

HOUSING FIRST SCOTLAND

Annual Check-up 2023



March 2024

**Housing First is
normal, it's fairer,
it works –
and we all benefit.**

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Section 1: Executive Summary

Housing First should be the first response for people whose homelessness is made harder by experiences with trauma, addictions and mental health. Housing First provides ordinary housing in an ordinary community because this, for most of us, is the best base to build and live our lives the way we want to. Housing First combines settled housing with person-led, strengths-based and flexible support – as much and for as long as someone wants it. Housing First actively rejects the idea that many people are not ‘ready’ for housing and aims to prevent rough sleeping and divert people away from temporary homeless accommodation.

Throughout this check-up process we have been told time and time again how Housing First is transforming the lives of individuals and families. When properly resourced, Housing First can also save local authorities money in time by reducing interactions with services such as criminal justice and social work.

That is why Housing First should be the first response for people whose homelessness is made harder by experiences with trauma, addiction and mental health

Housing First is being delivered in 26 of Scotland’s 32 local authorities at time of writing (March 2024). During 2023-24, Homeless Network Scotland carried out an extensive check-up process with the local authorities, tenants, housing and support providers in 25 areas, with one area not able to participate. Please see appendix ii for the list of local authorities delivering Housing First.

Several recurring themes and issues were raised throughout this check-up process which are set out in this report. Some of the issues raised in this report are ongoing ones that have not been dealt with so far and will continue to present unless they are addressed.

In section 4, 14 key priorities are set out that represent recurring themes across the check-up process. Each provides more detail to the broader matters of:

- **Funding:**

Housing First works and it saves money in the long-term. However, the long-term funding of Housing First in Scotland is now at a critical juncture with the uncertainty of funding actively damaging delivery of the programme in some areas through the inability to recruit appropriate staff which impacts the support available to tenants, caseload numbers and staff morale. An on-going issue is that Housing First is seen as exclusively a “homeless” issue which other (also over-stretched) departments use as a reason to step away from people that they would otherwise have had responsibility for. The overlapping nature of disadvantage in Scotland cannot be resolved by current public services that are planned, paid for and provided in separate sectors and siloes. If Housing First did not exist mental health, alcohol and drug services, community justice, social work and more would all be actively working with people who would be on that programme. Therefore there needs to be a cross policy and budgetary approach to severe and multiple disadvantage. Our evaluation suggests that when multiple partners make some of their resources available to Housing First, it also helps to establish better partnership working.

- **Upscaling Housing First:**

At September 2023, there were 717 Housing First tenancies (these tenancies started after 1 April 2021), compared to 486 in September 2022. This is good progress, but it is not enough. Housing First in Scotland is currently not meeting demand, there are far more people who could benefit from it but there is not capacity to deliver it. A consequence of this is that local authorities have developed strategies to decide who is referred onto Housing First and who is not. In order to upscale Housing First further there needs to be more funding to increase staff numbers, as well to provide them with the correct training and support, and more housing.

- **Tenancy support and sustainment:**

Housing First is working for those who are accessing it. The Scottish Government reports that tenancy sustainment rates are at 90% over 12 months since entry. The support tenants get from support workers is essential to maintaining tenancies and tenants overwhelmingly are positive about Housing First. In terms of what could be improved, Homeless Network Scotland have heard of various approaches to furnishing tenants’ homes, and that tenants should have more say. While there seems to be good communication between tenants and their support workers, there is little evidence to suggest that there are formal processes in place to enable tenants to feed back their views.

- **Housing Supply:**

As homeless numbers continue to rise in Scotland, there is increasing pressure on housing supply and there is simply not enough housing to meet demand which has impacted Housing First. Some Registered Social Landlords are exceptionally good at accepting Housing First tenants, but others appear to be blocking referrals. It is becoming harder to offer tenants choice in areas that they want to stay and stays in temporary accommodation are becoming longer, which can lead to tenants slipping into crisis.

- **Multi-disciplinary partnerships:**

Housing First is sometimes seen as a “homeless” issue and is impacted by the siloing of different departments. Housing First tenants told us how support workers go above and beyond. But when workers reach for support from specialist health and social care teams, the services are often not available to wrap around the tenant. As one frontline worker highlighted to us: increasing housing supply is one part of the equation, but helping people to sustain their tenancy is the other half. Specialist support is key to that. Some Housing First teams have been able to get a high level of buy-in from key partners at an early stage and implemented a structure such as a Memorandum of Understanding, partnership agreements and clear governance structures that have ensured successful partnerships. It would be good to see this happen for Housing First in all parts of Scotland and for these departments to also partly fund Housing First.

- **Recruitment and staffing pressures:**

Due to the uncertainty of funding some local authorities have found it difficult to recruit enough suitable staff. Due to staff shortages and funding pressures Housing First caseloads are meant to be smaller because the people involved have complex needs but fidelity to this particular Housing First principle seems under threat in a number of local authorities, which will impact both tenants and staff well-being. Staff well-being needs to be protected or more staff sickness and burnout will occur. There is a sense that there is not enough training on how to cope with tenant deaths or sufficient support given to staff when dealing with a loss.

There were also three consistent topics that support workers raised as areas that they were unsure about how to do best. Therefore, this report includes expert guidance on these three areas. This is available in full in section 5, and in summary as follows:

- **Death and dying (Homeless Link):**

Homeless Link in England point out that deaths are the most likely reason that a Housing First case is closed and therefore it should be addressed within Housing First. Housing First is working with people who are usually considered to have been systematically failed from an early age and endured long-term hardship that inevitably has an impact on health and mortality and placing someone into accommodation does not reverse years of traumatisation and damage. Housing First should not be viewed as a magic cure and in turn, death should not be viewed as a failure of the service. Instead, focus on giving people the best end of life possible when necessary. Housing First teams form close and enduring ties to the people they work with and the death of someone from the community requires support. Death and dying should be part of regular team conversations and training, as opposed to being raised for the first time at the point a resident dies.

- **Caseloads (Cymorth Cymru):**

Recent Housing First discussions in Wales have suggested that attaching specific ratios to the model might not be the best approach. Evidence suggests that actual caseload ratios change frequently over time. As long as staff wellbeing remains a focus, alongside person-centred intensive support without time limits, somebody working with, for example, eight clients for a period of time is not necessarily a major problem. As Housing First develops and matures across the UK and beyond, a larger number of clients will have received support for a longer time. This means that more clients might need less intensive support, although it must be accepted that this, again, can change over time, with support spikes arising. This requires support workers to have enough flex and capacity to increase support if someone in their caseload experiences a crisis or challenge in their lives. The Housing First principles do indeed reference 'small caseloads;' this is part of what differentiates the model from other, more traditional approaches. Indeed, caseloads should be as small as possible, but a realistic approach acknowledges there are limits to this. Combining a realistic approach with careful management of staff wellbeing and person-centred support should be the ultimate aim when it comes to caseload ratios in Housing First. Homeless Network Scotland is currently developing this cost modelling approach for the Scottish context.

