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# Adapting Housing First

Everyday Practice, Training Needs and Innovative Approaches in Four European Countries

Research Report



Y-Säätiö

## Abstract

This report examines how the Housing First model is being implemented, adapted, and developed across Europe, using Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain as illustrative examples of diverse national and local contexts. The analysis draws on qualitative data, including individual and group interviews, site visits, field notes, and case studies, supplemented by a European level training needs survey. Together, the data provides a comparative picture of how Housing First is implemented in practice within different welfare systems, housing markets, and organisational structures across the continent.

The findings confirm that Housing First has had a substantial positive impact on people experiencing long-term homelessness by offering stable housing, sense of safety, and person-centered support. At the same time, the ability to deliver the model as intended varies between countries and cities, shaped by structural factors such as the availability of affordable housing, access to services and fragmented service systems, and reliance on short-term or project-based funding.

Across all four participating countries, both staff and residents emphasised the importance of right-based housing, flexible long-term support, harm reduction, recovery and active engagement without coercion as essential features of Housing First. At the same time, the research also identifies practical challenges in consistently applying these principles, particularly in contexts where housing supply is limited or support services are understaffed or difficult to access. Clear training needs emerged in areas such as trauma-informed practice, harm reduction, recovery-oriented work, staff well-being, cross-sector cooperation and community integration.

Despite these challenges, the study highlights a range of innovative and context-sensitive adaptations of Housing First, such as communal Housing First models, strengthened cooperation with public housing providers and other landlords, different forms of prevention, and low-threshold community and work activities. These examples demonstrate how core Housing First principles can be upheld while still responding to local needs and systemic constraints. Overall, the results underline that effective Housing First implementation in Europe requires a balance between strong model fidelity and flexible, contextually grounded adaptations, supported by continuous training and cross-sector collaboration.

## Foreword

This report presents the results of the *Adapting Housing First - Innovating Staff project (2023-2025)*, a European collaboration examining how Housing First principles are implemented, interpreted, and adapted in different local contexts across Europe. The project was funded by European Union's Erasmus+ program and involved four partner organizations from Finland, Germany, Ireland and Spain.

Over the course of three years, the project has brought together experts, practitioners, tenants, and partner organisations to deepen understanding of on-going Housing First models, identify promising practices, and highlight the structural factors required to support Housing First implementation.

Throughout the process, the commitment of participating organisations and their frontline teams has played a central role. Their willingness to share experiences and practical insights has made it possible to build a rich and nuanced picture of the diverse ways in which Housing First operates in practice. We also warmly thank the residents of Housing First who contributed their perspectives; their voices are essential in understanding what truly matters in Housing First delivery and for developing more effective and humane solutions to homelessness.

In addition to the project, we have received practical support from outside partners. Our warm thanks to the Housing First Europe Hub, the Finnish Housing First Development Network and Swedish national Housing First network for their support in disseminating the training survey linked to the project, which significantly contributed to the breadth and depth of the data collected.

Lastly, we would also like to express our deep appreciation to the researchers, practitioners, and communities whose long-standing work on Housing First laid the foundation for this report. Their commitment to producing high-quality research, documenting lived experiences, and advancing evidence-based practice has been indispensable.

We hope this report provides valuable insights to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and all those working to end homelessness, and that it contributes to building more inclusive, supportive, and sustainable housing solutions for the future.

In Helsinki, November 17, 2025

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# 1 Introduction

Europe is currently facing a severe homelessness and housing crisis. Across the continent, rising housing costs, a shortage of affordable housing, and increasing social inequalities have led to growing numbers of people experiencing homelessness. Recent estimates suggest that more than 1.1 million people in the European Union are homeless at a given point in time (FEANTSA & Fondation Abbé Pierre 2025).

The Housing First model, which spread across Europe during the 2010s, offers a well-documented and effective response to homelessness by providing people experiencing long-term homelessness and support needs with immediate access to permanent housing and flexible, person-centered support (Tsemberis et al. 2004; Padget et al. 2012). The model has been seen as a key tool in moving towards a more active approach to homelessness within the European Union, directing funding towards models that seek to reduce and ultimately end homelessness, rather than merely managing or mitigate its consequences (O’Sullivan 2022). However, despite its proven impact and potential, Housing First has so far been implemented on a limited scale in most European countries.

This report summarizes research findings from the EU Erasmus+ project ‘Adapting Housing First – Innovating Staff’ (2023-2025), which is a collaboration between four organizations working in the field of Housing First in Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain. In addition, the report proposes research-based policy recommendations for strengthening the role and impact of the Housing First model in Europe and to identify and respond to central training needs.

A growing body of research evidence (Culhane et al. 2025; Aubry et al. 2020; Aubry et al. 2015; Woodhall & Melnik 2015; Baxter et al. 2019; Roggenbruck 2017; Padget et al. 2012; Tsemberis et al. 2004) demonstrates the effectiveness of the Housing First model in enhancing housing stability, improving residents’ well-being, and reducing public expenditure, for instance through lower healthcare and criminal justice costs. Despite this, there remain gaps in research concerning the practical implementation of Housing First programs and experiences associated with them. The Adapting Housing First project sought to address these gaps by conducting interviews and focus groups with staff and residents, administering a Europe-wide survey on staff training needs, and carrying out case studies of effective Housing First practices across the four partner countries.

## 1.1 Key Themes and Research Questions

The project focused on two central themes: first, training needs and second, adaptations and innovations of the Housing First model. The emphasis on training was seen as supporting the objectives of the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness to end homelessness by 2030, as well as improving staff working conditions and professional development opportunities. The focus on adaptation aimed to improve the outcomes of Housing First for its target group, people experiencing or having experienced long-term homelessness.

For instance, while fidelity to the Housing First model has been shown to be highly effective in achieving long-term housing stability, approximately 15-20% of those supported still return to homelessness. In the Adapting Housing First project, the aim was to explore whether specific adaptations to the model could enable better outcomes for this group and improved results. The questions guiding the research part of the project were:

1. How Housing First has been implemented in the project's partner countries?
2. What kinds of successes and challenges has the model encountered?
3. What kind of Housing First adaptations can be identified and how do they contribute to implementation of Housing First in the partner countries and improving its results?
4. What are the training needs related to Housing First and how do they contribute to the implementation and adaptation of the model?

Theoretically, the research is informed by Lancione et al. (2017), who conceptualise context as a dynamic and evolving element, requiring the Housing First model to be continually adapted while preserving fidelity to its core principles. The definition of homelessness follows European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS), which provides an understanding of homelessness as a multifaceted phenomenon. Homelessness is not limited to “rooflessness” but also includes living in temporary institutions and shelters as well as in insecure or inadequate conditions: “the realities of homelessness which service providers are faced with on a daily basis” as it is stated in the webpage of European homelessness organization FEANTSA.

Training represents one of the core activities and key instruments for implementing and disseminating the Housing First principle. It also plays a crucial role in supporting the capacity of professionals of the homelessness sector to perform demanding work and

maintain their well-being (Curiale et al., 2020). In addition to these dimensions, this research highlights the role of training as a mechanism for facilitating systemic change in the homelessness sector and homelessness policies (cf. Demos Helsinki 2022).

## 1.2 Structure of the Report

The report proceeds as follows. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the background of the Housing First model, including its core principles and the development of Housing First across Europe and in the four partner countries. Chapter 3 describes the research design, data, and methods used in the study, as well as the ethical considerations guiding the research process.

Chapter 4 presents the main findings on the development and implementation of Housing First in Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain, highlighting both progress and challenges. Chapter 5 focuses on staff training needs, combining results from a European-level survey and qualitative interviews. Chapter 6 discusses the adaptation and innovative practices of the model, drawing on case studies from the partner countries.

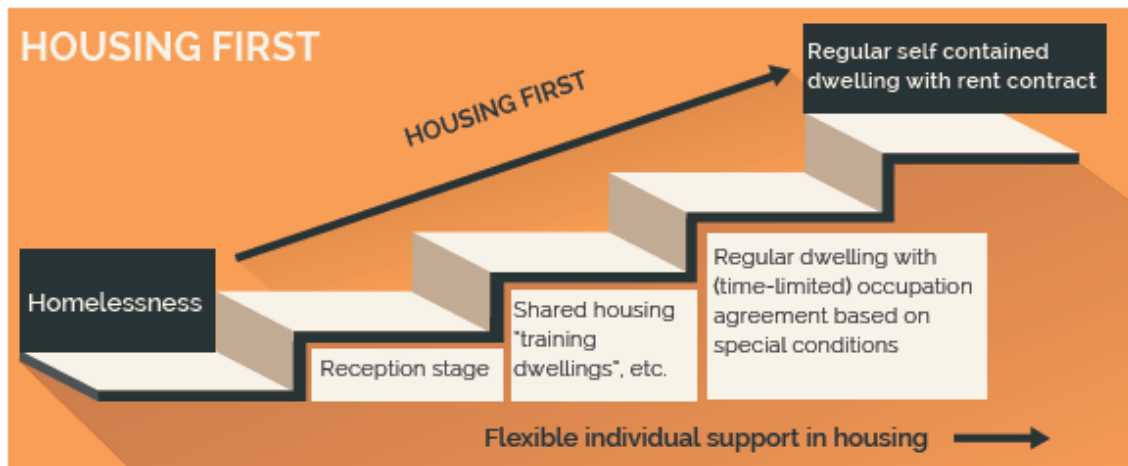
Building on the empirical findings, Chapter 7 summarizes the key conclusions and identifies directions for future research and policy development.



## 2 What is Housing First?

### 2.1. Core Principles and Previous Research

Housing First is grounded in the principle that housing is a human right. Its philosophy reverses the traditional ‘treatment first’ logic by providing people experiencing homelessness with a stable home as the first step, not the last. Support is then offered according to the individual’s needs, on a voluntary and non-coercive basis. Below image from European Housing First guide (Pleace 2016) describes the difference between the Housing First model and traditional homelessness services.



(Pleace 2016, 15)

The first Housing First model, Pathways to Housing by clinical psychologist Sam Tsemberis, was designed in New York in the 1990s especially to meet the housing and treatment needs of a chronically homeless population, who were typically seen “not ready” for housing due to their diverse support needs (Tsemberis et al. 2004). In Pathways to Housing model, contrary to this, they were seen as consumers and provided with housing and support if they were willing to accept it. Although the model was recovery and treatment oriented, both were treated as a separate domain from housing. Participants could choose to accept housing while declining treatment and other services entirely, without any impact on their housing status (ibid.).

Four key principles have been highlighted as central to the Pathways model’s success (in Remaüs & Jönsson 2011, 237): respecting the client’s priority for housing, providing



flexible services, removing barriers whenever possible, and taking responsibility for follow-up. Housing is delivered as independent, scattered-site housing. This model aligns with clients' wishes, as most of them simply hope to have a home of their own (ibid.). Support is typically delivered through Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) or Intensive Case Management (ICM) teams, ensuring that clients receive help tailored to their needs and preferences. The ACT model is designed for individuals with severe psychiatric disabilities, while ICM is suited for those with more moderate support needs (ibid.). Although the Pathways program is voluntary, the client has to agree with weekly home visits by Pathways to Housing workers.

