

Evaluation of Housing First England

A report for Homeless Link

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01. INTRODUCTION

Homeless Link commissioned CFE Research to conduct an evaluation of their Housing First England project. This report provides the findings from the evaluation.

The Housing First Approach

Housing First is an alternative beneficiary-centred approach to supporting people with multiple and complex needs including homelessness. The traditional approach to supporting this group is through the provision of various accommodation and treatment services until they are deemed 'housing ready' and able to access independent housing.¹ Housing First flips this approach and provides a home much earlier in the recovery journey without pre-conditions, such as being abstinent or receiving treatment. Homeless Link believe the Housing First approach is more effective and this is supported by a substantive global evidence base.²

Homeless Link have identified a set of seven principles for Housing First in England, based on the evidence and designed to maximise the effectiveness of the approach. These principles are:

1. People have a right to a home.
2. Flexible support is provided for as long as it is needed.
3. Housing and support are separated.
4. Individuals have choice and control.
5. An active engagement approach is used.
6. The service is based on people's strengths, goals and aspirations.
7. A harm reduction approach is used.³

¹ Homeless Link (2015) *'Housing First' or 'Housing Led'? The current picture of Housing First in England*. London: Homeless Link

² Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2015) *Housing First in England*. York: Centre for Housing Policy, University of York

³ Homeless Link (2016) *Housing First in England: The principles* London: Homeless Link

The Housing First England project

The Housing First England (HFE) project, led by Homeless Link, was a three year project funded by Comic Relief and Lankelly Chase. HFE aims to broaden the reach of Housing First approaches across England and embed effective practice so that all those who could benefit are able to do so. The project aimed to:

- Lead an alliance of cross sector partners with the vision and confidence to make Housing First a reality for all who need it.
- Challenge a service culture that places higher demands on people with the greatest needs, and end the practice of making a home of one's own conditional upon a standard of housing readiness.
- Build an evidence base so we can target Housing First resources at those whose needs are greatest and for whom this approach will be transformational.
- Engage local and national partners to deliver, review and replicate effective and sustainable Housing First projects.

The project was delivered between 2016 and 2018 and included:

- development of an open access Housing First in England knowledge bank
- research to fill gaps in evidence
- guidance and toolkits to support successful Housing First services
- case studies demonstrating the impact of Housing First on real people
- presentations at events, training and webinars to raise awareness of Housing First and related topics, and
- support for peer networking and learning to help those looking to adopt the approach.

This evaluation

This evaluation explores how effective the Housing First England project has been and how remaining challenges can best be addressed to maximise impact after the initial three years. The evaluation is not about evidencing the effectiveness of the Housing First model itself or the specific projects using the approach.

We identified four overarching research questions for the evaluation:

- How has the picture of Housing First in England changed since the start of the project in 2016?
- To what extent has the Housing First England project contributed to this change?
- How effective has Housing First England been in supporting change, including capturing and sharing learning?
- What does the Housing First England project need to do to achieve sustainable systems change after the initial three years?

To answer these questions we undertook the following activities:

- Review of planning, delivery and other project management information held by Homeless Link, including feedback survey results from HFE events.
- Review of evaluations of Housing First projects delivered in England
- Telephone interviews with 14 stakeholders
- Five learning sessions attended by a total of 46 stakeholders and 5 members of the HFE project team.
- Analysis of data collected through the telephone interviews and learning sessions.

Stakeholders consulted through the interviews and learning sessions included frontline workers and managers from service providers using or considering using Housing First, funding bodies, local commissioners and central government. A full list of organisations consulted is provided in Appendix 1.

This Report

This report is organised around the above research questions.

Chapter two looks at Housing First in England since 2015, outlining any changes and trends evident over the period of the Housing First England project.

Chapter three examines the role of the Housing First England project in contributing to the changes in Housing First outlined in the previous chapter. We also explore how effective the Housing First England activities have been.

Chapter four considers the potential future role of the Housing First England project and the challenges still faced, offering suggestions for how the project and Homeless Link might be able to help address these challenges.

Chapter five concludes the report, drawing together key findings and making suggestions for future practice.

02. HOUSING FIRST IN ENGLAND SINCE 2015

How has the picture of Housing First in England changed since the start of the project in 2015?

Interest in Housing First has grown over the lifetime of the Housing First England project. In 2015, Homeless Link produced an overview of the Housing First landscape at the time.⁴ This report highlighted the considerable international evidence base behind Housing First, but noted that practice in England was characterised by small-scale pilots and a mixed fidelity to the model. Further, it was noted that few service users involved in the research had heard of Housing First.

As shown in Figure 1 below, data collected by Homeless Link through their annual surveys suggests an increase in interest in Housing First since 2015, but a decrease in the number of providers reporting that they used the model.

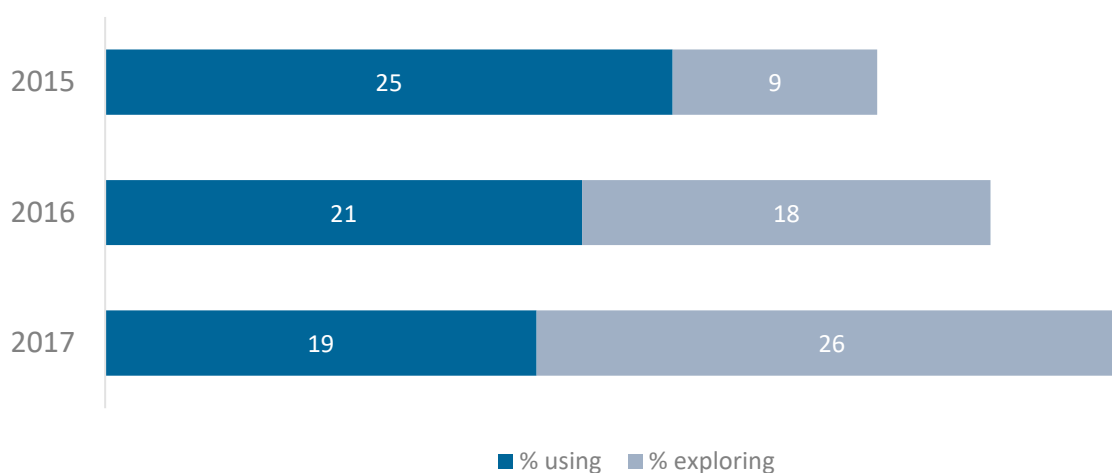


Figure 1: Percentage of services using or exploring Housing First, 2015-2017. Source: Homeless Link Annual Reports

In contrast, since the start of the Housing First England project in 2016, there has been a marked increase in the number of new project starts. Figure 2 highlights the number of new Housing First projects since 2011.

⁴ 'Housing First' of 'Housing Led? The current picture of Housing First in England. Homeless Link, June 2015.

