

Adapting Housing First in Europe

Policy Brief and Training
Guidelines

Y-Säätiö



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ADAPTING HOUSING FIRST
Adapting Housing First - Innovating Housing Staff



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Foreword

Housing First has proven to be one of the most effective rights-based responses to homelessness, yet its implementation is shaped by the political choices and structural realities of national and local housing and service systems.

The policy and training guidelines presented in this publication are based on the European Union Erasmus+ funded project Adapting Housing First -Innovating Staff (2023-2025), which was a three-year research and development initiative focused on strengthening the implementation and scaling up of the Housing First approach in diverse national and local contexts in Europe.

The project examined how Housing First model is currently implemented across four partner countries, Finland, Germany, Ireland and Spain, and, based on this, identified central training

needs among staff, peers and residents of Housing First, collected examples of promising and innovative Housing First approaches that support housing stability, person-centered approach to support, and the overall goal of ending homelessness (Perälä 2025).

The purpose of the policy brief and training guidelines is to support further development and wider uptake of Housing First across Europe. They do so by promoting context-sensitive implementation, which means enabling local adaptations that respond to differing housing markets, welfare systems, service infrastructures and target groups, while maintaining fidelity to the core principles of Housing First. This requires training on both the central principles of Housing First and the way in which these principles could be applied, without losing or diluting the ethical core of Housing First initiatives.

The other central goal is to strengthen the system change towards Housing First in the homelessness field and service system by integrating a broader set of actors alongside

and social care, mental health and substance use services, municipalities, and civil society organisations. This multi-actor orientation reflects the practical reality of Housing First delivery and is essential for sustainable scaling. Peers and residents are one key target group for the training guidelines, who should be actively included training initiatives.

At the beginning of the publication, a policy brief developed within the project is presented, outlining policy recommendations derived from the research conducted during the project. The publication then moves on to the training guidelines, which outline a flexible framework for Housing First adaptation training that can be applied in different local contexts. As noted, the overall aim is to support the wider uptake of the Housing First model while ensuring that its core principles remain clear and intact, even as local adaptations are developed and implemented.

Policy Brief

Adapting Housing First in Europe: Lessons and Policy Insights

Summary of findings from Adapting Housing First – Innovating Housing Staff project (Erasmus+ 2023-2025) Sophia Housing (Ireland), Y-Säätiö (Finland), Housing First Berlin (Germany), Arrels Fundació (Spain)

Background

Europe is facing a growing housing crisis with around 1,3 million people currently homeless. Housing First has strong international evidence: it improves housing stability, reduces healthcare and judicial costs and enhances quality of life.

Despite proven results, Housing First is still implemented on too small a scale.

Lessons Learned

- Long-term homeless people can be housed directly from the street into permanent housing.
- Housing + tailored support solve problems more effectively than emergency responses.
- Skilled staff and prevention work are essential to stop homelessness from growing.
- Housing acquisition and construction must be central to homelessness policy.

Key Findings from Adapting Housing First project

Positive progress

- Stable housing and high resident satisfaction.
- Improved recovery, personal growth, and community integration.
- Client-centered methods and professional expertise around housing.

