendations.



## 2 AN OVERVIEW OF HOUSING FIRST

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of current developments in Housing First and the working approach to fidelity with the original North American model which is being used in the UK and other similar countries. The second section of the chapter provides a description of each of the seven Housing First services that took part in the evaluation.

### Current developments in Housing First

Housing First challenges the conventional model for homelessness services, the ‘housing last’ or ‘staircase’ models, which use temporary communal and congregate supported accommodation to treat, support and train people experiencing homelessness who have multiple and complex needs to be ‘housing ready’. In North America and to some extent in Europe, these services had long been criticised for their relatively high costs, strict regimes based on abstinence and compliance with treatment, and for achieving enduring exits from homelessness for around 40-60% of the people using them.<sup>5</sup> Housing First immediately places someone in a settled home and then provides a mix of support, sometimes centred on case management (originally intensive case management or ICM) and sometimes also involving assertive community treatment (ACT), an interdisciplinary team including trained social workers, mental health and addiction specialists, who work for the Housing First service. High rates of success relative to other service models, typically achieving exits from homelessness that endure at least one year for 80% plus of service users, led Housing First to become prominent in North America and then be adopted in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of this evaluation, a simplified version of the definition from the widely employed *Housing First Guide Europe* has been adopted<sup>7</sup>, i.e. Housing First is defined as:

- Offering flexible, agile mobile support provided to people in their own homes.
- Providing a very high degree of choice and control to people using Housing First, which includes individuals choosing which forms of support and treatment they will use.
- Separating housing from support, i.e. people retain housing when/if they stop using Housing First and they hold their own tenancy for their home.
- Following a harm reduction model, which means that Housing First does not require abstinence from drugs or alcohol, or engagement with medical or psychiatric/mental health treatment in order to work with someone.
- Including Housing First services that only use a high intensity case management service model, along the lines of the intensive case management (ICM) approach, as well as those using the original ACT/ ICM model.
- Pursuing a recovery orientation, i.e. seeking to work with each person to enable a *mutually agreed* trajectory away from homelessness for someone whose experience of homelessness is associated with multiple and complex needs. This means that the Housing First approach, while user-led, is not passive and has to maintain what can be a difficult balance.<sup>8</sup>

Housing First has long since passed the point at which the proof of concept has been demonstrated.<sup>9</sup> The idea that housing-led, intensive case management services that are either Housing First itself, or a fairly closely related hybrid like Critical Time Intervention (CTI), is the most effective response to homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs, including for those

5 Pleave, N. (2008) *Effective Services for Substance Misuse and Homelessness in Scotland: Evidence from an international review* Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

6 Aubry, T. (2020) Analysis of housing first as a practical and policy relevant intervention: the current state of knowledge and future directions for research. *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1) pp.13-26.

7 [https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HFG\\_guide-en.pdf](https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HFG_guide-en.pdf)

8 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/core-principles-housing-first/>

9 Aubry, T. (2020) Analysis of housing first as a practical and policy relevant intervention: the current state of knowledge and future directions for research. *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1) pp.13-26.

people whose experience of homelessness is prolonged or repeated, is now mainstream.<sup>10</sup> In the UK and wider European context in which Housing First has become broadly accepted, the debates have shifted towards the practical and strategic implementation of Housing First.

One area of discussion centres around fidelity to the original Housing First model which originally became operational in New York in 1993, some 30 years ago at the time of writing.<sup>11</sup> Housing First was originally designed for a US context in which access to health, social work, welfare benefits, mental health and addiction services and affordable housing was highly restricted. While levels of support are highly variable, most European countries offer greater social protection than was available in the US at that time, at least in terms of access to health care, social services/care and welfare systems, alongside some access to social housing in much of North-Western Europe.

The original Housing First model had offered a health and welfare system in miniature, using an in-house team that included mental health, addiction and other specialists. Some argued that this was unnecessary in a European context and within the UK. This was because the health, social care and welfare services (and support with housing costs/social housing) was a basic entitlement for anyone experiencing homelessness. This meant, in theory at least, that UK and European Housing First, while still needing to provide significant direct support, could effectively address many treatment and support needs by ensuring the people it supported were getting access to the universal welfare, health, social care/social work and housing services that they were already entitled to. On this basis, case-management (only) Housing First services, without their own specialist teams (Housing First had originally included its own trained social workers, nurses, mental health and addiction professionals), began to be used in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and they appeared to be effective.<sup>12</sup>

Debates do still exist around whether very high fidelity to the original model is necessary or not<sup>13</sup>, and something to note is that there is clear evidence of considerable success in large experimental trials using high fidelity Housing First in Canada and France.<sup>14</sup> However, a consensus has emerged, in Europe and the UK, around the idea that services following a Housing First *ethos* are likely to be successful, without there being the need to replicate the detail of the original model.<sup>15</sup> Mainstream UK guidance on Housing First, such as that produced by Homeless Link<sup>16</sup>, tends to follow this line, which is also the approach taken by this evaluation, reflecting the *Housing First Guide Europe* approach.<sup>17</sup>

An important point here is how UK and European experience, cultural differences and attitudes have modified Housing First from the original North American model. Some of this is about differences in environment, such as (theoretically at least) universally accessible health, addiction and mental health services and the existence of significant social housing supply in many, albeit far from all, areas in the UK. However some of the operational differences extend into practice. British Housing First tends to collectively offer full legal tenancies (the original model used lease arrangements, holding the tenancy itself to reassure what were all private landlords) and does not exercise budgetary control over the people using the service (the original model made sure all bills were paid before releasing whatever money was left).<sup>18</sup> In addition, British Housing First, while it is not passive, also tends to skew towards a coproductive model that emphasises user choice and control, which means that it does not promote individual behavioural change with quite the same emphasis as the original model.<sup>19</sup> The wider conventions of British Housing First were widely in evidence across the seven services evaluated in this research, although as is described below, there some variations in how the model was interpreted and operationalised.

10 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu>

11 Tsemberis, S. and Eisenberg, R.F. (2000) Pathways to housing: Supported housing for street-dwelling homeless individuals with psychiatric disabilities. *Psychiatric services*, 51(4), pp.487-493.

12 Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2013) The Case for Housing First in the European Union: A Critical Evaluation of Concerns about Effectiveness *European Journal of Homelessness* 7(2), pp. 21-41.

13 Greenwood, R., Bernad, R., Aubry, T., and Agha, A. (2018) A Study of Programme Fidelity in European and North American Housing First Programmes: Findings, Adaptations, and Future Directions, *European Journal of Homelessness* 12(3) pp.275-298.

14 Aubry, T., Roebuck, M., Loubiere, S., Tinland, A., Nelson, G. and Latimer, E. (2021) A Tale of Two Countries: A Comparison of Multi-Site Randomised Controlled Trials of Pathways Housing First Conducted in Canada and France. *European Journal of Homelessness* 15(3), pp. 25-44.

15 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/what-is-hf/housing-first-guide/>

16 <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/the-principles-of-housing-first/>

17 [https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HFG\\_guide-en.pdf](https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HFG_guide-en.pdf)

18 Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First: The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* Hazelden: Minnesota.

19 Homeless Link (2017) *Housing First in England: The Principles* London: Homeless Link.

Another area of discussion centres on the idea that Housing First might need to be modified for some particular groups of people experiencing homelessness. There is growing evidence – some of which is contained within this evaluation – of a clear case for Housing First services that are designed, built and run for women by women.<sup>20</sup> Some of the key issues here centre on a generally greater need for safeguarding when women with complex needs experience homelessness, as experience of domestic abuse and gender based violence can be extremely high and women may often need some protection from former partners. This was not something that was systematically considered in the original designs for Housing First, because it was assumed most users would be men and that those men would often be highly socially isolated, rather than needing protection from people from former relationships. The other key development is around Housing First for Youth, usually abbreviated to HF4Y which has been experimented with in the UK and in Canada. Here, the argument is that because recent care leavers and other vulnerable and at-risk young people are still young, sometimes with no more knowledge or experience than children, that Housing First needs to be aware of and able to support a (broadly defined) pastoral or parent-like role which would be inappropriate for an adult.<sup>21</sup>

Debates have also moved onto the strategic implementation of Housing First and where it should sit within a homelessness strategy. These discussions draw on examples like that of Finland, where a specifically Finnish (rather than American) model of Housing First has shaped a housing-led, integrated and preventative strategy that has greatly reduced long-term homelessness among people with complex needs.<sup>22</sup> In France, a high fidelity randomised control trial of Housing First, closely replicating the original US approach, was successful and has been rolled out into a national programme<sup>23</sup>, while Ireland<sup>24</sup> and Portugal<sup>25</sup> are also pursuing the development of integrated,

preventative and housing-led strategies with Housing First at their core. In Scotland too, Housing First is being seen as at the core of a national homelessness strategy<sup>26</sup>, with similar developments in Wales<sup>27</sup> and Northern Ireland<sup>28</sup> and while England lacks a national homelessness strategy the time of writing, none of the UK governments is currently devoting significant funds to bolster and develop Housing First.

The main challenges are seen as centring on how to move Housing First away from being in a position of “perpetual pilot” services and into the mainstream. In England, around £1bn has been taken out of central and local government spending on homelessness services since 2010, and securing stable, adequate funding for Housing First has become increasingly difficult<sup>29</sup> as has finding suitable housing supply. While integrated homelessness strategies, which incorporate Housing First within a housing-led and preventative approach, are becoming mainstream in Europe, reflecting the goals of the *European Platform on Combatting Homelessness*<sup>30</sup>, England is falling behind.

In summary, Housing First is accepted by most local governments (and also by central government in England<sup>31</sup> and the national governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) as an effective, proven model. Broadly speaking, most guidance around Housing First in a British and European context suggests that services will be effective if they follow the core principles of Housing First, while noting that high fidelity services that replicate the detail of the original model, as for example in France, also have very strong results. There are new debates around the need for specialisation in Housing First, around services for women, which is a subject this evaluation explores, and around HF4Y services for vulnerable young people. Finally, barriers exist in England and the wider UK around the shortfalls in resourcing and, in England, the strategic planning, needed to develop the kinds of integrated, preventative homelessness strategies which have

20 Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) *Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review* Brussels: FEANTSA.

21 Blood, I.; Alden, S. and Quilgars, D. (2020) *Rock Trust Housing First for Youth Pilot: Evaluation Report* Edinburgh: Rock Trust.

22 Allen, M.; Benjaminsen, L.; O'Sullivan, E. and Pleace, N. (2020) *Ending Homelessness in Denmark, Finland and Ireland* Bristol: Policy Press,

23 [https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/contenu/piece-joynte/2016/11/4\\_pages\\_ucsdv\\_avril\\_2016\\_gb.pdf](https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/contenu/piece-joynte/2016/11/4_pages_ucsdv_avril_2016_gb.pdf)

24 Baptista, I.; Culhane, D.P.; Pleace, N. and O'Sullivan, E. (2022) *From Rebuilding Ireland to Housing for All: International and Irish Lessons for tackling Homelessness* Dublin: COPE Galway, Focus Ireland, JCFJ, Mercy Law, Simon Communities of Ireland and SVP.

25 Baptista, I. (2018) The New Portuguese Homelessness Strategy: Recent Developments. *European Journal of Homelessness* 12(1), pp. 95-109.

26 <https://homelessnetwork.scot/housing-first/>

27 [https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/ending-homelessness-high-level-action-plan-2021-2026\\_0.pdf](https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/ending-homelessness-high-level-action-plan-2021-2026_0.pdf)

28 <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/73313718-aa0e-4aae-b122-6573dcab88c7/Ending-Homelessness-Together-Homelessness-Strategy-2022-27.pdf>

29 Blood, I. and Pleace, N. (2021) *A Traumatized System: A critical crossroads for the commissioning of homelessness services* Leicester: Riverside.

30 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1550&langId=en>

31 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-first-pilot-national-evaluation-reports/mobilising-housing-first-toolkit-from-planning-to-early-implementation>

Housing First at their core, which are now becoming mainstream in many comparable European countries.

While there are logistical and political challenges in further developing Housing First, there are two further issues that are worth briefly mentioning. The first of these is ongoing criticism of Housing First, sometimes as being too close in goals and approach to the services it was replacing, i.e. as trying to modify who someone is in order to stop their homelessness (which broadly reflects the ideas of the political right) and sometimes, in a marked contrast, being criticised as an expression of 'socialist' thinking about social problems.<sup>32</sup> However, more fundamental questions have also arisen in recent years, which are around the extent to which Housing First shows success in improving physical and mental health, reducing addiction, reducing criminality (if present) and improving social connections and economic engagement. Housing First definitely ends homelessness at a high rate, but results in terms of other outcomes – including for very high fidelity services – are more variable.<sup>33</sup>

One response here is to consider what it is realistic to expect Housing First to achieve, especially when it always relies in part on other health, social care (social services), welfare and housing services, because it is ultimately a case management model and because it is working with people who have high and complex needs who will not suddenly 'get better' within a few weeks or months.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, hyperbole about Housing First has been an issue at various points during the adoption and development of the model, in North America, Europe and the UK. A more realistic picture, in which Housing First is an important component in integrated, preventative and housing-led homelessness strategies, but is not – and was never intended to be – a panacea that would solve every dimension of homelessness by itself, is now emerging.<sup>35</sup>

The second issue, which features heavily in this final report as it did in the September 2022 interim report, is adequate, affordable housing supply with reasonable security of tenure. Arguments about why the UK lacks a sufficient supply of affordable homes, particularly in

areas of high economic growth, are complex, varied and often contradict one another. The reality for Housing First services is that either securing adequate social housing or affordable, decent and reasonably secure private rented sector housing is often challenging in the UK. The challenges in some areas are greater than in others, but one of the structural barriers to wider implementation of Housing First is that does not have enough of the right sort of housing in many areas and that is something that is reflected in some of the experience reported here.

## The seven Housing First services

This section of the report provides a brief overview of the seven services supported by the Henry Smith Charity. In six cases, the Housing First received financial support under the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant. The seventh Housing First service, provided by Stonepillow, being supported under an associated programme. As is described here, each service was distinct and they were supported by the Henry Smith Charity in various ways.

### Action Homeless (Leicester)

Operating within the City of Leicester, this Housing First service was developed by Action Homeless, an established charity offering an array of homelessness services including supported housing.<sup>36</sup> Housing First was designed to provide support for 24 people with multiple and complex needs over a three year period, being designed to scale up from six people in year one, to 12 in year two and eventually reaching 24 in year three. The Henry Smith Charity was asked to support a 51 hour workload, around 1.45 FTE members of staff assuming a 35 hour working week, with some additional resources coming from Action Homeless.

Designed caseloads were six per worker, which is similar to the kinds of levels seen in other Housing First services across England.<sup>37</sup> Referrals to the Housing First service were expected to come from people experiencing homelessness who had multiple

32 Pleace, N. (2021) Neoreaction and Housing First: A Review Essay *European Journal of Homelessness* 15(2), pp. 269-288.

33 Aubry, T. (2020) Analysis of housing first as a practical and policy relevant intervention: the current state of knowledge and future directions for research. *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1) pp.13-26.

34 Blood, I., Birchill, A. and Pleace, N. (2021) *Reducing, changing or ending Housing First support* London: Homeless Link/Housing First England.

35 Kaakinen, J. and Turunen, S. (2021) Finnish but not yet Finished: Successes and Challenges of Housing First in Finland. *European Journal of Homelessness* 15(3), pp. 81-84.

36 <https://www.actionhomeless.org.uk>

37 Homeless Link (2020) *The picture of Housing First in England 2020* London: Homeless Link.

contacts with existing services in the city, without their homelessness being resolved, including via the City of Leicester's housing pathway.<sup>38</sup> The three year plan for Housing First was supported by the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant and became operational in early 2021.

The challenges linked to COVID and operational issues, around staff retention and recruitment had meant that the service had not scaled up as rapidly as intended, with a current caseload of six when the visited for the second round of fieldwork in 2023. The service was in the process of replacing staff who had quite recently left, and this was seen as likely to mean some expansion in the numbers of people using Housing First in the near future. The approach to Housing First taken by Action Homeless was seen as high fidelity, using a case-management model that offered relatively intensive support which was agile, flexible and co-productive in nature, working with and listening to the people being supported by the service. This view was echoed by the respondents who were using Housing First provided by Action Homeless.

Unlike some of the other Housing First services, Action Homeless Housing First had access to its own tenancies and hostels which could be used for people being supported by Housing First. Some of these were in bedsit or studio apartments within larger converted housing and they could be employed on a temporary or permanent basis. The goal was always to pursue settled housing, including enabling people using Housing First to access social housing, but not the private rented sector, other than where Action Homeless was acting as a managing agent (i.e. running private rented housing on a landlord's behalf under contract). Another difference was that, despite Leicester being a sizable city by UK standards with over half a million inhabitants, only one Housing First service, that operated by Action Homeless, appeared to be operational. This is in contrast to some other UK cities where, at the time of writing, more than one Housing First service may be operational, or there is a larger programme being led by the local authority.

## Bench Outreach (London)

Bench Outreach<sup>39</sup> is a long-established homelessness charity that concentrates on the London Boroughs of Islington and was one of the first organisations in the UK homelessness sector to establish a Housing First service in 2013<sup>40</sup> with Bench Outreach offering a range of other services.

In this case, support was sought from the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant to enhance the existing Housing First service through the addition of a specialist worker for women. Bench Outreach had found that around half the people using its Housing First service were women and had determined there was a need for a specialist, female worker. The goal for the one full-time women's worker was to support up to 30 women over a three-year period, aiming for 80% of the women being supported remaining in their own settled housing during the first year, rising to 90% in years two and three.

Alongside direct support to women presenting to Housing First with multiple and complex needs, often associated with long term and repeated homelessness, there was a wider role in ensuring that the Housing First team were gender informed, trauma informed and aware of the needs and challenges surrounding experience of domestic abuse. Other than the specialist women's worker, Bench Outreach Housing First was supported by LB Lewisham and LB Greenwich and housing was supplied through arrangement with social landlords, including Lewisham, which meant that the Housing First service had access to a social housing supply and could use council or housing association lets, rather than relying on the private rented sector. The specialist worker became operational in early 2021, within the larger Housing First service which has been operating since 2013.

Volunteer support through a student placement had been used during the course of 2022-23 for several months, but the core of the service being supported by the Henry Smith Charity was a lone worker. Caseloads were reported as being high relative to capacity at the second fieldwork visit in 2023, with the specialist women's worker having a current caseload of eight women, all of whom had high, multiple and complex needs.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-community/housing/homelessness/your-rights-if-homeless/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://benchoutreach.com>

<sup>40</sup> Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2015) *Housing First in England: An Evaluation of Nine Services* York: University of York.

## HARP (Southend)

The Homeless Action Resource Project (HARP)<sup>41</sup> is based in Southend and is a longstanding charitable provider of homelessness services. The original proposal for a Housing First service was for a four year transition away from the more traditional supported housing that HARP had been offering, which would be the first time a Housing First model approach had been used in the area. Housing First was intended to have four service users accommodated by the end of Year 1, rising to seven by end of Year 2 and ten by end of Year 3 which would be maintained at 10 in Year 4, based around a core of 1.6 FTE posts. Housing First was expected to make use of the private rented sector and any social housing that could be accessed.

HARP initially encountered a series of logistical and partnership challenges which created problems in realising their plans for Housing First, which had been awarded funding under the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant. These issues were exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the HARP Housing First service became operational after the other services that were supported via the strategic grant from the Henry Smith Charity, going live in Autumn 2021.

A series of administrative, structural and other changes at organisational level had seen the Housing First service shift from a rather confused start to full operational reality across the course of the period covered by this evaluation. This had included reviews of referral procedures and around the way in which Housing First was initially being delivered, particularly around a successful transition to the choice-based and intensive model of support, which lies at the core of Housing First, and away from more traditional conceptualisations of how homelessness services are organised. Staffing changes had also occurred. By the point of the second fieldwork visit in 2023, a clearly defined Housing First service was operating at just above originally intended capacity, supporting 11 people, with a broad plan in place to seek increased funding to reduce some of the pressure on staff and expand the service.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.harpsouthend.org.uk/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://sheltercymru.org.uk/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/homelessness-strategy.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.pathwaysvermont.org/>

## Housing First Gwynedd

This Housing First service was set up by Shelter Cymru<sup>42</sup>, an independent Welsh charity that focuses on housing inequalities and homelessness, which has links to the Shelter charities operating in England and Scotland and, like those charities, has a broader role around lobbying, research and campaigning. Homelessness policy and legislation in Wales are a devolved power within the remit of the Welsh Government and while Welsh homelessness law and practice has strongly influenced English policy, it is separate and distinct.<sup>43</sup>

Housing First Gwynedd was designed to operate in North Wales, covering a largely rural area in and around Caernarfon and Bangor. As with the other Housing First supported by the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant, it was intended for people with a significant history of homelessness, housing insecurity and homelessness service use, typically presenting with treatment and support needs that were likely to include various combinations of mental illness, addiction, poor physical health, limiting illness and disability and a history of offending. The approach taken was reported as being influenced by Housing First Vermont<sup>44</sup>, one of the first US Housing First services to operate in a more rural area. Housing First was built around 2.6 FTE staff, with volunteer support, and intended to work with up to 14 people (a caseload of 6-7 per FTE staff member) at any given time and was working at designed capacity at the point of the second fieldwork visit in 2023.

Housing First began operating in Gwynedd as the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns took hold, which delayed the establishment of face-to-face connections and meetings with people using the service and slowed down processes more generally. Fidelity with the original model, in terms of following the core ethos and providing a form of intensive case management was high, but the service faced significant challenges around securing suitable housing in a rural area with a significant tourist industry. Unlike some of the other Housing First services, Housing First Gwynedd had no direct access to its own stock nor a protocol or agreement with one or more social landlords, which meant securing social and private rented sector housing on a case-by-case basis. At the point the first

fieldwork took place, Housing First was working with people who had been in temporary accommodation for some time, however eight people had been found settled housing by the point of the second fieldwork visit in 2023 (see Chapter 5).

### Turning Lives Around (Leeds)

A long-established homelessness charity with origins in the formation of Leeds Housing Concern in 1972, Turning Lives Around<sup>45</sup> has a long history of providing supported housing and other services to people experiencing homelessness in Leeds.

Like Bench, Turning Lives Around sought support from the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant to develop specialist support for women which was designed to be integrated into an existing Housing First service. The proposal was to add 10 places for women that would be supported by two FTE specialist team members. The goal was that the women's Housing First team members would collaborate with domestic violence services in Leeds and that the service would, as with other Housing First, be focused on women with multiple and complex needs, including women who were living rough. Caseloads were intended to be between five and seven per full time worker, which again reflects wider practice across Housing First services in England.<sup>46</sup> Housing First was designed to have a six-month 'bill free' period while a woman was establishing a home, which helped provide furniture and other essentials and could also be used should there be a need for lock changes or other modifications or repairs around safeguarding.

The management of Housing First changed several times over the course of the evaluation, but the ethos and focus of the original proposal was reported as having been maintained. As was the case with Housing First Gwynedd, Turning Lives Around did not have its own housing stock nor an established protocol or agreement with a social landlord and had to make use of private landlords and encourage the women using their service to apply for social housing in Leeds. An initial collaboration with another charity in Leeds which had been part of the original application had broken down early on, linked to the relatively high and more complex needs that women were presenting with, which meant that Turning Lives Around had to return to

Henry Smith and request support be directed entirely towards their own in-house Housing First service. At the point of the second fieldwork visit in 2023, the two women's team members in the Housing First service had a full caseload.

### Turning Tides (West Sussex)

Established in 1992, Turning Tides<sup>47</sup> is a community led charity that provides a range of supported housing and addiction services in West Sussex, including Worthing, Horsham and Littlehampton. Support was sought from the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant to build Housing First through what was described as a West Sussex Housing First Partnership. Housing First was built around two FTE team members and a 0.6 FTE manager post with the goal being to have an operational capacity of 14 people using the service, assuming a caseload of seven people per worker which, as noted elsewhere, is in line with general practice of caseloads of 5-7 people per worker in Housing First services across England.<sup>48</sup> The Housing First was designed to be integrated with the existing services operated by Turning Tides and was presented as a response to the charity finding it was working with more and more people experiencing homelessness who were presenting with multiple and complex needs.

Turning Tides was another Housing First service that did not have access to its own accommodation, and which relied on access to social housing through collaboration with housing associations (registered providers). Delays in accessing housing were similar to some of the issues that Housing First Gwynedd was encountering in another relatively rural and suburban area, i.e. housing market stress was high and wait times for access to social housing could be considerable. Housing First had been implemented in line with the original proposal to Henry Smith without many changes in management or personnel over the duration of the project. At the point of the second fieldwork visit in 2023, Housing First was working at very close to planned capacity with 13 people receiving support, of whom seven had been found settled housing (see also Chapter 5).

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.turninglivesaround.co.uk>

<sup>46</sup> Homeless Link (2020) *The picture of Housing First in England 2020* London: Homeless Link.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.turning-tides.org.uk/>

<sup>48</sup> Homeless Link (2020) *The picture of Housing First in England 2020* London: Homeless Link.

## Stonepillow (West Sussex)

Stonepillow Housing First joined the evaluation of projects supported by the Henry Smith Charity in 2022. The Housing First service was not funded by the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant but through the wider programmes of the Charity.<sup>49</sup> Stonepillow<sup>50</sup> is a homelessness charity working in West Sussex, with services that include daytime service hubs, hostel and supported housing accommodation and addiction services, within Chichester and Bognor Regis. Stonepillow had previously secured National Lottery funding, support from Crisis<sup>51</sup> and from a local authority to add Housing First to its range of services and sought support from the Henry Smith charity to continue to run and develop the service. The service worked with 3.8 FTE staff, with a caseload of between 5-6 people each. Again, as with the other Housing First services, this appears to be within the typical range for Housing First services operating in England during the early 2020s. The intention was for Housing First to support 30 people over the period covered by the grant application. Stonepillow had begun to develop Housing First in response to changing patterns of needs among people experiencing homelessness in its area, as rates of high and complex need, including severe mental illness and addiction, were seen as increasing.