Both the Pathways model and subsequent Housing First models have been extensively documented in academic literature and policy reports. As a result, there is now a substantial body of evidence on the effectiveness and impact of Housing First (Culhane et al. 2025; Aubry et al. 2020; Baxter et al. 2019; Roggenbruck 2017). The Pathways to Housing First program was shown to achieve approximately 80% housing retention rate, challenging long-standing assumptions that people experiencing chronic homelessness are not able live in their own, independent housing (Tsemberis et al. 2004). In Canadian Housing First trial, Home/Chez Soi, for homeless individuals with mental illness participants obtained housing and retained their housing at a much higher rate than people in the treatment usual group, i.e. receiving traditional services. Most participants remained actively engaged in support and treatment services through the end of the follow-up period. Overall, housing stability, quality of life, and community functioning outcomes were more positive in programs that adhered most closely to Housing First standards (Goering et al. 2014).

In an international evidence review on the implementation of Housing First (Roggenbuck, 2018), three key findings concerning its effectiveness were identified. First, Housing First has proven highly effective in achieving housing stability for people with a history of chronic homelessness and complex needs. Second, Housing First programs facilitate access to health, mental health, and other support services, but also challenges remain in ensuring consistent and comprehensive service provision. Third, Housing First is a resource-intensive intervention that tends to be most cost-effective for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness with multiple and complex needs.

## 2.2 Housing First in Europe

In Europe, Housing First model has been advocated as an evidence-based model that demonstrates high housing retention and cost-effectiveness compared to traditional homelessness services (O'Sullivan 2022; Pleace 2016). The first research project on Housing First in Europe covered five different cities of Europe (Busch-Geertsema 2013) and reached same conclusion than previous studies that it is possible to house homeless persons even with the most complex support needs in independent,

scattered housing. Interviews with project participants showed progress also in terms of substance abuse and mental health (ibid.). Smaller studies and evaluations have shown similar good results (Pleace 2016).

The core principles of Housing First in Europe include housing as a human right, choice and control for service users, the separation of housing and treatment, recovery orientation, harm reduction, person-centred planning, active engagement without coercion, and flexible, long-term support (Pleace 2016, 13). The principles build on the model developed by Tsemberis, refined in collaboration with him and European stakeholders (ibid. 12).

With respect to Housing First implementation, the model has evolved in Europe in connection with national and local housing, homelessness and social and health policy landscapes. Thus, there is variation in the way in which the model is implemented. In some countries, like Ireland and Finland represented in this research, Housing First is the starting point of national homelessness policies, albeit implemented in different ways. In other countries, the activities take place in small projects. Promoting permanent housing and ending homelessness may also serve as a policy objective of many European countries, but in practice, achieving and implementing this goal involves often challenges (Parsell et al. 2025).

According to Eurocities report (2024) differences remain in how the scope of Housing First is understood: is it a targeted intervention designed for people with complex needs or is it a comprehensive, system-wide approach in which Housing First is viewed as a guiding philosophy for all homelessness services. Nelson (2024) identifies several interconnected dimensions within Housing First. It functions simultaneously as a broader philosophy guiding homelessness work and policies, a specific model for homelessness work, a systemic approach to reducing and ending homelessness, and a form of social policy.

### 2.3 Housing First in the Partner Countries

The Adapting Housing First project was built upon the existing Housing First models implemented in project's partner organizations in Finland, Germany, Ireland and Spain (Table 1).

In Germany and Spain, the project organizations based their activities on the European Housing First model and its principles, which they sought to follow and uphold, although it was also adapted to better meet local conditions. The organizations had also participated in trainings and studies related to the Housing First model

(Greenwood et al. 2018). On a country-level Housing First is implemented through individual and fairly small-size projects taking place in some of the largest cities. Nonetheless, the homelessness strategies of both countries articulate an intention to transition toward a Housing First oriented framework and to establish permanent housing as the foundational starting point for homelessness policy and practice. (Deutscher Verein 2022; Gobierno...2023).

In Ireland, the partner organization also used the European model as its main point of departure but aimed to expand and adapt it to better meet the needs of different target groups. The idea of adapting the model more broadly also originated from this organization. At the national level, Ireland's homelessness policy is based on the Tsemberis' Pathways to Housing model and seeks to follow its principles and activities closely. Five principles guide the work: consumer choice, separation of housing and services, matching services to tenants needs, recovery-focused services, social inclusion and scattered housing. The implementation is followed and measured (Government of Ireland 2022). There is also a Housing First for Ireland manual written by Sam Tsemberis that guides the activities (Tsemberis 2022).

Finland differed from the other countries in its application of the model, which was grounded in the same European principles but operationalized in a somewhat distinct manner. Four principles, in particular, were emphasized: enabling independent living, promoting choice and autonomy, supporting recovery and empowerment, and fostering social integration (Y-Säätiö 2023; see also Juhila et al. 2022; Kaakinen & Turunen 2022). The Finnish model also incorporates elements that are not part of the original framework. For example, rather than functioning solely as an intervention targeting long-term homelessness, the Finnish approach placed a strong emphasis on homelessness prevention. Furthermore, Finland implemented a broader array of housing solutions than those included in the original model, such as supported housing units specifically designed for individuals with substance use or mental health problems. As in Ireland, Finland's national homelessness policy was carried out with substantial state support.

Table 1 summarizes the key aspects of Housing First in the project's partner organizations.

Table 1

Organisation	Actions
<b>Y-Säätiö (Finland)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finland's largest national non-profit landlord. Owns over 19 000 apartments of which over 7400 are directed for people that face difficulties in securing housing</li> <li>• Works in close cooperation with social services</li> <li>• Provides housing counselling to its tenants, produces research on topics connected to homelessness and participates in homelessness work through different projects and training</li> </ul>
<b>Sophia Housing (Ireland)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Owns or manages 365 homes and provides supported housing</li> <li>• Emphasizes person-centered and trauma-informed approach</li> <li>• Housing stability of 99 %</li> </ul>
<b>Housing First Berlin (Germany)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project partnership with Verein für Berliner Stadtmission and Neue Chance gGmbH</li> <li>• Interdisciplinary team: social and peer workers, psychologist and housing coordinator</li> <li>• Focuses on clients that have not benefited from services based on traditional staircase model</li> <li>• Does not own apartments, but works in close cooperation with landlords</li> <li>• Follows the 8 principles of Housing First, emphasizing tenant participation and flexibility</li> <li>• Support continues even if a client loses their apartment</li> <li>• 80 tenants</li> </ul>
<b>Arrels Fundació (Spain)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides housing, food, social support and healthcare services</li> <li>• About 400 volunteers, 90 workers and over 6000 associates and donors</li> <li>• Participates in advocacy work and works alongside other services</li> <li>• In 2025, Arrels has housed 261 people</li> </ul>

## 3 Research Setting

The research part of the project aimed to support its objectives by exploring how the Housing First model was implemented in the partner countries and, in particular, how adaptation and contextual application of the model might help to expand and improve Housing First practice. Training was the other central research theme alongside adaption.

### 3.1 Studying Housing First Adaptations

The discussion on the adaptation of the Housing First model reflects broader debates in Housing First research about fidelity, effectiveness, and role of the context in implementation, of which fidelity, in particular, has come to be seen as a key component of Housing First as an evidence-based practice (Aubry et al. 2020). While the original Housing First model is widely regarded as a highly effective intervention for ending chronic homelessness, its expansion across diverse welfare regimes and housing systems has led to variation in practice. This has been followed by discussion about the extent to which the Housing First model can be applied.

The rapid spread of Housing First in Europe raised concerns about the potential dilution of its core principles, and the growing difficulty of comparing outcomes (Padgett et al., 2016). European research (Pleace & Bretherton 2011; 2012) acknowledged these concerns but concluded that strict fidelity is not essential for successful results, as Housing First has proven effective across diverse European welfare systems. Detailed replication of the original model would not even be possible across different cultural contexts and welfare regimes (Pleace & Bretherton 2013).

According to Wygnańska (2020), strict fidelity to the original design can even impede effective implementation where local constraints make exact replication unrealistic. Empirical research supports this view. Studies by Chen (2019) and Parsell et al. (2016) show that Housing First adaptations often develop as pragmatic solutions to local challenges, such as shortages of affordable housing or specific needs of service users and may contribute to the model's positive evolution. Such adaptations can also enhance the overall coverage of Housing First.

From a policy perspective, adaptation can be seen as an expression of policy learning and flexibility rather than deviation. As Walker, Rahman and Cave (2001) note in their theory of adaptive policymaking, sustainable policy design requires responsiveness to context and change, rather than static replication of a single model. In this sense, the

adaptation of Housing First could be seen as a policy process that balances model fidelity with applying the principles in a context sensitive way.

The starting point for this study was the idea proposed by Lancione and colleagues (2017), who state that implementing Housing First in new countries and contexts requires more than passively copying its original design. Local welfare systems, cultural norms, available resources, and institutional structures shape how the model can truly function, meaning that policies are reshaped, negotiated, and reinterpreted. The ideal situation would be active adaptation, where both the Housing First model and the local system are transformed to uphold the core ethos of Housing First of immediate housing and client-centeredness in support (ibid.)

### 3.2 Data and Methods

The study is based mainly on qualitative data collected through individual and focus group interviews conducted in Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain between 2023 and 2024. In addition to the qualitative data, a training-needs survey was conducted among European Housing First practitioners and other housing professionals in spring 2025.

As background material, the analysis draws on field notes from site visits to the project's partner countries, which provided contextual information about local Housing First models and policies and allowed researchers also to observe the everyday realities of the activities in practice. Moreover, case descriptions of organizations and their activities were collected from the partner countries. These introduced practices applied in project's partner and other organizations, which were regarded as successful examples of how the Housing First model had been adapted. In the report, the case are provided as descriptive accounts and are not subjected to analysis.

The qualitative interviews involved Housing First professionals, frontline workers, managers, and residents, representing a range of different organizational and local contexts. First, two focus group interviews (N=8) were conducted in each country, involving frontline workers, residents, and peer support workers engaged in Housing First services. The partner organizations were responsible for recruiting the participants. In Ireland and Spain, the interviewees represented organizations participating in the project. In Finland and Germany, also other organizations were included. The interviews were conducted by the Finnish researchers of the project. The interviews were carried out in the participants' native languages and, when necessary, interpreted into English by professional interpreters (in Germany and Spain). In Finland, the interviews were conducted in Finnish, and in Ireland in English and no interpretation was required. The interviews focused on the everyday implementation of the Housing First model, examined through the themes of housing and support and

training needs. In discussing these themes, participants were also invited to reflect on the Housing First principles and their adaptation.

Individual interviews (N=50) were conducted in the partner countries following the focus group interviews. The partner countries were responsible for recruiting the participants and carrying out the interviews themselves. The guidance provided emphasized the inclusion of actors and organizations with a central role in the country's Housing First policy and practice, in order to capture a broad range of perspectives. Between 12 and 15 interviews were conducted in each country, each lasting approximately two hours. The interview themes focused on the implementation of Housing First policy in the partner countries, the reflection and possible adaptation of Housing First principles, and the identification of training needs.

Both the focus group and individual interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1. & 2.). This meant that while certain predefined themes were covered in each interview, the discussion within these themes was open, allowing participants to introduce additional topics and perspectives of their own. The interviews were informal in nature, and participants expressed a wide range of both positive and critical views. The critical perspectives mainly concerned the prevailing homelessness and housing situation, as well as the functioning of the surrounding service system. The different dimensions of the Housing First principle were discussed in a reflective and nuanced manner. The group interviews were fairly balanced in their dynamics, with no single participant or small group dominating the discussion. Residents who were interviewed in separate group sessions expressed appreciation for the support they had received and shared positive experiences of their housing and the related services. A longer interview or multiple interviews might have brought up more critical perspectives as well.

