

HOUSING FIRST BEST PRACTICE REPORT

LEARNING FROM PROJECTS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR

NOVEMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

As part of Cymorth Cymru's focus on Housing First in Wales, we will be releasing a series of best practice reports, focusing on different stages of project life cycles. This report focuses on the first year of a Housing First project.

To gather examples of good practice during the first year of a Housing First project, we shared an online survey with various Housing First practitioners who have engaged with the Housing First Network. Four detailed responses were received, each from a senior individual at a different organisation or project.

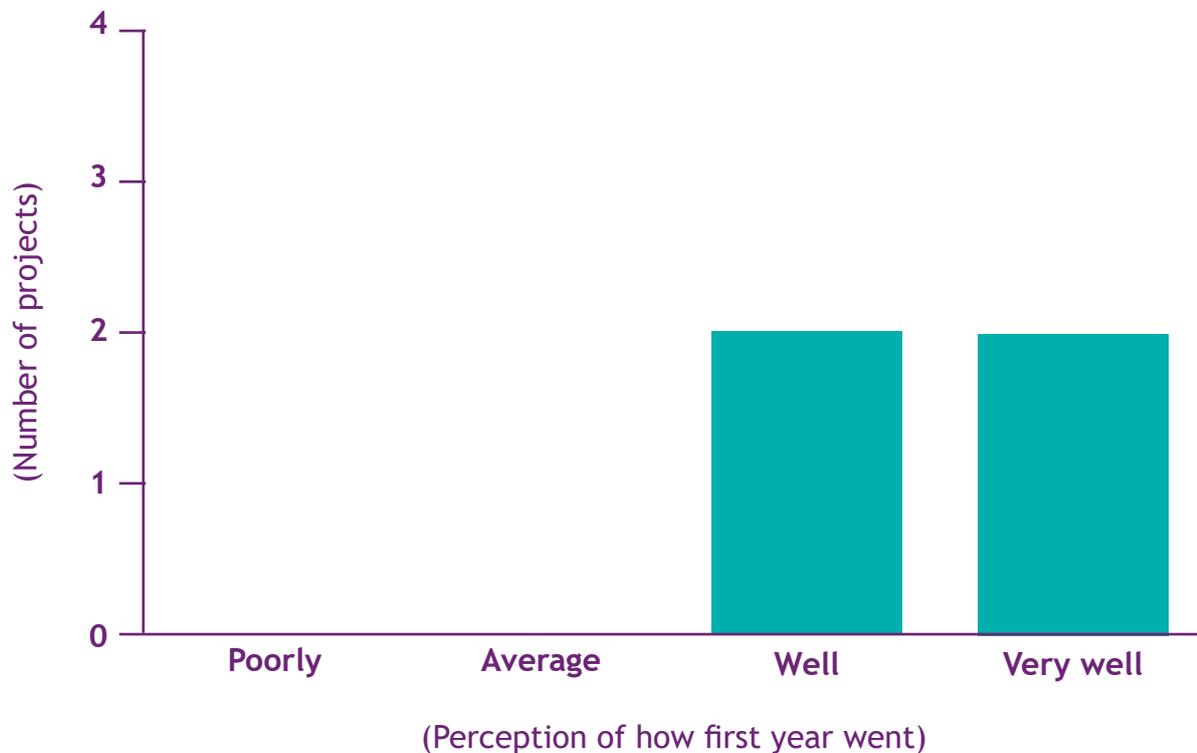
It should be noted that the field work for this report was carried out before the onset of the COVID pandemic. As the situation has evolved, it is clear that understanding what Housing First is, and how it can work effectively in accordance with its principles, is more important to Wales than ever. This document should be read alongside the good practice guidance we have published in relation to COVID-19: '[Housing First in a COVID and post-COVID Wales](#)'.

The following pages discuss key challenges and enablers associated with the first year of a Housing First project, as well as highlighting good practice for a range of stakeholders, from Welsh Government to local government, to support providers themselves.

FINDINGS

The following pages document the findings from the survey.

HOW WELL DID THE FIRST YEAR OF YOUR HOUSING FIRST PROJECT GO?



WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Respondents were asked whether they would have done anything differently, given what they now know about the first year of operation.

Key themes included:

The lack of available properties, and the need for more financial investment to secure better quality private rented sector accommodation in an effective way. To some extent these factors are beyond the control of Housing First teams, but it is notable that this has come up so consistently.