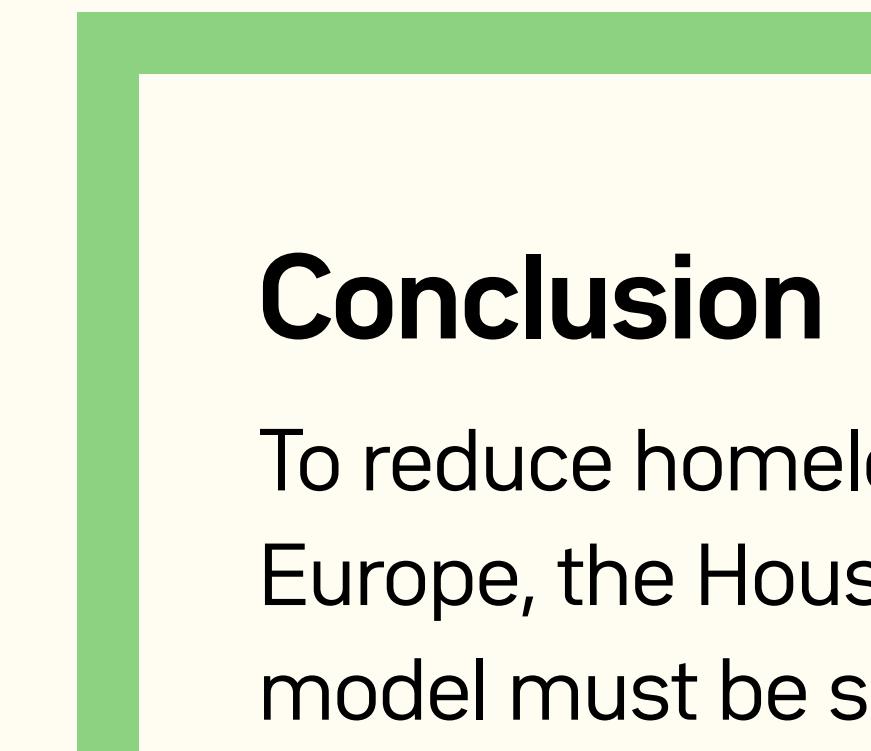
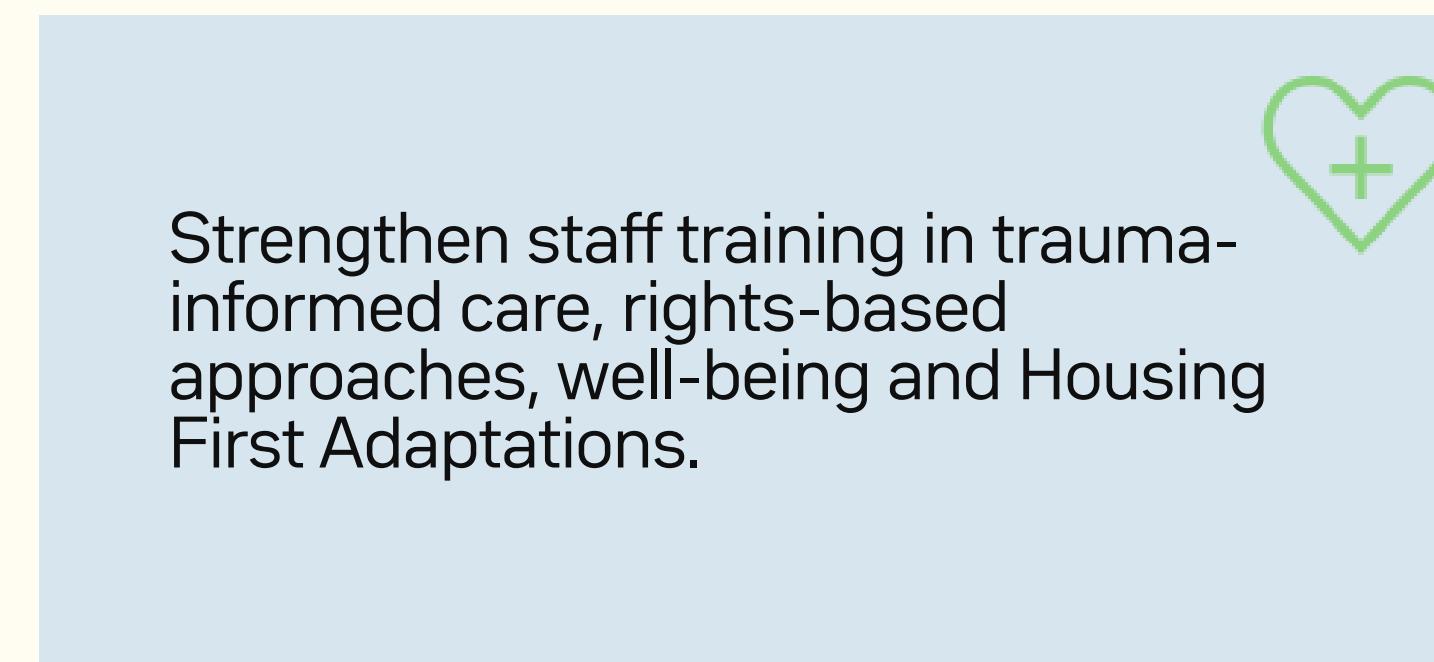