The data were analyzed using a thematic coding approach carried out in two stages. In the first stage, the analysis proceeded from descriptions of daily Housing First practice to identifying factors shaping the implementation of Housing First which were coded under different headings with Atlas Ti software. In this report, the findings are reported under the headings of positive progress and challenges related to the implementation of Housing First and training needs. In addition to this, the analysis focused on the descriptions of the Housing First principles and on how these principles were implemented in practice, which have their own section in the report. In the second stage, the focus shifted to adaptations, which were also coded. This meant that the analysis focused on identifying and examining instances in the data where interviewees described the different ways and reasons for which the Housing First model had been adapted.



The survey was distributed to various European homelessness and Housing First organisations through the partner organisations' own networks, national networks, and the European Housing First Hub, using a Webropol link. Responses were collected over the course of one month, after which the survey was closed. The survey examined respondents' views on their knowledge of the Housing First principle, their previous training, their training needs, and the barriers and facilitators to participating in training (Appendix 4). The survey was structured, but respondents were also given the opportunity to express their own perspectives. In this report, the survey data is used descriptively, with particular emphasis on the training needs identified by respondents.

### 3.2 Ethical Questions

The qualitative interview study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for social research. In Finland these principles are given by Finnish National Board on Integrity (TENK). Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and all participants were provided informed consent after receiving clear information about the purpose of the study, the use of the data, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequences both orally and in written form.

To ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the interviewees, all collected data were anonymised during transcription and analysis. Any potentially identifying details were removed or altered, and the findings are presented in a way that prevents individuals, organisations, or specific projects from being recognised. Hence, the interviewees are presented in this report only at a general country level, not by organisation. The examples have been selected to represent the range of respondents and the diversity of perspectives reflected in the data

The report is descriptive in nature. The aim has been to present as broadly as possible the interviewees' views and reflections on Housing First work, with a particular emphasis on concrete frontline practice. As a qualitative study, the emphasis has been on capturing participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings, and on identifying recurring themes, patterns, and developments of interest. The goal is therefore to illuminate how the interviewees understand and enact Housing First practice, rather than to establish cause–effect relationships. The report is not strictly comparative, but differences between countries are highlighted in places.

## 4 Central Developments in Housing First in Finland, Germany, Ireland and Spain

### 4.1 Positive Progress

Interviews conducted for the project highlighted several positive developments in the housing, well-being, and social inclusion of people who had experienced long-term homelessness. These improvements were largely attributed to the housing and related support provided by the Housing First model and were discussed similarly across all partner countries. Alongside the changes in the situation of people experiencing homelessness, Housing First has also introduced new working methods in the homelessness sector and facilitated wider changes in the service system and even in the operation of housing markets.

For residents, Housing First based living had provided an opportunity for independent housing, along with a sense of autonomy and security. In the interviews, living in their own homes was contrasted with life on the streets or temporary arrangements, which had been marked by insecurity and even life-threatening situations. In addition, gaining housing was described as the beginning of a path towards greater social participation and inclusion. Support linked to housing was highlighted as an important element in the perceived life transformation. The interviewed residents expressed strong appreciation for the support they had received and recalled their interactions with Housing First staff with gratitude.

#### Excerpt 1

I was in a very, very dark place, there was no light, and I had some problems with alcohol [...] Now I have money in my pocket. I can wake up in the morning and think I want to buy this, and I can, because X [Housing First organization] has given me this opportunity. I get money from painting apartments and X has helped me and they're here with me. Living in the street is, no lie, it's really, really hard, it's a nightmare.

### Excerpt 2

I would speak in monologues, and because I was so often alone that when I finally had someone listening to me, I would not stop speaking, talking. In Housing First, they not only have the help for the housing and the social help, but also psychological help. And this helped me a lot to get out of this neurosis thing I had.

### Excerpt 3

My quality of life improves simply because I no longer have to look for a new newspaper bin every night. When I'm no longer excluded, or no longer feel excluded, then I can start to dream about healthier things, and through that, begin to return to society, to become part of it, even a small part, whatever that may be..."

### Excerpt 4

I was homeless for 14 years. Now I've been living in my own apartment for 6 years. There's been a chain support. This organization saved my life.

The staff reported similar positive progress. First, many people who were once homeless and living on the streets were now in stable housing, which was highlighted as a major success of the Housing First initiatives in all countries. Secondly, similarly to the residents' perspectives, obtaining housing was regarded as a key turning point in life, such as a chance to access treatment for addiction, mental health, and other challenges, as well as to gain greater stability, safety, and community participation. One important form of progress was the residents' growing ability and willingness to even recognize that they might need support in their lives. This, in turn, was closely linked to the trust established with Housing First staff and projects. Below excerpts crystallize the principles of person-centered and flexible support combined with own housing that are central to the Housing First model according to the interviewees and contribute to good results

#### Excerpt 5

The best part is to see that people that I know of 20 years are now housed and settled in the community.

#### Excerpt 6

We've seen people with long histories of homelessness who, through this programme, have made significant progress in areas such as health, addiction recovery, and autonomy. Some participants had been living on the streets for five to eight years, with significant health and social deterioration. The work done with these individuals through Housing First couldn't have been achieved with other programmes. It really addresses the needs of a specific population in a way that other resources don't.

#### Excerpt 7

We are a safe space to women find their way to us and this need for support, this need for assistance, and accept this need for support and the best thing is actually that, yes, they come out of homelessness. They arrive and feel comfortable, and above all, yes, the families, the mothers with children, the children are also happy to have an apartment.

#### Excerpt 8

The success rates of housing retention are quite good; people haven't had to return to homelessness. For many, if you think about where they've come from, it's homelessness, so compared to that, it's really good. There's warmth and your own walls. A space of your own that you can control. A community you can feel is valuable and supportive.

There was also third form of support, community participation and social inclusion facilitated by Housing First workers, peers, or volunteers, that was highlighted in the interviews and was based on the principle of active engagement. According to the

interviewees, participation and inclusion also were a type of support and need that should be given more emphasis in the future (cf. Quilgars & Pleace 2021; Marshall et al. 2022). These could take many different forms, such as voluntary work activities, participation in NGO initiatives, hobbies, or simple home visits made by volunteers. It was also considered important that activities took place flexibly and in accordance with the residents' wishes and strengths.

#### Excerpt 9

Someone might go to the day activities, someone else to NA meetings, or someone takes part in the theatre, like some of our clients already have. Their own community can take many forms, but the key point is that the caseworker supports them in finding it. I've always found it wonderful to see when someone with really challenging circumstances gradually starts to make this block their own. It's about everyone finding their own way of belonging, and that's what we support them in.

#### Excerpt 10

One participant loved gardening, so we helped her apply for an urban allotment, which she now enjoys daily, building relationships with others who share the space. This has been incredibly positive for her. Another person joined a beginner's computer course to develop skills. These experiences are invaluable but not easy to replicate for everyone.

As for other positive developments, these reflected the change brought by the Housing First model in relation to traditional homelessness work, which was described as often hierarchical and ineffective. For residents, the support provided within the Housing First approach appeared more accessible and humane than many other services. From the staff's perspective, the model provided opportunities for professional growth and the adoption of new, client-oriented approaches to practice.

The quotations below (11–14) highlight clients' possibilities of having choice and control over their own lives, functioning interactions between staff and residents, and the possibility to participate without external pressure. Furthermore, the model introduced research-oriented elements into the everyday operations and monitoring practices of Housing First organizations, which were perceived as strengthening professional confidence in homelessness work and enhancing its overall credibility.

#### Excerpt 11

It's such a different way of working to your traditional way of working in homeless services. You know, it's not paternalistic. It is around client's choice and control and it's a challenge for workers. And you have to constantly reinforce that.

#### Excerpt 12

With one person you understand better than another, with others, somebody else might be better. It's about working as a team. Especially with areas as complex as this one, where we don't have magic solutions. We have to be very imaginative and really have to find strategies. It's very individualized for each case and we have to be, well, yes, very imaginative.

#### Excerpt 13

Active participation without pressure and coercion plays a role in the decision-making process. This emphasizes the importance of empowering women to make their own choices regarding their housing and support

#### Excerpt 14

We have our own measurement tool, and we use it to produce client reports. Every three months, we conduct a client survey. We stay constantly close to the surface of the client's situation, keeping track of how their world looks and whether they are getting what they need.

Lastly, a notable positive development that was highlighted concerned the growing recognition of the role of housing in homelessness work. Instead of just working with clients' everyday needs at shelters or on the street, Housing First provided a more goal-oriented framework for different activities, where the purpose was to create permanent housing, not temporary solutions.

At the everyday level of work this meant, for instance, the construction and acquisition of housing as well as broader advocacy efforts around affordable housing, which had gained a momentum through the Housing First approach; “*putting social housing on the table*,” as one interviewee in Spain described it. In this way, Housing First was seen as an initiative that made it possible to even discuss the prospect of ending homelessness, if not to solve it immediately.

Table 2 summarizes key factors that, according to the interviews, had facilitated positive progress in the partner countries. These included political commitment, such as European and national strategies and declarations to end homelessness, which had positioned the Housing First model at the center of homelessness policy, or at least established it as a relevant policy option. This was accompanied by a broader shift in attitudes within the homelessness sector regarding homelessness and its perceived solvability. In the Demos Helsinki report on Housing First and system change (Demos Helsinki 2022), this is referred to as directionality, meaning the shared strategic vision and coherence that guide system-level change.

Another crucial enabling factor was the presence of sufficient and suitable housing stock, alongside stable funding resources from national or local governments or, in few instances, private donations in the form of real estates. In the Demos Helsinki report (2022), this is named capacity building, which in the data also entailed the coordination of activities among stakeholders. For instance, Ireland and Finland had national coordination bodies and activities, which helped to maintain and put forward a shared direction and coherence for Housing First implementation and policy development.

Learning is a key aspect of system development (Demos Helsinki 2022), and it had also taken place in the partner countries, facilitating positive progress in the Housing First field. The examples mentioned in this regard included training on the central Housing First principles, which was seen as essential in the spreading of the model.



**Table 2**  
**Facilitators of Housing First Implementation**

<p><b>Directionality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• political commitment to Housing First</li> <li>• strategies supporting Housing First both at national and EU-level national level coordination and financing</li> <li>• local level commitment and understanding of Housing First</li> <li>• integration of Housing First to other sectors</li> </ul>	<p><b>Capacity Building</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• financial investment in housing, support and Housing First implementation</li> <li>• people and stakeholders responsible for the implementation and coordination both at national and local level</li> <li>• follow up of activities and policies</li> </ul>	<p><b>Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training on Housing First</li> <li>• actors responsible for arranging training</li> <li>• international cooperation</li> </ul>
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(Demos Helsinki 2022)

## 4.2 Challenges and Structural Barriers in Implementation

The challenges related to the implementation of Housing First were linked, on the one hand, to broader structural conditions and, on the other, to the ways in which the model was applied and its capacity to meet clients' needs.

The most significant structural barrier affecting the operation and expansion of Housing First projects was the lack of affordable housing. Without housing, people simply couldn't be housed, as was highlighted in interviews. Ireland and Spain emerged as the countries facing the most severe homelessness and housing crises, largely due to the limited supply of affordable housing.

### Excerpt 15

Then the sheer lack of housing stock. It is a melting pot of problems. So, what do I wish for? They just need to build houses, and they need to build, they need to build them upwards instead of outwards, they need to go high rise, and they need to pepper pot them and a mixture of social housing.

## Excerpt 16

I believe the issue of housing is a basic human right. I think we have provided that, but it's a small project and difficult to scale. We would have liked this to be the beginning of something much bigger, and it won't be because in a city like this, of course, we would need a project at least at the level of a county or at the level of the Spanish state. The city has many limitations in terms of housing.