- **Step Down/Stand Down (Homeless Link):**

It may be the case that residents are doing well because of the support provided through Housing First and removing this can reduce feelings of safety and impact stability. The aim of a Housing First service is to provide continued engagement and support beyond the sustainment of the tenancy and not to get to the point of removing that support unless this is desired by the individual. In Housing First, most people will need ongoing support for many years, and 'success' in Housing First will look different to that seen in other services. Reducing the intensity of support may be the right decision for some people, although not for everyone and all decisions should be person-centred. Funders, commissioners and providers must appreciate that to be involved with Housing First means a change to current practice and that concepts such as 'move-on' are not relevant. There is a difference between saying 'we won't be here for you in the future' and 'you might not need us in the future.' However, while in line with the core principles of the approach, all Housing First services should offer open-ended support, the reality of short-term funding means that this cannot always be realised. This tension needs a balance of managing reality and expectations: a trauma-informed approach with an understanding that relationships are central to Housing First. To be truly person-centred it is difficult to have a definitive policy around this, but safety and consistency are important for residents and staff.



Children — an emerging area of work for further research going forward:

Homeless Network Scotland would like further research to take place over the coming year on the impact of Housing First on tenants and their children. There has been a steady rise of children who are now included in the Housing First figures. In the Scottish Government's first quarterly report (from 1 April to 20 June 2021) it says that "residing within the 84 households were 86 adults and less than 5 children (with an additional 12 households having access to 13 children)"¹. Fast forward two years and there are now 726 adults and 100 children (with an additional 84 households having access to 132 children but do not have full-time custody)². The circumstances of these families are not known, so it is not possible to draw any conclusions at this point about whether Housing First is instrumental in enabling parents to stabilise enough to get access to their children, but these figures combined with anecdotes from local authorities during the check-up process, merit further detailed study.

1. Scottish Government, [Housing First quarterly monitoring: April – June 2021](#), 12 October 2021
 2. Scottish Government, [Housing First Monitoring Year 3 01 April to 30 September 2023](#)



Section 2: About Housing First

Housing First is designed to help redress the multiple and often severe disadvantages faced by a small group of people who experience homelessness.

Not everyone who experiences homelessness falls into this group. It is intended for people who are braving a range of challenges and whose needs are not being fully met by existing services. For example, people with underlying trauma who may have been homeless more than once, have mental health problems, poor physical health, or problems with drugs and alcohol.

*Housing First uses housing as a starting point rather than an end goal. Providing housing is what a Housing First service does before it does anything else, which is why it is called Housing First.*³

Housing First provides ordinary housing in an ordinary community because this, for most of us, is the best base to build and live our lives the way we want to. Housing First combines settled housing with person-led, strengths-based and flexible support – as much and for as long as someone wants it. Housing First actively rejects the idea that many people are not ‘ready’ for housing and aims to prevent rough sleeping and divert people away from temporary homeless accommodation.

From evidence into policy. And from pilot to pathfinder – and now into practice across almost all parts of Scotland.

Housing First is branching out across the country because it works – the international evidence tells us this, and now the evidence from home does too. The evaluation of Scotland’s Housing First Pathfinder said that “it was effective at supporting service users to sustain their tenancies, achieving an overall 12-month tenancy sustainment rate of 88% and 24-month sustainment rate of 80% in the period to end September 2021.”⁴

The Scottish Government’s latest figures reported on 26⁵ local authorities delivering Housing First across Scotland. Including figures from the Pathfinder and not just those since, there has been an estimated 1,646 tenancies started by the end of September 2023⁶. 65% of these tenancies were single men, 29% single women, 4% single parents and 2% were couples/other⁷. 94% of tenants are described as “white Scottish” (this is a higher share than the general homeless figures which is currently 83% of applicants are of white ethnicity⁸). 40% of tenants are within the 35-49 age group which is by far the biggest group, followed by 27% in the 25-34 group. This is in line with the wider homeless population figures.

3. Nicholas Pleace, [Housing First Guide Europe](#)

4. Johnsen, S, Blenkinsopp, J & Rayment, M 2022, [Scotland’s Housing First Pathfinder Evaluation: Final Report - Executive Summary](#), Heriot-Watt University

5. One additional local authority is currently developing a Housing First service, the other 5 local authorities use other models to provide support for those who need it.

6. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-first-monitoring-report-year-three-first-half/>

7. Scottish Government, [Housing First Monitoring Year 3 01 April to 30 September 2023](#)

8. Scottish Government, [Homelessness in Scotland: update to 30 September 2023](#), 27 Feb 2024

Housing First is underpinned by a set of seven principles:

1

People have a right to a home. People are offered a home of their own as quickly as possible, with no requirement to be 'housing ready.' Their tenancy agreement will be the same as any other tenant and they will not be asked to meet any additional criteria.

2

Flexible support is provided for as long as is needed. Support offered is not time-bound and is flexible enough to work with people at different levels of intensity based on their individual situations and experiences. This includes people choosing not to accept support or deciding they no longer need support as their situation has changed.

3

Housing and support are separate. Landlord and support functions are delivered separately, and choices people make about support do not affect their housing security. The offer of support stays with the person – if they decide to move to a new area or their tenancy fails, they are supported to avoid a homelessness crisis by finding and maintaining a new home.

4

Individuals have choice and control. People are involved in choosing their own home, in a location that best suits their circumstances. Through person-centred planning they are also in control of the support they receive choosing where, when, and how support is provided.

An active engagement approach is used.

Support staff have small caseloads, allowing them to be proactive and persistent in offering support; doing “whatever it takes” as many times as necessary to build a positive relationship with people. Cases will remain open even when engagement is low.

5

6

The service is based on people’s strengths, goals, and aspirations. Support is based on the understanding that there is always the possibility of positive change and improved health and wellbeing, relationships, and social and economic integration. Support staff work alongside people to identify strengths, goals, and skills, building self-esteem and confidence.

7

A harm reduction approach is used.

All engagement is based on the principle of reducing harm from alcohol and drugs and supporting people to minimise self-harm. Support is based on promoting recovery in physical and mental health and wellbeing.



Section 3: The Annual Check-Up process

The Housing First Annual Check-up is a process that was developed by Homeless Network Scotland and the Scottish Government in consultation with local authorities and local partners. It is intended to help align Housing First delivery with the National Framework. This process also aims to facilitate reflection on the effectiveness of Housing First in each area and to identify any changes needed.

There is no set path on how to do this best. Countries that are delivering Housing First have adopted different approaches to evaluating it, including structured accreditation processes. In Scotland, Homeless Network Scotland developed a collaborative and self-reflective approach with the aim of creating a culture that recognises that Housing First planning and delivery is challenging but that the outcomes are rewarding.

Homeless Network Scotland believes that consistent, supported self-reflection that supports those who commission, manage, deliver, and use Housing First services can serve to enhance that and share learning across different areas. It is a robust approach that draws from a wide range lens – workers who provide support, those who commission and plan services, and those who take up a Housing First tenancy.

Check-up process:

Stage 1: Gather Insights

- Homeless Network Scotland invites local authority teams, housing providers and support staff in 5 regional ‘housing options hub’ areas to come to a ‘Housing First Connect’ event to share feedback and ideas on how Housing First is developing locally.
- Homeless Network Scotland analyses Scottish Government Housing First reports which present data provided by local authorities on the delivery of Housing First.⁹
- An online survey is circulated to tenants to gather their insights and perspectives.

Stage 2: Self-Reflection Process

Local authorities and partners engage in self-reflection regarding their progress in meeting Housing First principles through the following steps:

- Local authority leads distribute a questionnaire to various stakeholders, including local authority staff (such as commissioners, managers, support workers, and housing officers), as well as housing and support personnel, to gather diverse perspectives on the service.
- The questionnaire uses a red-amber-green matrix to prompt reflection on core indicators for each of the 7 Housing First principles, which are condensed into 4 broad aims.