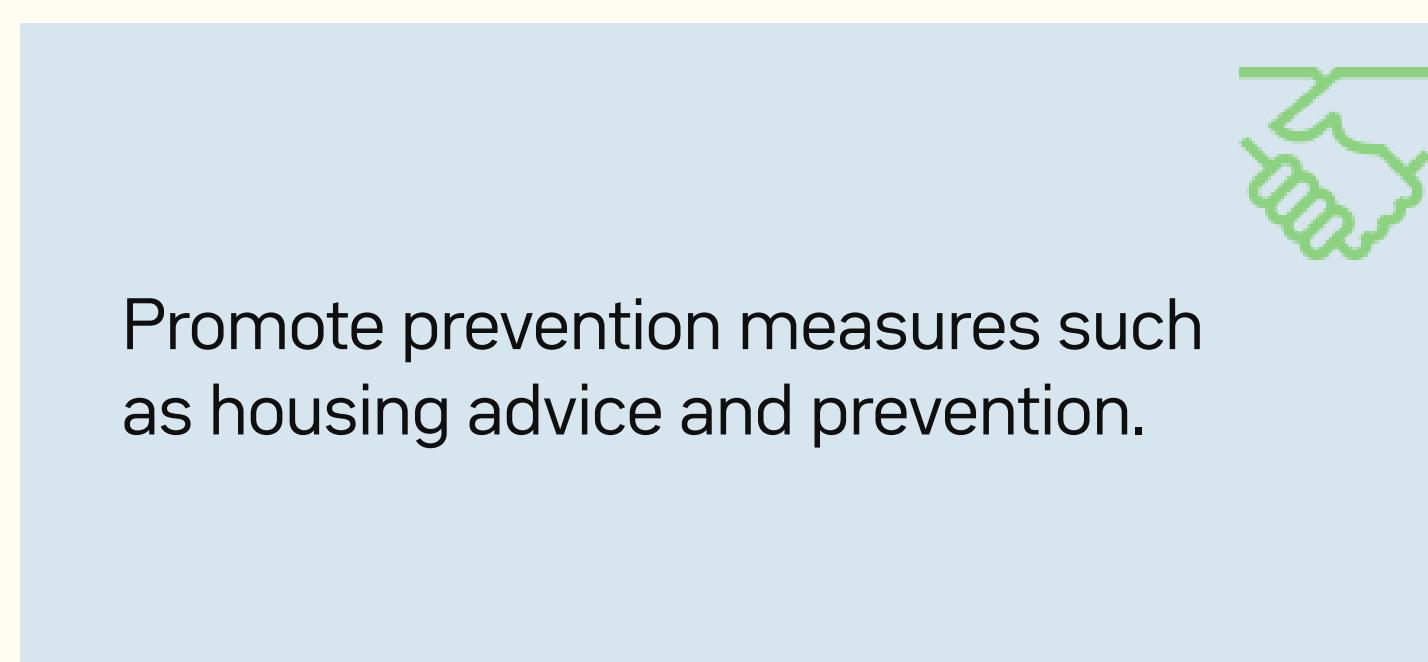
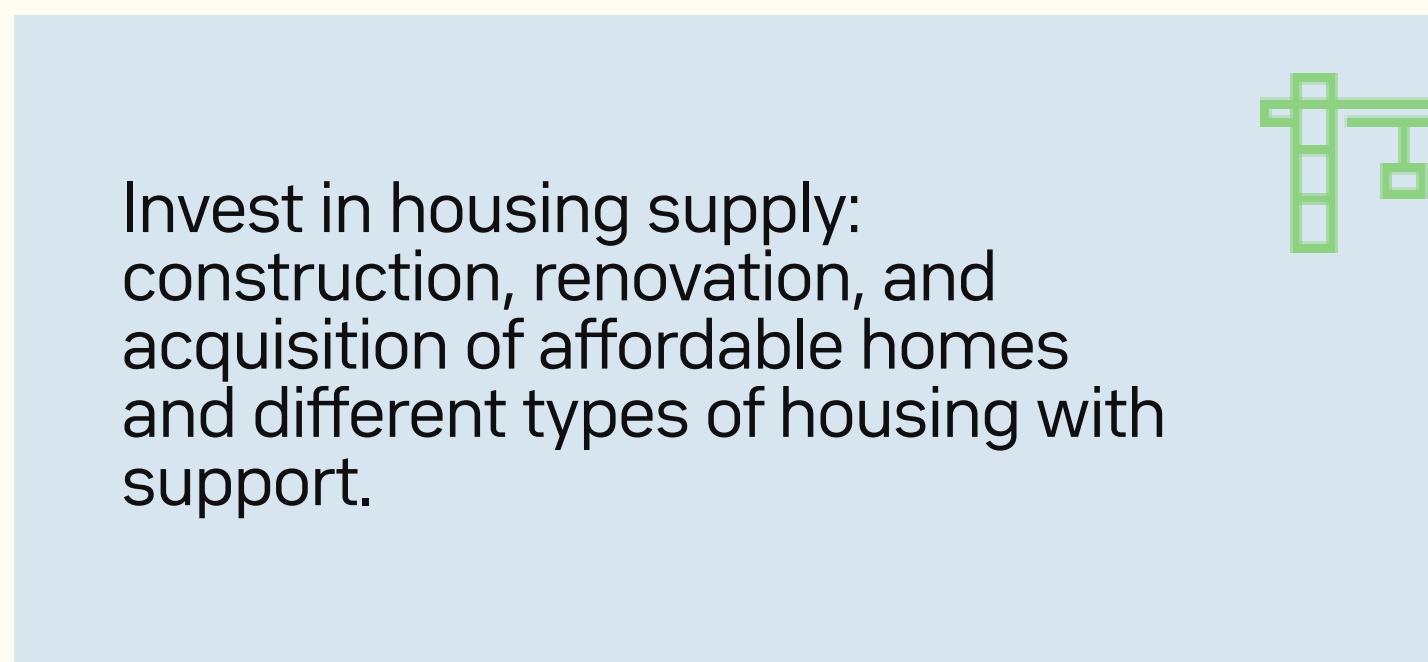