There were also problems related particularly to the lack of public or social housing, which in the everyday work of Housing First projects meant dependence on private landlords and the uncertainty that came with it. Here, racism and negative stereotypes associated with homelessness were mentioned as barriers affecting access to housing. According to Spanish interviewees, some private landlords had also withdrawn their apartments from Housing First projects due to tenant disturbances, raising, for some interviewees, the issue of tenants' vulnerable position within the private rental housing sector. Consequently, Housing First projects in these countries faced difficulties in finding suitable homes for their clients.

## Excerpt 17

Maybe they rent you a flat for 5-7 years and then they tell you that you have to give it back. Therefore, you have to move the person who was living there. So, the disadvantages of having to supply, to provide housing for housing first with housing at market price and in private market conditions.

Similar problems with the lack of housing were reported in Germany. There the operation of Housing First projects was, on the other hand, supported by cooperation with social housing companies, which made it relatively easy to find affordable apartments for Housing First residents (see more Chapter 6.2.3). Generally speaking, however, the homelessness problem was seen as too large in scale to be solved by individual projects Housing First projects alone. As one of the interviewees stated, implying that the problem is not solely an issue for the homelessness sector, *"this is now very much a matter of economic policy, so I can't really give good answers"*.

The shortage of housing in everyday Housing First practice was also a far more complex issue than a simple lack of housing stock. For instance, in Finland, where there was no comparable housing or homelessness crisis at the time of the study as in the other partner countries, and where the supply of social housing was relatively sufficient, the main challenge involved finding homes for people with rent arrears or records of housing-related disturbances. Even public housing companies were often unwilling to rent apartments to these client groups, which was seen as a structural flaw in the rental market, complicating Housing First implementation, but also a stigma related to homelessness.

Other frequently mentioned barriers with housing concerned the bureaucracy involved in obtaining housing and the strict tenancy criteria and requirements, which were impossible for people experiencing homelessness to meet without support. Finally, issues of accessibility and location were raised. For example, a person with problems with mobility could not be housed in a building without an elevator or the housing options available or within reach were sometimes poorly located.

#### Excerpt 18

Then there's rent debt and other problems. The landlords get frustrated. It can be very difficult to find an apartment for a person with this kind of history.

#### Excerpt 19

During the typical one-and-a-half-year support period, you are expected to show strong motivation and willingness to improve your situation so that you may eventually have a chance on the housing market and remain housed in the long term. However, many people, those with mental illness, trauma, or drug addiction, and those without any social network, cannot meet these demands. For them, we need a completely different approach: comprehensive, sensitive, flexible, and long-term support tailored to each person's individual history.

Also lack of funding or other resources for support made it challenging to provide adequate Housing First services or expand them. The situation was also made more difficult when Housing First projects did not receive sufficient support from the surrounding service system, even though such support should, in principle, have been available. The challenges with support appeared in all countries, but there existed also country-specific differences.

Germany stood out as a country where funding for Housing First was largely project-based and lacked continuity. Even if resources were available at a given moment, the situation could change later. This hampered the ability of the projects to provide long-term support and stability for clients. There were also difficulties in embedding the Housing First model within the existing social assistance framework and in establishing connections with governmental policies and practices. The existing help systems were described as difficult to navigate, with high thresholds and different criteria for receiving assistance that people experiencing homelessness with multiple problems often failed to meet. As one of the interviewees said ironically, *“they don’t follow the same eight principles as we”*. As a result, Housing First projects and their clients remained somewhat isolated from the mainstream systems and practices with also uncertain futures.

#### Excerpt 20

Our position is becoming more difficult. We get the same money as the budget before. But because of this problem here, inflation and so on, we are not able to hire new people. We would have to actually have more people to support the clients. But the main problem is that the workload for some clients is very intensive. Very high. And as a result, we are not able to house new people.

#### Excerpt 21

So, for me, it’s clearly the financing and embedding in the existing help system. This is our biggest challenge at all levels at the moment

In Finland, on the other hand, Housing First model was integrated into the standard social and health care services. There were no separate Housing First projects providing support; instead, support was delivered through regular services, either

directly or outsourced to service providers. On the positive side, Housing First residents were integrated into regular and universal services and there was cooperation between Housing First services and other social and health care services. However, as became clear in the interviews, the services were not always easy to access or welcoming, which led to delays in service provision and the accumulation of problems in residents' housing and well-being. In the excerpt below, the main challenge is substance abuse services, issues related to which were also raised in other countries. Other frequently mentioned key services included mental health services, services for the elderly, and child welfare services, which, according to the interviewees, should have a greater role in Housing First work and its implementation.

#### Excerpt 22

Substance abuse services are currently far from sufficient. Clients face long waiting times, and accessing treatment, such as substitution therapy, can be very difficult. I feel that many of our residents are deeply affected by their substance use problems. Therefore, when they do reach a point where they are motivated to begin recovery, our service system should be able to respond as quickly as possible. Timely access to treatment is a major challenge.

In cases where support services were outsourced to external providers, the core challenges related to responsibility and underbudgeting, issues that became particularly evident in the context of service tendering. This theme emerged most prominently in the Finnish and Irish interviews and was regarded as a key factor influencing the overall success of Housing First projects. If poorly organized, the tendering could impact on the operation of the Housing First model significantly and put in jeopardy its principles and aims.

#### Excerpt 23

I think also the challenge is, I know with the last tender, it was absolutely shambolic and actually, you know, very disrespectful, really, in terms of, I mean, I hate tendering processes anyway, because I think it's like you're talking about people's lives here and you want people to do it for the cheapest amount of money.

One of the key prerequisites for Housing First success was coordination, which meant fostering collaboration between organizations operating in different parts of the system and bringing them together under the same goals and practices. In reality, cooperation was hindered by poor coordination, the lack of shared goals and working methods and even competing.

#### Excerpt 24

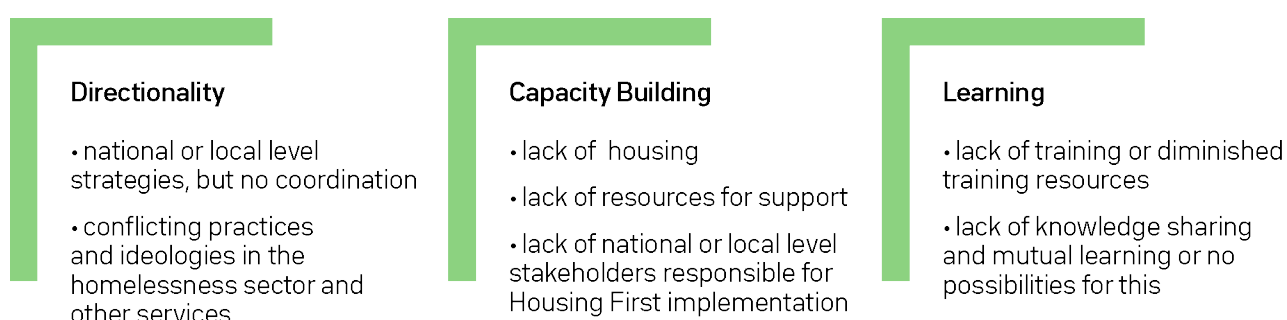
What we have constantly lamented, and very much so, is this lack of what we understand should have been the role of the Generalitat. If they were setting up a pilot program, they should have established indicators and common bases for all the programs that were going to be carried out, even though each one would later adapt to the reality of the territory. So that afterwards all of us municipalities that were carrying out this pilot program could meet and evaluate and see where we were going, what difficulties there were, and also carry out, let's say, a common learning experience.

#### Excerpt 25

But in terms of that collaboration piece, it's going to be massive. So, I see that as a challenge, but it's an opportunity as well to get things done better, too [...] Because they all come with their own values and ethos and vision and all that. You know, yeah, that's all good, but you're working for Housing First, and everybody should sing off the same hymn sheet.

Table 3 lists the key factors that, according to the interviews, hindered the functioning of Housing First projects. Of the systemic factors mentioned above, these were primarily related to capacity building, such as insufficient housing and other resources or limited or difficult access to them. However, challenges also concerned directionality, for example, the fact that the Housing First model had not yet been fully adopted as a central approach in national homelessness policy.

Table 3  
**Barriers of Housing First Implementation**



(Demos Helsinki 2019)

#### 4.3 Strict Following or Adapting? Housing First Principles in Everyday Work

The challenges in implementing Housing First work were also linked to the model itself. The model was seen as problematic particularly when it was perceived as limiting the range of available solutions.

In the interviews, the topic was addressed particularly through the principles of Housing First, which were asked about directly but were also frequently brought up independently by the interviewees. Among these principles, the separation of housing and treatment and the emphasis on choice and control for service users were seen as particularly challenging to implement, and, at worst, as factors that could undermine the outcomes of Housing First if they resulted in insufficient support for the individual.

The excerpts below highlight situations in which residents are seen to have limited opportunities to make meaningful choices, the choice is seen to be highlighted at the expense of support as well as instances where staff withdraw from providing support by appealing to the resident's freedom of choice. This was seen to exclude the most



vulnerable groups from Housing First projects or leading to the worsening of their situation

#### Excerpt 26

Choice is not always so easy and many of these women are such that they don't know how to make choices. With some of them, it's an emotional regulation skill...their skills are just not...

#### Excerpt 27

Some public officials have said we're [Housing First organization] a bit too maternal and that we tend mind people too much [...] I would see that this is housing with support rather than housing with conditions.

#### Excerpt 28

But you may still end up moving from one difficulty to another because of your choices. I feel that in the Housing First or homelessness sector, people are often punished for their own choices, if you have chosen a certain path, then you are left to deal with the consequences on your own.

The importance of community and social integration was emphasized also in this context, as these were seen to play too limited a role in the Housing First model, the emphasis being placed primarily on individual support. Loneliness and social isolation emerged as key themes for which solutions and even new principles were sought.

### Excerpt 29

The challenges related to isolation became very clear. It was exactly for this reason that we introduced things like the coffee shop and shared dinners. Some people really struggle once they close their door and find themselves alone, with no one to talk to and no family members calling them. The issue of isolation is definitely something we have had to take seriously.

In connection with the separation of treatment and support, the interviews questioned the primacy of scattered-site housing within the Housing First model and the underestimation of the communal Housing First solutions. These views were highlighted in Finland, where supported housing units are essential part of the model, but also in Spain and Ireland, where they were undervalued according to some interviewees, even though the model was regarded as good and functional. In the excerpts below, communal Housing First is presented as an option particularly for those who are unable to live entirely on their own and who have high support needs.

### Excerpt 30

And of course, if the separation between housing and support is, so to speak, the defining feature, then of course one might ask whether it [communal Housing First] can still truly be called Housing First. On the other hand, we also recognize the advantages of this model. What is the alternative if a person cannot live independently? Is the only option a shelter or emergency accommodation? We can see that this kind of arrangement does work. For some residents, the community becomes incredibly meaningful and dear. After all, some of us also prefer to live in communal settings. In fact, it is even seen as a kind of future direction.

## Excerpt 31

It's a model [communal Housing First] that I like a lot, and that it's working very well, because it gives them some autonomy, they are sort of free, but at the same time, they have support, so they have these two options, and it's a project that is working very well. So, I think having more of this could work, it's working very well [...] We also have other housing, maybe that would be also an interesting option because we have more and more people that end up in a delicate situation, maybe because they are growing old and they tend to need daily support, or every day, they tend to need more and more support, and we have a few spaces in this type of housing

Overly rigid adherence to established principles or earlier models was also viewed as potentially exclusionary, as it risked leaving certain groups outside the Housing First framework. In the Irish interviews, for instance, the exclusion of young people and families from the official model was identified as a concern, despite the existence of effective practices for working with these groups in the Housing First field. The problems of particularly young people were addressed also in other countries and there was a need for good models to support the work.

