

HOUSING FIRST

FIDELITY FRAMEWORK

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June 2025



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About the Authors

Imogen Blood has been Director of Imogen Blood & Associates since 2009. She is a qualified social worker, who worked in supported housing and as a prison drug and alcohol worker, before moving to research over twenty years ago. Housing First resonates with her values and expertise in relation to inclusion, strengths-based approaches and positive risk. She has led research, evaluation and feasibility studies on Housing First for Crisis, Homeless Link, Rock Trust, Soha, Conwy & Denbighshire and Welsh Government. She provides strategic support to government, local authorities and housing associations on homelessness and supported housing.

Anita Birchall ran the award-winning Housing First for women service at Threshold in East Manchester for 5 years. She is passionate about the model and has delivered advice, coaching and mentoring on Housing First to Local Authorities and organisations. Her Threshold model has informed the development of gender specific Housing First provision by the Finnish Y Foundation and Dundee Housing First for Women. A mental health nurse by profession, Anita has been an associate of Imogen Blood & Associates since 2019, contributing to Housing First evaluations for Crisis, Soha and Welsh Government and consultancy and research for Homeless Link.

Nicholas Pleace is Professor of Housing and Society at the University of York. He led the earliest evaluations of Housing First in England: in Camden (2013); and of nine Housing First services (2015). He wrote *Housing First Guide Europe* (2016) and led 2019 research on fidelity and implementation, for the Housing First Europe Hub. His 2019 study for Homeless Link on cost effectiveness modelled the changing intensity of Housing First support over time. He understands international Housing First practice and evidence, from work with DIHAL, (French inter-ministerial body), Simon Communities of Ireland, Finnish Ministry of the Environment, Y Foundation and FEANTSA. Nicholas has collaborated with Imogen Blood & Associates on Housing First and related evaluations, feasibility studies and cost effectiveness assessments.

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Introduction

This framework was originally produced in 2019 as the result of a collaboration between Imogen Blood, Anita Birchall and Nicholas Pleace (University of York) to set out the practical steps which a service should take to describe itself as maintaining high fidelity to the Housing First model.

It has been written in and applies to the UK context – there are likely to be some variations in other contexts.

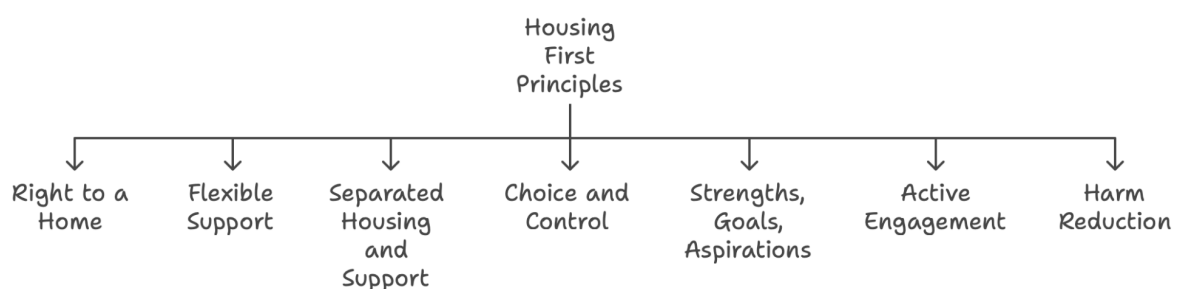
It seeks to describe what an effective Housing First scheme in the UK looks like and how it operates differently to other support services, and in a way that is better suited to what our homelessness services and research know works best for people with multiple and compound needs.

It makes explicit how – as independent evaluators and assessors – we define, understand and assess ‘fidelity’ in Housing First.

Part 1 of the framework begins by setting out what the Housing First principles (as defined by Homeless Link’s Housing First England project) should mean in practice for high fidelity schemes.

Part 2 presents the fundamental strategic and organisational building blocks that need to be in place to support the consistent implementation of these principles.

Part 1: The Housing First principles



1. People have a right to a home

Inevitably, there is huge tension in many areas between people’s choices and what housing is available and affordable. In the current UK housing crisis, we recognise that Housing First providers need to be innovative and flexible in their approach to accessing a range of housing options. Sourcing housing is time-consuming and ideally there will be a dedicated, specialist post to carry out this role.

