

Experiences of housing associations delivering Housing First

Research into how housing associations use the Housing First model and recommendations for delivery

2 December 2020

Summary

- Housing First provides permanent housing and open-ended, flexible support for individuals with complex needs, and who often have long-term experience of homelessness. Although housing and support are not conditional, the model aims to provide a stable home from which to address other issues.
- There is no unified, national policy on Housing First in England, with approaches developed locally. Because of purported differences in the service development and funding, we wanted to explore how the model works in the social housing sector, and give practical examples of how housing associations use it.
- This research is of use to, amongst others, commissioners looking to develop Housing First or diversify their homelessness relief offer, the government when considering policy development on the approach, homelessness organisations examining the implementation of the model, and housing associations who are developing Housing First projects.
- Our research investigates the role of social housing landlords – specifically housing associations – in using the Housing First model. We conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives from eight housing associations to understand their experiences.
- We found that housing associations considered Housing First an attractive model because it aligned with their organisational objectives, notably on addressing all forms of housing need, and included fully funded support. The

housing associations' involvement came after an approach by local authorities, support providers and/or developing a project internally.

- The research participants were keen to highlight that their housing association wanted to be a key partner in Housing First. This helped to address any concerns internally and clients to sustain tenancies.
- The main challenges with the model were in finding suitable properties, the risks around short-term support funding, and the strength of partnership working (both internal and external). The participants also mentioned issues in ensuring fidelity to Housing First, responsive neighbourhood management, recruitment, the time it took to establish practice and procedures, the time needed to engage with clients, and restrictions from nomination rights.
- Success was in the number of Housing First clients who had sustained tenancies. Overall, the housing associations' experiences of Housing First were positive and many planned to expand their involvement.
- Our main recommendations for delivering a Housing First model are that the government and commissioners should ensure long-term funding of contracts for support, and housing associations should be key partners in delivery. In addition, there must be clear communication within and across partner organisations to determine the practicalities of delivery.

Contents

This report explores the role of housing associations in Housing First, the following sections cover:

- **What the Housing First model is** ([skip to](#))
- **How the research was conducted** ([skip to](#))
- **How and why housing associations get involved in Housing First** ([skip to](#))
- **How services were set up** ([skip to](#)) **and delivered** ([skip to](#))
- **The challenges in delivering Housing First** ([skip to](#))
- **The main successes in delivering Housing First** ([skip to](#))
- **Conclusion and recommendations** ([skip to](#))

If you have any additional questions, suggestions or comments about this report, please [contact our Research team](#).

Introduction

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an approach to ending homelessness through housing and support provision. It prioritises access to permanent housing with tailored, open-ended, wraparound support for the resident that emphasises choice and control. The intensive support is free from conditions, apart from the willingness to sustain a tenancy. Individuals are not required to be housing-ready before moving in; rather, secure housing is a stable platform from which to address other issues.

The model is one of a range of approaches to ending homelessness. It focuses on a [specific group of people](#) with histories of repeat homelessness, very complex needs, experience of multiple disadvantage and for whom other services have not been successful in ending their homelessness. Evidence shows that the model helps people experiencing repeat homelessness and multiple disadvantage remain housed and make improvements in their health, wellbeing and social and economic integration, as well as reducing ineffective contact with costly public services.¹ Research in the USA, Canada and Europe shows that Housing First ends homelessness for at least eight out of ten residents, as measured by remaining housed for at least a year.²

The Housing First approach was first developed in 1992, in New York by Pathways to Housing. It has since been widely adopted across the USA and is a key part of national homelessness strategies in Canada, Denmark, Finland and France. It is also growing in popularity in countries like Italy, Sweden, Spain and, increasingly, in the UK.

The first UK project was established by Turning Point Scotland in 2010. The London Borough of Camden commissioned its service in 2010/11 and nine other projects were developed in 2012, through the Homelessness Transition Fund. In 2013, the Isle of Anglesey Council also commissioned a service. In November 2017, the UK government announced £28 million in funding to pilot the approach in the Liverpool City Region, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands.³

¹ [Housing First Europe Hub, Housing First Guide: What is Housing First, 1.4. The Evidence for Housing First](#)

² [Housing First Europe Hub, Housing First Guide: What is Housing First, 1.1. Introducing Housing First](#)

³ [MHCLG, Government to lead national effort to end rough sleeping, 30 November 2017](#)

Who is it for?

