

Exploring the relationship between social landlords and Housing First services

Introduction

“We know there's a housing crisis. We know there's a homelessness crisis. A housing association: there's no one really better placed, I don't think, to be involved in some of the solutions.” Social landlord

Housing First

Housing First is an internationally evidence-based approach that prioritises access to stable accommodation over the requirement for an individual to first address any other support needs they have. It provides intensive, flexible, and open-ended support and existing evidence has shown that it successfully ends homelessness for at least eight out of every ten people across Europe.¹ In England, the housing and funded support are usually provided by separate organisations.

Housing First is underpinned by a core philosophy that is applied across all international Housing First services. In England, this philosophy is built on the principles for Housing First in England:²

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. There is a harm reduction approach

Unlike other supported housing models, individuals supported by Housing First do not need to prove that they are ready for independent housing, and there are no conditions in place, other than a willingness to have, and try to sustain, a tenancy. Besides facilitating access to accommodation, Housing First support services are designed to provide long-term, open-ended and intense support to help people to integrate in their communities and access support for their ongoing needs.

¹ Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2013) The Case for Housing First in the European Union: A Critical Evaluation of Concerns about Effectiveness European Journal of Homelessness, 7(2), 21-41

² Homeless Link, (2016), Housing First in England: the principles.

https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Housing%20First%20in%20England_The%20Principles.pdf

Social landlords

Across much of England the demand for social housing outstrips supply, and so access is limited and often determined by need. Access is typically organised through direct application to a social housing provider, or via the Local Authority. Local authorities usually operate a 'choice-based lettings system' providing access to its own properties and to those of social landlords with which it has allocations agreements.

Housing First clients are usually not represented on Local Authority waiting lists, and can often face rejection from housing providers on the basis of previous arrears or anti-social behaviour. This means that although the mission of social housing is well aligned to Housing First, and the social rented sector could provide a secure, affordable and supportive housing option for people, it can be difficult to access and sustain without specific access agreements and working arrangements. Many social landlords are therefore working on an individual basis with Housing First support services to build these agreements to enable them to provide long-term accommodation and support.

This briefing

This report draws on twenty interviews with Housing First support providers and social landlords from across England to explore how they can work effectively together:

- the process of landlords coming on-board to provide accommodation to this group
- the experience of landlords and Housing First support providers in working together
- the challenges and benefits to both sides.

The report also includes an appendix on the use of Specified Accommodation Status for Housing First tenancies, based on scoping work we undertook (see Appendix 2).

Building partnerships: How Housing First services and social landlords come to work together

"We thought we'd better put our money where our mouth is and identify some properties that we thought could be used for the programme." Social landlord

How do Housing First services and social landlords come together? From the initial stages of developing a new service, to the point of residents moving in to their Housing First tenancy, we explore how social landlords are engaged, how working alliances are formalized, and the challenges recognised and overcome.

No two partnerships are the same: we found that they happen in different ways and at different stages of a service's development. Some landlords are part of the project from its inception while others come on board once a service has been up and running for some time. Amongst those we spoke to, it was common for the support provider or funder of a Housing First service to initiate contact with the landlord, rather than landlord proactively seeking opportunities to provide accommodation for Housing First.

In some cases the reputation of Housing First as a local priority, or as having worked well in other areas in which an RSL operates, made it a simple decision for landlords to work with a Housing First team:

"They [social landlord] had seen that Housing First had worked in other parts of South East England, where they've used Housing First... so they were keen to offer us a few properties." Housing First service

Homeless Link

In other cases an argument had to be made as to why housing stock should be prioritised for this group given that social landlords across many parts of the country do not have enough supply of one-bedroom accommodation to meet local demand.

We talked to services commissioned with an RSL, or RSLs contractually obligated to provide accommodation. Whilst this has great benefits and reflects a strong commitment from RSLs, this alone did not always result in timely and appropriate access to accommodation and could also be the result of a lengthy period of negotiation between the RSL, support provider, and funder.

Building engagement

It was a common experience amongst interviewees that it took time for RSLs to feel confident enough in the Housing First service, and working arrangements with the support team, to commit to providing accommodation. Interviewees talked about bringing landlords in early on in the process so that Housing First was an easier 'sell'. It was important to 'win over' both senior staff members who will ultimately make the commitment to Housing First, as well as operational staff who will be involved in delivering it. These groups need different kinds of reassurances and it is important for the smooth running of any partnership that these are met and ironed out at the beginning of a partnership:

"There were a couple of different stages. I think the more senior managers were quite quick to jump on board because they know that Housing First is kind of a big thing right now. It wasn't very hard to at that stage to talk to people and give people excited about it and tell them what we were about, the support that we offer, just the way that [organisation] works.

"The second stage was the more operational managers. There is definitely more resistance. Obviously our clients are extremely complex, they're aware of that. They were worried that they wouldn't get supported, the support we give was strong. They're worried that their managers or workers didn't have trauma informed knowledge."(Housing First service

Recognising and overcoming challenges

Once an RSL is engaged in a conversation about providing homes for Housing First, a more detailed process often follows before any agreement is reached. This includes discussing perceived additional risks and costs to the landlord and how these will be managed. Participants also identified a number of potential challenges to joint working that required discussion before agreement could be reached. These included gaining an understanding of the kind of support that Housing First workers provide, with a clear need to differentiate Housing First workers from floating support workers. Concerns about the client group and the risk of arrears and ASB (anti-social behaviour) were commonly talked about during these discussions:

"Some people cloak it in other questions but ultimately, are their properties going to get trashed, are they going to be really disruptive to everybody around them, and have I got the resources to manage this?" Housing First service

Being able to reassure RSLs on these issues and how tenancies will be managed is a key part of gaining agreement from landlords to provide accommodation for Housing First:

"We tried to really involve them in the whole development. They came with us to a visit to [Housing First project]. They were terrified about what this might mean for their stock and so forth. To have someone in [area] share about how it was working and how they're making it a success was hugely important to reassure them that we could make it work in [area]." Housing First service

Discussions between Housing First services, RSLs and sometimes also funders were often used to determine how challenges would be responded to and to clarify how Housing First providers and landlords will work together. However, two partnerships had developed particularly innovative ways to mitigate some of the perceived challenges of accommodating Housing First clients including a risk-pooling approach and an insurance-type scheme.