Homeless Network Scotland compiles the responses from each local authority area and consolidates them into a ‘Messages that Matter’ report. This report highlights areas of consensus, differences of opinion, and areas to prioritise for action.

9. These are published every 6 months.

Stage 3: Sounding Board

Homeless Network Scotland invites the local authority lead for Housing First and other key local partners to participate in a 'Sounding Board' session, which is a structured discussion based on the self-reflection forms that have been received. The session aims to provide feedback, explore significant messages identified, and challenge each other's perspectives to test assumptions and approaches.

- A panel consisting of at least 3 members is convened to evaluate the evidence collected from stages 1 and 2.
- The panel thoroughly examines the key considerations outlined in the Messages that Matter report.

Stage 4: Shared Solutions Report

- Homeless Network Scotland provides a final 'Shared Solutions' report for the local authority and partners, compiling and presenting the evidence and information gathered from stages 1 to 3.
- Homeless Network Scotland integrates the insights into Branching Out: The National Framework for Housing First regular updates.

Across the 4 stages, Homeless Network Scotland invited the insights of UK and international Housing First experts and benefited from their direct participation in some of the connect events and sounding boards. Their perspectives encouraged participants to reflect on why they deliver Housing First in the way they do, and to learn from examples of good practice from other countries. The Housing First experts included a mix of academics, policy experts and those with practical experience of delivering, and improving, Housing First programmes – please see appendix i.

To complete the annual check-up, Homeless Network Scotland:

- Engaged with 25 local authorities
- Facilitated 5 Housing First Connect sessions across the Housing Options Hubs areas
- Analysed over 90 self-reflection tools
- Held 14 Sounding Board meetings
- Received 107 tenants' survey responses

This annual report is based on the information received from this extensive check-up process.





Section 4: Key Themes and Priorities

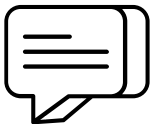
Theme 1: Funding

The Scottish Government has provided Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP) transition funding for five years, and at the end of 2023 it announced it would extend RRTP funding by an additional year and allocated £8m for 2024-25. The mainstreaming of Housing First is a core component of RRTPs.

It is out of this money that Housing First is primarily (but not always) funded across local authorities. There is a danger that this can exacerbate a view that Housing First is seen as exclusively a “homeless” issue with its own funding stream which other (also over-stretched) departments have used as a reason to step away from people that they would otherwise have had responsibility for (this is discussed in more detail under the multi-disciplinary partnership section). This has left Housing First going from one year of Rapid Rehousing funding to the next with staff unsure about what will happen when this transformation funding ends and worried about the impact this will have on tenants.

PRIORITY 1

Homeless Network Scotland would like to see renewed political priority given at a national and local level to help drive Housing First forward which would help to overcome challenges and give security to dedicated Housing First teams.



The uncertainty of funding is demoralising.

– homelessness team member, local authority

In the current financial climate, many Housing First staff believe that funding could be withdrawn at any time which would put Housing First in a vulnerable position in many local authorities. Housing First needs to be scaled up, not scaled back, to be an option for the cohort of people whose lives it could transform. The alternative is more expensive: lives in limbo with people cycling through the homelessness, health, social care and justice systems. However, all the services who benefit from a Housing First approach also need to invest in it – it cannot be left to homelessness teams to foot the entire bill and to also be expected to meet all the needs of these people. Health, community justice, social work, and other services need to help fund Housing First because a cross policy approach is the only way to address severe and multiple disadvantage. Our evaluation suggests that when multiple partners make some of their resources available to Housing First, it also helps to establish better partnership working.

Despite five years of transition funding, in most local authorities funding for Housing First is still temporary, without permanent long-term funding. This can create difficulties planning services, retaining and recruiting staff and scaling up support to meet demand. Local authorities should develop a long-term funding strategy for Housing First, including contributions from other departments to ensure that Housing First is not just seen as a homelessness issue.



*Housing First needs secure permanent funding.
It should be made a statutory service.*

– homelessness team lead, local authority

PRIORITY 2

Due to the overlapping nature of disadvantage, it is recommended that local authorities seek to move to a model of funding which sees Housing First funded by a number of relevant departments within a local authority, including the homelessness team, mental health, alcohol and drug recovery services, social work and community justice. This would help to fund Housing First and encourage specialist services to engage fully in the Housing First process. The Scottish Government should ensure that local authorities have sufficient funding to resource the level of Housing First that is needed.

Investment in Housing First makes savings across the public sector. Indeed, in England the Centre for Social Justice reported that **“Where an estimated £9,683 is spent annually on average per Housing First client, £15,073 is saved on other bills including homelessness services, the criminal justice system, NHS and mental health services, as well as drug and alcohol support.”**¹⁰ The savings of Housing First are made across a number of taxpayer funded services.

However, research from Homeless Link in England suggests it can take over five years for these savings to be seen. It is definitely a case of spending now to save in the future, and at a time of tight local authority budgets that can be hard case to make.



Homeless Network Scotland want to draw attention to one section of the Scottish Government’s figures on Housing First which could demonstrate how Housing First can turn lives around in the most amazing way by helping parents to become stable enough to have access to their children and in some cases have their children live with them. Further research needs to be done to establish if this is indeed the case. As well as the potential incredible human value of this, it could also create savings. In the Scottish Government’s first quarterly report (from 1 April to 20 June 2021) it states that “residing within the 84 households were 86 adults and **less than 5 children** (with an additional 12 households having access to 13 children)¹¹”. Fast forward two years later and there are now 726 adults and **100 children** (with an additional 84 households having access to 132 children but do not have full-time custody)¹².

Homeless Network Scotland have heard examples of tenants who are engaging in the Housing First process in order that they can work towards having access to their children and in time, take them out of care. At this point it is not possible to know from these figures what the breakdown is of how many children have been taken out of care and placed with their parents or how many of those children were already with their parent(s) when they started their Housing First tenancy, but one thing is clear: that as time goes on, the number of children being counted in the figures is rising. How much money has the state saved from a child being taken out of care?

10. Centre for Social Justice, [Close to Home, Delivering a national Housing First programme in England](#), February 2021.
11. Scottish Government, [Housing First quarterly monitoring: April – June 2021](#), 12 October 2021
12. Scottish Government, [Housing First Monitoring Year 3 01 April to 30 September 2023](#)



Having Housing First was a lifesaver for me. Moving into my house quickly [meant I was] able to get my daughter back. – Housing First tenant

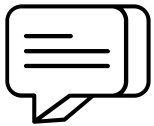
PRIORITY 3

Going forward Homeless Network Scotland recommends that Housing First teams actively gather data on how Housing First is helping parents to see their children and if it is helping them to keep their children at home with them.



Theme 2: Upscaling housing first

One key recommendation from last year's check-up report emphasised the need to support and encourage local authorities and partners to “keep branching out further and more rapidly.”



Think of the difference we could make if Housing First was upscaled. – homelessness team member, local authority

This year has seen continued expansion of Housing First across Scotland, with a total of 26 out of 32 local authorities now implementing the programme. (For guidance on rolling out Housing First in Scotland you can refer to this [Branching Out](#) document). Using the figures from 1 April 2021 (after the Pathfinder), there were 717 Housing First tenancies at September 2023, compared to 486 in September 2022. This is good progress, but it is not enough. Housing First in Scotland is currently not meeting demand, there are far more people who could benefit from it but there is not capacity to deliver it.



