

IN BRIEF:

HOUSING FIRST IN SMALL TOWNS



Although Housing First follows a specific set of clear principles, the reality of how support provision works on a day-to-day basis will depend on the context. This guidance has been developed by support workers who are delivering Housing First in small towns. They have advised that support providers and other stakeholders should be aware of the following issues if they are working in similar environments:

GOOD PRACTICE

Many aspects that are at the heart of successful Housing First projects are even more important to get right in small towns:

- Building relationships properly.
- Ensuring that clients know what Housing First involves, and their expectations are managed with open, honest conversations.
- Ensuring that referrals come with a detailed understanding of a client's history.
- Working to make sure that clients don't feel invisible to services, while not feeling too visible to people around them.

POTENTIAL ISSUES IN SMALL TOWNS

There are specific issues that might affect clients and projects in small towns with tightly knit communities. These include:

- **Close-knit communities:** One of the strengths of close-knit communities is that individuals and their histories are known, which often leads to community support. However, this could sometimes contribute to issues when trying to find suitable accommodation within an area. While Housing First depends on following a client's choices, they should understand that they might be living somewhere surrounded by people that know them. There's also a risk that people who do not know them will very quickly find out about their history after they've moved onto a particular street. This can contribute to a feeling of not having a 'second chance'.
- **Resilient social circles:** Communities that have grown up together have a long history of resilient and supportive social circles. This is almost always a positive; however, clients might find themselves worrying about previous peer groups or associates within the town. This is, of course, in addition to actually finding themselves pulled into previous circles. Because projects have less space to be dispersed, issues like this can become magnified. Having honest conversations about clients about this, as well as coping strategies, is vital.
- **Confidentiality:** When a community already knows a lot about individuals, this can create issues with confidentiality, which will impact on a client's mental state. Neighbours might somehow know a client is part of a Housing First project or a homelessness-related service without the project having shared any information. Again, building up buy-in and awareness of what Housing First really means is vital.

- **Communities have developed their own resources:** Because of the close-knit nature of small towns, there are often highly effective active community champions and groups. Housing First projects need to work through and with these groups rather than imposing from above.
- **Identifiable individuals:** Due to smaller populations, anything published on social media or in the local press could result in well-known individuals being discussed on social media. This could lead to a snowballing of negative perception of clients.
- **Embedded organisations:** Increasingly, organisations like the police, landlords and housing professionals are integrating into their communities. This is a positive thing, as it means they understand the issues facing these communities. However, this could result in negative opinions of a client being reinforced. This all contributes to clients feeling they can't ever change or escape such perception. As always, the better the understanding of Housing First, the better the buy-in will be, and the less these issues will arise.
- **A supportive community:** Often, because people in small towns know each other, they have close, supportive relationships with each other. However, there is the potential that someone placed within these communities, with no other links to people within them, might feel more isolated.
- **Overstretched external partners:** In small towns and rural areas, health services and other partners vital to Housing First might be overstretched, and less likely to prioritise Housing First clients in need of fast referrals. Clients might also feel 'invisible' to services, in a curious inversion of the problem of feeling too visible to peers, the community, and organisations like the police.
- **Reduced transport links:** Clients might struggle to make it to appointments, given a relative lack of public transport, or reduced frequency of transport. While members of staff in Housing First projects often take clients to appointments, or travel to meet clients where they feel most comfortable, support providers should take into account the potential increased demand for this in small towns.
- **Homelessness as a problem, not people with problems:** This issue applies to all communities, whether big cities, small towns, or rural: there can be a danger that the community sees homelessness as an issue affecting the town, rather than an issue affecting real people who need support.
- **Police balancing cohesive communities and the needs of support providers:** Members of the local police force might find it difficult to effectively balance the needs and concerns of a tight-knit community, with the things they are being told by support providers and other Housing First stakeholders. Ensuring that intensive support is available round the clock, to allay, in part, police concerns, is vital.

HOUSING FIRST NETWORK WALES

Co-ordinated by Cymorth Cymru, the Housing First Network for Wales is a group of individuals and organisations with an interest in developing Housing First and implementing it across Wales.

With representation from the third sector, the Welsh Government, local authorities, social landlords, health boards and more, it aims to ensure consistency, but also to share best practice and learning.

Find out more at: www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/en/policy/housing-first/