



Housing First and its impact in the **community**

Housing First in the community

The impact of Housing First on local areas, stakeholders and other services

Housing First England

Homeless Link's Housing First England project was created to promote development and support Housing First services across England. The project aims to increase and sustain the use of Housing First in England (where appropriate for a specific cohort) and promote activities that focus on leadership, research, and supporting practice.

This research was jointly funded by Lankelly Chase and Comic Relief.

<https://hfe.homeless.org.uk>

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Overview

This research explores the impact of Housing First services on wider stakeholders, other services and communities by identifying key positive themes and some of the limitations and challenges of this approach.

Apart from one interviewee, all of those interviewed had a positive opinion of Housing First and its impact on their local area. In general, they were knowledgeable about the project although sometimes had misunderstood certain elements of the model (for example, about the permanent offer of housing). Most people interviewed had close relationships with the project or those being supported.

Methodology

We conducted 17 telephone interviews with stakeholders from eight different areas known to have a Housing First service. All interviews were recorded and transcribed except two; one of which was undertaken anonymously with some notes made, and another not recorded due to the interviewee being hard of hearing and recording made the researcher harder to hear.

Participants

Interviews were sought with a range of people. We used a method of snowball sampling by asking Housing First services to recommend potential participants. As a result, we were generally referred to people who were well known to Housing First projects and, therefore, only conducted interviews with those with a relatively good knowledge of, and relationship with, the Housing First service. Consequently, a possible limitation of this research is that the responses are skewed towards those who have a more positive view of the project.

Interviewees came from a range of professional backgrounds including:

- Four police officers, two of these worked in Safer Neighbourhoods Teams (local community policing)
- One community safety officer
- Five hostel or housing project managers running other projects within the area
- Three council officers managing a range of homelessness services - a rough sleeping coordinator, housing options manager and resettlement services manager
- One mental health assertive outreach manager
- One team leader working in healthcare delivery with the homeless population
- One anti-social behaviour team leader
- One manager of the local Business Improvement District.

It proved particularly difficult to arrange interviews with any workers from social care or mental health services.

Findings

The key themes from the interviews were:

Improved engagement with services

Most interviewees reported that people were engaging better with Housing First than they had done with other projects or initiatives in the past. This was felt to be due to the flexibility and persistence of the workers who had taken the time to build trust with the person and this was seen as important. Overall, Housing First workers were regularly praised in interviews.

"It's not repeating the mistakes of the past, of being stuffy and clipboard-y. [The Housing First worker] has the right skills, the right engagement and set of skills."

It was also felt that some people being supported in a Housing First service were also engaging better with other stakeholders when working to achieve and sustain a stable home. This included those who had not engaged in the past - to the surprise of some interviewees. For example, a few people being supported by Housing First had managed to maintain a hostel placement for the first time because they knew that it was a temporary measure while they waited for permanent housing.

"It was great just to see her face, the house they got her, the journey. ...She was so convinced she would fail. I mean, underneath all her hardness...there's a deep vulnerability... and it was great to see her respond to that fact that she could have a chance."

Better outcomes for individuals

The respondents reported that some residents had reduced their substance use while others had not, which mirrors national and international evidence.¹ The police reported reductions in offending behaviour that were often quite significant. There were many reports of improved wellbeing, either where the worker felt that Housing First had literally saved someone's life, or where overall happiness had improved. Examples of this related to reconnections with family and feelings of a positive future ahead.

"[It's] successful because every one of them in my opinion, had got into a situation where they felt there was no other life available to them, other than what they had right there and then, which was nothing. Being out there, on the streets. Maybe getting in and out of hostels occasionally. Getting kicked out. There was just a real whole negative cycle really."

"Well it's police, it's courts, it's A&E, it's everyone involved...He's been transient for all that time, whether it's in bail hostels or bedsits, sofa surfing. His problems haven't gone away, he's still got alcohol issues, but the anti-social behaviour, the crimes, the offences, they're just not there anymore."