Challenges with housing supply which, as with most of the other Housing First services in the evaluation, was secured in social housing through collaboration with housing associations, were significant and ongoing. Housing First did not follow the conventions of the original model or common practice in the UK, in that it had a time limited element which meant it followed some of the ideas in a model like Critical Time Intervention (CTI) which has been used alongside Housing First in Denmark<sup>52</sup>, i.e. there was an expectation of 'graduation' if someone had sustained a tenancy for one year which meant a reduction in support. However, Housing First offered by Stonepillow sat between a CTI and a Housing First model, in that support could be reactivated on an open-ended basis. It is also worth noting that while Housing First is expected to be offered on an open-ended basis, the practical reality is often that support begins to drop over time, as would be expected if someone using the service decides that they need less day-to-day support over time.<sup>53</sup>

49 <https://www.henrysmithcharity.org.uk/explore-our-grants-and-apply/>

50 <https://stonepillow.org.uk>

51 <https://www.crisis.org.uk>

52 Benjaminsen, L. (2018). Housing First in Denmark: An Analysis of the Coverage Rate among Homeless People and Types of Shelter Users. *Social Inclusion* 6. 327. 10.17645/si.v6i3.1539.

53 Pleave, N. and Bretherton, J. (2019) *The cost effectiveness of Housing First in England* London: Homeless Link.

# 3 DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING HOUSING FIRST

## Introduction

This chapter looks at the views of people developing, delivering and working with Housing First, i.e. managers, team members and people working for external stakeholder agencies such as local authorities. Participation in these interviews was anonymous, with the goal being to encourage respondents to speak as freely as possible, being clear that no information would be reported that would identify them as an individual, nor their location or organisation. The chapter looks at the development of Housing First, fidelity to the Housing First model and different dimensions of providing housing and support across the seven services, including the meeting the needs experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness, and the issues around housing supply and with joint working with other services.

## Developing Housing First

### Impacts of the pandemic and cost of living crisis

The initial phases in implementing plans supported by the Henry Smith charity were delayed or modified in most of the seven Housing First services because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns. For the new services, Action Homeless (Leicester), Housing First Gwynedd, Turning Tides (West Sussex) and HARP (Southend) the process of becoming operational was slowed down and interrupted by the lockdowns that occurred in the Spring and Autumn of 2020 and in early 2021. For the established services that were adding specialist support for women, Bench Outreach (London) and Turning Lives Around (Leeds), their Housing First services were already operational, but working under restrictions which also affected the new women's team members while pandemic restrictions were in

place, the same being true for Stonepillow, who were drawing on Henry Smith funding to keep their existing service operational. A range of agencies from local government to the NHS and social landlords also continued a mix of home and hybrid working for longer periods, which affected the operational environment for the Housing First services. Challenges also existed for the Housing First services in recruiting staff during the disruption.

There were ongoing effects of the pandemic throughout 2020-2023, the period covered by this evaluation, particularly on the NHS which struggled to cope with the pandemic and saw waiting lists reach an unprecedented level, which had not been effectively addressed at the time of writing. As is discussed in this chapter, what were seen as the cumulative effects of relative reductions in resources for health and social care services since 2010, including addiction and mental health services, combined with intensification of demand and huge waiting lists that built up during the pandemic<sup>54</sup>, were widely seen as a barrier to effective joint working for Housing First. In May 2023, 7.4 million people were on the NHS waiting list in England, compared to 4.5 million in May 2019 and 2.6m in May 2010.<sup>55</sup> Housing markets also spiked, rather than prices and rents falling alongside the reductions in economic activity, with churn in the housing market as some people relocated because they were going to be spending more time working at home. House prices rose by just over 20% on average across the UK during the period January 2020 to December 2022, compared to an 8% increase between January 2017 and December 2019.<sup>56</sup>

The effects of the pandemic were not always as significant as had been feared for some of the services, as although people using Housing First were living in lockdown, it was often possible to maintain some sort of contact, albeit remotely. Being confined to their home, or in some cases to temporary accommodation

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/health-and-social-care-england-myths>

<sup>55</sup> Source: British Medical Association (BMA).

<sup>56</sup> Sources: Lloyds Banking Group and the Financial Times.

from which it had become more difficult to move from into settled housing, was reported as placing the same sorts of stresses that lockdowns placed on many people, i.e. boredom, loneliness and other frustrations. Nevertheless as one of the Housing First summarised in 2022, it was possible for Housing First to keep working.

*To be fair I think we, that hasn't really affected the way that we have supported [people]. Our approach has been throughout all COVID, we will still continue to see [people]... if there is a safeguarding concern or if there's a risk, or if there is a welfare concern... I think, given all that, we are where we, we are where I would expect us to be at this point. I was having a look through the case notes...yesterday, and I can see a difference... [people] being more settled now.*

**[Housing First service provider, 2022]**  
**Housing First team member, 2022**

One other effect was reported from the pandemic, which stemmed from the 2020/21 'Everyone In' policy in England, which sought to place everyone who was living rough or in 'shared air' (communal living and sleeping areas) homelessness services into self-contained accommodation, usually in hotels. As at January 2021, more than 11,000 people had been temporarily accommodated in England via 'Everyone In'<sup>57</sup> and for some of the seven Housing First services, this had led to a higher number of referrals than expected, as more people with complex needs were being picked up by services because of this blanket response to the pandemic<sup>58</sup>, including higher numbers of women experiencing homelessness.

The cost of living crisis<sup>59</sup> was triggered, while the effects of the pandemic were still fading, in February 2022 by the Russian invasion of Ukraine severely disrupting global fossil fuel and food markets. While interest rates rose very rapidly in the UK, demand for housing still greatly exceeded usable supply and, as of August 2023, house prices remained some 20% higher than pre-pandemic levels. Private rented sector median rents were £825 for England as of March 2023, the highest ever recorded, with median private sector

rents reaching £1,500 in London.<sup>60</sup> Evidence of mass food insecurity and severe impacts from sudden, rapid increases of over 200% in energy costs were reported. Within the homelessness sector it became very difficult for some homelessness services to keep operating as usual as their energy costs rose very high, very fast, alongside evidence that energy poverty was affecting people formerly experiencing homelessness who were trying to sustain their own tenancy.<sup>61</sup>

While these external factors influenced the operational environment for all seven Housing First services, significant delays in operational development and logistical issues were seen only in HARP (Southend) Housing First, mainly during 2021. However, by the point of the first fieldwork visit in 2022, the service had become more or less fully operational, with the second fieldwork visit in 2023 confirming that Housing First was functioning in the way that had been specified in the original application for the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant (see Chapter 5).

The seven services had all successfully developed from scratch, or added the extensions to their services for women with complex needs (Bench Outreach and Turning Lives Around) or drawn on support to continue their existing service (Turning Tides). While operations were disrupted and delayed and the operational environment, first because of COVID and then because of the cost of living crisis, was more difficult than it had been in 2019, everything was running in 2022 and had reached a steady state, generally operating at planned capacity, at the time of the second fieldwork visit in 2023. Overall, the support that the Henry Smith Charity had provided had been used to build, extend and continue services as had been intended and those providing and managing Housing First had worked to meet new and unanticipated operational challenges. This did not mean, as is discussed below in more detail, that every challenge from an inelastic, highly stressed housing market, through to the pressures on the NHS and the cost of living crisis could simply be dealt with by Housing First – there were ongoing and significant operational challenges – but, as is described below and in Chapter 4, the evaluation also showed successes and achievements.

57 Cromarty, H. (2021) *Coronavirus: Support for rough sleepers (England)* London: House of Commons Library Number 9057.

58 Harrison, J. (2020) *Manchester Emergency Accommodation Evaluation: Interim Report* Manchester: Riverside; Neale, J. et al. (2020) *Experiences of Being Housed in a London Hotel as Part of the 'Everyone In' Initiative Part 1: Life In The Hotel* London: KCL

59 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-under-and-without-jrfs-cost-living-tracker-winter-202223>

60 Source: ONS.

61 Snell, C. and Pleace, N. (2022) The Energy Crisis and the Homelessness Crisis: Emergent Agendas and Concerns *European Journal of Homelessness* 16(2), pp. 141-159.

## Fidelity

*I think that we are so deeply involved in so many aspects of their lives, so it really is that holistic approach. It's not we're just going to talk about your bills, we're not just going to talk about your addiction, we're not just going to focus on those things. It's 'What do you want? How do you want us to best support you?'*

**[Stonepillow] Housing First team member, 2023**

As was discussed in the last chapter, Housing First can exist in several forms and has generally shown success when it follows the core ethos of the model, in summary: choice and control for service users, a strength-based rather 'deficit' based approach to support, active engagement, open-ended support, separation of (settled) housing and support, harm reduction and a housing-led approach centred on the view that housing is a human right. There is evidence that intensive case management (ICM) and related models as well as high fidelity approaches, that very closely mirror the original Sam Tsemberis model of Housing First from the 1990s<sup>62</sup>, can effectively end homelessness among a majority of people with high and complex needs.

Partial implementation of the core ethos, e.g. offering only temporary accommodation, less intensive support or expecting abstinence rather than offering harm reduction tends to be less effective. Equally, an inflexible approach, like not offering abstinence based treatment when it is requested, reflecting the user-led nature of Housing First, even if it has harm reduction at its core, also tends to undermine effectiveness.<sup>63</sup>

As already described (Chapter 2), Housing First is not perfect, it does not work for (typically) 5-10% of people experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. Equally, while evidence for ending homelessness for one year and beyond is strong and clear, results around addiction, mental health, social and emotional networks and economic integration are more variable.<sup>64</sup>

Fidelity to the core ethos of Housing First was found to be strong across all seven services. This was based on feedback from staff, from people using the services and the views of external agencies that had been identified as stakeholders. The following quotes come from Housing First managers and team members describing all seven services.

*The intensity. The small caseloads. The person being completely at the centre. Obviously, I think you can still deliver if someone doesn't have that accommodation, as long as you're working to that. I think the difference for me is the small caseload, the intensity, for the person being at that centre.*

**[HARP] Housing First team member, 2023**

*Well, the housing and the support is definitely separate. That's 100 per cent. It is harm-reduction. It is trauma-informed. We do it the way the client wants us to do it. Because this fellow told us bog off a couple times, I said in the end, 'Right, we'll concentrate on getting you to your health appointments and your probation appointments, and anything else, you can tell us what you want us to do.' Rather than, 'You need to fill this form in, you need to do this, you need to do that, you need to do the other,' 'Well, you don't need to do it. It's probably best if you do, but you don't have to.' We don't tell people what they should or shouldn't do. We tell them, 'This will happen.' We've got somebody at the moment, I don't think they turned up for their Jobcentre appointment, and I've told them four times over a week, 'If you don't attend, they will close your file, and you will lose three weeks' worth of assessment period.' But again, it's their choice. If she asks me tomorrow, 'Can you make me an appointment at the Jobcentre?' then that's what I'll do.*

**[Wales] Housing First team member, 2023**

62 Padgett, D.K., Henwood, B.F. and Tsemberis, S (2016) *Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems and Changing Lives* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

63 Pleace, N. (2018) *Using Housing First in Integrated Homelessness Strategies: A Review of the Evidence* London: St Mungo's.

64 Aubry, T. (2020) Analysis of housing first as a practical and policy relevant intervention: the current state of knowledge and future directions for research. *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1) pp.13-26.

*I show someone that they're worth me visiting every week and taking to all their appointments and doing all this stuff for them, and eventually maybe after a couple of years they might start to think that they are actually worth something and that's the only way really you can make proper lasting change I think. Get someone to believe that they should put the effort in, should make these changes. They deserve somewhere safe to live. That's how you sustain a tenancy in my opinion, and that's why Housing First is so good.*

**[Bench 2022]. Housing First team member, 2022**

*The Housing First that we offer, we provide intensive support that's led by the client. We don't do disengagement. We don't send letters out for failed appointments. We consistently turn up when we've said that we will do. We don't go into their properties prior – without them knowing, any knowledge like that. We give them a home rather than a house. We also give them what is in that property, so it's theirs from when they go in, which usually creates the fact that they want to look after that house better, and they can take that away to wherever their next property is going to be. That makes a big difference.*

**[Leeds]. Housing First team member, 2023**

*Client's choice, absolutely. All of the housing providers, including the ones in [...] have absolutely adhered to – we asked the client which areas they want to be in, so not one person has been housed somewhere they do not want to be. I think that's really good. That has to be the initial thing. You're not going to go and live somewhere you don't want to, I'm not going to, so why should a client do that?*

**[Turning Tides] Housing First team member, 2023**

*I think, just to support the clients to develop, go towards their own goals, their own strengths. Obviously, build those relationships with the clients, help them get into their property, help them maintain the property, but also just develop in their own selves to be able to live independently eventually, whenever that might be.*

**[Stonepillow worker]. Housing First team member, 2023**

*So one thing that I do think is important to clients is housing first. Literally housing first, because a lot of support roles everywhere in England, it's kind of like, 'We'll just give you a bit of support. We'll try and get you an emergency bed for now, maybe try and get you a little place of your own, maybe start bidding for you'...*

**[Leeds worker] Housing First team member, 2023**

*The real difference, I would say, in homelessness – and I've worked in it for quite a number of years – is, Housing First, you're prioritising those clients, and then helping them have a voice. It's about choice and control for them. So rather than saying to them 'We've got this plan for you in this area, there you go,' we'll be saying to them, 'Where would you like to live, where would you not like to live? What would be suitable for you?' So it's about having their wishes, and then essentially going with their wishes, and giving them to whichever housing provider we're working with, and saying, 'This is the person we're looking for a property for. This is where they'd like to live, this is where they wouldn't like to live.'*

**[Turning Tides worker] Housing First team member, 2023**

*Yes. I think a lot of it is about agency. Our clients are adults. We remind ourselves this a lot, because you want to do everything for them because they're vulnerable and you just want to help, but the fact we're not there all the time means they have to think about, can I do this for myself first? Then they could call and I'll do it for them! Just that moment of independence, also of not living in a... Because when support is in the housing it's generally in the form of a hostel where you're surrounded by other people with exactly the same support needs. Growing in that environment I think is really difficult, especially with drug addiction. You've got someone next door to you offering you drugs every day, you're obviously not going to recover from your addiction, so having your own space I think is really... It's really nice to see clients becoming very house proud, yes, their own bit of independence for the first time.*

**[2022 fieldwork]. Housing First team member, 2022**

Delays in securing suitable settled housing, which typically centred on very low availability of suitable social or (for Housing First Gwynedd, HARP and Turning Tides) suitable private rented sector housing, were seen as undermining the Housing First model. In essence, in both 2022 and 2023, the people providing several of the Housing First services thought they were keeping people in temporary accommodation for too long. The pattern was not universal as, for example, Action Homeless Housing First in Leicester could access its own social rented tenancies. However, the pattern of people using Housing First experiencing long waits before settled housing could be found was widespread. Housing First was originally designed to deliver on its promise of a settled home relatively fast (if not necessarily immediately)<sup>65</sup>, as a way to engage with people with complex needs who had built up a distrust or cynical attitude towards other forms of service, that had not ended their homelessness. For some of the Housing First services, there were tensions stemming from the challenges around housing supply, i.e. if they wait for settled housing was likely to be prolonged, Housing First would try to ensure adequate temporary accommodation was in place, rather than allow prolonged residence in emergency accommodation or someone continuing to sleep rough.

*Often, so we will support people when they're still not housed when they're in hostels or TA, or even rough sleeping. We've got one guy that's rough sleeping. I don't know. Often, when they're waiting, they're coming to us, like, 'When are you going to get me a flat?' We have absolutely no say on that so that's difficult being the middleman. Often, yes, it's taking a long time between viewing and actual sign up.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

*The difference for me is that we're not necessarily going straight to tenancy... People were having to rough sleep, whereas I think I would really struggle if I can bring someone out of the cold or we as an organisation can bring someone out of the cold, to wait because we're waiting for a tenancy. That's where I'd say we're not quite super tight to the model, but I think that's right for us and the people that we're working with. If they wanted to stay out for that tenancy, we would still be providing that service to them until we get what they want.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

*The main challenge is access to housing. In terms of the numbers that we build, it's minimal. We're full. The private-rent sector is not offering anything or coming through. If people are on the housing register and they're in temporary accommodation, if they're even relatively stable, they could potentially be waiting two-plus years. That's a real challenge for people. If you're expecting people who are already having to live around a certain amount of chaos, to sustain that for two-plus years, that's incredibly difficult...*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

There were variations and one service, Stonepillow, had adopted a sort of hybrid model that expected 'graduation' from Housing First at 12 months. As noted in the last chapter, this has resonances with the Critical Time Intervention (CTI) model but does not replicate CTI in that support could be reactivated at any point. From a critical standpoint, this lack of an open commitment to support for as long as is needed, which

65 Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First: The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* Hazelden: Minnesota.

is a key facet of the Housing First model<sup>66</sup> both in the sense of very high-fidelity approaches and services that follow the core ethos of Housing First, was a breach with Housing First principles.

However, Stonepillow's practice of making cases effectively dormant ('graduation' @12 months) rather than actually closing them has to be seen in the context of what happens in other Housing First services. Housing First, in practice, will normally expect to wind support down over time, including a tendency in UK services to have often scaled support back significantly by the time someone has been using Housing First for 12 months or more. Within the Housing First approach, this cannot simply happen, it must reflect someone making a choice to reduce the amount of time they are spending with team members and team members assessing that as a safe and practical decision. Nevertheless, for many people using Housing First, support does start to tail off after the first few months as they begin to get more confident, settled and see other improvements and team members feel it is safe to make visits and contact less frequent, although support can be scaled up should the need arise.<sup>67</sup>

Recent research has also highlighted challenges for Housing First services in ending support, in that there can be few services to refer people 'down' to when support needs drop to a point where Housing First is not needed, but some help may still be required, or 'up', for example to intensive congregate supported housing or residential care, when someone's needs become too acute for Housing First.<sup>68</sup> Another issue here is the level and continuity of funding for Housing First, as the reality in England is that many services are not well or securely funded because of the cuts to local authority and other budgets<sup>69</sup>, i.e. Housing First that is funded for one, two or three years only and uncertain of whether it has funding going forward, cannot actually offer open ended support. However, while Stonepillow was not pursuing Housing First in

quite the same way that the other six Housing First services were, it was reported that practice of 12 month graduations was flexible.

Another difference in the application of the Housing First model was found in the approach taken by HARP and Turning Tides. Here the decision had been taken by HARP to use leasing arrangements with some one-bedroom flats. This is not common practice in the UK. English Housing First using the PRS tends to offer assured shorthold tenancies (AST) in the private rented sector (PRS), seek social housing where possible or offer secure tenancies within its own stock, should that be available. Turning Tides was working with one housing association (registered provider) which was prepared to offer Turning Tides itself tenancies, on the basis that Turning Tides would issue a license to people using Housing First, i.e. making Turning Tides the legally responsible entity if issues arose like rent arrears or anti-social behaviour.

Tenancy security is relative. An AST conveys legal rights as a tenant in a way a licence does not. An AST is often time limited, i.e. if a tenancy lasts for say 12 months, there is no recourse to extend it if a PRS provider wishes to end it after one year. In addition, over the duration of this evaluation, the capacity of private landlords in England to trigger a 'no-fault' eviction within the provisions of ASTs, which Government had long promised to reform, has remained in place.<sup>70</sup> This means an AST in the PRS in England is, in a both a technical and practical sense, *inherently* insecure.<sup>71</sup>

Some Housing First services, including several in this evaluation (Action Homeless, Bench Outreach, Turning Lives Around and Stonepillow), try to avoid using the PRS for this reason. While probationary tenancies (initial one year tenancies, with similar characteristics to AST) are commonplace among social landlords, both local authorities and housing associations still offer open-ended, secure forms of tenancy<sup>72</sup> as well as significantly lower rents. Good quality social housing is in many

66 While the original Housing First model (Pathways Housing First) has a concept of 'graduation' this is on the basis that the decision is only taken as and when someone using Housing First reaches a point where they and the support team think they no longer need support, i.e. it is not within a specific timeframe, see: Greenwood, R.M., Bernad, R., Aubry, T. and Agha, A. (2018) A study of programme fidelity in European and North American Housing First programmes: Findings, adaptations, and future directions. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 12(3), pp.275-298; Pleace, N. (2016) *Housing First Guide Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA; Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First: The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* Hazelden: Minnesota.

67 Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2019) *The cost effectiveness of Housing First in England* London: Homeless Link.

68 Blood, I., Birchill, A. and Pleace, N. (2021) *Reducing, changing or ending Housing First support* London: Homeless Link/Housing First England.

69 Blood, I. and Pleace, N. (2021) *A Traumatized System: A critical crossroads for the commissioning of homelessness services* Leicester: Riverside.

70 <https://www.generationrent.org>

71 Pleace, N. and Hunter, C. (2018) Evictions in the UK: causes, consequences and management, in Kenna, P; Nasarre-Aznar, S.; Sparkes, P. and Schmid, C.U. (eds) *Loss of Homes and Evictions across Europe: A Comparative Legal and Policy Examination* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 333-360.

72 Secure tenancies for local authority (council housing) and assured tenancies for housing associations (which can also offer a fixed-term tenancies).

senses the ideal tenure for Housing First. However, the difficulty with this approach in the UK can be twofold: first, the pressure on social housing supply is often colossal, which can mean long waits, and second, there are parts of the UK in which social housing supply is so depleted as to be effectively inaccessible, which means if Housing First is to operate at all, it must use the PRS.

The approach of HARP and Turning Tides in using licencing is not incompatible with a high-fidelity Housing First model. While a license provides less legal protection in theory, much can be dependent on how the licence provider interprets that agreement. The original Housing First model used very similar arrangements, with Pathways Housing First holding tenancies and using leasing arrangements as part of the approach taken in recruiting and retaining private sector landlords in New York and beyond (see Chapter 2).<sup>73</sup> Providing that the housing is within the control of and (with support) is the responsibility of the person living in it, as settled as possible, suitable and affordable, there are no hard and fast rules about how that housing is acquired and maintained in Housing First. One reason for this is that housing tenure, tenancy rules and practice, as well as levels of affordable, adequate housing supply, vary so much across different regions and countries. For example, the original Housing First in New York could not use social housing, because it was operating within an environment in which it barely existed, whereas Housing First in the Netherlands is in a context where almost one third of all housing stock is social.

There are still some issues in other agencies fully understanding the Housing First approach. Most people have heard of it, but may have a shallow understanding. Compared to many conventions and legacy systems in the sector, Housing First behaves differently around the intensity, duration and nature of support. There was sometimes an idea that one can escalate into Housing First from bad behaviour, but no evidence of that happening.

## Delivering Housing First

### Referrals

Referrals to Housing First tended to exceed places in all seven areas. This was in part because there was more need for Housing First than they could accommodate. Also, because Housing First is a

medium to long-term support model, each service became full up, i.e. it reached a steady state around ongoing relationships with the group of people using it. Placements sometimes broke down, but Housing First was not – and as an intensive, medium to long term service model, should not have been – characterised by the rapid turnover that would create a steady stream of openings for new users.

The broad picture was one in which referrals from local authorities and other partner agencies, as well as the mechanisms for referral from other in-house services that were operated by the seven providers of Housing First, were operating appropriately. There were reports that some inappropriate referrals still occurred, where someone who was below or above the range of support needs that Housing First was designed to support was referred, usually because there was no other service with available spaces to refer them to. However, inappropriate referrals were not described as commonplace and there was broad understanding amongst sector partners of what Housing First was and who it was designed to work with.

*Yes, people now do understand. There's more of an understanding of the sorts of clients that they should be referring to us. The early stages, people would be like, well, this person is doing really well in this shared accommodation. It's like, yes, that's not hard, that. There was a bit of confusion. They were like, I don't get that, because they're doing really well. So we had to break it down to the point of, like, look. We're attempting to house people that are maybe considered "un-house-able". It was just the easiest way that I could put it across to somebody, because traditionally, as I'm sure you know, the homeless pathway model is you go into a hostel, you start addressing your issues if that's, if they're able to do that. They go into Move-On housing to get the old 'tenancy ready' which is a phrase that's just, well, it's abhorrent to me. I don't want to hear 'tenancy ready.' So to start with, I think there was just natural confusion, because what would these people like? It's a brand-new thing. So now, yes, it has evolved. The referrals we do get, are the referrals we should be getting.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

73 Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First: The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* Hazelden: Minnesota.

*...our referrals normally – they're pretty much all internal. So, I manage our day centre. So, obviously all the rough sleepers in our area are in the day centre every day. So, I have quite a good knowledge of who's there and what rough sleepers are in the area and I know most of them well enough to know that they've tried everything. They've been through all the services. Like I say, I work quite closely with the local authority, so we'll speak to them and say has this person had accommodation before? Have they been in any of your temporary accommodation? If the answer is, 'Yes, they've been through everything and they keep coming back around and they're on the streets constantly,' we know okay, that person fits Housing First. Then we have an assessment tool that we use to see whether they fit.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

All of the Housing First followed the broad operational principles around referrals that have become established practice in UK Housing First. The central government funded Housing First pilots in England, worked within a framework that emphasises rough sleeping relative to other forms of homelessness and prioritise people sleeping rough<sup>74</sup>. However, the seven Housing First services followed UK, North American and European convention in being intended for anyone people experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness associated with high, multiple and complex needs, which includes the larger populations in homelessness services and experiencing hidden homelessness, as well as people sleeping rough. While a few countries, like France and Canada, that fund programmes through their mental health systems operate forms of Housing First that require a psychiatric diagnosis, this is not common practice in the UK.<sup>75</sup>

As has been reported in other research, failures were not unknown in the seven Housing First services. A small number of people refused to engage, could not or did not want to adapt to the requirements of Housing First, despite its relative flexibility or disappeared following initial engagement. This pattern has been widely reported in other evaluations of Housing First. It has also been noted in earlier research that there are not necessarily clearly visible patterns

within referrals around who will benefit from Housing First and who will not. Referral mechanisms based on data sharing, interviewing and assessing potential service users may not be reliable ways of predicting which, if any, of the people – all of whom have high, multiple and complex needs – will disengage or not be able to work with Housing First.