Within this context, a high-fidelity scheme:

- Takes time to understand individuals' housing needs, preferences and aspirations.
- Has sufficient resources (staff time/ relationships with landlords/ local structures or arrangements / access to a good range of own properties) to source a *range* of properties.
- Invests time in a matching process, trying to match needs and preferences with available housing as closely as is possible.
- Takes time to assess the suitability of a property, its location, proximity to amenities and sources of informal (non-service based) support
- Tries to offer people a level of housing choice which is as 'normal' as possible within the area (e.g. if shared/ shorter term tenancies are the norm, these might also be part of the Housing First offer).
- Has honest adult conversations with people, helping them understand what is possible now and mentoring them to make informed decisions about the inevitable trade-offs in deciding where to live.
- Supports people to understand the rights and responsibilities of a tenant and to make an informed decision about whether to take on a tenancy at this stage; helping them find alternative accommodation and support if they decide this is not right for them at the current time.
- Avoids short term incentives which create artificial affordability or security (such as rent top ups, landlord incentives); may provide 'insurance' (as opposed to incentives) which address objections to a landlord offering a tenancy, and which seek to remove prejudice, barriers or exclusions.
- Can demonstrate a collaborative relationship with the landlord which is committed to the 'permanent offer of accommodation' and which recognises that managed moves are sometimes necessary. There are procedures in place for how to respond to all eventualities because the shared goal is for a well-managed experience which avoids a 'crisis intervention' mindset. The parties can describe examples of how they have responded in different situations which have led to a well-managed outcome.
- Beneficiaries can describe their experience of being offered a home as a recognisably different experience. For example, they can see the difference between a 'suitable' offer which they feel they had no choice but to accept or be deemed intentionally homeless, and their experience with Housing First in which they felt that their worker was genuinely interested in helping them to find a property that felt like home.
- There may be a formal or informal agreement to disregard previous tenancy breaches and offer a genuine 'first refusal' (as opposed to only offering hard to let properties).

2. Flexible support is provided for as long as it is needed

To provide support which is sufficiently flexible and consistent, a high-fidelity scheme tightly manages workers' caseloads, considering factors including:

- The extent to which support workers are involved in other tasks, e.g. sourcing housing, engaging with people who do not yet have a tenancy, building strategic relationships with other agencies.
- The amount of administrative support available to them.
- The length of time people on the caseload have been settled (i.e. requiring less support, but still 'open').
- How integrated the service is with other services and specialisms (e.g. how much of the workers' time is spent in 'persistent advocacy' to gain access?).
- How the service is organised and who it serves (for example, if the workers are expected to be on the streets engaging with people, they need more capacity to flex).

The size of caseloads may vary between high fidelity schemes, however an upper limit of 7 is typical, with caseloads often being much lower than this in practice (e.g. under 5, especially where services – and hence those using them – are newer).

The measure of flexibility is the capacity of the service to respond to the needs of the people accessing the service.

It includes being able to demonstrate that one of the team can, and does, respond even if their primary worker is unavailable.

It will have a range of responses such as out of hours telephone contact and repairs service (especially with reference to domestic abuse incidents). It may have a peer mentor response, and it will have an arrangement for weekends and bank holidays. It will have emergency response mechanisms which include a budget for immediate requirements such as moves, taxis to hospital, B&B if unsafe to remain at home, food parcels or emergency fuel top ups.

The flexibility may also be measured by descriptions of good planning – that all eventualities have been anticipated, planned for, and communicated. The observed practice appears calm, smooth and responsive (rather than defined by drama or crises.) There should be little use of the word 'chaotic' to describe beneficiaries – their responses and behaviours are appropriate to their experience and environment; staff working in this area should be attuned to this.

Supervisors can describe in detail the mechanisms they have to support staff to remain resilient, 'attuned' and responsive in a very demanding working environment.

3. Housing and support are separated

A key principle of Housing First is that the support ‘sticks’ even if the tenancy fails; and conversely, that the person’s decisions made about accessing support do not, in themselves, jeopardise their tenancy.

