

A stylized line drawing of a woman with long hair, her eyes closed in a peaceful expression. She is holding a house with a window and a heart on its front. The background is a dark blue gradient with several colored squares: orange, red, magenta, and blue. The text 'HOUSING FIRST IN ACTION' is written in large, bold, white capital letters.

HOUSING FIRST IN ACTION

Insights from five
European cities



HOUSING FIRST IN ACTION.

Insights from five European cities

Participating cities:

- Brno
- Glasgow
- Lisbon
- Lyon Metropole
- Vantaa

Authors

- Content – Solène Molard (Eurocities)
- Design – Marta Buces (Eurocities)
- Editing – Sarah Wray (external editor)
- Editing – Michaela Lednova (Eurocities)

Acknowledgement:

We would like to thank the representatives of the different cities and organisations that were interviewed for this report.

The information included in this report was collected as part of the 'Diplome d'université Logement d'Abord 2023-2024' organised by the Université Lumière Lyon 2 and l'Orspere-Samdarra with the support of Lyon Metropole. We thank the team and teachers of the Diploma. Particular thanks go to Nadyah Abdel Salam and Nicolas Berut for their guidance throughout this process.

To know more:

Eurocities is currently releasing episodes of the podcast 'Let's Start with a Home,' co-produced with the Housing First Europe Hub.

You can find it on eurocities.eu under 'Resources'.



Eurocities is the network of more than 200 cities in 38 countries, representing 130 million people, working together to ensure a good quality of life for all people. Through joint work, knowledge sharing and coordinated Europe-wide activity, the network ensures that cities and people are heard in Europe.



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction	3
Key messages	5
• Key findings and success factors for Housing First implementation	5
• Policy recommendations	6
Case studies – Insights from five European cities	7
• Brno – Czech Republic	8
• Glasgow – Scotland	12
• Lisbon – Portugal	16
• Lyon Metropole – France	20
• Vantaa – Finland	25
Conclusions	30

INTRODUCTION

Across Europe, almost 1.3 million people are estimated to be sleeping rough, staying in night shelters or temporary accommodation for homeless people¹. These figures show the work that still remains to be done to reach the objective of the Lisbon Declaration to end homelessness by 2030. Cities, as signatories of the Lisbon Declaration² remain committed to this ambition. As a network of cities, Eurocities advocates for localised policies adapted to each city's unique context, while promoting the mutual exchange of knowledge and experience to improve policy design and implementation. This publication aims to contribute to this effort by providing more details on the Housing First approach and its implementation in five European cities.

In the Housing First model, the provision of housing is combined with intensive but voluntary support to ensure an individualised approach to exit homelessness. Housing First stands out as one of the methods of supporting people experiencing homelessness with the strongest evidence of success. Across the world, many Housing First programmes have demonstrated a success rate of over 80%. This impressive evidence has led key stakeholders and institutions, such as the European Parliament³ in 2021, to advocate for the adoption of the Housing First model across Europe. However, as this report demonstrates, Housing First isn't a one-size-fits-all model that can be replicated identically in different countries. Cities and their partners have adjusted this approach to align with their specific contexts, resulting in many unique implementation models.

In Europe, a set of eight principles defined by the Housing First Europe Hub are usually considered as the core principles of the model. As demonstrated in this report, though, differences remain in the understanding of the scale that Housing First interventions should cover, from a targeted intervention model which guides service delivery for people with complex needs, to a system-wide approach where Housing First is seen as a philosophy that should guide service provision for all people experiencing homelessness.

¹ OECD (2024), [Population experiencing homelessness](#)

² [Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness](#), adopted on 21 June 2021.

³ European Parliament (2021), [Resolution on access to decent and affordable housing for all](#).

The eight core principles of Housing First, defined by the Housing First Europe Hub



Housing is a human right



Choice and control for service users



Separation of housing and treatment



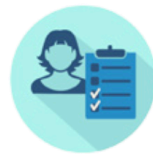
Recovery orientation



Harm reduction



Active engagement without coercion



Person-centred planning



Flexible Support for as Long as is Required

This report presents the implementation of Housing First in five European cities: Brno (Czech Republic), Glasgow (Scotland), Lisbon (Portugal), Lyon Metropole (France) and Vantaa (Finland). Rather than providing fidelity assessments of the Housing First programmes in each city, the report explores how a successful model can be adapted to different contexts and practices.

The selected cities represent varying contexts. For some, Housing First is supported through a national strategy, while others rely exclusively on a local ambition. Housing First programmes are implemented by partner organisations or directly by the municipalities and the approaches to mobilising housing strongly vary. Yet all the selected cities share one commonality: they have been frontrunners of Housing First implementation in Europe. Several cities were the first to implement it in their countries (Brno, Glasgow, Lisbon), while Finland has been one of the strongest promoters of this approach in Europe. Their experience and diverse implementation strategies of Housing First can therefore be a valuable tool for other cities or stakeholders wishing to implement their own programmes.

Image: The eight core principles of Housing First from the Housing First Europe Hub

KEY MESSAGES

Key findings and success factors for Housing First implementation

The analysis of Housing First implementation in Brno, Glasgow, Lisbon, Lyon Metropole and Vantaa shows that cities often play an essential role in developing, funding and implementing Housing First programmes. But they cannot do it alone. Successful homelessness policies and Housing First implementation require cooperation between levels of governments and stakeholders. National policies can prove essential to scaling up Housing First implementation, but sufficient funding should be provided to ensure intensive support and mobilisation of housing.

The report identifies several big challenges that stand in the way of successful efforts to scale up Housing First at the local level. Most cities experience challenges with regard to housing provision both from social and private markets. The difficulties in mobilising housing lead to long waiting times, restrictions on the number of service users and sometimes limitations on lease terms. Budgetary constraints affecting both local budgets as well as national policies that support Housing First implementation at the local level, compounded by the general social investment gap, can also hinder the ambition of ending homelessness by 2030.

Policy recommendations

To support Housing First implementation across Europe, cities call for the following actions:

- Ensure that the upcoming European anti-poverty strategy includes a strong focus on homelessness by proposing a Council recommendation for an enabling framework towards the eradication of homelessness.

This recommendation should recognise and support cities' role in combatting homelessness, taking into account the unique challenges that local authorities face when implementing homelessness policies. A homelessness framework should include a strong focus on Housing First as well as ensuring that alternative forms of support are available, in particular for individuals not included in Housing First programmes.

- The European Union and member states to reinforce policies and funding to ensure sufficient social and affordable housing.

Cities welcome the nomination of an EU Commissioner dedicated to housing as well as the commitments of the new European Commission regarding investment to support social and affordable housing. Plans and strategies should be designed and implemented in close collaboration with cities to ensure take-up on the ground. Besides additional funding for social and affordable housing, close attention needs to be paid to allocation policies to ensure that the most vulnerable can access housing, including people experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion.