Housing First works, the evidence is there. We received a referral for a young man in his twenties who was sofa surfing because he had been banned from the B&Bs he had been placed in because of his ‘aggressive behaviours’. He is neurodivergent, addictions and poor mental health and big social settings did not work for him. In the months that he has had his own home he has stabilised and has gone from 2:1 support to 1:1 support and no longer presents as aggressive. He is now at the stage of re-seeking education.

– service manager, third sector

Housing First Demand Estimates

Aberdeen City	221	Edinburgh	357	Orkney	6
Aberdeenshire	103	Eilean Siar	8	Perth & Kinross	73
Angus	60	Falkirk	103	Renfrewshire	124
Argyll & Bute	40	Fife	273	Scottish Borders	55
Clackmannanshire	49	Glasgow City	538	Shetland	7
Dumfries & Galloway	109	Highland	91	South Ayrshire	58
Dundee City	181	Inverclyde	44	South Lanarkshire	158
East Ayrshire	79	Midlothian	33	Stirling	62
East Dunbartonshire	20	Moray	39	West Dunbartonshire	136
East Lothian	47	North Ayrshire	132	West Lothian	150
East Renfrewshire	17	North Lanarkshire	185	Scotland	3,560

Everyone who is homeless needs a home fast, some people just need more support than others. Around half of households who experience homelessness in Scotland have no support needs. Analysis suggests that around 10-15% of homeless households are best fit for Housing First. Heriot-Watt University carried out analysis for Housing First Scotland in 2020 which indicated that approximately 3,560 new Housing First tenancies are needed each year to meet demand in Scotland. With 306¹³ new tenancies started in the year to September 2023, this suggests Scotland is currently meeting around 9% of the projected demand. The ideal is for Scotland to be working towards the position where it can offer Housing First to anyone who needs it.

Local authorities have made clear that there is higher demand for Housing First compared to its availability in many areas and so they have to make decisions as to who is assigned to Housing First and who is not. The check-up process has revealed a number of strategies that local authorities use to prioritise access to Housing First which includes:

- Limiting Housing First to a particular geographical area which means anyone who wants to stay in another part of the local authority will not get onto the programme.
- Setting age restrictions for eligible tenants (younger people are often excluded).
- Temporarily closing referrals until capacity allows for more tenants.
- Restricting access to certain groups e.g. one local authority did not allow a group with specific additional needs to access Housing First because that group of people would have lost their specialist support if they moved onto the Housing First programme due to the internal budget arrangements of that authority.

13. HNS analysis of Scottish Government's [Housing First: Quarterly monitoring reports](#) looking at the total number of new Housing First tenancies reported in Scotland between October 2022 and September 2023

The opposite can also happen where in some cases local authorities try to accommodate more tenants than they have capacity for and therefore compromise fidelity to the Housing First principles. The greatest risk is increasing staff-to-tenant caseload ratios.

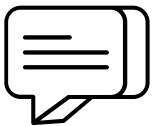
PRIORITY 4

Housing First must continue to upscale to meet the needs of everyone who could benefit from the approach.



Theme 3: Tenancy support and sustainment

Housing First is working for those who are accessing it. The Scottish Government reports that tenancy sustainment rates are at 90% over 12 months since entry¹⁴. Throughout the annual check-up process when staff stop to think and reflect on Housing First, they say it works. Staff talk about people they have seen go through the homeless process repeatedly as they go in and out of prison, able to finally find a degree of stability and support that allows them to sustain a tenancy. Homeless Network Scotland heard how tenants who had previously struggled to maintain tenancies have, with the support of Housing First, been successful in maintaining tenancies.



We have a man in his fifties who has addictions, is HIV positive, has a mobility disability, who has been in institutions – hostels and prisons – since he was 14 years old, and he came onto Housing First because he has been in the homeless system for so long. He has now sustained his Housing First tenancy for three years. He now has his first ever bank account. He hoovers and cleans his little house. Housing First works.

– housing support worker, local authority

Several local authorities have highlighted the success of setting aside a sum of money that can be used for when a tenant must serve a short historical prison sentence or has to stay in hospital to cover their rent costs when they are not in a position to access social security support. This money means that they have been able to come out and go back to their tenancy, rather than end up back in the homeless system again.

PRIORITY 5

Receiving a short prison sentence, having to stay in hospital or taking a place at residential rehab should not impact on tenants sustaining their tenancy. Local authorities should consider ring-fencing funds to cover rent costs for tenants in these circumstances.

14. Scottish Government, [Housing First Monitoring Year 3 01 April to 30 September 2023](#)

Investing in properties to ensure that they are suitably furnished has meant that tenancies are sustained, rather than abandoned. Like many aspects of Housing First, a small initial investment saves services money in the long run.

As well as accessing funds via the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) Community Care Grants, many local authorities provide additional grants to support tenants when it comes to furnishing their homes. Some provide a budget for 'supervised spend' where the tenant goes out with the support worker and chooses what they would like to buy in the way of furnishings and decoration. Other local authorities use existing contracts to provide additional decoration and furnishings for properties.

Some support workers identified delays in Scottish Welfare Fund applications which had the knock-on effect of delaying when a tenancy could be taken up. In some cases this was resolved by using a separate pot of money to furnish properties, rather than the SWF. This could be resolved if decisions were made in principle for Housing First tenants, so that once a suitable property became available funds could be released straight away. Homeless Network Scotland was told that in some local authority areas Scottish Welfare Funds were being exhausted quickly so tenants were not able to access that help, or where the SWF did not cover certain items such as carpets.

PRIORITY 6

Local authorities to consider taking a cash first approach rather than providing goods to enable tenants to purchase what they feel best suits their needs to furnish their home. Scottish Welfare Fund departments should be supported to make awards in principle, so that as soon as a tenancy is signed a community care grant can be released.

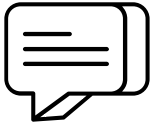
As part of the annual check-up process, Homeless Network Scotland were keen to establish what tenants themselves thought of Housing First and encouraged them to submit feedback. Overwhelmingly, tenants felt that the support offered through Housing First had enabled them to sustain their tenancy.

107 tenants completed feedback on the Housing First service they had received and overwhelmingly respondents were incredibly positive about Housing First, highlighting:

- Quick housing placement
- Excellent support teams
- Improved mental health

Housing First is seen as vital for maintaining tenancies and people appreciate the flexibility, care, and advocacy that they are given. The support provided by staff, and the dedication they bring to the job are also highlighted. Two factors were flagged as especially important to tenants:

- The relationships between Housing First support workers and housing officers or landlords when it comes to sustaining tenancies. This means that any issues can be raised and dealt with quickly before a tenancy is put at risk.
- Practical support, such as reminders to pay rent and bills, as well as help with budgeting were identified as key. The holistic support that Housing First provides, such as helping tenants to attend appointments and pick up prescriptions are also important in ensuring that tenancies are sustainable.



“Always there to help with everything, making sure I attend appointments etc. Brilliant service helped me change my life around.” – Housing First tenant

However, a small minority felt excluded from the allocation process, that there was a lack of involvement in decision-making, and noted communication gaps between support and allocation teams. The sense from the check-up process is that while there are good relationships between tenants and their support workers, more formal feedback loops are not in place and so tenants are not able to feed into wider improvements to services and systems.

PRIORITY 7

Local authorities should set up an organised and formal feedback loop that enables tenant views to be fed back to decision makers to help Housing First to branch out effectively in their area.