¹ https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238368/ending_rough_sleeping_what_works_2017.pdf

Decreased workload and pressure

In general, the provision of Housing First is perceived by the respondents to decrease and improve workload pressure of wider service providers. This seemed to be particularly relevant for police, community safety and anti-social behaviour teams.

From the interviews, it was clear that the police could be significant beneficiaries of Housing First operating in their communities, particularly in small towns where a fairly low number of key individuals could be causing a lot of anti-social behaviour. As a result of the Housing First intervention the police reflected an enormous amount of time and energy was saved e.g. in arrests. In some cases, the Housing First worker was able to remind residents about court appearances which was also considered as positive. However, interviewees also said that there could also be increased callouts relating to anti-social behaviour at properties occupied by Housing First residents.

"Yes, if I arrest an individual for theft, it can take hours to do... So even if it is a simple theft, minimum three to four hours plus. So, not to have to do that with somebody who is regularly doing it, makes a massive difference, because we're not impacted by their behaviour. However, conversely, with an individual as difficult to deal with as the other person, it took a lot of time, initially, because of the number of visits and trying to get them in the right place and get it right for them. But that's not an impact from [Housing First]. That's just an impact from the individual who is so chaotic, in terms of their substance abuse."

In some areas, robust information sharing protocols were in place between the Housing First service and the police which has enabled agencies to locate people more quickly and easily and for information about their activity. The police could pass messages to people in a Housing First service via the Housing First worker and in one area, the Housing First worker would share case notes with relevant agencies who could use them in their own records.

"I mean, from our point of view, anything that takes away the calls for service from us is obviously positive. It's great for us because we can focus on other matters, and it's great for the individual because they're not getting locked up".

The presence of a Housing First service in a community was also said to enable other agencies to have more time to focus on key issues. Once housed, individuals whose previous contact with services had been time consuming and ineffective, were able to receive more focussed support. For example, one service mentioned being free to focus on mental health interventions rather than spending the time offering housing related support; outside their area of expertise.

In some cases, the presence of a Housing First service was said to increase the workload of external agencies. However, this was often seen as a positive indication of engagement and progress and might involve attending extra meetings or completing referral forms. Only one interviewee was less positive as they felt they were being asked to prioritise or respond quickly to people who were accessing Housing First over others (health service). In some cases, the extra work could be generated by accompanying the Housing First worker to visits. This was occasionally necessary when an individual represented a high risk but again was felt to be a positive as there was engagement taking place.

Addressing a gap in local service provision

Several interviewees highlighted that there was a group of people in their community for whom no previous interventions or services had been successful. They recognised that these were the people that Housing First services worked best for and understood that Housing First services could meet this need in their community. Interviews felt that while Housing First wasn't suitable for everyone, it was appropriate for specific people.

[Without Housing First] I think definitely that there are people who are in accommodation that wouldn't be in accommodation right now. I think, unfortunately, we would have seen more deaths on the streets. I would be really fearful as to where they would have been. They were in really poor health when they came into us."

It was clear from several interviews that some stakeholders were very much involved in the support of Housing First residents. The relief at having a suitable referral option and seeing improvements in their lives was tangible in several interviews with the stakeholders interviewed. Those respondents who worked for local authorities also reported the relief at being able to respond positively to enquiries about well-known individuals from elected members of the council.

Participants working in hostels and other services also expressed positive feelings and a sense of relief at being able to refer to Housing First. They all described working with individuals that, without Housing First, would have had no appropriate housing and support option. Some of these people were 'stuck' in hostel accommodation or at risk of eviction.

Improved joint working and cross sector support

Most interviewees felt that effective joint working was well-established prior to the development of a Housing First service. Pre-existing inter-agency meetings were useful to discuss Housing First residents and several interviewees mentioned that they attended regular meetings or case conferences. The Housing First worker was reported to play a useful role in coordinating or leading these meetings.

