



HOUSING FIRST WALES

PRINCIPLES

**DISCUSSION, CONTEXT
AND GOOD PRACTICE**



INTRODUCTION

Housing First is a recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that is focused on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into a settled home, while providing person-centred, multi-agency support for as long as it is needed. The model has been most successful with people with chronic and complex support needs, for whom traditional models of support have failed.

Housing First was developed in New York in the 1990s, primarily by community psychologist Sam Tsemberis. Tsemberis found that providing housing to vulnerable people who were living on the streets, without the kinds of preconditions usually associated with homelessness services, had a hugely beneficial impact on their lives.

Over the years, robust international evidence has proven how effective Housing First can be, with the model rolled out across many countries in Europe. Finland was an early adopter of Housing First, with the model being credited as a key factor in significantly reducing the level of homelessness in the Nordic country.

Housing First is based on a set of principles that underpin the model and make it so effective, leading to strong tenancy sustainment internationally, which has been proven over decades. By effectively implementing Housing First in Wales, we have a real chance to help people access and maintain accommodation for the long term – people who have, in some cases, spent years sleeping rough and living with co-occurring trauma, mental health and/or substance use issues.

The Housing First Wales Network, a group of stakeholders who have varied roles in delivering the model locally and nationally, developed a set of Wales-specific principles in 2018. These were based on the principles established by Homeless Link and FEANTSA, but reflected the Welsh context. Additional principles were included, focused on multi-agency partnerships and psychologically-informed approaches.

This set of principles has served Wales well. A majority of local authorities now have some level of Housing First provision, with – at the time of writing – tenancy sustainment averages across the country of around 91%. Several projects have undergone the accreditation process that is also unique to Wales.

Over recent years, as more Housing First schemes have been developed and delivered, our understanding of how the principles work in practice has evolved. We have had incredibly useful conversations within the Network as projects have matured, challenges have arisen, and interpretation has been debated. In addition, the external environment and policy context in which Housing First operates has changed significantly, both during and following the pandemic.

In 2023, the Network agreed to review the principles for Wales, establishing a task and finish group to carefully consider each principle in detail, as well as engaging with people who have used Housing First services. We are very grateful to everyone who contributed their views, experience and expertise to this process.

The revised principles are set out in this document, accompanied by guidance on self-evaluation scoring, quotes from people with lived experience, evidence that would be considered as part of the accreditation process, and an insight into the considerations and good practice that influenced the principles.



THE RIGHT TO A GOOD QUALITY HOME

People have a right to a home that is affordable, secure, habitable, physically and culturally adequate, with access to services. People are prioritised for housing and helped to find a home as quickly as possible. Access to housing is not conditional, people have choice about where they live, and housing options are dispersed across communities.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

0

Housing is not affordable, secure, habitable and adequate. Accommodation options are restricted, people do not have choice about where they live, and/or multiple Housing First clients are congregated in a single building or group of buildings. People have to commit to treatment, engaging with support, or to changing their lifestyle, in order to access accommodation.

3

Housing is affordable, suitable, secure, habitable and adequate. The right home is provided as quickly as is possible. Accommodation options are dispersed across the community, and located according to client choice. People can access accommodation regardless of circumstance and current or historical engagement with treatment or support.

"I think people should have support and housing straight away, no waiting. I was told I would be waiting 15 years and thought wow, I've got no home. But then Housing First took me off the streets, gave me a beautiful flat and support with everything I needed. Housing First. WOW. Totally changed my life. There's not enough space in this expanding universe to fit enough thank-yous in for Housing First."

- A client, highlighting the value of the right home being found as quickly as possible

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service specification documents
- A map showing the geographic spread of properties available or being used for Housing First
- Applications/referrals demonstrating choice of properties and geographical area
- Email exchanges discussing client choice regarding properties and geographical area
- Email exchanges discussing property standards
- Email exchanges discussing repairs or works carried out in a property
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Housing First is based around the idea that somebody is most likely to succeed in the right accommodation – in a place that feels like home. The idea that someone should be grateful for any type or quality of accommodation should be challenged.

Standard and quality of accommodation

While there are legal requirements regarding property standards, Housing First is oriented around the idea that a person's accommodation must feel like their home in order for them to have the best chance of reaching their goals and aspirations. The [United Nations](#) has underlined that the right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly, and must meet the criteria of being secure, affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally adequate and have access to services and infrastructure. As such, accommodation provided through Housing First should be in line with this definition, although client choice might override this. A particular consideration for Wales is that accommodation tends to be older than in other parts of the UK and could therefore be at greater risk of poor standards. As such, it is doubly important that the time is taken to ensure that the accommodation is suitable.

Dispersed accommodation

Housing First in Wales should provide accommodation based on a dispersed model, not a congregate model. That is to say, accommodation options should not be restricted to a single building or group of buildings. This is key to client choice and also ensures that people can form new relationships in mixed communities. To some extent, client choice can override this in practice – for example, if two Housing First clients wanted to live together, that should be respected. Similarly, a Housing First client might want to live in an area where other clients happen to live; this is also driven by choice, and is acceptable. However, the options available to clients must not be restricted to a single building. This would dilute the Housing First model and risk its effectiveness, and therefore would not be considered Housing First.

Absence of a mandate to engage or be 'tenancy ready'

Another key pillar of Housing First is that clients are not required to commit to being 'tenancy ready', abstaining from taking substances, or engaging with treatment. They simply need to express an interest in being housed, and – potentially – staying in touch with a support provider in a basic way, usually on a weekly basis. While intensive support is offered, and can often have hugely beneficial effects, it is not mandated.

Speed

The faster someone is provided with the right home, the quicker they can settle into a Housing First tenancy, and start determining what their goals are, before working to achieve them. Given the current scarcity of accommodation for single people, it may take time to find an appropriate property. Working in this context, homes should still be found as quickly as is feasible. Honest and transparent conversations between support workers and clients or potential clients are vital here, so clients can choose for themselves the balance between speed and suitability that anyone else would when it comes to moving home. The longer someone has to wait for a property, the harder it can be for clients to trust in professionals and the process as a whole.