- Boost funding available for city governments and their partners to scale up Housing First.

While there is strong evidence that Housing First can play a key role in ending homelessness, budgetary limitations currently stand in the way of any ambition to scale up this approach. Sustainable funding frameworks combining national, European and private funding should focus on pairing people and place-based social investments with investment in infrastructures. The accessibility of EU funds to local governments should be simplified and further financing opportunities need to be explored in close collaboration with cities.

- Reinforce the focus on the local level in the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness.

While great progress has been made on the adoption of national strategies to combat homelessness, their effective implementation requires the involvement of local governments. The European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) can play a key role in supporting the development and implementation of local strategies that include Housing First by providing dedicated training, data collection and knowledge exchange opportunities that are accessible directly to cities.



CASE STUDIES. INSIGHTS FROM FIVE EUROPEAN CITIES



Case study

BRNO

Czech Republic

- **Budget:** €24 million for 2.5 years (not including management by the city). This project is funded by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) with a small amount of co-financing from the city.
- **Number of Housing First tenancies:** 60 households, including 20 with targeted allocations (five seniors, five people with disabilities, five families, five young people).
- **Ratio of staff per service users:** Ranging from 1:10 to 1:17, depending on the support needs of service users.



Who is Housing First for?

Housing First services in Brno are designed to provide stable housing with no preconditions, under the principle that housing is a basic right. The programme provides as much support as is needed for individuals and families, for as long as necessary. It aims to support the most vulnerable populations, including rough sleepers and shelter users. Priority is however given to people living on the streets as they often face more dire situations and worse future outcomes.

Unlike traditional social housing, which often requires applicants to be debt-free or have a payment plan in place, Housing First in Brno does not impose such requirements. The typical profile of service users includes individuals struggling with addictions, trauma and financial difficulties. In the case of families, there is a strong prevalence of single parents or large families, often with at least one member suffering from a severe illness. The success of these initiatives has led to their continuation and expansion, with Brno now operating three social housing projects: Housing First, Critical Time Intervention and Social Intervention. Several local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also developed their own Housing First services.



How was Housing First adopted in Brno?

Brno led the way as the first city in the Czech Republic to implement Housing First. A pilot project that provided rapid rehousing for 50 vulnerable families was first launched in 2016. Building on this success, a second Housing First pilot was launched in 2017, extending the programme to 65 individuals, including both adults and young people. The programme's effectiveness has led to continued expansion, with new projects launched in 2020 under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding framework, further solidifying Brno's commitment to Housing First as a key strategy in addressing homelessness.

The role of the city

In Brno, the development and implementation of Housing First have primarily been driven by the city itself, in the absence of a national housing strategy. Strong local political support led the municipality to mobilise European funds from 2016 onwards to pilot the Housing First approach and dedicate resources, particularly in terms of social housing, for this purpose. The programme is therefore directly managed and implemented by the city.

While the municipality played a key role in initiating Housing First in the Czech Republic, Brno also aims to build on the expertise and opportunities provided by the different actors in the field. A new national strategy has been under development for several years. It is expected to include social housing provisions and be funded by the government. This would be an opportunity to guarantee more long-term and stable financial provision for Housing First services. Additionally, the city is exploring the possible delegation of certain services to specialised NGOs to enhance effectiveness.



“We are waiting for the approval of a national strategy on supported housing, which would enable us to receive financial support from the state for our Housing First support services.”

*Jana Janečková, head of the department for social housing,
City of Brno*

Mobilising housing

The majority of flats mobilised for Housing First tenancies are municipality-owned social housing. The city owns around 30,000 flats, of which 200 are reserved for social housing. Despite this, the demand often exceeds availability of flats and the waiting time for a lease ranges from six to nine months. Additionally, service users are assigned flats based on specific needs rather than personal preferences, limiting their ability to visit or choose between multiple options.

While a new law is expected to bolster social housing efforts, the city has started exploring additional solutions through a city rental agency. Since its creation in autumn 2023, the agency has successfully mobilised 10–12 flats on the private rental market by offering guarantees, insurance and full support, including handling payments and signing leases with tenants.

The leases provided are initially set for one year but can be renewed if tenants have no outstanding debts and no extensive complaints from the neighbours. Approximately 90% of leases are renewed after the first year, and 80% continue after two years. Most service users are able to pay their rent through benefits (such as pensions and disability support schemes). A few service users also work but a significant increase in their income can lead to issues for renewing their rental contracts as social housing is conditioned on a defined maximum level of resources. This can prove particularly stressful for service users when their lease ends and exacerbates the administrative burden of having to re-apply several months in advance.



Service provision

In line with Housing First principles, service provision within the programme focuses on maintaining strong, transparent, flexible and needs-based relationships with service users, who are under no obligation to accept any form of treatment. Teams are extensively trained in motivational interviewing, open dialogue, crisis management and trauma-informed care, with new Housing First workers joining a one-week workshop through the Czech social housing platform.

Each service user is assigned a key worker who provides intensive initial support, which is then gradually reduced according to the user's evolving needs. The support provided covers a broad range of areas, with a primary focus on housing stability. Teams help users connect with various NGOs to build a supportive long-term network.

The core team includes nine social workers, a project coordinator, two peer workers, a therapist, a maintenance technician, and a case manager responsible for linking users with additional services. The support ratio typically is of 1 worker to 10 service users, though it can extend up to 1 to 17, depending on individual needs. In each project, a team is also in charge of continuing the support for service users from previous projects.

Critical Time Intervention

Critical Time Intervention (CTI) is a support model distinct from Housing First. It is aimed at people with more housing skills than traditional Housing First service users. CTI emphasises housing provision and intensive support in a one-year plan divided into four phases:

- Before the service user moves into their new flat, a period of three to four months is used to identify needs, strengths and weaknesses and design a plan with clear objectives.
- Once the person moves into housing, they are provided with intensive support (around once per week) for a duration of four months.
- The support then slowly decreases as the person becomes more independent, with regular visits every two or three weeks for four months.
- Towards the end of the process, very low support is provided, and the focus is on cooperation with case manager and identifying a strong support network.

At the end of the CTI intervention, service users can keep their flat but the status of the lease changes.



Key results and evaluation

The Housing First programme in Brno has demonstrated impressive results in maintaining housing stability, with 92% of individuals and 96% of families successfully retaining their housing after one year and over 80% continuing after two years.

The most recent evaluation conducted by the Ministry of Social Services included 11 cities to assess various aspects of service users' lives, including housing history, job status, income, health, relationships and family dynamics, at entry, 12 months, and 24 months into the programme.

Both these evaluations and social workers' experience demonstrated that the programme has had a profoundly positive impact, including improved stability for children, strengthened family reconnections, and enhanced relationships between social workers and service users.