"So, the idea is that [the Housing First worker], wherever they are, will coordinate with the various statutory and non-statutory partners, or people who have an interest, or people who can help, and coordinate getting them to one place at one time, to discuss the individual. Work out who is doing what. If people aren't doing something, why aren't they doing it; whether they are going to do it? How are they going to do it? And it's just getting all the interested parties who can potentially make a difference, so who can definitely make a difference to a person's behaviour, life, prison, whatever it may be, getting them all together in one place, to work out who is doing what, to share information. ...So, it's having all that information in one place, easily accessible, with the professionals who know their policies, their procedures, and we can say, "Why hasn't this been done? We don't understand. We thought this was happening." And they'd say, "Well, actually, unfortunately, it falls outside of this policy." Or, "We've got to do this first. Can somebody chase up the psychiatrist for the assessment?" "Yes, we can do that, and we'll email everybody back in the next few days, to explain that one."

Some new relationships between different external teams and services were built through Housing First including with Housing Benefit, Mental Health and Social Services teams. One interviewee detailed an initially challenging relationship they had with both Mental Health and Social Service teams that had improved over time once they gained a better sense of the purpose of the Housing First service. Once these relationships had developed, they remained strong which was beneficial in future cases.

Nearly all interviewees reported good relationships with the Housing First team. However, our research may be skewed as we struggled to contact some agencies (e.g. mental health services) and it is likely that we only spoke to those who had strong working relationships with the service already. However, most interviewees talked positively about being able to work with the Housing First staff. They mentioned being able to work collaboratively to discuss and reflect on cases and to coordinate activities. Having a consistent point of contact for a client was also regarded as a helpful element to the service.

Catalyst for wider culture and systems change

A small number of interviewees felt the Housing First service had enabled learning and reflection on their own working practices. Most interviewees felt that their own services were already effective, whereas a few reported to have altered their own practice as a direct result of the presence of Housing First.

For example, one person felt that their agency had learnt to be more flexible in order to support people who would otherwise have quickly received warnings or been excluded. It had been acknowledged prior to the onset of Housing First but they had since operationalised an approach to supporting individuals while avoiding warning and exclusions where possible more widely.

Another agency was reportedly working in a more person-centred as a result of seeing the Housing First service. Previously they might have enforced a penalty for certain behaviours but through work with a Housing First service user they had taken a new approach in distinguishing between the individual and their behaviour. This has now been rolled out to other people using the service.

Another agency had reconsidered the way they support people. Prior to seeing the Housing First service approach, they had sought to work with an individual on a range of issues with a view of moving them through the service. In emulating the Housing First approach they are now more likely to prioritise what they think is of current importance to the individual.

“So, we had one guy. He would come in, and he was absolutely...drunk, and we would find him asleep in the corridor, on the floor, face down .the other clients, if they didn’t change that behaviour, we would start escalating warnings for them. Whereas, we didn’t with him. We would just put him to bed, and worked with him to stay in service .The focus became about working in a way that we were saying to him, “We want you, we just don’t want this behaviour,” and I think that sort of approach has widened to the more general people that are coming into resettlement, as well...”

Some interviewees also reported that their own service had made adaptations in order to meet the need of individuals supported by Housing First. They talked about having tried and failed in the past with this client group. As such the system needed to change and services needed to become more flexible.

“It is in my best interests to try and work differently with this client group, who were entrenched, non-engaging, and were quite happy with that. Something had to give, and I felt that, as a professional service, it needed to be us, rather than them. If that makes sense?”

Impact on the community

All interviewees were asked about the impact of Housing First on the local community. Generally, those working for local authorities or the police had more information about this than those working in other services.

The impact in smaller towns and cities was more significant compared to larger urban areas where the impact of a Housing First service was less noticeable. This observation is likely to be because of the larger numbers of the street population in the big towns and cities. Comparatively, in smaller urban areas where a well-known group of people hanging around the town centre were then supported by Housing First, the public, police and businesses had reported noticing the absence of some of them.

"So, in terms of the local community, everybody's benefited through it. The police have benefited. The local community has benefited. Shopkeepers have benefited, as well the city centre. The tourism has benefited, because it wasn't great to see the stuff that would go on...It's not nice for anybody to witness, and it's certainly not nice for him to go through that, and the same could be said for the majority of the guys that we've done this with on Housing First."