To achieve this in practice, high fidelity schemes:

- Are clear that the tenancy agreement (and wider legal framework) sets the parameters for the individual, as they would for anyone else, and that the purpose of support is to enable the person to sustain their tenancy (and citizenship) successfully.
- Do not add further rules and requirements regarding engagement with support provided by Housing First and other agencies.
- Are clear that the offer of accommodation is permanent. A tenancy can be ended, however, the commitment to permanence means that the service has responsibility to secure an alternative. The new tenancy should also be offered unconditionally, disregarding previous failures. However, it should be apparent that learning about property suitability and matching has been appropriately applied to the new offer. High fidelity to this principle does not mean that we keep making the same mistakes repeatedly.
- Plan to provide unconditionality, setting out a clear management plan which anticipates and de-escalates possible challenges and issues. This means that a managed move can be orchestrated if a tenancy fails. The plan might, for example, include access to emergency gas, electric, and/or food vouchers, a built-in (albeit internal) insurance policy for non-payment of rent, a personalisation fund for damaged furniture or stolen personal items, a 24-hour response contact, etc.
- A core part of the support offered to tenants will be to help them understand, pre-empt and develop strategies to deal with their own triggers.

4. Individuals have choice and control

Choice and control are critical to the model, as both a mechanism for individual recovery and wider culture change in services. A high-fidelity Housing First scheme:

- Takes time at the outset to build a strong relationship with people so that they understand what Housing First is and give informed consent to be part of it (this should not be confused with having to be ‘housing-ready’).
- Takes time to define what this principle looks like in practice in their service, and where the boundaries are.
- Team members can describe the parameters of choice, are aware of power imbalances, structural inequalities and service/process led rather than person centred approaches. They can also describe the checks and balances within their team, organisation and wider network to reduce the risk of reverting to the familiar (best for service vs best for person)
- Maximises people’s choices in relation to their housing and tenancy (see points under Principle 1).
- Ensures that tenants feel in control of when and how they receive support.

- Supports people to navigate 'ordinary' systems and services, as part of wider work to remove barriers within systems for those with multiple needs.
- Enables tenants to develop their own strategies to keep themselves safe, to access their entitlements and to meet their responsibilities as tenants and citizens.
- Continuously reflects on and manages the balance between liberty, wellbeing and safeguarding.
- Can demonstrate a learning mindset and culture which is open to challenge. Team members and management challenge each other.
- There may be a critical friend available to the team, someone who is less invested. They may seek out uncomfortable conversations which challenge their practice, or their application of the principles. They may have an external evaluator or peer review system in place to maintain the impetus and avoid complacency.

5. The service is based on people's strengths, goals and aspirations

Housing First is a strengths-based model. This means that:

- Workers take a collaborative approach, putting people in control of their own lives, not telling them what they should do; staff can describe the ways in which they demonstrate a belief that people have the right to make decisions about their own lives.
- Relationship-building, between workers and customers and between customers and others in their lives, is understood to be what matters most. There may be an overtly stated theory of change or operating principle which sets out how this service recognises the value of positive relationships on sustainable outcomes, and can describe how their interactions and interventions hold these principles in mind.
- It recognises that everyone has strengths and something to contribute. It supports people to identify, develop and apply their own strengths and find opportunities to give as well as to receive support.
- Workers stay curious about the individual, drawing on psychologically informed models, such as trauma- or attachment-informed approaches to understand puzzling behaviour as an adaptive response to life experiences, and help people develop alternative responses and strategies.
- Workers maintain a general outlook of hope, believing in human capacity to change.
- The approach gives permission, both to staff and customers, to take risks to achieve the things that matter, although it requires them to weigh up risks, plan to reduce them wherever possible and learn from the times when things don't go as planned.
- It aims to build resilience in all areas of a person's life, so that they are better equipped to bounce back from challenges and have a support network which can help them do this.

A high-fidelity Housing First scheme recognises that, to work consistently in this way, it must:

- Model and clearly articulate this way of working throughout – from its staff management to its partnership work, and from its policies to its practice with individuals. It needs to be clear about how it is different from other services, e.g. in that it does not use sanctions to manage or respond to behaviours.

- Invest in sufficient training, supervision and emotional support for its workers so they can articulate and apply this way of working consistently and sustainably.
- Recognise that workers can and should share their personal experiences and form professional friendships with the people they support, but that it takes a lot of reflection and honesty to manage these boundaries. Supervisors and managers can describe the ways in which they are vigilant about supporting staff with these new boundaries.
- Ensure that the way in which it records incidents and the stories it tells other professionals reflect these principles, and does not simply describe a series of problems, crises and practical tasks.

6. An active engagement approach is used

This principle challenges traditional models in that it places responsibility for engagement on the worker, not on the person. Traditional services may use terms such as 'hard to reach' or 'difficult to engage' which is a clear indicator that the person is expected to conform and comply with the service offer. Failure to engage is often used as a measure in these services.