Theme 4: Housing supply

As homeless numbers continue to rise in Scotland, there is an increasing demand on housing supply and there is simply not enough housing to meet demand. This has also had an impact on Housing First, even though Housing First numbers are much smaller. For instance, one local authority team lead told us: “We just need 25 lets. That would change the landscape for us.”

Lack of housing supply is an issue across Scotland and not just for the six stock transfer authorities who have no housing stock of their own. Those without their own stock are reliant on Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) accepting Housing First applicants. Some RSLs are exceptionally good at this and interact proactively with local Housing First teams. However, in the current landscape RSLs are faced with a number of competing priorities, and some local authorities felt that gatekeeping can occur with Housing First tenants seen as more difficult to accommodate in the longer term. There is a particular problem in rural areas where ‘everyone knows everyone’ and stigma is attached to certain people who have been in the homeless system for years. And while a local authority can challenge this, strong links with social landlords are necessary to maintain as much housing choice as possible.

Where RSLs are made part of the Housing First governance team there is better partnership working and it can really work well. However, this does add a further step and an additional layer to the Housing First process.

A key principle of Housing First is that a tenant is offered the choice of where they want to live. This enables tenants to say no to a home in an area where they know drug dealing is taking place for instance or to find one where they have a support network. However, as housing supply comes under increasing pressure in much of Scotland, it is becoming harder to offer tenants choice in areas that they want to stay. But this is not a universal picture. One local authority said that in their area a Housing First tenant gets up to 7 housing options to choose from.

Homeless Network Scotland also heard that it is taking longer to find someone a permanent tenancy. One local authority said that they now have people referred onto Housing First who are having to stay in unsuitable accommodation for more than a year before they get a home.

The reality of the impact of this was succinctly expressed by the local authority team lead: **“a challenge of not having suitable stock to move people through is that the outcomes are too frequently prison, hospital or death.”**

This local authority was not alone, as others said that as they wait for suitable properties to become available, people end up staying in temporary accommodation longer and they can go downhill fast, so then staff are just waiting for them to have a crisis. This impacts the person and staff as both get frustrated as it does not work holding people in a space that it is not working.

One local authority team said that they “flip” temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation if the tenant is happy for that to happen so that they do not have to move again.

Housing supply is clearly going to be under more pressure as 2024 progresses so this problem is only going to get worse. Housing First requires a home of your own or it is not Housing First no matter how good your support is.

PRIORITY 8

Housing First needs homes to work. The internationally regarded Housing First programme in Scotland will fail if the affordable housing supply programme is not accelerated so more socially rented homes can be allocated to Housing First. Meantime, the Scottish Government and local government need to work with Registered Social Landlords to increase allocations to Housing First tenants.

PRIORITY 9

Homeless Network Scotland heard over and over again that Housing First works for tenants, including those with overlapping disadvantages and support needs. Housing First successes need to be promoted so the service becomes known and valued.



Theme 5: Multi-disciplinary partnerships



Housing First is a homelessness intervention strategy, aimed at people with multiple and complex needs, particularly rough sleepers. It provides access to permanent housing as a starting point to help tackle their non-housing needs as well.¹⁵

Housing First is not housing only. A stable, secure tenancy is the starting point to help tackle the non-housing needs of people who have been homeless. This means that Housing First is as much of a health, social care and community justice policy as it is a housing and homelessness one. While some local authorities have good partnerships in place with specialist services, without doubt the biggest challenges that have been identified for Housing First are funding and access to specialist services and Homeless Network Scotland believes these are linked issues.

The Scottish Government provided transformation funding for Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, and it is out of this money that a lot of Housing First across Scotland is funded. This can mean that, in some areas, Housing First is seen as exclusively a “homeless” issue with its own funding stream which other (also over-stretched) departments have used as a reason to step away from tenants that they would otherwise have had responsibility for. That prevents the full potential of Housing First being realised.



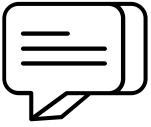
It all comes down to money.
– homelessness team lead, local authority.

Scotland cannot afford not to have Housing First as the alternative is more expensive: it will leave people cycling through the homelessness system, in and out of services across many sectors. However, all the services who benefit from a Housing First approach also need to invest in it – it cannot be left to homelessness teams to foot the entire bill and to also be expected to meet all the needs of tenants.

Housing First tenants told us how support workers go above and beyond. But when workers ask for support from specialist health and social care teams, the services are often not available to wrap around the tenant. Over this last year Homeless Network Scotland again heard about tenants getting stuck between addictions and mental health teams over who treats who. There are some good examples of specialist partnership working that mean mental health and addictions support are integrated into Housing First support with the result that tenants have better outcomes. However, this is not the case across all local authorities and is an on-going frustration for some of the teams delivering Housing First.

This is part of a bigger challenge in Scotland to ensure No Wrong Door, especially for people facing severe and multiple disadvantages:

15. House of Commons Library, [Housing First: tackling homelessness for those with complex needs](#), by Wendy Wilson and Philip Loft, 8 March 2021.



The limited availability and inflexibility of many of the statutory health and social care services that Housing First projects work in conjunction with have restricted the extent to which its potential benefits have been fully realised. The Pathfinder helped service users navigate what are often complex systems, but gaps in external provision and barriers to access remain. Difficulties accessing mental healthcare for this population are especially acute given rigid eligibility thresholds and prohibitive engagement requirements employed by many National Health Service Boards for example.¹⁶

Although mental health and addictions services are often mentioned as difficult to access by Housing First teams, it is not limited to those teams.

Homeless Network Scotland believes that if social work, alcohol and drug recovery, mental health, and community justice were to partly fund Housing First from their budgets, an immediate consequence of this would be that it would enable Housing First teams to access people within those services to help tenants.

Housing First staff are all too aware of the intense pressures that other services are also under and know that post-pandemic addiction levels and mental health issues have increased significantly but accompanying funding has not matched demand. As one frontline worker highlighted to us – increasing housing supply is one part of the equation, but helping people to sustain their tenancy is the other half when it comes to Housing First and specialist support is key to that.

PRIORITY 10

Many Housing First tenants need specialist services such as mental health or addiction recovery. Too often these services lack capacity to take on everyone that needs support, leaving Housing First staff to fill in the gaps. There needs to be sufficient resources to allow mental health and addictions services to meet demand. And given all that is now widely understood about the overlapping nature of disadvantage and the sequence of adverse life experiences, Housing First should act as a passport to those services

16. Sarah Johnsen, Janice Blenkinsopp and Matthew Rayment, [Gaining and Preserving Pioneer Status: Key Lessons from the Housing First Pathfinder Programme in Scotland](#), I-Sphere, Heriot-Watt University and ICF, April 2023

As well as the challenges of multi-disciplinary partnerships, the check-up process has also heard of where it works well:

- Some Housing First teams were able to get a high level of buy-in from key partners at an early stage and implemented a structure such as a Memorandum of Understanding, partnership agreements and clear governance structures that have ensured successful partnerships.
- Establishing a named contact in partner organisations has also proven to be highly successful. In local authorities where a link worker was specifically funded to serve as the point of contact, support staff were often able to promptly refer tenants or obtain the necessary information.



The mental health nurses have been a godsend. Being able to lift the phone to them when someone goes into a decline has been one of the huge successes of our partnership working which on some occasions has saved lives.

