

Housing First

Finding independence, moving forward
and creating cultures – Key Learning from
the ICM Housing First project 2016-20

March 2020

 **Inspiring Change Manchester**



 Shelter

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Introduction

Housing First is recognised as a successful approach in helping people to sustain their own tenancies where they have faced recurrent homelessness and other disadvantages, such as addiction or mental ill health.

It works simply by supporting people directly into their own place instead of having to go through the traditional 'stepped' process. In Housing First, a person who is struggling to navigate the housing system is supported to find suitable housing where they can have ownership of their own tenancy without any pre-conditions to engage with additional support.

Key features of Housing First

Housing First is guided by a set of principles that help to tie it to its original aims and purpose. These include:

- People having a right to a home
- Flexible support provided for as long as it is needed
- Housing and support being separated
- Individuals having choice and control

- Support based on people's strengths, goals and aspirations
- Encouraging active engagement
- Harm reduction, not abstinence
(Homeless Link 2017)

This paper helps to draw upon the experiences of the Inspiring Change Manchester project to understand how they were able to put these principles into action over the course of the project. It helps to reflect on learning from daily practice where a project has moved on from the initial pilot period to consider the everyday realities that practitioners face in delivering a Housing First project. It hopes to add to the conversation on Housing First and develop learning in this area of work in order to consider ways forward and support others developing their own Housing First projects.

Inspiring Change Manchester

Inspiring Change Manchester (ICM) is an 8-year, National Lottery Community Fund initiative that is led by Shelter to develop ways of supporting people facing the challenge of

- homelessness,
- substance addiction,
- mental ill health
- offending

The initiative has been set-up to explore and develop ways of supporting people facing these challenges, to consider what we can learn from this and to promote wider systems change so that people can get access to the support they need.

The initiative was set up in partnership with

Community-Led Initiatives - who provided Peer Mentoring Support

www.communityled.org.uk/

Back-On-Track – who provided training, education and employment support

www.backontrackmanchester.org.uk/

Self-Help Services – who provided mental-health and well-being support

www.selfhelpservices.org.uk/

www.inspiringchangemanchester.org.uk

Background to the Inspiring Change Manchester Housing First Project

In 2016, ICM began a 2-year Housing First Pilot to explore ways of supporting

people who were repeatedly homeless and finding it difficult to gain housing through the conventional or ‘traditional’ steps. During this time, the University of York undertook an evaluation of the pilot to help the project think through how Housing First could work in the city. This is what they said:

- Housing First can be successful in stabilising someone’s housing situation, helping them to maintain a place to stay when it closely follows its original principles
- Housing First works best when connected with wider support around social inclusion, health and well-being and developing personal training, volunteering and employment opportunities
- Staff adopting ‘new’ philosophies to support, including more flexible working, personalisation and empathetic approaches, helps people to overcome personal barriers to housing.

In March 2018 the pilot period came to an end but ICM decided to continue with the project for a minimum of 2 years. They used this as an opportunity to help develop learning over this time, to move beyond the usual pilot phase and see what was needed to help people on a longer journey of recovery in their own homes.

The Housing First team was made up of a Service Manager, a Development Officer, 2 Engagement Workers, a Trainee role and were supplemented by a team of

Peer Mentors. Staff experiences ranged from professional backgrounds to personal experiences of accessing homelessness services.

At the time of this research the Housing First project has been running for nearly 4 years and has worked with 22 people, 17 of whom have both found and sustained their own tenancy.

What we did

Working collaboratively with ICM Staff and Volunteers we went through a process of 'critical reflection', attempting to ask ourselves questions of where we were going as a project, what role Housing First could continue to play in people's lives and how we could build on what we have learned, as well as what we bring to help people on their personal journey. To support this we set out a series of questions to help frame our learning:

- Is quality of life improving for people on Housing First and how would we know?
- If people are stably housed, what role does Housing First then play in helping people move forward?
- How do we support people to find greater agency and independence that helps their time on Housing First come to a natural end?

Through a series of interviews and group sessions we built up a picture of the things we felt were most important in developing Housing First. This ranged

from understanding what success looked like for Housing First clients, to the skills needed to work on Housing First, to how Housing First worked within wider 'systems' and service provision.

Through this we recognised the challenges that we were facing that situated our work within a wider context of service provision and support. From this we evolved our learning to ask ourselves further critical questions -

Housing First is based on a principle that support is on-going but how realistic is this with existing resources?

We want to encourage people to become independent but how can we achieve this when they have faced long-term institutional support or have on-going needs that might need life time support?

How do we come to decisions about when to step back from offering support and enable someone to have full responsibility for their own tenancy?

It was these challenges that we wanted to face up to as part of the on-going learning.

Housing First - Towards a Fulfilling Life

Housing First is built on the foundation that having a place of your own can help you start a journey that helps you tackle other challenges you may be facing. It is not 'housing only' - a simple means of

housing someone without any support. Instead, it is an attempt to provide a genuine foundation for people to start a personal journey that helps them to improve their overall quality of life.