Evidence shows that Housing First is effective for people with multiple and complex needs, and supports them to achieve better outcomes than other services. Multiple and complex needs are interrelated health and/or social care needs, which impact an individual's life and ability to function in society and that many services struggle to address holistically. Housing First residents have typically experienced multiple disadvantage that can include long-term or repeat homelessness and service use, poor physical and mental health, experience of domestic abuse, contact with the criminal justice system, barriers to education and employment, problematic drug and alcohol use and difficulties around social integration.⁴

The model also aims to reach groups for whom other forms of support are ineffective, or who fall through the gaps in services because their needs are individually too mild or too high to meet a threshold. It's estimated that a Housing First approach would be appropriate for approximately 10-20% of people sleeping rough or in contact with services for single homeless people.⁵

How is Housing First different?

Housing First is based on a set of key principles. Studies have shown that the more closely a Housing First service adheres to this set of principles, the more successful it is in supporting residents to achieve positive outcomes.⁶ The principles are:

- People have a right to a home
- Flexible support is provided for as long as it is needed
- Housing and support are separate
- Clients have choice and control
- Use of an active engagement approach
- The service focuses on the client's strengths, goals and aspirations
- Use of a harm reduction approach

The starting point of Housing First is to provide permanent housing to develop support around. This differs from services that aim to address the service users' support needs before securing housing. Housing First also differs from traditional

⁴ [Housing First Europe Hub, Housing First Guide: What is Housing First, 1.4. The Evidence for Housing First](#)

⁵ [Housing First England, Housing First in England: Frequently asked questions](#)

⁶ [Housing First England, Housing First in England: The principles](#)

floating or tenancy support models in terms of: the caseload; engagement models; separation of housing and support; and the length of the support relationship.

The separation of housing and support means that the support provision is not attached to one tenancy. The same support worker can “follow” the client if they move from one tenancy to another. Support is available for as long as needed, and clients who choose not to engage with the support are not required to leave their housing.

Floating support workers may have caseloads of 20-40 people, whereas Housing First workers will typically support five to seven people. The number of clients may increase over time, as existing clients require less support.

About this research

As awareness of the Housing First model and its apparent success has become widespread, more housing associations have started to get involved and others are considering how they might offer the service.

In 2018, Housing First England published research into the implementation of Housing First in England.⁷ It investigated the scale and approaches to provision, how the services were set up, and the different approaches to the model.

One of the areas explored was the use of different types of housing, in the private rented sector or the social housing sector. The research found that the social housing sector generally has better standards of accommodation, more secure tenancy rights, and lower rents, but is less flexible than the private rented sector, as it can take longer to go through the allocation process, and there is a shortage of appropriate one-bedroom properties in some areas.⁸

There is no unified national policy around Housing First. According to Housing First England, mostly local authorities or voluntary sector providers develop the services locally. The approach can be funded through local authority commissioning, other

⁷ [Housing First England, Understanding the implementation of Housing First in England, November 2018](#)

⁸ [Housing First England, Understanding the implementation of Housing First in England, November 2018](#)

statutory funding sources (such as public health and adult social care), or non-statutory funding such as trusts, foundations and philanthropy.⁹

Because of these purported differences in the service development and funding, we wanted to explore how the model works in the social housing sector, giving practical examples of how housing associations use it.

We conducted in-depth interviews with staff from eight housing associations – some of which provided accommodation only, while others provided both accommodation and support. The participants were spread across different departments and held various types of roles at different levels. This ensured that we received a diverse range of perspectives about the Housing First services offered.

The housing associations ranged in size from small (below 1,000 homes) to large (above 50,000 homes) landlords, with most having between 20,000-49,999 homes. Participating organisations held stock across a number of authorities, mainly focused in the South East, South West and West Midlands.

The participants mainly worked in Care and Supported Housing, including two who were their organisation's lead on homelessness. One participant worked in Neighbourhoods. Another participant worked in Lettings and was from an association with no supported housing.

The interviews were semi-structured – there was a set list of questions in various topic areas, and follow-up questions were used to explore areas of interest in more depth.

Due to the nature of the research, the findings are not representative, but highlight the experiences of housing associations involved in Housing First. It is important to note that each participant's experience is unique and, although we have identified some common themes, each participant and their respective organisations implemented and experienced the Housing First model in different ways.

⁹ [Housing First England, Understanding the implementation of Housing First in England, November 2018](#)

How and why do housing associations get involved in Housing First?

How

The housing associations were usually involved in Housing First via three different routes:

- Approached by local government
- Approached by the support provider for the property, or
- The idea was developed internally before seeking a partner in local government.

Although an approach by a local authority was the most common route, these routes were not mutually exclusive. For example, a housing association could have developed an interest or project internally prior to an approach by a potential partner.