FLEXIBLE SUPPORT FOR AS LONG AS IT IS NEEDED

Support is not time-limited, recognising that recovery takes time and varies depending on people's needs and experiences. Flexibility is crucial, as the frequency and intensity of support will fluctuate during people's support journey. The service commits to a small caseload, ensuring staff can provide intensive, person-centred support.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

0

Support is time-limited and finite. Support is inflexible and cannot be increased or decreased in line with the client's support needs. Support is commissioned on a rigid, per-hour basis. Caseloads are not controlled, and single members of staff might regularly work with an unsuitably large number of people, so large that the caseload affects the intensive person-centred support at the core of Housing First.

3

Staff are committed to providing ongoing support not limited by time. Support can scale up and down, and can be re-accessed when needed. Support is not commissioned on a per-hour basis. Individual support worker caseloads are carefully considered to ensure that clients have the support they need, while staff wellbeing is maintained. No support worker should have a caseload too large for them to handle, and caseloads should be small enough to allow a persistent and proactive approach, focused on the needs of the person.

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- Commissioning documents
- Job descriptions
- Evidence of discussion with funding bodies/commissioning staff
- Steering group meeting notes
- Referral documentation
- Support worker client allocation documents
- Email exchanges evidencing support worker caseloads
- Move-on/graduation/dormancy policies or processes
- Support plans
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

“My support workers always have doors slammed in their faces, but they keep advocating for me.

- A Housing First client, discussing the strength of the relationship with their support workers

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Housing First depends on support that is not time-limited, and is flexible, shaped according to a client's needs. Support plans should look considerably different depending on client experiences and context. That said, support should increase or decrease in intensity based on a client's needs, and be 're-activated' from low-intensity levels if a client needs this. Housing First clients might well have been repeatedly let down by the housing and homelessness sectors; they might need to be assured of support continuing for as long as is necessary, in order to form trusting relationships.

When it comes to the lack of time limits, there is a natural tension between the model and how funding tends to be granted. Funding is often provided to support providers on a time-limited basis – sometimes yearly. As such, there is an inherent difficulty in confirming that support is not time limited.

The context here is important – at the time of writing, the Welsh Government has made a commitment to the Housing First model, which is seen as a key part of the ongoing move towards a housing-led rapid rehousing approach, with Housing First being the most intense 'end' of the spectrum. All major political parties in the Senedd have also endorsed Housing First. As such, while the timing of funding is still relevant – and likely always will be – the position of Housing First in Wales should not be seen as precarious. The tenancy maintenance statistics that have been published thus far (at the time of writing, 91% of Housing First clients have maintained their tenancies) should continue to demonstrate the successes of the model, which will only bolster its position. Local and national government officials should make the absence of time limits clear in any relevant documentation, and project staff can use these kinds of statements as evidence to any clients who might be worried about support ending.

On an operational level, Housing First staff should take care not to re-traumatise clients by introducing the topic of time limits. That said, staff should be prepared for the fact that Housing First clients – who are, of course, considerate, thoughtful and intelligent individuals – might initiate these discussions, and show an interest in this issue. Of course, project staff should not lie or evade questions, but engage with the topic if appropriate. Project managers should ensure that staff are prepared to handle these conversations appropriately, should they arise.

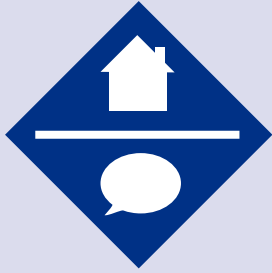
As Housing First matures, and people receive Housing First support for longer periods of time across Wales, an increasingly important topic is what happens to a person's support if they feel like they no longer need it. An increasing number of services are using the concepts of 'dormancy' or 'maintenance', whereby someone is still associated with the project, and could still receive support should they decide it were needed, but the normal level of support required by that person is now very low. The key point to consider is that Housing First has no time limits and must continue for as long as a person might need it.

Maintaining support, and having support remaining available to clients who are managing independently, need to be managed carefully as part of resource planning within each individual project. Consideration should always be given to potential spikes in support needs; provided this planning is done thoroughly and carefully, the use of a 'dormancy' or 'maintenance' concept seems like a sensible approach to enable growth in maturing projects and recognise the progression of the clients who live as part of Housing First services.

Small caseloads for individual members of staff are vital if flexibility is to be preserved. Research carried out during the development of the accreditation process suggested that the highest number of clients allocated to an individual support worker should be no higher than between five and seven, depending on the size of the service. However, given the use of dormancy lists (which might include the aforementioned clients with low ongoing support needs), as discussed above, and the fact that the support needs of individual clients might vary considerably, this document mandates no specific caseload numbers.

Instead, it is down to managers at each service to ensure that the balance is struck between support availability and staff wellbeing, and that support workers are not expected to handle caseloads that don't allow them to provide focused intensive, proactive and person-centred support.

In potentially life-long models such as Housing First, services also need to consider staff turnover and absence, and the effect this can have on clients within the project. Some projects, for example, ensure that every client has spent some time with at least two support workers, so that clients feel confident to engage with others in the wider team, not just their primary allocated support worker. However this is managed, every effort should be made to empower clients to develop confidence in all members of the team, and good relationships with as many professionals as possible.



SEPARATION OF HOUSING MANAGEMENT & SUPPORT

Housing management and the provision of support are delivered independently of each other. Support workers are able to advocate on behalf of clients regarding any issues with their accommodation. Housing is not dependent on engagement with support and the offer of support continues if people move to a different home.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** Housing management and support have no separation. Housing management and support provision are carried out by the same organisation, and tenants perceive the two functions as being interchangeable.
- 1** There is some separation between housing management and support provision. Support workers and housing management professionals might come from different teams within the same organisation. Clients perceive no or little difference in roles.
- 2** Housing management and support provision are more clearly separated. Both might be delivered by the same organisation, but by separate directorates, with clear independence and autonomy from one another. Support workers act as advocates for clients and are not involved in rent collection. Clients perceive these roles as separate. If a tenancy ends, support will continue from the same organisation, even if the tenancy moves to a different landlord.
- 3** Housing management and support are completely separate. They are carried out by different organisations, though both should be committed to Housing First as a model. Clients understand that the housing management function and support service operate independently from each other, feel confident that support workers will advocate for them, and know that any housing management issues will not affect the support they receive.