During the Housing First pilot, ICM supported 22 people to find their own tenancies and continued to support them with on-going issues such as access to health care services and mental health support, benefits and personal financing, peer mentoring and access to personal pursuits, as well as training and personal development support.

We know from previous research that Housing First can help people to see different futures for themselves by providing stability and personal space for people to reflect on their own agency and personal goals. Attempting to understand an individual's motivation, setting out a hopeful vision for themselves and for a fulfilling life helped to initially set some early parameters for setting these goals.

In 2017, as part of the Inspiring Change Manchester programme, we asked people what they thought made up a personally fulfilling life. They told us

- Personal independence and 'control over my life'
- Financial security, 'the money I need'
- A safe place to stay
- Strong, close relationships
- Friends, Family, Loved ones

- Purpose – 'I know where I'm heading with my life'

Individual journeys on Housing First have both represented the distance that people have travelled on ICM as well as the challenges they still face in achieving these. In some cases, small steps, such as staying regularly in their own homes and engaging with staff, was considered a major breakthrough. In other cases gaining employment or attending college were considered realistic goals.

Creating these goals was agreed in conversation with the Housing First client. These were often dependent on a person's life history, their own biographies and what their personal expectations were. They could vary, but they would form an important early part in the engagement work of staff and the development of initial support plans.

Where Housing First clients, for example, had a long history of institutional settings (care, prison, hostels), street homelessness and social exclusion, as well as facing additional learning and communication needs, what was considered 'moving forward' could vary. For example, staff often asked what was realistic for people if they felt they would always need some level of support for long-term conditions. This could be a challenging discussion where, for example, there was a wider context that emphasised personal independence away from existing services in order to reduce 'dependence' on them. Staff

recognised that building relationships with existing services and gaining access enabled people to start a positive journey but success in achieving this could vary. In many cases staff would act as advocates for Housing First clients to help restore previous broken relationships with existing services or, alternatively, to make first introductions.

‘Goal setting’ for Housing First clients was initially undertaken during the development of support plans that were assessed through the Homelessness Outcomes Star¹. The emphasis in support planning was placed on providing immediate welfare and connecting people with existing services. Much of the energy of staff was directed towards keeping people safe in their homes, stabilising someone’s financial situation and getting immediate access to wider health and social care services. Staff acknowledged that more emphasis could have been placed on discussing longer-term plans for people and creating an early vision for independence within their support plans. However, these were often overtaken by more immediate concerns, especially around an individual’s safety and well-being.

Part of the challenge for staff were that ‘soft’ outcomes, such as the immediate gains for people on Housing First were not always highlighted within wider reporting or monitoring but did shape

early support. Oversight of the project would focus on housing sustainability, improvements in health and well-being and reduction in other service use but these were often long-term outcomes for people that did not always prioritise their immediate goals. Where a Housing first client could make some small personal steps, it could be difficult to link to these wider outcomes.

For example, an individual attending an appointment on their own, using public transport, going shopping or ringing friends and family could be a strong indicator that they were taking greater control of their lives and starting to express personal agency. This could be a clear sign that someone was more likely to make a success of their tenancy as they built these soft skills and developed personal confidence. However, there was less emphasis or opportunity to record these within wider outcomes monitoring. Clearly greater emphasis could be placed on understanding and recognising personal journeys within wider outcomes frameworks in Housing First.

Supporting in the community

Moving from a place of institutional housing support (whether through supported housing, temporary accommodation or rough-sleeping services) to self-sustaining tenancies

¹ Homelessness Outcomes Star is an assessment tool developed by Triangle, in partnership with London Housing Federation and Homeless Link

would prove to be a challenging transition as people were moved out of their environments where they had learned natural survival habits into potentially unfamiliar situations. Staff discussed how this came to re-situate their work from one of a 'service-led' approach with a clear objective ie. Finding and sustaining a tenancy, to community-based support where individual goals were being discovered over time.

Broadly keeping to the Housing First principles, staff spoke of the need to adopt 'person-centred' approaches to supporting individuals, helping them to identify their personal strengths and goals, create purpose and to empower informed decision-making over their own lives. There was an emphasis throughout the project on connecting Housing First clients into existing support networks to help them overcome the potential for social isolation and begin to build new forms of 'recovery capital' (see Best 2017).

Through the ICM project, Housing First clients could access peer mentoring and education and training support, as well as group activities through the ICM Hub. In addition, staff would connect people to wider support, including substance use and addiction services, mental health services, mutual aid groups and local community clubs. In some cases, staff would have to advocate on behalf of a client to try and gain access to a service and then offer motivational

support to encourage them to engage in the support. In other cases, it was a matter of providing information to the client and leaving it to them to engage in the support themselves.