Challenges and next steps

Despite the proactive role of the municipality in initiating Housing First programmes in Brno, political changes have impacted its implementation, especially the adoption of a stricter stance on housing issues and conditions for lease renewals, increasing stress for service users who may need time to resolve conflicts as part of their recovery process. The one-year timeframe for adapting to a new living situation is often too short, especially for clients transitioning from homelessness who wish to maintain existing connections. Problems with neighbours, including cases of discrimination, and the lengthy waiting times for flats add to the difficulties. The emphasis on quick resolutions and time pressures puts social workers at odds with the Housing First philosophy, which advocates for respecting users' timelines.

This stricter approach is impacted by a lack of societal support for the Housing First model as well as the pressing need for social housing. In Brno, 200 individuals and 400 families are currently in need of supported housing. The need for additional resources is however not limited to housing. The shortage of support services, such as therapists and psychologists, exacerbates the issue. The two psychologists available in the project are proving insufficient and general mental health services often have extensive waiting lists or costs that can constitute a barrier to treatment.



Find out more

Renáta Machalová

Coordinator of the Housing First programme, Brno
machalova.renata@brno.cz

Monika Antoniaková

Social worker in the Housing First programme, Brno
antoniakova.monika@brno.cz

Jana Janečková

Head of the department for social housing, Brno
janeckova.jana@brno.cz

Šárka Otavová

Critical Time Intervention team, Brno
otavova.sarka@brno.cz



Case study

GLASGOW

Scotland

- **Budget:** Annually €1 million for core staffing and several millions for support packages. Funding has evolved from a per-user basis to a fixed amount, a change welcomed by associations as it allows for better staffing stability.
- **Number of Housing First tenancies:** 311 tenancies created as of April 2024.
- **Ratio of staff per service users:** 1:7 (compared to 1:14 for traditional housing support work)



Who is Housing First for?

Housing First rejects the traditional notion of 'tenancy ready', emphasising that everyone deserves a stable home regardless of their current situation. The ambition is to provide tenancies to those who wouldn't typically receive them, sustaining them in these homes for several years, and ensuring continuity of care. In Glasgow, Housing First actualises the right to housing written in Scottish law for individuals whose needs cannot be met through general housing support. Initially, the programme focused on intravenous drug users, particularly heroin users, who were often excluded from tenancies. It was then extended to all individuals with multiple complex needs, such as repeat offences, hospital admissions, and severe substance abuse issues combined with homelessness.



How was Housing First adopted in Glasgow?

Glasgow was the first local authority in Scotland, and one of the first in the UK, to adopt the Housing First model, a move heavily led by the voluntary sector, particularly Turning Point Scotland. Ian Irvine, the former head of homelessness at Turning Point Glasgow, explored various models across Europe and America to find innovative support methods. In the hope of providing a response to the homelessness of intravenous drug users, 12 registered social landlords in the city participated in a pilot programme starting in 2010, which continues today. Initially, this pilot was funded through surplus funds from larger contracts and investment from Turning Point Scotland's board.

In 2017, Glasgow decided to integrate Housing First as a core element of service provision, though no specific resources were initially aligned to it. The adoption of a National Housing First strategy further supported this integration. The Ending Homelessness Together Fund provided relatively short-term funding with the expectation of mainstreaming the programme. Scottish local authorities received funds by submitting rapid transition to housing plans, further embedding Housing First into Glasgow's approach to addressing homelessness.

The role of the city

Housing First was initiated in Glasgow by Turning Point Scotland and funded by the city. Glasgow later became one of the five pilot areas for the Scottish Housing First Pathfinder initiative, alongside Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Stirling. The pilot concluded two years ago, and Housing First is now fully integrated into Glasgow's strategy and service delivery. The Scottish Government initially funded the first six months, after which local authorities were responsible for the next six months, facilitating the transition to sustainable funding. The Housing First Scotland Fund allocated €4.6 million to support this initiative across the country.⁴

During the Pathfinder period, there was a high level of co-design. Nowadays, the model is considered rather well established and more settled. Despite challenges, including an alliance of providers that wasn't particularly successful and the impact of the pandemic, the city is now taking the lead in reinforcing co-production of services.



Mobilising housing

In Glasgow, individuals participating in Housing First are entitled to permanent tenancies. Security of tenure is seen as one of the most crucial principles. The programme exclusively utilises public housing, with Glasgow having approximately 110,000 social housing properties. In 2023, 50% of new lets were mobilised for homelessness services for a total of 3,300 contracts. Although slightly under the objective of 60% set by the city, these numbers were achieved through very supportive legislation. Section 5 of the Housing Scotland Act states that homeless households should be given reasonable preference within housing associations' allocation policies. Glasgow operates under an operational strategic framework that allows for daily data-sharing to monitor housing stock turnover and match it with demand. In some cases, housing associations provide lists of available properties to the city or to service providers, who then match individuals to these homes. The time between referral and tenancy varies depending on the desired location.

Housing First therefore relies on a strong partnership with the city's housing associations (registered social landlords).

⁴ Pleace N. et al. (2019), *Housing First in Europe. An overview of implementation, strategy and fidelity*. *Housing First Europe Hub*.



Service provision

After the initial assessment conducted by the local authority, Housing First services are delivered by 2 NGOs contracted by the city under a multi-annual framework: Turning Point Scotland and the [Salvation Army](#).

All services follow the [Intensive Case Management](#) approach and therefore do not include specific health professionals, relying instead on the support of the general healthcare system. Teams collaborate closely with all services involved in a users' situation, including justice workers, mental health, alcohol and drug workers, thus facilitating comprehensive support.

In Turning Point Scotland, the teams comprise lead support practitioners, different managers and coordinators which take on the supervisory roles, as well as peer support workers. Everyone in the team is considered a lead practitioner due to the complexity of the work, ensuring better pay and recruitment. Peer support workers are paid as other employees. While initially their job title highlighted their personal lived experience, they are now given the choice of their title, thus allowing them to decide whether or not to disclose their past.

The support provided is intensive, flexible and responsive. It includes practical assistance with daily tasks like grocery shopping and bill payment, as well as psychologically informed care and harm reduction strategies. Support plans are co-produced with input from multiple agencies, ensuring holistic care.



It is usually expected that service users will work with the teams. However, the approach is psychologically informed, recognising that users may express needs and vulnerabilities through ambivalence. Choice and control are heavily emphasised. A risk assessment matrix (red-amber-green) helps ensure that service users are in control of their own support while navigating risk levels. The team works assertively with users exhibiting behaviours that threaten their tenancy, sometimes using pre-agreed methods to maintain contact.

