

Practitioner Article

‘Housing First’ in Scotland: Challenging Perceptions

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Shelter
Scotland

'Housing First' in Scotland: Challenging Perceptions

Chief Executive at Turning Point Scotland, Martin Cawley, explains how they are following the approach of the Pathways to Housing project in New York in the early 1990s piloting this new approach to homelessness services in Glasgow.

In the early 1990s, the Pathways to Housing project in New York began a new approach to homelessness services. Targeting homeless people with severe mental illness, they provided the housing first, and then combined that housing with support and treatment services. The outcomes that they were able to achieve and sustain with this vulnerable and chaotic group of people, and the apparent cost effectiveness of this approach attracted international attention, and has led to the development of Housing First projects across the world, including our own pilot project in Glasgow.

Our interest in this approach came from our experience of working with people whose homelessness is related to many complex and interrelated factors, including substance misuse, mental and physical ill-health, and involvement in the criminal justice system. We had long been aware of a group of people who, in spite of strong government policies and local commitment, were continuing to fall through the cracks. These people:

- Were not engaged or were reluctant to engage with support services, often as a result of repeated negative experiences
- Had been unable to access or sustain accommodation
- Constituted 70% of the drug related deaths in Glasgow

In 2009 we carried out a scoping exercise, working with Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) and Queens Cross Housing Association, Scottish Government officials, Glasgow Addiction Services, Glasgow Homelessness Partnership and Strathclyde Police, as well as related voluntary organisations and interested individuals, to carry out the following tasks:

- **Task 1** – To make direct contact with this group of people, and to understand the barriers that prevent their engagement with services
- **Task 2** – To work with people who have not been able to access or sustain a tenancy due to their continued substance misuse and to explore ways in which they could be supported towards sustained accommodation and recovery
- **Task 3** – To undertake a 'desk-top' exercise to learn about services that have been developed in response to these needs in the UK, Europe and internationally.

We found that:

- Homeless people with complex needs are unable to meet the demands of a 'linear' approach, resulting in a high attrition rate and a repeating cycle of homelessness¹
- Temporary accommodation can have a damaging influence on vulnerable people, and can itself increase substance misuse² – this was evident in individual accounts as well as academic research
- Another issue to be highlighted by both academic reports and individual participants was the positive role that can be played by Peer Support Workers, who have their own experience of substance misuse and homelessness

The Housing First approach was identified through our desk-top exercise as an innovative approach to addressing these needs, and one that was supported by evidence. The evaluations of the original 'Pathways' Housing First project in New York³ suggests that this approach can deliver towards outcomes in the following key areas:

- **An effective response to homelessness** – for people with complex needs, people who were not engaged with any service and who had previously been unable to access or sustain a tenancy are now housed, and have access to support
- **Homeless prevention** The Pathways Housing First programme sustained an 80% housing retention rate over two years⁴
- **Effective use of resources** – Many reports conclude that Housing First is a highly cost-effective approach, which offsets costs via a reduction in clients' use of expensive emergency services⁵. An evaluation of the Denver Housing First Collaboration in the United States, for example, calculated that total emergency-related costs (such as use of shelters and hospital emergency rooms) declined by 73% per client, in the 24 months of participation, as compared with the previous 24 months⁶

Our pilot project has been running over the last two years, and represents a partnership approach between ourselves, GHA and Queens' Cross Housing Associations, Strathclyde Police and Greater Glasgow & Clyde NHS. We have learnt from the Pathways experience, and have created an approach to suit the context and priorities of Glasgow and Scotland, the key features of which are:

¹ **Johnsen, S. & Teixeira, L.** (2010) *Staircases, Elevators & Cycles of Change: 'Housing First' and Other Housing Models for Homeless People with Complex Support Needs* University of York, Centre for Housing Policy

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

- **Housing comes first** – rather than homeless people starting in temporary accommodation and gradually progressing through services towards independent living, we work with RSLs to place vulnerable people in safe and secure permanent tenancies from the outset, with a comprehensive package of support⁷
- **A holistic package of support** – built around each individual, and delivered through assertive outreach, our interventions support people to develop their life and tenancy management skills *alongside* a harm reduction approach that encourages recovery from substance misuse and mental ill-health
- **Peer Support** – the staff team includes four Peer Support Workers, each with their own experience of homelessness and/or substance misuse

We are already seeing the difference that this approach can make in people's lives, and we are working alongside other European nations who are developing their own Housing First models to share our experience as part of the European Union funded 'Grundtvig Programme'⁸. We see great potential in this approach, and believe that it has an important role to play in preventing and responding to homelessness across Scotland and the UK.

To this end we are holding a conference on the 11th of September in Glasgow. '**Housing First: Challenging Perceptions**' will bring together our European partners to share their experience of designing and delivering Housing First services in a range of contexts, and we are delighted to announce the Founder and CEO of Pathways to Housing, Sam Tsemberis as our Keynote speaker. For more information, please visit our website at <http://www.turningpointscotland.com/housingfirst2012/>

Housing First is not a panacea, it does not hold all the answers to finally tackling homelessness, but it is an approach that encourages a new and creative way of working, and an approach that seems to work. We believe that is something worth trying.

Further information

If you would like any further information, please send an email to practicescotland@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://www.grundtvig.org.uk/>