## Excerpt 32

We're deploying it in such a small manner and being so sort of pedantic that no, Housing First can only be this thing. But we need to start thinking of widening it out because particularly the families as well, and I'd be a big believer in that, and young people.

Lastly, various structural factors posed constraints to the application of the principles. The shortage of housing, for instance, hindered the implementation of the principle of choice, while insufficient support resources limited the provision of individualized and flexible assistance. Here, the interviewees particularly emphasized the importance of taking local factors into account in Housing First work, as well as the need for support from the surrounding service system and other organizations (see also Perälä et al. forthcoming).

The interviews also revealed differing views reflecting a broader debate on the scope of the Housing First principle. In this context, some interviewees criticized, for instance, the lack of a prevention dimension within the Housing First principle, arguing that this omission contributed to the continuation of the problem. Few reflected on the limits of Housing First, emphasizing the need to address the deep socio-political issues on the background of homelessness which the Housing First principle was not, at present, considering enough.

#### Excerpt 33

And at some point, Housing First has to start thinking about prevention as well as they kind of work with somebody longer. But the only way to prevent people becoming homeless is changing structures in society and investment in deprived areas, schools, health, get rid of no-fault evictions, and build the right houses in the right places.

#### Excerpt 34

Because I don't think living alone in a small apartment in a large city, with professional support just a phone call away, is a real solution. It may solve the problem of homelessness, but not social exclusion and isolation. These individuals often lack the social bonds necessary to integrate into society.

Table 4 summarizes the discussion on the principles by country. Common challenges across countries include enabling choice and addressing issues related to recovery or active engagement. With the exception of Finland, all countries faced a tight housing market, which significantly restricted residents' freedom of choice. Also, limited resources made it difficult to fully implement the principles.

Country	Challenges
Finland	<p><b>Enabling choice, separating housing and support, recovery orientation, flexible support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More emphasis has been placed on harm reduction than on recovery-oriented practice.</li> <li>• Due to the unit-based model, separating housing and support can at times be difficult, although this is not necessarily seen as negative.</li> <li>• The possibility of choice is not always realised in practice, and choices are not always sufficiently supported.</li> </ul>
Ireland	<p><b>Housing as a human right, enabling choice, harm reduction, separating housing and support, recovery orientation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The shortage of housing and different housing options makes it difficult to enable real choice.</li> <li>• In practice, housing is not treated as a human right.</li> <li>• Housing First accommodation may include weekly meetings, but the support offered is not always sufficient.</li> <li>• Bureaucracy and regulations hinder the effective implementation of harm reduction.</li> <li>• There is a desire for a stronger focus on recovery-oriented practice than at present.</li> </ul>
Germany	<p><b>Enabling choice, separating housing and support, active engagement without coercion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are no resources to enable real choice, for example regarding neighbourhoods; in Berlin, it is particularly difficult to secure apartments in areas with good transport connections.</li> <li>• The lack of resources and staff time is seen as a future threat to the intensive level of work required by the Housing First model.</li> <li>• Separating housing and support, as well as ensuring active engagement without coercion, is especially challenging in work with women and children.</li> </ul>
Spain	<p><b>Housing as a human right, enabling choice, separating housing and support, active engagement without coercion, flexible support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing First programmes operate as isolated projects, which makes it difficult to provide flexible support once the project ends.</li> <li>• Housing as a human right is not realised in practice due to individuals' economic difficulties, the shortage of housing, and racism in the housing market.</li> <li>• The lack of available housing limits the possibility of choice.</li> <li>• There are challenges in separating housing and support.</li> </ul>

## 5 Training Needs in Housing First

Training needs related to the Housing First model were explored both in interviews conducted in the partner countries and through the European level survey for organizations working in the field Housing First. Previous research shows that workers in Housing First programs have greater access to and find more value in training and supervision than the staff in traditional homelessness services (Curiale et al. 2020). Training is also regarded essential for implementing the model's principles, such as person-centered approach as well as crucial for translating the model's principles into everyday practice. Future research should identify which type of training would be most effective and how it can be tailored to staff roles and local contexts (ibid).

### 5.1 Training Needs Survey

The training needs survey reached 201 respondents across eleven European countries. The largest groups of respondents came from Sweden (30.8%) and Finland (28.4%), followed by Ireland, the UK, and Spain. The respondents represented a range of professional roles from frontline support workers and housing coordinators to managers and project developers. Most had direct experience in Housing First practice, with varying years of work experience.

On a general level, the survey results reflect the maturing of Housing First in Europe and the challenges that follow this. In the light of survey responses, the understanding of Housing First and its principles is widespread. However, what is highlighted is the importance of turning this knowledge into practical and context-sensitive tools that would provide Housing First staff with tools to solve real-life problems emerging from their everyday work.

A majority of survey respondents (66 %) had participated in some form of Housing First-related training, with the highest participation in Sweden (75%) and Finland (64%). Training was reported to have the greatest impact on increasing understanding of the subject of Housing First (over 80%). Networking and peer learning were also identified as valuable outcomes of training. However, many noted that previous trainings were too theoretical and lacked a practical component. Several respondents expressed in their open answers a desire for “*hands-on, case-based training*” that would directly inform their daily work with clients.

When self-assessing their knowledge across different HF work areas (on a scale from 1 to 5), the survey respondents rated themselves at an intermediate level (3-4). Strongest knowledge areas were areas involved with client work, individual case management and Housing First principles. The respondents, however, still expressed a

strong need for further training in trauma-sensitive care (52 %), managing aggressive client situations (38 %), recovery orientation (35 %) and substance abuse and harm reduction (32 %). This could be seen to be in line with the discussion presented at the end of chapter 4, which addressed the ability of Housing First project to work with certain more challenging resident groups. Also, peer work stood out as an area in which respondents felt their own expertise was limited (2,9 on a scale from 1 to 5).

The weakest areas of knowledge consisted of various structural issues, such as acquiring funding or acquiring housing for Housing First projects, scaling up Housing First programs, and housing legislation and rights. The average self-assessed score here was below 3. Among these, scaling up Housing First and housing rights and legislation were particularly identified as areas in which respondents wanted more training (41 %). This may reflect the fact that many respondents were frontline practitioners and therefore less familiar with such structural matters. However, it can also be interpreted as an indication that the systemic aspects related to the expansion of Housing First poses challenges to model's everyday implementation and make scaling up the model difficult. As one survey respondent noted in their open comment, highlighting that training should also target a broader audience than those directly working in Housing First services:

#### Excerpt 35

It'd be very interesting to learn more about how to scale up Housing First and deal with all the challenges that come with scaling. Training should not only target care organizations, but also municipalities and housing associations.

In relation to expansion of Housing First, some survey respondents saw that Housing First should be better integrated into existing service structures, including social, health, and housing sectors. As one respondent noted in the open answers, *"training feels toothless"* if the systemic support for work is lacking. Also training that would consider local contexts and local needs was highlighted.

The most important factors encouraging participation were relevance to daily work (85 responses), training scheduled during work hours (67 responses), high-quality trainers (63 responses) and employer support (56 responses). Main barriers to participation included high workload and lack of time (89 responses), high cost of training (89



responses) and limited information about available training opportunities (46 responses).

Placing the greatest value on relevance to their daily practice signals a wish for training that directly supports frontline work with clients. The preference for training during working hours and free of charge suggests that cost and scheduling are decisive factors influencing participation, particularly for staff under heavy workloads or within resource-constrained services. Respondents also valued online learning opportunities, showing that flexibility and accessibility are increasingly important in attending training.

The most significant barriers for training attendance were lack of time due to workload and high training costs, which point to structural issues within organizations. Frontline workers, who are the primary target group for Housing First training, often face demanding caseloads that leave little time for professional development. Similarly, limited financial resources in many services restrict participation in fee-based or travel-dependent training.

## 5.2 Training Needs in Individual and Group Interviews

The qualitative interviews highlighted several training needs from client interaction, to managing relations with the neighbors and acquiring housing. Similarly to survey responses, shared training needs across countries included a strong demand for practical, hands-on training that would bridge Housing First theory and everyday practice.

Respondents in all countries emphasized the importance of training that would enhance their understanding of Housing First tenants' mental health and substance use problems, and other complex client needs. Specific themes included addiction, neurodivergences and hoarding, which all created difficult situations in the everyday practice of Housing First work, as well as ethical challenges, such as determining when to intervene without losing the client's trust or violating their right to self-determination. Also, similarly to the survey responses, the findings highlighted the need to train professionals in other sectors, as the interviewees observed a lack of sufficient understanding of the Housing First principles among them. These kinds of views were shared across partner countries.

The principles of recovery and harm reduction were seen as areas where there was still too little knowledge, both at the theoretical and practical levels. Barriers to recovery were identified particularly as poor functional capacity, but also loneliness and social isolation, the prevention of which was seen as a key training need. Overall, in relation

to both recovery and harm reduction, respondents expressed a need for concrete examples of what this type of training could involve in practice.

#### Excerpt 36

We've no engagement with the disability sector. And there's an enormous amount of diagnosed and suspect, strongly suspected undiagnosed disability needs, particularly neurological, cognitive deficits, learning disorders, ADHD, and particularly in the cohort of Housing First.

Also, a need for concrete tools to handle various challenging client situations, such as aggressive encounters, was expressed. Suggested training topics included anger management, de-escalation techniques, and staff safety. On the other hand, support was also requested for improving client interaction, communication skills, and the ability to address various traumatic emotions, which were seen as underlying many clients' behaviors and choices. The need for practical training that would follow a case management approach and be based on realistic, everyday client examples was highlighted in particular. In addition to clients, training should also address the needs of employees in terms of self-care and the prevention of burnout.

#### Excerpt 37

I suppose when I spoke there in terms of training around working with people that are, you know, neurodivergent or have particular mental health issues. I think that's probably a huge untapped resource pool that could probably do with being formalized a bit better, you know.

### Excerpt 38

Staff well-being, because secondary traumatisation is a real issue. So, it's important to stay balanced and self-aware, so you can support others without being overwhelmed. You really end up working very close to people's deepest experiences. These are big, heavy issues to be with. It's easy to imagine how demanding it can be.

Country-specific differences reflected variations in service systems and in the implementation and target groups of Housing First. Interviewees in Germany's focused a little bit more on model principles than the other countries and also networking across Housing First projects. Ireland placed greater emphasis on trauma-informed approaches, and the responses also highlighted the need for more specialized and health-related competencies, reflecting the national Housing First policy's growing emphasis on improving the monitoring of residents' health and well-being. In Spain, there was interest in legal and housing-related knowledge, including tenancy rights, community relations, and understanding how to prevent social isolation. The latter was a major theme in the Spanish interviews also more broadly and was reflected in the emphasis on different types of participatory forms of work in supporting residents. In Finland, particular attention was drawn to issues related to staff well-being and the management of challenging resident situations. This may partly reflect the typical Housing First client group in Finland, which includes many relatively young individuals with severe substance use and social problems. On the other hand, it may also be linked to the specific working methods used in communal Housing First units, which involve challenges but for which only limited training opportunities are available. It is also important to note that in Finland, Housing First work involved several hundred people, whereas in other countries the projects were significantly smaller. Thus, the challenges were also related to the scaling up of the model.

Among the training needs identified by residents, harm reduction and various forms of first aid training were emphasized. Similar to findings from other studies on harm reduction (Ranta & Perälä 2022; Perälä 2018), residents expressed a desire for tools that would help them take better care of themselves. In addition, they wished for more concrete and meaningful activities, which can be seen as training needs directed toward Housing First projects. The use of digital tools was also highlighted, especially in Finland where service system was heavily digitalized.