"We go toe-to-toe!"

- A support worker explaining their willingness to challenge their colleagues on behalf of the client

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service specification documents
- Internal policy/joint working protocol clarifying roles – making clear that one role wouldn't unfairly influence the other, for example
- Service-level agreements clarifying the different roles of landlord and support provider
- Job descriptions
- Relevant policies at the different organisations, or governing different teams
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

The separation of housing management and support provision is vital, because it helps to ensure that the support workers with whom a Housing First client engages can always be their advocate – focusing on supporting them, and allowing the client to be at the centre of their support. If, for example, a support worker was also expected to collect rent from a tenant, problems could arise. A client may well be reluctant to openly discuss sensitive issues – including, perhaps, past trauma – with somebody who might need to take action on issues such as rent arrears or anti-social behaviour.

Support workers and those involved in housing management should, at a bare minimum, have distinct roles, and – crucially – independence and autonomy from one another. These members of staff should have the independence and autonomy that would be expected if they came from different organisations, as well as support from their management to make this a reality. If both housing management and support are provided by the same organisation, it should be standard practice that if a Housing First tenancy should end, the support provision would continue, wherever any future accommodation came from. This is what Housing First clients would expect if they had been engaging with separate organisations, and this is what they should expect if only one organisation is involved. Similarly, where one organisation delivers support and housing management, a clear distinction should exist between a client's tenancy maintenance, and a client's engagement with support. Again, this is what would be expected from two separate organisations, so the situation should be the same for one organisation. For example, if a client is having no issues with their tenancy, but has chosen, for the time being, not to engage with support, this should incur no additional punitive actions. Ultimately, a client perception of 'you're all the same' needs to be avoided.

Where the same organisation is delivering both support and housing management, they would need to take additional steps to ensure that clients perceive that these roles are distinct and separate, particularly with regards to the support worker being able to act independently from the housing management team and advocate on behalf of the client. For example, the organisation could have different teams sign a joint working policy, which makes the different roles clear. Such a document could then be provided during the accreditation, as evidence of fidelity to this principle.

As such, while housing management and support provision are both vital parts of the Housing First model, the more separate they are, the better. This is not to diminish the importance of good, honest, and effective working relationships between members of staff in both areas. These members of staff will need to have a clear understanding of their role, and 'where they fit' when it comes to Housing First. What is more, support workers must feel able to constructively challenge the housing management partner (or, indeed, anyone else) if decisions do not seem to be aligning with the best interests of the client.

It is also important that representatives of the housing management part of Housing First take a sensitive, trauma-informed approach to their work. It should also be noted that, in the same way that engagement with support is not mandated in Housing First, the same applies to any generic support offered by landlords. People living in a Housing First property must never be disadvantaged or penalised when not actively engaging in the support provision or housing management on offer; exceptions would include gas checking and other legally mandated tenancy requirements.



PEOPLE HAVE CHOICE & CONTROL

People should have as much choice and control as is possible over where they live and the type of housing they live in. They should be in control of the support they receive, choosing where, when and how support is provided. People should be listened to and their choices should be respected.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** When it comes to accommodation, people are allocated one property without any choice and/or the tenure offered is a licence agreement. Clients have no input into the way their support is delivered, or what their support focuses on.
- 1** People are able to choose properties, but within specific areas, or between properties of lower quality; the tenure offered is a full tenancy. Clients can make some basic decisions about their support.
- 2** People are able to choose properties based on a free choice from the housing available; the tenure offered is an occupation contract. Clients are encouraged to make choices about, and take control of, their support.
- 3** People are able to choose properties across all tenures, and can also request specific Private Rented Sector properties be considered or approached by the Housing First support provider; the tenure offered is an occupation contract. Clients are strongly empowered to make choices about, and take control of, their support.

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- Relevant specific client-oriented policies
- Steering group meeting notes
- Move-on panel meeting notes
- Co-production plans
- Client engagement/involvement documents
- Collaborative tools (the outcomes star, for example)
- Evidence of personal budgeting
- Evidence of people moving – emails and tenancy agreements, for example
- Evidence of support providers working with multiple landlords
- Personal Housing Plans
- Allocation schemes
- Support plans
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

“Sometimes I’ve been in a very good position, and [my support workers] know me so well that sometimes they’ll back off for a few weeks, when I want them to.”

– A Housing First client explaining how they can exercise control when it comes to their support

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Given that there are different elements of choice and control that Housing First clients should have, they all need to be considered when using the self-evaluation scoring system. For example, where clients have full choice and control when it comes to their accommodation, but the support provided to them is rigid and inflexible (however unlikely this might be in reality), the score could not meet the Housing First fidelity threshold (self-evaluation scores of 2 or 3). The opposite would also be true – clients might have extensive choice and control when it comes to their support, but are not offered meaningful choice over their accommodation. This, again, would not score highly.

Managing expectations and informed choice

There are times during a person’s support when the support worker(s) involved, as well as other staff in and outside the service, might need to manage their client’s expectations. This should involve the frank, honest, and open communication at the heart of relationships in Housing First. The process of choosing accommodation might likely require this expectation management. While in theory Housing First clients should be able to look for housing anywhere, the context and reality of a particular area will by nature restrict this choice – as would be true for anyone else looking for a home. Certain types of accommodation (one-bed, for example) are rarer than others; certain areas might suffer from accommodation shortages more than others; and specific locations within an area might be more desirable than others.

These situations require that support staff work honestly with their clients, empowering them to make informed choices with all the information available. For example, if a client has expressed interest in a certain part of town, the support worker might have to explain that the waiting time could be double the time associated with the client’s second choice of location. Similarly, the support worker might have to explain that the service has only just started working with a particular private landlord, and as such the properties the landlord has in a particular area might not be accessible yet – and it could be hard to predict when they will be.