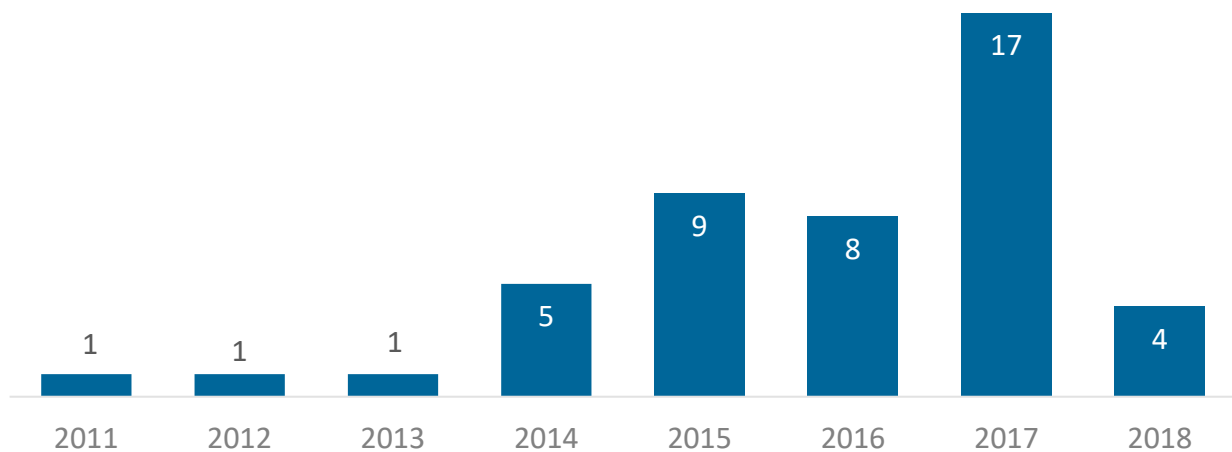


Figure 2: New Housing First projects, 2011-2018.⁵ Source: Homeless Link monitoring data

One explanation for this apparent contradiction is that the reduction in the proportion of services saying they use Housing First is due to an increase in understanding of what exactly Housing First is, and increasing recognition of the principles of the model and the importance of fidelity to this. Feedback from Homeless Link staff suggested that in 2015, lack of understanding of Housing First meant respondents overestimated their use of Housing First and following increased awareness of the model, modified their responses in future years. If correct, this is a positive development.

There have also been changes in the regional distribution of Housing First projects across the country (see Figure 3). In 2015, the spread of Housing First projects was relatively even across England, with the largest percentage of projects located in the North West. By 2018, the percentage of services located in the North West remained similar but the proportion of services in the South had increased, with almost half (46 per cent) of the Housing First projects in England located in London and the South East by 2018. This is notable in the context of the particularly acute difficulties in sourcing affordable accommodation in this part of the country.

⁵ 2018 data is up to September 2018 so does not represent the full calendar year.

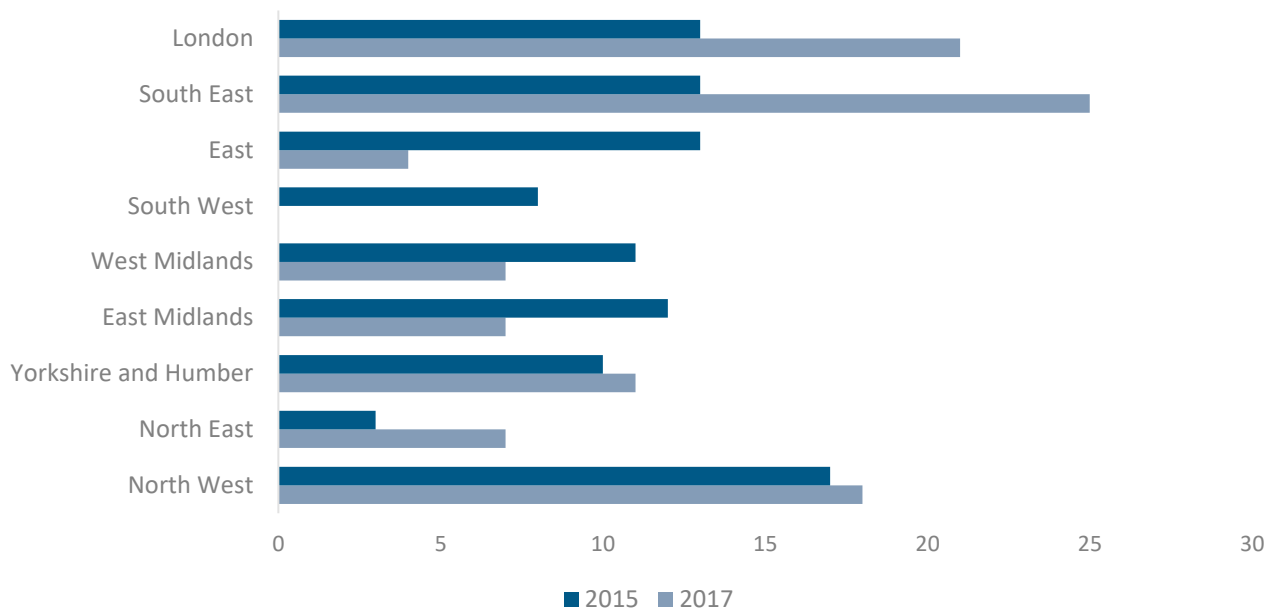


Figure 3: Distribution of Housing First services across England, 2015-2017. Shows the percentage of total Housing First projects in England, in each region. Source: Homeless Link (2015)⁶; Homeless Link (2018)⁷.

Most of the stakeholders we spoke to were positive about Housing First and what it had to offer. There was a recognition that Housing First provides an alternative, radical approach for those for whom traditional approaches have not worked, and this was a major factor in its appeal.

I think the model is really appealing, because working in the hostels we'd have people who were in the hostel system for years and it was obviously not really working out in the long term...to have Housing First brought into the borough was really exciting.

— Learning session one participant

Other key elements of Housing First that appealed to stakeholders include the intensive and personalised nature of support provided, the emphasis on choice and home as a human right and that beneficiaries are supported to deal with issues at their own pace. The impressive success rates and good evidence of Housing First's effectiveness were also important in generating interest in and support for the approach. This was said to be important in making a case to funders and commissioners. At the start of the evaluation, we were asked to identify reasons why some stakeholders may be sceptical of the approach. Yet over the period of the Housing First England project the debate appears to have moved on. We found little evidence of doubt about the value of Housing First or resistance to it as a useful option – at least within the housing and homelessness sector. Concerns, where they were expressed, related to Housing First being promoted as a panacea or the only

⁶ 'Housing First' of 'Housing Led? The current picture of Housing First in England. Homeless Link, June 2015.