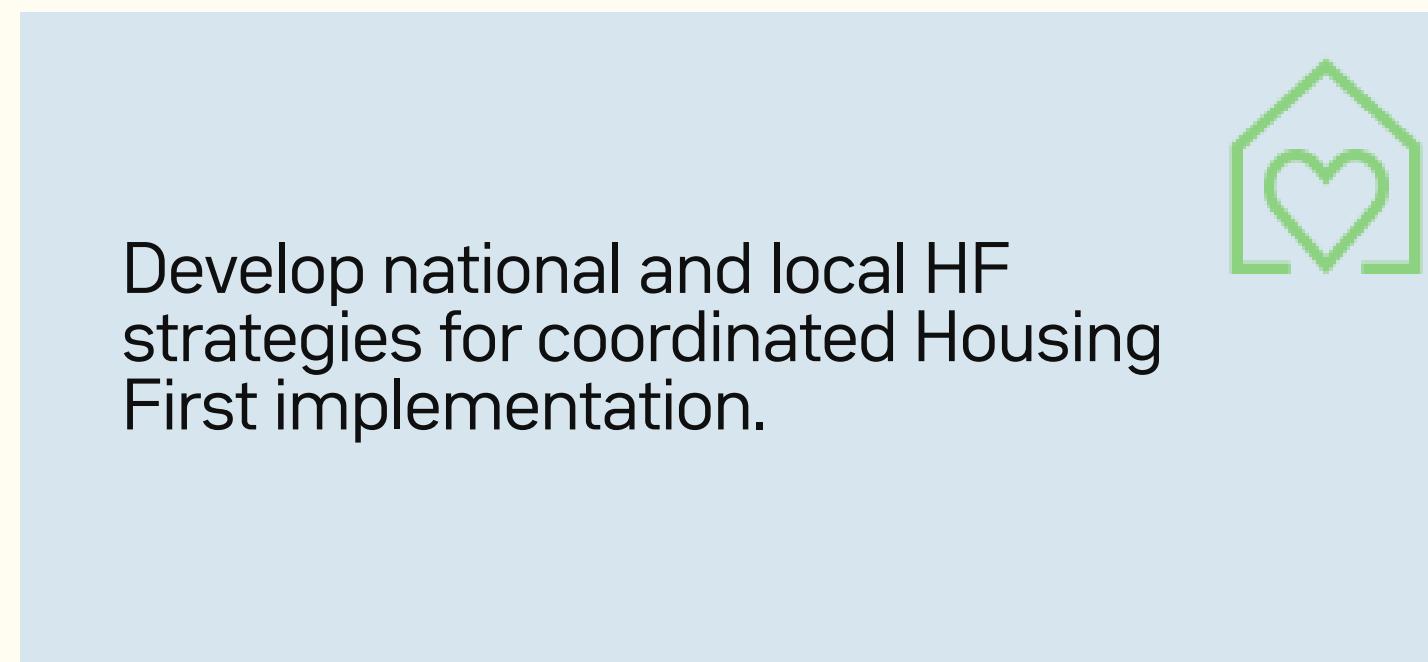
Training needs (European survey, N=201):