– homeless team leader, local authority

When partners were involved in the Housing First referral panel, they could ensure that tenants who were unsuitable for Housing First, either due to their significant needs or requiring limited support, could be directed to the relevant partner without the need for additional referral processes.

PRIORITY 11

The establishment of formal, high-level partnerships with other stakeholders creates clear processes and responsibilities and can provide accountability. Where they are not already in place, local authorities should consider developing such partnerships. The next iteration of the Branching Out National Framework will draw from existing local examples to provide guidance on producing a high-level memorandum of understanding and partnership agreement.

Theme 6: Recruitment/staffing pressures

Another challenge – intricately linked to funding – that was cited by staff was the issue of recruitment. Housing First as a service is sometimes seen as separate from the core housing and homelessness teams within local authorities. Due to the uncertainty of funding of Housing First, some local authorities have advertised posts on a one-year basis which has proved to be unattractive and has led to a shortage in staffing, putting even more pressure on stretched staff and challenging fidelity to the principle of small caseloads. Some local authorities have taken the decision to advertise two-year contracts which has improved the number of applicants, but it was felt that it was not enough and that the ability to offer permanent contracts would make it easier to recruit, and retain, the right staff for Housing First.

PRIORITY 12

Short term contracts negatively impact recruiting and retaining the best support staff. Local authorities and support providers should offer longer term or, ideally, permanent contracts to enable them to recruit and retain the best staff.

A key principle of Housing First is ensuring that staff caseloads remain small. Yet during the check-up process caseload ratios continued to be raised as an area of concern. This is not surprising when you consider staff shortages and funding pressures as outlined above. Homeless Network Scotland heard of one extreme example where a worker was running caseloads of 26-30 as there were only two of them providing support (although not all cases were Housing First). Managers can find it hard to justify someone having less than ten cases when other colleagues have upwards of 50 “generic” homeless cases. If staff end up supporting more people than is manageable, it becomes about managing crises rather than providing the support the tenant needs.

Caseloads need to be smaller to enable a more intensive form of support and the protected time needed to encourage and respond to disclosures made by people who are opening up about their life and experiences. Where there is a lack of support from partners outwith the homelessness services, Housing First staff can end up carrying too much responsibility for the care of the tenant, and often then go above and beyond to make a success of the tenancy which can lead to unrealistic expectations of Housing First staff.



The amount of support that X receives has steadily decreased since she became a participant. At the beginning of the journey there were weeks where she was receiving 20 plus hours of direct support from her Housing Support Worker; this has reduced to a couple of hours a week, and the support will be stepped down to a lower-level support team in the coming months. If her support needs increase, then she can re-enter the housing first programme without further assessment, demonstrating the flexibility and participant focused nature of the support. – homeless team leader, local authority

PRIORITY 13

Small caseloads allow for strong relationships and trust to be built. When this is compromised, so is the support that people receive. The impact on frontline staff should also be everyone's concern. In the context of budgetary pressures, the core principle of having small caseloads continues to be under threat, even though supporting tenants well is key to the success of the programme. As far as possible Housing First teams should ensure that caseloads remain manageable, and person-led so that there is flex to enable staff to increase support if it is needed.

In many local authorities there is great practice where time is provided for reflective practice and mentoring. There are local authorities, and support and housing providers, who are ensuring their staff are trained in a trauma informed approach, enabling them to better support their tenants. But this is not a uniform picture. As general homeless numbers rise, teams are under increasing pressure and care of staff becomes deprioritised leading to burn-out, people being off long-term sick or high turnover of staff as people move on to less demanding jobs.

During this check-up process the impact of tenants dying whilst in a tenancy has been brought up repeatedly, both in terms of the unreasonable expectation that Housing First should prevent deaths and the separate trauma it causes for staff. Housing First tenants are likely to have much poorer health than the general population and even the general homeless population and therefore are more likely to die younger. Housing First should not be expected to “somehow magically undo the effects of the abuse and/or neglect that their bodies have suffered given prolonged exposure to life on the street, problematic substance abuse, and associated trauma.”¹⁷ There will be tenants who continue to have addictions and poor health, some of whom will still be able to maintain a tenancy, but others will struggle, especially if they are unable to access the specialist services that they need. **This is not a failure of support workers or of Housing First.**

What is required however is assurances that staff who are dealing with the death of someone they work with on a weekly and sometimes daily basis can access the support they need. Support workers can be one of the most involved people in a tenant's life, to the extent that even during the Covid pandemic when funeral numbers were severely restricted, support workers would still be invited to funerals. It is important that Housing First practice includes giving staff appropriate support when a death occurs, which currently is not always the case:



You get the phone call to ask if you are alright but nothing else – local authority support worker

PRIORITY 14

It is essential that staff welfare is a priority with time for self-reflective practice built into the working week no matter how under pressure a team's time is, otherwise staff sickness and burnout will continue to be an issue.

There is expert advice on this topic in the following section as it was raised so often – see section 5.

17. Sarah Johnsen, Janice Blenkinsopp and Matthew Rayment, [Gaining and Preserving Pioneer Status: Key Lessons from the Housing First Pathfinder Programme in Scotland](#), I-Sphere, Heriot-Watt University and ICF, April 2023





Section 5:

Housing First expert opinion: death and dying; caseloads; step down/stand down

Throughout the check-up process three issues were raised consistently that frontline staff were unsure about how to do best:

- The impact of tenants dying on staff and on the service
- When to step down/stand down
- Caseload numbers

Homeless Link and Cymorth Cymru were kind enough to allow this report to include their expert insights on these three issues.

Death and dying: expert opinion by Homeless Link¹⁸

Taken with permission from Homeless Link's guidance and research papers.¹⁹

A key principle of Housing First is harm reduction, and support staff should always work to reduce harm, prevent risk, and encourage people towards healthier choices. However, our research found that tragically, at 6%, deaths are the most likely reason a case would be closed in Housing First and it is important to acknowledge this.

Death is often seen as a failure of a service. This is partly cultural in that death can be a taboo subject and discussions on death are often avoided despite its inevitability. But given the high numbers of people supported by Housing First who do pass away whilst accessing these services, death must be considered differently. Housing First is working with people who are usually considered to have been systematically failed from an early age and endured long-term hardship that inevitably has an impact on health and mortality. The average age for a person experiencing homelessness to die is 46 for a man and 42 for a woman²⁰ and placing someone into accommodation does not suddenly reverse years of traumatisation and damage.

Housing First should not be viewed as a magic cure and in turn, death should not be viewed as a failure of the service. Instead, focus on giving people the best end of life possible when necessary, and ensuring that they are supported by the health and care packages accessible to the average citizen.

18. Homeless Link, [Managing transitions in Housing First services guidance](#)

19. Blood, Imogen, Birchall, Anita and Pleace, Nicholas orcid.org/0000-0002-2133-2667 (2021) [Reducing, Changing or Ending Housing First Support. Research Report. Homeless Link](#)

20. Homeless Link, [Managing transitions in Housing First services guidance](#)

There are several behaviours which may act as key warning signs for someone's deteriorating health, or where there could be a risk to life. These include:

- Non engagement with health services
- Missed appointments
- Repeated hospital admissions
- Repeated overdose and use of naloxone
- Non-compliance with medication and treatments
- Visual deterioration in physical appearance
- Self-neglect
- Increased substance misuse and alcohol abuse.

The Surprise Question (Joanne Lynn) is used in palliative care, and it may be helpful to ask, 'would you be surprised if this person was to die within the next 6-12 months?' to identify the most at risk on the Housing First caseload.