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In the area adopting a risk-pooling approach, the Local Authority who funds Housing First support provides a financial guarantee that cushions the landlord from particular additional costs which may be incurred from accommodating Housing First clients.

“They [Local Authority] guarantee that they will cover any rent shortfalls if there are rent arrears in the first two years. There is something in our service level agreement that says that should, further down the line, an eviction be necessary due to serious antisocial behaviour and that kind of thing, they will cover some legal fees up to, I think, £2,000.” Social Landlord

This offer to share the risk was a key part of this landlord’s decision to come on board and provide accommodation for Housing First:

“I think because this was negotiated so well, with ‘risk’, if you like, being spread across the parties, and obviously the really, really important enhanced support given by [provider], which is really, really fundamental, it was decided, ‘Yes, let’s go for it and have a go’.” Social landlord

Another provider had developed an insurance-type scheme for social landlords; negotiating with their funder to ring-fence some of their budget for particular costs which may be faced by a landlord. This fully costed scheme has been developed through experience of both the concerns that landlords have and the kinds of costs that are likely to be incurred by housing providers. This protected ‘insurance budget’ is often not fully spent and is reinvested into the service, but having it has enabled the Housing First provider to bring landlords on board by being able to respond to their every concern:

“So, it was being able to say to every objection that somebody [social landlord staff] raised to me – ‘Well, what if they disappear? What if they damage the property? What if this?’ – ‘Well, I’ve put some money in the pot, and I can pay you up to this.’” Housing First service

This provider highlighted that it was crucial that RSLs have confidence that the support provider understands what they are asking of a landlord and how they will respond to any issues:

“You’re asking them to change the way they think, change the way they work, change the way they manage, change the way they fund everything. They need to feel that you’ve got it, you’ve thought of absolutely everything, and there is nothing left to chance.” Housing First service

Housing First can also represent a significant change in working practices for social landlords, particularly where it means agreeing to house people who may usually be excluded from their accommodation, or to work in different ways with clients. These processes were about recognising this, and finding ways to move forward that everyone was comfortable with.

Agreeing working practices

As well as having formal arrangements in place to provide reassurance to RSLs on any additional costs they may face, interviewees also highlighted the importance of agreeing how day-to-day working practices will operate. This is particularly the case for any roles in which staff will be asked to vary their usual working practices, or work in partnership with a Housing First support worker. This could be the case for Lettings Officers, asked to conduct a tenancy sign-up in different locations or across multiple appointments, and for Housing Officers being asked to let Housing First workers take the lead on supporting residents.

A variety of strategies were used by participants to meet this need. Some organisations took an assertive approach, whereby they went to a provider with a clear offer of how things will work:

“...sitting down with the local authority but also with some of the RSLs and saying, ‘Look, this is what we’re doing. This is what we envisage about working closely in partnership with you guys, so that it’s quite clear that there is a procedural policy in place for your tenancy management staff or Income, Lettings Officers or ASB’.” Housing First service

Homeless Link

Other providers had approached housing staff with the aim of working together to co-create working protocols:

“It was all build it from the bottom up with them instead of this is what we have to offer, you’re going to be part of this. Everybody seemed to respect that... I think it really made people feel at ease that they actually have control over what they were doing and that we were going to be more help than a problem.” Housing First service

Ensuring that RSLs understand the way that support is provided through Housing First, and how this is different to other forms of supporting people, can be an important part of this process and of establishing expectations:

“One of the things that we’ve established while we’ve been having negotiations with three different housing providers is that they want guarantees on things like, ‘You will provide X amount of support each week’, or, ‘Let’s get this right’. But you can’t ever provide those guarantees, because Housing First isn’t about guarantees in anything other than you will continue to offer that support and you will be continually assessing with the person what that looks like.” Housing First service

This process of agreeing how Housing First providers will work with social landlords was seen as key to getting buy-in from staff. It clarifies expectations on both sides and when done well ensures that everyone understands how Housing First works and their role in supporting tenancies to be successful.

Formalising the partnership

A number of providers had taken further steps to formalise agreed ways to work together. Agreements took two main forms.

- a) Naming the housing provider within the Housing First contract. This could be formalised through pre-contract partnership working, or included in responses to funding bids made by support providers either themselves or as part of a group:

“It was part of the bid [submitted by Housing First service to the Local Authority] that they would need to be council properties, and I think that’s because we have a significantly high problem with PRS.” Housing First service

- b) Using Service Level agreements (SLAs). These SLAs could be co-created between landlord, Housing First provider and funder, and capture this detailed information about the relationship between the housing and support provision. It is possible to have both an SLA and a contractual agreement about who will provide accommodation.