⁷ The picture of Housing First in England. Homeless Link, 2018.

option, or practical challenges such as securing funding. Where there was a desire for additional evidence, this tended to relate to the effectiveness of Housing First for specific sub-groups of people with multiple needs (such as women) and how best to sustain and implement the approach, rather than its essential efficacy. We explore these concerns further in Chapter 4.

Based on the evidence available to us, it appears that there have been substantial changes in the picture of Housing First in England over the course of the Housing First England project. There has been a growth in interest in the model, new projects and pilots being launched and enhanced understanding and acceptance of the model. In May 2018, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) announced three new substantial, government funded Housing First pilot projects in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and the West Midlands.⁸ This demonstrates the extent to which Housing First has become recognised as one of the key tools available to tackle homelessness. In the next chapter we explore the extent to which the Housing First England project has contributed to this change.

⁸ MHCLG (2018) Housing Secretary James Brokenshire awards funding to reduce rough sleeping *GOV.UK* [online] 9th May 2018. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/housing-secretary-james-brokenshire-awards-funding-to-reduce-rough-sleeping> [Accessed 22nd January 2019]

03. THE ROLE OF THE HOUSING FIRST ENGLAND PROJECT

The contribution of Housing First England

HFE has engaged a large number and wide variety of stakeholders. Up to September 2018 the project engaged 1,744 participants through Housing First England events, including workshops, practice networks and webinars. A Homeless Link representative also attended external meetings and events such as council meetings, commissioning workshops and other regional events to raise awareness of Housing First and answer questions.

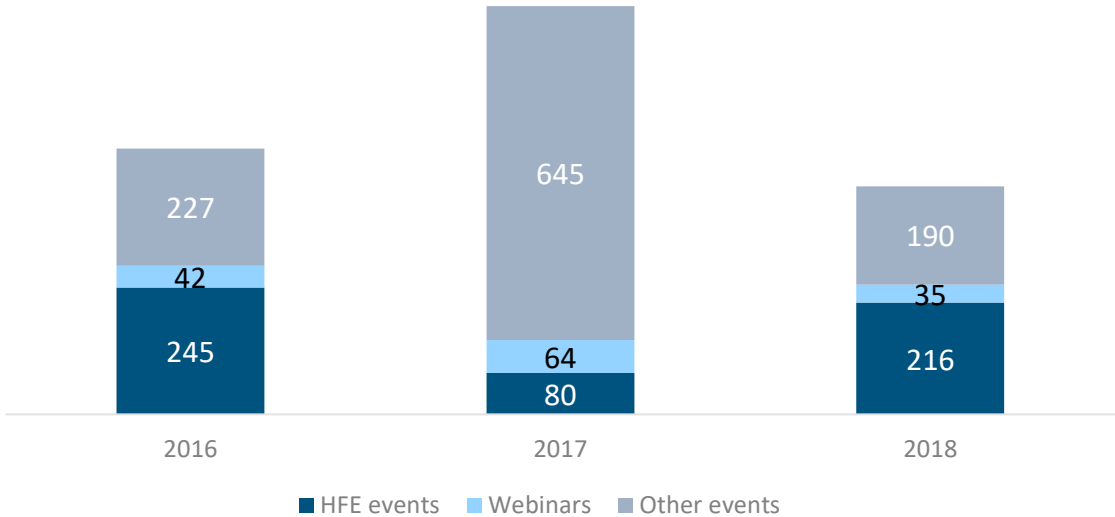


Figure 4: Total number of attendees at Housing First events and webinars, 2016-2018.⁹ Source: Homeless Link monitoring data.

Figure 4 shows a substantial volume of engagement activity in 2017 in particular. This aligns with a substantial increase in new Housing First projects (see Figure 2) and suggests the project has responded to increasing demand for information and support.

Importantly, participation in events appears to be a spur to action (see Figure 5). As a result of events or meetings, attendees reported they would take steps to increase their

⁹ 2018 data is up to September 2018 so does not represent the full calendar year.



and others’ knowledge of Housing First, improve their practice and – vital for growing the approach – work towards implementing the model.

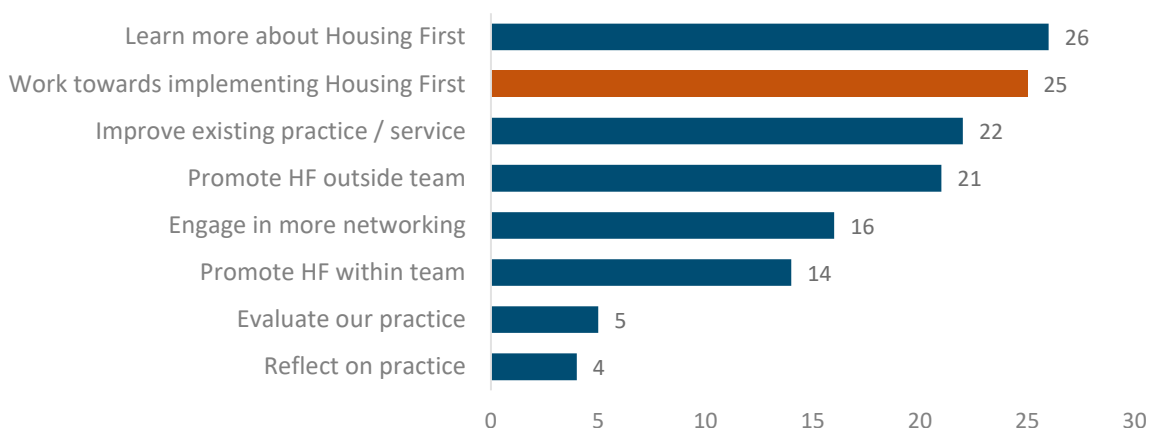


Figure 5: Responses to “What will you do as a result of the meeting/event”, HFE feedback forms completed by attendees (n=133 completed)

Evaluation participants told us they found HFE events very useful and attendance had led to an increase in knowledge of what Housing First is and, perhaps more importantly, what Housing First is not.

Although we cannot attribute the growth in interest in Housing First directly to the Housing First England project, there was a clear perception among some of the stakeholders we spoke to that it had contributed.

Nationally I would have thought that the growth, albeit limited at the moment, of Housing First services around the country, a lot of that is probably down to Housing First England, at least in part, you know, raising the profile

— Stakeholder interviewee

It is clear from the evidence we gathered that Homeless Link has become the ‘go to’ place in England for information and support on Housing First. The Housing First England project was said to be valuable in bringing together information and guidance in a single place and in an accessible way. The project provides a vital reference point, presenting evidence and learning that can be used with commissioners.