Why

The most common reason for their involvement was that Housing First aligned with their organisational objectives (such as meeting all forms of housing need). Participants also believed the evidence base from pilots in other countries, which showed that the model worked for housing the most vulnerable. Other reasons included the motivation to try something different or perceived as more risky, the availability of fully funded support when support funding had all but disappeared - one participant mentioned that due to loss of funding, their organisation had to repurpose supported schemes. In addition, housing associations liked that the model was an extension of existing service practice (such as person-centred support).

What do housing associations provide for Housing First?

Most of the participants came from housing associations that only provided accommodation, but three came from organisations that provided both housing and support.

To them, Housing First was either a mainstream service or a pilot. Usually the housing associations took part in a pilot before making it a mainstream service. Alternatively, it was a mainstream service from the beginning. A common point raised during interviews was that as one of the Housing First principles is the provision of permanent housing, then a housing provider could not really consider the model as a pilot.

The biggest risk to delivery was the end of support funding for a pilot or mainstream service. This could potentially leave the high needs client to sustain their tenancy with no support. This risk was managed through limiting the number of clients, taking on both housing and support functions, and housing providers maintaining a relationship with clients should support funding end.

Clients were housed in general needs accommodation or (for one association) supported housing properties, using the provider's standard tenancy agreement. This was usually an assured short-hold tenancy, but one association used a fixed term tenancy agreement. One housing provider used a form of licence agreement as their project was a "Housing First-type" model in a hostel, which was part of the 'Everyone In' scheme in response to the coronavirus lockdown.

Housing was usually in one-bedroom properties, but one association mentioned they had more success in offering studios because they were "smaller, more intimate, [and] it is easier for the resident to feel safe in a small studio flat".

The number of clients supported, or homes provided, was low across the participants. This reflected the principles of Housing First, as well as the relative newness of the service or pilot. Between two and 18 clients were housed/supported in each housing association. Many housing associations were actively engaged with more clients, and were either committed to providing more homes, or keen to use homes in different areas.

How the services are set up

Services started on an informal basis at first, most commonly through "a two-fold process" of approaches and conversations with either the commissioning authority, support provider or internal departments. In general, this involved meetings with all partners (including other services that support clients for example, the police or healthcare services) and establishing formal partnership agreements, such as terms of reference or service level agreements.

The participants emphasised the amount of time needed to set up a Housing First service. Part of this was about internal buy-in, as one participant said, "you really need someone who believes in it". But also it was about the practicalities of delivery. This included: the number of properties to use, how the properties were allocated, building the approach with different internal teams, recruitment, communication and information-sharing with internal and external partners,

developing criteria and referral processes, wording formal agreements, and drafting supporting paperwork.

It took between three and 18 months from the initial discussion to the first client moving into a property. Some of this time is representative of how long it takes to support a client into accommodation. It can take two or three months from the first contact to accepting an offer. A housing and support provider said a key success for them was having a commissioner who wanted to work with them and gave them space to develop their approach internally, even though the authority was under pressure from their funder, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to begin the project.

Case study from Sovereign on the experience of service set up

Sovereign's experience of working with local authorities and support providers to establish a Housing First service was positive. However, they had experienced local authorities trying to place clients in their properties without talking to them first, which led to confusion. When councils attempted to place clients through the Choice Based Lettings system, without informing the landlord that the client would receive wraparound support, their applications failed for not meeting allocation criteria for a general needs property. In Sovereign's experience, Housing First worked best when the local authority, support provider and landlord worked together as an equal partnership and communicated with each other. When all three were working in partnership, Sovereign found they could adapt their policies and processes to fit the model. They said: "if you want Housing First to work you have to get the landlord on board and round the table, understand their concerns". Housing First has been successful for Sovereign because they are an "active landlord", and do not follow their standard housing management procedures or leave the support provider to manage the tenancy.

How services are delivered

This section takes a broadly chronological look at how housing associations delivered Housing First. It covers [support](#), [referrals](#), [allocations](#), [finding properties](#), [tenancy and housing management](#), [staffing](#), [managing behaviour](#) and [fidelity](#).

Support

One of the benefits of Housing First mentioned by more than one participant was the fully funded support. It allows providers to house people who might not ordinarily be housed in general needs accommodation due to their

complexity and risk. Without this support in place, housing associations might not have the resource, funding or intensive-enough tailored approach to meet the needs of these clients and help them sustain tenancies.

Support providers and landlords discussed taking a psychologically informed, harm reduction approach with clients, in accordance with the Housing First principles. For the three associations that offered support, the service for the client was flexible and open-ended. However, they did not all work in the same way. For example, one association's default was to be both the support and housing provider as it was "easier for the landlord function to take on those [tenancy] risks if [we have] the support as well", whereas another association, a support provider, preferred not to undertake housing management as they wanted to focus on the relationship with the client.