This said, it is important to note that all seven Housing First services worked within operational parameters that placed some limits on who could be accepted. Needs that were too high, too low, or which were associated with a high potential risk to staff could mean that someone was defined as not appropriate for Housing First. The evaluation did not find evidence, at the point of the 2023 fieldwork, that any of the seven Housing First services were 'cherry picking' people who would be easier to work with. All the Housing First supported by the Henry Smith Charity was engaging with people with histories of long-term and recurrent homelessness and high, multiple and complex needs, but they were also conscious of risk management and the wellbeing of their staff, which meant they did not take on anyone without careful assessment.

*We do have a bit of a waiting list and we don't really say no, because a lot of the people do hit the criteria. It is basically significant homelessness and a chaotic lifestyle. That's mainly what is referred to us. I mean, we have said no to one client, purely because of risk to staff. We usually have meetings with other agencies, a multi-agency meeting, and everybody discloses, then we go from there. With one potential client, he was threatening staff, finding out where they lived, that kind of thing. We decided as a team that it was probably best because he's a male and we're an all-female staff as well, just with that, we decided that it was probably best that we didn't. We do have clients that are dangerous on paper and we're all happy to work with them because it doesn't always reflect the person that they are today. Obviously, that's just a judgement call, isn't it? It's meeting with somebody, it's finding out the information and it's just risk assessing everything.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

<sup>74</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1102005/Housing\\_First\\_Evaluation\\_Third\\_process\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1102005/Housing_First_Evaluation_Third_process_report.pdf)

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.housing.org.uk/our-work/homelessness/housing-first/>

Stakeholder attitudes towards Housing First were generally very positive and this meant there was a willingness to refer people experiencing homelessness to Housing First. This was linked to a broad understanding of what Housing First was, sometimes coming from the experience of the model, but also the increasing extent to which central government, local government conferences and the homelessness sector were discussing, sharing information about and promoting Housing First as an approach.

*So for me, Housing First is crucial. Having observed it and seen the supportive aspects that I've been involved in – you know, I've been a frontline worker for many years before I became a manager, so my understanding is how critical that is, and actually, with the absence of that long-term support, it's what leads to failure.*

**External Stakeholder, 2023**

## Housing

*What we've had to do, which has been the hard part, is trying to get properties available, or getting housing providers to enter into the Housing First idea. That's been the real difficulty...*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

As has already been noted, rapid and reliable access to suitable, secure and affordable housing was an issue for all the Housing First services. Some, for example Bench Outreach, had better and more established relationships with social landlords because they had been up and running for over a decade, and services like Action Homeless could draw on their own housing stock. However, waits for suitable social housing could be long and finding social housing that was suitable, both in the sense of being adequate, secure and affordable and in terms of location, could be difficult for all the services and extremely difficult for several of them. The wrong location could mean that someone was placed at risk – a particular issue for many women using Housing First (see below) – or could not access services like outpatient appointments or social activities, because public transport was limited, not available or too expensive.

*One thing about Housing First is trying to get properties in more desirable areas to try and get them away from what might have been the norm. Now, people might argue that there's antisocial behaviour and drugs everywhere, but for some areas, it's more obvious, and so it's trying to get the property in an area where the client feels comfortable to live. Now if you get accommodation with us in that area, we might try and get you your own permanent accommodation in that area, but there's no guarantees because you're waiting on housing stock, and so in a way, that might not be what we wanted to create.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Basically we get sent...[a] flat that's been allocated to Housing First and then my manager, the Housing First manager looks at the clients we have that aren't housed yet and decides which one will be best suited to it, because obviously we want to make sure they're in a safe area for them, make sure it's got whatever for their health needs. Often with drugs especially you'll have areas where it's just not safe for them to be because of dealers and other acquaintances that they want to leave behind.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

Reliance on the PRS presented a number of challenges, again because finding adequate, relatively secure PRS housing in the right place and, crucially, at an affordable rent, was often inherently difficult and also because the inherent insecurity of ASTs in the PRS meant a 'settled' home was not being delivered. Both the challenges around social rented and PRS housing were at their most acute in overheated housing markets in which there was little supply of adequate and affordable housing for anyone, let alone people using Housing First. The Shelter Cymru Housing First service, HARP and the two services operating in West Sussex, Turning Tides and Stonepillow, probably faced the most acute challenges in securing housing, reflecting the degree to which their overall housing markets were overheated, but there were challenges everywhere. Bench, while it had long established relationships with social landlords, was facing mounting challenges as overall pressure on those landlords increased in line with sustained spikes in PRS rents across London.

The concerns that were voiced by the seven Housing First services about elements of fidelity to the Housing First principles being threatened by long delays in supplying a settled home have already been noted. Further issues were raised in the 2023 fieldwork with the seven services, where staff reported problems with temporary accommodation and housing being offered that quite distant from where someone had become homeless and the concern that the PRS, in terms of current tenancy rights, does not offer a genuinely secure home.

*...the TA is in another [location]. It's at least an hour from here to get there. It's really not good, and that's something that we've found across the service and other charities, other services. Trying to get people into TA is just an absolute nightmare, because the local homelessness department has just gone hugely downhill, basically, in the last two, three years. I assume that's because of funding cuts, they've restructured because of funding cuts.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*The only failing that I feel that we have had is that because we don't personally have properties as an organisation, then we've had to use private landlords. So, even though they've maintained a tenancy for a period of time, we've had to encourage them to register with local housing and look at Move-On eventually being into their own [...]*

**Council property. Housing First team member 2023**

When the Housing First services were only able to support someone in temporary accommodation or in a homelessness service like a hostel or supported housing for several months, or sometimes longer, before housing could be arranged, this was not necessarily seen as entirely negative. The presence of more intensive, personalised and agile support, which was actively seeking housing, if not able to rapidly provide it, was seen by some of the staff working in the seven Housing First services as often making a positive difference, even if substantial delays had been occurring.

*Yes, I think we have had difficulties, like I said, in getting the properties in the first place. So we often have clients, or we have had clients on Housing First for quite a long time without the house first, so it doesn't quite fit the way that it should be going, but it's still been quite successful with those clients because we have had that time to really build up that relationship, do some of the work that needs doing.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The Housing First services were sometimes working with a small group of social landlords but were also sometimes having to find whatever housing or temporary accommodation they could from an array of services. Both HARP and Turning Tides, which as noted, had resorted to holding tenancies themselves and offering licenses to service users as a way to recruit landlords, could be said to have improvised a mix of housing and other accommodation to deliver Housing First, because there was no way they could get the right mix of homes from only one or two sources.

*Yes, I'd say now it has now that we're leasing. We lease properties: one-bedroom flats. It's completely changed it. I think, when we first started, private rented was something we didn't want to go down. Social housing comes with a certain sense of security, so we were really focussed on getting the council on board and going to social housing...We tried it and it's been brilliant.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

Landlord attitudes have often been reported as a barrier to Housing First by earlier research and evaluations. Reluctance to house someone with any history of rent arrears or who might present with difficult or challenging behaviour is present in both the private and social rented sectors.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Pleace, N.; Quilgars, D.; Jones, A. and Rugg J. (2007) *Tackling homelessness – Housing associations and local authorities working in partnership*, London: The Housing Corporation.

*We were asked by one housing association, 'Couldn't we maybe have some of them that weren't so much of a problem?' and we went, 'Well, no, they wouldn't be Housing First, otherwise, would they?' We do understand that. The perception is that these people are problematic, and other people in the community are suffering because of their behaviour, but like I pointed out, 'Well, they're going to be in the community, regardless of whether you give them a home or not, so you may as well give them a home, we'll put the support in, and then they'll annoy people less, in the end, won't they?'*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Then with the housing, some of them are on board, some housing services were just reluctant to have anything to do with our clients because of their history. They just did not want to provide housing for some of the clients. When we explained that our support has made a difference and we have given examples because we can show actually because our clients have been successful, which is maintaining the tenancy for a year. Then they have been more on board with us.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*...even though they say they accept what Housing First is they [social landlord] won't go past their rules or their organisation. That's basically, all of them have said that the one thing they won't go past is if they've already had a tenancy and they've been evicted for rent arrears or ASB and they've not made any effort to address that...That's the problem we still face. It's been unfortunate.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

It is important to bear in mind the issues that social landlords need to consider. Housing someone who may present with chaotic and worrying behaviour in a stable neighbourhood could undermine the housing rights, sense of home and housing security of the people living there. For a social landlord, their other tenants are part of any equation, it is not simply a matter of the immediate housing needs of someone who requires Housing First. One of the analogies used by the creator of Housing First, Sam Tsemberis, is that

well-functioning Housing First housing placements should be like well-functioning plumbing, in that no-one should notice it or really think about it, because someone using Housing First, with the right support, should be just another neighbour.<sup>77</sup> It was reported that when Housing First worked well, built relationships and crucially, built up trust with social landlords, good working relationships could develop.

*Where [Housing First] have been so good is, if there is an issue, they're on it and they're dealing with it, and actually it gives the neighbourhood managers, the people who have to manage the properties, if you like, greater confidence than they would if they were just putting in somebody who didn't have support. Let's face it, everybody who's coming through the housing register is vulnerable at the moment. It gives us, if you like, some kind of surety that that person will get the support that they need. Obviously, there was a nervousness around whether they would engage with that support, because [Housing First] make it very clear that they can't make people engage with the support.*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

This relationships with social landlords were not always simple to maintain. If there were suddenly significant problems and challenges for Housing First users that caused operational challenges for a social landlord they could back away from Housing First and the damage might take time to repair. Not everything was directly under the control of the Housing First services and a particular issue identified across several of the Housing First services was 'cuckooing'. Cuckooing refers to exploitation of vulnerable individuals by others, this can range from moving themselves in and taking welfare benefits and other resources from them, through to using their home as a distribution and storage point for illegal drug markets. As people using Housing First are living independently and have a right to privacy in their own homes, Housing First and other services might not be able to easily see when cuckooing is occurring, at least in the early stages.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.pathwayshousingfirst.org>

*I think extreme, and extreme means that property cannot be used for anyone. In the time I've been in, I'm aware of two, at least two, maybe three, but we managed to get one out. The thing is, it's that loss, you can't do anything with a property that's been cuckooed if it's dangerous. So you have to leave it, you have to get everyone away, and you have to leave it unoccupied for a period of time, and you have to work with all the other agencies to ensure that happens effectively. I'm aware of two, three properties that that's happened to. There might have been more, but I'm only aware fully of those.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Then we found out he'd been subject to an undercover police investigation and that there was drug dealing and he'd been cuckooed. That really hit me that I could have been in the property that many times and not seen it.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Well, yes. I mean, I think the point is we get cuckooing in Housing First, but also in general needs. It isn't exclusive to Housing First at all. Yes, we have had a situation with [Housing First] where there was a client who was cuckooed, but we've also had it in general needs in the same area, and all over [area]. I don't think it's exclusive to Housing First at all. It's just a really big problem.*

**Social Landlord, 2023**

A point made by some of the Housing First service providers was that cuckooing was not always straightforward in terms of where to draw the line between social and emotional support, albeit social and emotional support from people who might present a risk (from the perspective of Housing First) and exploitation. Theoretically, providing one-bedroomed accommodation and setting rules about who else can stay in someone's home and on what basis could reduce the risks. However, that would in effect be saying that everyone except people using Housing First can establish relationships in which they cohabit with one or more other people.

*I think that's real challenging, which brings up around cuckooing. I think people are lonely. I don't think it's necessarily right for us to be thinking that people should be ingrained in the same communities and social groups that everyone else is in. Why are their friends wrong? Actually, if my friends or acquaintances had saved my life multiple times, or kept me going, regardless of whether I morally agree with how that occurred, I shouldn't be saying to people, "that's wrong". I think what's happening is people are coming into tenancies. Friendship groups are coming with. It's rare that people want that clear break.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

Using the PRS was not really seen as a sustainable option across all the Housing First services. The PRS was certainly much better than nothing, but cost and issues with security of tenure were seen as meaning that a PRS tenancy was unlikely to provide a settled home on an enduring basis.

*No, it's the affordability again and that they can be evicted at any point, so the stability, so it's just not ideal, but it is an option if that's what they ask for.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The challenges in finding the right mix of housing often entered the conversations with the people providing the Housing First services that took place in both 2022 and 2023. As noted, the problems with affordable, adequate and secure housing supply are universal in the UK and the challenges around housing supply for Housing First, notwithstanding some ongoing issues with landlord attitudes, all stemmed from the deep and chronic undersupply of affordable and social homes in the UK. However, there was also an important reality of these same Housing First being able to circumvent these challenges, often by improvising suitable housing supply from whatever sources they could find, in order to deliver the kinds of home that Housing First is designed to deliver. Across all seven services, there were reports of Housing First working well for the people who were using it when the right sort of home had been secured.

*So I think everything else, the family involvement the community stuff, criminality, drug and alcohol, mental health, seems to get to a certain place and improve on its own, kind of thing, when they've got their permanent tenancy. Sometimes it takes a while. I'm not saying it's like, boom, magic and it's done. We can't take the credit for all of it, because a lot of it is their determination to make things different, to improve things.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*...there's a huge difference between a house and a home. When I was homeless, there was always one box I wouldn't unpack because it wasn't my home. I wasn't ready. It wouldn't be a specific box. I think home is really important, and if a client can say, 'Housing First gave me a home,' they're already better...*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*It's just about being able to put them into a house first, rather than, historically, it would have been, 'Let's get them through a hostel. Let's get them into a move-on house.' It's almost, with these kind of chaotic, complex characters, setting them up to fail, putting them into those old-fashioned methods of accommodation. You're then mixing them with other people. Most of the clients that I work with have trauma, so there are reasons they behave the way that they do, and it tends to be childhood trauma that's manifested itself. It's about time we can give them, intensive support, wraparound support, and having them in their own home.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

## Meeting support needs

*...we've got so many of the same people that just are never, ever getting anywhere. They're never reaching the end of the service. They're making it through the emergency hostel placements. If they're making it through there, they're not getting much further and just for housing people that we... The clients that we work with, especially your heavy drug users, which we have a lot, when we got the referrals in, a lot of people were heroin, crack, psychosis, all those sorts of problems.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

Housing First is designed to work with people experiencing what is often long-term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. This means very high rates of severe mental illness, addiction, limiting illness and disability compared to the general population, although it is important to always be aware that not everyone using Housing First will necessarily be presenting with all these treatment and support needs. Alongside this, rates of contact with the criminal justice system, child protection systems and mental health services can often be high compared to the general population and people using Housing First can often have histories of sustained and repeated contact with other forms of homelessness service that have not resolved their homelessness. The gender dynamics of support are discussed in more detail below, but it is again important to note that patterns of need vary across the people using Housing First. One of the most significant differences there is the rate of traumatic experience, particularly around domestic abuse and gender-based violence, appears to be much higher for women experiencing recurrent and sustained homelessness who have high, multiple and complex needs.<sup>78</sup>

All seven of the Housing First services were routinely working with people with a mix of high and complex needs, who very often had histories of long term and repeated homelessness. All the Housing First services explored in this evaluation were engaged with the groups of people experiencing homelessness that the original model was designed for. The (anonymised) stories of the people using Housing First were never quite the same, as each person had different experiences, different needs and had taken different decisions, as well as having different sets of decisions

<sup>78</sup> Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) *Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review* Brussels: FEANTSA.

taken about them. However, the two examples of the patterns of need and experience being talked about by two Housing First team members given below, give a broad picture of the patterns of need among people using the seven Housing First services in 2023.

*...yes, very high support as well. Alcohol-dependent, a lot of past trauma. He also had recently lost his dad, and that was the one member of the family – he was almost estranged from the rest of the family apart from his dad, and his dad passed away. Health issues as well. He was taken to hospital last week with chest pains, but he’s a heavy smoker and a heavy drinker. We do think that he struggles with shared accommodation, as many of them do. He needs his own space. As long as we can get, see if there’s a care package that needs to be put in place for him, we can do that. I think he just, he wants his own place, that if he wants to have a drink, he can. If he doesn’t, then he won’t. He struggles with too many rules and regulations.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*...he’s a prolific offender for stealing, in and out of prison and it’s always theft that his charges are. A drug user, quite heavily. So, when he first came to us, he was just smoking cannabis. [...] is now using heroin and injecting quite severely. We managed to do quite a big piece of work with the housing association around his property where they didn’t actually go for the eviction in the end. They allowed us to relinquish the property, so that we could get Housing First again for him, and he hasn’t got an eviction on his record. So, I have actually just put his name forward for another property with another housing association and they’ve accepted it.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The prevalence of mental health problems was always mentioned whenever someone working for Housing First was asked to talk about the patterns of treatment and support need that people experiencing homelessness were presenting with.

*I think they’ve all got multiple complex disadvantage. They’re all suffering from multiple disadvantages. It’s not really like anyone has one or two, even. I would say there’s quite a strong correlation of people having multiple needs. A lot of people have physical needs as well as mental health. Mental health is obviously key in everyone.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

*Mental health. All of them will have anxiety or depression or both and then many of them will have what I think of as the next tier of mental health issues, personality disorders, schizophrenia, that kind of stuff.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

*...so mental health, drug-alcohol misuse, and that may have mental health associated with those problems. They tended to be people that have maybe gone through the traditional hostel routes; hasn’t worked for them, or they’ve had their own tenancy, had their own property, and faced difficulties without support, haven’t been able to maintain those. In a way, it’s really the hard-to-reach people that I would say...*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The fidelity with the ethos of Housing First that was reported by managers and team members across all seven services has already been described and was reflected in the practice of delivering support which was found in both the 2022 and 2023 fieldwork. Support was universally described as user-led (still often referred to as ‘clients’ by Housing First staff, following long established conventions in the UK homelessness sector), as agile and as highly flexible. Staff in all seven Housing First services talked about how one day they might be helping someone find paint or carpet, while on another day they were helping someone manage a mental health crisis, or helping someone deal with debt or a difficulty with their housing. The intensity of the support, the relatively low caseload and the case management role of Housing First were all routinely talked about by staff working across all the Housing First covered by this evaluation. As part of the interviews, staff in Housing First were asked what a ‘typical day’ looked like and almost always replied that they did not have typical day, as each one would present a different set of issues and needs to be addressed.

*I offer intensive support to the clients, so we go really based on their needs. Their choice is very much at the forefront of how we work. We can see and speak to clients daily if they want to. Also, if they choose not to speak to us and not to engage with us we will try. I think what is different about our service is that we will try to engage with the clients anyway, we'll keep continuing to engage with the clients. We help with budgeting, family relationships, probation, substance misuse, support with mental health and other health issues. Then just general emotional support, money management, benefits, etc.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

Time and consistency were frequently mentioned as being important in how Housing First delivered support. Consistency was reported as important because trust would be built up with a specific worker or, as one of the Housing First services designed it, with a small team of team members who someone using Housing First would build a relationship with.

Time was referred to in four senses. Firstly, support being open ended<sup>79</sup> at least in terms of while funding for Housing First was in place gave a greater sense of space in which to work. Secondly in the sense that Housing First staff had more time for each person and the capacity to scale support up and down in a way that most other homelessness services did not. Thirdly in the sense that building up a working relationship could take time, particularly around building a sense of trust in people who could be highly alienated from society and who may have had negative experiences with other services and in time spent in institutions and/or communal/congregate services.

Finally, time was also reported as important because it could considerable time for someone to share experiences or for the full extent of their needs to become apparent. Homelessness can often mean patchy and episodic contact with health, mental health and social care services, even before the current crises in the availability of those services at the time of writing. This could mean that when someone engaged with Housing First, it might be the first time they are subject to detailed and systematic assessment, revealing undiagnosed, unrecognised and hitherto untreated or unsupported needs.

Having time, taking time and having the capacity to increase the time spent on support were all generally seen as important in dealing with a reality in which support and treatment needs would vary, trending towards being lower over time, but standing on often brittle foundations, which meant there would be dips in wellbeing, crises and challenges, even where someone's overall trajectory was positive.

*After about three months, he eventually would answer the call, but then wouldn't see me. In the last six months, he's now coming to [mental health service] appointments with me, dentist appointments, with tackling his bills, sorting out issues with his property with [social landlord]. So, it's been that gradual process, but I feel that I've had to be really a bit dogmatic in like, 'You will do this.' I know it's client-led, I'm not going to upset anybody, but I'm not going to be batted away. I'm going to keep on coming until we make that connection, which I think we've done. So, I get a lot of positivity from that.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*When I look back to where he was and where he is now, and we've now unearthed a whole myriad of other things because his mental health has come to the fore because he's not masking it with drink. So, we've opened up another set of situations, if you like, but that to me has been a positive run... So, it was me getting in there into his room and going, 'You must get in the shower. I'm going to stand here in case you fall but you've got to do it...' it's very hands-on in that sense.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

<sup>79</sup> But with some differences in how Stonepillow was organised (see above)

*I think it's a learning curve. What we've all witnessed and experienced, is not long after a client moves into a property, they take a massive downturn, because as much as we try and say to them in advance, this is not the answer, it's the beginning. Obviously, because they're people experiencing homelessness, when they get a property, they think that's the answer to all the questions. They have a little honeymoon period, and then they go, but I'm still mentally ill. I've still got substance misuse, blah, blah, blah, so they get really, really depressed, so it's kind of... At the beginning, it's always like, right, we know they're in. We've told them that this is likely to happen. They're like, no, no, I'm going to be fine, and then they're really not fine, so you have to do this really intense bit of work with them around that at the beginning stages. Then they tend to plateau out somewhat.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Yes, absolutely, and it is the relationship-building. It's absolutely paramount, because as we know from this demographic, these are people who have had some pretty horrible, traumatic things happen, often more than once, at the hands of people they love or people working in authority, so if you can build a relationship and they start to trust you, that's a massive part of it. There's always going to be someone who's best placed to have a conversation with a client about something, so it needs to be that worker that they know, that is their regular person. If it's about a different, engaging with a different service, well, let the worker have that conversation with them, because that will instil a little bit of trust, and then they can go off and deal with that other person from the other service, so it is about, yes. That comes with its own issues in the fact that people move roles, people move on, and that's just life. We all have to accept that.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The role of Housing First in providing social and emotional support was frequently discussed, both in terms of the direct help offered by team members and in the ways in which they sought to help people using Housing First develop better friendship, family and social networks. While practical help was seen as important, perhaps more so around debt and financial management than day to day running of a home, a need for someone to talk to, share problems

with and seek advice from was very widely reported by team members and managers in all the Housing First services. For some people using Housing First, loneliness, isolation and alienation were seen as real challenges, particularly when the primary, or sole, source of social and emotional support for someone was a Housing First team member. Building relationships with the people using Housing First was also often seen by team members as the best way to fully understand and respond to needs, i.e. the support offered by Housing First was enhanced by being a user led (managed) relationship with one or more team members.

*I think battling people's loneliness once they do get out into the community, and integrating them back in, and finding what people are interested in is probably the biggest struggle. The other needs are what we've always done; taking them to appointments and all that sort of stuff anyway, but yes, I would say that's the biggest struggle.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*It's little things. It's just little, even nonverbal cues, that, 'Hey, I trust you.' It's a hug; it's a firm handshake; it's a look. It's just little, little things that indicate that you're doing a good job. It is a meaningful relationship for them. Sometimes it's the only relationship outside of the services that they have.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*...expecting somebody to sit opposite you, and tell you about their life, or open up. I just don't think that works any more, and you give nothing. It'd be like me saying, 'Tell me all about your life, but I'm not going to tell you – professional boundaries. I can't tell you anything.' I think us taking that and scrapping that and starting again and taking them to Costa. I hate to use the word 'normal': all those 'normal' activities that we would do and think nothing of. It's introducing that into their lives again, or they might never have had that. All those things that, to them, would seem so frightening, because they've not done. It's bringing that into their lives.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

Building a managed relationship and enabling connections to activities, social and family networks, could build self-confidence and, through that process, enable other positive developments in someone's life. This process seemed to often involve reintroduction to the social world and social networks from which people Housing First had been disconnected by experiencing homelessness.

*...he just loves to go out and have a bit of breakfast or lunch in the city. He likes to be around people. He wants to feel like a normal human being.... That's what they yearn for. We do a lot of that. As much as I possibly can, I'm always pushing that: 'Do you want to do something fun? What's something that you'd really enjoy doing? Would you like to go see a movie? What would you like to do?'*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*When we first started working with him, he spent a lot of time just not doing anything. Just drinking all the time. Over a really long time, we've built up more of a relationship where we can just chat quite freely, and it's come out that he's actually really interested in music production, so we've managed to, linking in with a digital inclusion project, get him a laptop. We've got a colleague that works over in [...] that knows a lot about music production, so he's met with him, sent some links over, and it's just giving him a little bit more of – it might not go anywhere in terms of successful moneymaking, but it's something that he's enjoying doing, keeping him busy.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*We both had our nails done together, and neither of us had had it done before. We were both like, 'Oh my God, they're so annoying. Get them off, get them off.' I said, '[...] how are you getting on?' She said, 'I hate it.' We both walked out with a smile, and it was a bit of a bonding moment, and then something we really laughed about.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The roles that Housing First team members had in providing emotional and social support could create pressures, the knowledge that someone using Housing First did not, at least initially, not have anyone else they could talk to or refer to, meant that team members

could find it worrying and difficult to disconnect from work. Not infrequently, this meant going further than their roles technically required, such as being available to contact during the evening and at weekends.