Stakeholders in particular felt that there was an important role for an organisation such as Homeless Link to run a project like HFE and act as a central resource or a ‘first point of contact’ for the approach in England. Collating evidence and good practice from across projects and partnerships adds value, making it more accessible and increasing the potential impact.

I think, as a membership organisation, there's power in collating that information and making a coherent voice or, as you say, data that has multiple projects behind it.

— Stakeholder interview

Almost all stakeholders who participated in the evaluation were aware of the Housing First England project and had used this, or Homeless Link more widely, to find out more information. Some evaluation participants had worked with Housing First for a number of years and were aware of the approach prior to the Housing First England project. But those who had come across Housing First more recently were likely to have heard of the approach through Homeless Link, for example, after attending a conference or other event. Those who found out about the approach through other channels used the HFE project to find out more.

Crucially, the HFE project is seen as both a credible and authoritative voice in the sector. The support for Housing First provided by Homeless Link has helped to not only raise awareness of the approach, but to legitimise it. We found evidence that this has helped individuals and organisations to make the case for adopting Housing First and for validating their practice. This adds further weight to the case that Housing First England has contributed to the growth in adoption and understanding of Housing First.

I've been talking about this for two or three years now to my organisation. The fact that now that conversation is, sort of, legitimised by Homeless Link has helped my Chief Exec say, 'Okay, yes. Alright, yes. We need to look into this a bit more closely.'

— Learning session participant

I really like the way it brings organisations together under a, kind of, united banner, if you will, and again, just as we mentioned earlier, just validating practice and being able to hold your own project to account against the principles and having that authority of the Housing First thing to go back to, I think, is really useful.

— Learning session participant

The Housing First principles

The Housing First principles developed and promoted by the HFE project are a valued and useful resource. Among the online resources, they were most commonly mentioned by evaluation participants. All who had used the principles found them useful not just for themselves but within their organisation. Having the principles clearly outlined in a simple and visually appealing format provides users with an accessible checklist for developing a Housing First project. They also help with communicating to others what a Housing First approach is.

I've used the principles - these are displayed in all our offices as well and they're constantly being revisited.

— Learning session participant

The principles clearly set out what a Housing First model should look like. There was some concern from participants that the growth in interest in commissioning Housing First services could lead some to claim their services as Housing First in order to secure funding. Having clear guidance around the principles is believed to help ensure the fidelity of the model.

I think one of the key things that they've done is to promote the, principles. I think that one of the dangers is, and I get the sense that this has been happening, that people have been branding what they do as Housing First when it isn't really because they think that's a way of getting money. So, I think having a set of principles set down, benchmarks, if you like, to refer to, is really useful.

— Stakeholder interviewee

It was considered important that the principles had been developed and promoted by an independent, national organisation, rather than a housing provider or particular authority. Again, this was believed to give the principles (as well as the Housing First approach as a whole) legitimacy and validity.

[Jo] underlined the key principles of it which is really helpful for us because to get that message on a national level, a national programme, and the importance of the key principles and maintaining high fidelity... I think it gave some external rigour to what we were doing, some external validation to the approach we were taking that was actually really helpful.

— Stakeholder interviewee

When discussing the principles, learning session participants felt that all were important and all complemented each other – removing any one was difficult as many were interdependent. It was generally agreed that all were needed to deliver a true Housing First approach.

There were varying thoughts on the most important principles, but number 1 ('People have a right to a home') and number 4 ('Individuals have choice and control') were commonly considered as the most integral to Housing First. A right to a home was considered a fundamental human right that should be the basis for any service. Individual choice and control was seen as an important element of what distinguishes Housing First from traditional support and makes a real difference to clients.

This is the first time that people in our services have ever had any control over anything, giving them that choice... That you're giving them that choice is so empowering and it's really valuable.

— Learning session participant

That's what is quite transformational about the approach. It's saying, 'You're able to make your own decisions about where you live,' which sound obvious, but often that group, they're not allowed to make their own decisions or have any real say.

— Learning session participant

Yet this principle was also considered one of the more difficult to adhere to, largely due to a lack of affordable and quality housing in the areas of clients' choice. Some compromise is often required, leading some to feel uncertain about the extent they were meeting this principle.

The effectiveness of Housing First England in supporting change, including capturing and sharing learning

Feedback from the Housing First England events is overwhelmingly positive, with almost all participants rating them as either excellent or good.

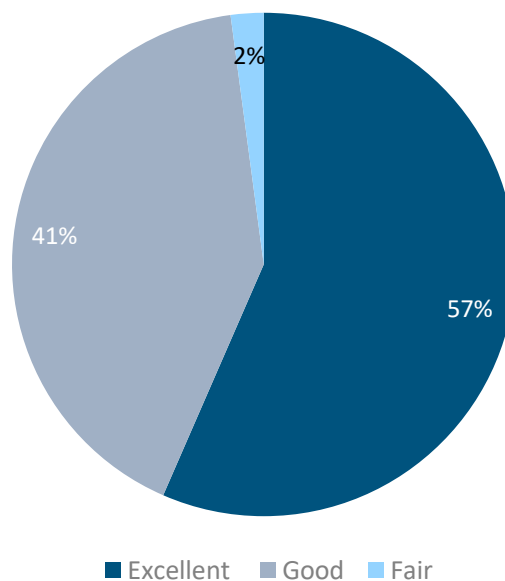


Figure 5: Responses to “Overall, how would you rate the event?”, HFE feedback forms completed by attendees (n=133 completed)

Participants particularly valued the networking aspect of events and the opportunity and encouragement to learn from one another and share good practice. Those who were not yet involved with Housing First or in the early stages of planning and delivering the approach found learning from those with more experience very useful. Participants

valued having the time and space to share challenges and, importantly, how these have been overcome or the lessons learned.

Whenever we've come down to these conferences in London, it's been really interesting just to learn from people that are just a little further ahead than what we're trying to do.

— Learning session participant

The HFE project has also been effective in reducing the extent to which providers are or feel like they are working in 'silos'. It provides the reassurance of a central resource and network of support that practitioners can draw upon.

I found it useful to find out what other people were doing around the country in relation to Housing First.

— Stakeholder interviewee

There is a clear desire for ongoing opportunities for people working in a similar space to come together and share learning and provide mutual support. This was one of the reasons participants were keen to attend the learning sessions we held as part of the evaluation.

The tailored and knowledgeable support provided by the HFE project was valued highly and perceived as very useful. Evaluation participants particularly highlighted the valued support provided by Innovation and Good Practice Manager, Jo Prestidge.

The people I've worked with on the project, I've been immensely impressed with. They've been so helpful to us as we've been starting up our network, so they were really, really instrumental. That the combination of research and training and networking is absolutely the right way to go.