Service users decide when they feel ready to graduate from the service, supported by their teams, often reflecting on their growing social networks and capital. A citizenship programme, developed in collaboration with Yale University, supports this transition. Clients always have the option to return and reopen their case if needed, aligning with the city's prevention agenda to avoid repeat homelessness.

Turning Point Scotland

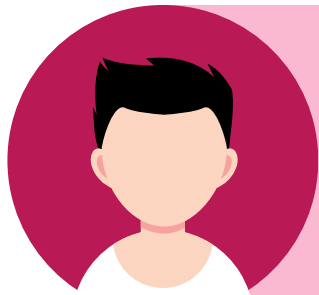
[Turning Point Scotland](#) is one of the main social care providers in the country, with over 1400 employees. They support over 10,000 service users and deliver homelessness services in 20 local authority areas, including Housing First in five of them.

Turning Point initiated the first Housing First pilot in Glasgow. Nowadays, the organisation supports around 200 people through Housing First in Glasgow. Drawing on this experience, the organisation then played a key role, together with [Homeless Network Scotland](#), in convincing other local authorities to adopt Housing First methodologies. Being able to convince the central government to mandate local governments to mainstream Housing First across Scotland was a key step. Turning Point is also one of the founding members of the [Housing First Europe Hub](#), which aims to foster knowledge exchange and advocates for Housing First implementation across Europe.



Key results and evaluation

The Housing First programme in Glasgow has undergone extensive evaluation, beginning with the original pilot project and continuing through subsequent initiatives like the Pathfinder project. It clearly demonstrated significant benefits, especially when compared to traditional congregate living models, which often fail to provide stable housing solutions. Regular data collection in 2024 showed a total of 142 settled accommodations, 164 tenancies where support is no longer required, and several cases of individuals successfully moving on or transitioning to other forms of care. Housing First has also led to improvements in various areas, including health, criminal justice involvement, and substance abuse, even though it does not specifically target these issues. The initial resistance to the Housing First model in Glasgow has decreased over time, supported by advocacy and training efforts that educate stakeholders on its principles and practices.



“We know that Housing First works; it needs to be the default position for people with complex and multiple needs. Maybe we need to evaluate as closely outcomes for people in congregate living models because, clearly, there’s something not working with the current model for people with complex case histories.”

Gary Quinn, service manager, homelessness, Glasgow City Council



Challenges and next steps

One of the significant challenges for Housing First in Glasgow is the difficulty in scaling up beyond a certain number of tenancies. Many service users continue to require high levels of support without transitioning to other care services, such as adult care, due to the siloed nature of services like homelessness, mental health and addiction. This leads to strained resources as there is currently no transition to sources of funding outside of the homelessness budget, such as adult care.

Tensions with neighbours still create challenges, although they likely already existed outside of Housing First services and are simply easier to identify when support workers can be contacted. Additionally, Housing First service users might experience discrimination and a lack of patience from neighbours. The isolation experienced by some tenants has also been identified as a barrier to them maintaining their tenancy.

Finally, while Glasgow has integrated Housing First as a key element of its homelessness service provision, certain practitioners regret a persistent reliance on supported accommodation and a level of risk aversion. Despite the programme’s success, there is a constant need to justify its cost, as financial constraints could quickly reverse the progress made.

Gary Quinn

Service manager, homelessness, Glasgow
City Council

Gary.Quinn@glasgow.gov.uk

Find out more

Patrick McKay

Director of operations, Turning Point Scotland
PatrickMcKay@turningpointscotland.com



Case study

LISBON

Portugal

- **Budget:** €21 a day per person up to a total of almost €3 million (includes rental costs, staff, supporting the payment of bills and the cost of furniture, etc.).
- **Number of Housing First tenancies:** 400 places have been contracted but not all are available due to a lack of housing.
- **Ratio of staff per service users:** 1:10 (compared to 1:30 with the current level of national funding).



Who is Housing First for?

Housing First in Lisbon is designed to provide individual, permanent housing for chronically homeless people, tailored to their unique needs. The programme prioritises long-term rough sleepers with complex needs, including mental illness, though it does not require a formal diagnosis or medical history for eligibility. Women are also prioritised. The approach is rooted in a human rights model, offering scattered-site, permanent housing, as well as intensive support for as long as people need. Collaboration with outreach teams is key in identifying those who would benefit most from Housing First.



How was Housing First adopted in Lisbon?

Housing First was initially adopted in Lisbon in 2009 as part of Portugal's First National Homelessness Strategy (2009–2015). The initial pilot was implemented and financed by the national government's social security system, with a specific focus on homeless individuals with mental health issues. The Association for Psychosocial Study and Integration (AEIPS), a local organisation, managed the project, which began with 50 houses. However, during the financial crisis, the national social security system ceased its funding and the city government stepped in to provide financial support. Due to its demonstrable success, the programme expanded over time, eventually offering around 80 places in the city's Housing First services and being replicated by other NGOs in Lisbon.



“We don't define our success by the number of visits, but through community integration. If people are connecting with the community, if they create a new group around the house. If the house became a home.

A place where they love to stay.”

Jose Ornelas, president of the board of AEIPS

 **The role of the city**

While the initial experimentation with Housing First in Lisbon was proposed by AEIPS and funded under a national programme, the municipality of Lisbon has since played an essential role in ensuring its continuity and expansion. The city council coordinates the city's responses to homelessness and serves as the primary funder of the Housing First programmes. Lisbon's first municipal strategy for homeless people (2016–2018) provided guaranteed funding for the Housing First programme and led to the involvement of a second NGO (CRESCER). In 2019, the city advanced its commitment by adopting a municipal plan for 2019–2023, which was approved at the highest level of municipal government. This plan sets an ambitious goal of securing 400 flats for Housing First, with four NGOs tasked with its implementation. Opting for a municipal plan rather than a strategy gives the issue increased visibility and ensures stability beyond the duration of a political mandate.

Since 2020, the national social security system has resumed funding for Housing First, but its contribution is limited to human resources at a ratio of 1:30, versus the city's ratio of 1:10. This means the national funding serves only as a financial complement to the city's investment which is necessary to guarantee strong fidelity to the original Housing First model. The city also remains responsible for funding housing, technical support and planning.

The homelessness plan is also supported by NPISA, a working group co-chaired by the deputy mayor in charge of social affairs, a board representative from Santa Casa de Misericórdia (which manages social support in Lisbon), and the regional director of the social security system. This high-level involvement strengthens the decision-making process and ensures better collaboration with NGOs.

A new homelessness plan was approved in 2024, establishing the ambition to double the number of housing places to 800, reflecting Lisbon's dedication to addressing homelessness through this approach and responding to increasing needs.