“We’ve got a service-level agreement which we’re going to be signing with three registered providers in the next few weeks. They’re already starting to identify potential properties. So once that’s done they will be onboard. So it is a positive outcome.” Housing First service

Reflecting the very individualised nature of the relationships between RSLs and Housing First services, there were also cases of Housing First services personalising their SLA for each RSL that they work with:

“We altered them [SLAs] slightly per organisation as well. So it wasn’t like it had to be exactly the same, if someone really wanted something a little different and it was reasonable we would just do it.” Housing First service

In summary, this chapter has highlighted the different steps that are undertaken in advance to work through any concerns or working practices that will arise in the partnership between RSLs and Housing First services. It demonstrates that a highly personalised approach that responds to the particular concerns and working practices of RSLs has been effective in gaining agreement to access housing. This process can take time, but has the potential to provide a solid basis for successful partnerships.

Access to Accommodation

RSLs can provide accommodation for Housing First through a number of different mechanisms. Theoretically, social housing is available to all Housing First residents through open applications to housing providers or through the choice-based lettings system which Local Authorities operate for eligible residents. Some Housing First providers do use these routes, however, registering for choice-based lettings requires advocating for the resident to be recognised as in priority need for accommodation, and it can also be a number of years until clients reach the top of the waiting list and an appropriate property become available.

Many people supported by Housing First may be excluded from housing providers' standard lettings policies on the basis of anti-social behaviour or past rent arrears. Access to housing through these routes makes it more challenging to address these issues and obtain flexibility. For these reasons, many Housing First providers and RSLs needed to find arrangements outside of the usual pathway to ensure access to housing for clients:

"Everybody is an exception [to Lettings policy]. So, yes, we have had to look outside of existing pathways for people to make exceptions to prioritise this group of people. Some people – and we had to start slowly, you know; it took us a year to get off the ground – we had to say to landlords, 'Just give us one property'. 'No.' 'Just one.'" Housing First service

As such many Housing First providers and RSLs work together to create alternative routes into their accommodation, beyond those available to the general public.

This chapter explores what some of these routes look like, and identified some of the operational challenges that services have experienced and how these have been overcome.

Designing a pathway

The pathways that were created to access RSL accommodation varied between the services that we spoke to. Many RSLs had guaranteed a certain number of units of accommodation to Housing First services, with Lettings teams and Housing First workers working together to identify appropriate individuals as properties become available.

Local Authorities in some cases were able to influence a wider pool of landlords to make properties available to this group. We heard about one Local Authority who had guaranteed that a certain proportion of available properties through their allocations system (including Local Authority stock as well as Housing Association properties with agreed allocations policies) would be made available to Housing First:

"They've skimmed off a percentage of properties, that come through to the allocation scheme, and made them available to the Housing First project, which is a really big commitment." Housing First service

We heard from Housing First providers who lease properties from a Local Authority or a social landlord and then provide tenancies to those on the caseload themselves. In some cases this arrangement was specified in the service contract:

"We had to be a registered certified landlord [specified by the LA tender]. We had that status. And basically, we lease a property from them for two years. They provide us with a grant that's spread over the two years per property." Housing First service)

This arrangement reduces risk for landlords, but can also provide less security to residents than a standard RSL tenancy, which may be a secure tenancy ('tenancy for life'). There are cases within the leasehold arrangement where after a set period of time there is an option for the tenancy to be transferred back to the stock holder; giving the Housing First resident greater security of tenure at this point:

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“Ideally, you know, what we would like to see happen is, that over the two years, they take on the responsibility for paying the bills. And, eventually yes, we would sign the lease back to the council, and they would become a council tenant.” Housing First service

Operational challenges

Even after relationships had been built with landlords and pathways to accessing accommodation agreed, this research highlights a range of operational challenges that can act as practical barriers to individuals being given the keys to a home.

Availability of appropriate accommodation

The first and most basic of these is availability of the kind of properties needed. Most people supported by Housing First are seeking one-bedroom properties as larger properties are unaffordable due to the bedroom tax. Due to the lack of social housing in many areas, simply waiting for the right kind of property to become available can take time:

“I’ve got pledged for in excess of 10 flats but, as I say, turnover is so slow that I just haven’t got them.” Housing First service

Related to this lack of available accommodation, Housing First clients accessing social housing often do not have a high degree of choice about where they live. They are often able to refuse properties made available to them, but then have to wait for another more suitable property to become available. As one Housing First provider put it:

“There is a certain amount of choice in that people can obviously say no, but then they need to just wait until whatever else is available. There is no obligation for them to take it, but they’re not choosing from a range of options available at any one point. There is one option available at any one point.” Housing First service

There can also be issues with matching properties to people; where RSLs hold stock may not always be where a person would like, and would be safe, to live³.

Accessing housing: risk and delays

Some Housing First services also experienced operational challenges when seeking to access the housing that was pledged to them. It was common to experience delays between making an agreement with the landlord and housing becoming available, during which various obstacles were navigated. These obstacles were often related to concerns about appropriateness of properties for Housing First residents and what impact clients might have on a particular neighbourhood, block or street:

“We did struggle as everyone does to get any housing for a while. People were scared to, they were trying to just offer us things that were not around anybody, that there was no chance that anybody would get in an argument over it but after a period of time we explained to them that we would go through each client and make sure that the person was very well suited for the area.” Housing First service

Delays were also experienced by services who on receiving the offer of properties found their clients were then refused as applicants usually due to concerns about their past behaviour:

³ See Homeless Link, (2018), Understanding the implementation of Housing First in England.