While this kind of honest management of expectations is most necessary when it comes to property choice, there are other contexts in which it might be required. A client might want to have support sessions over breakfast in a local café, and a support worker might have to explain that this might not always be possible, because of – for example – part-time working arrangements. Different options might be discussed: changing the day of the sessions, or arranging input from another support worker, for instance. Again, the emphasis should be on ensuring the client has all the required information, and understands the likely outcomes or consequences of specific choices, without facing judgement. Housing First clients are resilient people whose ability to navigate these kinds of choices should be respected and not underestimated.

Giving up choice and/or control

Clients ceding choice and/or control is something that support workers should consider. There will be times when a client wants or needs their support worker to take more control in helping them to overcome challenges, particularly at the start of their Housing First journey, or if they encounter challenges along the way. However, support workers should bear in mind the ethos of 'doing with' not 'doing for', and avoid creating dependence. If a client chooses to give up a particular decision, they are exercising control. As long as they can always re-attain control, this choice must also be respected. A client might, for example, ask a support worker to fill out a form they could have worked on together – in effect saying, 'I'm okay with you doing this for me.' This idea should not, of course, be confused with clients asking support workers to carry out tasks that might be inappropriate to that role, but opting out of an activity they choose not to be a part of at that particular time.

Co-production and collaboration

The concepts of co-production and collaboration are key to Housing First. Collaboration between clients and support workers (as well as other professionals, like substance misuse workers, for example) is inherent to the model of support described in this principle. Similarly, co-production as a concept requires that clients have a say in how a project or service is run – as such, they should be provided with opportunities to give feedback or opinions in this area.

Practical examples of people being empowered to shape the service delivered to them might include: participating in recruitment interview panels; informing service design; or client surveys being shared regularly – as long as an organisation's response to such surveys is transparent, honest and meaningful. Co-production and collaboration are also concepts that should be embraced by the partners delivering Housing First. This is also made clear in the principle focused on multi-agency partnership working.



AN ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

An active engagement approach should be used throughout. This begins with assertive outreach, where staff should be proactive, persistent and purposeful as they build trusting relationships with people. This approach should continue when the person has a tenancy, with support being offered in different ways, even if engagement is low.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** Outreach is limited or doesn't exist, and the service relies on formalised referral systems. If clients or potential clients are slow to engage, or their level of enthusiasm for receiving support fluctuates, offers of support are withdrawn. The process must start again from scratch if the person ever changes their mind. Support workers show no flexibility when it comes to engaging with clients, arranging appointments or meetings in a prescribed way, regardless of the person's needs or preferences.
- 2** People are able to engage when they want, but there is limited outreach to encourage them and ensure the paths to engagement are open. Outreach is often based on a set number of meetings. The service has a mentality of waiting for people to come and engage with the service, after initial contact has been made. While engaging with clients, support workers show some flexibility, but clients will still need to engage in somewhat prescribed ways.
- 3** The service has a strong assertive outreach element, where people are approached regularly and engaged with, whatever their current circumstances, and without the proviso that they need to commit to support; the service is ready to move quickly if the person changes their mind and wants to engage. In the same way, engagement is flexible and responds to the needs of the client during their tenancy. Support workers will engage with clients in a range of situations and contexts, and will approach these situations in the most appropriate ways. The mentality is very much along the lines of 'leave nobody behind'.

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- Relevant specific policies – for example, assertive outreach policies
- Job descriptions (if, for example, there is a dedicated outreach worker)
- Steering group meeting notes
- Support plans
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

“It’s all about trust, at the end of the day.”

– A Housing First client, emphasising a key part of the relationship with their support worker

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Active engagement refers to a way of working with people that should take place throughout a person’s Housing First journey. Assertive outreach and active engagement are often discussed interchangeably. They are different but related topics. Assertive outreach refers to specific outreach work a project carries out as part of an active approach, to begin developing relationships with people who might benefit from Housing First. This should be done in an active way, and would be part of an active engagement approach. Working in an active, assertive, and open way (without being overbearing) is vital to establishing trust from an early stage.

Essentially, working in an active or assertive way means a support worker should be proactive, persistent and purposeful as they seek to build trusting relationships with potential Housing First clients. They should bear in mind that the person they are trying to reach might have many reasons not to want to engage (this kind of understanding forms the basis of a trauma-informed approach). Some of these reasons might be short-term and temporary while others might be more ingrained.

While respecting the right of anybody not to engage with someone else, support workers should be willing to try different approaches with their clients – at the same time as working in a way that is trauma-informed and person-centred.

Support workers, understanding that somebody might not want to talk to them at one moment, might tell a client that they will be sitting in a nearby café, should they change their mind. Support workers need to be patient and understanding. A support worker might suggest a venue that they perceive would put a client most at ease – a local park, for example. Because many of the clients suited for Housing First will have been repeatedly let down by the system, active and assertive engagement means making clear that the same thing will not happen in this instance, and that the support worker will always be willing to talk; however a client is feeling, and whatever trauma they have internalised, ‘the system’ as represented by a support worker or outreach worker will be there for them when they are ready. Building relationships takes time, of course, and support workers should be prepared to put this time in.

Additionally, clients might engage differently from one day to the next. This fact, and day-to-day circumstances, might require support workers to meet clients in a variety of settings – at a GP surgery to coincide with an appointment, for example. Similarly, clients might be more willing or able to engage at a specific time – people might swap shifts to see clients at night, for example, or in the early morning. Support workers should, in effect, have a toolkit of approaches, in recognition of the fact that different clients might have very different needs and engage differently. Cymorth Cymru has published documentation covering good practice when it comes to assertive outreach in both English and Welsh.

A key element of active engagement in general is that clients are offered a situation better than the one they are currently in – for example, they might prefer bed and breakfast accommodation to a hostel place.

Engaging in an assertive way means ensuring that different organisations, individuals and agencies commit to the same approach, so that it becomes a multi-disciplinary way of working. That said, it should be remembered that certain clients might have difficult relationships with certain organisations, and as such, the support offered should be separate from any specific organisation or agency.