 **Mobilising housing**

The Lisbon model of Housing First currently relies exclusively on the private rental market. The approach is to place individuals in apartments scattered across regular neighbourhoods. The process is efficient, with AEIPS stressing that it takes an average of two weeks from outreach to securing housing. Tenants are given the opportunity to express their preferences regarding the location of their housing, providing a sense of choice and control over their living situation. AEIPS keeps track of the locations of the different rentals and avoids placing two participants on the same street. This method is based on evidence suggesting that integration and recovery are more successful in typical community settings.

The rental contracts are held between the NGO and the property owner. The service users sign their own contract with the NGO, agreeing to a visit from a social worker each week and contributing 30% of their income to the rent. When individuals exit the Housing First programme, they can still receive financial support through Santa Casa de Misericórdia, though they may be required to move to a different flat.

This choice of private housing was initially guided by the flexibility that the private housing market offered, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the availability of empty tourist rentals temporarily alleviated housing shortages. This was seen as a positive alternative to further stretching the city's social housing which is already in high demand from non-homeless residents. However, the current difficulty in finding suitable housing is a

significant barrier to the programme's expansion. Extending the programme into the metropolitan area of Lisbon has been considered, but this poses several challenges, including differing political mandates and the need to renegotiate support from Santa Casa de Misericordia, which initially did not cover areas outside the city. Additionally, it proved more complicated for NGOs to provide effective intensive support to participants who were more dispersed and live further away from the city centre.



Service provision

In Lisbon, the support services for Housing First follow a person-centred approach, providing 24/7 assistance tailored to each participant's needs. These services are implemented by four NGOs under renewable three-year contracts.

In AEIPS, the support team operates within an 'ecological and collaborative' framework, meaning they work within the participant's

natural environment. This involves helping them to transition into their new home, integrate into the neighbourhood, and building a support network that reflects their new life circumstances rather than their previous experiences of homelessness.

The team prioritises community integration, which is why there are no medical professionals or psychotherapists on staff. Instead, support workers accompany participants to local health centres and other services, emphasising the separation of treatment from housing support. The support ratio is kept at a low 1:10, ensuring that each participant has consistent contact with the same support person.

Additionally, the team includes a professional to provide technical assistance in the home and two peer workers who are fully integrated into the team with the same rights and contracts as other staff members. Training is provided within the organisation to maintain high standards of care.

Unlike some other Housing First programmes, AEIPS does not adhere to a harm reduction philosophy. Instead, the focus is on supporting participants toward full recovery. Participants are however not required to abstain from drug consumption or to receive a treatment. They are actively involved in deciding their own plans, goals and timelines, while the team also plays a proactive role in providing information and guidance.

AEIPS

The Association for Psychosocial Study and Integration (AEIPS) is an NGO which since 1987 has specialised in providing support to people with mental illnesses in the areas of housing, education and employment. In 2009, AEIPS was the first NGO in Portugal to start a Housing First programme. From an initial 50, the association now provide support to 160 Housing First tenants in Lisbon.



Key results and evaluation

AEIPS and other NGOs report a housing retention rate of over 95% after two years. Overall, the results demonstrate the programme's effectiveness in maintaining stable housing for participants. Yet, it also highlights the ongoing need for government support to address the external pressures affecting housing availability and affordability.

Under Lisbon's new homelessness plan, an evaluation of the existing 400 homes will be initiated to formally assess the programme's effectiveness and provide recommendations for future improvements. This evaluation is particularly crucial given the challenges posed by a strained private housing market, which has made it increasingly difficult to secure new housing. The evaluation will also explore the emergence of a new profile of service users, comparing their experiences and outcomes with those of earlier cohorts. This analysis aims to provide insights into how the programme might need to adapt to these changing demographics. The evaluation is expected to offer recommendations that will reinforce the ongoing advocacy efforts towards both national and municipal governments, particularly in terms of funding needs and options to mobilise additional housing.



Challenges and next steps

Lisbon's main challenge in implementing and scaling up Housing First implementation lies in the availability of cheap housing. While 400 places are contracted with NGOs, less than 400 households currently benefit from the services due to difficulties in securing properties on the private market. The current housing crisis could exacerbate this phenomenon and hamper Lisbon's ambition to double the number of Housing First tenancies in the city.

To address these challenges, there are ongoing efforts to negotiate increased support from the national government. This includes advocating for an improved ratio of cases per worker, allowing the municipality to redirect funding from the current staffing budget to finding more housing. Another solution might be the introduction of a national law that would commit a share of social housing specifically for homeless people, particularly social housing projects supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

Another key focus is on enhancing prevention efforts. Despite substantial investment in Housing First, homelessness numbers in Lisbon continue to rise, posing a risk of criticism that the programme is not effective. A significant factor in this increase is the large proportion of migrants, many of whom are in a legal 'grey zone' while awaiting the completion of their regularisation processes.

Looking forward, NGOs and the municipality share the goal to expand the Housing First model and to end homelessness in Lisbon entirely. This includes adapting and extending the model to other vulnerable groups, such as migrants and those in need of alternatives to institutional care, with increased support ratios (e.g., 1:5). The ambition is to ensure that the successes of Housing First can be replicated and scaled to meet the diverse needs of all those at risk of homelessness in the city.

Paulo Santos

Mission team coordinator of the municipal plan for homeless people, Lisbon
paulo.silva.santos@cm-lisboa.pt

Find out more

Teresa Duarte

Housing First coordinator,
 AEIPS
teresa.duarte@aeips.pt

LYON METROPOLE

France

- **Budget:** €2 million (of which €1,1 million is provided from national level grants), including support services, management, training of staff, evaluation etc. Funding per person ranges from €7,000 to €10,000.
- **Number of tenancies:** 400 households per year.
- **Ratio of staff per service users:** 1:5 in the Housing First programme of Foyer Notre Dame des Sans Abris (FNDSA).



Who is Housing First for?

In Lyon Metropole, Housing First is used in a whole-system approach aiming to provide direct access to housing for individuals experiencing homelessness, offering support as needed and for as long as necessary. The target population covers all homeless people, ranging from rough sleepers to those staying with friends or in temporary shelters. However, in practice, this model is accessible only to those who can obtain housing, which excludes undocumented individuals or those with so-called incomplete legal status.

Housing First also aims to shift perceptions about homelessness, advocating for direct access to housing as a fundamental right. It impacts the entire housing and support system, requiring changes both in enabling people to access housing and the way support services are provided. Housing First in Lyon Metropole is therefore both a public policy and a set of tools and principles designed to assist this population, with each element being essential to the other.



How was Housing First adopted in Lyon?

Housing First was adopted in France in 2009, when the French housing minister found out about this successful approach through European networks. An initial experiment 'Un Chez Soi d'Abord' (UCSA), inspired by the [Housing First Pathways](#) model in New York, focussed on providing housing to individuals with significant mental health issues who were living on the streets.