- Trauma-informed care (52%).
- Crime prevention and justice system links (42%).
- Scaling up Housing First (41%).
- Housing rights and advocacy (41%).

Challenges

- Rising homelessness and shortage of affordable housing.
- Uncoordinated or conflicting policies across countries.
- Limited resources and lack of trained staff.
- Slow pace of systemic change and persistent stigma.

Policy Recommendations



Training Guidelines

Working with Housing First Adaptations in Local Contexts

Setting the Purpose, Target Audience and Principles of the Training

The purpose of the training is to strengthen the capacity of staff and partner stakeholders to apply Housing First (HF) principles with fidelity while making context-sensitive adaptations. Another purpose is to provide peers and residents of Housing First with tools to work and live safely in the context of Housing First. The training focuses on core training needs associated with European Housing First practice (Perälä 2025), including trauma-informed practice, harm reduction, recovery orientation, active engagement without coercion, staff well-being, cross-sector cooperation, and community integration. Training organizers are also welcome to include additional themes according to the training needs identified within their organisations and local areas.

The central target group of the training should include a wide array of different actors from staff and peers of Housing First to Housing First residents and all other relevant stakeholders. The aim is to involve participants from across the housing and service system to support the goal of scaling up the Housing First principle. The training should be delivered through “hands-on”, case-based learning designed to bridge Housing First theory with everyday professional practice.



The Housing First principles underlying the training are the eight principles presented in the European Housing First Guide (Pleace 2016), which also formed the starting point of the Erasmus+ project.

Housing as a human right

Choice

Harm reduction

Recovery orientation

Separation of housing and treatment

Active engagement without coercion

Person-centred planning

Flexible and long-term support



Planning the Training



A. Define the Training Goal

Identify 2–3 local Housing First challenges the training must address. These challenges should shape the goal of the training, invitation of participants, training material and training outputs.

The challenges can be, for instance:

- Access to housing
- Access to services and service fragmentation
- Eviction prevention
- Low engagement of the Housing First residents
- Managing Challenging Situations (e.g. aggressive residents, hoarding, complaints from the neighborhood)
- Staff burnout

Locally specific challenges may also arise, and these can be incorporated as training themes to ensure the training responds directly to the needs of the local context.

B. Set the Session Format

Choose a fitting training structure, such as:

- 1 full day or
- 2 half-days
- Follow-up Session after 4–6 weeks (60–90 minutes)

This structure supports both theoretical learning and practical implementation. A full-day format, or two half-days for greater accessibility, allows enough time to cover the core Housing First principles, practice skills and case-based exercises without overwhelming participants. The follow-up session after 4–6 weeks is essential for consolidating learning. It gives participants the opportunity to reflect on what they have tried in real situations, troubleshoot challenges with peers, and strengthen new practices. consistent application, and higher overall impact.

C. Clarify Fidelity vs. Adaptation

Distinguish in training between:

- HF core principles
- Local adaptations that are acceptable and necessary

Training should cover both the core Housing First principles and local adaptations. In practice, this means that the training should begin with an introduction to the Housing First principles as well as a brief overview of key Housing First adaptations. This distinction helps prevent the training from becoming either overly abstract training on Housing First principles or overly based on local needs. Active adaptation means consciously reshaping both the Housing First model and the local system so that together they uphold the core ethos of Housing First. It is not a dilution of the model, but principled, context-sensitive development that stays faithful to its key principles (Lancione et al. 2017).