*Like around Christmas for example, a lot of our clients struggle around Christmas, but we were on the phone and did alternate days so that the clients had somebody to speak to. If we had issues with medication and transport to go and pick up medication, and if we were not on shift then, what would they have done? We've learned a lot really.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The challenges around managing these relationships were threefold. One issue, which staff in the seven Housing First services usually had experience of effectively managing, was when a relationship was misinterpreted or exaggerated by someone using Housing First. The line between being seen and responded to as supportive professional and being seen as responded to as a best friend, prospective partner, sibling or parent was reported as representing some challenges, but not as something team members in the Housing First services had a lot of difficulty managing. A second issue was that because there was a form of relationship, the negatives of having an emotional link came into play, i.e. tempers could be lost and grudges borne in a way that would not happen in a service that offered less intensive one-to-one support. A third challenge centred on the emotional toll that could be experienced by Housing First team members, connections were built with people using Housing First, who were often very ill in many respects and who could and sometimes would experience marked deteriorations in their health and die. 'Failures' could also occur, where a Housing First team member was dealing with someone abandoning the service, disappearing or losing connection for another reason and again, a human connection that had built up, over months or years, was suddenly severed.

*...it's my fault! Every time there's an issue, it's my fault! We were on a group chat, we had to put [...] in a group chat because [...] a lot to deal with. Every single time there's an issue on the group chat, [...] says, 'I don't want to work with [...], it's her fault!'*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*The only thing – obviously, some of them can get quite agitated and then start shouting and swearing. That’s the only thing, really, that we won’t tolerate. We don’t say they’re coming off the project because of that; we just put it to them, ‘Right, I’m not having you speaking to me like that. I’ll arrange to see you again tomorrow.’ Most of the time, they do realise that they’re out of order and they are fine, by the next day. But that can be difficult for us, as well, because you don’t go to work to be shouted and screamed at.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*I think I’m very careful that I don’t overstep...I have to be mindful of that whilst keeping that engagement going, because ultimately he will end up independently living. I want to be very involved in the work I can do with him now so that it is then successful. So, whilst he’s not ready for a property, he wouldn’t be able to manage that, if I can spend the next six months working on his budgeting skills, working on his cooking skills, making sure that his self-care remains where it is...*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

During 2023, the cost-of-living crisis had become ever more acute and it was more common place for people using Housing First to be in situations of net negative income, i.e. even with careful budgeting rent and minimal energy and food costs exceeded the amount of money coming in. Running successful Housing First is challenging whenever the people using it do not have enough money to live on. This became an issue during 2022/23 as food, energy and private sector rent prices rose at rates that had not been seen in decades.

I think affordability full stop is a massive problem everywhere, and as we know the Universal Credit that people are receiving is barely covering bills and hardly ever food. Certainly, if anybody comes with any debt issues then that’s a problem. Then, obviously if people have been used to being on the streets, they’re not used to the idea of gas, water, council tax, etc., and when they realise that that’s taking up all of their Universal Credit money and there’s nothing left, that’s got to be a difficult thing to recognise. External stakeholder, 2023

## Gender and support

*Every Housing First service should have a women’s specialist. I think it’s really important. Women get forgotten about, or they get tokenistically thought about, but no one has the time or capacity to put all their energy to making sure the service is gender informed.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

Two of the Housing First services, Bench and Turning Lives Around, were established Housing First services which had used the Henry Smith Housing First Strategic Grant to add specialist team members focused on women to existing Housing First services. In addition, all the other Housing First services being supported by the Henry Smith Charity were working with women, ranging from around half to around one third of all service users across the different Housing First services.

The main differences around gender reported by Housing First team members were that women’s needs, when they had become long-term or repeatedly homeless, tended to be greater than those of men, albeit that those men also had high, multiple and complex needs. Women’s homelessness was more strongly associated with trauma, with gender-based violence, sexual violence and domestic violence at a level that was not seen among the men using Housing First. Safeguarding women from former partners and family who had been abusive was also a necessity for many of those using Housing First.

*It’s identifying, and often I feel like absorbing, the barriers that women face when they’re trying to end the cycle of homelessness. It’s trauma-informed, gender-informed support. I think I do a pretty good job of making sure we’re doing that. It’s also, which we had an idea of at the beginning, but I don’t think we realised the extent to which it would be the case, very much a domestic abuse service.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Just that repeated trauma, over and over and over and over. Obviously, all our clients are traumatised, but the women, it does seem to be trauma upon trauma upon trauma.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

Generally it's sex work, domestic abuse, overwhelmingly domestic abuse. Loss of children, although that doesn't always immediately present, but that does tend to be a pattern, and women who are really traumatised and self-sabotage a lot. That's not on our referral form, but that's definitely a case. We need a service like Housing First which can keep working with someone even when they don't turn up to appointments all the time, and cancel, and seem to have this erratic behaviour, because we do have that active engagement, trauma-informed sort of approach, flexible approach. There's a thing with Housing First where it's inherently good for super-traumatised women, in my opinion, in many ways. Just the principles.

**Housing First team member, 2023**

I can't visit some of my clients because their abusive partner's going to be there, and they don't like me. It's like, we have to meet somewhere else. Normally, our rules across the service are that there can't be anyone else in the flat when you visit. It has to be just that one client, for obvious reasons. Sometimes we're a bit more flexible with that depending on... Sometimes we need to see a client, but they have a very controlling partner who won't leave, so we will talk to them on the doorstep, or try to get them to go outside.

**Housing First team member, 2023**

They have all experienced domestic abuse to some extent and that creates a very specific set of I'd say interpersonal problems like trust issues. The way that they've learnt how to survive might be a very specific thing, whether it's... A lot of my clients are very people pleasing, they won't want to rock the boat, they don't want to say no to anything because that's how they've stayed safe, is just by going along with anything to avoid the angry outburst or whatever it is. Or the opposite, they're very abrasive and standoffish because they've had to show that they're tough in a world where women are taken advantage of a lot. It's a very specific set of dynamics for women.

**Housing First team member, 2022**

[**Interviewer:** Do you find any difference in supporting men and women?] One hundred per cent. Women, it's a lot about mental health, vulnerability and safeguarding in relation to their cohort of relationships.

Cuts to domestic violence services, in a context where funding for refuges, sanctuary schemes and other services has been subject to a series of sustained cuts over most of the UK<sup>80</sup>, have increased these challenges. Cuts to Police services in some areas have also been deep, with around a 20% reduction in funding since 2010 at the time of writing, which again meant that liaison and coordination had become more difficult for some of the seven Housing First services.<sup>81</sup> Moving women to alternative housing could also be a slow and laborious process: in one area, transferring a woman from one social landlord property to another was reported of taking upwards of six months, with logistical problems arising if there was a need to briefly pay the rent on two PRS properties at once in order to enable a woman to move.

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/network-of-refuges-in-england-depends-on-services-running-with-no-funding/>

<sup>81</sup> <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/policing-budget-understanding-impacts-austerity-cuts-crime-police-effectiveness-and#:~:text=At%20the%20heart%20of%20these,900%20police%20stations%20in%20England>

*It's a huge problem we've had, yes, one client being attacked by ex- partners...We've been to everyone and they're just like, 'Well, it's going to take a really long time to get a move.' What's the point in these managed moves if it takes two years to organise? I don't understand that. Then she's not, the client is not willing to go into TA in the meantime, who then don't take her seriously. They're like, 'Well, can't be that bad if she doesn't want to go into TA.' That's difficult. We've had, yes, I've got a client at the moment. I don't know where she is, and she's been attacked by her ex-partner.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

These challenges around access to domestic abuse, the criminal justice system and alternative housing were all the more acute because of the complexity and depth of many women's needs. Team members told story after story about working with women who had trauma, complex needs, challenging behaviour, poor self-esteem and, commonly, distress stemming from the loss of and disconnection from their children. Talking through their experience of working with some of the women using Housing First, two team members related examples of the kinds of needs women were presenting with. It was reported that, in a few cases, women's needs had proven too high and complex for some of the Housing First services.

*She uses crack and she's on a methadone prescription. She's schizophrenic. She's very, very, very paranoid. She has absolutely no self-esteem. She's got an eating disorder. She's really just, like, tragic childhood situation. She's had three children, only one of which she raised for a little bit before they all went into care. She doesn't have any contact with them now. She's experienced loads of drug violence and violence from sex working.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*She's illiterate, alcohol dependent, substance dependent, chronic mental health issues, and is currently rough sleeping. She was evicted from one of our, well, from our high support facility in [...], which didn't sit well with us, because it's, like, well, you're supposed to be the high support facility. This is a quite frustrating one because she's the client that [housing association] are currently looking for property, and it's just taken longer than we hoped really. The sooner we can get [...] into the property, the better...very complicated, very chaotic.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

The Housing First services had a small number of experiences with trans women. While these experiences had only been very limited, the picture was again one of women presenting with high and complex needs, associated with traumatic experiences that included prejudice, rejection and hostility. All the Housing First services were trans-inclusive.

External stakeholders working alongside the seven Housing First services also highlighted what they saw as the challenges of supporting women experiencing homelessness. Again, the importance of recognising that women's needs were often different, could also often be higher and more complex and needed specific support was highlighted.

*Also, I find that vulnerable women are more likely – like younger people, and less well-educated with less opportunities, are more likely to be exploited by others within the homeless community. So I think their risks are greater.*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

*I think the women are always far more complex, which I think is the nature of homeless women.<sup>82</sup> They're always, I think – there's been more trauma, there's more complex need because they've more than likely been more abused, more manipulated, just generally more bad stuff has happened to them. So when they come to Housing First, I think they are the ones that need that specific service [Housing First for women], that real trust building, take it as slowly as it needs, work with them to slowly link into people like Athena to get them that domestic violence support.*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

*They're far more risk because we don't know about them. We did a lot of work in [...] around the hidden homeless, which was very much the female community, and it was, they're the ones that are sofa surfing, they're the ones putting themselves in far riskier situations, and they're the ones that don't get counted, that we don't find. The homeless count used to make me laugh.*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

Wider challenges have been identified across ending support for all users of Housing First services in England. Those challenges stem less from any intrinsic issues about Housing First itself than from the environments in which it is operating. In essence, there is some evidence of people becoming inappropriate 'stuck' in Housing First when their needs change. At one end of the scale, the challenge centres on falling support needs and at the other end of the scale, on increasing support needs. In summary, other research has shown Housing First is often in circumstances in which there are limited options in referrals to other services when support needs fall and very limited options when support and treatment needs intensify. As Housing First cannot refer 'down' or 'up' it can be left supporting people who no longer need it and people who really need more intensive support and treatment that it can offer.<sup>83</sup> The further complication here of course is that Housing First is service user led,

so ending support also needs to be consensual. In practice, Housing First services in England seem to be managing this by intensifying support for higher need cases while making lower need cases effectively dormant, but there are of course operational limits around how long they can keep doing this. This issue had started to appear for some of the longer running Housing First services, where the Henry Smith Charity had extended funding or added additional specialist workers for women.

*...we obviously still have some clients who started with us nine years ago, and some clients who have become much more independent and don't really need us anymore. We developed this thing that we call CIS, so it's client-initiated support. after a point where someone's doing well, they actually don't need weekly visits anymore, you're visiting and they're like, 'Hi, I'm all right, goodbye,' when you say, 'Okay, well, maybe we can try, like, I'll call you once a month, and if you need anything, you come to us.' switching off the active engagement thing and making it more client-initiated, which actually I think works quite well. Sometimes I think we use it to lower the caseload. Sometimes we're looking for people, 'Who can we put on CIS?' Again, I wouldn't say that's making it less Housing First. It's just making Housing First viable, because you can't just keep adding and adding and adding.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

## Recruitment and retention

The seven Housing First services, in common with much of the UK homelessness sector, tends to operate with relatively tight budgets. Across both the Housing First services evaluated here and the sector more generally, while Housing First team members are working with people with multiple and complex needs, they will not usually be trained social workers who command relatively high salaries (which was an expectation in the original Housing First model)<sup>84</sup>. Almost all Housing First services are commissioned by local authorities in England from the charities and non-governmental bodies that form the bulk of

82 Research on women's experiences of homelessness indicates that complex needs may arise and be associated with multiple services and systems around homelessness in the UK (and in comparable countries) being designed on the basis that the bulk of lone adults experiencing homelessness are men, generally in contexts, again including the UK, where there is evidence that women's homelessness is being undercounted and underrepresented, see: Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review Brussels: FEANTSA; Quilgars, D., Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2019) How to Deliver Housing First for Women: Learning from Threshold Housing First, Four Years on York: University of York and Bretherton, J. (2017) Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21.

83 Blood, I., Birchill, A. and Pleace, N. (2021) *Reducing, changing or ending Housing First support* London: Homeless Link/Housing First England.

84 Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First: The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction* Hazelden: Minnesota.

the homelessness sector, while a few are supported philanthropically and pay tends to be lower than if Housing First team members were directly employed by local government.<sup>85</sup>

Recruitment and retention of staff had become an issue for some of the Housing First services between the 2022 and 2023 fieldwork visits. This was linked to the ongoing 'cost of living crisis' at the time of writing, i.e. the inflationary spiral that had led initially to greatly increased energy costs and then to much higher rates of inflation which had not been seen since the 1970s, resulting in large part from the ongoing Ukrainian war.<sup>86</sup> Housing First team members were sometimes facing financial troubles of their own, as rents, energy prices and food costs increased rapidly and their wages did not keep pace. In some cases, the Housing First services had found extra money from various sources and been able to bolster existing salaries or offer higher wages for a replacement if someone had moved to another role, seeking better pay.

*It's really hard, really hard. [Local Authority] have just released a housing drug and alcohol worker at £31,000 to £34,000. I just think no one sees it. It's such a challenge. I can't compete with that.*

**Housing First team leader, 2023**

*It would be great to have more of a resource. One of the things I did was increase the pay the staff in Housing First were getting because I think it had been set up just as any other service, so that we're getting the same money, but actually, it's much more intense. Emotionally it takes much more, and we did have a high rate of burnout and fatigue. So yes, resources. It's not nice always having to do it on a budget where you're panicking about whether you can afford to pay it. Actually giving people enough space and time to work in the way they need to with people, would involve more budget, more bodies, basically.*

**Housing First team leader, 2023**

*Yes, salaries are problematic I think for the Housing First support workers. Me, as coordinator, it's not too bad. Obviously, I wouldn't say no to any more money, but I'm not on the breadline. Obviously, [workers] are on Universal Credit, and there's no point them doing any more hours, because they'd just be working more for less.*

**Housing First team leader, 2023**

Resources, in terms of salaries, housing and general access to health, mental health and addiction services, among others, were widely reported by Housing First team members as being less than was ideal. Housing First was often working around restrictions in resources and often relied on the goodwill and commitment of team members who could often earn more in other roles, but who chose to stay engaged because they enjoyed the work and, as discussed above, felt a connection with the people they were supporting. None of the seven Housing First services described themselves as entirely adequately resourced and none of the Housing First team members described access to other services or to housing as sufficient.

## Joint working

Some of the issues around access to other services, particularly mental health, addiction, general NHS services and social care have already been mentioned. When Housing First team members and external stakeholders were asked about joint working, the relative cuts to NHS services, the cuts to social care, local authority and police budgets were all mentioned. Resource limitations were generally seen as much more significant than other potential barriers to joint working, such as a lack of understanding about what Housing First was or incorrect images of who people experiencing homelessness were.

From the perspective of Housing First team members, barriers to mental health services were probably the most acute and enduring challenge to joint working. This manifested in two ways, the first was great difficulty or extremely long delays in getting services to engage or in arranging appointments and the second was a tendency for mental health services to rapidly step back, for example in dropping a service user who missed a single appointment. The issue was not unique to mental health services, there were also

<sup>85</sup> Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2019) *The cost effectiveness of Housing First in England* London: Homeless Link.

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/events/a-cost-of-living-crisis/>

difficulties in getting access to NHS dentistry, which like mental health services has also seen generally falling accessibility for the general population.

*We're seeing multiple and overlapping needs and the [location] services are not set up or designed to work with overlapping needs. There is no connection between mental health and anything else, which is not uncommon. It's a bit like going back in time. There is no assertive outreach related to mental health, which is really unfortunate. So the chances of us getting people through diagnosis and treatment is slim to zero, and if they've got substance use, they won't touch with a bargepole.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*We have a client who is really struggling with his mental health and for me, to be quite honest, it's been a bit of an eye-opener into the mental health services and maybe the lack of funding. I don't know, but just the lack of help really and support. We've had to deal with the brunt of it. We're trying to support this client and we've spoken to a lot of mental health services and raised our concerns; we've been concerned for a while and feel like he's getting worse and worse and worse. We feel like we've been brushed off quite a lot. We've seen him deteriorate and that's scary. When you try and explain that to the services that you thought would know what to do and they've left you to it. Yes, it's a bit concerning. It's been a bit disheartening, to be honest.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*We couldn't, for love nor money, get any of our client's dentist appointments. One of my colleagues did a piece of work with her dentist practice. I'd already written to everywhere, even pleading, 'Would you do pro-bono? What would you do for this client?' It was all, 'No, we're not accepting anyone onto our list.' She managed to come up with a scheme with her dentist service. So, out of my six clients, five have now been referred and four of them are seeing a dentist, which they haven't done for the last five years. I need to refer myself onto that scheme because I can't get one either!*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*The patterns of behaviour are quite similar with most of my clients. You take your eye off them, and that's when they fall by the wayside. Say with Housing First – all of my clients are, really, so in the sense that they need that regular communication, and need to feel reassured somebody is there. Mental health is a massive factor with all of my clients, I would say. Over and above the drug and alcohol use, mental health is the biggest problem for them that isn't well-supported with a number of our clients. It's a constant battle to get the right kind of intervention from that service. That's my biggest qualm, and it has been always an issue in homeless services, always.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Yes, we do meet with the drug and alcohol service, and mental health. They're two key agencies that we work with really closely. So we quite often meet with them, yes, like doing the multidisciplinary meetings. We outline how we can all contribute and support and manage the risk, essentially. That can be quite difficult, because some services aren't as present as we would like them to be, so that's quite difficult. Sometimes, holding the risk is quite difficult. At the end of the day, I am a Housing First worker, I'm not a qualified mental health worker, and I'm not a counsellor, so it's quite hard.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*Mental health services, basically, don't exist. They're massively understaffed, under-resourced in the mental health services. My clients, they all need long-term trauma therapy. None of them are ever going to get it and they know that and that's quite difficult. They're all always going to have unaddressed PTSD because they've all been through a huge amount of trauma from the beginnings of their lives and then ongoing in their lifestyles. That kind of treatment doesn't really exist for free. You get six weeks of CBT on the NHS. That's not going to scratch the surface of any of my clients.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

*So I think what Housing First are going to do is they're going to pick up those cases, and again, they're going to struggle to get the external support, the mental health support for someone that's still actively using substances. They're going to pick up that pressure as well.*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

In 2022, challenges around resources were also seen as the main issue around joint working, but there were also some reports of other services being reluctant to engage with Housing First. Uncertainties about what Housing First was, expectations that homelessness services would follow a 'housing last' model and other services having false images of homelessness, e.g. that everyone who experienced it was a criminal with addiction, were all reported.

*You just have to do it in every multi-agency meeting, in every direct meeting, in emails. You just have to keep reminding them and then they do. They just have to be reminded. I think that's the key is to positively remind people, so they do want to try to. For instance, I think there was a client, and they were like, 'We don't think he's ready to be housed.' No, that's not... This is why they're here. They **are** ready to be housed.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

Earlier research has highlighted that stigmatisation can block access to health, social care and other services in other ways. Sometimes people experiencing homelessness can face attitudinal barriers, usually based on mass media images of 'homelessness' rather than actual information about an individual or direct experience of working with people experiencing homelessness, which bar access to services. One example of this is people experiencing homelessness presenting at a GP surgery and being told that the lists are full, whereas someone else would be taken on as a new patient.<sup>87</sup>

However, research into access to NHS services has shown the main attitudinal barriers are not among service providers, but people experiencing

homelessness themselves. In essence, some research shows that people experiencing homelessness do not seek treatment because they expect rejection, which is often linked to a very poor self-image, which is in turn linked to their experience of homelessness. This can mean that the problem is not how people experiencing homelessness are treated once they are through the door of an NHS service, but that people experiencing homelessness do not open the door, because of the attitudes they think will be behind it.<sup>88</sup> The Housing First services had reacted to these challenges by working with people to get them through those doors, which across all seven services had sometimes involved taking people to register with GPs and to GP and outpatient appointments.

*I've taken a lot of times my clients to, for example, GPs. They've been unwell and I've felt they're not doing it themselves; I'm basically dragging them to the GP to make sure that they're all right, getting antibiotics, whatever they need. That's very hands-on, and I also escort my clients a lot of the time to their appointments, like [addiction service], where I'm not sure if they would be going or they would remember to go without me. I make sure that they're there on time as their appointment is, so that's very hands-on, I'd say.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

Joint working was not always problematic and could be productive. There were reports that cooperation and support from Jobcentre plus (DWP) services had been helpful in ensuring access to disability benefits to which many people using Housing First were entitled. In addition, coordination across multiple services was happening, which enabled Housing First to deliver the packages of multiagency care and support that it is designed to provide. Importantly, this bolstered the capacity of Housing First to keep working with someone as their needs shifted and intensified, because Housing First team members were not someone's sole source of help.

87 Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2020) *Health and Care Services for People Sleeping Rough: the views of people with lived experience* The Partnership for Responsive Policy Analysis and Research (PREPARE).

88 Pleace, N. (2023) *Social and healthcare services for homeless people: A Discussion Paper* European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, Mutual Learning Event 3, Brussels: European Commission.

*I go and see him two or three times a week, he's the guy that – probably a bit less recently because he hasn't wanted to see me, but we've sorted him carers and stuff now. He just went into complete self-neglect. He thought he'd be quite an easy person, but he hasn't been, bless him. He just struggled with the independence. It's what he wanted, but then I think when he got it, he really struggled, and I think he's 65, but he's a very old 65, and I think he struggled with the fending for himself a little bit. He's just massively deteriorated, he's drank more than he's ever drunk before, and he's become incontinent, which wasn't just from this spell, it was happening for a while. I've just managed to get him the health and social care assessment, and he's got carers and stuff coming in now.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

## Outcomes

The Housing First supported by the Henry Smith Charity was working in situations in which access to suitable housing and access to other mental health and other services often fell far short of ideal. Housing First was also supporting people whose needs were high, multiple and complex, which is something that is inherently difficult. Alongside this, of course, everything had tried to become operational in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Housing First was seen as working. There were all the challenges that Housing First team members identified, there were the issue flagged by stakeholders, but the overwhelming impression was that people using Housing First valued it and that it was very often bringing about an end to long-term and repeated homelessness associated with high, multiple and complex housing needs. The picture was very positive in that sense and another positive message was that Housing First was also still delivering its core objectives even in situations that were less than ideal, again in terms of speed of access to adequate, affordable, settled housing and access to mental health and other services. Housing First was working from the perspective of Housing First team members and external stakeholders, but with more resources, more housing and better joint working with better resourced partner agencies, it had the potential to do more.

*So there's very few high-fidelity models I think in the UK if they're honest, and... that doesn't mean to say it doesn't still work because the principle of it, this idea that someone has this autonomy, this right to choose, and it should be a fundamental right that they've got housing, you can work with that and then from there make the rest of it come together.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*I'd say the positive is the fact that two-and-a-half years in, the housing associations now realise that it works, that Housing First does work. Actually, I think internally as well, there were doubts about the model, and whether it would work. You've got some people that maybe have worked for, say, our organisation, 10, 15, 20 years. They know the clients that we were dealing with, and they were like, oh, that stuff is never going to work. Oh, they're never going to maintain a tenancy, and actually they all are. Yes, it's the fact that you launched this brand-new thing. There were some of us that started on it, and we totally believed in it, and it was pretty much us against the rest of the world. That's how it felt, but now it doesn't. Now it feels like people are like, oh right, this thing does work.*

**Housing First team member 2023**

*I've had people that didn't even know they wanted to recover, recover under my support, which was really nice. I've really seen people turn their lives around, which is incredible, and I think people reach out to me when they really need someone to speak to which is lovely. I think my strengths are tapping into people, tapping into what people like, tapping into different things with people, getting people involved in different things. The service's strengths, I'd say they're really supportive with anything I want to do with anyone, there's never been any concern over any money that it's going to cost me for anything that I can prove works for people. There's never been any concern over that. We've made sure everyone that moved in has everything that they could possibly need.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*I would say with this service that it doesn't discriminate, does it? Everybody is entitled to a home. No matter what their background is, we'll fight their corner, we'll work with them. We'll see what their goals are, we'll work at their pace, no matter what it is. With this service, I feel like you do build a better relationship with your clients. I feel like there's more trust, there's more openness, there's more communication. I think that's what makes this successful.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*The Intensity of the support. That's working really well. That's the massive difference really between our service and other services, and you build such a good working relationship with your clients that they are more willing to come to you with any issues that they have. Obviously, that's what is helping them move forward.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

## The future of Housing First

Perhaps the one remaining challenge around attitudes and understanding of Housing First that was reported in this research was an expectation that it would prove almost instantaneously effective. Some hyperbole occurred during the early days of Housing First and it was sometimes presented as an instant, comprehensive 'solution' to homelessness, even though that was never claimed by its originators, and some of that messaging had lingered. As noted above, expectations of Housing First have shifted over time, with a recognition that outcomes, beyond delivering an end to homelessness for (broadly) eight or nine out of every ten people it works with, can be variable, i.e. mental health problems, addictions and other needs do not suddenly disappear, nor do they fade away at a rapid and consistent rate. Allowing Housing First time to work could create some tensions with the short duration of much of the available funding (e.g. some local authority commissioning might only offer two years or less) which was coupled with expectations that, for example, a two-year commission of Housing First would yield strong, clear and positive outcomes within that sort of timeframe.