— Stakeholder interview

Those who had direct contact with the Housing First England project were hugely complimentary of the service provided and the level of knowledge and expertise on offer. It was also felt that it was delivered in an accessible way, and that the bespoke aspect of training for individual organisations that could be tailored to their level of need was particularly useful.

Yes, they've really been-, it's been a pleasure to work with them and to read and then steal their materials for our own purposes and to really collaborate on things in terms of the training and the sharing and the network building. Just to say that they've done a really-, the people particularly involved have been really excellent.

— Stakeholder interview

Online resources are also seen as useful, but awareness could be improved. While the majority of evaluation participants said they had visited the dedicated HFE website, they varied in the extent to which they were familiar with and used the online resources. A minority were not aware that the site existed, and some did not fully understand what was available for them to access and use. A small number reported that they had not had the time to look through the website properly or make full use of it.

Those who had used the online resources were positive about them and gave lots of examples of how they had used them in various aspects of their work, in particular: to inform funding bids, engage and persuade others and enhance their own work. Figure 6 provides just a few examples of the use of HFE resources.

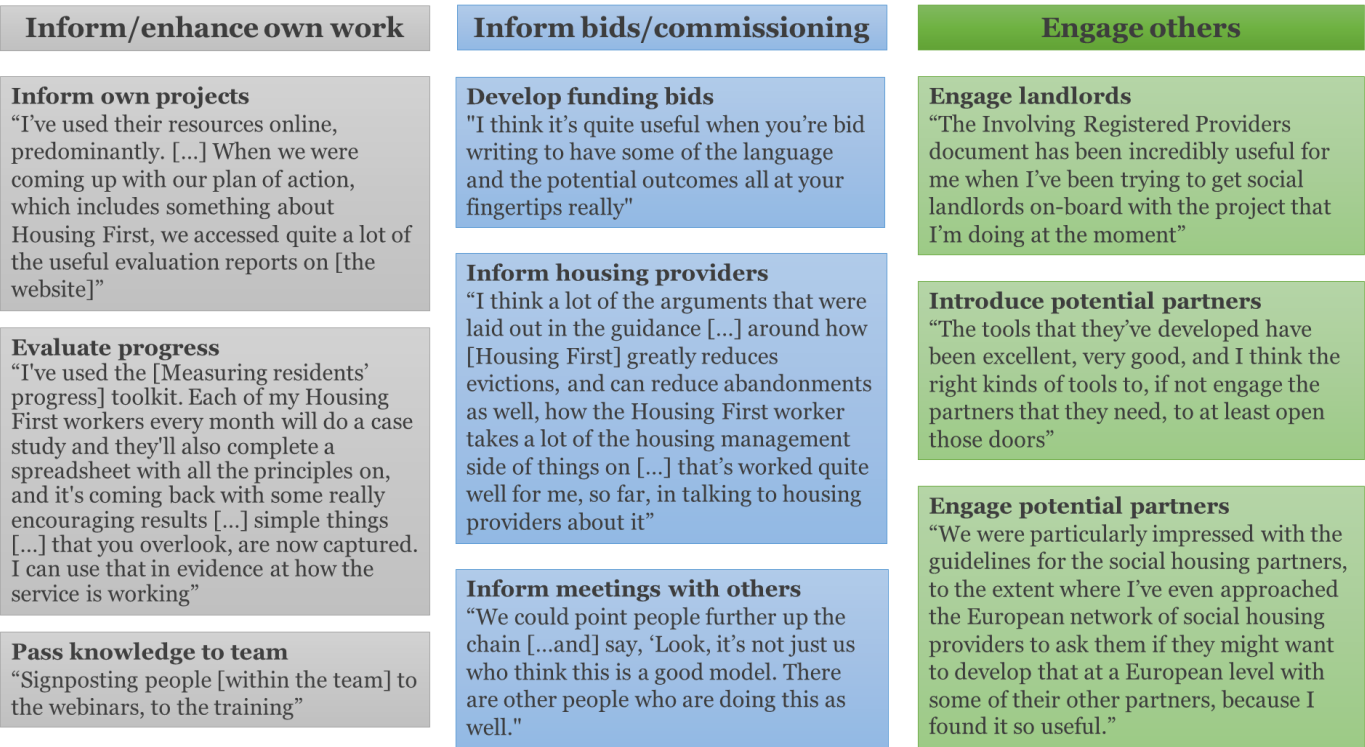


Figure 6: Examples of how people have used HFE online resources

As well as valuing what was already provided, evaluation participants suggested other types of online resources that they would find useful. Some of the suggestions made in the early stages of the evaluation (such as information on skills for Housing First workers) have since been implemented. Others were for resources already available on the site (such as video case studies) – again highlighting the need for greater awareness raising of the wealth of content now available.

Other suggestions for resources included:

- Video interviews with housing providers and/or commissioners exploring benefits of Housing First (to add to the value of the client videos)



- Guidance on preparing for the move-in stage, particularly when supporting people who have been rough sleeping for a long time
- A ‘starter pack’ with guidelines for those thinking about Housing First
- Help with where to get funding from, such as a list of organisations or trusts which favour Housing First approaches
- Evidence of outcomes for different sectors, such as physical and mental health and offending
- Evidence of cost-savings
- Examples of where Housing First *hasn’t* worked, and learning from this.

Overall, it is clear that the Housing First England project has contributed to raising awareness of the approach and developing the knowledge and understanding of those who have engaged with activities and resources. Participants felt better informed about the principles and benefits of the Housing First approach. They were better equipped to make the case for Housing First to funders, service providers, landlords and other stakeholders. They have benefitted from the opportunity to share challenges and learning with colleagues to inform better implementation and scaling-up of pilots.

Although we cannot prove that the increase in interest in and uptake of Housing First is directly or solely attributable to Housing First England, the evidence indicates that the project has made an important contribution to supporting the growth and acceptance of the model, helping to drive and sustain the movement.

Evaluation participants agreed that the Housing First England project was valuable and wanted Homeless Link to continue to provide this central resource.

I think it would be useful if the [Housing First England] project could carry on in some form really, to build on what’s been done. It’d be a shame for it to disappear now, particularly as there’s a bit of momentum getting behind it... I hope that some way could be found to keep the Housing First England work going in some way because I think they’ve built up a good knowledge base and they’re quite well known.

— Stakeholder interview

If there were a capacity for it to continue, and to continue to, kind of, be a centre of training and information and guidance, and advocacy too, if that’s something that they’re ready to take on, I think that that could be really useful.

— Stakeholder interview

In the next chapter we explore the challenges remaining and make suggestions for how Homeless Link might further develop and build on the legacy of the HFE project.

04. SUSTAINING CHANGE

Challenges and barriers to creating a movement

While we found general positivity for Housing First and great support for the Housing First England project specifically, evaluation participants identified a number of concerns and barriers to the continued growth of the approach and the achievement of a sustainable Housing First movement. Many are inextricably linked to and further exacerbated by wider issues such as austerity, welfare reform and the housing market, making them particularly difficult to address.

