

# Housing First in Scotland

## Topic Briefing

April 2019

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Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help. We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

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## Key points

- This paper provides information on and sets out Shelter Scotland's view of current developments on **Housing First**, the approach pioneered by Dr Sam Tsemberis in the 1990s to resolving homelessness through the immediate provision of housing, accompanied by tailored, wraparound support.
- Housing First is now a **core tenet of the Scottish Government's housing policy** and a major focus of political attention.
- Housing First is part of an **overarching approach, "Rapid Re-housing"**, whereby it is now expected that local authorities will take steps to reduce time spent in temporary accommodation and to move people rapidly into settled accommodation.
- **Shelter Scotland supports the principles of Housing First** and believes that it has a role to play in alleviating multiple and complex needs homelessness. However, we have several questions about the planned delivery and also how it can be delivered at scale across Scotland.
- We want to see Housing First being **carefully developed, fully resourced and properly delivered**, to avoid the risk that an under-funded and under-developed programme fails to both sustainably support some of the most vulnerable people in our society and undermines the credibility of the Housing First approach.
- There have been a number of Housing First projects around the world and some small-scale projects in Scotland. These projects have generally been successful, but to varying degrees.
- Several local authorities in Scotland have now pledged to run local Housing First projects including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Stirling and Aberdeen, with around 800 homes earmarked for use.
- Housing First is intended specifically for **households with multiple and complex needs**. Especially in view of the significant investment required to properly support Housing First, there is a need to ensure that other people affected by the crisis of homelessness are not treated as being of lower priority.
- Shelter Scotland strongly believes that **many other structural actions need to be taken** to create a system which effectively deals with homelessness.

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## What is Housing First?

Housing First was developed by the psychological practitioner Dr. Sam Tsemberis in New York in 1992 as a solution to rough sleeping and chronic homelessness, as part of the Pathways to Housing programme. It is an alternative to traditional models of resolving homelessness, such as the 'staircase' model of re-housing. The staircase model involves a person committing to relevant support, staying in transitional or temporary housing and then moving on to permanent accommodation when they are deemed 'ready'.

Housing First turns this model on its head by offering permanent housing immediately or as soon as possible with no preconditions, in line with the principle of housing as a human right.<sup>1</sup> Housing First also provides tailored support for the individual (though this is not a precondition to a tenancy) and is available whenever the person is ready to engage.

Housing First is underpinned by five core principles.<sup>2</sup> It is widely agreed that to get the same or similar outcomes to the evaluated Housing First projects then fidelity to the model is absolutely critical. The core principles are:

- 1) Immediate access to housing with no "readiness preconditions"
  - The person should immediately be given a tenancy without having to prove they can manage one.
- 2) Consumer choice and self-determination
  - People should have an element of control over where they live and the support they receive.
- 3) Recovery orientation
  - A Housing First programme should be aimed towards improving the overall wellbeing of the person and goes much wider than just regulating drug or alcohol use or supporting engagement with treatment.
- 4) Individualised and person-driven supports
  - The support provided should be tailored to the individual's needs and wants.
- 5) Social and community integration
  - The support and accommodation provided should emphasise the importance of the person being part of their community and facilitate this.

It is important to note that this model was developed in the 1990s in New York in a context of almost no other service provision, and no statutory rights to assistance. This context is examined in more detail later in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Homeless Link (2016); [Housing First in England: The principles](#)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Observatory on Homelessness; [Housing First](#)

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## Evaluation of Housing First projects

The Housing First approach has had high levels of success in sustainably re-housing its target client group of people who were rough sleeping and experiencing multiple and complex needs. However, as noted by Pleace (2018), *“Housing First is not a coherent model. The original approach in the USA has not been followed consistently, meaning there is not a single type of service called Housing First, but a series of related interventions.”*<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the understanding of multiple and complex needs varies widely and we are aware that there is divergence in particular over whether people with addictions will qualify for Housing First programmes in Scotland and this discrepancy has been replicated in other Housing First programmes around the world.

Added to this are the varied starting environments in each country around housing supply and affordability, existing support frameworks and the accessibility and generosity of welfare systems. As a result, we must treat outcome reports with caution and on their own merit, as well as in the context of what is currently being achieved through existing services here in the UK and Scotland specifically.

To illustrate, much of the available evidence on Housing First comes from the United States<sup>4 5</sup> where there is little to no housing safety net, assistance programmes vary by state and there is a severe shortage of affordable homes.<sup>6</sup> Health, social care and addiction services are also not universally accessible in the US. With this in mind, it is perhaps to be expected that Housing First outcomes in this environment would almost always be a success compared to the very low baseline.