*I think the shock is that it's not a quick fix. I think there's a lot of, oh, gosh. The only phrase in my head that is coming is poverty porn. People giving people on Instagram and Facebook videos, like a sandwich and a haircut, and this person's like, 'Oh, I'm really fixed.' There's so many videos like that around, isn't there? Someone going, 'Oh, here's \$20, or here's £20.' Yes, oh, my God, your life's turned around. The reality is it doesn't look like that. It doesn't work like that. People are way more complex than that.*

**Housing First team member, 2023**

*I'm not expecting people who've had entrenched homelessness for 43 years of their lives, people who have injected heroin since they were 13, people who have suffered with trauma and disadvantage and health issues to change in a year just because I've been here...People aren't going to change just because I've clicked my fingers or waved a wand and hung out with people and taken them to appointments...but I think the little things are quite promising, that show that there is a scope for change.*

**Housing First team member, 2022**

The risk here was that Housing First would run into difficulties because it was expected to yield very rapid results. On one level, this does not present a danger to Housing First in the sense that, as with the Housing First evaluated in this report, results in terms of ending homelessness are consistently strong. However, it was the case that at least a few service users would inevitably experience problems and at least one or two might return to homelessness. In addition, while sometimes there would be challenges around individual cases, the risks of losing some service users were exacerbated by the coordination problems linked to the resources available to other services and to the challenges around housing supply. In essence, Housing First could be working very effectively, but there could still be ammunition available should a local authority or other funding source want to argue for shutting a service down.

Beyond this, the main concerns around the future for Housing First centred on the availability and reliability of adequate funding. All seven Housing First services thought there was a case for expansion and all seven had concerns about continued funding for their existing services, while viewing the possibility

of expanding funding as being quite unlikely in the current political context at the time of writing, in which deep cuts to local authority budgets had been unceasing since 2010.<sup>89</sup>

*I think, funding-wise, it's very difficult. This sort of project, which is really for a long term, I think funding, to get it for a specific amount of time, I think that can be quite limiting.*

**Housing First team leader, 2023**

*How much more evidence do you need that this works? You're doing all of this stuff, you've done Housing First right across the country in various different areas, and you're the expert in this area, but I just imagine it's giving very similar results. It works. There's other countries that are saying it works. Obviously, there's times when it doesn't work, but you're getting some good results. You're getting better results than doing it another way I think is the other way of looking at it. Because all these people are always like, can we spend this money better, sort of thing. My thoughts on that is just, how much more do you need until somebody's going to turn around and say, this is policy now, this is how we're going to have to do it.*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

*...we'll have a project here for six months, we'll have a project here for three months, we'll have a project here for 12 months, we'll have a project here for two years.' People are lost in this contracting and commissioning cycle, and so we don't properly analyse and evaluate where the successes are, or the sustainability stuff. I find it quite frustrating, because we work in a targeted narrow-specific approach time and time and time again, but that's often to the detriment of other individuals, because they're not getting the interventions that they will benefit from. In the end, we get one size-fits-all...*

**External stakeholder, 2023**

<sup>89</sup> Beyond short term increases linked to COVID-19 emergency funding, see: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/local-government-funding-england>

# 4 USING HOUSING FIRST

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on the views of people with lived experience of homelessness who used the seven Housing First services. As with the earlier chapters, people who supported the research by sharing their views on Housing First were promised anonymity, so that no individual or particular Housing First service is identifiable from any of the material presented below. The chapter looks at both the experiences of people using Housing First and their views of the seven services in the evaluation. Gender is reported according to how someone self-identified in the quotations used in this chapter.

The interviews took place in 2022 and 2023, it was possible for people using a Housing First service to be interviewed on both occasions, but this only happened in a handful of cases. In summary, across 46 interviews:

- Seven interviews took place with people using Action Homeless Housing First (Leicester), of which four were in 2023
- Four interviews took place with people using the specialist women's Housing First support at Bench Outreach (London), of which two were in 2023
- Eight interviews took place with people using HARP (Southend) Housing First of which four were in 2023
- Six interviews took place with people using Housing First Gwynedd, of which four were in 2023
- 10 interviews took place with people using the specialist women's Housing First support at Turning Lives Around (Leeds) of which five were in 2023
- Seven interviews took place with people using Turning Tides Housing First (West Sussex) of which five were in 2023
- Four people using Stonepillow Housing First (West Sussex) were interviewed in 2023
- 19 of the 46 interviews conducted over 2022 and 2023 with people using Housing First were with women (41%)
- Almost all the interviewees were in the 35-55 age range and largely identified as White British and cisgender<sup>90</sup>

## Housing

Housing satisfaction was strongest among those people who had settled housing, usually in the form of a social rented home. As most people using Housing First were single, they tended to be allocated one-bedroom flats by social landlords. Several respondents were in temporary accommodation, some in probationary tenancies for housing association (registered provider) and local authority social housing and a some in the private rented sector.

People using Housing First had a generally high awareness of the challenges in securing affordable, adequate and suitable housing in each of the seven areas. Housing First was often seen as having to work in challenging circumstances, as the people using these services had encountered long waiting lists, experienced private rented sector rent levels and had an understanding that affordable, adequate homes were often not easy to come by. The people using Housing First were often very grateful when housing was secured and all the more so if it was of a reasonable standard, had a secure tenancy and was affordable. The following descriptions of their homes came from people using Housing First across the seven services.

*I got a flat within a few weeks. It was [...] brilliant, it really was. The time and effort they put in. I just thought, yes, they just want to help me, and they'll put me somewhere in some [...] hole and it was lovely. It really was. They did it up for me and it made me feel hopeful that they could be there for me. They made it homely; you name it. They were there constantly, every few days, or every week.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2022**

<sup>90</sup> i.e. the gender that was originally defined for them at birth.

*I've got a separate bathroom and toilet. I've got a separate kitchen and I've just got one big, massive room with my cat. I've just started to paint and that.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*It's okay, mate. It's not bad. I've got a ground floor flat, garden, yes...Yes, got everything in there... Cooker, microwave. I've got a toaster, got a kettle, got everything in there.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Obviously, it's got a bedroom. I hadn't had a bedroom of my own for over four years. I've been in hostels. It's nice being able to get up and go to a bedroom. Bathroom, disabled shower, which I miss the bath, but I've got the disabled shower. Nice own little kitchen obviously, front room. Really nice and bright and it's a lovely flat. It's just where it's situated.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*It's a flat, separate bedroom, separate kitchen and everything. It's first floor, so it's just two flats, there's one below and one above, and it's on a row of houses, and it's just in a little court. So it's very quiet, it's very nice, and it's what I needed, and then of course the neighbours. My downstairs neighbours are absolutely lovely.*

**Person<sup>91</sup> using Housing First, 2023**

*Oh, it's fantastic. Yes. I was over the moon. I got in the bathtub and because I've not had a bath for, God Almighty, a long time. Not been in a bathtub for a long time. I was so excited to see a bathtub.*

**Male using Housing First Male using Housing First**

*I'm really, really happy with what I've been given because I've even got a garden, which is the best thing ever because it's coming up summer. I've always wanted my own space in the garden, do you know what I mean, because sometimes I can't mix with people, do you know what I mean, because of my mental health. So I just like to have me time and that flat is absolutely perfect, and so is the garden. Honestly, I couldn't ask for anything better, do you know what I mean, because it is literally the best.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*Yes, it's lovely. I hope the next place is the same size. I'm very house-proud. I wouldn't say OCD, but I'm very house proud. I've managed to go around because I can restore furniture as well. So, I'll get an old table and sand it down, and paint it, or whatever. So, I've got it looking really nice. Yes. It's got a washing machine and tumble dryer in it. They bought everyone in that house brand new Henry Hoover for their room. Yes. So, they're brilliant, they are.*

**Woman using Housing First**

Conditions within some of the housing were sometimes less than ideal. Some social rented homes, once they were obtained, required some refurbishment, redecoration and also some repairs. Fixtures and fittings, in terms of the kitchens and bathrooms and also the heating and water systems in some of the (mainly) flats and studio flats that Housing First services were securing could be old, even if they were still functional. The following was reported by people using three of the Housing First services

*Yes, it's just getting a bit old, and there was a leak. The main problem is there was a leak while it was empty. Damp has got behind the kitchen units, to where you just have to take the kitchen out to do anything about it. So it's always got that damp. There are a couple of cupboards I don't really use.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

91 Gender was defined on the basis of how someone chose to identify themselves.

*It works yes, but the bath is about 50 years old. It's got no enamel left on the bottom and that do you know what I mean? It's pretty crap... A little bit of damp. Yes, a little bit of damp but I sorted that out, I think. It seems to be all right...Everything is working, but it's just an old kitchen do you know what I mean? I don't think they'd look at it as it's that decrepit.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*You're meeting people's basic needs aren't you really and then people have to build up, don't they? Yes, it would have been the cherry on top if he'd furnished it for me and done it all up lovely and that. That would have been the cherry on top but that's unrealistic do you know what I mean? Yes, I was just happy to get a flat do you know what I mean? Really just happy to get a flat.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

Mentions of more serious issues, such as widespread mould or infestations, were not common among the people using the seven Housing First services. If housing had something wrong with it, it was more likely to be the equivalent of a builder's 'snag list' than a list of serious structural problems or potentially risky issues like mould or unsafe heating and hot water systems.

Housing First was typically providing at least some assistance with setting up a new home across all seven services. Sometimes the work involved was minimal, in other cases it was significant, including refurbishment as well as redecoration and furnishing. Across the seven areas, Housing First variously used a mix of its own funding (which was never extensive), ensuring social and private landlords fulfilled their obligations and collaboration with local charities and, where available, grants and loans from DWP or local authorities, as well as their own informal networks to find get the necessary resources together to create a new home. The following users of three Housing First services summarised the kinds of experiences of many of the people using Housing First.

*The really good thing for me was that it needed decorating originally when I moved in. I don't know if this is a bit off-topic, but that was the really good point of having – I painted it, put blinds up, everything like that, the first week when I moved in. I think, for me, that was a really good thing, and a real difference to temporary accommodation where you just go in somewhere and it is the way it is. Yes, that was a really good way to start and to settle in, and make it feel my own.*

**Male using Housing First, 2022**

*Yes, they helped me with furniture. There was a budget, household furniture budget. When I moved in, I had nothing, so it was a budget. Got a sofa, got a bed, got all – everything that I needed for the flat. Kettles, cookers, washing machine, all brand new. So still got the washing machine, still got the fridge freezer! Still got all of that.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Housing First did all my decorating, yes. They decorated for me, yes. Yes, I told them what colours I wanted, and they decorated it all for me. It were lovely. They had the furniture in with it as well, yes.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*Well, I had nothing. I could have put my life in a carrier bag, literally put it in a carrier bag. Didn't have nothing. I moved in. The place is beautiful. It's all good. High-spec standard. I didn't have a bed, first of all...Housing First had the funding for, I got a sofa bed, a brand-new sofa bed, a telly, a lamp, everything I needed. Pots, pans, everything. I didn't need for nothing. A cooker. Like the two-ring cookers, and ovens and grill. That was there. The person who owns it, the landlady. I got a microwave. Yes. I didn't want for nothing, literally, even loads of cleaning bits and things like that.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

Finding housing in the right sort of location, both in the sense of getting somewhere suitable for someone with high, multiple and complex needs and a history of homelessness to live and in sense of having good transport links and proximity to family and friends, was sometimes difficult. Again, the people using Housing First sometimes viewed this as a function of what they perceived as being huge shortfalls in affordable housing supply. When housing in the right sort of area could be found, it meant the home that Housing First had been able to arrange was viewed all the more positively, when shops, services, transport and, where someone was in contact with them, friends and family networks were nearby.

*I've got a 24-hour shop at the end of the road, got a little corner shop. You've got [Area] down the end which is quite nice. You've got [...] Park, which is lovely. It's nice.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*I think it's quite a nice little square do you know what I mean? It's all right and it's got a little parade of shops down the bottom. You've got a Tesco Express and off-licence and grill and there's chicken places do you know what I mean and a hair place. So it's all right. It's not a bad little area. I've never witnessed any antisocial behaviour really down there at night.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

For some of the women using Housing First, proximity to children who did not live with them, either because they were no longer dependents or were living in some other arrangement, was particularly important. People using Housing First were generally, although not always, without any access to a car, which meant reliable public transport and a relatively low cost could be important, as having to use taxis was prohibitively expensive. Issues with poor access to affordable public transport arose in more rural areas, but could also be a difficulty in smaller towns and some suburbs.

*Housing First stepped in...I can't remember how long it was, maybe a year, managed to find me a property in [a rural location] which is in between [two towns]. So, right slap bang in the middle... It's a village in the middle of nowhere with hardly any buses. No buses at the weekend, no buses after six o'clock. They're hourly if they turn up. I have quite a few disability issues, so wherever I'm situated, even getting to the bus stop is a big heave-ho. Then it's an hour on the bus. All my family are based in [town], so Housing First are trying to get me back into [...]*

**Woman using Housing First**

*It's a safe place to live. It's a bit out of the way. There are two train stations, so travel is not too bad. The main thing: there's not a supermarket, affordable shops and things like that, up here.*

**Male using Housing First**

Issues with neighbours, with local drug markets and dealers and with low level criminality were mentioned by several, though by no means a majority of the people using Housing First. This sometimes restricted someone's quality of life and the usual response, across all of the Housing First in the seven areas, was to try to institute a move where one was desired, although that was a process that often took time. Attitudes varied between the people using Housing First as to what an unsafe place looked like, with some seeing some element of crime and anti-social behaviour almost like background noise. However, some women using Housing First had a sense of unease and worry when they were in an area in which they did not feel safe, worrying about abuse and trauma they had experienced in the past occurring again.

As described in the last chapter, the Housing First teams reported worries about cuckooing, which had sometimes caused significant and worrying problems for the people they had supported. As noted, cuckooing refers to occupation and use of a vulnerable person's home by exploitative, abusive and criminal people, such as using a vulnerable individual's flat as an illegal drug storage and distribution point.

*Well, yes. I went to prison for 14 months. What I'd done was I let my flat out to some drug dealers, and they were giving me £100 a day. I were only in it for the money. The police come bursting through and I got arrested and took to court. I was fined with intent to supply, but which I wasn't, I wasn't supplying, the lads were that used my flat. I got an ASBO for nine years off the council.*

**Male service user, 2023**

For some women using Housing First, cuckooing had been a horrendous experience and was also something they reported still feeling at risk of.

*I had a dealer overtaking my house and this was going on for seven years. It was an awful situation. There was just no privacy, no anything because I smoked that. Not at first it wasn't like that. When I first met him, he was just my dealer. Then he had nowhere to stay. He just didn't sleep there but just was there from... He could get there at 4:00 and he'd be there the whole 24 hours a day. So, I was just like – the first couple of years and then for my 45<sup>th</sup> I went to my mum's and then he stayed in mine. All my windows got smashed out.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*...that was the wrong sort of area, they don't use that area anymore. There were a lot of drug dealers trying to use girls for cuckooing the properties.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*I got cuckooed, as you call it. Yes, got cuckooed, as you call it... So they moved me out quick, which were good.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

The people using Housing First were generally highly aware of what their tenancy or lease arrangements were and how secure their position was. In some cases, this was reported as stemming from experience of insecure housing in the past, losing one or more tenancies in the private rented sector being one example. Experience of eviction was not universal,

but was quite widespread, sometimes under the 'no fault' provisions of PRS ASTs<sup>92</sup>, but quite often by social landlords for rent arrears or 'anti-social' behaviour. Anything short of a secure council or housing association (registered provider) tenancy could be seen as insecure.

*I'm waiting for the – because I've been moved on for so many times, I'm waiting for... 'You need to move on.' I think it needs to be more – if it said something like – if you had a contract that said, 'If everything's been this way and you've stuck to all this and you've done all this and everything's really good, then within one year the tenancy could come over to you,' or within a year and a half, the tenancy could come over to you, or in two years the tenancy would come over to you. The goal – and then you get it's yours because at the moment you don't know if that's still going to be pulled out from underneath you.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

Housing First has been associated with successful exits from homelessness because it is able to generate a sense of ontological security<sup>93</sup>, i.e. the feeling that life is safe, secure and, in particular, predictable, which is thought to be strongly associated with a sense of having a settled home. When Housing First services are unable to secure settled housing quickly, achieving this sense of ontological security is likely to be more difficult for people using those services.

Secure tenancies, or other homes that were felt to be at no risk of being lost, were seen very positively. Many of the people using Housing First has either never had a settled home or had not had their own tenancy for years. When a settled home, ideally with a secure tenancy was provided, it was often reported as a relief from prolonged periods of precarious, stressful and frightening insecurity and homelessness, as was described by three people using three of the Housing First services.

92 Private rented sector, assured shorthold tenancy

93 Padgett, D.K., Henwood, B.F. and Tsemberis, S (2016) *Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems and Changing Lives* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Much more secure than I have been in the last eight years, to be honest. I was living on the streets for 18 months when I first lost my house. From here, there, everywhere. Now, to get in somewhere of my own, do you know, that I can actually call my home. Do you know what I mean? It's just amazing.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*Yes, I'm so happy. It's the best. It's the first time I've had my own place for seven or eight years now.*

**Man using Housing First, 2023**

*Well, my problem in the hostels is, even though I've been on the street, I've always tried to look after myself and keep myself clean and tidy. In these hostels, you can clean the bathroom or the kitchen, and then you go back ten minutes later, and it's just an absolute mess. I can't live like that; it does my head in. That's why I never last in these places very long. I've always said, I just need my front door where I can have my bath and my kitchen, and I can keep it as tidy as I want. I know it's going to be like that when I get back. That's it: that's why I'm just so happy to actually finally have that.*

**Man using Housing First, 2023**

## Budgeting

Finances were almost universally very tight for the people using Housing First. Many of those who were talked to qualified for additional disability benefits which meant they were not reliant on Universal Credit alone, but the cost-of-living crisis at the time of writing (see Chapter 3) had placed further strain on their finances. Sometimes rent was covered wholly by housing benefit/the housing element in Universal Credit, i.e. in social housing, but even where this was the case, the rapid rise in food and energy costs, already high relative to income for someone reliant on benefits, had been difficult to manage. Even where not in a situation of net negative income, i.e. having less per month than is needed to cover rent, minimal energy and food costs, the people using Housing First were often living rather limited lives, because they lacked the means to do anything beyond subsist. The experience was not universal, some people were

managing better than others (some also lived in cheaper parts of the UK than others) but coping on a very low income was often central to the lives of people using Housing First. People using four of the Housing First services described their experiences in the 2023 fieldwork:

*I get my clothes out of containers. So I don't pay for clothes. I know where food banks are if I need them.*

**Woman using Housing First**

*They were quite high, but then everybody's has been. I pay direct debit, so it's cheaper than having one of them key things. They did spike up, but then that was when everything went up, so it wasn't a case – it's a long time since I had to pay bills because every hostel I've been in, you pay a certain amount, and it covers everything.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*God, do you know what, this last winter has been really bad. Obviously with the price of... I'm putting so much gas in it's unreal because I'm on a thingy card. I'm glad I'm on the thing really because I know roughly where I am, but sometimes I can't put the heating on.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Would I rather eat or have shampoo? Do you know what I mean? Things like that, so. Then I have to go back to [Housing First] and ask them to give me a food bank voucher. Do you know what I mean? So, it's awful really.*

**Woman using Housing First (benefit sanctions), 2023**

*It's a struggle. Me it's a struggle being on Universal Credit. We was all right. When I was working – we was all right. It wasn't a lot of difference, but I managed, but it's definitely a struggle on Universal Credit.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

Debt management was part of the challenge facing some of the people using Housing First. Sometimes this was because they had been given loans by the welfare system which then took money out of their monthly allowance, already described as very low by many

studies<sup>94</sup>, to settle the debt. There were also credit card and utilities bills debts. All of the Housing First services offered support with budgeting, welfare rights and with debt management, as well as interpreting and handling bills in a wider sense. This help was viewed positively by many of the people using Housing First, as was support in setting up home, e.g. in securing furniture and white goods, which would be very difficult on often highly restricted incomes. Nevertheless, a reality of existing on very low incomes, that restricted almost every aspect of life, was the day-to-day experience of many of the people using Housing First.

## Health and wellbeing

Poor health, most frequently in the form of poor mental health, was a part of the lives of almost all the people using the seven Housing First services. Conditions were often complex and multiple, often including a combination of addiction and mental illness alongside some further limiting physical illness or disability. As Housing First, as with many homelessness services, used single occupancy units, this meant that someone (with support) could self-isolate and follow the lockdown during COVID, which meant infection rates were low.

Illness and disability could limit quality of life. Housing First could enable treatment, within a context of high demand for relatively low resources across the NHS and offer some other forms of support around addiction, loneliness and isolation and poor self-esteem. Some emotional support came from Housing First team members, other support, like arts-based activities and community groups for people with limiting illness or disability was also accessed via the Housing First services. Housing First was seen as positively affecting health and wellbeing by many of the people using it, but many of these people were at same time seriously ill, their mental health problems, limiting illness and disabilities were often acute and enduring, i.e. many were seriously ill and had been for some time. These conditions could be mitigated and improved by the intervention of Housing First, but at the same time, there were many people using these services who, while their experience of homelessness had ended and some of their conditions might improve, were facing a lifetime of limiting illness and disability.

## Mental health

Mental health problems, which tended to exist alongside limiting illness, disability and addiction for many of the people using Housing First, were the most common form of health problem mentioned by the people using Housing First in 2022 and 2023. Use of GP prescribed medication was high, but contact with mental health services was low, reflecting the reports of the often very limited availability of NHS and social work services described by Housing First team members. The picture around mental health reflected wider research on Housing First, which has found a mixed reality of mental health conditions sometimes improving, because of factors like stable, adequate housing, but also sometimes remaining constant.<sup>95</sup>

*Yes, I do get depressed. You know what I mean? It's something that I've suffered it for, what, for 19, 20 years. It's not something that I really want to talk about. You know what I mean? I just can't engage my sentences and putting words together and saying... You know what I mean? It's just weird.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*I have no intention of going to work. I can't even walk up a set of stairs. I can't carry big boxes. My attitude is quite... I'm a bit funny – not with people; I can chat to anyone, but as working in a shop or something that'd do my head in, that... God, I couldn't handle that. I suffer anxiety. I was shaking. I'd be depressed, I might say the wrong thing and I can't help that...*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*I can stand at that bus stop and the bus can go past me and there's not another one for an hour. So, if I miss that appointment, then I get all these people going, 'Well she didn't attend.'*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

<sup>94</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/call-landmark-change-universal-credit-so-people-can-afford-essentials-research-shows>

<sup>95</sup> Padgett, D.K. (2007) There's no place like (a) home: Ontological security among persons with serious mental illness in the United States. *Social Science & Medicine*, 64(9), pp.1925-1936.

*[see GP] Less at the moment. They're just trying to work out my meds do you know what I mean, trying to get the balance of my antidepressants and my other things. I've got a few problems. I've had brain injuries like I say.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Yes, obviously it's got better – a lot better – because I am stable and I'm secure. No one can take that away from me; that's nice so that would be itself. But then I've had low points as well because I've had addiction and stuff that I've dealt with. Where I've not had medication, my mental health has been really bad, but it's getting – I'm in a lot better place now, so yes, it's got better.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2022**

*Yes, my mental health has improved greatly since moving here. Because when I was in the other projects, I wasn't able to cook, because I have an unfortunate issue with hygiene and stuff, I can't touch things that are dirty, and the properties weren't being managed properly. This was a large aspect of me trying to move out of those properties, and now I have a kitchen to myself, I'm able to cook, and I'm able to feel better.*

**Person using Housing First, 2023**

*I've got ADHD, I'm bipolar anyway, and because my brain goes somewhere else, I always forget to eat anyway sometimes. So I realise when I get home, I'm like, oh my goodness, I actually haven't eaten today. Then I put something in the oven and then it burns. So then I'm like, oh my goodness gracious. Lord, what have I done? Then I've got distracted from that, cooking that, to doing something else. It's awful.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

Women's experiences of mental illness were found to often be associated with trauma. Women using all the Housing First services and, in the Bench and Turning Lives Around services, the specialist workers for women, very often reported domestic abuse, gender-based violence and the loss of children when child

protection services took them away, or because they felt they had to place them with relatives to keep them safe. The lives of women were frequently permeated at every level by the trauma of abuse, both because of the lasting effects of what had happened to them and because of the ongoing risks that many of those women still faced.

Earlier research highlighted the distinctions between women and men with multiple and complex needs who are long-term or repeatedly homeless and began to argue the case for Housing First for women. This research adds to the case for Housing First developed, managed and developed by women for women.<sup>96</sup> The very widespread need for safeguarding against an ongoing or potential threat of abuse and the near-universal experience of trauma stemming from domestic abuse for women using Housing First, was also highlighted by the results. This is not to suggest that abuse and trauma had not and could not feature in the experience of lone men using Housing First, but while it was present among men, this research indicated experience of abuse and trauma was near-universal among women, and that there were frequently threats of further abuse. Housing First had originally been designed on the widespread, but now questionable assumption, that the majority of people experiencing homelessness with multiple and complex needs would identify as male. Women were regarded as being present, but not in great numbers, which had meant their needs, characteristics, experiences and choices had received less attention than those of men.<sup>97</sup> New research during the 2000s and 2010s, including work on Housing First, which showed women appearing in greater numbers than had been expected, began to not only highlight the presence of women, but also the complexity and extent of their support and treatment needs. Again, there was strong evidence of near-universal associations between long-term and recurrent homelessness among women and mental illness, linked to trauma, which stemmed from abuse and violence.

## Addiction

Addiction was widespread, although not universal, among the people using the seven Housing First services. Associations between addiction and mental illness were strong, but that would be expected for Housing First services which are designed to support

96 Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review Brussels: FEANTSA; Quilgars, D., Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2019) How to Deliver Housing First for Women: Learning from Threshold Housing First, Four Years on York: University of York.