One organisation suggested that in future they would create a lessons log to keep track of key lessons learned (for example, giving cigarettes to smoke with potential clients, and to have an on-call system for 24/7 support; having a team van).

KEY CHALLENGES

Respondents were asked about the key challenges they faced during the first year of running a Housing First project. The key challenges named across the responses were:

- Property availability and the lack of suitable housing supply
- Building buy-in and developing trusting relationships with clients, housing providers, and other stakeholders
- Recruitment of appropriate staff
- Cuckooing and county lines causing issues for clients
- One response discussed the challenges around geography and transport links in the local area, which is very rural, with poor public transport - this makes it hard for clients, and mileage reimbursement is high.

KEY ENABLERS

Similarly, respondents were asked to identify key enablers (that is, decisions, people, policies or structures that had a positive effect) for the first year of the Housing First project. Key enablers were:

- Successfully recruiting the right support staff and ensuring they understand the principles and have the tools they need to do the job; ensuring these members of staff have a 'whatever-it-takes' focus on solutions and can negotiate well with landlords.
- Having the existing right team, and existing frontline relationships, as well as existing relationships with commissioners.

DIFFICULTY OF PRINCIPLES

Respondents were asked about the difficulty they perceived in implementing the Housing First principles, as developed by the Housing First Network. All respondents rated the difficulty as 'average', out of a 1-5 scale: Very hard, hard, average, easy, very easy.

Respondents were asked if any principles stood out as being particularly difficult, or particularly easy, to implement.

One respondent said that the context at the time could make different principles easier or more difficult. This was expanded on in another response saying a similar thing.

For the latter respondent, **the main obstacle was sourcing adequate and affordable accommodation in the areas chosen by clients**. Quite often, expectations need to be managed, and team members need to communicate honestly with clients about this.

One respondent pointed out that implementing Principle 10, which refers to **external stakeholders like the police, mental health teams, health representatives and substance use workers**, was particularly difficult.

WHAT ONE THING CAN WELSH GOVERNMENT DO TO MAKE THE FIRST YEAR OF A HOUSING FIRST PROJECT EASIER?

Respondents were asked to name one thing that Welsh Government could do to make the first year of Housing First provision easier. Most respondents called for longer-term, more sustainable funding covering more than twelve months. Respondents argued that this would come with a range of benefits:

- It would aid staff retention and show commitment to providers.
- It would also encourage property allocation and stronger enforcement of offers from housing providers.
- It could improve client engagement.

Respondents pointed out that when social landlords and PRS landlords engage in a leasing scheme to house Housing First tenants, it reduces concerns that private landlords might have about the model. As such, Welsh Government should work to expand its leasing scheme system.

WHAT ONE THING CAN COMMISSIONERS DO TO MAKE THE FIRST YEAR OF A HOUSING FIRST PROJECT EASIER?

Respondents were asked to name one thing commissioners could do to make the first year of Housing First easier. Key themes included the repetition of earlier points about longer, more sustainable funding - in particular, funding covering periods longer than a year. Longevity and security of funding has a direct impact on staff retention and morale, so this needs careful consideration.

When Housing First schemes are commissioned, funding and capacity needs to be available to provide trauma-informed support to staff, to address potential vicarious trauma. Commissioners should also work with local partners to ensure that allocation processes enable access to social housing, as well as work with the private landlords to expand capacity in the private sector (potentially via leasing schemes). One respondent suggested a Housing First roadshow in North Wales, to engage more commissioners and raise awareness of the model.

WHAT ONE THING HOUSING OPTIONS OR HOUSING DEPARTMENTS DO TO MAKE THE FIRST YEAR OF A HOUSING FIRST PROJECT EASIER?

Respondents were asked what local authorities could do to make the first year of Housing First easier. Respondents made a number of suggestions.

- Recognising the importance of property allocation, as well as ensuring all stakeholders understand and are committed to the Housing First principles and putting them into practice
- Similarly, housing assessments need to be completed in faster and more flexible ways. Fewer administrative processes here would enable people to be moved onto housing waiting lists more quickly and be allocated property more effectively.
- One respondent pointed out that they were finding it difficult to encourage housing associations to sign the Housing First Housing Management Charter (developed by the Housing Management Sub Group of the Housing First Network) that they had already verbally agreed to.
- Housing benefit rates could be increased, to improve the affordability of properties and lead to a wider choice of properties - rather than just the cheapest, lowest-condition properties being available.

