



Checklist: How to target and support people experiencing homelessness with the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform
Community of Practice on Social Inclusion

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Introduction

This checklist on the use of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for actions to support people experiencing homelessness was developed as part of the work of the ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform (2020-2022)¹. The ESF+ can, in the 2021-2027 programming period, support Member States in implementing principle 19 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) 'Housing and assistance for the homeless' by funding initiatives that support homeless people back into housing.

First developed in New York in the early 1990s, the Housing First model has proven very successful in ending homelessness among people with high support needs in the USA and Canada and in several European countries. In the USA, Canada and in Europe, research shows that Housing First generally ends homelessness for at least eight out of every ten people². As such, Housing First is a social innovation replicated and scaled up in Europe³.

The questions featured in this document will guide those managing or implementing the ESF and ESF+, including managing authorities, intermediate bodies, relevant ministries, and organisations working on housing, in planning and implementing Housing First actions with homeless people. It draws on the experience and recommendations of Housing First initiatives previously funded by the ESF (2014-2020), building on the reflections of the peer-to-peer training 'Programming Housing First under the ESF+' (2021-2027) that took place in February 2021.



1. Have you ensured calls for projects are based on the core principles of Housing First?

Substantial evidence from across Europe, Canada and the USA demonstrates that Housing First programmes are successful when they respect the core principles of Housing First⁴.

Housing First is designed for people who need significant help to leave homelessness. Housing First uses housing as a starting point rather than an end goal. A Housing First service starts with the provision of housing and helps service users to live immediately and successfully in their own home as part of a community. Housing First is also focused on improving the health, well-being and social support networks of homeless people. It can help any person in situation of homelessness as well people with severe mental illnesses or mental health problems, homeless people with problematic drug and alcohol use, with

¹ The Platform comprises four Communities of Practice (CoP): 1) Employment, Education and Skills, 2) Social Inclusion, 3) Results-based Management, and 4) Social Innovation. These CoPs enable ESF managing authorities (MAs), intermediate bodies, expert and sectoral stakeholders to exchange knowledge, practices and experiences, and to deepen cooperation. The Social Inclusion CoP promotes social inclusion and combating poverty in a holistic manner. It works to integrate marginalised communities, tackle discrimination, enhance accessible, affordable and quality community-based services, and promotes the social economy and community-led development strategies. The CoP focuses on three sub-themes: Poverty and Social Exclusion of Children, Deinstitutionalisation, and Homelessness. For more information on Housing First: [What is Housing First - Housing First Europe Hub](#).

² Source: Housing First Europe Guide, chapter 1.1 Introducing Housing First. Accessible here: <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/what-is-housing-first/introducing-housing-first/>

³ See also the work of the ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform on social innovation at: <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en/social-innovation-and-transnational-cooperation>

⁴ See also previous work: 7th meeting of the ESF Thematic Network on Inclusion: https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/filedepot_download/2025/1880 and Transnational Platform (2019) Study Visit to Brno. <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/content/fighting-homelessness-help-esf.html>

poor physical health and disabilities. These services have also proven effective with people who are experiencing long-term or repeated homelessness⁵.

The Housing First Europe Guide describes in detail the eight core principles of Housing First and is a very useful resource, which is available in several languages. The core principles are: (1) housing as a human right, (2) choice and control for service users, (3) separation of housing and treatment (and non-conditionality of access to housing), (4) recovery orientation, (5) harm reduction support, (6) active engagement without coercion, (7) person-centred planning and, (8) flexible support for as long as required.

A Housing First approach prioritises people with high support needs, such as people with physical and mental health problems, addiction issues, and people with experience of chronic or recurrent homelessness.