Nonetheless, even in large cities, people also noticed the absence of some people who had been extremely prominent in the community after they were supported through Housing First.

In some cases, Housing First was used as part of a range of initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour and one interviewee stressed that it was difficult to attribute the full impact of Housing First, although it had had some impact.

"I can think of two individuals whose alcohol or substance abuse has, in the past, negatively impacted businesses in the town centre, tourism in the town centre, locals using their town centre, so on and so forth. Over the past couple of years there's been various things that have...had an impact on that. But, certainly, having them receive the sort of attention they've received from [Housing First].. it's not a small part of why we're seeing less ASB from them. Because they are housed, they are more comfortable, they're happier."

Some interviewees also reported an increase in anti-social behaviour and other neighbourhood challenges in the specific areas where those supported by Housing First were accommodated. There were several examples of neighbours complaining about anti-social behaviour after Housing First residents had moved in. However, this was often felt to be related to the presence of other people taking advantage of the Housing First resident, e.g. taking over their flat to deal drugs (known as cuckooing). One interviewee stressed the importance of carefully selecting the location of housing and avoiding areas where residents had previously experienced significant anti-social behaviour. It was felt that this helped to reduce the impact on neighbours and increased the chance of integration for the client. The comments from other interviewees suggest that taking this careful approach could potentially have helped to avoid the issues they experienced.

"it's making sure that the right person moves in, and we do that anyway where we possibly can. If it's somebody who is known to my service for causing issues in the community. If we're moving people into a property whereby there's been a history of antisocial behaviour, and nuisance and crime, we don't want to subject the community to that anymore. But on the side of the client, actually what we want to do is make sure that they're able to integrate in the community as well."

Limitations and challenges

Although the perception of Housing First was generally positive, interviewees did express some challenges and limitations to the approach.

In some cases, **workload could increase** for some agencies in dealing with anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood complaints when a client had been accommodated. This was sometimes felt to be due to a particularly difficult neighbour who had complaints about the Housing First resident, or as a result of the property being unsuitable. While it was certainly the case that responding to these issues was resource intensive, one police officer pointed out that one individual concerned had a history of anti-social behaviour that they had been dealing with anyway and the positive outcomes were worth the resource investment.

It also became apparent that the interviewees felt there was a **misunderstanding of the Housing First service** by some people. This included a perception that those offered the service were being rewarded for bad behaviour, a feeling that beneficiaries should show signs of engagement before being referred to the service, and in one case that the project ought to be aiming towards getting people into employment.

A common misconception was that 'Housing First' was **simply quick access to housing** and should be offered to anyone who found themselves homeless rather than those with complex support needs. This was particularly challenging if public figures, such as MPs, demanded it for individuals who did not meet the criteria, and providers of Housing First could be criticised for not offering it to larger groups of people.

"For example, if you go into any meeting with probation, 'Housing First, Housing First, Housing First', it's all they talk about for all their clients, and it's like, "Well, at the end of the day, Housing First is a specialist thing, in my opinion. It's not just for everybody."

Other interviewees expressed **concern about the inequity of referrals** to the project reporting that other single homeless people questioned why they hadn't been selected for the service or feeling that their peers were able to get their own home despite behaving in a way that could be viewed as unacceptable. This could be a genuine challenge in areas where there is not enough accommodation for everyone who needs it.

"Oh, so you get to do this, this and this? Then you get rewarded by a Gold Star service." We are like, "No, that's not what it is."

"They'll say, "Well, how come he can behave like this, and get his own flat?" So, there is an element of that that we have to manage."

Another concern was for residents of a Housing First service who may be evicted as the interviewee was unaware of the permanent offer of housing. Another respondent was concerned that support would end once someone was housed; including access to specific health and support services for people sleeping rough without having access to other usable options. Another issue related to stakeholders believing that Housing First was a comprehensive service leading to other services closing cases rather than recognising that their ongoing support was essential.