<https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Understanding%20the%20implementation%20of%20Housing%20First%20in%20England.pdf>

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“If someone's been excluded by [housing provider] in the past, even if they're coming through the Housing First route, they won't accommodate them, despite the fact that this is a model of support that's very different to a general tenancy.” Housing First service

Depending on the agreed route into housing, it could also be the case that the prospective landlord has much more information about a Housing First client than they would about another prospective resident. Despite the provision of intensive support from Housing First workers, some services reflected that the additional information provided to some landlords may mean that Housing First clients appear to be 'riskier' than other applicants to social housing:

“They've been given a far greater amount of access to information about that person's personal situation than, perhaps, would normally be the case with a landlord. They have been aware of the immediate history of that particular individual and the risks that they might present to an area.” Housing First service

One provider reflected that due to the trauma experienced by some clients they can find the viewing and sign up process difficult and their first meeting with the housing provider can be difficult. In this case, the Housing First service has responded by offering trauma informed care training to a wide range of RSL staff. The training aims to support staff to better understand the presentation of some Housing First residents and to explore ways of working with people who have experienced trauma.

Although there are significant barriers, this research found many example of RSLs and Housing First support providers working together to overcome these to provide high quality services and homes. This was often achieved through strong partnership and communication between both parties, and a willingness to be open, honest and flexible. We explore below the important roles that flexibility and supporting culture change play in successful partnerships.

Working together: taking up support and exploring additional costs

What happens once a Housing First resident moves into a property? We explore below issues understood by Housing First England as key concerns of RSLs in considering whether to make accommodation available to Housing First services. Do residents take up the offer of support once they have been given the keys to their home? When compared to a typical new social tenant, are there different maintenance or support costs to accommodate a Housing First Resident?

Do residents take up the offer of support?

Choice and control about the support received are two of the key principles of Housing First. Housing and support are separate, meaning that if an individual refuses support they do not automatically lose their accommodation.⁴ Understandably this can be a source of anxiety for landlords, who may be concerned about individuals with high support needs living in their accommodation without support. However in reality this was not a common experience:

“A couple of times people have said to me, ‘I know I don't need to see you and I can still stay here’, and I think, ‘I've shot myself in the foot there’, but we haven't had anybody [refuse support once they move in].” Housing First service

⁴ Homeless Link, The Principles of Housing First in England for more detail. Available at: <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/The%20Principles%20for%20Housing%20First.pdf>

Two factors emerged from our interviews as important in ensuring the offer of support is taken up.

- a) An active engagement approach** (principle number five⁵) is key to ensure that people continue to engage with support provided by the service. Active engagement turns the idea of engaging with a service on its head; putting the onus on engagement with the provider rather than the client to ensure that they are working in a way that people are able to engage with:

“I get asked this a lot by commissioners and various people who don’t really understand it because they’ve not delivered it – is ‘how many people disengage?’, and I’m flummoxed by the question because to me, we do the engaging, not them.”(Housing First service

The stakeholders we spoke to shared what this looks like in practice. When someone refuses an offer of support, the Housing First worker will work with colleagues to identify why this might be and what steps they might take to increase engagement:

“We try and think about why the person’s here seeing us so we definitely understand what is happening. Does he just not have a need or is there something else going on? Is it trauma, something else confusing that? A different need. So we try and be really thoughtful about understanding why they might say no to what we can do about it.” Housing First service

Housing First teams will continue working with individuals who have disengaged from support; finding new ways of interacting and continuing to offer support. Housing First services do not exclude people as a result of disengagement and where people do disengage from support this is often temporary with people returning to the service when they need it:

“On the very rare occasion that she really needs help, she has come back.” Housing First service

- b) Pre-tenancy engagement:** Interviewees also identified that building a strong relationship between a Housing First worker and client before the tenancy starts is key to people continuing to access and accept support:

“I was a bit wary of that because when we first started off with the women offenders- but it has never happened, and that is because of the importance we put on the relationship.” Housing First service

Where Housing First providers have accommodated people before a relationship has been built, this can risk engagement with support in the long term:

“We actually ended up supporting a few people that the Housing First workers had no relationship with and no understanding with at all, just based upon some rather high pressure referrals from partner agencies who were quite desperate. What that meant was that our workers didn’t really know the clients and the clients didn’t really know the workers. There is one particular individual who has never really recovered from that.” Housing First service

Additional maintenance and support costs

We asked interviewees about whether landlords face greater maintenance or support costs for Housing First residents when compared with other tenants accessing their accommodation through usual routes. This question is important because it indicates whether landlords should be prepared for additional resources to accommodate people supported by Housing First, and how these might be paid for. This is particularly relevant to the question of whether accommodation for Housing First should be classified as Specified Accommodation (see Appendix 2).

⁵ Homeless Link, The Principles of Housing First in England for more detail. Available at: <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/The%20Principles%20for%20Housing%20First.pdf>

Maintenance

Many landlords commit to providing a higher standard of accommodation for Housing First residents. This could include painting properties, providing flooring and some white goods. This one off cost was not considered significant and was appreciated by both landlords and Housing First providers as an important way to support the transition into housing and to enable the new resident to make their property a home.