97 Bretherton, J. (2017) Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21

people presenting with both sets of treatment and support needs. Drug use was diverse, but tended to coalesce around cannabis, crack cocaine and heroin, which followed broader patterns of addiction in UK society<sup>98</sup>, with only limited use of synthetics like Spice. Alcohol consumption, sometimes on its own and sometimes with illegal drug use was widely reported and tended to be described as at high levels by the people using Housing First who talked about their drinking. Addiction is broadly associated with long-term and recurrent homelessness, but the evidence base suggests this takes quite complex forms, i.e. it is not simply about addiction ‘triggering’ homelessness, as addiction can arise *after* homelessness has occurred, particularly if it is prolonged, and also be present before, during and after homelessness.<sup>99</sup> The picture around addiction was mixed, as other evidence on Housing First has also shown, for some contact with Housing First had marked a step change and drug and/or alcohol use had ceased.

*Yes. I drink two big jugs a day of blackcurrant juice. You're only meant to drink one, but I'm in the fast lane, I drink two.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

For others progress was relative, use of alcohol and/or drugs had reduced, but not ceased altogether. However, only a few of the people who were talked to had ongoing issues with very high intake of drugs and alcohol. Histories of drug and alcohol use could be very long, sometimes stretching over the course of decades.

*I've been into drugs, alcohol all my life. I ended up losing my children when they were 7, 8, and 14. I lost my family home. So, yes, I've been homeless since then, basically. Then, it's took me eight years now to get to where I am today.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

Some of the women using Housing First talked about being approached or targeted by dealers when they were trying to reduce their drug use. In one instance, a woman had been provided with an alarm system by Housing First to discourage approaches by dealers. There were also women and men who reported being

surrounded by illegal drug use or excessive drinking in neighbouring households and finding that atmosphere difficult, linking back to the importance attached to the nature of an area by both people using Housing First and Housing First team members.

*Well, I tried to explain my situation but they're not listening, are they? Like, 'Leave me alone', but they're leaving me alone. Since I've got Verisure, trust me, they're not... Verisure alarm.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

Addiction was reported by people using Housing First as being linked to various circumstances. As with anyone, alcohol use coincided with stress and the same was true of drug use, with experience of trauma being reported as a driver for addiction by some people using Housing First, including several of the women. Boredom, isolation and low self-esteem were also reported as associated with addiction, again this is nothing new, and not unexpected, but it illustrates the complexities that services like Housing First can face when dealing with addiction, when it is so often linked to emotion, experience and broader mental health.

*I don't get drunk. I'm not getting drunk. I'm just numbing myself... Yes, bored shitless. I'm not happy to sit there and watch Coronation Street.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

## Physical health

Physical health problems among the people using Housing First were widespread and often included limiting illness and disability. Several of the people using Housing First were eligible for and receiving PIP (personal independence payments) and there were also people who were wheelchair users and who required adaptations such as wet rooms because of limited mobility. People's lives were sometimes restricted by limitations around mobility, where it was difficult to move around outside their home and access to services like public transport, where it was present and offered regular services, could be restricted. Housing First across the seven services had reacted to limiting illness and disability by seeking social

98 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-drugs-phase-one-report/review-of-drugs-summary#:~:text=Taking%20the%20health%20and%20criminal,scale%20of%20magnitude%20to%20the>

99 Pleace, N. and Lloyd, C. (2022) *European responses to the needs of people who experience homelessness and use drugs* EMCDDA: Lisbon.

care, treatment and other support services, pursuing enhanced welfare payments for disability and in some cases by seeking specific housing. One example of this was someone who, rather than be housed in an orthodox flat, had selected sheltered housing, because of their care and support needs, which Housing First had then facilitated. The role of Housing First in facilitating access to treatment, via GP and outpatient appointments, and in conducting general welfare checks, was discussed by some of the people using Housing First.

*You get your own big room, it's like a bedsit, you get your own kitchen, your own bathroom, and your own walk-in wardrobe. I have to supply the food. It's £66 a month rent, and I get the medical staff to supply me with my drugs, which is a good thing.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Housing First do help me get to my appointments and things and they remind me as well. So, even if they're not able to take me, I can take myself, but they remind me. So, they are really good with that. They'll remind me, they'll text message or they come round themselves. They're all so good that if they haven't heard from you for a while they'll come round to the house and ring on the door just to check that you're okay*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

## Social activity

Levels of social activity were variable among the people using Housing First, but they commonly reported a history of isolation, disconnection from family and partners and, among women, loss of contact with their children. Housing First, across the seven services, offered a mix of direct emotional support and facilitation of two main sorts of social activity, the first was support with reconnection with family and friends when it was requested and the second was supporting access to formal social activities, which might range from cooking classes to amateur dramatics. The realities of often relatively isolated lives were conveyed by many of the people using Housing First. Reconnection was also not always possible, often for women because their former homes and relationships had been abusive but also because partners, friends and other family had been lost.

Disconnection and isolation was also associated with very poor self-esteem, the lack of financial resources with which to travel or to socialise and, again, with the constraints on life that could arise from limiting illness and disability.

*Well, I've just been talking to [Housing First team member]. I'm joining a comedy club, a course on a comedy club. I want to do some am dram as well because at school that was the only thing, I was ever good at drama. So I want to do some am dram and do the comedy course. So [Housing First team member] said to me hopefully he can put up some of the money if I put up the rest of the money for the course do you know what I mean?*

**Male using Housing First**

*Me personally, I just turn to gaming. I speak to my worker when I do see them, and they do help a hell of a lot, she is one of the most supportive workers I've ever had, genuinely. But currently I just turn to my gaming if I need to, because I'd rather internalise than externalise.*

**Person using Housing First**

Isolation from former social and emotional ties could also be a deliberate act of self-preservation, again breaking ties that had been abusive, something that was particularly true for many of the women using Housing First and avoidance of former relationships that had been associated with addiction. Building new connections was not straightforward, many of the people using Housing First were well into middle age, facing multiple barriers to socialisation around and linked to their treatment and support needs and without much resource to draw upon. All the Housing First services worked to support social activities, but the climb towards a healthy set of meaningful relationships was a difficult one for many of the people using Housing First.

*I'm trying to avoid everyone that I did know. Everyone I knew was on the street or had drug problems. I'm trying to avoid all of those sorts of people now.*

**Man using Housing First**

*Getting away from that bad environment into a new place, it's good, [but] you take yourself with you, but I am slowly getting it. I'm not perfect. I'm trying.*

**Male using Housing First, 2022**

In this context, the direct social and emotional support that were provided by Housing First team members were highly valued by many of the people using the seven services. At least initially and sometimes on a prolonged basis, the main social – as well as the main service provider – contact in people's lives centred on seeing the Housing First team member who supported them. Some of the services rotated staff a little, so there was not simply one relationship with one team member, both because of the potential risks around misinterpretation of relationships, but also to build trusting relationships with more than Housing First team member.

*Just someone saying, 'Are you okay?' That can mean a lot to somebody who has got nobody. Do you know what I mean? Are you all, right? Even if that's all they say, are you all right, and I go, 'Yes,' that will do for me. You can't ask for more, can you? You can't ask for more than that.*

**Male using Housing First, 2022**

*Even before I had the flat, they used to meet me regular in Costa, Nero. We'd meet for a coffee, and just have a chat through the day, wanting to know how my week's gone. It was, it was massive to me, it was an escape.*

**Male using Housing First, 2022**

## Support

Attitudes towards the support being offered by all seven Housing First services were almost universally positive. The range and agility of the support, the much higher contact rates and longer duration of support than other services, the assistance with everything from finding paint to securing treatment or dealing with a difficult neighbour, through dealing with a gas bill or providing some emotional support were repeatedly praised.

I just wasn't used to the passion that they give you and wanting to help you. They really did mean what they said. It was weird... They know what you need. They kept coming and coming and coming, just didn't leave me alone. So you just have to give in and let them help you. It's the best thing I ever did. I did go off the path a few times, but they tracked me down. Woman using Housing First, 2022

*He's become like a friend to me. He's not just my carer I see him as a friend.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Just having the support of a move, just [Housing First team member] being there, being patient, being understanding. I don't know. Can you say the word? If she left, I'd be devastated...She's amazing.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*Because I'm a sceptical person. I just thought they were a bunch of do-gooders who like to preach at you, and actually get no help along the way. The outcome, they've helped me a lot. [On offers of specific help] They don't push it. She slips it in now and again like, have I changed my mind or whatever? No, they supported me through everything.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*[Housing First team member] is a diamond...he is the man do you know what I mean? He is like my manager or personal assistant. My manager, do you know what I mean? He's really good do you know what I mean with all manner of stuff. If I said, '[...] I'm a little bit concerned about that' he's, 'Well let's have a look at this and sort it out.'*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

Basically, if I needed help with anything, anything like putting my Wi-Fi on in my house; coming and picking me up; taking me to hospital appointments; picking me up from places where I shouldn't be. Where she's come and got me, rescued me and taken me home...come every week...It's a good couple-of-hours journey... They do that every week for me, even after me saying to them, 'That's it! I don't want anything to do with it.' This is what I'm saying: they did not give up on me, mate.

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

...got me to apply for PIP and to get on the right Universal Credit, which I wouldn't have done any of that. I wouldn't have known what I was entitled to and what was right and stuff if these hadn't have told me. I'm just waiting for my decisions to come through on all of them, and hopefully it'll be a lot better once I get – my money goes up...

**Male using Housing First, 2022**

(They were subsequently found eligible for PIP).

They helped me with budgeting for my flat. Helped me get my things into my flat, like my furniture into my flat, helped me buy furniture. They helped me with my electricity, my gas, anything to do with my flat and anything I was anxious about, anything like that, they helped me with all that. With my social, my DSS<sup>100</sup>, everything they helped me with...

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

They helped me; because I'm dyslexic, I can't fill forms in, nothing like that, yes. So they've helped me with my grants and everything, and they've managed to get a cooker, a washing machine, fridge-freezer, everything. So everything's fully equipped, isn't it.

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

Yes, they're brilliant. Yes, they stick to their word. You know what I mean? They do a lot for me. They take me shopping, food shopping and stuff like that. They're a good bunch. I like them.

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

Yes, of course, yes. They've always been there, been a help when I needed it, have always told me, '[...], just come to us. Don't matter what it is, if you need something, ask. If we can help, we will.'

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

Yes, they listen to us. I think also they're understanding, they've got compassion and you need that in a job like this. They might not have been through what we've been through... I suppose they're not going to know what it feels like if they don't listen and hear our side – and they do. If there's anything we need, they listen to that and try and do their best to sort it for us. They're really good.

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

Knowing there's support there. Knowing they listen to me...they don't judge me. It must be frustrating for them as well. I'm sure it would be, but they don't give up on me. Same with the drinking. As it gets larger, they don't give up on you, and they help you.

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

The whole team. The way they work. Yes. Just unbelievable. If you need something, you got it. There's no judgement about addiction. I'm in recovery at the minute. I've had a couple of lapses. Little slips and back up the next day. They understand that so. That's a big thing. Yes.

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

<sup>100</sup> A reference to DWP/Jobcentre Plus by its old, long discontinued, title: Department for Social Security (DSS).

## Effectiveness

### Strengths

*I would recommend them to anybody. I would. I think I fell on my feet when I started with Housing First, definitely. Everybody I know is jealous of my flat. All support that I get, normally you'd have to get it from several different agencies where I've got one person that can do it all and if I need another agency then [they] can refer me to it.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2022**

*Particularly the Housing First, I think they're a fantastic idea. I wouldn't be in the property if it wasn't for Housing First because I tried myself. I tried with every council, getting nowhere, every housing association, renting privately and to be honest they don't touch you with a bargepole if you're not working, regardless of what the background of why you're not working is. I worked all my life up until a couple of – well four years ago. I know if it wasn't for Housing First, I'd be probably back on the streets now because most hostels are shutting down or they're overrun.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*Then once I moved in, it was kind of like, well, actually, this is more going back to where I was before homelessness, and it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be, in terms of adjusting, because it felt more back to normal.*

**Male using Housing First, 2022**

The strengths of the Housing First model were seen by many of the people using it as centring on the nature of the support being offered and the emphasis on securing settled housing as quickly as possible. In essence, Housing First was thought to be a good idea for the same reasons which had underpinned the original ethos and design of the model. The seven services all received considerable praise from many of the people using them. Views were not universally positive, but very few people had anything very negative to say about any of the Housing First services they were using. Awareness of the external pressures on Housing First, for example that social housing was difficult and time consuming to secure or that there were long waits for NHS and mental health services, were widely recognised, so that Housing First services

did not typically get blamed for the challenges they encountered that were outside their control.

*Honestly, this is where I've got more to say, because I've done co-production and stuff here. I've got into having more of an opinion on the way things work as a whole. That's probably where I've got most to say. I've gone from eight different stays in hostels that didn't work, over, probably if you totalled it up, five-years-plus rough sleeping. There have been a few issues, but I've not had any problem with any risk of losing the place, or anything like that. I see with so many other people, as well, that supported accommodation is just like a revolving door. It costs so much more money than Housing First, to fund it.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*Housing First itself is brilliant. They do get dealt a few rough hands every once in a while, from the groups that support them, like [social landlord] specifically, but other than that the Housing First team are amazing.*

**Person using Housing First, 2023**

*I didn't realise about the support, to be honest, until it happened. They're just so professional, what they do, you can just talk to them about anything and everything, they don't judge you. They just listen to you, Then, they just help you with how they come.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*It's much better than before that – it was a shambles. There was no hope for a lot of people, but now with Housing First there, they're actually supporting people getting flats and moving on and looking after them when they're in the places, which before all you had was like a homeless hostel. They put you in that. If you're lucky and you got to move on, then you're left to it, aren't you, sort of thing, so at least you've got the Housing First and it's actually working.*

**Male using Housing First, 2023**

*I think it's amazing, I think it's brilliant. I know a lot of clients that use Housing First, and they've all had good things to say about it. But for me, it's one of the best housing organisations I've used, it really is, and I feel comfortable with the staff.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*I think it's a really good opportunity to have. It really put me on my feet. It really helped me. Yes, I think it's a really good thing. Yes, I do, yes.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

*They tell me what, they ask me what I want from, basically, life, and what I need. What I need sorting out first. Then I'll tell them everything and then they'll make a plan up for me, say right, start here first, let's get this main thing sorted, your housing, if that's, obviously the main thing, isn't it. Then look at your drugs and so on and so on. It's brilliant.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

## Limitations

The people using Housing First had very often lived complex, challenging lives by the time they reached one of the seven services. For many, contact with homelessness services, with the NHS, social care, child protection, mental health, addiction and criminal justice services, was longstanding, and they had long histories of poor mental and physical health and addiction. Housing First had often brought relative stability to their lives, in the sense of having a reliable source of support and, once they had been rehoused, a stable home. However, poor mental and physical health, isolation, limiting illness and disability, relative poverty and living with trauma were day to day realities for many of the people using Housing First. Addiction could also often be an ongoing presence in their lives.

Risk, particularly for the women using Housing First, was ever present. Risk of domestic abuse, risk of violence and risk of exploitation, perhaps exemplified by the challenges around cuckooing, was a part of many women's lives, even as they received support from Housing First to create a stable home and to get access to the help they needed. Housing First could not fix everything in the complex reality of women's

lives and nor could it address all the issues, risks and trauma facing men.

Criticism of Housing First has tended towards arguing it does not address underlying need with enough force, i.e. it should be directing people's lives rather than supporting their choices within a co-productive way of working.<sup>101</sup> These arguments are flawed in the sense that the global evidence base is that Housing First tends to be more effective in ending homelessness than services that attempt to direct the lives of people experiencing homelessness who have high and complex needs. However, there is another dimension here, which is that these criticisms tend to be simplistic, i.e. they are posited on the idea that Housing First would be 'more effective', if it promoted abstinence and ensured treatment compliance for severe mental illness. The reality of the lives of the people using Housing First and, particularly the women using the seven Housing First services, were far more complex than something which could be reduced down to 'stopping addiction' and 'treatment compliance'. While dealing with that complexity may not have been within the reach of any single service like Housing First, perhaps the greatest strength of the seven services evaluated here was that many of the people using these services felt seen and understood, even if Housing First could not fix everything.

*Obviously, they've been my biggest support for the last two years. To be honest, they've done everything for me. I wouldn't be where I am, it might not be a very good place where I am, but I wouldn't be where I am if it weren't for them. They're probably the only people that I had around a lot of time. Good eggs.*

**Woman using Housing First, 2023**

<sup>101</sup> Pleace, N. (2021) Neoreaction and Housing First: A Review Essay *European Journal of Homelessness* 15(2), pp. 269-288.

# 5 MONITORING OUTCOMES

## Introduction

The services were asked to provide monthly returns on the people using Housing First. For the six services supported by Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant the period covered was from January 2021 to May 2023 (29 months) with Stonepillow providing data from 2022 onwards. Data collection was very reliable from Bench Outreach, Housing First Gwynedd, Turning Tides and Turning Lives Around and fairly reliable for Action Homelessness. For HARP, which had seen several reorganisations, data submission was only partial and the same was true for Stonepillow which had joined the wider evaluation only

in 2022. This chapter does look at all the monitoring data on people using Housing First, but mainly concentrates on the more complete data from Action Homeless, Bench, Housing First Gwynedd, Turning Tides and Turning Lives Around. Data were, as was the case with the interviews, entirely anonymised, with the services creating a special identifier (ID) for each person using their service which existed only for data transfer to the University and to which the University had no key, i.e. there was no way to know who it referred to. Very basic data, including approximate age and gender (as someone self-identified) were also shared. Table 5.1 summarises the reports received from each service.

**Table 5.1 – Number of reports on people using Housing First (January 2021 to May 2023)**

Services	By Gender <sup>102</sup>		Total
	Male	Female	
Action Homeless, Leicester	93	40	133
Bench Outreach, London	0	194	194
HARP, Southend	98	0	98
Housing First Gwynedd	214	69	283
Stonepillow, West Sussex	137	34	171
Turning Lives Around, Leeds	0	159	159
Turning Tides, West Sussex	246	2	248
<b>Totals</b>	<b>788</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>1,286</b>

<sup>102</sup> According to how someone defined their own gender identity, in this instance statistical data were not available for a very small number of Housing First service users who did not identify as male or female.

Overall, 39% of the reports received were about women using Housing First, while the remaining 61% were about men. Rates of male service use were generally higher than for women across the five general Housing First services, with data being collected and shared for the specialist women's Housing First workers supported by the Henry Smith Charity, at Bench Outreach and Turning Lives Around (see Chapter 2).

Table 5.2 summarises the number of people using Housing First about whom reports were submitted. The reports covered 169 people in total, with a quite large element of that total being for the Turning Tides

service, which had taken on a high number of new service users over the course of the evaluation (see Table 5.3). Overall, 38 of the people using Housing First who participated in the monitoring were women (23%<sup>103</sup>) and 131 (78%) were male.

Table 5.3 summarises the returns from the services. As can be seen, Stonepillow and HARP shared returns for shorter periods of time and both those two services and Turning Tides, tended to share fewer returns per person (for a greater number of people, see Table 5.2). Housing First Gwynedd, Turning Lives Around and Action Homelessness had delayed starts due to COVID, so their returns began at the point they became operational.

**Table 5.2 – Number of people using each service about whom reports were submitted**

Services		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Action Homeless Leicester	Number	9	2	11
	%	81.8%	18.2%	100.0%
Bench Outreach London	Number	0	12	12
	%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
HARP Southend	Number	17	0	17
	%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Housing First Gwynedd	Number	13	4	17
	%	76.5%	23.5%	100.0%
Stonepillow West Sussex	Number	21	6	27
	%	77.8%	22.2%	100.0%
Turning Lives Around Leeds	Number	0	12	12
	%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Turning Tides West Sussex	Number	71	2	73
	%	97.3%	2.7%	100.0%
Total	Number	131	38	169
	%	77.5%	22.5%	100.0%

<sup>103</sup> Percentages in the text are rounded up to the nearest 0.5.

**Table 5.3 – Reports received by service**

Service	First date	Last date	Number of returns	Number of months returns received	Average returns per person
Action Homeless Leicester	January 21	February 23	133	25	12
Bench Outreach London	January 21	May 23	194	28	16
HARP Southend	January 21	July 22	98	17	5.7
Housing First Gwynedd	April 21	May 23	283	25	16.6
Stonepillow West Sussex	January 22	August 22	171	7	6.3
Turning Lives Around Leeds	January 21	February 23	159	25	13.2
Turning Tides West Sussex	January 21	May 23	248	29	3.4
All Housing First	January 21	May 23	1,286	-	7.6

## Housing

The broad picture across all the Housing First services was one of progression towards settled housing over time. Housing First, operating in the circumstances in which all seven services found themselves often faced barriers to finding settled housing quickly. This meant during the initial weeks (and in some areas, months) of contact, the likelihood was often that Housing First would be working with someone who was still in temporary accommodation and had sometimes arranged that temporary accommodation if someone had been living rough at first contact. Over time, the situation improved, at six months or less of contact, 68% of people using Housing First were in temporary accommodation, at 6-12 months, that had dropped to 42% and at one year was at 30% (Table 5.4). At one year or more, 70% of people using Housing First were in social rented (housing association or council) housing. Attrition from Housing First was low within the data received, with few people being reported as having left the service or entered an institutional setting (i.e. prison, residential care or long stay hospital).

Some North American research has highlighted an element of ongoing rough sleeping, i.e. someone spending at least some time outside their housing when using Housing First. The findings here were also broadly positive, in that only 10 people (6%) were

reported as having slept rough at their most recent encounter with Housing First across the services as a whole. Those people who had secured social housing through Housing First were unlikely to report any experience of sleeping rough at their most recent contact with the services (2% of those with a social rented tenancy).

There are some important caveats to note here. Data were partial for HARP and Stonepillow and because data monitoring was continuous and covered all use of Housing First, included people who were joining Housing First as new service users right up until the final month of submission. This meant that the data probably included a few people who would leave the Housing First services without being housed, with the data also covering people who had not been in contact with Housing First for long.

Equally, the data presented here are based on what someone's housing situation was at last contact, and this included some closed cases where contact had been formerly ended and others when it had simply ceased. This meant that for some of the cases here, the person had been in social housing or temporary accommodation when last seen by Housing First, but as contact had been lost, it was not clear whether this was still the case.

No patterns linked to gender were apparent in the data shared by the seven Housing First services. Women

**Table 5.4 – Housing Position by time in Contact with Housing First services**

Housing Position at last contact (includes closed cases)		Summary of time in contact with Housing First			Totals
		Up to 6 months	6-12 months	1 year plus	
Temporary accommodation	N	56	21	11	88
	%	68.3%	42.0%	29.7%	52.1%
Living rough	N	2	5	0	7
	%	2.4%	10.0%	0.0%	4.1%
Private rented sector	N	2	1	0	3
	%	2.4%	2.0%	0.0%	1.8%
Social rented	N	14	18	26	58
	%	17.1%	36.0%	70.3%	34.3%
Supported housing	N	3	2	0	5
	%	3.7%	4.0%	0.0%	3.0%
Left service before accommodation secured	N	4	0	0	4
	%	4.9%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%
In institution	N	1	2	0	3
	%	1.2%	4.0%	0.0%	1.8%
HF tenancy broke down	N	0	1	0	1
	%	0.0%	2.0%	0.0%	0.6%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>169</b>
	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

\* Includes some people who passed away

did not vary significantly from men in the rate at which they entered or sustained settled housing.

Wider evidence suggests that after say five or six years of operation, allowing that there would be ongoing challenges around housing supply, these proportion of stably housed people using Housing First would go up. However, while the overall pattern was positive, it was clear that significant barriers to affordable, adequate and secure housing were slowing down Housing

First when it came to securing the fundamental goal of these services, which was to end homelessness through a housing-led approach. The data from the services echoed the picture given by Housing First team members and the people using Housing First, as described in earlier chapters.

As noted, the entire dataset contained brand new cases right up until the last submission of the monthly returns, because the Housing First services were asked

to record any and all contact with people they were supporting. To try to control for the data including people who had (almost literally) just started using Housing First, a selective dataset was also employed that focused only on those people who had received more than one month of support from one of the seven services. This dataset covered 113 individuals, 33 of whom were women.

Focusing down on those cases in which Housing First had been working with someone for more than one month, there were indications that positive feelings about having a safe and settled home tended to increase over time (Figure 5.1).

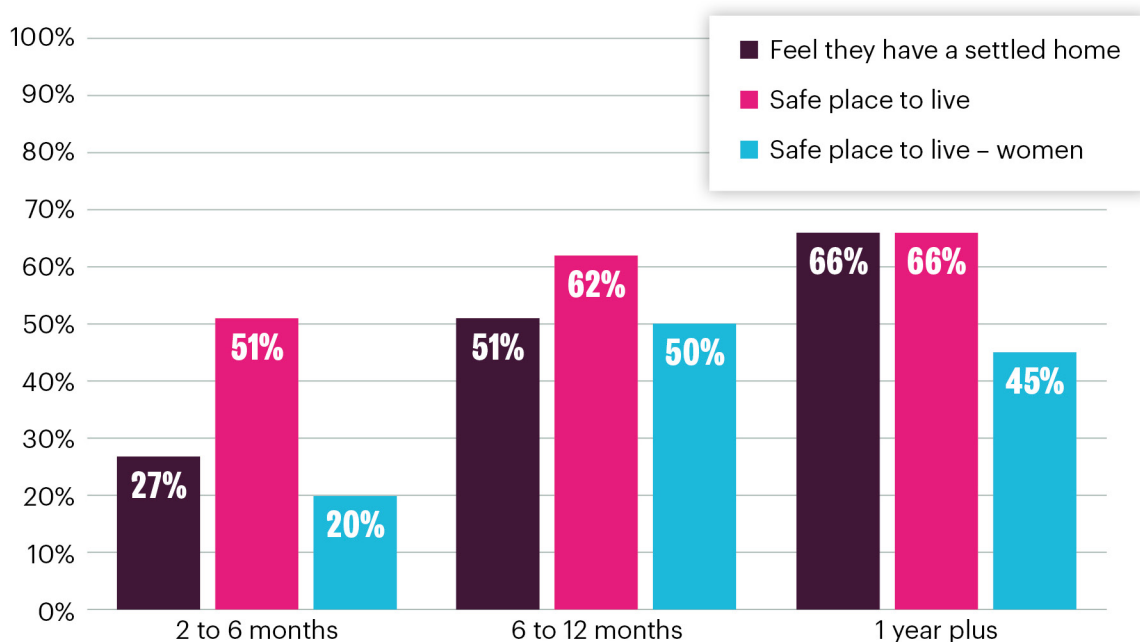
However, while there was still an increase in their sense of safety over time, only around one half the women using Housing First were reporting feeling safe in their homes when they had been receiving Housing First support for six months or more (Figure 5.1). As described in the last chapter, there was often a sense that trauma and risk stemming from previous, ongoing and potential abuse, permeated the lives of women using Housing First, even as support brought about housing stability and other positive changes.