In Housing First, the service recognises that it is the systems that have failed many people with an inflexible approach. It is the responsibility of the provider to be much more creative and persistent in building trust and establishing a relationship.

This means that workers will use a range of approaches and responses to establish contact with a person.

There will be an understanding of how long it can take someone to trust a professional, therefore traditional practices of withdrawing a service offer after three missed appointments are not seen in any form.

Workers make an effort to be visible and available within an environment or situation familiar and comfortable to the person, and a recognition that numerous visits may be necessary.

There are no performance indicators in place which dictate how long it should take to 'engage' someone.

The service should have a clearly defined statement of their offer which recognises the balance between respecting a person's choice not to see a support worker on a particular day or not to engage with a particular type of support, with the need to be persistent and consistent so that potential issues are caught early. Again, this is about striking a balance between liberty, wellbeing and safeguarding.

A high-fidelity Housing First scheme:

- Checks in with its customers regularly – in practice this varies between a daily phone call offering support 365 days a year to a weekly visit. The service should have a

clear rationale for how and why they define their offer and should be able to describe how it differs from traditional services.

- Is proactive when its customers are not asking for support or when they say they are 'fine' but appear not to be so.
- Provides an emotional place of safety, a sense of unconditionality to its customers.
- Takes care not to convey a sense that workers' time is more valuable than customers' time.

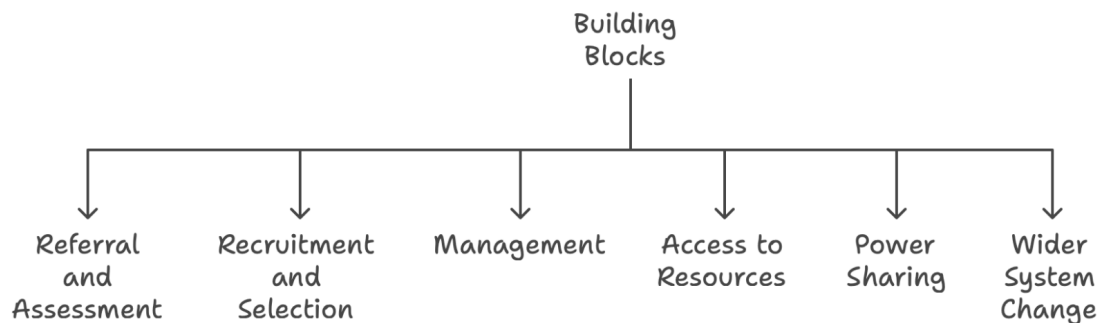
7. A harm reduction approach is used

Different schemes and the individuals working in them may have diverse beliefs and theories in relation to addiction and change, but there must be a shared understanding of harm minimisation. In practice this means that a high-fidelity Housing First scheme:

- Has a shared ethos in relation to harm minimisation.
- Works hard to apply this consistently, through regular staff and case supervision, consistent policies and procedures, and a culture of self- and peer challenge within teams.
- Recognises that drug and alcohol use is not something which the service can or should 'fix'.
- Supports individuals to set their own goals in relation to behaviours that may be harmful or risky to them and to develop their own strategies and solutions to manage these.
- Responds to lapses, crises and problems in a non-judgemental and non-punitive way, encouraging people to draw their own learning from them.
- Provides opportunities for peer support and mentoring, recognising that people with lived experience who provide this support will also need significant support to identify and manage their own triggers and boundaries.

Part 2: The strategic and organisational building blocks for a high-fidelity Housing First scheme

Here we identify the foundations needed to support a high-fidelity Housing First scheme.



1. Referral and assessment

Some of the principles above should ideally apply in *all* homelessness services: for example, **everyone** who is experiencing or at risk of homelessness should receive a service which is strengths-based, offers them choice and control, and recognises their right to a home. However, the cost effectiveness of a high-fidelity Housing First offer hinges on it being targeted at those with multiple and compound needs who are in greatest need of a long-term flexible support and active engagement offer. To ensure this, decisions about who should be offered a place or accepted onto Housing First should ideally be made by more than one agency.

There are different processes and criteria in place for making decisions about whether a person is suitable for Housing First. It is important that these recognise that people will take different routes into the service and that current accommodation status does not become a barrier to their acceptance. For example, if a scheme only takes current rough sleepers, it does not allow preventative interventions; if a scheme only takes people from hostels, it slips back into the 'staircase model' which it is intended to replace for this cohort.