“These people have an enhanced standard, so everything is decorated throughout and it's carpeted, so that when they move in, it starts to already feel like a home... There is a financial cost as well to doing that, so we're providing the homes and some additional financial input as well.” Social landlord

“They were furnished, you know, which we wouldn't do generally on a social rented tenancy, but we felt it was important to obviously furnish the tenancy to get them moving really, so, it felt like a home.” Social landlord

Besides this one-off cost, other maintenance costs were recouped through the usual routes when they arose and as such did not pose any additional costs to the landlord:

“We've had a couple of broken windows. They [the tenants] have repaid. It's their responsibility. They pay for it, or the support organisations have got the windows fixed quickly, and then come up with an arrangement. But they've cost us no more than any other tenant.” Social landlord

Support and associated costs

The picture was more mixed when it came to whether landlords incurred additional support costs accommodating Housing First residents. One group of landlords recognised that the profile of people reaching the front of the queue for social housing through choice-based lettings is often not very different to that of Housing First residents. As more is usually known about Housing First residents, and they have access to intensive support, this can make it an 'easier' tenancy to manage:

“From a housing perspective when it works it is less work for us, because it takes away pretty much all of the housing officer role and moves that on, in a nice way. It's not that we completely remove all of our obligations, but it moves a lot of those from that first point resolution onto the support services that are working alongside the Housing First clients.” Social landlord

Other providers reported spending a considerable amount more time and resource providing support to Housing First residents than they would to other residents. This can be because landlords have taken on a greater role in the Housing First project locally and so make a decision to go beyond offering accommodation to clients:

“Yes, definitely [have provided more support to HF residents]. I think it has more been from the co-ordination point of view. In terms of dealing with the other agencies, making sure the planned visits are there, and just making sure... because the two chaps we're talking about have not had a fixed address for many, many years.” Social landlord

In other cases, additional costs arose from landlords having taken the decision to vary their working practices in order to better support the ethos and principles of Housing First. Landlords described additional tasks related to managing neighbourhood tensions, as well as varying their practice to work in a harm reduction way according to Housing First principles. These practices were considered more resource intensive than business as usual.

These variations in working practices appear to be related to the relationship between the support provider and landlord and to how the service had been organised locally. Although it seems very likely that Housing First residents would benefit from their landlord being more flexible and working in line with the principles, further exploration is needed to understand the ways in which residents benefit from particular variations in practice. There is also a need to explore how additional costs are to be funded in situations where the landlords play an enhanced role in the service.

Key elements for success: flexible working practice & culture change

Two elements highlighted throughout the interviews as key to effective joint working were shifting the staff culture around Housing First, and being willing to flex, and challenge, existing working practice. These key characteristics are explored below.

Flexible working

“If we stuck rigidly to our lettings policy, then we wouldn’t have housed a single one of them... as a sector we have to have more person-centric, person-based flexibility within our policies to enable us to even start the journey.” Social landlord

The willingness and ability to flex usual working practices was identified as a key characteristic of successful partnerships between Housing First teams and social landlords.

Housing First services stressed the importance of being flexible and personalising their approach with each RSL they were working with. Being able to adapt agreements to align with the working culture, and tailoring approaches to individual personalities, was key to gaining the initial buy-in that would eventually provide housing.

“It may be that you go to team meetings- or we’ve had a panel approach in some services where problems can be aired and commitments can be agreed and witnessed, if you like – so different arrangements work for different providers, and different scenarios, but in every one of those examples, it’s relationships, isn’t it?” Housing First service

During the course of defining working practices, and in day-to-day dealings with residents, it is RSLs who offered a sometimes significant amount of flexibility to make arrangements successful. This flexibility involved not just giving tenancies to those who may usually be excluded, but also taking on whole new ways of working to sustain tenancies where issues arose that would typically put residents at risk of losing their home. This attests to the real commitment of some RSLs to work together with Housing First services to support clients.

A number of examples were provided about how social landlords had flexed their policies to enable Housing First residents to access tenancies. This often meant landlords taking on greater risk; either perceived risk of anti-social behaviour or financial risk through practices such as waiving deposits. This was noted and appreciated by Housing First providers:

“I mean most of our clients can’t afford a deposit. So we have to talk to the housing providers into waiving the deposit or significantly shrink it and then we pay for it. So that’s a cost and a risk.” Housing First service

Processes were also simplified, or adapted, for Housing First clients. One example given was adapting a sign up process that had initially been challenging for people to engage with. It is agreed that the Housing First worker can complete part of it on the landlord’s behalf, with contact with the social landlord taking place over shorter and multiple time periods and carried out in flexible locations.

“They can send out a lot of the paperwork beforehand then we can start going through that first with them before they go to sign up, so that when they go for the sign up that’s sorted.” Housing First service

Another significant flex to ‘business as usual’ was seen in the way that landlords dealt with anti-social behaviour. One example given was of domestic violence cases in which the tenant is a victim of domestic violence perpetrated by someone not registered at their address. These cases are often treated as ASB by

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social landlords which in ordinary circumstances may lead the resident to be evicted. In the case given, the landlord had agreed to support managed moves in these circumstances keeping the victim safe and enabling them to remain housed:

“Ordinarily what might happen in the sector is that that person would be seen to be guilty of ASB, not managing their tenancy correctly, they might be served notice, they might be evicted, and with Housing First what we’re saying is why are punishing this person for that person’s behaviour? And so, we do managed moves, which is much less traumatic for everybody and you don’t get evictions and your permanent offer of keeping a roof over somebody’s head, you’re able to honour.” Housing First service

Taken together these flexibilities amount to significant movement in the social housing sector to meet the needs of this particular client group. They are great examples of the sector working to support Housing First and highlight what can be achieved through positive partnership work.

Culture Change

“It’s quite a big cultural shift for them to be housing these tenants, even though they’re housing association, you know? They’ve always gone into their supported provision, or the hostels, and this is quite a big shift.” Social landlord

Supporting culture change came up time and again in interviews with both Housing First services and RSLs. In a similar way that Housing First has been seen as a shift in practice for the homelessness sector, so too can it be for the social rented sector. We have seen that landlords may work flexibly in terms of their lettings, tenancy deposit and ASB policies in order to accommodate Housing First residents and that these changes can amount to a significant shift from ‘business as usual’. This was identified by participants as a significant culture change that required buy in at the start of the project, along with being continually reinforced and embedded.