D. Invite the Right Participants

A multi-actor participation is essential for successful training, as HF outcomes depend on housing and service system coordination. The groups to invite depend on the topic of the training and local conditions, but could include, for instance, following groups:

- Housing First practitioners (support workers, team leaders, managers)
- Housing actors (social/public housing, NGO based housing companies, private landlords, national or local housing funders)
- Service-system partners, such as:
 - Mental health and substance use services
 - Primary/somatic care
 - Social services/income support
 - Disability services
 - Child protection/family services
- Emergency/crisis services
- Employment or education services
- People with lived experience

E. Choose Facilitators with Complementary Skills

Ensure the facilitators cover:

- Housing First expertise (fidelity, adaptations)
- Local Systems Knowledge
- Group Skills

These qualities are essential for ensuring high-quality and contextually relevant training. Housing First expertise is needed to present the core principles accurately and distinguish between fidelity and adaptation. Local systems knowledge enables trainers to connect the Housing First practice to the realities, constraints, and opportunities of the local housing and service environment. Strong group facilitation skills ensure that participants can engage meaningfully with the content, work together through practical cases, and learn from one another in a safe and productive setting.

G. Plan for Ethics, Safety, and Confidentiality

If particularly lived experience facilitators, participants or real cases are participating and presented, planning should include:

- Clear consent
- Anonymisation standards
- Option to step out/debrief
- No coercive or punitive framing

These safeguards are essential to protect the dignity, safety and autonomy of people with lived experience. Clear consent and anonymisation standards ensure that people's stories are shared voluntarily and respectfully, without exposing them to unwanted identification or consequences. Providing an option to step out or access debriefing acknowledges that participation can be emotionally demanding and that people's needs may change during the session. Avoiding coercive or punitive framing is crucial to uphold the values of Housing First and to prevent lived experience from being instrumentalised.

H. Define How Training Impact Will Be Measured

Select 2–4 indicators for measuring impact, such as:

- Improved knowledge of Housing First Principles and Adaptations
- Faster or clearer cross-sector responses
- Staff well-being indicators (e.g., perceived workload)

Measuring the impact of the training should directly reflect the goals of the training itself. For this reason, the indicators and questions used to assess impact need to be tailored to each specific training session rather than applied uniformly. Depending on the focus of the training, relevant outcomes may include improved knowledge of the training topics, faster or more coordinated cross-sector responses, or indicators of staff well-being such as perceived workload or emotional strain. By selecting measures that align with the intended learning objectives, organisations can more accurately determine whether the training has strengthened practice in the areas that matter most.

Organizing Training

This framework is intended to support training organisers in designing a session that introduces participants to both the core principles of Housing First and the practical realities of adapting the model in diverse local contexts. The outline provides a step-by-step structure, from opening the session and framing the logic of fidelity and adaptation, to offering short thematic inputs, facilitating case-based group work, and closing with concrete tools that participants can use in their daily practice.

By following this structure, organisers can ensure that the training addresses the key training needs addressed at European level, such as trauma-informed work, harm reduction, active engagement without coercion, recovery orientation, community integration, cross-sector collaboration and staff well-being, while giving participants sufficient time to apply these ideas to real situations. The framework has been designed to be flexible, allowing organisers to tailor examples and emphasis areas to local needs, and to incorporate a follow-up session that strengthens implementation after the training.



Step-by-Step Guidelines for Arranging a Training Session



A. Opening and Framing the Session (10-15 min)

Purpose: Ground participants in the dual logic of Housing First adaptations in local contexts:

- Fidelity: protecting the core values and principles that define HF.
- Adaptation: adjusting Housing First interventions to local conditions without compromising the core principles.

Content to cover:

- Core principles of European Housing First (housing as a human right; choice; harm reduction; recovery orientation; separation of housing and treatment; active engagement without coercion; person-centred planning; flexible and long-term support).
- Why fidelity matters: It maintains ethical grounding, protects tenants' rights, and ensures the model's effectiveness.
- Why adaptation is necessary: Housing shortages, fragmented services, funding constraints, and local system structures inevitably shape how HF can be delivered in practice.

Clarify that adaptation should not mean weakening Housing First. Good adaptation is justified, safeguarded, and monitored for outcomes.

B. Short Input: What Adaptation Means in Practice [10-12 min]

Provide an overview of the most common European adaptations (see e.g. Perälä 2025), for example:

- Using single-site HF settings where scattered housing is unavailable.
- Increasing collaboration with addiction and mental health services due to system gaps.
- Adapting tenancy pathways due to local housing market constraints.
- Highlighting prevention through e.g. housing advice

Explain the difference between:

- Model drift (problematic): e.g., adding treatment conditions or temporary housing, using coercive measures
- Adaptation (acceptable): adjusting Housing First practice while preserving principles.