Measuring the success of support was generally quite light touch, but depended on the key performance indicators in the commissioner's contract. One accommodation and support provider used a specific tool, called the Homeless Outcomes Star,¹⁰ alongside any measures in contracts.

All the support providers said their aim was to decrease the level of support provided over time, as it was important to prevent dependency. One provider estimated they delivered approximately five to seven hours of support per week per client. They found this was not very expensive, especially considering the support tapered over time. While they wanted to be certain the client paid their bills and engaged with a harm reduction approach, it was up to the client when support stopped. It was considered a successful outcome when the client decided to stop receiving support, "telling us they're fed up with us" as one participant explained.

Another housing and support provider found that while throughput was built in, the complexity and chaos of the clients made it difficult in practice. They anticipated "putting in the same number of support hours for the first tenant [we] moved in for at least another year's time". This meant they were in a situation where frontline staff were "at capacity in terms of the ideal numbers to be working with".

Support and housing providers also spoke about how to carefully handle a client's transition from the street to a home, as well as possible stepdown options if they did

¹⁰ [Triangle Consulting Social Enterprise Limited and the London Housing Foundation, Homelessness Star™: The Outcomes Star for people with housing and other needs](#)

not feel comfortable in accommodation. Moving from the street to a home can be “daunting”. One support provider said clients might need daily contact to help them settle. A housing provider spoke of one client found living in a tent in the living room: “this would normally trigger a safeguarding issue, but with this client it didn’t because we knew that’s how they felt comfortable. It was part of their transition from living rough to moving into four walls and a roof – moving away slowly from what they are used to – to a home”.

Support providers held the personalisation budget for clients. The budget depended on the grant and was very limited. It was mainly used to furnish the property (see [below](#)), but could be used to pay deposits, rent and bills if necessary. However, it was a challenge to furnish flats with available funds. One support provider had a budget per client of £1,500-2,000 and another about £1,000 (but felt that £1,500 would be better). The latter provider also felt it was a good idea to keep money aside for any damage.

Referrals

There was no consistent approach to referrals. Processes were developed within local areas, sometimes using forms and/or panels. Referrals could be made by the commissioning authority or authorities, the support provider (including internal referrals if it was a housing and support provider), the support provider and the commissioning authority, or any service that worked with the client (notably the probation service).

Decisions on referrals were through internal discussion or panels with multiple agencies or partners. Participants mentioned using tools to help with referrals, such as the CHAOS Index¹¹ and risk assessments. Some had developed specific forms, others used existing care and support referral forms. One housing provider mentioned they had developed a psychologically informed referral process. This focused on what the client wanted to achieve, rather than what had gone wrong previously.

Support providers said they used referral information to assess whether the client would benefit from Housing First or another service and how best to engage with them.

¹¹ [10 questions that scores individuals on issues such as risk to themselves and others, whether they’re abusing substances and their housing situation.](#)

Only one association mentioned 'red lines' around not accepting referrals with a history of arson or hoarding, but said they would always discuss the case to see if exceptions could be made. One support provider mentioned housing someone with significant hoarding issues and, as a result, introduced specific training to support clients with a history of hoarding. This shows the benefit of mitigating any concerns of associations and working with multiple housing associations who may have different allocation policies and can share best practice.

Allocations

Allocations were made through direct lets or the Housing Register. One housing provider insisted clients register through the Housing Register to prioritise them and allow them to bid on chosen properties. This was so applicants could be assessed and prioritised for their housing needs and have a choice of advertised properties. The register also permits the partners working with clients to disclose and share information about them. The benefits of direct lets was that providers could match properties to clients (which the client could accept or refuse) and they were not limited by nomination rights (see below on [Finding and furnishing properties](#) and [Nominations](#)).

We also found evidence of reciprocal arrangements on allocations, if the housing association was one of a number of housing providers involved in Housing First. If a housing association had prior, poor experience of housing a client, another association would house them.

Finding and furnishing properties

Interviewees mentioned finding suitable properties for their clients was one of the most challenging aspects of Housing First.

In most interviews, providers said that, where they could, they chose what accommodation to include. For example, one housing association chose not to use flats in high rises due to historic issues of managing temporary accommodation in those blocks and the then ongoing Hackitt Review. In some cases, however, nomination agreements restricted associations in their choice of property. A housing provider found in one county, where the County Council had commissioned the service, that the District/Borough Councils agreed initially, but then blocked use of properties as they had 100% nomination rights. Others mentioned internal teams or existing residents trying to block the use of properties due to prior knowledge of the

client or an expectation of tenancy issues. For ideas on how to manage these issues, see the sections on [Tenancy and housing management](#) and [Managing behaviour](#).