Potential locations for Housing First meetings should be considered carefully. There have been instances, for example, where Housing First teams without suitable office space have had to use probation offices to meet clients. Where clients have had negative experiences with the probation service, this could result in them not feeling comfortable to engage as openly as possible. A trauma-informed approach should take these aspects into account.

When meeting in cafés or libraries, privacy needs to be considered. Drop-in centres have worked well in the areas where they operate – like anywhere else, though, there are many practical things to consider when establishing these, including opening times and other uses of the space.

There is, as is often the case in Housing First, a balance to be struck when it comes to allocating resources and staff. The following situation has, for example, been highlighted at a Housing First Network meeting: a small Housing First service is trying to engage with a potential client, who continues to express interest but repeatedly misses appointments. While this is going on, the potential client is in and out of prison, and it has often been hard for project staff to determine where the person is, and how best to reach them.

Staff worry, naturally, that there are other clients and potential clients who *are* engaging and could benefit from the focus and time of staff. At what point do members of staff stop trying to engage with the potential client? As long as the commitment exists to support this person, should they change their mind at any point, and some reasonable efforts are made to offer appointments (at which a member of staff, prepared for the possibility that the client will not show up, could bring work to do, or offer to see another client after some time has passed), the spirit of Housing First is evident. It is important that staff are supported to avoid getting frustrated in these situations, and accept that potential clients might have experienced significant trauma, leading to challenges with engagement.

The Housing First model does not expect already-stretched teams to devote large amounts of staff time to people who have expressed interest but are not otherwise engaging. The mentality that Housing First expects is one of ‘we don’t leave anybody behind’. As such, this potential client is not removed from lists, and if at any point does begin to engage, their previous lack of engagement is not held against them. This is a difficult balance to strike, and to some extent, it is about conveying the message: ‘we will be ready to speak to you, when you’re ready to speak to us.’ Ultimately, in the same way that support should be flexible, so too should engagement and outreach, avoiding rigidity and being led by the client or potential client.



A FOCUS ON STRENGTHS, GOALS & ASPIRATIONS

The service is supportive and empowering, helping people to develop increased self-esteem and confidence. Support staff work alongside people to identify their strengths, goals and aspirations in relation to their health, wellbeing, education, work, social or community activities. People are supported to pursue and achieve their chosen goals.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** Clients are not encouraged to identify or pursue strengths, goals or aspirations.
- 1** Limited attention is given to a client's strengths, goals and/or aspirations, but in general these are not viewed as a priority and clients are not given the tools they need to achieve them.
- 2** Clients are supported to identify their strengths, goals and aspirations. They are helped to make plans and to access opportunities, resources or support that will help them to achieve them. Small steps and successes are celebrated.
- 3** Clients are supported to identify their strengths, goals and aspirations. They are helped to make plans and to access opportunities, resources or support that will help them to achieve them. Small steps and successes are celebrated. Clients are empowered and enabled to continue working towards their goals independently.

"Progress on whose terms?"

- A support worker, asking the question that gets to the heart of a client-centred approach. What 'progress' is should be decided by the client, and enabled by their support worker, rather than determined or defined by anyone else

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- Relevant specific client-oriented policies
- Client involvement policies
- Co-production plans
- Email exchanges evidencing client involvement
- Client engagement/involvement documents
- Activity rotas/timetables
- Support plans
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Empowering and enabling Housing First service users to, using their strengths, pursue their own goals and aspirations is a vital aspect of the model.

It should be understood that someone who begins receiving support from a Housing First project might not know what their strengths, goals and aspirations are. They might not know what they enjoy doing day-to-day. Their confidence and self-esteem may well have been affected by their experiences of homelessness. The trauma they have experienced could well have restricted this kind of insight.

As such, Housing First provides an opportunity to, simply, help people to discover or rediscover their skills and strengths. One approach might be for a Housing First project to offer a varied selection of activities, to help clients narrow down what they are good at or what they want to pursue. Clients might find that they engage in an activity to alleviate boredom, and then take genuine ownership of their actions as part of said activity – painting furniture for their accommodation, for example, can become a very different activity as it continues and a client starts to express themselves creatively.

Similarly, support workers can have a range of conversations with clients when it comes to goals – does a person want to rebuild relationships with their family, for example, or seek employment? It is vital that support workers take the lead from clients and not 'force' presupposed goals on the person they are supporting.



A HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

A harm reduction approach to substance and alcohol use is taken by stakeholders involved in delivering a Housing First service. People are not required to abstain from using substances in order to access a Housing First tenancy or support. People are supported holistically to reduce and minimise harm to their health and wellbeing.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** Using substances and/or alcohol is not accepted in the accommodation, and doing so would result in eviction, as is made clear in the relevant tenancy documentation. Staff have no understanding of substance or alcohol use, or the possible harms associated with them. Substance and alcohol use are not discussed with support workers.
- 1** Substance and/or alcohol use in accommodation is banned in tenancy agreements. Support workers have a limited understanding of substance and alcohol use, but focus only on abstinence with clients.
- 2** The support provider takes a harm reduction approach, by openly discussing substance and/or alcohol use with clients if clients want this. Practical options to reduce harm (like needle exchange and provision of naloxone) are available or signposted to clients. Support staff are trained to understand substance and alcohol use, as well as the potential harms they can cause. Specialist partner organisations are integrated into the project work. Landlords at least tacitly accept that substance and/or alcohol use might be taking place.
- 3** All partners and stakeholders understand the potential nature of Housing First clients, the associated trauma, and substance and alcohol use. Stakeholders have received training in and understand the potential harms associated with substance and alcohol use. Conversations around, and support with, harm reduction is provided to clients with no judgement and no mandates. All partners, including landlords, understand and support the approach, with specialist organisations integrated.

"It's all about knowing the clients. We had a case where a cleaner found somebody who'd overdosed because they left their keys in the door - and the cleaner knew it was unusual."