A significant advantage of the UCSA came from the joined funding between health and homelessness authorities in order to secure housing and offer strengthened support services. The experiment also included an evaluation method that calculated the avoided costs at €14,000 per person, a sum which was used to determine the level of funding, showcasing the programme's potential cost efficiency.

Following these good results, the Interministerial Delegation for Accommodation and Access to Housing opted to extend the UCSA experiment while also extending Housing First implementation for a broader target group, with a goal to deploy this approach across France. To achieve this, a five-year Housing First plan (2018–2022) was developed. Local authorities, including Lyon Metropole, were selected to become pilot areas and were closely involved in the deployment and implementation of Housing First on their territory.

Both the UCSA programme and the five-year plan continue to coexist following the adoption of a new plan in 2023. This plan focused on integrating Housing First into mainstream tools for addressing homelessness. It includes measures aiming to mobilise private housing and improve access to the Housing First programme.



“Housing First is both a public policy and a set of principles to support homeless people. One does not go without the other.”

Cécile Flandinet, head of department, FNDSA

The role of the city

Lyon Metropole became one of the first ‘accelerated Housing First implementation territories’ in France. The local plan adopted a three-pronged approach: focusing on producing affordable housing, piloting support projects, and facilitating the transition to new practices. Given the shift in models, this approach was supported by training, observation, research, participation from people with lived experience, and creating a community of practice. Housing First in Lyon is therefore the result of a close partnership between the French government, which holds the responsibility for emergency accommodation, and the metropolis, which holds responsibilities related to housing. This collaboration is reflected in the mutualising of funds from the state and the Metropole.

The five-year local action plan for the Housing and Accommodation of Disadvantaged Persons highlights the ambition of aligning a homelessness-related support actions with the Housing First principles, aiming to shift the mindset within social support services. This includes striving for housing as a priority but also embracing non-coercive approaches, such as avoiding mandatory contractual obligations, offering indefinite support by default, and respecting the individual's choice.

As a way to reinforce this ambition, Lyon also prioritises the production of affordable housing over traditional shelters. However, due to the ongoing housing crisis, the Metropole has had to rely on temporary housing, tiny houses, and the legalisation and upgrading of squats to make them habitable. Although far from ideal, they provide a transitional form of housing that offers individuals a place to call their own, even if only temporarily.

The strong political mandate for Housing First in Lyon Metropole is also visible in the city's involvement in advocacy and knowledge exchange. At the national level, Lyon supported the creation of a Housing First working group within France Urbaine, a network of French cities. At the European level, Lyon chairs Eurocities' working group on homelessness and is an active member in the the Housing First Europe Hub. Besides this engagement on knowledge exchange, Lyon Metropole took a strong advocacy role through Eurocities' political campaign for the EU elections by becoming Shadow Commissioner on housing.

Mobilising housing

Most of the housing used for Housing First in Lyon Metropole comes from social housing. An integrated reception and orientation service (SIAO) coordinates the demand and supply of housing and support services for Housing First. The different funding streams for support measures and reserved housing allocations are pooled together by the various actors, converting these funds into Housing First places with no time limits on support.

The SIAO conducts pre-admission interviews to introduce the Housing First services to potential users and to ensure that they have or can quickly obtain the necessary legal status and rights for housing. While about half of the tenants can have a direct lease with social housing companies, for the other half sliding leases are put in place. These are often used for individuals who have debts or lack complete administrative documents. Under this system, a service provider initially holds the lease and enters into a separate contract with the tenant, which helps reassure landlords by reducing perceived risks and offers tenants additional support. Once the tenant's circumstances stabilise, they can transition to a direct lease with the landlord without needing to move. The state and social landlords finance a security fund that provides guarantees to the NGOs acting as temporary leaseholders for the sliding lease. It is used for unpaid debts or higher repair costs when a tenant moves out.

The use of social housing also aims to ensure that the tenant can retain their housing when they graduate from Housing First services or decide to no longer use the support, thus reinforcing the principle of separation between housing and support. However, despite being shorter than for traditional tenants of social housing, the waiting time for a social tenancy can be quite long, ranging from 12 to 18 months for smaller units, with even longer waits for larger units. To address this, the new national Housing First plan (2023–2027) includes measures in favour of affordable housing. For example, a rental market intermediation system uses funds to bridge the gap between what private landlords demand and what tenants can afford, while also ensuring proper property management. Similarly, Lyon Metropole's initial Housing First plan had set an ambition to mobilise 350 lets from private tenancies but the tight local housing market has made this impossible, with less than half this number of contracts signed. The metropolis continues to explore new possibilities, including the creation of a land trust to purchase housing directly.

Lyon Metropole is also looking into ways to ensure greater transparency in public housing allocations by exploring a system where eligible tenants could apply for a flat directly.

Service provision

In Lyon, all services which are involved in homelessness service provision implement Housing First programmes. They are constantly working on shifting their services to place the individual and their choices firmly at the centre of the process, in line with the core principles of the Housing First model. This includes processes like active outreach and ensuring that the service user is involved in all discussions regarding their situation. One of the bigger shifts of this approach is the lack of a predefined time limit for support and the absence of a requirement from Lyon Metropole to sign contracts for engagement in services.

FNDSA – Foyer Notre Dame des Sans Abris

FNDSA is a 73-year-old association which specialises in supporting people experiencing homelessness. It is organised around two main services: inclusion through economic activity, and welcoming, accommodation and housing. The latter is in charge of over 2,000 places in emergency accommodation as well as day and overnight shelters. Following Lyon Metropole's engagement in Housing First, FNDSA also has 75 places available for Housing First and housing-led support. The organisation is gradually training all staff to ensure that the Housing First philosophy is integrated into all services.

In the Foyer Notre Dame des Sans Abris (FNDSA), 75 Housing First support measures are allocated among three groups: homeless people oriented through the SIAO, FNDSA shelter users that become eligible for housing and require intensive support, and 10 places reserved for European families. The NGO has shifted its approach from a shelter-based model to one where a shelter is intended as a temporary option until a person has their documentation in order and can apply for housing. Depending on their needs individuals are then oriented towards lighter-touch transitional housing-led support or a more intensive Housing First programme.

In that case, a dedicated multidisciplinary team brings together social workers, a housing advisor, an employment counsellor, a nurse and health mediator. The team is also exploring the possibility of developing peer work, particularly to assist European families with navigating complex bureaucratic processes. With a ratio one member of staff for every five service users, the team is able to ensure that the support meets the specific needs and requests of each household, whether it involves securing housing, ensuring children's health, or accessing education. The approach is holistic, addressing all aspects of the service users' lives to facilitate comprehensive support and recovery.