IF YOU COULD MAKE ONE RECOMMENDATION TO SOMEONE STARTING A HOUSING FIRST PROJECT, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Respondents were asked to provide one recommendation they would give to others starting a Housing First project. Providers suggested many ideas, including:

BEING BOLD: Being bold in one's approach, rather than conforming or compromising to satisfy the potentially traditional approaches used by other agencies. By being prepared to challenge such approaches, and communicating honestly, it'll be easier to develop strategic buy-in. This is important, as relying on individuals carries risks in the long term, as they might change roles or leave.

WORK COMPASSIONATELY: Work with clients compassionately and positively, and recognise every situation is different.

KEEP NOTES: Log all lessons learned, which has been key for one of the respondents to prevent issues repeating themselves.

REMEMBER CHOICE AND CONTROL: Care should be taken to remember the importance of client choice and control when it comes to finding accommodation, despite the lack of housing supply. Clients might well be in a property for years so it is vital the client has chosen it, and the property is of a high standard.

KEY THEMES THROUGHOUT

Throughout the survey with these providers, key themes were identified which are noted above in separate sections, but summarised below.

- The need for longer term funding.
- The need to recruit and retrain the right people.
- The need for positive relationships with social and private landlords.
- The need for more suitable properties.
- The need for stakeholders to understand and be supportive of Housing First.
- The need for strategic buy-in from all stakeholders as opposed to relying on individuals.

BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are some best practice recommendations for providers, and all other stakeholders:

LEARNING LESSONS

Keep track of lessons learned, as well as examples of best practice, Housing First project staff should consider keeping a 'lessons log', which can be shared with new staff and collaborated on.

RENTING ENFORCEMENT

Where necessary, work with landlords to ensure that the importance of engagement with Rent Smart Wales is understood.

CHARTER ENGAGEMENT

Work with social landlords to encourage them to sign the Housing Management Charter. Cymorth Cymru and the Housing Management Sub Group will be providing support in this area in due course.

LONGER TERM FUNDING

Commissioners, alongside Welsh Government, should look at ways of providing longer term funding, rather than annual funding.

MITIGATE TRANSPORT CHALLENGES

If the Housing First project is in a rural area, where transport links are difficult, there might be innovative ways of reaching clients. Funding might also help with transport reimbursement costs.

STRONG, TRAUMA-INFORMED STAFF SUPPORT

To increase staff recruitment and retention, appropriate support needs to be in place for staff (to help with secondary or vicarious trauma, as per the principles of Psychologically Informed Environments). Staff need to feel they are valued and supported. Other ways of improving staff relationships and team-building should be considered.

PREPARE FOR EXPLOITATIVE PEOPLE

Good practice around cuckooing and county lines must be shared. Several organisations have dealt with these issues now and stakeholders should utilise the Housing First Network meetings to share learning and best practice.

REMAINING HONEST AND TRANSPARENT

To develop lasting relationships between staff and clients, honest and open communication is needed. Expectations might need to be managed, but ultimately, it is vital that client choice is respected, so they feel they have control over their lives and support. As such, clients might need to understand that they have to wait for accommodation in the area they want.

TRY NEW THINGS

Similarly, being bold and ready to challenge existing ways of working can help build relationships with other agencies, organisations, or individuals who need to be involved in Housing First delivery in some way. Do not accept traditional, embedded approaches - there is plenty of evidence that Housing First is effective, and as you start building your own in collaboration with others, this should be clear.

SHARE BEST PRACTICE

Housing First roadshows should be established across Wales to share best practice. Alternatively, the operational meetings on Housing First that Cymorth Cymru is setting up could serve this purpose too - although the current focus will be on the current COVID-19 situation and how it is affecting Housing First, the scope could widen in time.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Housing benefit rates should be examined to make property more affordable.

HOUSING SUPPLY

Although this point has been made repeatedly, there needs to be an increase in truly affordable housing supply. Cymorth Cymru will continue to lobby for this, but projects should aim to work with as many landlords as possible, provided the landlords understand and are committed to the principles. Similarly, links with private rented sector landlords could be developed where appropriate.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

To develop strategic buy-in from stakeholders, work to ensure that different members of staff at organisations understand Housing First, and have been presented with evidence of its effectiveness. Bring as many people on board as possible, developing relationships along the way.



**FOR QUERIES ABOUT HOUSING FIRST, PLEASE CONTACT:
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