- A support worker explaining a specific example of harm reduction in practice

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- Relevant specific harm reduction/substance use/alcohol policies
- Steering group meeting notes
- Move-on panel meeting notes
- Email exchanges
- Support plans
- Service-level agreements
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

'Harm reduction' can mean different things to different people. In the context of Housing First, harm reduction refers to the idea that, while clients should be enabled to make their own choices, support workers and other stakeholders will work with clients to reduce potential harm caused by substance use, alcohol use, and potentially other behaviours. This harm reduction work stands in contrast to focusing only on achieving abstinence (although that might be a client's goal) and 'policing' substance and/or alcohol use. Housing First clients are likely to have experienced considerable trauma, and substance and/or alcohol use is a way that many people try to cope with trauma.

Practical examples

Harm reduction in a practical sense can take several forms. First, actually discussing substance/alcohol use with support workers, and specialist partners, with a view to reducing harm is key. These conversations could lead to staff providing naloxone to clients. Similarly, project staff should be trained in the administration of naloxone, as well as first aid procedures in case of overdoses or other healthcare incidents. Local needle exchange provision, if not integrated into the service, should be signposted by staff.

Many specialist substance/alcohol agencies will prescribe medications for clients. In particular, methadone, Suboxone or Subutex, and Buprenorphine are commonly used as part of opiate dependence treatment. Alcohol dependence treatment might involve naltrexone or disulfiram. Additionally, various benzodiazepines and other medications might be prescribed to people receiving Housing First support. Clients accessing the appropriate prescriptions should be enabled and supported by Housing First partners. This might take the form of a support worker taking a client to collect a prescription, or attend an appointment. Discussions around harm reduction and risk might need to take place when it comes to prescription drugs – concepts might include, for example, overusing prescribed drugs, additional risk of overdose, and even the risk of acute precipitated withdrawal if certain prescription medications are combined with street drugs.

It should be accepted that landlords, of whatever type, will need to balance a harm reduction approach, and delivery of the Housing First model, with the needs and safety of the surrounding community – in fact, reducing potential harms to people living near to someone using substances and/or alcohol could be considered part of a harm reduction approach.

While Section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 controls the use of cannabis and opium, and the production and supply of controlled drugs on premises, multi-agency partnerships should be developed to enable a pragmatic and harm reduction approach to enabling people with substance use issues to be housed via Housing First.

Whatever treatments are available to help somebody cope with, or address, their substance and/or alcohol use should be carefully considered. The wider aspects of a person's life need to be considered when it comes to determining treatment options. Someone might need other things to do if they're not spending time sourcing money and buying substances. There is a risk that a person might become isolated, lonely or even depressed. Activities should be made available as well as signposted by the service, which could help mitigate this. Psychological support might also be needed if a person experiences trauma as their substance and/or alcohol use is reduced.

Developing trusting relationships to support harm reduction

The relationship between a support worker and a client, as is discussed elsewhere in this document, is at the heart of Housing First. A strong, trusting, honest relationship can in itself reinforce a harm reduction approach. Nobody should feel judged or ashamed because of their use of substances and/or alcohol.

If someone can be honest about their substance use with, for example, their support worker, then the worker can provide the most appropriate honest advice, so decisions are made, or actions carried out, with all the information available. The better a support worker knows their clients, the more likely they'll be able to predict times when the risk of overdose is higher.

Cuckooing

In addition to direct harms to a person's health, the use and supply of substances can be harmful if they involve the exploitation of vulnerable people and cause damage to relationships. Cuckooing, for example, is often associated with the supply of substances. While this document is not the right space for an extended discussion about cuckooing (a situation in which a person's accommodation is 'taken over' by others, with varying levels of consent from the tenant, often to enable drug supply), it is worth mentioning here as a phenomenon that can arise for Housing First clients. All partners should be aware of the warning signs of cuckooing, and frequent updates and information sharing between different partners is vital. This locally produced [guide](#) introduces the topic of county lines and cuckooing in a clear and accessible way.

Even if cuckooing is not taking place, partners should be aware of the potential for exploitation surrounding substance use – a client's associates might know when they receive benefit payments, for example, and choose that day to show up at the client's accommodation. Support workers should encourage clients to discuss whether they are experiencing issues like this.



PROVIDED TO PEOPLE WHO NEED IT THE MOST

The service is targeted at people who have experienced repeat homelessness and have experience of trauma, mental health issues, substance and/or alcohol use issues, and/or engagement with the criminal justice system. This includes people who have often been failed by traditional approaches and systems.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)



The service is able to exclude on the basis of complexity, and seeks to avoid clients deemed potentially 'risky'. Clients either do not have experience of the issues listed in the principle text, or clients are avoided by the service on the basis that they do.



The service actively identifies and works with people who have co-occurring experiences of the issues listed in the principle. The service works with clients that more traditional models addressing homelessness might deem too risky.

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- Steering group/panel membership lists
- Steering group/panel meeting minutes
- Referral documentation
- Documentation that enables the service or panel to assess complexity of support needs – the Chaos Index, for example, or a bespoke document
- Risk assessments
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Defining for whom the Housing First model works most effectively is difficult. The term 'complex needs' has often been used. While many people have understandable problems with the phrase, there is a broad understanding that this means people with co-occurring experiences of homelessness, trauma, mental health issues, substance use issues and/or offending. Trying to define 'complex needs' in a specific way can also lead to problems: for example, by suggesting that Housing First is aimed at people with a specific combination of issues, the flexibility so key to the model is lost.

Tools like the Chaos Index attempt to attribute a 'score' based on a set of issues widely accepted to be prevalent among people experiencing homelessness. Again, none of these tools are perfect. Some Housing First or homelessness services in Wales have developed their own referral/assessment tools and forms. The experience of the professionals working at these services is vital. Similarly, understanding local context will go a long way to helping someone understand who is at the 'most complex' end of the spectrum within a particular area.