Respondents highlighted two groups where a cultural shift had been necessary for partnerships between social landlords and Housing First providers to run smoothly.

- a) **Decision makers:** role-holders who would decide whether the organisation would commit properties for Housing First, or agree in principle to flex any of their policies for this client group. As we have already seen, this can be especially challenging where the decision represents taking on greater financial risk for the organisation and occurs in a context of high demand for properties.

“I always say it’s a hard sell...[but] the reality is, explaining that, you know, it works. These are people, they just need to be given a realistic opportunity. Social landlords have a social conscience and want to help. It’s just, it’s against all the principles they’ve worked with historically so it is a massive cultural change.” Housing First provider

- b) **Operational staff:** those who make the day to day decisions and will either adhere to the agreed way of working with Housing First, or revert to business as usual. Where RSLs or Housing First providers had not taken the time to ensure that staff were bought into Housing First and different ways of working, obstacles often arose:

“Our senior management are really gung-ho. “Let’s do this. This is to the core of our social values. This is exactly what we should be doing.” But it’s the day-to-day workers. Maybe it’s the people that are working at the coalface that are more reticent about it.” Social landlord

“Because you’re managing 30,000 homes or whatever, and it’s very difficult to think about the five Housing First tenancies, and, you know, you’ve got a specific policy that just applies to those five guys. So, it’s making sure that culturally the guys on the ground have those practice principles and know that that can happen, and there’s not some committee up the line that is going to block that from the internal policies within the organisation really.” Social landlord

Homeless Link

Where the importance of culture change was recognised, both social landlords and Housing First services were doing a range of things to support housing staff to work alongside Housing First on an ongoing basis, including:

- Providing training on trauma informed practice to RSL staff.
- Internal advocacy to promote Housing First to ensure staff are fully informed about the evidence-base for the approach and the organisation's involvement. This included using events such as organisational conferences as forums for promoting Housing First and presenting the positive impacts that the partnership is having:

"For us, also, it's been about talking about it and making sure that we really do have the right advocates for the scheme in place as well, so talking about it really positively to the rest of our team." Housing First service

- Showing the success of Housing First, both in the organisation itself as well as an approach more generally

"I think it's our job really, is to break down that stigma within our own organisation. That's what we are working hard to try and do. The only way we can do that is to do more and show more success." Social landlord

Externalities – challenges

This section explores three externalities that pose real challenges to RSLs and Housing First services working together:

- supply of appropriate accommodation for this client group
- Universal Credit
- short term nature of funding for Housing First services.

Supply of accommodation

Housing First residents tend to need one-bedroom accommodation and some may have other specific needs, such as requiring level-access or being unable to live in a specific location, which restrict the pool of properties available to them. The shortage of affordable homes is a nation-wide issue, and with many RSLs having standing commitments to provide a certain number of properties to the Local Authority and other local schemes, some providers reported that there were simply not enough 'spare' properties to offer Housing First. This was cited as an absolute barrier to some RSLs engaging in conversations with Housing First services:

"I have heard... 'With all these priorities, there are no properties left for me to offer to the general waiting list'." Housing First service

In other cases, one-bedroom accommodation had been found, but due to high demand was available in locations which were not always appropriate for clients. Potential issues relating to the neighbourhood were not always flagged up-front. This meant Housing First workers learned only when issues arose that a property was not appropriate for their client:

"We didn't find out about it [that the properties were former crack houses] until a lot later, because of neighbours really. The council didn't tell us. And all it takes really is one person to come looking for drugs and they can set the whole thing off again. We think that that's what's happened. It's really not been helpful for the client." Housing First service

Homeless Link

It was frequently the case that despite both the Housing First provider and RSL being committed to the idea of choice of location, this was challenging in reality as the pool of available properties is so small:

“There is a certain amount of choice in that people can obviously say no, but then they need to just wait until whatever else is available. There is no obligation for them to take it, but they’re not choosing from a range of options available at any one point. There is one option available at any one point. It’s whether it’s suitable or not.” Housing First service

These issues around supply of one-bedroom properties mean that even where strong partnerships exist and RSLs are willing to provide homes for Housing First it can be very challenging to find appropriate properties at the times that people need them. We have seen that this can result in lack of choice, provision of inappropriate accommodation, or lengthy waiting times that risk individuals’ recovery.

Universal Credit

Claiming Universal Credit could also be a challenge for the way that RSLs work with Housing First services. Under Universal Credit landlords no longer automatically receive rent for a property, with residents receiving the housing element of Universal Credit directly, unless an Alternative Payment Arrangement (APA) is in place. Housing First services had often been successful in putting APAs in place, and their concerns more often related to the length of time that it takes for a Universal Credit claim to come through:

“We think it doesn’t really work for either the clients or the landlords. We have had some good experiences where it’s been turned around quite fast, but generally it takes a while for the landlords, and I think landlords and clients would have concerns about that.” Housing First service

That previous arrears can be automatically deducted from a Universal Credit payment was also an issue in this context. Many Housing First residents have not accessed services for long periods of time and when they begin a new claim they may have outstanding debts deducted that can significantly reduce the amount of money they receive:

“Another issue is where tenants have been off-grid for a long time and maybe not making any benefit claims and what have you for quite some time. All of a sudden, when they come back on-grid and make these applications, we have things like ancient fines coming up, court fines, taking money from the Universal Credit directly.” Social landlord

Up to 30% of a Universal Credit standard allowance can be used to automatically repay specific debts, having a significant impact on the money available to residents to settle into a new home.