The two biggest challenges to creating a Housing First movement were said to be the availability and quality of affordable housing and the availability of sufficient and long-term funding. Some also expressed significant concern that promoting Housing First could be at the detriment of other approaches and there was disagreement about the extent to which this would be problematic. We consider this concern first.

The role of Housing First within the wider homelessness support landscape

Some evaluation participants were worried that the rapid rise in interest in Housing First could just be another passing policy fad or ‘buzzword’ and disappear with equal speed. One stakeholder felt that the interest of some was starting to wane with the realisation that to be effective Housing First requires substantial investment. As a result, some cautioned against promoting Housing First at the expense of other modes of support.

I feel concerned that, as a sector, we don't seem to have an eye on the future and we all seem to be getting on the Housing First bandwagon and ... we will all go home and we will allow hostels to close... I think we need to be really cautious of putting all our eggs in the Housing First basket.

— Learning session participant

There was disagreement among participants about the extent to which hostels ‘worked’. At least one stakeholder felt that reducing hostel provision would be the only option for offering a large-scale Housing First project in their area.

I think the only way that we could realistically scale up our Housing First provision would be by scaling down our hostel beds.

— Stakeholder interviewee

Related to this, many evaluation participants felt that Housing First should not be promoted as the only way to address homelessness and that it is not an approach that is right for everyone. There was general agreement that Housing First should be part of a menu of options not an alternative to something that already exists. Given the focus on Housing First as a solution for those with multiple needs, there was concern that putting significant resources into Housing First at the detriment to other services, could create a gap in provision for those with less complex needs.

You don't want people to have to be in the worst possible situation before, they get a roof over their head and the support that they need. That's my worry, that we create this marvellous all-singing-all-dancing Housing First. We target it at those who are the most excluded and the most disadvantaged, and particularly from rough sleeping, street homelessness, and then almost, it's kind of do you have to be in that situation before you get what you need?

— Stakeholder interviewee

A small number of participants, however, made the point that the heart of Housing First is that people have a right to a home and therefore the approach could and should be relevant to everyone. But this was not the prevailing view.

Availability and quality of housing

This was the most oft-cited challenge faced by individuals and organisations wishing to either begin, or grow, a Housing First service in their area, and a significant barrier to the national growth of the approach. Stakeholders frequently reported a lack of affordable, good quality accommodation, with that available often a low standard. The lack of suitable accommodation means it is particularly difficult to source properties in, or even close to, the client's area of choice – a principle of the Housing First model.

The prevailing perception that this is a particular problem in London and the South East was said to mask that other areas struggle with this too.

There's a shortage of accommodation. I think, sometimes, there's a bit of a London-centric view, not from voluntary organisations, but I think certainly from ministers and civil servants, that says the shortage of housing is a London and South-East problem, you know. It isn't, it's a national problem.

— Stakeholder interviewee

Fuelling this issue is a reluctance of landlords, particularly private but also in the social sector, to open up their properties to Housing First clients.

I mean housing associations and local authorities, and those people that have the housing stock that we can use, how on earth are we going to persuade them because our service users are the ones that they don't want?

— Learning session participant

The reliance on housing benefits is particularly problematic when trying to locate suitable properties in the private sector. For example, it was reported to us that in Birmingham less than two per cent of private rental properties were available at or below the housing benefit threshold. Many private landlords are unwilling to accept tenants reliant on benefits.

Availability of funding

Accessing funding was also identified as a key challenge for the long-term future of the Housing First movement. Cuts to local authority funding mean raising the significant up-front resources necessary to deliver a Housing First model is particularly challenging. Remaining faithful to the principles of the approach, providing the intensity of support required by clients for as long as needed, requires long-term investment.

I actually think that accommodation is problematic, but I think funding is the main thing. It does need to be very long-term...I think the expectation would be over time, a lot of them were really stabilised and didn't need that support, but for many, many people, that didn't happen. We've just got some very complex people who live in those properties, and disproportionately they need lots of resources.

— Stakeholder interviewee

There was evident frustration amongst stakeholders in particular that funding largely still remains limited to short-term pilots, including the three major government funded Housing First projects. This despite the fact that the model is generally considered proven and further 'testing' unnecessary. Some felt the ongoing pilot funding was down to a lack of political will rather than a genuine need for more evidence.

You know, all of this is doable. This is the problem with all the research, all the pilots. We're just finding out, again, things that we already know. This is not new information, it's not new knowledge, it's the will to deliver, to implement it, that's not there, and, you know, the resource.

— Stakeholder interviewee

The short term nature of the funding creates a conflict with one of the principles of Housing First, as it is impossible to guarantee open-ended support to clients. This makes planning projects more challenging and the lack of certainty creates anxiety about what happens after the funding or pilot period ends.

I think every Housing First service, they're all pilots, they're all one or two years and that, again, that's the only way you seem to be able to get the funding for a Housing First service, off the ground is to persuade the Local Authority to give it a two year pilot. Which, again, goes against - then what happens after two years?

— Stakeholder interviewee

It was also argued by some participants that short-term and pilot funding made it more difficult to integrate the approach with more mainstream housing support.

Related to the lack of long-term funding is the challenge of evidencing cost-savings that result from the model. Showing the model is cost-effective was seen by some to be important in making the case for Housing First. But the level of support that some clients require means short-term savings can be difficult to demonstrate.

Other challenges

As well as the above, a number of other challenges faced by Housing First England and the future of the model were identified. These include:

- The need for **a cultural shift in perceptions** around homelessness and people with multiple complex needs, particularly in working practices (for example, the lack of conditionality of Housing First could be a drastic change for frontline staff across all sectors involved);
- **Availability of a suitably skilled workforce** with the expertise to work with the Housing First client group and provide the flexible and personalised support required;
- Ensuring fidelity to the Housing First **principles**;
- **Lack of access to other specialist support**, such as with mental health; and
- **Particular difficulties** faced by this client group, such as loneliness, potential for tenancy hijack, not liking being indoors, loss of begging income and getting clients engaged with services.

Suggestions for future Housing First England priorities

Evaluation participants made suggestions of how the Housing First England project and Homeless Link could potentially address some of the challenges described above and support the sustainability of the Housing First model.

We've collected the suggestions into two groups - those that relate to providing support for particular organisations and audiences, and wider campaigning and engagement work. The two are, however, interconnected, as it was recognised that challenges faced at a local and organisational level could be lessened through progress at the national level.

Organisational level support

A quality assurance framework or fidelity assessment

The Housing First principles are particularly valuable and it was suggested that Homeless Link could take this further and develop some kind of quality assurance framework or similar to assess the fidelity of Housing First projects.