Housing associations requested pre-allocation information to help with finding a property. This could be background information as requested through standard referral forms and procedures, or a more detailed history of the client that included housing history, mental and physical health needs, substance misuse needs, learning disabilities, financial management, existing support networks, and behavioural issues. The information allowed providers and partners to assess clients (including whether they were a risk to the public) to help identify suitable properties that would meet their individual needs. One support provider said that the key information in terms of placement was identifying any possible risks to the public.

Our research found that the housing providers took an active role in giving the client a choice in where to live. The participants mentioned helping clients select areas or properties. Because they were keen “not to set clients up to fail”, they would carry out checks on selected properties and/or only make offers in specific areas in order to match appropriate properties to the clients. For example, they did not offer clients accommodation in areas with a known drug issue, if the client had a history of substance misuse. In another example, clients were not housed in properties where neighbours had previously complained about noise. The participants also mentioned they avoided placing clients in blocks with leaseholders, because the tenant would be “hounded by complaints”, as well as adapting available properties to meet certain requirements (e.g. soundproofing). (See also “[Managing behaviour](#)” below.)

In addition, to help find “the right property” for the client, they considered the client’s own choice alongside information from their internal teams and partners on the client’s history, as well as knowledge of the local area from other tenancies.

Housing associations also had access to information that the support provider might not, such as a client’s anti-social behaviour history or the proximity of a previous partner who perpetrated domestic abuse. One participant mentioned having a data sharing agreement in place to share information about a client with partners to ensure the needs of the client were fully understood.

One support provider believed furnishings were important to starting well. In general, support providers had a personalisation budget and/or the housing provider might furnish or provide white goods (or safety check goods left by a previous tenant) for the property. Participants also mentioned sourcing furniture

from third party donors, such as local churches, or securing deals from companies that provide furniture packages.

A2Dominion's reflections on offering accommodation

A2Dominion's preferred Housing First delivery model was an all-in-one housing and support service. They sought to engage with the client and really understand their needs. Although it was important that the offer of accommodation was made quickly, understanding the client's needs was fundamental to the success of the placement. A2Dominion advocated a "shared ownership of processes" that involved the client, as well as all relevant stakeholders and partners, to ensure the placement worked smoothly and encouraged progress.

Tenancy and housing management

When it came to housing management, landlords found that the support provided meant delivering Housing First was no harder than for other properties. One association was "quietly pleased" that it did not "cost any more to deliver a landlord service to Housing First compared to any other general needs property". None of the housing providers charged for intensive or enhanced housing management. Any additional costs were absorbed into their existing operating model.

To assess the outcomes of Housing First and measure its success, housing providers used tenancy and housing management measures. Mostly this was on tenancy sustainment, but it could include antisocial behaviour. One housing provider looked at rent arrears, the upkeep of property and communal areas, and tenancy sustainment.

Participants mentioned adapting their policies and approaches with internal teams – such as lettings, neighbourhoods and income – along with training and meetings, to make sure everyone understood the model, and how to manage it. One association said that although they began managing a Housing First property within supported housing, they intended to move the management to general needs after 12 months. More than one participant spoke of a joint approach with the support provider, so if there were any problems, then officers knew to call the support provider in the first instance. One participant had a contact plan in place for each Housing First resident, agreeing the level of contact. It was also important for both clients and support providers to have a relationship with the Housing Officer.

A housing and support provider had some clients going through tenancy actions, but no failed tenancies. Another support provider confirmed that none of the clients they supported had been subject to legal action. A housing provider said that, although they had some challenges with engagement, there was always a reasonable reason behind it, and clients were not as transient as they had initially feared. Participants gave examples of failed tenancies, but these were not common and there were no common themes as to why they failed.

Case study from Citizen on approach to enforcement

Enforcement was a joint approach, shared with the support provider. Like most providers, Citizen have an initial, automated rent arrears process, and clients know that, in their case, any arrears letter will go straight to the support provider who will then discuss it with them.

Case study from Hightown on housing management

Clients live in general needs properties, but housing management is through the Care and Supported Housing Team, who are responsible for sign up and tenancy management. There are flags on the system to let colleagues in Maintenance/Repairs and Income Recovery know to contact the Housing First Coordinator in case of any issues. Hightown found involvement with other departments was helpful in the management the tenancy.

Staffing, recruitment and training

Most of the housing providers we spoke to as part of the research had not recruited new staff to manage the tenancy. They used existing staff, with additional training or held joint sessions with the support provider to explain the Housing First model and how it would work in practice.