2. Do Housing First projects sit within a wider, comprehensive homelessness and housing strategy?

Housing First initiatives have the highest success rates when they are part of strategies that strive to reduce and prevent homelessness. Wider housing strategies should: ensure the sufficient provision of affordable housing (including the construction of social housing units), provide adequate housing benefits (adequate in terms of private rental prices), and ensure effective rent control. While temporary and emergency accommodation are important to provide short-term immediate relief when people become homeless, permanent housing options substantially reduce homelessness in the mid- to long-term. Here, the ESF+ can resource Housing First pilot projects or the scaling up and/or mainstreaming of existing Housing First initiatives or strategies.

In summary, projects need to link with wider homelessness and housing responses and should be sustainable, both in terms of the support as well as the housing provided. The examples below presented at the peer-to-peer training illustrate these key aspects.



Key aspects and examples of ESF-funded Housing First actions

Strategic activities: Any successful Housing First strategy needs strong political will and guidance to move from an emergency to a long-term response to homelessness, especially during the early years of its implementation. This means a shift from financing emergency shelters towards a planned and continuous investment in permanent housing, through the creation of new housing and support of people in a situation of homelessness to access existing housing, usually mainly social and public housing.

Representatives of local/regional public housing providers, public and private landlords as well as housing authorities and public bodies in charge of housing and, ideally, of housing development and planning, are key stakeholders who need to be involved continuously in the development and implementation of a Housing First strategy.

Furthermore, Housing First strategies need to integrate rehousing and person-centred, low-threshold support. Social and health professionals who work with people in situations of homelessness are key stakeholders, including substance abuse and mental health services, women-specific and child protection services. Whenever possible, rehoused persons should

⁵ Source: Housing First Europe Guide, chapter 1.1 Introducing Housing First. Accessible here: <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/what-is-housing-first/introducing-housing-first/>

be referred to existing mainstream social and health services (to ensure access to the wide range of specialist health care). In addition, social workers can act as 'door openers' for people who are hesitant (or refuse) to get in touch with mainstream services (which often is related to negative experiences in the past).

Local service cooperation: Local cooperation is important, for instance, support services should assist Housing First tenants in accessing some form of income (e.g. social benefits) to ensure the tenant can contribute to the rent payments. In turn, a registered address allows the rehoused person to claim social benefits. This is particularly crucial if the project funding is only available on a temporary basis.

Training and employment related activities for tenants: Some Housing First initiatives combined Housing First with efforts to improve employability and social inclusion of users, for instance through training programmes, after people were successfully settled into their housing (see for example several regional Housing First projects in [Hungary](#)). In these cases, the ESF funded the delivery of training, a compensation paid to participants and covered public transport costs. In addition, social activities (such as workshops or volunteering) contribute substantially to the social inclusion of people who had experienced homelessness, support the re-establishment of a daily routine and provide meaningful activities.

Rental payment and social rental agencies: Funds from the ESF have been used to pay rent (for instance in the [Housing First Warsaw Project](#)). Housing First projects show that support by a social rental agency or local support services can be of great help in accessing and maintaining housing on the private rental market, particularly, when private landlords are reluctant to rent out to people receiving social benefits. To help build trust with local landlords, local services or social rental agencies initially sign rental contracts and then sub-rent to the tenant. After an agreed period of time, these contracts should turn into regular rent contracts between owner and tenant.

Renovation and refurbishment: The 2014-2020 Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) has been used for basic furniture and equipment and this can be combined with other national funds for renovation⁶. Funding for renovation and refurbishment is essential when people move into older housing units or housing which has not been occupied for a long time.

Employment of social workers and other support staff, training and knowledge exchange: The quality of the support provided by staff is critical to the successful rehousing of people who are homeless. Staff should be sufficiently trained and resourced, so that they can either directly provide support or assist tenants in accessing the support they need. ESF funding can be used to employ staff who accompany and support people as they settle into housing. These roles can include social workers, childcare specialists, medical professionals, including addiction specialists, and mental health professionals. In addition, local networking and exchange between professionals improves the quality of support provided to homeless people.