Finding suitable housing was also a significant challenge. In some areas it was reported to be extremely difficult to source private rented or social housing meaning some individuals referred to Housing First had to wait for a long time. Several interviewees pointed out how essential it was to have the right type of housing in the right location. Even in areas where housing supply was less limited, it could be challenging to find housing

that would give the resident the best possible chance. One interviewee also reported a lack of immediately accessible temporary accommodation for those waiting for permanent housing. This meant that individuals moved in either straight from the street, chaotic night shelters or hostels and it was felt that alternative interim accommodation (e.g. B&B) would enable them to break some of their lifestyle habits prior to moving to a permanent home. In cases where hostel accommodation was used as an interim, there was a significant cost to the hostel provider relating to unpaid rent and service charges.

As mentioned previously, there were several cases reported of **neighbourhood complaints** of anti-social behaviour of Housing First residents; often as a result of vulnerable Housing First clients being targeted by others. In some cases, neighbour complaints were thought to be justified but others were deemed as overstated or unfair reactions. Nonetheless, this highlighted that there could be issues for neighbours which in turn can cause issues for Housing First residents and other professionals.

"I think for us as a provider of housing, it's having the right type of property in the right location at the right time. That's what we're struggling with...For us, it's getting single units at affordable rents in appropriate locations that we are not setting somebody up to fail but also- That's twofold. That we are not placing them in the thick of it where they might relapse further but also at the same time, we are not sticking them somewhere where neighbours are very low tolerance with regard to any kind of activity and would be very judgemental."

The **current and future capacity of the Housing First service** was also a concern for some interviewees. It was felt that there could be a potential challenge for the Housing First workers in managing residents needs despite the low caseloads e.g. if all residents were in crisis at the same time. Due to the extremely high support needs of residents it was felt that Housing First was hugely time-consuming work which could place pressure on workers who were thought to need a great deal of resilience. Housing First provision was felt to be expensive because of the staff-client ratio and so while services were viewed positively, the cost could be a challenge for expanding the project further. In addition, one interviewee expressed concern that while the project offered support for as long as it was required, an uncertain funding environment might make this unsustainable to deliver.

Concerns were reported around **wider service involvement and differences in approaches**. Although nearly all the interviewees we spoke to as part of this research had a positive relationship with Housing First through their own services, other services were not felt to be fully participating; this included mental health services, social care and mainstream health provision (although there were also some examples where these services were involved effectively).

"I think it just needs to be a little bit more joined up with a number of other service providers, such as healthcare, mental health, addiction services, employment services. Just a bit more of a package."

"You're not coming to us just to get a house. You're coming with us to try and make sure you're not in this situation again"

For the one interviewee who was generally less positive about Housing First the key issue was a clash of approaches. Their own organisation provided equal support and treatment for people and believed in supporting them to make positive life choices. They felt that Housing First prioritised certain people, especially those who had not taken steps to change their lives. There was concern about this.

Conclusion

This research provides an overview of the benefits and limitations of a Housing First service for local communities – services and stakeholders.

Overall, the presence of a Housing First service is deemed to improve residents' outcomes, increase effective inter-agency working and fill gaps in service provision and has a particularly positive impact on the workload of the police, community safety and anti-social behaviour teams. While anti-social behaviour in some cases remained problematic this was often deemed to be as a result of others - those using the property of the Housing First resident or overly concerned neighbours. In some cases, anti-social behaviour in properties was caused by individuals who had a history of this while homeless.

Several limitations and challenges were reported by interviewees, some of which are widely acknowledged such as limited housing supply and sustainable funding streams. Others highlight the need to ensure that the current use of Housing First and the key principles of the approach are properly understood by residents and everyone else who comes into contact with the services.

Overall, it is clear people working and living in communities with a Housing First service value the support it provides to people in their area. They can see a difference in outcomes for people that had previously found it difficult to engage with services and recognise that that has a positive impact on capacity and resources of other services in their area.



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness agencies and the wider housing with health, care and support sector. We work to improve services through evidence and learning, and to promote policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

Let's end homelessness together

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