C. Introduction to Key Training Themes [10-15 min]

Briefly introduce the central themes that the training will translate into practice. Based on training needs on the European level (Perälä 2025) these are:

- Trauma-informed practice
- Harm reduction and substance use (including first aid/ overdose response if relevant)
- Active engagement without coercion
- Recovery orientation
- Community integration and social participation
- Supporting people with complex needs
- Cross-sector cooperation
- Staff well-being and reflective practice
- Local Need (e.g. migration, intercultural communication, hoarding, drug related death)

For each selected training theme, present also one concrete example illustrating how fidelity, adaptation, and their interaction are reflected in practice. For example, how a trauma-informed approach incorporates key Housing First principles such as choice and a person-centred approach, while at the same time adapting them to residents' and local needs (e.g. supporting and guiding choices in a client-centred way, and offering different forms of trauma-informed support in single-site contexts or group-based settings.)

D. Case-Based Group Work (45-60 min)

Divide participants into small groups (4-6 persons). Provide 2-3 local cases that combine HF principles with local adaptation challenges, such as:

- A Housing First tenant facing eviction risk due to neighbour complaints + gaps in mental health services.
- A Housing First with complex substance use needs awaiting treatment and there is a risk of overdose.
- A Housing First resident in single-site HF struggling with social integration and community conflict.
- A newly housed Housing First tenant experiencing trauma triggers leading to disengagement.

Group task (same structure for all cases):

- Identify Housing First principles at stake (fidelity check).
- Analyse local constraints driving the problem (housing shortage, service gap, funding limits).
- Propose options and possible adaptations to respond effectively.
- Define safeguards to protect tenant rights, non-coercive practice and other core Housing First principles
- Design a concrete response plan

E. Plenary Sharing and Synthesis (20-25 min)

Each group shares:

- Fidelity principles they protected.
- Adaptation they designed, if necessary.
- Practical action to take
- "Red flags" (risk of model drift) and one safeguard (to prevent model drift).

Facilitator synthesises into:

- A shared understanding of acceptable vs. unacceptable adaptation.
- Implications for local training or cross-sector reforms.

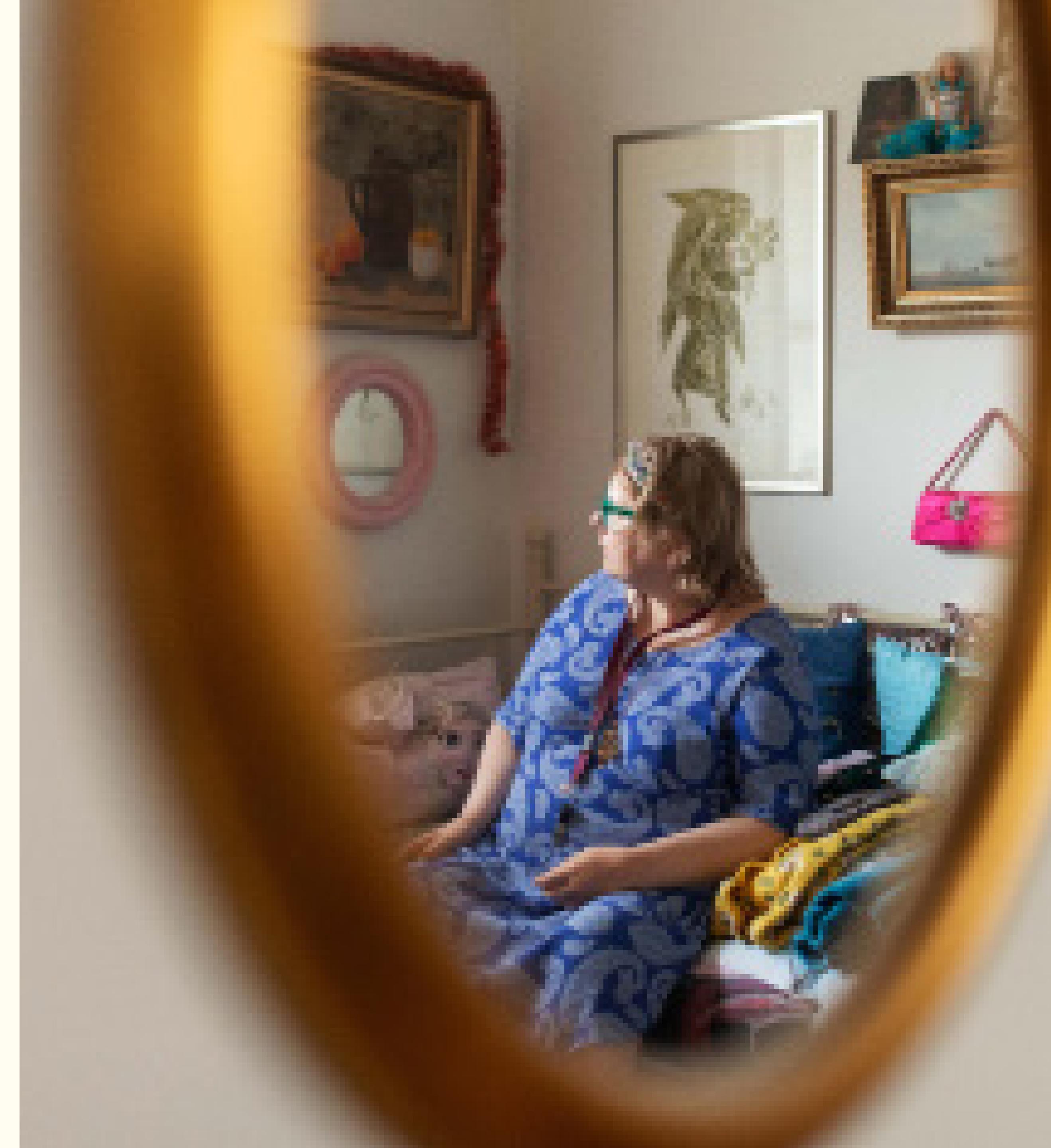
F. Closing and Take-Home Tools (10 min)