In terms of the European experience, cities such as Amsterdam<sup>7</sup> report success with the Housing First approach and Finland claims to have effectively eradicated rough sleeping due partly to its Housing First approach.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Finland’s success is centred on cross-sector partnership working and significant investment into building affordable homes (bearing in mind however, that this was achieved somewhat controversially by building clusters of blocks of self-contained flats purely for Housing First, contrary to the high-fidelity recommendation of dispersed flats which are integrated into the community<sup>9</sup>). Finland has also made tackling homelessness a continuous government focus since the 1980s<sup>10</sup> and researchers cite this strong political will and a national

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<sup>3</sup> Pleace, N. (2018); [Using Housing First in Integrated Homelessness Strategies: A Review of the Evidence](#)

<sup>4</sup> Tsemberis, S., Gulcur, L. and Nakae, M. (2004); [Housing First, Consumer Choice, and Harm Reduction for Homeless Individuals With a Dual Diagnosis](#)

<sup>5</sup> Srebnik, D., Connor, T., and Sylla, L (2013); [A Pilot Study of the Impact of Housing First – Supported Housing for Intensive Users of Medical Hospitalization and Sobering Services](#)

<sup>6</sup> Galvez, M., Brennan, M., Meixell, B. and Pendall, R. (2017); [Housing as a Safety Net: Ensuring Housing Security for the Most Vulnerable](#)

<sup>7</sup> Busch-Geertsema, V. (2013) [Housing First Europe: Final Report](#)

<sup>8</sup> Foster, D. (2017); [What can the UK learn from how Finland solved homelessness?](#) [The Guardian]

<sup>9</sup> Pleace, N. (2017); [The Action Plan for Preventing Homelessness in Finland 2016-2019: The Culmination of an Integrated Strategy to End Homelessness?](#)

<sup>10</sup> Housing First Europe: [Finland Overview](#)

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strategy as key to their success.<sup>11</sup> This is further helped by Finland having what is regarded as one of the most generous welfare systems in the world, through which the requisite ‘wraparound support’ can readily be facilitated without significant additional investment.

Results from the UK show slightly lower but nevertheless notable success for people with complex needs,<sup>12</sup> reporting that around 74% of people engaged in Housing First retained their housing a year later. It is important to view this figure alongside the tenancy sustainment rates for other households resettled after homelessness as well as tenancy sustainment rates achieved by other forms of housing support.

There have already been small scale Housing First projects in Scotland and the evaluation of Turning Point’s Housing First project in Glasgow in 2013 showed positive results:

*“The project has been highly successful at retaining the involvement of service users, including several of those widely regarded as ‘serial disengagers’. Its housing retention outcomes have also exceeded expectations. The vast majority of service users have retained their tenancies continuously since they were allocated their property; half of these individuals had in fact done so for more than two years by the end of the pilot period. No evictions were recorded, but one service user ‘lost’ their tenancy due to serving a long prison sentence (and thereby losing Housing Benefit entitlement), and another ‘gave up’ theirs after being victimised by other members of the drug-using community.”<sup>13</sup>*

Interestingly, an interim review of Shelter’s own high-fidelity Inspiring Change Housing First pilot in Manchester<sup>14</sup> showed high tenancy sustainment rates and emphasised that *“Housing First is most effective when employed as a key component of an integrated homelessness strategy, focused on homelessness among people with high and complex support needs, including both addiction and severe mental illness.”* This re-affirms the importance of Housing First being part of an overall strategy, as is the case in Finland. Housing First is indeed part of the Scottish Government’s five-year Ending Homelessness Together High-Level Action Plan,<sup>15</sup> and this inclusion may well prove to be instrumental in any future success if the action plan is implemented in full.

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<sup>11</sup> Hopp, J. (2019); [Eradicating homelessness in Finland: the Housing First Programme](#)

<sup>12</sup> Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N; (2015) [Housing First in England: An Evaluation of Nine Services –](#)

<sup>13</sup> Johnsen, S. (2013); [Turning Point Scotland’s Housing First Project Evaluation Final Report](#)

<sup>14</sup> Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. (2017); [The Inspiring Change Manchester Housing First Pilot: Interim Report](#)

<sup>15</sup> Scottish Government & COSLA (2018); [Ending Homelessness Together: High Level Action Plan](#)

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## Can Housing First work in Scotland?

**We believe that Housing First does have the potential to radically transform the lives of people whose needs are currently not met by existing provision and who are often viewed as “hard to engage with”.** In order to achieve this, it is imperative to provide long term-term funding at the necessary level to ensure that housing and support are permanently available. As above, a number of Housing First programmes and pilots are already operating at various stages and scales across Scotland. Shelter Scotland would advocate the need to clarify the longer-term funding for these initiatives, to support future delivery of Housing First and reassurance that this will not be achieved through disinvestment from other homelessness services or other actions that de-prioritise the needs of homeless households who do not have complex needs.

There also appears to be disagreement, deviation and confusion over who exactly Housing First is intended for. Some programmes (both in Scotland and internationally) specifically target rough sleepers and some do not and importantly, some programmes target people with addictions, while others do not. The definition of the group to be targeted will depend somewhat on the locality and the availability of other support services. But it is crucial we understand who this approach is best placed to support. It is difficult to understand how people can self-refer or how partner organisations can refer people to these programmes if the definition of the target group isn't clear and consequent allocations policies are ambiguous.

The success of Finland has been closely studied by key players in Scotland. However, it should be noted that Finland's success is based upon a “whole-systems”, cross-sector approach, with significant, long-term and targeted investment. What is being suggested for Scotland is that Housing First is additional to existing service provision and thus it cannot be assumed it will lead to outcomes similar to Finland's.