## Excerpt 39

Harm reduction, like Naloxone, first aid, something to do; with my mind or with my hands.

## Excerpt 40

The world has changed a lot over the past ten years, and the problems and challenges people face out there have changed too. It's no longer just about going to the social office with a paper slip — now you need digital skills and all that.

In the resident interviews, themes related to resident interaction and treatment also emerged, particularly concerning how they were approached and addressed in Housing First organizations and society overall. In Irish focus groups interviews it was especially important for the interviewees that they were seen as residents, not as service users. In other interviews, broader themes related to the treatment of people experiencing homelessness were raised as well. This highlights that contemporary issues related to identity and identification are also significant for Housing First residents and that Housing First serves as a safe and accepting platform for expressing such views.

## Excerpt 41

One really important thing is that when you're on the streets you're invisible, you're despised by people, because some people have drug issues, some people have alcohol issues, some people think all the people on the street are the same. So, thanks to X [Housing First organization] we now feel appreciated, we feel able to get out and do other things and feel better as a person.

## 6 Adapting Housing First: New and Innovative Approaches from Partner Countries

### 6.1 Adapting Housing First Principles

This final section presents the Housing First adaptations in use among the project's partner countries. Following Lancione et al. (2017), we refer to these as active adaptations, as they represent attempts to respond to contextual challenges encountered in the implementation of the Housing First model and have therefore, at times, required some deviation from its core principles. At the same time, however, the surrounding service system has also moved closer to the ethos of Housing First.

The cases were collected in the partner countries using a shared structure that aimed to capture the described model's principles, target group, approach, key outcomes, and the ways in which the model follows or adapts the Housing First principles (Appendix 3.). A total of 3–5 descriptions were collected per country. In the following section, the cases are presented by theme. Each theme may therefore include cases from all four countries

### 6.2 Case Studies from the Partner Countries

#### 6.2.1 Prevention

Prevention is a central component of homelessness work, aimed at preventing homelessness and its recurrence. It operates on several levels. Universal prevention seeks to reduce the risk of homelessness across the whole population by ensuring adequate social protection and sufficient housing supply. Upstream prevention targets specific risk groups, such as people leaving prison or young people exiting child protection services. Crisis prevention focuses on avoiding homelessness in situations such as eviction processes or other acute disruptions in housing (Mackie 2023).

In European homelessness policy, prevention has generally been seen to play a secondary role. A review of European homelessness strategies identified comprehensive prevention strategies in only nine countries (Baptista & Marlier 2019 in Mackie 2023). Following two examples are drawn from Finland and Spain and highlight different dimensions of prevention: universal, upstream and crisis.

## Universal Prevention and Housing Advice (Finland)

In Finland, there are various forms of universal homelessness prevention, the most extensive of which include the housing allowance system and the state-supported affordable housing scheme. These have been considered key reasons why Finland has not experienced the kind of housing shortages typical of many European cities, nor homelessness caused by income poverty. There is also a third important form of prevention in Finland specifically aimed at reducing homelessness: housing advice. While housing advice includes elements of crisis prevention, it is not limited to crisis response alone but can be regarded as universal prevention and upstream prevention.

In brief, housing advice is a form of multi-agency support aimed at securing residents' housing, targeted especially at those living in state-subsidized affordable rental housing. Housing advice responds to current societal developments, and changes in the operating environment directly influence the need for and focus of the work. In Finland, in recent years, these have included older people's ability to cope at home, changes in social security, the availability of affordable housing and growing prevalence of debt problems (Oosi ym. 2019).

The development of housing advice has been an integral part of the Finnish Housing First model and advanced through the national programmes to reduce long-term homelessness (Oosi 2019). Since then, housing advice has become part of the work carried out by municipalities, housing companies, and NGOs, supported by state funding and, to some extent, legislation. However, the service is not statutory, which has resulted in fragmented and uncoordinated provision. Moreover, housing advice is not available in all municipalities (ibid.).

Nonetheless, the results of housing advice have been encouraging. Through housing advice, a large number of evictions has been successfully, resulting in significant savings for the state, municipalities and landlords. Housing advice also directly benefits tenants and clients by avoiding eviction-related costs and by helping them resolve personal housing challenges. At the individual level, housing advice has additionally

prevented people from being directed to more intensive and costly services, as it is easier to approach than traditional social services.

The City of Helsinki housing advice model represents a well-developed form of preventive housing social work. It operates as a multi-agency service integrated into both city's social services and the city's housing companies. The work involves close collaboration with city's housing companies, social services, social security, mental health and substance use services, and a wide range of local actors.

The work combines psychosocial support, practical problem-solving, and long-term follow-up, and includes both office-based counselling and home visits. It also incorporates innovative approaches such as the peer support scheme to support immigrant residents' integration. Evaluation data show significant impacts: reductions in evictions, rent arrears cases resolved before reaching court, and substantial cost savings for both the city and housing providers. The model therefore offers a comprehensive and scalable example of preventive practice in a large urban context.

In 2024, the service recorded 24,919 customer contacts. The preventive effect was substantial. Advisors resolved 1,070 rent arrears cases and prevented 586 evictions, with eviction interventions defined as actions that halted the legal or enforcement process. Since 2009, housing advice has secured 3,662 homes for people at risk of losing their housing and 175 homes for people experiencing homelessness. Eviction prevention is financially significant: a single eviction costs an estimated €10,600, and the cost of homelessness ranges from €17,000 to €52,000 per person. Housing advice also supports access to housing. In 2024, a total of 428 homes were secured for residents at risk of homelessness, including 153 homes for people who were already homeless. Overall, the programme demonstrates a high level of effectiveness, both in preventing homelessness and in reducing its financial and human costs.

## Crisis/Tertiary Prevention (Spain)

Zero Flat (ZF) by the Arrels Foundation is an emergency stable accommodation model in Barcelona designed for people who have spent long periods sleeping rough and who face severe vulnerability. The project responds to the city's large homeless population and to the clear preference of many unhoused people for small, calm spaces over overcrowded shelters with strict rules, disturbances, and lack of safety. Although Zero Flat is not permanent housing, it functions as an essential part of tertiary homelessness prevention, offering a safe place to rest, rebuild routines, and prevent returns to the street while supporting long-term transition to housing. The model aligns with European standards, including the European Social Charter and the Lisbon Declaration, which emphasize dignified emergency accommodation and pathways out of homelessness.

ZF aims to reduce time spent on the streets, strengthen trust with highly vulnerable individuals, and help them restore the habits needed to sustain future housing. It prioritizes people who have slept rough for years, have serious health problems, are at risk of death, have been excluded from other services, or have struggled to maintain housing due to illness or conflict. The service accommodates 10 people at a time, with no time limit, and offers night-time access while connecting residents to other daytime activities and services provided by Arrels. The model is low barrier: pets are allowed, substance use is permitted under a harm reduction approach, and there are no financial or administrative criteria for access. Residents receive meals, showers, clothing support, medication monitoring, and ongoing assistance from a small team that includes a coordinator, social integrator, volunteer, and flexible social support workers.

Over five years, Zero Flat has supported 118 people, 80% of whom have moved on to individual housing or other stable accommodation. The model is grounded in Housing First principles—choice and control, non-coercive engagement, harm reduction, person-centred planning, and the separation of support from accommodation—and represents an innovative extension of Housing First in the context of emergency, stabilizing, and dignity-focused services



### 6.2.2 Communal Housing First

One, already quite widely studied adaptation of the original Housing First model is single-site housing or communal Housing First (see e.g. Pleace 2016), which is not part of the original Pathways to Housing model developed by Tsemberis, but has emerged as a response to the challenges stemming from the everyday implementation of the model. This type of housing involves constructing new apartment buildings or converting existing communal homelessness services, such as emergency shelters or hostels, into apartments.

In the light of previous research, the model has shown effectively to support housing stability, community, and quality of life among particularly those with multiple and complex support needs (Harris et al. 2019; Montgomery et al. 2019; Clifasefi et al. 2016; Parsell et al. 2015; Collins et al. 2013). The critical questions related to the model have concerned the concentration of high-needs residents and related problems with the risk of harmful environments, resident's autonomy, which might be more limited than in scattered housing, community opposition, and maintaining Housing First fidelity. The essential factors that must be ensured to prevent these challenges include, for their part, safeguarding residents' autonomy and freedom of choice by ensuring that they live in their own independent apartments, providing 24/7 support and supervision to prevent difficult situations and disturbances, keeping support and housing clearly separated through effective coordination of functions and activities also in communal housing settings and maintaining collaboration with the surrounding neighborhood (ibid.)

Among the partner countries, communal Housing First appeared in Finland, Ireland and Spain. In Ireland, however, this type of housing was not considered part of the country's official Housing First policy, which emphasized scattered-site housing. The size of the communal Housing First sites ranged from sites with around one hundred residents to units with a few dozen or even fewer. The sites were either old buildings (e.g. residential blocks, shelters, monasteries) that had been converted into housing facilities, or purpose-built units. The following three examples represent Communal Housing First models designed for young people, women, and families and they have been established in response to challenges arising from the local operating environment

## **Strongly Supported Housing Model for Aftercare Youth**

**(Finland)**

The model implemented by the City of Helsinki and NAL Services (housing provider) provides intensive, individually tailored supported housing for young people entitled to aftercare. Established at the end of 2022, the service operates in two housing units with a total of 25 places and has served about 60 clients in its first two years.

The model was created to address the long-recognized need for a service with high staffing levels and comprehensive support for young people with complex challenges, including mental health issues, substance use, and difficulties in daily functioning. Clients are referred by their social workers, and admission is decided jointly in a dedicated placement group.

Support is delivered through a hybrid model: clients live in ordinary rental apartments provided by NAL Apartments (housing provider), while staff are present in the units daily from 7:00 to 23:00. Nighttime safety is supported through an alarm system. Each client is assigned two key workers responsible for rehabilitative work, relationship-building, and coordinating services such as healthcare, meals, and community activities. A multidisciplinary team, nurses, practical nurses, social services professionals, an outsourced doctor, and peer support, implements the work.

The model includes innovative practices such as alumni mentoring and thematic campaigns related to daily life and substance use. It has shown excellent outcomes: no evictions have occurred, over 95% of clients have secured continued housing, and many have progressed toward education, employment, or financial independence.

The model follows Housing First principles by providing clients with legally valid tenancy agreements, low-threshold access regardless of current challenges, and a strong emphasis on sustaining housing. It ensures security, flexibility, and continuity of housing even during crises. The hybrid structure, combining independent living in standard housing with intensive support, is highlighted as a promising approach for use elsewhere in Europe.

## Llar Rosario Endrinal – Communal Housing Care Project (Spain)

Llar Rosario Endrinal is an innovative communal housing project launched in February 2024 by the Assís Foundation in partnership with the Barcelona City Council. Designed for women experiencing chronic homelessness (ETHOS category 1), the project provides 10 individual apartments in a 600m<sup>2</sup> building located in the high-income Sarrià neighborhood of Barcelona. It focuses on supporting women who face multiple vulnerabilities, including health issues, violence, lack of social networks, and substance use challenges. The Rosario Endrinal Home has 10 fully equipped individual rooms with their own kitchen. The building has communal areas, collective management and social and educational support. The women, who can stay there indefinitely, will be able to live there with their pets.

The model follows key principles

- Housing is separated from treatment, meaning residency does not depend on participation in specific programs.
- Harm reduction guides all interventions.
- Voluntary engagement, with no coercion.
- Human-centered planning, where women's own priorities shape their support.