Key results and evaluation

The implementation of Housing First in Lyon has significantly improved the quality of support services and housing outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. The introduction of Housing First principles has led to a shift towards a recovery-oriented approach, emphasising long-term support, non-coercion, and respect for individual autonomy. While some variations remain in the level of engagement of stakeholders in the Housing First approach, most stakeholders in Lyon are actively involved in the process and contributing to its mainstreaming. This shift has been accompanied by extensive training in recovery and harm reduction principles among the organisations involved.

Since the first programme, evaluation has been a critical component of the Housing First initiative in Lyon. Each programme within the initiative produces an evaluation, with some undergoing detailed impact studies. Lyon Metropole also funds research initiatives, such as cohort studies, to deepen understanding of Housing First's long-term impact and remaining challenges that need to be addressed. Recent studies include a [collaboration with Prison Insider](#), an information platform on prisons around the world, on people leaving custody, and a [study exploring the transformation of shelters](#) into individual units that would be closer to the Housing First model.



Challenges and next steps

Despite a clear ambition, Lyon Metropole still faces a range of challenges in the implementation of Housing First and is at a critical juncture as it seeks to move from experimentation to broader implementation. One of the central paradoxes is the coexistence of a rapidly expanding shelter system with efforts to accelerate the implementation of Housing First. Despite successful experiments in specific territories, the programme has yet to fully transform the broader homelessness response. This dual focus on traditional shelters and Housing First interventions is seen as reflecting a reluctance at the national level to adopt a bold, transformative approach akin to Finland's, where a decisive shift was made to invest in permanent housing and comprehensive support.

Funding sustainability is a significant concern. Although the state has invested in the fight against homelessness, the shelter system remains a 'bottomless pit', with resources continuously funnelled into temporary solutions rather than permanent housing. This has led to tensions between local authorities and the state, particularly as local efforts to innovate sometimes go beyond their mandates, leading to a strained relationship that once was more cooperative. The pressure is mounting as the number of people on the streets continues to rise, necessitating the creation of more temporary solutions that often become semi-permanent, further complicating the transition to a Housing First model.

The financial situation for local governments is deteriorating, particularly as their primary source of revenue – taxes on real estate transactions – declines. This financial strain,



coupled with the lack of long-term visibility for Housing First programmes outside of UCSA, makes it difficult to secure ongoing support.

Another significant challenge is the difficulty of securing private housing. This is combined with an ageing social housing stock where living conditions can be substandard.

Additionally, there is a blind spot in addressing social isolation among Housing First participants. While they may leave shelters, the social connections they formed there are often lost. Unlike traditional community centres, Housing First support structures often do not provide the same social spaces for individuals to maintain connections, leaving a gap in the social support network. Initiatives are ongoing to identify spaces that currently act as connectors and ensure that they are actively integrated into the local strategy.

Stakeholders also fear that the initial momentum and enthusiasm that drove the Housing First experiments risk being lost as the programme integrates into mainstream services. With less

funding available for network coordination and community-building among organisations, there is a danger of slipping back into a more pragmatic, less ambitious mode of operation.

Finally, there remains the unresolved issue of those who are excluded from Housing First due to their immigration status, which continues to challenge the inclusiveness of the programme.

Despite these concerns, Housing First projects remain strongly defended by their advocates, who are determined to maintain the programme's transformative potential.

Nicolas Berut,

Housing First coordinator, Lyon Metropole
nberut@grandlyon.com

Find out more

Cécile Flandinet

Head of department, FNDSA
cecile.flandinet@fnDSA.org



Case study

VANTAA

Finland

- **Budget:** €3.6 million for Housing First. Part of the services are funded through national programmes while the rest comes from the Vantaa and Kerava Wellbeing Area's (VAKE) own budget.
- **Number of Housing First tenancies:** 186.
- **Ratio of staff to service users:** This varies depending on the structures and support needs of service users. It ranges from 1:2.5 users to 1:1.5.



Who is Housing First for?

Housing First, as implemented in Vantaa, embraces a whole-system approach to addressing homelessness, extending its reach beyond specific target groups to all individuals who can benefit from this model. It prioritises securing housing for service users in a manner that respects their choices.

As other support models have already proven effective for temporary forms of homelessness, Housing First services focus primarily on those who are hardest to reach. Common among the service users is a history of either repeated or prolonged homelessness, often accompanied by substance abuse, mental health issues or other health problems. These individuals typically range in age from 20 to 60 years old.

The Vantaa and Kerava Wellbeing Area (VAKE) offers a diverse array of programmes with different support levels, not all of which strictly adhere to the Housing First principles. However, there is a strategic effort to integrate more Housing First elements into these programmes. This is seen as increasingly vital given the emerging pathways into homelessness, particularly among young people and individuals with migrant backgrounds. By broadening the implementation of Housing First principles, VAKE aims to create a more inclusive and effective support system for all those affected by homelessness.



“Having elements of the Housing First philosophy included in all forms of service provision is increasingly important due to the new paths to homelessness which affect more young people and people with a migrant background.”

Hanna Tuomisto, lead social worker, VAKE wellbeing service county



How was Housing First adopted in Vantaa?

Between 1988 and 2008, Finland achieved a significant reduction in homelessness, with the number of homeless individuals decreasing from 20,000 to 8,000 through the provision of shelters with support. However, this progress did not extend to long-term homelessness, which continued to affect approximately 45% of the homeless population. From 2008, the Finnish government therefore mandated local authorities to focus on chronic homelessness. This shift consisted of a radical transformation in the approach to shelter and support, advocating for long-term solutions such as stable housing without conditions, traditional lease agreements and no time limits on housing and support. Additionally, funding was allocated to support the transformation of existing shelters into individual housing units.

In Vantaa, Housing First began with a pilot project involving two housing service units during 2012–2013. This initiative was further expanded through the VAKE competitive procurement process, which has explicitly mentioned Housing First since 2018. While not all projects in Vantaa can be called Housing First, all service provision currently integrates some of the principles of the Housing First philosophy. The most recent national strategy places a strong emphasis on prevention, reflecting Finland's continued commitment to eradicating homelessness.



The role of the city

In Finland, wellbeing services like VAKE hold the responsibility for both the strategic planning and implementation of homelessness services. They provide a variety of services for homeless people, ranging from low levels of support to more intensive help, and from congregated units to scattered sites. In Finland, public authorities own a significant amount of land, which facilitates the construction of housing units. However, the process can be lengthy and might still face opposition from neighbours.

One of the unique aspects of the Housing First policy in VAKE is the involvement of individuals with previous homelessness experience in the procurement process. They collaborate with procurement experts to shape the description and expectations of housing services. This inclusive approach ensures that the services are responsive to the actual needs of the homeless population. Every four years, Vantaa reassesses and renews its procurement contracts to maintain the effectiveness of its services.