Results around how happy people using Housing First were with their accommodation varied. There was not the same broad pattern of improvement linked to duration of contact with the Housing First services as was seen around a sense of safety (across Housing First as a whole, but less so for women) and feeling settled. Overall satisfaction levels ranging from 'excellent' to 'good' were higher at 6-12 months (78%) than at one year plus of contact with Housing First (65%).

This was a broader question, encompassing both housing itself and the wider neighbourhood, where the 2022 and 2023 fieldwork showed issues like poor transport links, lack of shops and sometimes issues with anti-social behaviour and crime could sometimes undermine otherwise positive feelings about housing.

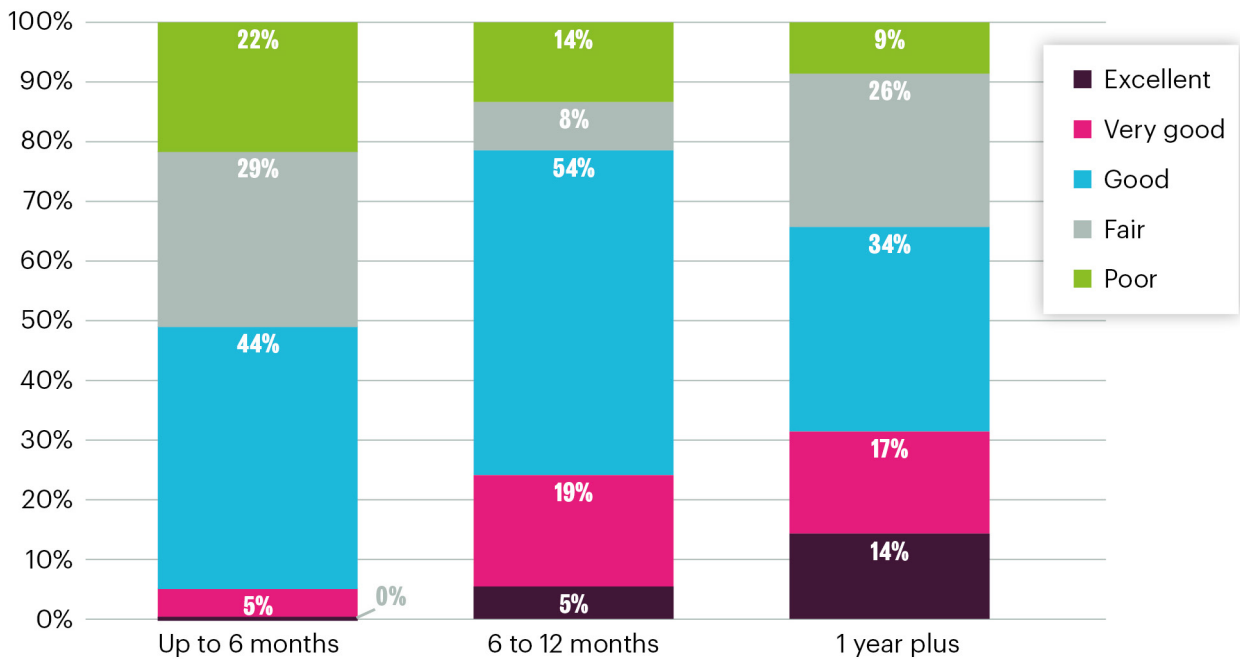
When looked at by whether or not someone was housed (i.e. in social rented or private rented sector housing) higher levels of contentment were reported by those in settled housing than in some form of temporary accommodation (including short stay supported housing). As is shown in Figure 5.3, satisfaction levels of 'good' and above (79%) were clearly higher for those with settled housing than without it (52%). People in temporary accommodation

**Figure 5.1: Changes in feelings about housing**



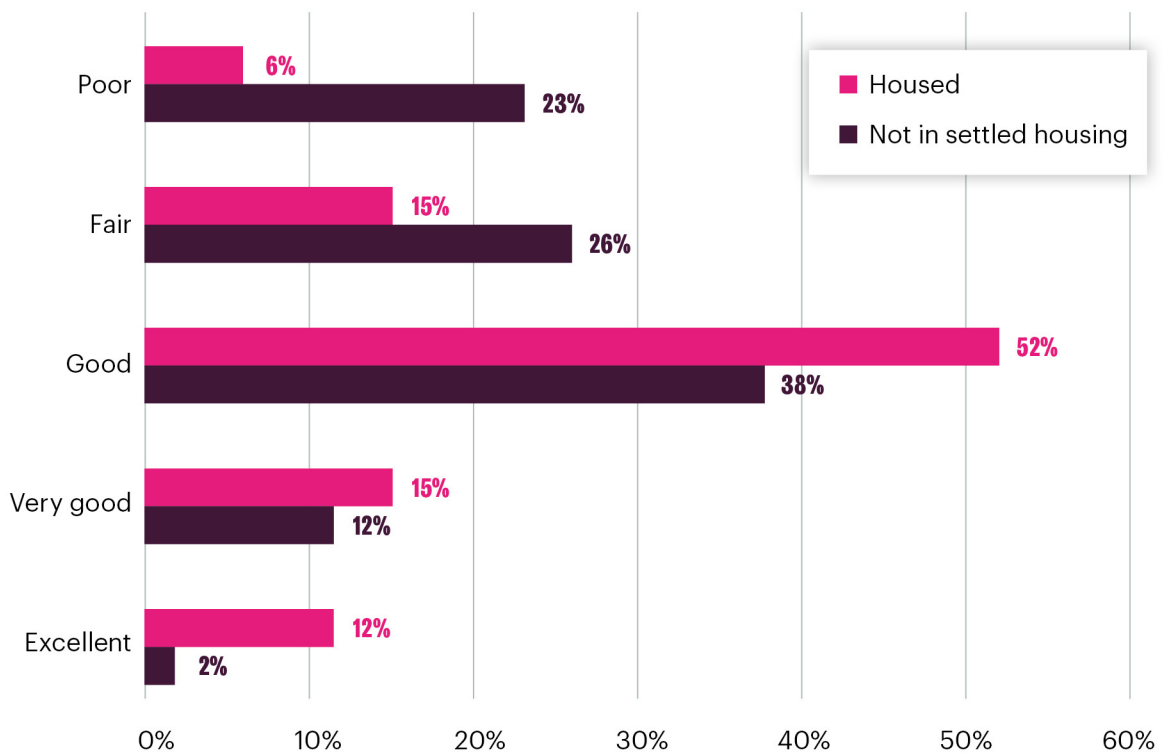
Base: 115 people using Housing First for more than one month (41 2-6 months, 37 6-12 months and 35 12 months plus) Thirty-three respondents (29%) were women. Based on most recent return completed by respondents.

**Figure 5.2: Are you happy with where you are living?**



Base: 115 people using Housing First for more than one month (41 2-6 months, 37 6-12 months and 35 12 months plus) Thirty-three respondents (29%) were women. Based on most recent return completed by respondents.

**Figure 5.3: Satisfaction with where you live by housing situation**



Base: 115 people using Housing First for more than one month (41 2-6 months, 37 6-12 months and 35 12 months plus) Thirty-three respondents (29%) were women. Based on most recent return completed by respondents.

were much more likely to report where they lived was ‘poor’ (23%) than those in settled housing (6%).

### Operational context and housing

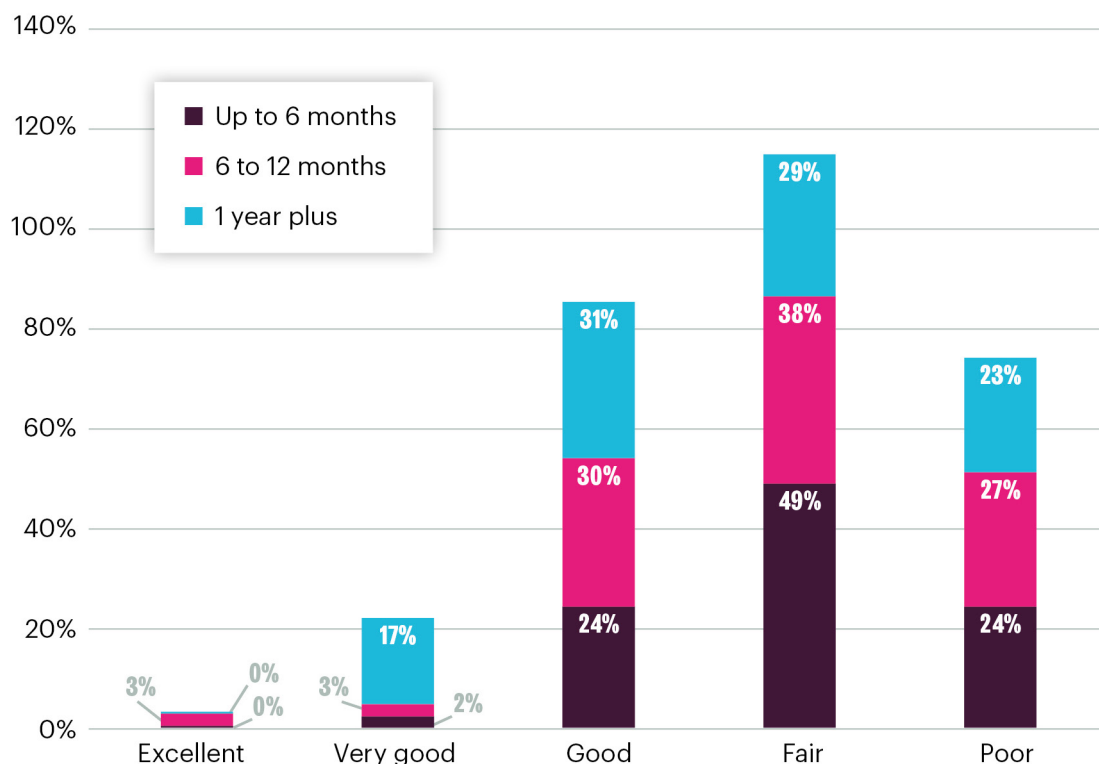
Housing First was delivering housing, but the seven services were being affected by the housing supply problems they were all reporting, and which the people using Housing First were experiencing. It was taking time to find housing and, when housing was secured, it was not always suitable for someone’s needs. The fieldwork in 2022 and 2023 found issues with housing supply everywhere. In some places, existing relationships with social landlords made a difference. This meant that rates and speed of placement into social housing (both council and housing association) for example by Action Homeless Leicester and Bench Outreach which, respectively had their own stock and a long-established relationship with a London borough which was a social landlord, were faster and higher than for some of the other services. The services operating in West Sussex (HARP, Turning Tides) and in rural North Wales (Housing First Gwynedd) could all face long waits in accessing housing.

Beyond this, a situation of scarcity created a feeling across all of the Housing First that whatever housing could be made available had to be at least considered and sometimes the best and only option was something that needed repair, modernisation or which was in an area with social problems or poor infrastructure. Much depended on getting the right sort of adequate, affordable and legally as well as physically secure housing in the right place, as when the housing was not right, or someone was stuck in temporary accommodation for (much) longer than they should be, it created extra work for Housing First services and reduced the wellbeing of people using Housing First (see chapters 3 and 4).

### Health and wellbeing

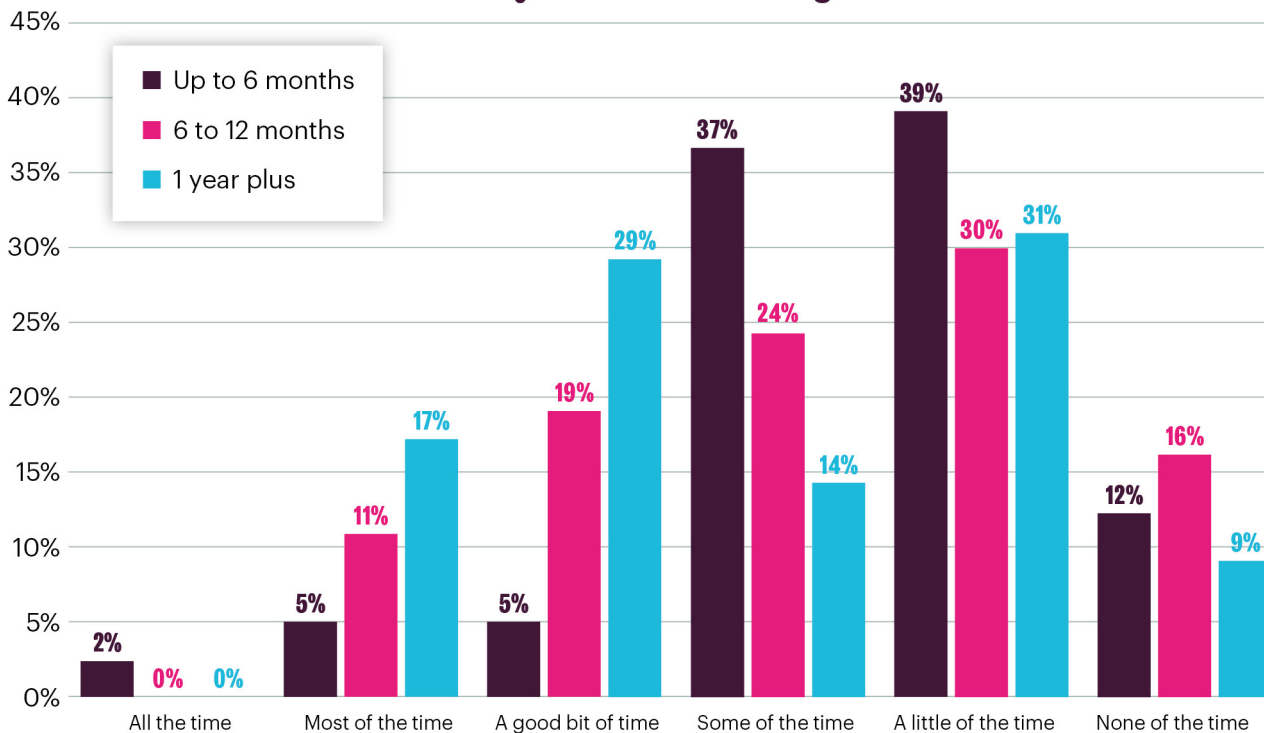
General health among the people using Housing First was recorded as being quite poor in the monthly returns, echoing the findings from the 2022 and 2023 fieldwork and the focus of Housing First services on people experiencing homelessness who have high, multiple and complex treatment and support needs.

**Figure 5.4: How is your health in general?**



Base: 115 people using Housing First for more than one month (41 2-6 months, 37 6-12 months and 35 12 months plus) Thirty-three respondents (29%) were women. Based on most recent return completed by respondents.

**Figure 5.6: during the past four weeks have you felt calm and peaceful by contact with Housing First**



Base: 115 people using Housing First for more than one month (41 2-6 months, 37 6-12 months and 35 12 months plus) Thirty-three respondents (29%) were women. Based on most recent return completed by respondents.

Most reported that their health was ‘fair’ with a slightly greater tendency for people who had been receiving Housing First support for six months or more to report ‘good’ health. The group who had been receiving Housing First for one year or more were the most likely to report that their health was ‘very good’ (17%) but were still much more likely to report fair or poor health (52%) (Figure 5.4).

As was noted earlier in this report, Housing First works with people with chronic and deteriorating conditions who will not necessarily see improvements to every aspect of their health stemming directly from better support and access to appropriate, settled housing. Some conditions will improve once someone is out of homelessness and homelessness may cause existing conditions to worsen at a rate that would not occur if someone was adequately housed. There is wider evidence that homelessness has a cumulative effect on health like accelerated ageing, so that someone who is experiencing long-term or repeated homelessness, may, in somewhat oversimplified but broadly accurate

terms, have the health of an 80-year-old when they are fifty. There is also extensive evidence of very early mortality among people experiencing homelessness for prolonged periods.<sup>104</sup>

No significant differences between women and men were noted when the data from the monthly returns about health were compared. Both genders were likely to report generally poor health and quite unlikely to report good health.

People using Housing First were quite likely to report limiting illness and disability (Figure 5.5). These conditions tended to remain constant, i.e. they were not less likely to be reported when someone had been using Housing First for some time. Again, pre-existing and degenerative conditions might be worsened by homelessness, but will persist when homelessness has been ended and support is in place.

Measuring mental health statistically can be quite complex, not least because arriving at a formal

104 Crane, M. and Warnes, A.M., 2010. Homelessness among older people and service responses. *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology*, 20(4), pp.354-363.

diagnosis can be an involved process. Some questions were included in the monthly data returns from the Housing First services which are broad proxies for mental health (based on validated survey measures) but which do not constitute reliable information about whether or not someone has a mental health problem.

Figure 5.6 summarises a question on whether or not someone has felt calm in the last four weeks according to their duration of contact with Housing First. There was some patterning, with people who had been using Housing First for a year or more being more likely to report they had felt calm most or a 'good bit' of the time (46%) than those who had been with Housing First for shorter periods. However, the relationship was not significant, as everyone using Housing First was quite likely to report they did not feel calm and peaceful all, or most, of the time.

Looking at this through some other questions, including 'during the past four weeks have you felt down hearted?' produced very similar results, with a tendency towards somewhat more positive findings among people who had been using Housing First for longer, but – again – within a quite negative overall picture. Those who had been using Housing First for a year or more reported feeling down 'a little of the time' at a higher rate (51%) than those who had been using Housing First for 6-12 months (38%) or for between 2-6 months (36%). While just under one quarter of those who had been with Housing First for 2-6 months (24%) or 6-12 months (also 24%) reported feeling down all or most of the time, the figure for those using Housing First for 12 months plus was 9%.

Rates of drug and alcohol use were not clearly associated with contact with Housing First in the data collected for the monthly returns, although there was evidence of reductions in use over time from both the 2022 and 2023 fieldwork as well as some individual examples of addiction and alcohol use coming to an end. Overall, one half of the people using Housing First reported an issue with drug use and 45% with alcohol use. A total of 27% reported both problematic use of drug and alcohol. This is again in line with what would be expected of the cohort of people

for whom Housing First is designed, but it is also important to note that the popular images of long term homelessness as always being associated with addiction are problematic, something that research has been telling us for a long time.<sup>105</sup> Something that may be more noteworthy here is that another 27% of people using Housing First reported no issues with drugs or alcohol.<sup>106</sup>

## Operational context and health

Again, the question of the environments in which Housing First was operating has to be raised. Endless reports of delays and difficulties in getting access to NHS, addiction and mental health services and the limited availability of social care and social work services were a feature of the 2022 and 2023 fieldwork. That fieldwork took place in the context of the general public facing major delays in getting mental health<sup>107</sup>, health<sup>108</sup> and social care services<sup>109</sup> to the point where some forms of treatment and support are effectively inaccessible to many people.

Poor health, limiting illness, disability, mental illness and addiction cannot be treated by Housing First alone, while the original model, rarely used in the UK (see Chapter 2), with its ACT components did include medical and mental health professionals, the core of Housing First is still intensive case management. Housing First relies on relationships with health and social care services to deliver the full range of treatment and support people using it request, if those services are not there or very difficult or time consuming to access, it becomes harder for Housing First to operate as intended. One consequence of which is that Housing First may end up handling more complex needs than it is designed to do on its own, but more importantly than that, it is hampered in trying to assemble the right mix of treatment and support for the people it is designed to help.

105 Pleace, N. (2008) *Effective Services for Substance Misuse and Homelessness in Scotland: Evidence from an international review* Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

106 Based on reported use at most recent contact. Base: 115 people using Housing First for more than one month.

107 <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2022/10/10/hidden-waits-force-more-than-three-quarters-of-mental-health-patients-to-seek-help-from-emergency-services>

108 <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/news-and-events/media-centre/press-releases/rtt-waiting-times-march-2023/>

109 [https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/188797/7/Health\\_Social\\_Care\\_Comm\\_2022\\_Gridley\\_Social\\_care\\_causes\\_of\\_delayed\\_transfer\\_of\\_care\\_DTOC\\_from\\_hospital\\_for\\_older.pdf](https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/188797/7/Health_Social_Care_Comm_2022_Gridley_Social_care_causes_of_delayed_transfer_of_care_DTOC_from_hospital_for_older.pdf)

# 6 RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

## Introduction

This final chapter discusses the results of the evaluation. It begins by considering the achievements of the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant programme and then considers the limitations, before considering the challenges for Housing First going forward in the UK.

## Successes

The Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant has been a success on three main levels:

- The Strategic Grant has created new Housing First capacity outside the major cities in which Housing First developed in the UK, creating rural and suburban services in North Wales (Housing First Gwynedd) and in West Sussex (Turning Tides). In doing so, the Strategic Grant has demonstrated that Housing First can work across the UK.
- The Strategic Grant has supported important innovation in Housing First through the support for specialist women's workers in Bench Outreach (London) and Turning Lives Around (Leeds). The research conducted for this evaluation has added to an evidence base showing that Housing First cannot and should not operate in the same way for women as for men and that services built, managed and run by women are needed to address the intersections of domestic abuse, trauma, loss and multiple and complex needs that shape the experience of lone women experiencing long term and recurrent homelessness.
- The Strategic Grant has added to the wider development of Housing First in the UK, creating new evidence, practice and experience that can all be fed into broader debates to support the strategic integration of Housing First. That strategic integration is vital if Housing First is to build the interagency and interservice networks, housing supply and level and continuity of funding

that is needed to end long term and recurrent homelessness associated with high, multiple and complex needs in the UK.

The wider support offered by Henry Smith has also enabled the continuation of established Housing First services, through the assistance given to Stonepillow through another programme. As Housing First has developed, one of the greatest challenges in the short term, ever shrinking, budgets of local authority homelessness service commissioners has been securing sufficient and stable funding<sup>110</sup> and, frankly, given the ongoing crisis in local government funding<sup>111</sup>, Housing First can use all the help it can get.

That the Housing First being provided through the support of Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant has itself shown success is not surprising. All the evidence is that, while clearly not a panacea and only intended for one aspect of homelessness, which is long term and recurrent homelessness associated with high, multiple and complex needs, Housing First is often effective in bringing that form of homelessness to a sustainable end.

The debates about fidelity, which are in many senses debates about how much Housing First can and should cost, are likely to continue and as discussed in Chapter 2, there are arguments on both sides. High fidelity services with relatively high running costs make practical sense, as the French trials of Housing First at national level have shown, because they can reduce homelessness and improve mental health among people who are long term and recurrently homeless. Equally, however, the ACT/ICM model creates a health and social care system in miniature in many respects, while still ultimately reliant on interagency working and case management, which makes sense in a North American context in which health services are not universally accessible, but can seem illogical when those services are (at least theoretically) universal. In essence, the argument here is that if one can deliver Housing First in a more cost effective way by simply focusing on intensive forms of case management, then

<sup>110</sup> Blood, I. and Pleace, N. (2021) *A Traumatized System: A critical crossroads for the commissioning of homelessness services* Leicester: Riverside.

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/local-government-funding-england>

why not do so, as it makes whatever resources are available stretch further and ends more homelessness.

The ever present danger in the UK and actually in the wider European context, is a temptation to take this logic and find reasons to do Housing First as cheaply as possible. This eventually dilutes Housing First to the point where it ceases to be distinguishable from older forms of far less intensive, housing led model, like 'resettlement services' and 'floating support'. The Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant and other support for Housing First has been sufficient for this not to happen with the seven Housing First services evaluated here, allowing that Stonepillow was pursuing a different model around continuity of support<sup>112</sup> but one which, in line with Housing First orthodoxy, ultimately kept the support open ended. This is another success of the Strategic Grant, it provided enough resources for a long enough period for Housing First to be developed, enhanced and sustained within the core ethos or key principles of the model. While debates will continue around fidelity as said, the seven services supported here were able to function as Housing First, which meant that the core of the model, around co-production/consumer choice, separate provision of settled housing and intensive case management, within a harm reduction framework all operated as it should have done.

## Limitations

The difficulties for the Housing First supported by the Henry Smith Charity are environmental. The context in which these Housing First services, and indeed all Housing First, is operating in the UK presents a set of three major challenges:

- Suitable housing supply, across both the social rented and private rented sector, is difficult to acquire quickly. Housing First will not work with very poor quality and insecure housing, nor with housing that is basically unaffordable to someone on a low income, whether that is welfare benefits or some combination of welfare benefits and paid work. At the time of writing, PRS housing remains inherently insecure and has become ever more expensive, while social and affordable housing supply is very low in relation to housing need.
- Funding for Housing First services is primarily

through local authority commissioning, which has come under extreme pressure following deep and sustained cuts to local government budgets since 2010. Commissioners are often unable to offer the sustained, sufficient and reliable funding that the Housing First model is predicated upon. There are possibilities in NHS funding for Housing First services, for example in relation to very high-fidelity ACT/ICM services which in France and Canada are funded through mental health budgets, but NHS budgets are also under very high pressure, especially given the ongoing effects of the enormous backlogs linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the relative reductions in public health funding since 2010.

- Relative cuts to NHS and mental health services and deep cuts in social care funding, again linked to cuts to local government budgets, relative to need have created profound and enduring pressure on the mental health, addiction, primary care, hospital and social care services with which Housing First needs to collaborate through strong and reciprocal joint working. This means Housing First can be left carrying levels of treatment and support need it is not designed for, while systemic failures across mental health, the wider NHS and social care systems mean that higher numbers of people with high and complex needs enter homelessness.