Having a multi-agency process for deciding who should be accepted onto Housing First should facilitate a joint commitment to support each individual. Ideally, this process should sit within a wider integrated homelessness system so that the decision is not 'Housing First or not' but about finding the best offer for this person (or couple) within the whole system. Alternative solutions can then be generated for those who are not offered a place.

2. Recruitment and selection

Recruiting and retaining the right staff is crucial to a Housing First scheme's ability to deliver according to the principles. Prioritising values, aptitudes and personal resilience within recruitment and selection is a first step to finding the right people; involving people with

lived experience in designing and delivering the process can help to challenge traditional approaches and assumptions.

Lived experience can be extremely valuable within staff teams; however, it is important that selection processes also look at other experience and aptitudes so that people are not set up to fail. It is important to think about whether the team reflects the age, gender, ethnicity, etc. of the cohort it will support and consider taking positive action to encourage and support under-represented applicants.

3. Management

High fidelity Housing First schemes depend on excellent management. Managers need to be able to provide a high level of support and supervision to frontline workers, including emotional support and general vigilance. There is a need for constant contingency planning to manage caseloads, crises, staff sickness, etc. and for regular supervision to manage risks positively. Externally, the manager needs to promote integration with wider services and systems at both operational and strategic levels if housing is to be sourced and access to other services brokered.

Traditional performance management – the need to report to commissioners, funders or partnership boards on multiple performance indicators – can get in the way of fidelity. It is important to keep indicators to a minimum (ideally focusing only on tenancy sustainment) and, through regular dialogue, find ways to define and improve ‘performance’ in relation to the principles and building blocks outlined in this framework. It is important from the outset to have a clear consensus around what problems the project is intending to solve and what each participating organisation wants to get from it.

Little work has been done to date on the specific skill set required for managers of Housing First services compared to traditional services. There will be additional pressure on managers who are at the interface between traditional contract performance and new ways of working, often without adequate infrastructure to support them. Again, values and beliefs which can translate into behaviours are critical. Specifically, managers must be capable of critical thinking, be reflective, have specific skills in reflective practice, coaching, restorative approaches. They must have an ability to understand and implement theoretical models, and, perhaps most importantly, the self-awareness to recognise the amount of ‘unlearning’ they will need to do, and to actively seek mentoring to challenge their practice.

The more senior the manager, the more important it is that they understand how different this way of working is, and demonstrate a commitment to redesign, reframe, and re-present all the systems and processes which support the model.

4. Access to resources

Good administrative support is important to prevent frontline staff being drawn too much into the back-office, and managers into organisational bureaucracy, rather than being available to provide emotional and case-based support to workers.

Effective systems need to be in place to source housing – whether through a housing association partner, a housing broker or social lettings agency – otherwise the team can end up spending a large proportion of their time trying to find properties.

Access to ongoing learning and development is essential for the team to operate within the principles. This should include input on psychologically informed approaches, strengths-based practice, positive risk management and safeguarding. Access to regular clinical supervision from outside of the organisation is generally considered to be best practice.

5. Power sharing

Power-sharing is critical to the ethos of Housing First and provides another opportunity to trigger wider system change. High fidelity schemes work to include people with lived experience in both service development and delivery. There are a range of different models being used to achieve this: some projects link to existing groups, traineeship or mentoring schemes; some recruit their own paid and/or voluntary workers with lived experience. Many involve people with lived experience in the selection of paid workers, on project boards, in developing processes and policies, and in reviews and evaluations.

High fidelity schemes take their duty of care to people with lived experience acting as peer mentors or support workers very seriously. They allow sufficient time and resource to support and develop these workers, helping them to identify and plan for their own triggers and build their own resilience.

6. Wider system change

If Housing First is to be effective in its case management offer to people with multiple and compound needs, it will need to overcome the barriers which exist for this group within mainstream services. Operationally, this will require relationship-building with staff in other agencies and, almost inevitably, some 'persistent advocacy' on behalf of the individual. To be sustainable, this should be supported by work at a strategic level to understand and act to reduce barriers to people with multiple and compound needs within policies, processes and service provision. There is an opportunity here to stimulate wider system change, benefitting those outside of the Housing First cohort as well as those within it.