There is no time limit on stays, and residents can remain as long as they wish. Support materials include self-developed tools and tailored contracts. The project required an initial investment of €1 million funded by the Barcelona City Council and the Catalan Government.

Two research components examine (1) the lived experiences and recovery processes of the resident women and (2) the professional practices within this pioneering gender-sensitive Communal Housing First model. A three-year study led by the University of Barcelona is currently underway, incorporating an intersectional gender perspective

and involving 10 residents. Preliminary findings were presented in November 2024 at the 3rd “les inVISIBLES” Conference.

The project aims to deepen understanding of the critical elements influencing women’s recovery, assess how the Communal Housing First methodology operates in practice, and identify necessary improvements to enhance the women’s quality of life.

### **Sophia Housing – Cork Street Long-Term Supported Accommodation**

**(Ireland)**

Sophia Housing’s Cork Street project in Dublin, established in 1999, provides long-term supported, own-door housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness and complex needs. The service currently offers 45 independent apartments to approximately 50 adults and 20 children on a single site, delivered by Sophia Housing Association with support from government funders

The model targets people with multiple and overlapping challenges, including mental health issues, substance use, dual diagnosis, disability, domestic violence, offending behaviour, child protection concerns, and other complex social or health-related needs. A key feature is the on-site Nurturing Centre, offering pre-school and after-school services for resident children.

The model is grounded in Housing First principles and Trauma-Informed Practice. All staff across the organization receive training in these approaches. Residents live in their own long-term apartments while receiving tailored support in housing, health, welfare entitlements, daily living skills, addiction and mental health stabilization, family work, and crisis management. Intensive on-site staff presence ensures 24/7 support and safety. Interagency collaboration with healthcare, social services, addiction services, education, and local authorities forms a core part of the practice

Funding comes from Irish government departments, charitable donations, and Sophia’s own income streams. Implementation is guided by a comprehensive set of internal policies and national legislation related to housing, welfare, equality, health, and safety

The project's outcomes are strong: tenancy sustainment reached 100% in both 2023 and 2024. Regular monitoring, internal evaluations, inspections, and resident feedback ensure quality and continuous development. Results are also reported to government funders and included in Sophia's annual reports.

The Cork Street model demonstrates how long-term, own-door housing, combined with trauma-informed, person-centred, and flexible support, can effectively align with Housing First principles and contribute to homelessness policy development across Europe.

### 6.2.3 Scaling Up Housing First

The scaling up of Housing First is one of the central questions associated with the model and reflects the broader debate on whether the model should be understood as a specific form of homelessness work or as a wider housing and social policy programme (Nelson 2025). As the analysis in this report shows, this discussion also appeared in our data. The two examples presented in this subchapter illustrate how the expansion of Housing First was carried out in the partner countries in close cooperation with housing providers and landlords. This cooperation is fundamentally important, as access to housing is the essential resource on which Housing First practice depends.

#### **Role of Social Housing Companies in Housing First Berlin**

**(Germany)**

In 2018, Housing First Berlin (HFB) was launched as a project partnership between Berliner Stadtmission and Neue Chance gGmbH with the goal of ending homelessness among people sleeping rough and supporting them intensively in finding their own apartments. One of the main challenges from the very beginning was securing affordable and suitable housing. To address this, an experienced housing specialist was hired at the project's start.

Because a large share of Berlin's rental housing stock is owned by the city's seven state-owned social housing companies, the initial search for apartments focused on these providers. Meetings were first arranged with the CEOs of the respective companies. During these discussions, the principles of Housing First were introduced, the full range of support services was outlined, and the first cooperation agreements were signed. As a result, the first apartments were successfully allocated to HFB clients.

Today, five formal cooperation agreements are in place. One additional company provides apartments without a formal agreement, while one company has not yet been convinced to collaborate.

The success of these partnerships is due to several factors. First, Housing First Berlin provides extensive and reliable support to tenants. For example, there is an agreement that housing administrations must inform Housing First Berlin immediately in cases such as rent arrears or disturbances of the peace, and Housing First Berlin commits to being available at all times to address problems quickly. In addition, a small financial fund is available to cover potential damages, such as lost rent, broken windows, or replacement keys.

Second, there is strong political will from the city government, which owns the social housing companies, to work closely with all Housing First teams and support the provision of affordable housing as a key strategy to overcome homelessness.

For Housing First Berlin, cooperation with municipal social housing providers forms the foundation for sustainably housing formerly homeless people in their own apartments and is therefore a crucial pillar in tackling homelessness in Berlin.

## Scaling up Housing First (HF) through public policy and partnerships (Spain)

Provivienda, in partnership with HOGAR SÍ, is expanding the Housing First model across Spain by embedding it into public policy and promoting its adoption by regional and local organisations. The model is active, growing, and currently implemented in numerous Spanish regions, supported by mechanisms such as Spain's Recovery Plan. Through this approach, 671 Housing First apartments have been established nationwide, serving a large and diverse population

The initiative aims to (1) promote the development of Housing First in Spain with strong fidelity to the original model, (2) strengthen the separation between housing and treatment, and (3) involve other organisations and local NGOs in delivering the model throughout different territories. While the focus is on individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, the programme also includes prevention initiatives, youth-focused projects, and support for people living in hostels.

Implementation consists of providing individual apartments as permanent housing solutions combined with wraparound support services, including motivational interviewing, harm reduction, and practical skills training. Residents are supported to build community networks, and projects are funded through a mix of public resources, private partnerships, and EU grants. Manuals such as the national Evaluation Report on Housing First and the Housing School guide the practice.

The model has achieved strong results, including a 95% housing retention rate and contributing significantly to the transformation of homelessness services across Spain.

### 6.2.4 Community Support and Activities

Housing First is highly successful at ending chronic homelessness but gains in social integration have been more modest (Quilgars & Pleace 2016). Housing alone cannot be expected to deliver full social integration, which is why additional targeted interventions, such as peer support, community-based activities, education and employment supports, should be incorporated into the model (ibid.). This is also a key finding of the

analysis presented in this report. The following two examples illustrate how the partner countries have worked to promote the social integration of residents



### **Community in Scattered Site Housing (Germany)**

The project is a weekly open group held every Wednesday from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. at the Housing First Berlin's office. During this time, clients can drop in without prior registration, enjoy a free breakfast, and connect with at least three staff members in a low-threshold, informal setting.

Participation is limited to clients already engaged in the support system. The group aims to provide accessible support without fixed appointments, prevent loneliness, and offer a reliable weekly point of contact. The project is funded through grants and organized by one staff member responsible for preparation and shopping, while two additional colleagues assist with hosting and cleanup. If staff presence exceeds client turnout, team members coordinate who remains on site and who stays on call

Quality is maintained through regular internal discussions and feedback from participants. The main outcome of the initiative is that clients feel seen, welcomed, and valued, which strengthens their self-esteem and supports relationship-building with staff beyond their primary case workers. Additional benefits include quicker trust-building in crisis or substitution situations, reduced loneliness through a stable weekly routine, and improved daily structure.

The project reflects core Housing First principles: participation is voluntary and non-coercive, support is provided separately from the client's housing, and there is no time limit for involvement. The group demonstrates a person-centered approach in which clients are welcomed as they are, and support adapts to their needs rather than requiring them to adapt to the service.



## Low-Threshold Work Activities in Salvation Army Communal Housing First (Finland)

The Salvation Army's low-threshold work activities are an ongoing practice implemented in all three of Salvation Army's communal Housing First sites in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Established in 2011–2012, the model aims to strengthen housing stability, daily functioning, and community participation among long-term homeless residents. The primary goal is to support successful tenancy by offering meaningful daily activities, fostering a sense of responsibility, and reducing harms such as substance use. Participation is voluntary and open to all residents.

Work activities are carried out by trained work coaches together with housing unit staff. Activities follow community-based methods that emphasise respectful, equal interaction between staff and residents. Tasks include subcontracting work, cleaning and maintenance, outdoor upkeep, small repairs, and canteen duties. Residents can participate 1–4 hours per day according to their capacity and motivation. They receive a small work allowance (2 euros per hour, up to 8 euros per day), along with meals and coffee. The environment is kept substance-free, and work tasks are adjusted individually based on each participant's daily condition.

The model has produced positive outcomes: it has strengthened residents' sense of inclusion, improved self-esteem and interpersonal skills, reduced substance use, and increased the overall comfort and community spirit in the housing units. Residents describe the tasks as meaningful and comparable to real work, especially because the activities involve essential responsibilities within the community. Key success factors include voluntary participation, a positive and supportive atmosphere, flexibility, and the focus on residents' strengths.

The activity follows Housing First principles by supporting residents' recovery and social inclusion without tying their tenancy to participation. It provides structure, meaningful routines, and opportunities for empowerment, thereby promoting housing stability and advancing the broader goals of Housing First services.

## 7 Conclusions

The project's results demonstrate that Housing First delivers substantial improvements in housing stability, safety, and overall well-being for individuals with long-term experiences of homelessness. The positive impact of Housing First was visible in the data with residents and staff reporting greater housing stability, sense of safety, and personal recovery, and frontline workers describing a shift toward rights-based, person-centered practices, which provide also room for meaningful professional development. These findings reinforce earlier research showing that people experiencing homelessness do not need to be prepared for housing; rather, the necessary support can be delivered directly into their home, allowing recovery and inclusion to begin with the stability of one's own home.

However, the findings also make clear that the realisation Housing First is significantly shaped and, in many cases, constrained by various structural factors. Foremost among these are the limited availability of affordable housing and fragmented service systems as well as otherwise insufficient resources to provide adequate support. In addition, reliance on short-term or project-based funding, particularly evident in some contexts, undermines the capacity to offer long-term, flexible support. As Culhane and colleagues state in their recent analysis on Housing First in the US (2025): Housing First isn't failing; the nation is failing Housing First. In light of this report, a similar risk threatens European Housing First policies and efforts to end homelessness if the essential resources for this work, namely housing and financing support, are not secured.

Three central themes in the development of the policies in particular should be given greater attention in the future. *First*, investing in housing and keeping it a central focus of Housing First work, whether through constructing new housing, renovating existing stock, or building partnerships between private and public landlords. *Second*, investment in support is essential, but it should be organised in a way that makes use of existing services and builds up functional cooperation with them alongside the support provided by the Housing First initiatives themselves. The analysis indicates a risk that Housing First projects may create parallel support systems separate of official services, thereby failing to make use of existing structures that could be functional for them and their clients. Addressing this requires building actively new partnerships as well as advocacy and development work in close cooperation with the service system and other relevant stakeholders (cf. Pleace 2024).

*Third* development need concerns community participation and integration as a specific area of support of Housing First, alongside more service-oriented activities. According to the interviewees, this type of work within Housing First was still in its infancy, even

though the outcomes it produced could be extremely positive. The measures involved were often very simple and did not require substantial resources, only that options were considered together with the client and made available to them. This points to a more fundamental shift in current ways of thinking and working within the Housing First principle, as Quilgars and Pleace (2016) note. For example, issues related to social integration, and support for achieving it, should be incorporated more proactively into the scope of the Housing First principle. This, in turn, means identifying needs related to personal well-being and social integration and paying attention not only to whether a person formally has the 'right' and choice to pursue a meaningful life, but to their actual capability to achieve it (Marshall et al. 2022).

All of these require local measures and actions, as well as the effective use of local conditions in order to succeed. Also, adaptation plays an important role here. Our results strongly point out that within the Housing First principle there should be sufficient flexibility to make the best possible use of available resources. Excessive rigidity in interpreting the principles, for their part, can lead to the dismissal of practices and models that might have provided clear benefits in addressing various challenges; in this context, the role of communal Housing First emerged as particularly significant.