Many of the challenges were seen as being about resources, the resources for the individual Housing First services and for the housing, health, mental health, addiction and social care services on which Housing First relied.

*I think it would just be great if we could grow. I think that we are generally quite successful. I can see it working. We see it work all over the world. People say, 'Housing First is the way forward for homelessness,' and I think that it could grow. We do have more clients that we would love to be able to take on. We'd like to see more properties, and then more clients. That would need more staff.*

**Housing First staff member, 2023**

It will not be possible for England, as well as the other UK administrations, to transition to the kind of integrated, preventative, housing-led national homelessness strategy in which Housing First has

<sup>112</sup> See Chapter 2.

been most successful in mainland Europe. While there is still a pattern of ever diminishing support for local authority commissioning of homelessness services, prevention is underfunded and health and social care services are under too much pressure for joint working to be effective. Equally, in a context of deep and chronic housing market failure and no clear strategy or significant resources being directed towards affordable, let alone social housing, Housing First will continue to face an uphill struggle in becoming a mainstream service response in England.

These are not issues that a single programme supporting Housing First can resolve, but as was the case for this evaluation, Housing First in the UK is often performing well in *spite* of a very difficult set of circumstances. There were many positive achievements for the Henry Smith Charity Housing First Strategic Grant and the other support provided to Housing First, but the services being supported were all operating in challenging circumstances. Housing First needs adequate, secure housing, it needs reliable access to sufficient funding and it needs good joint working with sufficiently funded mental health, addiction, health and social care services and for now, none of that is in place in the UK.

# 7 RECOMMENDATIONS

## Introduction

This final section of the report presents recommendations based on the results of the evaluation. These recommendations are presented in two sections. The first section is focused on key lessons for future Housing First development and the second section contains recommendations for the Henry Smith Charity in the event that they opt to provide further support for innovation and diversity in Housing First services. A final section highlights some recommendations for the next UK government, which will take office at some point in 2024 or early 2025.

## Housing First

### Moving beyond people sleeping rough

Housing First is not a solution to homelessness in and of itself. The *Crisis Homeless Monitor*, which is a systematic attempt to assess numbers, estimates at GB level (excluding Northern Ireland), core homelessness<sup>113</sup> was around 300,000 people in 2023 and projected to remain at that level for several years to come.<sup>114</sup> In England, this population includes some 30,000 people in temporary, residential homelessness services, which are usually described as hostels (but which includes communal and congregate supported housing, transitional/move on services and emergency shelters/night-shelters). In addition, there are a further 3-4,000 people sleeping rough at any one point in England. Alongside this, around 105,000 homeless households of whom 68,000 are homeless families, containing 139,000 children have been placed in temporary accommodation by local authorities.<sup>115</sup>

Broadly speaking, the 'target' population for Housing First is likely to be the population in homelessness services and living rough, which is where people with high and complex treatment, care and support needs, associated with recurrent and sustained homelessness are most likely to be.

The UK is not consistent in its support for Housing First. Scotland<sup>116</sup>, in particular, but also Wales<sup>117</sup> and Northern Ireland<sup>118</sup> are pursuing strategic development of Housing First within their national homelessness strategies. England lacks a national homelessness strategy and has not had a coherent national response to homelessness since policy was devolved to local authority level under the localism legislation in 2011. There is, however, a national plan for ending rough sleeping in England, *Ending Rough Sleeping For Good (2022)*<sup>119</sup> which emphasises the use of Housing First. Government has also produced the *Mobilising Housing First toolkit: from planning to early implementation*<sup>120</sup> resource, which replicates some material from earlier guides to Housing First fidelity, which is again strongly linked to wider rough sleeper policy.

While Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are seeking to integrate Housing First within national homelessness strategies, England has a less clearly defined set of goals that are skewed towards the policy emphasis on people sleeping rough. While the role of Housing First is not discussed simply in those terms, the three central government pilots that operated in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and West Midlands were quite heavily focused on people sleeping rough.<sup>121</sup>

At the time of writing there is a varied policy landscape for Housing First in the UK. In England, the role of Housing First is less clearly defined

113 Defined as "people sleeping rough, staying in places not intended as residential accommodation (e.g. cars, tents, boats, sheds, etc.), living in homeless hostels, refuges and shelters, placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation (e.g. Bed and Breakfast hotels, out of area placements, etc.), and sofa surfing (i.e., staying with non-family, on a short-term basis, in overcrowded conditions", i.e. hidden homelessness.

114 [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/248457/the-homelessness-monitor-great-britain-2022\\_full-report\\_final.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/248457/the-homelessness-monitor-great-britain-2022_full-report_final.pdf)

115 <https://www.gov.uk/housing-local-and-community/homelessness-rough-sleeping>

116 Scottish Government (2020) *Ending Homelessness Together: Updated action plan* Scottish Government: Edinburgh.

117 Welsh Government (2021) *Ending homelessness: A high level action plan – 2021-2026* Welsh Government: Cardiff.

118 Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2022) *Ending Homelessness Together Homelessness Strategy 2022-27* NIHE: Belfast.

119 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/631229d7e90e075882ea2566/20220903\\_Ending\\_rough\\_sleeping\\_for\\_good.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/631229d7e90e075882ea2566/20220903_Ending_rough_sleeping_for_good.pdf)

120 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-first-pilot-national-evaluation-reports/mobilising-housing-first-toolkit-from-planning-to-early-implementation>

121 DLUHC (2022) *Evaluation of the Housing First Pilots: Third Process Report* London: DLUHC.

than elsewhere. Housing First in English (national) policy is frequently framed mainly in terms of people sleeping rough, not the wider recurrent and long-term homeless populations with multiple, high and complex treatment, care and support needs, i.e. including people in shelters, hostels and short to medium term supported housing, as well as those experiencing living rough on a repeated or long term basis.

There is consequently little Government guidance or policy around strategic integration of Housing First in England. The focus on people sleeping rough effectively confines Housing First to a niche role in national level English homelessness policy, focusing on a smaller element of homelessness than it was designed for. Housing First is not viewed or treated in the same way in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, or indeed much of Europe or the USA, instead the focus is rather narrower, primarily viewing Housing First services as a largely rough sleeper focused model. National level funding for Housing First is precarious, short-term and closely linked to rough sleeping policy in England. While English local authorities are often using Housing First in a more strategic role, it is a context in which their budgets have declined rapidly since 2010, with some £1bn having been taken out of local authority spending since that date.<sup>122</sup>

This creates real challenges for Housing First service providers and for current and future funders of services in England. There is a risk that Housing First will remain a small, niche intervention in many areas, focused largely on people sleeping rough when supported by central government funding, which automatically shrinks the role of any Housing First relative to its larger, intended goal of working with anyone experiencing homelessness associated with unmet high and complex treatment, care and support needs. None of the Housing First services in this evaluation were focused simply on people sleeping rough, which reflected their fidelity with the core principles of the approach.

Based on the learning of this evaluation, which reflects the results of other research<sup>123</sup>, it is **recommended** that, in England:

- Housing First is commissioned or funded by other means on a sustained basis, i.e. with at least 3-5 years funding in place, within a framework that should be designed to guarantee longer-term funding insofar as possible. National level funding is not wholly or largely confined to using Housing First for people sleeping rough.
- The Housing First is pursued within a high fidelity model that addresses existing and potential homelessness associated with unmet high and complex treatment, care and support needs, i.e. which includes but which is *not* largely or exclusively focused on people sleeping rough. This should enable Housing First to take the wider, strategic role in effective homelessness prevention and reduction that it was designed to do.

### Effective joint working

Housing First is a case management model. The original model of Housing First offered both intensive case management (ICM) services and the more intensive assertive community treatment (ACT) model, with Housing First being able to scale-up support for people with the most complex needs from ICM to ACT. As Housing First rolled out across the US, Canada and mainland Europe it has sometimes retained the ACT/ICM model, but also appeared as ICM-only approaches, which is also the typical approach to Housing First in the UK.<sup>124</sup> ICM requires other services to function, because case management is designed to assemble interagency and multidisciplinary packages of support to effectively end homelessness. This means there has to be meaningful buy-in from social landlords (councils and housing associations), collaboration with any elements in the private rented sector which are prepared adequate housing at affordable rents with reasonable security of tenure, with mental health, addiction, wider NHS and social (care) services, including social work, alongside good working relationships with the Police and criminal justice system.

<sup>122</sup> Blood, I.; Pleace, N.; Alden, S. and Dulson, S. (2020) *A Traumatized System: Research into the commissioning of homelessness services in the last 10 years* Leicester: Riverside.

<sup>123</sup> Blood, I.; Birchill, A. and Pleace, N. (2021) *Reducing, changing or ending Housing First support* London: Homeless Link/Housing First England.

<sup>124</sup> Homeless Link (2020) *The picture of Housing First in England 2020* London: Homeless Link.

Housing First is immediately hampered by inadequate joint working, to the point where otherwise potentially effective Housing First services can be at least partially undermined by inadequate support from other service providers. There are examples of this within this evaluation and, again, this is not the first time research has flagged this issue.<sup>125</sup>

Enhancing joint working for Housing First is not a simple matter, resources in many public services are inadequate after more than a decade of cuts and, through the combination of the effects of COVID-19 and deep cuts in resources, the NHS is an unprecedented state, widely regarded as a crisis, at the time of writing.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, if Housing First is to be effective in preventing and reducing homelessness, as much effort and resource as possible has to be put into ensuring it can work jointly with other services. This remains true of ACT level Housing First, a rarity in the UK (which may not actually exist anywhere at the time of writing, as it is comparatively expensive to commission), because while that form of Housing First has its own multidisciplinary team that can include social workers, mental health clinicians and addiction specialists, it is again ultimately reliant on case managed packages of support built in collaboration with other services.

Based on the findings of this evaluation and other research, it is **recommended** that:

- Housing First must be commissioned or funded with clear and – insofar as possible – adequately resourced joint working relationships with social landlords, the NHS and social (care) services, while also being able to collaborate effectively with the criminal justice system and other relevant services.
- Policy makers, commissioners and other funders must be made aware that Housing First can only take an effective strategic role in preventing and reducing homelessness when this joint working is in place, without it, spending on Housing First services will not generate the best possible results.
- It must be recognised that Housing First cannot function without an adequate, affordable and relatively secure housing supply, which necessitates good relationships with the right social landlords. The private rented sector can be an option under some circumstances, but there are risks around

security of tenure and after-housing cost poverty. Again, any strategic use, any commissioning and any funding of Housing First has to be on the basis that a supply chain of social/affordable housing is in place.

## Sufficient funding

Housing First is most effective when a part of an integrated, preventative strategy with joint working and a rapidly accessible suitable supply of housing at its core. While this interconnection is vital, it is also necessary to ensure sufficient funding is in place to allow Housing First services to operate effectively. In essence, Housing First services need to be able to recruit and retain the right mix of staff, which means they should be able to offer an appropriate (i.e. at *least* a real living<sup>127</sup>) wage and, in locations where housing costs are high, be able to weight salaries so their management and staffing are not at risk of after housing cost poverty or housing exclusion themselves. Caseloads must also reflect high fidelity to the model, a Housing First service where workers have caseloads of 15 is automatically diluting the approach and could subject them to unhealthy levels of stress, whereas somewhere between three and seven people, depending on the mix of needs is closer to the core principles of the approach. Continuity of funding is also vital, Housing First services will often be working with individuals with high treatment, care and support needs for years in order to ensure a permanent exit from homelessness and need to be able to offer the job security at sufficient pay to allow continuity of support on a sustained basis. A Housing First service that is operating on a 18 or 24 month contract is not able to offer stability and security to its own staff, let alone the people it is supporting. It is **recommended** that:

- Housing First be commissioned/funded on the basis that staff teams should be paid at *least* the real living wage, with additional weighting in areas with higher housing costs.
- Housing First staff should not have unrealistic caseloads, both to ensure fidelity with the core ideals of the approach and to reduce risks to staff wellbeing.
- Continuity of funding is essential to the proper functioning of Housing First.

<sup>125</sup> Blood, I.; Birchill, A. and Pleace, N. (2021) *Reducing, changing or ending Housing First support* London: Homeless Link/Housing First England.

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/an-nhs-under-pressure>

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>

## The Henry Smith Charity



### Funding innovation

The Henry Smith Housing First Strategic Grant and wider support for Housing First in the grant given to Stonepillow has supported innovation in two senses. The first is the use of Housing First outside urban contexts, where the people experiencing homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs are present in smaller numbers over wider areas, meaning that services need to operate on a different basis than in major cities. The second is in supporting Housing First for women<sup>128</sup>, where an emergent evidence base, including the results from this evaluation, is indicating that there is a clear case for Housing First that is designed, managed and run by women for women.

The key achievement with regard to Housing First in rural, suburban and small town locations is in showing that, when the funding is in place, Housing First can and does work outside urban locations. That said, there are challenges in operation which this evaluation has highlighted, these include still greater scarcity of adequate, affordable and secure housing, more staff time being needed for travel, issues with poorer public transport and transport infrastructure outside cities and greater challenges in accessing health and social care services that may be less easily accessible than in cities. It is **recommended** that:

- Henry Smith consider ongoing support for Housing First outside major population centres, with an emphasis on demonstrating two key strategic messages, first that Housing First can function well in these contexts, if housing supply and interagency collaboration are in place, and second, that tailored and enhanced financial support may be needed to achieve operational effectiveness.

Building Housing First for women is a significant innovation that at the time of writing seems to be largely focused on experiments happening in the UK. The need for these services is still being explored, but the evidence base that is available so far (again including the results from this evaluation) does indicate a need for these services. Housing First, as originally conceived, assumed a largely lone male client group, without there being a routine need to build systems and structures that would enable safeguarding people at risk of domestic abuse and gender based violence. Women are also presenting with very high and complex needs, again linked to experiences of abusive behaviour and, according to wider research on lone women experiencing homelessness, separation from children.<sup>129</sup>

However, there is a real need for caution in how future support for Housing First for Women is designed and thought about. The narrative that is emerging around women's needs for Housing First is that they have 'more complex needs', but research into women's homelessness has highlighted that part of what shapes their experiences is that services, systems and strategies still assume that almost everyone experiencing long-term or recurrent homelessness is a lone man. This links to wider evidence, for example until relatively recently in terms of how mainstream health, welfare and other systems have often responded to women, which has been to problematise them, i.e. define women as more 'complex' or 'challenging', when their unmet treatment, care and support needs are actually – at least in part – linked to systemic failures and systemic assumptions.

A woman who presents as 'complex' to Housing First for Women may be 'complex' because domestic abuse and homelessness services are not sufficiently resourced or coordinated and because her exposure to abuse or experiences like having a child taken into care has not been recognised or responded to by health and social care (social work) systems in an appropriate way. There is a clear case for supporting more development and mainstreaming Housing First in ways that fully recognise and respond to women's needs, which might mean standalone Housing First for Women services and the 'bolt-on' specialist services for women of the type that the Henry Smith Charity funded for Bench Outreach. However, what is also important here is not to 'mystify' women experiencing homelessness linked

<sup>128</sup> The Housing First evaluated in this report was all trans inclusive.

<sup>129</sup> Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2021) *Women's Homelessness: European Evidence Review* Brussels: FEANTSA.

to unmet treatment, care and support needs as being 'more complex' (i.e. more 'vulnerable') than men, because that may surround them with stigmatising and disadvantaging imagery that will make their exits from homelessness harder than necessary. It is **recommended** that:

- Henry Smith consider ongoing support for Housing First for Women, both in the sense of standalone services and 'bolt-on' specialist workers for existing Housing First. The narratives around how this support is designed and provided are important, in that Housing First for Women should be framed as enhancing integrated strategic responses by addressing systemic issues in existing responses to women's homelessness, not in terms of women being 'more complex'.

The other areas of potential specialisation for Housing First include Housing First for Youth (increasingly referred to as 'HF4Y'<sup>130</sup>), which like Housing First for Women is an emergent rather than mainstream practice and is another area in which the UK has been relatively active, there also being significant interest in Canada. The case for HF4Y centres in part on heightened risks of homelessness among young people with a history of contact with child protection/ social work services and a sustained policy failure, over several decades, to break the associations between young people 'leaving care' and significantly heightened risks of youth homelessness.<sup>131</sup> Here, the case for a modification of the core Housing First model centres on young people's inexperience and an absence of the usual familial and social support networks that stems from their childhood experiences. However, there are also significant systemic factors at play, because for example, most if not all social care support is cut off from age 21 onwards, if not beforehand, as legal responsibilities held by local authorities cease. This is a developing area for Housing First, one in which there is a case for further – careful – experimentation as with Housing First for Women, the specific needs among young people need to be seen in a systemic sense, i.e. as strategic and systems problems, not just in terms of an oversimplified individual pathology.

Another area is the possible use of Housing First as a response to LGBTQI+ homelessness. Again, there is the need to be careful around how this is framed. Some evidence indicates that LGBTQI+ people may face specific risks of homelessness in different ways from some other groups, essentially a (potentially) heightened risk of encountering familial and community hostility that may trigger homelessness and service designs and operational assumptions that make little or no allowance for their sexuality or identity.<sup>132</sup> On one level, a well-run Housing First service *should* be suitable for someone identifying as LGBTQI+, because it should provide them with the support that enables them to live in their own home in the ways they choose within a broader ethos that should be inherently positive because it begins at housing being a human right. There is also the same risk of needlessly 'othering' LGBTQI+ people experiencing homelessness as somehow 'different' from anyone else. That said, the same assumptions, i.e. that the original model of Housing First *should* work for anyone, can equally be applied to women and young people, but in both of those instances there is at least some evidence that specific modifications to Housing First are necessary for the approach to work well. This is an area where further experimentation would be useful, because there may be unmet dimensions of need among those experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness who identify as LGBTQI+, that would be best met by a Housing First services and/or specialist workers.

There is further possible potential in modifications to the Housing First model. One of these is the role that Housing First services might take in addressing recidivism associated with multiple and complex needs among some people who are repeatedly in prison for short sentences. Some evidence suggests that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between recurrent and sustained homelessness, addiction, low level offending and prison time, specifically around people whose long-term experiences of homelessness are punctuated by short prison sentences for petty (often drug-related) offences.<sup>133</sup> Criminological research has long reported a relationship between housing insecurity and unemployment on leaving prison and the risk of reoffending and there is broader evidence suggesting that people with unmet treatment, care and

<sup>130</sup> <https://homeless.org.uk/areas-of-expertise/housing-first/housing-first-for-youth/>

<sup>131</sup> Dixon, J., Quilgars, D.J. and Wenham, A.M. (2021) *Relationships First? The initial two years of Haringey Housing First Project for Care Leavers* York: University of York/Centrepoint

<sup>132</sup> Shelton, J. (2023) LGBTQI+ people and homelessness in Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Homelessness* London: Routledge, pp. 158-168.

<sup>133</sup> Neale, J. and Stevenson, C. (2013) A qualitative exploration of the spatial needs of homeless drug users living in hostels and night shelters. *Social Policy and Society*, 12(4), pp.533-546.

support needs (particularly around mental health and addiction) are both more likely to experience recurrent homelessness and to be imprisoned.<sup>134</sup>

As with other potential specialisation in Housing First, it is important not to problematise, individualise or exaggerate the characteristics of people who experience both homelessness and prison on a repeated basis. The first point here, of course, is that most prisoners have not been homeless when they enter prison and nor do they become homeless on discharge from prison. The second point is that most people experiencing homelessness also do not experience the prison system. Nevertheless, there are points at which these populations do overlap and those within this group can be amongst the most vulnerable in UK society, which creates a potential role for Housing First in a broad sense in supporting people in these situations, but also raises the question of a role for more specialised services.

Two roles may exist for specialist Housing First services in this space. The first is as a homelessness *prevention* service for people with high, multiple and complex treatment, care and support needs who are leaving prison, including those who were homeless on entering prison and who have no clear housing and support solution in place on discharge. The second potential role lies in reinforcing and enhancing existing MAPPA<sup>135</sup> (Multi-agency public protection arrangements) where an ex-prisoner presents ongoing potential risks which are combined with multiple needs, where a specialist version of Housing First might both support and monitor someone who presents with both needs and potential risks.

It is **recommended** that:

- Henry Smith consider supporting further innovation in Housing First design and operation, including HF4Y and the need for further specialisations, such as specialist services for people identifying as LGBTQI+ or people whose long-term homelessness intersects with repeated experiences of prison. The narratives around how this support is designed and provided are again important, in that these services should be framed as enhancing integrated strategic responses by addressing systemic issues in existing responses and avoid ‘othering’ the people they are designed to work with.

## Advancing Housing First through supporting effective strategy

The final area in which the Henry Smith Charity might support further work in Housing First is in the promotion of strategic integration of services. As is discussed earlier in this section, the success of Housing First is ultimately dependent on the quality of interrelationships with landlords (both social and private) and with health, welfare and social care services, alongside other key working partnerships such as the Police. Housing First services should ideally not be commissioned or funded as short-term experiments that sit to one side of homelessness systems, either at local level, or within national strategy. The challenges around strategic integration are, as noted, at their most acute in England at the time of writing. A further area of Housing First development that the Henry Smith Charity could consider supporting centres on projects that move beyond provision and enablement of Housing First services and towards the development of preventative, integrated and housing-led homelessness strategies in which Housing First services are at the core of a coordinated strategy. It is **recommended** that:

- Henry Smith considers the possibility of supporting strategic integration of Housing First alongside the funding of individual services, working in collaboration with local authority commissioners and other partners. The logic here is that one or more ‘demonstration projects’ would emphasise the need for greater strategic planning around the use of Housing First to ensure the model is as effective as possible.

<sup>134</sup> Filipović Hrast, M.; Pleace, N. O’Sullivan, E.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Teller, N. (2023) *Leaving Prison and Homelessness* Brussels: FEANTSA.

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-public-protection-arrangements-mappa-guidance>

## Housing First and the next government

### Creating secure and sufficient funding for Housing First

Some broader points about the sufficiency and continuity of funding for Housing First have been made throughout this report. The key issue in the development of Housing First from a policy perspective is the lack of coherent strategic approach in England. The emphasis on localism in homelessness policy since 2010, which devolved individual homelessness strategies to local authority level and abandoned all national strategic concern with homelessness, beyond a very limited focus on people sleeping rough, has been widely criticised.<sup>136</sup> One specific aspect of this wider policy failure has been the lack of a clear, consistent and sufficient plan for funding Housing First at strategic level across England, which has left Housing First reliant on local authority commissioning in a context in which local authority budgets have been subjected to deep and sustained cuts. Government has been a position of both advocating Housing First as a response to homelessness<sup>137</sup>, albeit within a narrative that too often equates all homelessness with people sleeping rough, but simultaneously failing to provide the sufficient, predictable, core funding that a coherent Housing First strategy for England would require. It is **recommended** that:

- Central government in England emulate and also move beyond the strategies for Housing First that exist in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, specifically in creating a national Housing First budget that can be accessed to create, sufficiently fund and sustain Housing First services on an ongoing basis, throughout all of England.

### Recognise that Housing First is dependent on strategic integration

Housing First is, as discussed earlier in this chapter, a case management based services that is ultimately reliant on excellent working relationships with social housing, welfare, health, social care, mental health and addiction services, alongside other key partnerships including the criminal justice system. On one level,

Housing First cannot function properly unless it has sufficient resources, again provided on a predictable and steady basis, to enable it to build the relationships it needs to function well. Alongside this, Housing First has significant potential to contribute to homelessness prevention among people with high and complex treatment, care and support needs, but again, this role is dependent on it having the resources to build the necessary links and cooperation with local authority Housing Options Teams.

There is also another dimension to strategic integration. This centres on the capacity of health, social care and other services to find the time and resources to collaborate with Housing First at strategic level. Cuts to every aspect of social protection systems in the UK have made this difficult and, at the time of writing, both the NHS and social care systems in England are in a position of unprecedented difficulty, trying to manage huge spikes in demand and the lingering effects of COVID-19, while facing ongoing cuts in resource levels relative to the needs they are presented with. One way around this is to consider the development of multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) which have the resources to support Housing First services sufficiently, which might extend to building ACT/ICM Housing First services that have so far proved very difficult to finance in the context of the UK, in marked contrast to some comparable countries, particularly France. It is **recommended** that:

- Alongside a national strategy to provide sufficient finance for Housing First, systems, supports and resources are put in place to enable all Housing First services to have access to the essential support and inputs required from the NHS, social care and other necessary services.

### Recognise that social housing is necessary for Housing First to work

Housing First cannot function properly without the right housing supply. The reality is that the private rented sector, in the form it currently exists in the UK, simply cannot reliably offer adequate housing of sufficient quality, with sufficient security of tenure at an affordable rent. Social housing is under huge pressure, in part because of sustained failures in broader housing policy that have seen the housing market consistently fail to provide enough decent, affordable

<sup>136</sup> Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H. and Watts, B. (2020) The limits of localism: a decade of disaster on homelessness in England. *Policy & Politics*, 48(4), pp.541-561.  
<sup>137</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-first-pilot-national-evaluation-reports/mobilising-housing-first-toolkit-from-planning-to-early-implementation>

homes, both in terms of owner occupation and private renting. It is not fair or reasonable to expect social landlords to focus entirely on Housing First, as there are many other dimensions of both general housing need and of homelessness, where very significant housing need exists. One possible solution here, which has been pursued as part of Finnish national homelessness strategy and recently been emulated in Ireland, is the creation of a *dedicated* stream of new social housing building (including repurposing existing buildings) to provide the kind of one and two bedroom flats that are ideal for Housing First and other housing led services, i.e. creating a social housing supply that is specifically for Housing First. This does not alleviate the wider need to increase social and affordable housing supply, but it takes potential tension out of working relationships with social landlords and creates a clearly defined pool of housing resource for Housing First services. It is **recommended** that:

- Government explore the creation of a dedicated social housing supply stream that is designed to support strategic provision of Housing First within an integrated, preventative national homelessness strategy.

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