Support providers, however, did recruit new support workers. Support workers were required to have the right mix of skills (outreach, substance misuse, housing experience) and be flexible in both character and working times. One housing and support provider said four unsuccessful recruitment rounds led to significant delays to delivering their Housing First service.

A support provider said their staff were “the ingredients of success”. They advised getting the right support staff, paying them well and taking care of them. They were “very proud of the achievements with staff”.

In general, participants said any training was an extension of their existing offer, with one provider saying it was easy to identify gaps in knowledge from the history of the client and undertake further training.

Managing behaviour

When participants were asked about their experience managing of antisocial behaviour (ASB), we found the approach taken was different for each association:

- One housing association, based in the South West, logged an ASB complaint on their system and passed the information to the support provider, who then would speak with the client and with the Neighbourhood Officer. The housing association was responsible for speaking to the complainants.
- A London and South East housing and support provider had an ASB Officer (with knowledge of Housing First) who would visit the property and resolve the complaint with tolerance and support plans. For them it was important to do “what can we do to hold those [client] behaviours safely”.
- A housing provider in the Midlands said they had no disproportionate increase in ASB complaints, but experienced “more lifestyle issues than tenancy enforcement...in a lot of cases [the clients] want to keep themselves to themselves”.
- A South East housing provider and their support provider spoke with the client about the tenancy and expectations before they accepted the property. They tended to get a spike in ASB at the beginning of the tenancy, though this was not unique to Housing First. To address the problem, they acted quickly and took a joint approach with the support provider – visiting the property to understand the client’s version of events. They found that for most residents “that’s enough, they are all very committed to making that tenancy work”.
- Another housing provider also acted quickly – the client was contacted within 24 hours to carry out a risk assessment and determine the support needs. An action plan was put in place to explain what would happen if the behaviour continued. The support agency also contacted the client and spoke with the housing association about the outcome, after which both the housing provider and the support provider arranged a joint visit to client.

A housing provider in the South reported ASB from existing residents towards clients in smaller communities, where the client was well known in the area. They said that although being visible in a small community could be a positive - one client had been “really embraced” by their community - for others it led to malicious complaints. The housing provider recorded these as complaints then worked to understand the reason for the complaint and a possible resolution. Because of these challenges, it was important for the housing associations to consider the area and the client’s ASB history when finding properties.

Case study from Two Saints on behaviour

Two Saints found it helpful get to know the neighbourhood and the neighbours. They engaged with the neighbours and other services, such as the police, and encouraged them to call “if there’s a problem”. They also encouraged neighbours to call them rather than “automatically call the police” if the situation merited it. They said, “good neighbourhood management is key, especially in the early days.”

Most of their clients generally kept to themselves, but there were some occasions when the clients’ behaviour could affect their neighbours, such as playing loud music. They spoke with the clients about how to manage their tenancy and offered support, which also covered having “certain old friends visit”, which could put their accommodation at risk, but, at the same time, they acknowledged that it was the client’s home. They made the effort to “get to know their clients very well” and acknowledge that they had just come from “a complex situation, most likely rough sleeping, so a period of adjustment with support [was] required for them in their new situation”.

Fidelity to the Housing First principles

Although the aim of this research was not to assess whether housing associations were maintaining fidelity to the principles of Housing First, participants were asked about the principles that guide their service and how they ensured it met those of the model.

The participants shared that keeping fidelity was a challenge and required a lot of reflective practice. Housing associations were aware that they needed to maintain fidelity in order for the service to be Housing First. One housing and support provider spoke very passionately about the principles, saying it was the reason they wanted to do Housing First and, given the success rate, “there’s no

point deviating from that model”. Fidelity was particularly an issue when it came to giving clients choice and control in selecting properties, given the considerations described in this report.

Reflective practice was used to maintain fidelity. One participant, providing housing and support, believed that “any decent organisation should have policies like this”, the biggest differences for them in delivering Housing First was the right to housing and the open-ended support.

One other fidelity issue raised by one association was housing couples where only one of the partners was a Housing First client. This might be a survivor of domestic abuse who was not tied to a tenancy agreement in case they wanted to flee the tenancy, or a partner who does not have needs. If the partner was not part of Housing First, it could be much more challenging if they were the one putting the tenancy at risk.

Three associations spoke of “Housing First-type” models. These might have similar principles, but were not a Housing First project:

“A lot of people are talking about Housing First, but the fidelity model is not being followed. The more interest and traction in Housing First, the more people will add interest to it and move away from the fidelity model and that will be a shame”.

Another provider also touched on this as they found that even after working out the processes there were issues in practice because “one organisation’s understanding of what Housing First is [differed] from another’s”.