Death has a ripple effect across any community and death in Housing First is no different. Housing First teams form close and enduring ties to the people they support and the death of someone from the community requires support. There are some good practice examples Housing First teams could consider, including:

- Timely announcements to the team.
- Space to talk and reflect.
- An offer of counselling with a professional.
- A memorial service and remembering the person activities.
- Being mindful of religious customs around death for staff, residents and others affected.
- In time, take opportunities to consider any lessons learned from the person's death, including Safeguarding Adults Reviews.
- It's OK to take your work home with you but remember... "The people we serve can always live in our hearts but when we're home, they're on the other side of our heart. Think of our heart as a rotating planet. We need to make room for ourselves, our family, friends and other parts of our life."

Death and dying should be part of regular team conversations and training, as opposed to being raised for the first time at the point a resident dies upskilling teams to have a better understanding of death and dying, as well as training around advocacy for palliative and hospice care would be useful. A local hospice may offer free training on Advance Care Planning.

Caseloads: expert opinion by Alex Osmond, Cymorth Cymru

Alex Osmond provided the following guidance especially for this report.

The principles used for [Housing First in Wales](#) (which are similar to the ‘core’ set of principles used worldwide but have been amended slightly to reflect the context of homelessness in Wales) have not up to this point included references to specific caseload ratios. That said, as Wales’ Housing First Accreditation process was developed, research was carried out that suggested a caseload of somewhere between five and seven clients per support worker most aligned with the model. As such, this number was used during the process to evaluate whether Housing First services were keeping caseloads appropriately small, and thus able to deliver the intensive, person-centred support so vital to the model.

For various reasons, these principles are undergoing a review; at the time of writing, this review has finished, and a new set of principles, and associated documentation, will be published imminently. Each principle has been examined in detail by a task-and-finish group, members of the Welsh Housing First Network and its various subgroups, support workers delivering Housing First, and people receiving Housing First support.

These discussions suggested that attaching specific ratios to the model might not be the best approach. While there are issues generally with support provider staff going ‘above and beyond,’ when it comes to delivering support – and this needs careful management from a staff wellbeing perspective – restricting staff to fixed numbers in itself an inflexible approach to providing flexible support.

This idea has been reinforced by the various accreditation processes, where evidence suggests that actual caseload ratios change frequently over time. As long as staff wellbeing remains a focus, alongside person-centred intensive support without time limits, somebody working with, for example, eight clients for a period of time is not necessarily a major problem.

What is more, as Housing First develops and matures across the UK and beyond, a larger number of clients will have received support for a longer time. This means that more clients might need less intensive support, although it must be accepted that this, again, can change over time, with support spikes arising. This requires support workers to have enough flex and capacity to increase support if someone in their caseload experiences a crisis or challenge in their lives. The service would need to carefully manage the addition of a new client, who may need more intensive support, if a support worker already has a caseload of this size.

As long as managers maintain careful scrutiny when it comes to the wellbeing of their staff, have procedures in place to manage support needs rising and falling, and make use of methods to avoid single-point dependency (clients might, for example, work with more than one member of staff), then actual caseload ratios need not be fixed and inflexible. (Another interesting aspect of recent conversations covering this topic in Wales is the idea that Housing First clients should be supported to understand and accept the idea of people in their lives, like support workers, moving on or changing jobs. Saying ‘goodbye’ to people, particularly in a professional context, is a normal part of life.)

In addition to being flexible, the support provided must be intensive, strength-based, and person-centred. Again, as long as the focus is on the right approach here, the numbers don’t matter as much as might be perceived.

The Housing First principles do indeed reference ‘small caseloads;’ this is part of what differentiates the model from other, more traditional approaches. Indeed, caseloads should be as small as possible, but a realistic approach acknowledges there are limits to this. Combining a realistic approach with careful management of staff wellbeing and person-centred support should be the ultimate aim when it comes to caseload ratios in Housing First.

For the Welsh accreditation process [Scotland does not have an accreditation process], a project aiming to get the highest score for the relevant principle, amended as part of the review process, will need to deliver support that aligns with this:

Staff are committed to providing ongoing support not limited by time. Support can scale up and down and can be re-accessed when needed. Support is not commissioned on a per-hours basis. Individual support worker caseloads are carefully considered to ensure that clients have the support they need, while staff wellbeing is maintained. No support worker should have a caseload too large for them to handle, and caseloads should be small enough to allow a persistent and proactive approach, focused on the needs of the person.

Step down/Stand down: expert opinion by Homeless Link²¹

Taken with permission from Homeless Link's guidance and research papers.²²

Housing First is a service aimed at those experiencing the most severe multiple disadvantage and where other housing support models have not worked. This means that the thresholds in Housing First services are very high, and the people being supported have ongoing needs around physical, psychological and emotional health, which will not be fixed by having a tenancy. It may be the case that residents are doing well because of the support provided through Housing First and removing this can reduce feelings of safety and impact of stability.

The aim of a Housing First service is to provide continued engagement and support beyond the sustainment of the tenancy and not to get to the point of removing that support unless this is desired by the individual.

In Housing First, most people will need ongoing support for many years, and 'success' in Housing First will look different to that seen in other services. Reducing the intensity of support may be the right decision for some people, although not for everyone and all decisions should be person-centred.

Housing First promises to work with people experiencing multiple disadvantage for as long as support is needed, and this means two things:

1. There is very limited through-put for the service as the caseload is relatively static.
2. In order to increase capacity, there usually needs to be further investment in the service.

Funders, commissioners and providers must appreciate that to be involved with Housing First means a change to normal practice and that concepts such as 'move-on' are not relevant.

Journeys are not linear and support needs fluctuate. It is difficult to predict what someone's support journey will look like as there may be periods of time where a person's support needs increase due to a crisis or other change, and other times where things are more stable and consistent. However, we know that journeys will be unpredictable, and Housing First services need the ability to step-up and step-down support as needed.

One of the reasons Housing First is successful is that small caseloads genuinely allow teams to provide a flexible and intensive support service, and this is important throughout a resident's journey.

21. Homeless Link, [Managing transitions in Housing First services guidance](#)

22. Blood, Imogen, Birchall, Anita and Pleace, Nicholas orcid.org/0000-0002-2133-2667 (2021) [Reducing, Changing or Ending Housing First Support. Research Report. Homeless Link](#)

In order to free up capacity on a caseload, a resident should:

1. Be handed over to a step-down service for ongoing lower-level support (if needed); and
2. Have their case formally closed (with agreement from all parties).

It is difficult for a Housing First worker to provide both an intensive support service and a lower needs support service and trying to create this will lead to difficulties in adhering to the key principles. Housing First services should forge partnerships with other organisations or develop an additional service offer in-house to meet the needs of residents requiring less support. It is key to remember that, in Housing First 'lower level' support needs are still relatively high compared to the general population.

There is a difference between saying 'we won't be here for you in the future' and 'you might not need us in the future.' It is possible to talk about a future where support is no longer needed, or no longer needed at an intensive level, without the need to pressurise the individual into feeling that support will be withdrawn at some point. However, while in line with the core principles of the approach, all Housing First services should offer open-ended support, the reality of short-term funding means that this cannot always be realised. This tension needs a balance of managing reality and expectations: a trauma-informed approach with an understanding that relationships are central to Housing First. Support may be delivered in many ways but must never do harm or risk retraumatising someone.