To be able to assess whether Housing First might work in Scotland, we must first identify the problem we are trying to solve; be clear on the outcomes currently being achieved for this group and the outcomes we wish to see in the future.

If the policy intention is to end homelessness in Scotland and follow the lead of Finland, **Housing First will not work on its own.** Research referenced in this report strongly indicates that many other policy changes are needed to both complement Housing First and to address other types of homelessness separately. Such changes include better prevention measures; good quality and timely housing advice; substantial investment to deliver significant and sustained increases to the supply of affordable housing; strong partnership working across sectors including with the NHS and properly resourced, flexible housing support.

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As above, Housing First must be part of an integrated and long-term Homelessness Strategy, as Shelter Scotland has repeatedly called for.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of measuring success, we anticipate that success, aside from tenancy sustainment, will present itself in homelessness statistics through a decrease in the number of repeat applications and also a decrease in the number of lost contacts, which accounted for around 6,000 households last year.<sup>17</sup> Aside from this, the success of Housing First could be shown in a number of ways, and this should be considered carefully by both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator.

As for other outcomes, it is important to note that while evidence suggests that Housing First is likely to help people exit homelessness, it is not generally the case that *“people using Housing First are characterised by universal or rapid improvements in mental and physical health, addiction, or social and economic integration, although some improvements do occur.”*<sup>18</sup> Therefore while we must be ambitious, we must recognise the limitations of Housing First and understand that there are wider related issues, such as poverty alleviation and the provision and adequate resourcing of other services such as social care, addictions and mental health support, and criminal justice.

### **Key questions around Housing First**

Below we set out Shelter Scotland’s key questions in relation to Housing First and specifically its practical implications. Housing First in Scotland is growing at pace, and we must ensure that it sustainably meets the needs of the particularly vulnerable client group it is designed to serve.

In the context of the volume of recommended changes as laid out in the High-Level Plan, it is critical that there is clarity and transparency about objectives, client group and process. This is important not just for statutory bodies and providers, but also wider stakeholders and third sector advice agencies working with this client group. Fundamentally, there is a lack of clarity and coherence about how much funding the Scottish Government is providing from the £50million Ending Homelessness Together fund to support this, and how much funding is being released on a one-off basis, on a yearly basis and what the plans are to continue to fund Housing First into the future.

In terms of allocations and selections, clarification is required on:

- How will the new tenants be selected and what is the criteria?

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<sup>16</sup> Shelter Scotland (2016); [Homelessness far from fixed - Why Scotland needs a National Homelessness Strategy](#)

<sup>17</sup> Scottish Government (2018); [Homelessness in Scotland 2017-18](#)

<sup>18</sup> Pleace, N. (2018); op. cit.



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- How will Housing First allocation policies interact with the current homeless legislation in terms of local connection and intentionality?
  - Are new allocations policies needed and will these be consulted on?
  - How long will these properties be available for?
  - Will there be choice over housing for people? Will there be sufficient properties earmarked by local authorities for people to exercise this choice?
  - What impact will earmarking the 800 homes have for people on the general waiting list who do not qualify for Housing First?

In terms of tenancies and support:

- What kind of tenancy will people have?
- If the tenancy is contingent on willingness to engage with support, but Housing First principles state that support is available whenever the person is ready, how long will the support be offered for before it is withdrawn due to non-uptake?
- Will Housing First funding, both from Government and afterwards from local authorities themselves, be ringfenced?
- What impact will the cost burden of funding support for Housing First have on local authorities in terms of what they can spend on other people once initial government support for Housing First costs is phased out?
- Given the pivotal importance of health and social care services being involved, is their role clear, understood, agreed and future-proofed?

In terms of the day-to-day management of Housing First:

- Who will manage the properties across the participating local authorities?
- What control will the original housing providers maintain?

In terms of rent and benefits:

- What rent is being charged for the property?
- Is there a support element to be funded and will the properties be re-categorised as supported accommodation to allow this?
- Will the person be assisted to claim any benefits they're entitled to?
- What happens if a person doesn't qualify for housing benefit? (e.g. no recourse to public funds?)
- What happens if a person gets into arrears or they breach their tenancy agreement in other ways?

And finally, in terms of monitoring and review:

- What is the monitoring approach going to be and who is responsible for this?

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- Is the Scottish Housing Regulator involved in monitoring the services provided?
  - Is the plan for this to become a long term model following on from the initial two years?

## Conclusion

**Housing First has the ability to change the lives of some of the most vulnerable people across Scotland** and remains an important policy area to monitor. We share the concerns of others however, that this approach understandably requires significant investment, so that it can operate in the long term and provide stability to what can often be very difficult lives. We must ensure that Housing First in Scotland follows the principles proven to lead to successful outcomes and that it is managed in a way across local authorities and other services that delivers the best possible support for individuals.

Housing First is not intended for all people who find themselves homeless and we must not lose sight of the structural factors such as supply and affordability which lead to homelessness. It is imperative that we invest in solutions which will help everyone quickly and sustainably into safe, secure and affordable homes.

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We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at [shelterscotland.org](https://shelterscotland.org)

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