One participant was hopeful that similar models could be used for certain groups (such as care leavers) or for blocks of self-contained accommodation. They had just opened a building with self-contained accommodation for ten clients with intensive and peer support on site. As the units were not dispersed, it couldn’t be called a Housing First model, but they found the results to be “really good” and much better than the hostel model.

The challenges of delivering Housing First

The previous section picked out a number of challenges in delivering Housing First, namely finding properties, maintaining fidelity, neighbourhood management and recruitment. There were some additional challenges that

repeatedly came up in interviews, specifically [risk management](#), [practicalities of delivery](#), [being “at the table”](#) and [nominations](#).

Risk management

Board and executive teams were keen to understand risks to the organisation taking part in Housing First.

The biggest risk mentioned in interviews was around support funding. The support funding came through grants (mainly from MHCLG) and commissioned by local authorities on short-term contracts. Typically, the funding was for one to three years at a time, though one support provider, an outlier, had a seven-year support contract in one area.

Short-term funding was the biggest concern for most of the housing associations we interviewed. The uncertainty was mainly focused on what would happen to the support for their tenant, and their ability to sustain the tenancy, if the funding stopped. One housing association said “if the funding for support stops that person is left without a service”. They feared that if the client was placed in a general needs property (the housing association used supported housing) they would only be contacted “when there [was] an issue, which is sometimes too late”.

A support provider reassured housing providers they worked with saying, “it might sound like a year [of support funding], but our experience is that it doesn’t end, you find a way. If the worst comes to the worst, you don’t drop people, you just stop taking new ones”. They recommended giving “long contracts, as long possible, with plenty of extensions attached to them” to mitigate the uncertainty as “organisations like to invest and need assurance”.

One housing association said that one of the main lessons they learned from delivering Housing First, was to review the first year of operation fully before committing to year two. Recruitment delays meant that their first year started late and the second year funding bid came before they had completed a full review. The funding for the first year was determined before they were involved and the same price envelope was agreed for the second year. They now find that the complexity of the clients means the funding is not enough to support an increased caseload.

Other areas of risk management, already mentioned under delivery, included finding suitable properties and neighbourhood management.

How it works in practice

Participants repeatedly mentioned the time it took to establish services and support clients into their homes. They said the amount of time should not be underestimated and “it’s not about rushing it”.

A stumbling block found by some was that, although they might agree the approach with partners or internal teams, there were still issues in practice. One housing association said they worked with partners to develop processes, but “things look different in reality to on paper. You might agree something at a meeting but then the person who needs to press the button doesn’t necessarily understand the project”.

Early involvement with partners and with internal teams was key to shaping the service, sharing information and creating shared ownership. One participant found that, once the client was housed, daily discussions between their Neighbourhoods team and the support provider helped, as did having a single point of contact for the support provider in the Neighbourhoods team. Another, a support provider, spoke of “myth busting” to challenge preconceived notions that clients would cause anti-social behaviour when clients kept to themselves.

Being flexible and yet clear on practical service delivery and processes was a challenge. While agreement on services and processes was needed, for example, on referral pathways and criteria, this created a fidelity issue because as one participant said, “there’s a tension between the person-centred way and a tight enough structure that is still flexible”. Flexibility needed trust, which was a key element in partnerships and supporting clients. Partners who trusted each other enough to step outside of normal processes or procedures found Housing First easier to deliver. If the housing association had existing relationships with the local authorities, or were able to build trust quickly, then they faced fewer challenges in getting sign off on clients or properties.

Being “at the table”

The participants were keen to highlight that the housing providers had to be a key partner for Housing First to work successfully. Landlords wanted to be equal partners to help the clients sustain their tenancies.

When housing associations entered into discussions on service set-up later than the local authority and support provider, this created issues if the provider, or responsible team within the housing association, was not able to shape and adapt

their service. It could also restrict the service offered or result in ignoring the needs and/or concerns of the housing providers during set up.

In the case of one housing association we interviewed, they were approached separately from the support provider, despite the participant's request that they meet together. They suggested that the local authorities perhaps did not realise that Housing First should "be a tripartite arrangement with the commissioner, the landlord and the support provider", in order to work effectively and run smoothly.

The housing associations were also keen to emphasise how important it was to involve landlords in early discussions between the commissioner and support provider. They felt the model worked best if they were an "active landlord", and could develop specific procedures for the clients and not let the support provider manage the tenancy.

Nominations

Nominations also presented a challenge for the housing associations delivering Housing First. One association spoke of "working around nomination agreements". Another experienced local authorities with 100% nomination rights blocking Housing First lets.