Short term nature of funding

The final challenge considered here is posed by the short-term nature of funding for Housing First support. It is common for Housing First services to receive relatively short term funding, even where there is a commitment to the service locally.⁶ Homeless Link’s Picture of Housing First in England revealed that 1-2 years was the most common funding period for Housing First services in 2017, although many services had had contracts renewed, with 38% being in operation for more 2+ years.⁷

The short-term nature of support funding can act as a barrier to RSLs providing homes as they have no guarantee that support for these vulnerable residents will continue when a contract ends. Concerns about what will happen into the future can deter them from providing accommodation:

⁶ Homeless Link, 2020, Scaling up local Housing First Services (video):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nt_5s3pkmY8&feature=youtu.be

⁷ Homeless Link, 2018, The Picture of Housing First in England. Available at:

<https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/The%20picture%20of%20Housing%20First%20in%20England.pdf>

“We work really intensively, I think they’re really reassured by that, but then we work for short periods because we have short periods of funding, so I think they’re thinking, ‘Hang on, who’s going to look after these people in a year’s time?’” Housing First service

These challenges will not be solved by Housing First services or social landlords alone. They require significant change in the ways that we invest in housing, fund services, and administer welfare benefits. Services will need to continue to navigate these challenges as best they can, whilst supporting change and evidencing the impact of the current status quo.

Summary and lessons learned

“We know there's a housing crisis. We know there's a homelessness crisis. A housing association: there's no one really better placed, I don't think, to be involved in some of the solutions.” Social landlord

This research has highlighted the ways in which these partnerships are put into practice, and what measures social landlords and Housing First services can take together to provide homes for Housing First clients which align with the principles of Housing First. This can take time, but the benefits can be long lasting.

There is a spectrum of partnership working between RSLs and Housing First services, with an agreement to provide homes outside of usual pathways on one end; and new pathways plus changes to working policies and practices and input of additional resources to meet the needs of these residents at the other. Every place on this scale is a commitment for an RSL and identifying where each partnership should sit needs to be discovered and agreed by both parties.

Throughout our interviews there was a strong message about the importance of bringing everyone in the organisation on-board, from senior staff members to frontline staff. Both RSLs and Housing First services have a role to play in supporting this culture change, including potentially bringing staff on visits to other services and providing training around relevant practices. Supporting this organisational culture change was a constant process, and one of the key challenges in developing and maintaining positive partnerships.

Even where agreements have been made and both parties are committed to these agreements, access to accommodation can remain a real challenge. There is a nation-wide lack of affordable one-bedroom accommodation and this can result in lengthy waiting times for Housing First clients.

In practice, RSLs often do more than provide access to homes. Many flex their policies to enable tenancies to continue when issues arise and some providers have identified a need to work in a more person-centred and trauma-informed way across the board. Where RSLs do provide additional support or enhanced property standards they can find that it costs more to house Housing First clients. This needs to be taken into consideration as agreements are made about how partnerships between individual RSLs and Housing First services will work, and there are questions to be asked about how this is most appropriately funded.

“Things are dealt with a lot quicker on the Housing First. That’s why I go back to when it works well, it works brilliantly. Really useful to a housing association.” Social landlord

Recommendations: practice

1. Build relationships and understanding

Trust and a shared understanding appear to be the bedrock of effective Housing First partnerships. Local authorities and service providers should take time to build relationships with housing provider staff at all levels to ensure strategic and operational buy-in to Housing First. This should include:

- providing, or jointly gathering, information about the experiences and successes of Housing First locally or in other areas
- raising awareness of the approach and increasing understanding of the client group
- taking time to address concerns and exploring perceived challenges

To overcome potential operational challenges, housing providers should work internally to raise awareness of Housing First and the organisational commitment to it. This may include identifying appropriate training and support to upskill staff.

2. Partnerships: agree roles and remits

Allow adequate time to negotiate the partnership and agree roles and remits. This should include:

- determining operational working practices between the support and housing staff so that the services provided are coordinated and aligned to the key principles of Housing First.
- agreeing how identified risks will be mitigated and addressed; including the use of innovative solutions such as an 'insurance scheme' or 'risk-pooling approach'.
- determining whether the partnership will be formalised through a contract or service level agreement.

3. Work flexibly to deliver homes

Social landlords have an important role to play in provision of Housing First but it requires flexibility and commitment to a person-centred approach. Considerations include:

- changes to lettings, tenancy deposit and anti-social behaviour policies and procedures
- provision of furnishings and fittings to better meet the needs of those requiring Housing First.
- how a property will be matched to the individual's needs and circumstances. A level of transparency is required about the needs of the individual and the characteristics of the property and neighbourhood. This information should be used to determine suitable property offers rather than to exclude people based on their support needs.
- How support staff will establish relationships with individuals from the outset, eg via a period of engagement. Developing trust, along with taking an active-engagement approach in the long-term, reduces the likelihood that a client will disengage or experience significant issues in their tenancy.

Recommendations: policy

There are some intractable challenges that RSLs and Housing First services face in working together. Any practical changes need backing up by addressing some of the systemic issues which currently limit the full potential that Social Landlords can play in Housing First:

At a national level:

1. Commit long-term funding for the support services needed to enable 16,500 Housing First tenancies over the current Government term. Government should drive the Housing First agenda by providing a long-term commitment to fund support for those receiving a Housing First offer, along with a broader commitment to funding floating support for those who are at risk of homelessness already living in tenancies.

Long-term commitments will give many more social landlords the assurance needed to work with Housing First and encourage local authorities to embed high-fidelity provision. In recognition of the crucial role played by non-homelessness providers in delivering Housing First, commitments should be cross-departmental in order to facilitate effective multi-agency collaboration at the local level.