VAKE is also responsible for directing homeless people to the right services. The organisation assesses the needs of each client individually, creates a targeted support plan with them, and then directs them to one of the service providers or to VAKE's own services. The funding for these initiatives comes from a combination of national funds and Vantaa's own budget. National programmes or action plans often provide project-based funding for wellbeing service providers as VAKE to enhance their services.



Mobilising housing

VAKE secures housing for Housing First services through a combination of public and private collaborations, ensuring a diverse array of housing options. Private service providers play a crucial role in the service delivery, with 36% of Housing First and 58% of housing-led services being privately managed. When VAKE manages the services directly, different teams handle housing and support, allowing for better separation of housing and support, in line with Housing First principles. Currently, VAKE has around 170 places in Housing First units and flats.

Housing formats vary, ranging from congregated housing units in new builds or renovated shelters to scattered flats. Few homelessness services follow the model strictly by the book, with renewable leases typically lasting between three and six months with the aim of rehabilitating service users towards independent living, but many incorporate elements of the philosophy.

Service users are involved in choosing their housing format. Waiting lists are relatively short due to the wide availability of Housing First services but service users' choices are still limited by capacity and resources. VAKE interviews future users and work with them to determine the best fit for their needs. The teams noticed that service users with substance abuse issues often find it challenging to stay in scattered housing and might benefit from community.

Service providers also act as representatives for the housing companies, such as taking responsibility for ensuring rent is paid. Tenants sign leases directly with housing providers, giving them the same legal protections as in general housing. In 24-hour care units, additional laws define service offerings, though the rent agreements remain separate and complementary.



Service provision

Supported housing is available in various formats, ranging from daytime support to 24-hour service housing with staff present around the clock. The different categories of service provision are mandated by law, with social workers from VAKE overseeing the services, supported by social counsellors and practical nurses in the units. Contracts and delegation of services define the case load and the types of workers required. However, some units lack social counsellors, which can limit the support available to service users.

VAKE – Vantaa and Kerava Wellbeing Area

VAKE is the wellbeing service for the area of Vantaa and Kerava in Finland, serving around 4,500 people. Within VAKE, people experiencing homelessness are often supported by different services. However, the formal responsibility lies within the department of social work for adults. Housing First is specifically the responsibility of the team in charge of housing social work. They are also responsible for different forms of supported housing. In VAKE, more than 600 people are in long-term housing services, of which 186 live in Housing First units.

Service users are actively involved in all aspects of service planning, adhering to a recovery-oriented approach where staff are trained to start from the service users' goals. Meetings with service providers are tailored to the users' needs and can occur daily or weekly to assist with everyday situations, such as applying for benefits or visiting healthcare centres. The lightest version involves service users living in individual apartments, either their own or in scattered Housing First sites, with service providers visiting weekly or more frequently to guide them toward necessary services like healthcare, employment agencies and support with administrative tasks.

On top of the support delivered by service providers, users meet with VAKE social workers on a regular basis - monthly, every three months or every six months - to ensure the entire service network functions effectively for them.

When a person no longer requires intensive support, their case is transferred from a social worker to a social counsellor, who continues to manage the situation until support is no longer needed. Service users can then apply for housing through the Y-Foundation or the traditional housing market if they have good credit. Even after transitioning out of support, service users are monitored for a few months to aid the transition, with the flexibility to reopen cases if needed. This flexible system ensures ongoing support and stability for those exiting homelessness.





Key results and evaluation

The evaluation of Housing First services in Vantaa is generally conducted through internal quality assessments rather than specific evaluations. Regular analyses are performed by university students. A new unit of social work experts focusing on structural social work is also being established. This unit aims to gather and inform decision-makers and the organisation about users needs and service issues. It contributes to evidence-based policy, which has been compulsory in Finland since 2015.



Challenges and next steps

One of the main challenges facing VAKE is to encourage a shift towards permanent leases. Short-term contracts are widely used and justified by cost-effectiveness, especially during times of reduced funding. Some fear that there won't be enough apartments available, as current residents may occupy them long-term, limiting availability for new service users. However fixed-term rental agreements bring their own issues which can lead to evictions. Under shorter contracts, social workers have less time to work with the service users to resolve rental debts, and shorter timelines often lead to higher, unrealistic payment expectations. Additionally, having the service providers as intermediaries or as direct housing providers sometimes creates tensions in the relationship with service users.

Funding remains a critical issue, as services must operate cost-efficiently. Competition with other social priorities further complicates funding allocation, with no specific budget being earmarked for Housing First. Limited resources and high levels of demand often translate to heavy caseloads for VAKE social workers (who cover 50 to 70 service users), necessitating more personnel.

The reliance on private service providers brings additional issues. Having a profit element in the provision of homelessness and Housing First services is an area of debate as it could conflict with the goal of transitioning service users towards independence. Therefore, VAKE workers shared that they would be in favour of more public Housing First services.

Social workers also call for more scattered site housing. Tensions with neighbours are often an issue, preventing the creation of new Housing First congregated units. Historically, Finland has focused on housing service units, but a shift towards scattered apartments could ease some of the tensions with the community and prove more adequate for certain people, such as women who lack gender-specific services.

While Finland has made significant progress towards ending homelessness, poverty remains an issue for many service users. Legislation defines a minimum disposable income for people living in 24-hour care units. However, the remaining €182 a month left for personal expenses after rent and paying the food and services fee is often insufficient for a good standard of living.

Salla Laisi

Social Worker

salla.laisi@vakehyva.fi

Find out more

Hanna Tuomisto

Lead Social Worker

hanna.tuomisto@vakehyva.fi

CONCLUSIONS

Research consistently highlights the success of Housing First across varied local contexts, including Brno, Glasgow, Lisbon, Lyon Metropole and Vantaa, demonstrating its adaptability and effectiveness in providing stable housing solutions to people experiencing homelessness. By prioritising the right to housing, Housing First shifts away from the traditional notion of 'housing-ready', creating a system that empowers individuals through choice, sustained support and peer involvement. This innovative approach requires significant changes in service provision, giving users more control over their housing journey and ensuring support remains available for as long as needed.

Despite the successes of Housing First programmes, challenges remain. A tightening housing market and limited availability of affordable housing in cities put pressure on Housing First initiatives, while budget constraints at the local level further complicate local implementation. National policies that support Housing First are essential in sustaining these efforts but require true collaboration with local authorities as well as funding to ensure cities and local stakeholders can play their role in the fight against homelessness.

As an integrated model, Housing First, when aligned with the local context and supported by adequate policies and funding, can be crucial to uphold the ambitions of the Lisbon Declaration. The new mandate of the European Commission presents a timely opportunity, with the first European anti-poverty strategy and a reinforced focus on housing. A dedicated Commissioner on housing and the announced increased funding resources will be instrumental in supporting cities and their partners, enabling them to scale up Housing First and strengthen Europe's commitment to housing as a fundamental right for all.