I think Homeless Link need to have some sort of audit that says, 'Yes, this is Housing First and this isn't.' So that organisations, if they want to set Housing First things up, they've got a guide that they can say, 'This is Housing First, but if you change one of the areas of fidelity to the model, then it's not'.

— Learning session participant

This would help to address the concerns around other types of support being inappropriately badged as Housing First. MHCLG reported that the centrally-funded Housing First pilots will be evaluated using a fidelity assessment. This was said to be crucial as previous projects that have followed these guidelines have been successful.

Adapting the model for particular groups and contexts

It was acknowledged that Housing First has been shown to be successful in various contexts. There was a widespread perception, however, that it would not work for everyone. One way to address this perception is to provide guidance and evidence relating to the effective implementation of Housing First for different types of client. Those who were very familiar with Housing First in particular were interested in this kind of information. Some felt this would help ensure that a balanced picture of Housing First is presented and that the approach was not portrayed as a broad solution to homelessness. The Housing First England project has already begun to address this by providing guidance relating to Housing First and women.

I think probably more specific stuff about different groups that Housing First works with. So, more evidence-based stuff around women, for example. Actually, there is quite a lot of good stuff happening now. I think maybe its bit early to have evaluations and stuff on there that much but, yes, I think guidance around targeting specific groups.

— Learning session participant

There was also a desire for information about project failures and risks, as well as positive examples. As well as the learning generated from understanding when things do not work, this would help counter perceptions that promotion of the approach was somehow unbalanced.

For Housing First England it should be a true picture, not just, 'This is Housing First. These are the principles. Go do it,' but actually, 'There are some risks involved here. We know this has happened in other parts of the world and, therefore, these things need to be borne in mind.' So, it will reduce numbers on the street, absolutely, but where's the risk? What is the risk and what's happening? There is evidence of that, but nobody talks about that.

— Stakeholder interviewee

Given the challenges of funding and accommodation, one respondent suggested guidance on adapting Housing First where it was simply not possible to meet all principles would be helpful.

[Help with] doing Housing First with shared accommodation. I know, that goes against one of the principles, but if that's all you can do in your particular locality, so actually, maybe using some of that resource and having more information on the website I think would be helpful.

— Learning session participant

While there is a need for pragmatism in how the approach is delivered, this suggestion would need careful consideration given that the majority of individuals felt that adherence to the principles was an essential feature of Housing First. Suggesting that Housing First, or something very like it, could be delivered without meeting all the principles would dilute the effectiveness and clarity of messages about what the model is and the role of the principles.

Help convincing landlords

Although the Housing First England project already provides guidance on working with social landlords, a greater emphasis on engaging both private and social landlords would be welcomed. Suggested resources that could potentially help to convince landlords included tailored evidence of the benefits and effectiveness of the approach, and case studies or success stories told from landlords' perspective.

It can be a hard sell, to landlords, whether it's housing association, private, etc, so maybe some examples from landlords talking about their successes in the project to help that selling process.

— Learning session participant

Resources should be provided that specifically address the concerns that landlords are likely to have and what they could expect from a Housing First client that might differ from tenants they usually accommodate.

From a landlord's point of view, in terms of where Homeless Link might want to go in terms of getting those messages out, it's important to communicate to specific groups on this, for me. So, clearly, landlords will have issues around rent arrears, around damage, around antisocial behaviour.

— Stakeholder interview

Wider campaigning and engagement

Continue to be the voice of the sector

Given the praise for the Housing First England project, it was unsurprising that there was strong support for Homeless Link to continue the work and act as the voice of the sector on the issue. It was recognised that a central, independent body adds value and has greater impact not just in providing information and guidance, developing networks and sharing good practice, but also in providing a platform for national advocacy and campaigning on behalf of local and regional level organisations.

Homeless Link have the ability to get those voices heard from smaller providers and larger providers, and I think they act as a really good reference point for the sector. I think they do a lot of good practice guides, they do a lot of community practice events. They have a real good way of getting messages out there, and they're very influential in the sector, as well. They're a really important partnership member, in terms of not only just Housing First, but for the whole Rough Sleepers Initiative moving forward.

— Stakeholder interviewee

As the approach gains recognition and the number of new projects increases, there is a recognised need to continue to support that growth. If the feared move away from Housing First is to be avoided, then ongoing championing of the model at the national level will be important too.

I think they should probably be continuing to support the growth. We would anticipate that the pilots would have a significant impact on how the approach is taken up around the country, and I would expect Housing First England to be there, interpreting the information that comes out of that, and guiding the future expansion of the use of the model.

— Stakeholder interviewee

Housing First as part of the solution

In line with the concern that Housing First could be perceived as *the* model for the future, at the expense of others, some participants suggested that Housing First England should challenge this, and reinforce the notion that Housing First should be complementary to other services rather than a replacement.

Perhaps that's something that Homeless Link maybe could do more around, making the voice that this is only part of the solution. They certainly did that at the conference, but I don't think they do that regularly in the articles and things that they send out.

— Learning session participant

Alternatively, if the position of Homeless Link is that Housing First should be a universally adopted approach, then much more work is needed to demonstrate and persuade stakeholders that this is appropriate and that the model is adaptable to different contexts and works with many different types of client. The information on targeting different groups suggested above should help contribute to this.

Cross-sector engagement and joint campaigning

To secure the long-term future of Housing First there is a need to secure cross-sector support for the model. Homelessness and supporting people with multiple and complex needs, are not issues that could or should be tackled solely by the housing sector.

Homelessness both causes and is caused by a wide variety of problems, including mental and physical ill health, poverty, and substance misuse. The engagement and support of other sectors is vital in any strategy to deal with homelessness. These include criminal justice, health and adult social care.

Housing First isn't a housing funded solution. It needs to have criminal justice, it needs to have health, it needs to have a really collective response around it. How can we get colleagues from social care and how can Homeless Link help us know what they're trying to do to influence cross-departmental work on this.

— Learning session participant

One stakeholder highlighted that the oft-cited success of Finland in eradicating homelessness through Housing First was the result of a national strategy that involved different ministries working together – including finance, to ensure that the scheme had appropriate funding.

The best way to think about it [Housing First in Finland] was that it was a national strategy with different ministries coming together, agreeing that this would be the strategy for at least five years, and then renewed, you know, in perpetuity we hope.

— Stakeholder interviewee

Despite the work done so far, some felt that organisations and authorities could still benefit from close working, both within-sector and across other sectors outside of housing. The networking and peer support elements of Housing First England have been particularly popular. Extending these activities to activity engage other sectors was seen as an important next step. The project is perceived as being successful in raising the profile of Housing First within the housing sector; now the message needs to be taken wider.