Support is provided 'for as long as it is needed' and it is important to know both when support needs change and how to manage that change. To be truly person-centred it is difficult to have a definitive policy around this, but safety and consistency are important for residents and staff. (For further guidance refer to Homeless Link's 'Planning and Reflection Tool' in their Managing Transitions guidance.)²³

23. Homeless Link, [Managing transitions in Housing First services guidance](#)

Section 6:

Comparison to 2022-23 Check-Up

Last year the Housing First check-up process engaged with 13 local authorities and their partners, following a similar process to engage with staff. Since then, the process has evolved to include the perspectives of Housing First tenants which gives a fuller picture of how Housing First is working in Scotland.

Last year’s process identified key takeaways and ideas for development across the areas involved, detailed in the table below with an update on progress based on feedback from this year’s process.

In 2022 we recommended	In 2023 we see
<p><i>On Branching Out:</i></p> <p>There are many more people that can benefit from a Housing First approach in each part of Scotland. Local authorities and partners need to be supported and encouraged to keep branching out further and more rapidly.</p>	<p>The number of Housing First tenancies continues to grow despite increasing pressure on housing systems.</p> <p>The number of local authorities delivering Housing First has doubled, demonstrating a continued determination to branch out.</p> <p>The pace and scale of Housing First branching out still has room for improvement. While we’re getting closer, there are still many more people who can benefit from a Housing First approach.</p>
<p><i>On Securing Housing:</i></p> <p>Local authorities struggling to source properties due to increasing market pressures to consider adapting allocation policies to enable direct allocations to Housing First, with the understanding that this must be done in a way that does not affect the choice and control of the tenant.</p>	<p>Sourcing homes for Housing First is a continuing challenge, worsening in some areas due to higher pressures on the housing market.</p> <p>With the increasing pressure on housing, Housing First needs innovative thinking on how to access affordable, settled housing across Scotland – last year’s recommendation on allocations is one of many ways to make social housing more accessible for this cohort.</p>

<p><i>On No Wrong Door:</i></p> <p>The development of local methods to enable Housing First tenants to be ‘passported’ into specialist services when they are needed. This would enable tenants to circumvent long waiting lists and enable Housing First support to focus on the goals and aspirations of tenants, while specialist services engage with tenants to provide support in their area of expertise.</p>	<p>Accessing specialist support services for mental health and recovery continues to present a challenge to Housing First teams.</p> <p>The idea of “passporting” into specialist services remains a priority this year – different areas are facilitating access to specialist support services in different ways e.g. buying in services for diagnosis, creating multidisciplinary teams at strategic and operational level, or funding specialist support staff for Housing First tenants.</p>
<p><i>On Commissioning Support:</i></p> <p>Guidance on commissioning Housing First and on step down/stand down support should be built into the National Framework to help ensure a consistent approach across local authorities. Fully consider the pros and cons of delivering Housing First support in-house vs. commissioning the service to a third-party provider. Independence of housing support from housing provision is key, and Housing First tenants need to feel confident with the arrangement.</p>	<p>This year this report provides an advice note on what step down/stand down means in practice. This will inform conversations on developing guidance within the national framework this year.</p> <p>Work is currently in development on a cost model to assist local commissioners to price and commission Housing First support in a way that enables flex in the service and around the step-down/stand-down processes.</p> <p>Where housing support is delivered in-house, local authorities are able to demonstrate a clear distinction to ensure that housing security is not dependent on engaging with support.</p>
<p><i>On Making a Home:</i></p> <p>A change to SWF guidance to allow faster provision of funds, white goods or furniture for Housing First tenants. This will allow all local authorities to offer a uniform service to Housing First tenants and would minimise the need for local authorities/housing providers to absorb the cost of grace periods for rent while tenants wait for properties to be furnished.</p>	<p>Accessing funds to furnish properties continues to come mainly from Scottish Welfare Fund as a Community Care Grant. How this is administered differs in each local authority, and Housing First would benefit from a “fast track” process for welfare fund applications from Housing First tenants/ teams.</p> <p>Given the pressure on Scottish Welfare Funds, some areas and housing providers are finding ways to top up funds to allow new tenants to settle in a property with their basic needs met.</p> <p>This year’s report includes a priority for taking a cash first approach, which is in line with enabling choice and control for tenants wherever possible.</p>



Section 7: Conclusions

Scotland is currently in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, a housing emergency and homelessness figures are increasing. It is a highly pressured environment for people who are accessing the support services of Housing First teams.

It is also a pressured environment for support staff, many of whom are dealing with vastly increased caseloads and post pandemic are witnessing a rise in problems with mental health or with drugs and alcohol. Despite these difficult circumstances the Housing First teams Homeless Network Scotland met over the last year were all committed to Housing First and even though they felt somewhat embattled due to funding and other pressures, they were seeking to see how they could improve the service that they offered to tenants and support they offered to staff.

As well as lives being transformed, savings are being made. But it takes time for these savings to be realised. Over the next year the ideal is for local authorities to move towards a more permanent cycle of funding of Housing First in partnership with all the services that the tenant needs support from and for this to be embedded in a partnership working which will have better outcomes all round for tenants, staff and ultimately for the public purse. The hope is that this then would allow Housing First to be upscaled at pace so that it can meet need.

The roll out of Housing First has been steady but there is more to do. Housing First is at a critical juncture in Scotland due to uncertainty over funding but it continues to demonstrate that it works and that it prevents and resolves homelessness. It also helps to reunite children with parents. It reaches people that other services have not been able to reach. Along with long-term funding, Housing First needs a steady supply of social homes.



Housing First is the ultimate homelessness prevention activity. – homeless team lead, local authority

Appendix (i): Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the participation and input from Housing First tenants, Housing First staff, housing providers and support workers. Homeless Network Scotland is grateful to everyone who made the time to fill out a survey, a self-reflection form, participated in a Sounding Board or Connect event. We do not take that for granted.

Homeless Network Scotland wants to thank Housing First leads in the local authorities whose assistance and support in carrying out this check-up process has been invaluable. We hope this report is useful to you and is an appropriate thank you for your engagement and your continuing passion and delivery of Housing First.

We are also grateful to all the Housing First experts who generously gave of their time and knowledge and added their expertise into the check-up process and to this report. We know that it was also valued by the Housing First staff who benefitted from hearing your insights first hand.

Thank you:

Prof Sarah Johnsen, University of Edinburgh

Juha Kahlia, Y-Foundation

Alex Osmond, Cymorth Cymru

Alex Smith, Homeless Link

Appendix (ii): Participating local authority areas

Local authority	In delivery	Not started	To be confirmed
Aberdeen City Council			
Aberdeenshire Council			
Angus Council			
Argyll and Bute Council			
City of Edinburgh Council			
Clackmannanshire Council			
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar			
Dumfries and Galloway Council			
Dundee City Council			
East Ayrshire Council			
East Dunbartonshire Council			
East Lothian Council			
East Renfrewshire Council			
Falkirk Council			
Fife Council			
Glasgow City Council			
Inverclyde Council			
Midlothian Council			
North Ayrshire Council			
North Lanarkshire Council			
Orkney Islands Council			
Perth and Kinross Council			
Renfrewshire Council			
Scottish Borders Council			
Shetland Islands Council			
South Ayrshire Council			
South Lanarkshire Council			
Stirling Council			
The Highland Council			
The Moray Council			
West Dunbartonshire Council			
West Lothian Council			



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