The original set of Housing First Wales principles focused heavily on rough sleeping as a criterion for accessing housing and support via the model. Since then, there has been a recognition that some locations have a lower prevalence of rough sleeping, and there are people experiencing other forms of homelessness who could still benefit from Housing First. Additionally, chronic rough sleeping tends to be experienced more by men than women, who are more likely to sofa surf or stay with acquaintances – forms of homelessness that are less visible, but still have a significant impact on people's lives, health and wellbeing. There might be instances where a person is unable to leave an unsuitable home because of children, or fear of a partner. It is vital that Housing First providers do not overlook or ignore such cases because rough sleeping isn't necessarily a large part of a person's history.

Additionally, different parts of Wales experience different levels of rough sleeping, and different levels or manifestations of other issues potentially associated with homelessness.

As such, the principle should be seen as a guide, not a rigid set of criteria. Determining whether Housing First is right for a person should take place as a relationship develops between service staff, supportive professionals and potential clients.



PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED & ACTIVELY INCLUSIVE

The service is psychologically-informed, taking into account the emotional and psychological needs of the person and their experience of trauma. It is actively inclusive of people from all backgrounds and identities, gender-informed and provides person-centred support based on people's needs, their context, and who they are.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** There is no evidence of a psychologically-informed approach by the service or its partners. The service is not inclusive of people from all backgrounds and identities, and does not take into account the personal history or circumstances of the person while shaping the support.
- 1** There is limited evidence of a psychologically-informed approach by the service and its partners. The service is aware of the person's identity, personal history or circumstances, but this does not have a meaningful impact on how the service is delivered.
- 2** There is good evidence that a psychologically-informed approach is taken by the service provider. Partner organisations are aware of the impact of trauma and the need to be trauma-informed. The support provider is actively inclusive, staff have received equality and diversity training, and take into account a person's needs based on issues such as gender, race and sexual orientation when delivering support.
- 3** There is extensive evidence that a psychologically-informed approach is taken by the service provider and its partners. Staff at the service and all partner stakeholders are trained to understand and be aware of the personal history, trauma and experiences of their clients, and work to ensure their interactions are sensitive and responsive to those experiences. Staff engage in regular reflective practice and receive support to cope with vicarious trauma and traumatic incidents. The service is actively inclusive, staff have received equality and diversity training, and take into account a person's needs based on issues such as gender, race, disability and sexual orientation when delivering support. The service will continuously and pro-actively examine the relationship between the demographics of the local community, and the demographics of clients, and attempt to address barriers that are preventing particular groups of people from accessing support.

"If I'm having a bad day, [my support workers] take my brain out, re-program it, and stick it back in. Then I'm fine!"

- A Housing First client, explaining their support workers' ability to take their psychological state into account

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Service policy documents
- EDI or other relevant policy documents
- Staff training records
- Steering group meeting notes
- Client engagement/involvement documents
- Risk assessments
- Support plans
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

This principle, in its original and updated form, has existed to highlight the focus on trauma-informed work in Wales, and the importance of specifically integrating it into the Housing First model. This section will discuss several aspects of this kind of support.

Psychologically-informed approaches

Psychologically-informed environments (PIE) take into account the emotional and psychological needs of the people using services, and their experience of trauma. The aim of PIE is to provide psychological safety and security for people and therefore improve their experiences and outcomes. There are five key components of PIE:

- **Psychological Framework:** Organisations have a strategic and operational commitment to psychologically-informed approaches. Service design, development, and evaluation are informed by an evidence-based, trauma-informed model and the organisation's culture is reflective, compassionate and person-centred.
- **Relationships:** High quality relationships are recognised as the principal tool in effective service delivery and staff have the time to develop trusting relationships with people using services. Psychologically-informed approaches are used regardless of whether experiences of trauma are known and expectations are communicated in a clear, consistent and respectful way that avoids re-traumatising people.
- **Physical and social environment:** Assessment and support environments are safe, welcoming and flexible, enabling positive, trauma-informed interaction between staff and people using services. People have choice and control over how they engage with services and the physical environment supports their wellbeing.
- **Staff training and support:** Staff receive training and support to increase their understanding of trauma and how this can impact on people's engagement and relationship with services. Reflective practice, continuous learning, professional supervision and therapeutic support ensure that staff feel confident working in a psychologically-informed way.
- **Evidence and learning:** Evidence is gathered to demonstrate the impact of psychologically-informed approaches, and this is used to support continuous learning and improve the effectiveness of services. Information on the experiences of people who use services is regularly gathered and is used to inform service planning.

Professional competencies: Therapeutic approach ≠ delivering therapy

It is vital that partners involved in Housing First understand that support workers take a therapeutic approach to delivering support, but should not be expected to be, or to act as, therapists. Psychologically- and trauma-informed support, as this principle makes clear, involves the partners delivering Housing First taking into account the potential traumas experienced by, and psychological context of, a client.

For example, this might mean understanding that perceived 'acting out' or an increase in anger around the Christmas period could derive from particular historical difficulties a person experienced at that time of year. This way, a support worker understands that a client isn't deliberately behaving in a difficult way, or setting out to cause problems for anyone. At the same time, this doesn't mean aggressive behaviour, for example, should be tolerated – but a support worker might explain that certain behaviour is inappropriate, leave the situation, and – crucially - 'draw a line' under the behaviour next time they meet with the client.

This is a therapeutic approach, whereas actual therapy would, as per the involvement of different organisations, come from a mental health specialist. To take another example – an LGBTQ+ client, who has expressed an interest in further exploring this aspect of their identity, might be informed about an upcoming Pride festival, and where appropriate supported to attend. However, this client's support worker would not deliver therapy in terms of, say, unpacking 'what it means to be LGBTQ+' during support sessions. The line between a therapeutic approach and actual therapy is by very nature a blurred one, and support workers should be empowered and supported by their management and colleagues to understand what is expected of them, and to ensure they don't deliver more than they are supposed to, which could result in more trauma for the client and the support worker.

Ultimately, support workers should understand and respect the boundaries around their professional competencies. Taking a therapeutic approach is about how conversations are handled and support is delivered, rather than providing a clinical intervention.