2. Ensure there is a supply of suitable homes to meet the scale of need for Housing First and wider housing-led provision to tackle homelessness. This should include funding commitments to rapidly increase the supply of housing available to people moving on from homelessness, including exploring options for tenure conversion and market acquisition to boost the supply of one bed social rent homes. Access to the private rented sector should be improved by making additional funding available to local authorities, implementing a national rent deposit guaranteed scheme and making essential reforms to the welfare system.

At a local level:

- Commissioners, social landlords and their partners should work through housing and homelessness partnerships to understand the scale of need locally and agree an allocation of tenancies for commissioned Housing First services. Local allocation policies and systems should be reviewed and any punitive blanket bans on those with past records of substance misuse, offending, rent arrears, etc should be removed
- Create social/local lettings agencies which can identify, inspect, maintain, lease and/or manage properties from the socially rented sector(s);

Appendix 1: Methodology

Nineteen interviews were conducted between September and December 2019 with Housing First providers and registered providers of social housing (RSLs) accommodating people across England.

All services known to Housing First England, and all RSLs known by Housing First England to provide accommodation were invited to participate in this research. Additional RSLs were identified through snowball sampling, mostly through contacts of the Housing First services that participated in interviews. Colleagues with expert knowledge from both the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing also advised us in this research.

Sample

This research included 19 interviews with:

- 13 Housing First services providing support only
- 1 Housing First service providing support, and acting as landlord by leasing properties from a local authority or social landlord and then letting these to Housing First residents.
- 5 RSLs. We did not speak to stock holding Local Authorities as part of this research, but did speak to Housing First services who were working with Local Authorities providing housing to clients.

Appendix 2: Specified Accommodation Status

The question of whether Specified Accommodation Status (SAS) is appropriate for Housing First is often raised by policymakers and those who are involved in delivering Housing First across the country. Homeless Link spoke to 20 stakeholders from the housing and homelessness sector to explore if, and how, SAS was being used for properties accommodating Housing First clients.

Specified Accommodation

To be categorised as Specified Accommodation Status, according to the Housing Benefit and Universal Credit (Supported Accommodation) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, accommodation must be:

- Exempt accommodation:⁸
 - Government-funded temporary accommodation for people “... without a settled way of life ... with a view to assisting them to lead a more settled life.”
 - Accommodation provided by a non-metropolitan county council in England⁹, a housing association, a registered charity or voluntary organisation, in conjunction with care, support or supervision, or
- Accommodation provided by a relevant body¹⁰, where the claimant has been admitted in order to meet a need for, and receive care, support or supervision; or
- Accommodation provided by a local authority or a relevant body to the claimant because the claimant has left the home as a result of domestic violence; or
- Local authority owned hostels where residents receive care, support or supervision.

⁸ s30 Jobseekers Act 1995

⁹ s1 Local Government Act 1972

¹⁰ Council for a county in England for each part of whose area there is a district council; housing association; registered charity; or voluntary organisation

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The level of care, support, or supervision required to make a claim is not detailed in regulation, but case law has qualified it to mean ‘more than trifling’ or ‘more than minimal’; it is likely that Housing First residents will always meet this threshold since the service is aimed at those who have experienced multiple disadvantage and require the intensive support offered by Housing First.

In order to understand whether Specified Accommodation Status is a good fit for Housing First, we explored whether additional costs exist for social landlords accommodating Housing First residents and what the wider implications would be of adopting a general principle that accommodation for Housing First should be Specified.

Key conclusions

Stakeholder practice and views as to whether Specified Accommodation Status should be used by social landlords providing Housing First are mixed.

Benefits of using SAS were seen as:

- Helps manage and cover additional costs incurred through accommodating Housing First residents (ie via the additional intensive housing management for refurbishment, maintaining facilities, responding to ASB)¹¹;
- Offers social landlords assurance, and hence manage risks, that additional costs would be covered
- Acts as an important incentive and recognition of the additional input that landlords might be expected to make for a Housing First services to be effective.

Drawbacks and reservations when using SAS:

- Specified Accommodation Status was not seen as necessary in order for a social landlord to provide accommodation for Housing First and for this to work effectively. There were other routes to covering costs and managing risk.
- It could undermine long term affordability i.e. once clients transition to general needs tenancy, or their take up of ‘support’ tapers off
- There is a need for better accreditation/monitoring to ensure that Housing First is being properly provided in line with the Housing First Principles to ‘validate’ the SAS. This comes in a context of an increased number of providers claiming exempt status without providing adequate support services.¹²
- It risks creating a two tier playing field for Housing First, as similar levels of housing benefit cannot be claimed in the private rented sector.

Given our knowledge that Housing First operates quite differently across the country, this is an issue which there is reluctance to apply a blanket statement. However, it is our view that Specified Accommodation has a specific purpose and cannot and should not be seen as a mechanism to plug the gap in support funding for Housing First, nor be relied on as an incentive for social landlords to be involved in its delivery.

RSLs are able to provide accommodation for Housing First without Specified Accommodation Status, and this may also be true at scale. Our research above has highlighted the ways Housing Associations are involved in Housing First, and the positive working practices that have developed.

We need a much clearer understanding of the full costs of delivering Housing First, including those costs to landlords to identify how Housing First could operate without the need for the extra capacity provided by Specified Accommodation Status.

¹¹ It is clear in legislation that IHM can be claimed for tenancy management costs only, and not to cover the cost of support. This is important for Housing First as it means that it cannot be used to contribute to, or to replace, the support provided by Housing First workers.

¹² <https://www.commonwealhousing.org.uk/unregulated-exempt-accommodation>



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance, and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

Let's end homelessness together

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