One housing provider was keen to use the model, but did not have the nomination rights on their stock. As a result, they were dependent on local authorities to allow them to use properties. In their experience, although local authorities seemed enthusiastic, few had progressed the model. The provider thought this might be because of a nervousness about the clients being seen as "queue jumpers", political disinterest, or because it didn't fit with the current allocations policy.

There is evidence to show that as housing associations become more experienced in providing Housing First, local authorities are then more inclined to work with them. One housing provider found that initially local authorities did not want to commit to the project, or did not want to commit in the way the provider wanted to deliver it. However, they have seen an increase in demand from local authorities since they started providing the service, stating, "more local authorities are willing to have conversations and listen to us as a landlord who already provides Housing First".

Main successes in delivering Housing First

The section on [delivering Housing First](#) picked up some of the successes, including tenancy management and staff, but the main successes picked out by participants were [sustained tenancies](#) and [partnership working](#). Two housing associations were also conducting formal evaluations, including a cost-benefit analysis, to understand the impacts better.

Sustained tenancies

The housing associations were particularly proud of the success they had with tenancy sustainment.

The Housing First clients of were often already known to the housing and support providers; some may have previously been housed by them. One housing association said that in most cases, if Housing First did not exist, they might have housed them through another service:

“we’d have picked them up in hostel or general needs accommodation, maybe in a revolving door, failing in tenancy [pattern]”.

To them, the merit of Housing First was that it prevented homelessness and helped people sustain tenancies. The participants were proud that complex individuals, many of whom had been rough sleeping for years, had stayed in their home. One participant housed two people they would not have been able to, if the Housing First support was not available. One of the clients was housed in a new build property, which was seen as a sign of trust. Another mentioned that a client had sustained tenancy in their property for 20 months.

A support provider said although there were challenges they were proud of their clients:

“With some people we’ve had a bit of a bumpy ride, or are still on a bumpy ride, we’re not out of the woods. The first person we moved in is probably the most chaotic person I have ever met. But, she is still in that property, she hasn’t lost it after nearly a year. We’re 10 months down the line and that’s probably the longest she’s stayed anywhere.”

Partnership working

Partnership working was a success of Housing First for many participants (while also presenting challenges, as described in the [previous section](#)). One housing association said the collaborative approach between partners was no different from the fundamental relationship between a Housing First support officer and client:

“That ethos is extended to relationships with commissioners and internally, it helps with the whole set up being about person-centred core conditions and making that part of what we do...the Housing First project we’re doing is part of our psychologically-informed environment work and that’s about embedding it in real person-centred processes”.

Another participant said that the joint working with their support provider meant they were “positively enjoying Housing First, there’s no downside, no worries about waiting for this or that”. A support provider said some of the successes were in the partnerships with local authorities and housing providers and the buy-in that comes from this. One housing association was also proud of the partnership working and the work within the organisation to take a different approach with Housing First clients.

Conclusion and recommendations

Recommendations

This research has investigated housing associations’ experiences of delivering Housing First. We have developed a number of recommendations from the research findings.

- The government and commissioners should ensure contracts for support are long-term, and funded as such. This is to minimise the risks to Housing First clients, support providers and landlords.
- Commissioners and support providers should see housing associations as key partners in delivering Housing First. Housing associations should be involved in setting services up so that they can adapt policies and processes. This also means local authorities and support providers would know the number and location of homes provided and determine how Housing First fits with allocations and nominations.
- Housing associations, commissioners and support providers should have clear and consistent lines of communication with external partners and internal teams to deliver Housing First. This might include a formal service

level and/or data sharing agreements, (e-)panels and named contacts. The benefits of doing so are a shared understanding and clarity of Housing First, the ability to share information to help the client, internal knowledge of what policies and approaches to follow with clients, and awareness of who to contact within the housing association or support provider should there be any issues.

- Housing associations should have open conversations internally about what delivering Housing First will look like in practice. All teams should be involved in thinking about and shaping the service delivery.
- If a housing association wants to start delivering Housing First, they should start small and not overestimate throughput of clients. Housing associations should review the outcomes and costs in full before applying for further funding or projects.
- Housing associations could use some of the principles of the model (such as harm reduction) in all tenancy management.
- Housing associations could develop new types of supported schemes using elements of the Housing First model, such as the principle of being housing-led.

The housing associations we spoke to were proud of the great successes they had with Housing First in terms of housing clients with complex needs and chaotic lives and how these individuals had sustained their tenancies. These individuals were not likely to have been successfully housed without the support available through Housing First. While there were some challenges in delivery, the housing associations felt the model really worked; they “positively enjoyed Housing First” and were “quietly pleased” that it was no more expensive to manage than a general needs property. Many of the participants were actively looking to expand their involvement in Housing First.