Protected characteristics

UK law makes it illegal to discriminate against someone based on the following characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation. Given that this is a legal requirement, it is to be expected that a Housing First service – including all involved partners – would adhere to such legislation. That said, it is vital that all partners understand and align with law covering the protected characteristics and that policies clearly reflect these requirements.

Active inclusion

The concept of being actively inclusive goes beyond understanding and accepting of a person's gender, sexual orientation, disability, or race - but it certainly includes them. The example above, of a gay client being supported to attend a local Pride festival, would be a form of active inclusion. Active inclusion goes beyond a willingness to support anyone, no matter who they are, and embraces the person-led aspect of Housing First by empowering clients to achieve their own goals and meet their own needs, by being who they are.

Delivering Housing First in an actively inclusive way means accepting that gender, sexual orientation, disability and race might well influence a person's perception of themselves – rather than treating anyone differently by default, collecting inappropriate personal data, or delivering therapy connected to these topics (as is discussed above).

Services should also make efforts to communicate their approach to inclusion, to avoid any perception that they are not inclusive and to encourage people to feel comfortable expressing their identities.

Gender-informed support

The inclusion of the phrase 'gender-informed' in the principle text and scoring should not be interpreted to mean that gender is the only aspect of a person that might affect how they are supported, or that gender is the only thing that will affect a person's goals, needs and experiences. However, ongoing discussions about Housing First for Women in Wales suggest strongly that women in Housing First tend to present with support needs and traumas often requiring the involvement of specialist organisations. A specific Housing First for Women model is developing in Wales, and refers to a Housing First project that specifically works exclusively with women, usually led by a specialist women's support provider. However, a gender-informed approach is also critical within mainstream Housing First projects, who will need to consider the particular support needs and traumas experienced by women. These services should develop relationships with specialist women's support providers locally, to develop their understanding and enable clients to access specialist support.

Anti-racist Wales

In 2022 the Welsh Government published its Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, which emphasises that being anti-racist is more than just not being racist. It's about proactively taking anti-racist action. The action plan has a section focused on homes and identifies actions for the sector related to representation within the workforce and leadership positions, ensuring services advance race equality and meet the needs of ethnic minority people, and ensuring people have a voice and influence on policy. In the context of Housing First, this could include consideration of how the support workforce reflects the diversity of the population they serve, whether the service is proactive in how welcoming, accessible and inclusive it is to people from black, Asian and ethnic minority communities, and how the voices of ethnic minority people are listened to and acted upon to ensure that the service meets their needs.

Strategic approaches to inclusion

Services delivering Housing First should take a strategic approach to inclusion. There might be barriers to people accessing support, and part of Housing First's role should be attempting to address and overcome these barriers. Similarly, clients might have experienced trauma associated with systemic racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia. Services will seek to understand these kinds of trauma, and to identify and challenge systemic discrimination.



MULTI-AGENCY PARTNERSHIP WORKING

The widest range of services is involved in partnership from the service's inception, so people can access them in a timely manner if needed or wanted. These services might include, but are not limited to, mental health services, substance use services, wider health services, social services, housing partners, and probation.

SELF-EVALUATION SCORING (0-3)

- 0** The service is commissioned by the housing department with no involvement or buy-in from other services; the service is run with minimal to no involvement from other agencies.
- 1** The service is commissioned with limited and / or late involvement from other services, and the service plans to run with partial, incomplete involvement from other agencies.
- 2** The service is commissioned with planned involvement from other services, and there is a plan to involve those services, but there are limited commitments, with no shared memorandum of understanding or service-level agreement. Alternatively, relationships with other local services have been developed over time, leading to strong partnership working, wherein people receive the support they need in a timely manner.
- 3** The service is commissioned with full partnership approaches, and relationships between partners have strengthened over time; memoranda of understanding and/or service-level agreements are in place. There is regular commitment by all stakeholders to review the systems and continue to support individuals, and there are 'fast-track' referral procedures in place to improve access to services such as mental health.

EVIDENCE

Sources that are likely to evidence fidelity to this principle include:

- Commissioning documents
- Service specifications
- Joint working agreements
- Memoranda of understanding
- Service-level agreements
- Email exchanges
- Support plans
- Steering group meeting minutes
- Evidence of adaptive processes
- Stakeholder interviews
- Client interviews

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND GOOD PRACTICE

Evidence repeatedly confirms the necessity of other services. Additionally, Welsh Government guidance over recent years has been clear about the importance of partnership working, and how fundamental it is to Housing First. Over time, the accreditation process has also been amended to more overtly recognise the partner agencies working alongside support providers and landlords to deliver the Housing First model.

There should be a strategic commitment to delivery of the model from a range of public services, and a partnership approach to the effective design and delivery of Housing First services. This strategic development of Housing First should take into account the sector's context more generally. At the time of writing this, for example, Welsh Government is overseeing the transition a housing-led, rapid rehousing approach with multi-disciplinary support at its centre. Housing First is a key part of this sector-wide transformation, being at the more intensive end of the spectrum of housing-led approaches.

While the most obvious services that partner with Housing First projects tend to include the health service (and mental health and substance use teams in particular) and probation teams, it is worth noting that a huge range of organisations can and do work effectively to provide support according to the model - for example, the police, the prison service, the DWP and job centre staff, and others. It is often vital for a client and their support workers to have a good relationship with their GP, for instance.

For some people receiving support, social workers are likely to be a key part of the Housing First journey. It is also worth considering the fact that, although another principle discusses the relationship between the housing management function and the provision of support, housing partners should also be seen within the context of this principle; housing partners should, for example, be able to 'fast-track' Housing First tenancies by prioritising them, and the relationship between the support provider and housing partners is a vital part of Housing First.

As is reflected in the scoring above, it is worth pointing out that where partnership working isn't commissioned, relationships between organisations can be developed over time - though the earlier the involvement of other services begins, the better.

All partners involved in the delivery of Housing First should consider themselves advocates for the model itself, building buy-in among their peers, and sharing good practice where appropriate. By acting in this way, services can be strengthened, as an understanding of the Housing First model is reinforced across a range of organisations, agencies and individuals.