Establishment of knowledge sharing structures: Existing Housing First projects/programmes show that knowledge sharing contributes greatly to the successful implementation of Housing First initiatives. Learning networks, which include implementing organisations and services, have been funded under the ESF, as well as transnational training events with European Housing First expert organisations. The ESF can also be used to employ former homeless persons as 'experts by experience'. In addition, several Housing First projects used the FEAD to cover costs for training and counselling materials.

⁶ For 2021-2027, the actions which were supported by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived in the 2014-2020 programming period, eg. the distribution of food and/or basic material assistance, have been integrated into the ESF+.



3. Do planned Housing First actions involve all relevant stakeholders?

Relevant stakeholders ensure calls for projects meet local needs. In particular, the following groups should be involved in programming calls for projects:

- Public and private landlords to identify available housing units.
- Local support services and other frontline organisations to help to prioritise specific vulnerable groups (such as specific age groups, women, or mobile EU citizens) and collaborate to provide targeted support.
- Local policy-makers who plan, contract and manage different services in their community, including public housing development agencies.
- Officials in charge of homeless and housing policies and strategies (in Ministries, local authorities and/or public housing bodies).
- Funders / investors in housing, including housing cooperatives and banks, who might have interest in financing specific housing projects.
- Social and health services as well as other local organisations who support people in a situation of homelessness. They contribute experiences from their work towards the development of strategies to access new housing, the creation of support networks for involved staff and the identification of new or emerging vulnerable groups.
- Research agencies and public housing / urban planning agencies who can provide data to support the development and monitoring of Housing First programmes.



4. Do all stakeholders have a thorough understanding of Housing First as an approach?

Awareness raising and training should also be made available for all stakeholders. It is crucial that everyone involved in designing and delivering Housing First programmes understands the core principles of the approach. Exchange and training sessions will give the opportunity to either refresh knowledge about Housing First and to learn and to reflect on the process of implementing Housing First in local communities. This should go along with communication material, such as practical and user-friendly guidance about the Housing First approach.

The above mentioned [Housing First Europe Guide](#) touches upon all relevant aspects related to the planning, development, implementation and evaluation/monitoring of projects and programmes. Practical aspects related to the provision of [housing](#) and [support](#) within projects are also discussed in detail. Evidence on the effectiveness of Housing First and its positive outcomes for rehoused persons is provided in [chapter 1.4](#). (see, for instance, the '[First Assessment of the Housing First Methodology in Spain](#)').

The website also provides detailed information on Housing First [training](#), including a two-year 'Train the Trainer Programme' and features a list of country-specific experts. The Hub is a knowledge sharing platform for Housing First, both at conceptual and practical levels, and contact details of the programme coordinators are available [here](#).



5. Have you defined specific target groups for Housing First initiatives?

Target groups should be identified through a thorough assessment of the local context. The [ETHOS Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion](#) provides a complete description of the different living situations commonly referred to as 'homelessness'.

Homelessness does not only refer to people sleeping on the street or in emergency accommodation, but also refers to those sleeping at their friends' places or with family members. Women are particularly vulnerable to this type of homelessness, also referred to as 'hidden homelessness', which potentially exposes women to relationships of abuse and violence. ETHOS also ensures people living in non-conventional and unfit housing are included as target groups. As emphasised under the previous point, it is crucial to involve local support services to ensure all vulnerable groups are identified and included in the planned Housing First programme or project.



More information

In order to work best for specific groups such as young people and women, Housing First may need to be adapted. See also the [Housing First for Youth Programme Model Guide](#), [Housing First How To- Supporting Women – Tips from frontline professionals](#) by Homeless Link UK, and the [Toolkit on Women Experiencing Violence Against Women & Girls](#) by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance UK.



6. Have you ensured the Housing First initiative will give priority to people with high support needs?

When allocating places in Housing First programmes, priority should be given to the people who have high support needs, including mental and physical health problems, drug or alcohol addiction, chronic or long-term homelessness.

While Housing First is effective for most people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, it is important to focus on people who, without the support included in Housing First, would be failed, i.e. by other housing programmes / interventions which do not provide both housing *and* person-centred support.

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