Lastly, with respect to training, Housing First professionals across Europe share similar needs for practical, hands-on learning that bridges theory and everyday practice. Priority areas include trauma-informed care, harm reduction, recovery orientation and active engagement, and staff well-being. Community integration and prevention of loneliness and social isolation emerged as particularly central areas. Training should also extend beyond homelessness services to include municipal officials, landlords, and community organisations, to foster shared understanding and collaboration. The study also underscores that training is not merely a tool for professional development but a mechanism for systemic change. When integrated into national strategies, training supports coherence between policy and practice, strengthens workforce capacity, and enhances the sustainability of Housing First as a cornerstone of European homelessness policy.

This report has been descriptive in nature and has summarised the key findings and perspectives emerging from the data. The results will also be presented in other publications (Perälä et al., forthcoming). One theme that surfaced in the empirical material but was excluded from this report concerns migration related to homelessness. Within the context of Housing First policy, the theme was perceived as difficult, as undocumented people in particular often remained outside housing solutions due to the lack of required documentation. This is a theme that warrants greater attention in future Housing First discussions and poses ongoing challenges for practitioners working in the sector. Some individual Housing First projects already support individuals with issues related to securing the necessary documents and even

acquiring apartments. However, this requires more coordinated working methods and policies where also European level decision-making plays a central role.

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## Appendix 1



## Erasmus+ Adapting Housing First

### Focus groups

**Aim:** To gain an insight into how Housing First adapted & what training needs for staff has been there has been to meet the needs of the people supported in Housing First Projects.

**Who:** Partner organisations, other service organisations, peer workers, service users

**Number of participants in each group:** app. 6-10

**Duration:** max. 2 hours/group

**Two focus groups per visit**

**Each partner will take of the following:**

- recruitment of the participants,
- location & refreshments
- interpretations (if needed). Two researchers of Y-Foundation will be present, but if there is a need for interpretations, the partners will organise this.
- Translations for the consent forms (incl. permission for recording, confidentiality and data pseudoanonymisation). The documents (in English) will be provided by Y-Foundation

1. Introductions and the purpose of the research
2. What is Housing First for you? What are the key elements you wish to highlight?
3. Housing

What is the housing pathway like?

What type of housing is available? Are there any options?

Where does the housing come from? How quickly can the housing be organised - any waiting time?

Are there any pre-conditions?

Who pays the rent?

Role of the tenant in the process?

Role of the support worker/service provider?

4. How is the support organised?

Team? (ACT, ICM, other)

What kind of support?

How often? On what basis (need of the tenant, other)?

Based on the individual needs of the tenant or same model for all?

Link to the mainstream services, benefits?

Is support compulsory?

Role of the tenant in the support?

Are there activities linked to the support (group activities, work activities, other)?

As long as needed or time-specific?

Is support linked to housing? What happens if support ends? What happens if the tenant moves - does the support continue?

5. Any groups specific adaptations (i.e. young people, women, people with migrant background etc.)?

6. Other aspect of Housing First

- Community
- Neighborhood work?
- Integration?

7. In terms of HF, what are the current training needs in your organisation?

## Appendix 2.



## Erasmus +, Adapting Housing First in Europe

### Interviews with Organizations

**Who:** Interviews with organizations who have adapted housing first, via zoom & in person. Interviewees can represent different types of organizations involved in the implementation and adaptation of Housing First policies (cities, ngos, mental health services etc.). Interviewees will be staff members. Staff will include front line, management and administration staff as well as peer workers.

**Number of interviews:** 50 (12-13 interviews per country)

**Recruitment:** Individuals/representatives of organizations you think are important for understanding Housing First adaptations in your organization /country/area. It would be good to have more than one organization represented and, also central partner organizations or other central actors in cities/regions.

**Duration:** max. 2 hours

**Aim:** To understand better the local contexts of housing first policies in different European countries and the ways in which housing first policies are adapted

**Expected results:** Improved insight into innovations in supports for homeless people creating training opportunities for staff and people with fewer opportunities.

Each partner will take of the following:

- recruitment of the participants,
- location & refreshments
- conducting the interviews in their own country
- Translations for the consent forms (incl. permission for recording, confidentiality and data pseudoanonymisation). The documents (in English) will be provided by Y-Foundation.

#### 1. Interviewee's working history and position in HF policies

- What is your current working place and job description and how long you have worked in the field?
- How your job description relates to Housing First policy (if it differs from previous question)

#### 2. Implementation of HF model in interviewee's organization and other organizations

- How is HF policy implemented in your organization? E.g.
  - central target groups?
  - number of apartments and residents?

- tenant agreements and tenants legal rights
- support related to housing, staff and professional background
- role of peer work?
- interviewees own activities

- Do you know of other organizations implementing Housing First policy? Are your activities different from them and do you cooperate with them? How?

-What do you think are the central results and best practices of HF up to date?

-What do you think are the current challenges related to HF?

### **3. Adapting Housing First**

- How essential to your work are the following core principles linked to HF policies? (8 core HF principles outlined by Pleace in 2016)

-How are they considered in the design of HF policies and activities in your organization? How about in other organizations in your city/country?

-Would you modify or improve them somehow? How?

### **4. Training Needs**

-What kind of training on HF policies is available in your organization/country? (e.g. by whom, how often)

-Have you participated in these trainings and what have been the central themes addressed in them?

-Have you attended other kinds of training on the HF principle? (e.g. international webinars, conferences)

-What do you think are the most central training needs related to HF policies?

-What other things would you wish from the training on HF principles?

## Appendix 3.



Project Number: 2022-1-IE01-KA220-VET-000089473

## Erasmus+ Adapting Housing First in Europe

### Case Study Protocol

Case Studies are provided by partner organisations. Each partner will provide 3-5 case studies. They contain a brief (1-2 pages) description of the existing or applied model/practice that has been used in homelessness work and that follows or applies the Housing First principle either in the partner organisation or in their country. Cases can also present the activities of other organisations than those participating in the Erasmus+ project, provided that this is not prohibited by a copyright or that permission has been granted. The deadline for cases is in the end of 2024.

The cases will be disseminated to different European actors and organizations as part of the Erasmus+ project. The aim is to spread information about best practices and applications of the Housing First principle, which could potentially be implemented in other organisations and countries.

Case studies are produced using the following structure.

#### 1. Name of the Model or Practice

#### 2. Adoption Level

- how widely the model/practice is being applied (organizational level, national level or international level?)
- is it an ongoing or a past model (e.g. a finished project)
- when and by whom the model/practice was established
- who is or are responsible for its implementation now

-Approximately, how many organizations/clients/residents are covered by the activity? (e.g, annual coverage or the number of people participating in some activity or number of people participating in training)

### **3. Description of the Model**

- the main starting points and objectives of the model/practice
- the key target group or groups
- the key actors or bodies implementing the model
- the concrete implementation of the model/practice
- funding and other resources used to implement the model
- manuals or other support materials or tools used in the application of the model

### **4. Central Results**

- the main results or achievements of the model/practice
- the key factors in achieving the results
- have the results been evaluated anywhere? where and with what measures?
- have the results of the model/practice been published anywhere? where?

### **5. Adapting Housing First with the Help of the Model/Practice**

- describe or reflect in few words how the model follows HF principles and how it could benefit the development Housing First policies in Europe

## Training Needs in Housing First

Project Number: 2022-1-IE01-KA220-VET-000089473

Who: Frontline workers, experts, public officials and decision makers in the field of Housing First and homelessness in Europe

Duration: max. 15 min

Deadline: 30.5.2025

Aim: The European Union has set an ambitious target to end homelessness by 2030. The development and expansion of the Housing First model, combining housing and support, has emerged as a viable and evidence-based intervention. However, successful implementation of the policy requires that there is trained staff and expertise to support people out of the cycle of homelessness.

Survey: The survey contains questions and statements related to Housing First training. Respond to them from the point of view of your own work and job description. The aim is to find out what training needs are related to the implementation of Housing First, what factors enable or hinder participation in training, and how respondents rate their skills related to different fields of Housing First. All responses will be anonymous, and participation is voluntary.

The survey is part of the "Adapting Housing First - Innovating Housing Staff" (2023-2025) project, funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ program. We sincerely thank also the Housing First Europe Hub and Nordic Homelessness Alliance for their invaluable support and contribution to the distribution of the survey.



1. Country \*

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2. What is your current job position? \*

- ☐ Frontline client work / Housing maintenance
  - ☐ Team management
  - ☐ Organisation management
  - ☐ Researcher / Developer
  - ☐ Communication
  - ☐ Peer work
  - ☐ Politician / Decision-maker
  - ☐ Public official
  - ☐ Other
- 

3. How long have you been working in the Housing First field? \*

- ☐ Less than 1 year  
☐ 1-3 years  
☐ 4-6 years  
☐ 7-10 years  
☐ Over 10 years  
☐ I work in another field. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Have you participated in Housing First training before? \*

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

5. In which of the following areas did the training have an impact on? (select all that apply) \*

- ☐ Practical skills  
☐ Networking  
☐ Attitudes  
☐ Advocacy and housing rights  
☐ Increased understanding of the subject  
☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ None of the above

6. Please rate your knowledge on a scale of 1 to 5 in the following areas of Housing First work. (1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Housing First principles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Trauma-sensitive approach	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Managing aggressive client situations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Substance use and harm reduction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Recovery orientation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Mental health issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Housing legislation, housing rights, and advocacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Neighborhood work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Communication and media relations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Continuum of care and collaboration with other services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Acquiring housing and housing options	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Acquiring funding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Housing First management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Staff well-being in Housing First	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Peer work in Housing First	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Homelessness and stigma	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Housing First, crime prevention, and criminal justice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Transitions in housing (forced or voluntary moves)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)
Multidisciplinary collaboration	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Scaling up Housing First	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	(1= no knowledge, 5= very knowledgeable)

7. Which topics would you like to learn more about? (select all that apply)

\*

- ☐ Housing First principles
- ☐ Trauma-sensitive approach
- ☐ Managing aggressive client situations
- ☐ Substance use and harm reduction
- ☐ Recovery orientation
- ☐ Mental health issues
- ☐ Housing legislation, housing rights, and advocacy
- ☐ Neighborhood work
- ☐ Communication and media relations
- ☐ Continuum of care and collaboration with other services
- ☐ Acquiring housing and housing options
- ☐ Acquiring funding
- ☐ Housing First management
- ☐ Staff well-being in Housing First
- ☐ Peer work in Housing First
- ☐ Homelessness and stigma
- ☐ Housing First, crime prevention, and criminal justice
- ☐ Transitions in housing (forced or voluntary moves)
- ☐ Multidisciplinary collaboration
- ☐ Scaling up Housing First
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Which factors do you consider most important when participating in training? (select up to three)\*

- ☐ Support from my employer

- ☐ Convenient location
- ☐ Training scheduled during work hours
- ☐ Relevance to my daily work
- ☐ Free of charge
- ☐ Option to attend online
- ☐ Clear communication of training objectives and content
- ☐ High-quality trainers
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

9. What factors prevent you from attending training? (select all that apply) \*

- ☐ Lack of time due to work load
- ☐ Lack of support from my organization
- ☐ High cost
- ☐ Inconvenient location
- ☐ Training only available online
- ☐ Poor technological tools
- ☐ Lack of information of available training
- ☐ Insufficient information of the content of training
- ☐ Training does not match my needs
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your training needs, preferences, or challenges?

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