



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Housing First (HF) – National Principles and Guidance for Wales

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Introduction

'Housing First' is a recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that centres on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into independent and permanent housing and then providing additional support and services as needed.

Housing First (HF) is a concept which originated in the USA in the 1990s and has since been significantly promoted across Europe and elsewhere. The concept is based around the principle that people with chronic housing and support needs should be offered 'normal' housing first with support built around their needs, rather than expecting them to pass through a hostel or other interim housing where they are prepared for longer term accommodation which they would move on to.

The concept has been applied most specifically with people who are rough sleepers or at least very marginally housed, and who have chronic and complex support needs.

Policy context in Wales

The rise in rough sleeping requires a concerted, strategic response. Housing First can play an important role in tackling longer term rough sleeping, particularly for those unwilling or unable to live in hostels or other shared living situations. In 2017 Welsh Government has made available additional funding to reduce rough sleeping, and is supporting a range of new projects based on HF approaches.

By mid 2017 only a small number of HF projects were in operation across Wales, but they indicate the value of a much wider application of this approach.

Background

From its origins in the US, HF was applied first in Europe in Finland, and then across a wide range of countries. A substantial amount of research has been carried out on HF, including by Michele Lancione of Cardiff University. Officials organised a policy development event on 3 April 2017 with Dr Lancione, which considered much of the research evidence. This paper takes account of the discussions at this event. It also takes account of development of Housing First in England by Homeless Link and Crisis, as well as European guidance by FEANTSA.

There is strong evidence that, where delivered with the appropriate support, HF is highly effective in achieving settled accommodation. There is also evidence of wider social and cost benefits, although this is less conclusive.

FEANTSA, the EU funded organisation which works to promote good practice on homelessness, endorsed HF at its 2016 conference and adopted a set of core principles for HF, as follows:

- Housing is a human right
- Service users should have choice and control
- Housing not conditional on support or treatment
- The approach is recovery oriented
- The approach is one of harm reduction

- There is active engagement without coercion
- Planning is person-centred
- Flexible support is available as long as required

Principles

The Welsh Government endorses the above principles.

The core of the approach is that people should move straight into their own self-contained accommodation - which is not conditional upon engagement with support - and that flexible, intensive community support should be offered around the needs of the person. They should have normal security of tenure.

The individual should be central to the service, exercising as much choice and control as possible. Support should be based around a person's strengths rather than their problems, with services working proactively to encourage engagement.

Welsh Government and Rough Sleepers Cymru are keen to see models based around a key worker approach, with someone working closely with the rough sleeper, helping them from the street into a settled home.

Individual budgets are also an important element which can be used to engage and incentivise the rough sleeper, to help them take ownership of their own progress.

As well as the 'pure' model in dispersed accommodation, in some cases HF is provided in a communal setting where support services are provided on site, often a conversion from a hostel. The HF project may also be based on rapid rehousing after a short period in temporary accommodation, as part of a broader housing-led approach.

There is a distinction between HF and generic floating support. HF is designed specifically to help people who have high and complex needs, but are unable to benefit from a hostel or other temporary shared setting. They therefore need to be housed into general accommodation with a package of intensive support as part of a specific inter-agency programme. This is therefore not typical of floating support, but shares some features.

In dispersed areas HF may be applied to help people on an individual arrangement as opposed to part of a funded programme. The principles of HF can be applied more widely and be used to house anyone with complex needs moving on from institutional care or situations where people have multiple needs and do not have settled accommodation.

Further articulation of the principles is covered in the key features below.

Key features

- A co-ordinating key worker/team to help the person move away from the street into settled accommodation with continuing support
- A proactive approach by services to support service user engagement
- Access to individual budgets to incentivise and empower the person to move into accommodation
- Support with tenancy and life skills

- Individual choice and control in assessment of their strengths and needs and how they move forward
- Arrangements for identifying suitable accommodation across sectors, using a range of safeguards and incentives for private landlords
- Commitments from social landlords to support implementation of Housing First planning and enable this through their allocation policies
- Application of psychologically/trauma informed practice
- Financial preparation and advice to ensure accommodation is affordable and sustainable
- Assistance to access routes into employment
- Engagement of statutory services, particularly health and substance misuse, with commitments to supporting tailored individual support/care arrangements
- The undertaking of risk assessments
- Access to support on a continuing basis where needed
- Sharing of practice experiences including service users' perspectives
- Outcomes monitoring

The case for Housing First in Wales

The advantages HF can offer for Wales include:

- A direct way of reducing rough sleeping
- Enabling and incentivising people who may not be suited or willing to live in a hostel environment to move into a more settled, 'normal' environment where their support needs may be more effectively addressed
- Encouraging the individual to take control of their lives (individual budgets can support this)
- Providing better stability from which employment and other goals can be more easily progressed
- Reduced pressures on health and other services

Implementation criteria for Housing First

Local authorities and partners will need to decide to whom they offer a Housing First approach. Local partners will wish to decide how widely this approach is applied, taking account of availability of support, housing and other capacity and risk issues.

It is essential that all social landlords co-operate in the delivery of HF, enabling access to their accommodation for applicants with challenging backgrounds where they will receive the support they need from relevant agencies, rather than expecting people to justify their ability to hold down a tenancy.

Housing First can also be applied effectively in the private rented sector, as already demonstrated in the Wallich HF project in Anglesey.

Some emergency accommodation will still be needed. There will continue to be a need for some fixed site supported accommodation, such as for people escaping abuse, and for vulnerable young people.

Conclusion

Welsh Government expects Housing First to play an increasing role in local approaches to tackling homelessness - and rough sleeping in particular - and should be considered in all local contexts. This will be reflected in forthcoming statutory guidance. These principles and guidance should inform planning and application of all Housing First approaches in Wales.