Bring cross-sector, more multiple needs on board rather than just housing and homelessness, because I think it's preaching to the converted a little bit.

— Learning session participant

It was also suggested that Homeless Link and the Housing First England project should undertake more joint advocacy and campaigning work alongside other organisations in the housing sector where there is a common cause, such as the need for more affordable housing.

Somebody has to supply the units and I think maybe Crisis is taking over a little bit in that, kind of, campaigning space. It would be nice maybe if Homeless Link and Crisis joined together to make a joint campaign around it.

— Learning session participant

The number of suggestions made by people we spoke to about how the Housing First England project could move on is testament to the interest in the future of the project, and recognise the hard work and progress already made in raising awareness and engaging large numbers of individuals and organisations with the Housing First model. The key challenges facing the future of the model are large, complex and impossible to solve by any one organisation or even the homelessness and housing sectors alone. An increase in cross-sector engagement and working is vital to move the model forward, increase interest and knowledge and explore funding that would secure projects for longer than current short-term pilots.

05. CONCLUSIONS

How has the picture of Housing First in England changed since the start of the project in 2015?

There has been a **marked rise in the increase in Housing First projects across England since the start of the Housing First England project** in 2015, with a peak of 17 new projects in 2017. Perhaps more importantly, awareness of and interest in the model appears to have also increased.

We found **widespread support for the Housing First approach**. The majority of participants saw value in the approach as an alternative way to support those who have struggled to break the cycle of homelessness in traditional services.

To what extent has the Housing First England project contributed to this change?

The Housing First England project engaged a large volume of stakeholders through events, webinars and external meetings since the start of the programme. Not only has this helped to stimulate interest in and knowledge of the approach, participants have been inspired to take action as a result. **Homeless Link and the Housing First England project are now recognised as the ‘go to’ place for information, support and guidance on Housing First**. The network that has been developed around the project and the considerable bank of resources, coupled with helpful and knowledgeable staff, provides valuable information and guidance in an accessible way and all in one place. **Having a central and independent resource on Housing First in England has helped to legitimise the approach by providing a credible and authoritative voice on the subject**.

Although an evaluation of this nature cannot show for certain that the growth in interest in Housing First is due to the Housing First England project, the evidence provides a good indication that **it has made an important contribution and helped drive forward and support the emerging movement**.

How effective has Housing First England been in supporting change, including capturing and sharing learning?

Feedback following events, training and workshops run by HFE was overwhelmingly positive, with particular praise for the staff involved in delivering these. Networking, sharing best practice and hearing the experiences of others were all highly valued. This emphasises how **Housing First England has created a space where networks can grow and learning can be shared.**

Those who were most familiar with Housing First England were highly knowledgeable about the model and its strengths and limitations. They were also acutely aware of the challenges faced by those using, or hoping to use, a Housing First approach. Those who were less familiar tended to have more scepticism, though this was not universal. Most agreed that **the more they learned about Housing First, the greater the appeal.**

Staff in a range of organisations from across the country gave examples of how they have **made use of the online resources and found the various guidance very useful.** The Housing First England resources are helpful not just in building the understanding of service providers, but in engaging external parties such as commissioners and funders with the growing movement. Those who use them clearly have confidence in the quality of the resources and make use of them for writing bids and designing services.

The principles developed by the project were particularly well used and valued. They are seen as an important way to help check and maintain the fidelity of the model. There was general agreement that **the principles are the right ones and that all are needed to deliver a true and effective Housing First project.** The principle of choice and control was seen as particularly important as it distinguishes the approach from other types of intervention and is empowering for clients. It can also one of the hardest to implement given lack of affordable and quality accommodation.

What does the Housing First England project need to do to achieve sustainable systems change after the initial three years?

Despite the positivity of feeling towards the Housing First approach, some expressed frustration at the difficulties still faced by those wishing to provide a Housing First service. It was generally agreed that the evidence base for the effectiveness of Housing First is robust and extensive enough to move towards an integration of the model into mainstream housing support.

There was some concern that Housing First was being promoted as the answer to solving homelessness. Some felt that it should rather be advocated as one of a suite of options available. This appeared to be partly due to a fear about the extent to which support for the approach would be sustained over the longer-term. **Participants would welcome**

more information and guidance on using Housing First with different groups and in different contexts as well as greater discussion of where and for whom the model has not been so successful. This would also help address concerns about the extent to which Housing First is appropriate for a wide range of people with varying needs.

We suggest **Homeless Link consider creating a fidelity assessment or audit**. This could be used by commissioners to ensure that the Housing First projects they fund are genuinely adhering to the principles. A kite-mark or similar could be awarded for Housing First projects independently assessed as meeting the principles. This would help to address concerns that the model may be diluted and its impact reduced if the principles are not followed.

The two biggest challenges facing the future development of Housing First are lack of long-term funding and appropriate and affordable accommodation.

Both of these make achieving the principles of ongoing and flexible support and choice and control more difficult. Funding is still often restricted to limited-term pilots, despite widespread agreement that the model is proven.

Moving beyond pilots and addressing the housing shortage are major challenges. Key to making progress on these is **securing cross-sector support for the approach**. Housing First England should focus on this going forward and build on the good work achieved in developing a comprehensive set of resources and a network of housing support providers. **Evidence of the impact of Housing First on outcomes of interest to other sectors, such as offending and health, could help to engage a wider audience.** Adult social care was highlighted as an important sector to work with, given that the target client group are likely to have needs that require a joint approach.

As a highly regarded and credible ‘voice of the sector’, Homeless Link has a crucial role in advocacy and campaigning for the growth of Housing First and supporting this. Many expressed that they would like to see a continuation of the good work and the successes achieved so far by Housing First England. **Further campaigning, including in collaboration with other organisations with similar aims, is essential to grow cross-sector support and to promote the need for an effective response to the lack of affordable housing.**

APPENDIX 1: ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED

Basis Yorkshire	Kairos Community Trust
Big Society Capital	London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Bradford Council	Medway Council
Cambridgeshire County Council	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
Camden Council	Nightstop Communities Northwest
Canopy Housing	Opportunity Nottingham
Cathedral Archer Project	Phoenix Futures
Changing Lives	Riverside
Cherrytree Support Services	Salvation Army
Chester City Council	Spitalfields Crypt Trust
Coastline Housing	St Basils
Comic Relief	St Mungo's
Crisis Centre Ministries	Standing Together
Elim Connect Centre	Tendring District Council
FEANTSA	Thames Reach
Framework Housing Association	Threshold
Fulfilling Lives Islington and Camden	Torbay Council
Greater London Authority	Triangle Consulting
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	Trinity Homeless Projects
Groundswell	Turning Lives Around
Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust	Westminster City Council
Homeless Link	
Inspiring Change Manchester	
Julian House	