Provide participants with simple, ready-to-use tools, designed before the training.

G. Follow-Up Session (1,5-2 h)

Host a short meeting to:

- Explore together real cases that occurred after the training.
- Check whether training tools are being used.
- Assess challenges and successes in applying fidelity and adaptation in daily practice.



Afterword

In preparing this publication, our aim has been to translate the work of the Adapting Housing First – Innovating Staff (2023–2025) project into a form that is both accessible and directly useful for those working to strengthen Housing First across Europe. The project combined research and development work in four partner countries, drawing on empirical material collected during the project period—including interviews and focus groups, a Europe-wide training needs survey, and case examples of Housing First practice. Together, these data provided a grounded understanding of what supports effective implementation, where the main barriers remain, and what kinds of competences are most needed in day-to-day work.

The publication began with a policy brief that summarised the project's key findings and outlined policy recommendations informed by the research. These recommendations speak to the conditions required for Housing First to deliver on its promise at scale, including the availability of housing, sustainable support structures, and functional cooperation across the wider housing and service system.

The second part of the publication presented the training guidelines, which are intended to support the wider uptake of Housing First while keeping its core principles clear. They recognise that Housing First is implemented within very different local realities across Europe and that context matters. For this reason, the guidelines were built around the idea of fidelity alongside context-sensitive adaptation. They encourage approaches that remain faithful to the ethos of Housing First, while enabling local actors to adjust delivery methods in ways that respond to local constraints and opportunities.

Importantly, the guidelines emphasise that scaling up Housing First cannot be achieved by homelessness services alone. Sustainable implementation requires collaboration with housing providers and landlords, municipalities, and health and social care systems, including mental health and substance use services, as well as community-based organisations. In addition, they underline the importance of ensuring that peers and residents can access and contribute to training. This is not only a matter of inclusion; it is also a way of

strengthening practice and reducing unnecessary hierarchies between professionals and residents in Housing First work.

We hope this publication offers both strategic direction and practical support as well as providing a shared language, concrete tools, and a structure for training that can be used based on local needs. Above all, we hope it contributes to continued learning and collaboration across Europe, and to the sustained development of Housing First as a rights-based and effective response to homelessness.

Lancione, M., Stefanizzi, A. and Gaboardi, M. (2017) Passive adaptation or active engagement? The challenges of HF internationally and in the Italian case, *Housing Studies* 33 (1) pp.40-57.

Perälä, Riikka (2025) Adapting Housing First. Everyday Practice, Training Needs and Innovative Approaches in Four European Countries. Y-Säätiö.

Pleace, Nicholas (2016) Housing First Guide Europe. FEANTSA. Stavros Niarchos Foundation.



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