The main emphasis through this support was to develop personal resources for the client such as self-agency (being able to make decisions for themselves) and self-esteem (having the confidence to take control of decisions) as well as develop supportive networks (that broke patterns of self-harming behaviour).

Engagement in wider support networks could be mixed and this proved to be the main challenge facing Housing First staff. Creating new support networks could be difficult where, for example, existing relationships with services could be broken, clients have had long periods of social isolation and where organisational barriers could be put up. In many cases, natural social networks (friends and family) that could offer much needed personal support were not in place or, where they were, whilst offering emotional support in the moment, could also perpetuate self-harming behaviour. In other cases, having a personal social network could act as positive motivation for personal transition away from harmful behaviours.

Staff found themselves striking a balance between wanting to intervene and manage someone's support, stepping back and enabling someone to have full agency over their own lives and acting as

a supportive network for them. In some cases, staff acknowledged that they were often the only support network for an individual and this could lead to fears that a dependency could be created through the project.

This helped to highlight some of the challenges in implementing a Housing First project where there are wider cultures of support that naturally want to intervene, manage or provide overarching care for someone's welfare. Staff acknowledged that they often had to navigate through this as there was still an emphasis on 'fire-fighting' crisis moments and ensuring that people were being 'moved' into further support. As one staff member noted *'it is still a cultural hangover'*. This proved to be an important learning point for staff who reflected on the emotional labour of the role and the need to protect their own well-being whilst working in the context of high welfare needs and vulnerability.

On reflection staff highlighted that there needed to be a general culture of 'whole-person' working within networks of support for people facing multiple and complex needs, of which, Housing First could be a strong part of. It was highlighted that the principles of Housing First could be over-run by the need to house people in the context of a high level of homelessness, which may miss out on the important elements of collective well-being and recovery support that also needs to be in place

when supporting people in their own tenancies.

This was considered an important learning point from the project and one which was felt was needed within wider discussions on how Housing First is being implemented.

Leaving the project

At certain stages in people's journeys on Housing First, conversations would begin that looked at how people would leave the project and begin to live independently from the support offered. To date, 6 people have successfully left the project and are living independently from the project in their own tenancies.

In some cases, this could be a natural, organic moment where it was clear that a Housing First client was supporting themselves and beginning to express their own agency – such as accessing benefits, attending training courses, going shopping or attending other services on their own.

At other times it could be a difficult discussion when it was felt that an individual could live independently from the project without a direct support worker in place. Staff acknowledged that there could be fears about letting go and this could be a difficult transition point for individuals if they had fears about losing their support base. As one staff member noted *'I fear that someone could be suffering in silence if we are not*

around'. These fears could be largely internal and were natural parts of people's roles where they were developing support relationships with Housing First clients.

This raised difficult questions as to which point an individual's time could come to an end on Housing First. Under the defining principles of Housing First (Homeless Link 2017) flexible support could be offered for as long as is needed but staff acknowledged that this should stay an under-pinning principle and not an over-riding objective, as it could lead to misconceptions about never-ending support and create the potential for dependence on a service to be created.

Naturally where support relationships were being developed, there were always risks that personal attachments could be created between a Housing First client and their Support Worker. These could act as a positive step, especially in helping to bridge gaps between someone accessing a service and those providing it. At the same time, they could also inhibit the potential for an individual to find their own independence within their tenancy. This balanced approach proved to be an enduring challenge for Housing First staff, who felt at times they had to move between both positions to help support people through times of crisis, transition or taking control of their own homes. This again raised some critical reflection as to what 'leaving the project' meant for people on Housing First, what this

looked like for their relationships with the project and what this could mean for on-going Housing First provision.

In the last 2 years ICM has begun to develop a membership approach, in which Housing First clients become active and on-going 'members' of the project, ensuring they would not be closed to the service when moving on from 1-2-1 support. Part of the purpose of the membership was to ensure that individuals could stop being key-worked but still continue to access support through the ICM Hub, Peer Mentoring and Education and Training provision. This has enabled people to re-attend the project and get support around additional access to services, including college or training courses.

It was acknowledged by staff that this helped to alleviate initial fears about ending the direct support work with an individual and helping them to have more agency from the project. This gradual phased 'stepped' approach was seen as key in beginning to take steps back from an individual and enabling them to move on from Housing First support.

Developing roles, building skills and creating cultures

Staff had time to reflect on their roles as Practitioners within Housing First and discussed how these developed over time, what skills they had built and how these were realised in practice. Staff had

received a wide range of training to help them build their roles depending upon what they were felt was needed within the project. Training available to staff included:

- Psychologically Informed Environments
- Interpersonal trauma
- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Attachment Theory
- The Care Act
- Supporting Women experiencing Homelessness
- Psychological perspectives on homelessness

Homeless Link (2018) have provided an oversight of the skills and learning needs of Housing First Workers. These helped to provide a map of the sorts of skills that staff on the project were to develop. These include:

- Advocacy
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Reflective practice
- Solution focused therapy
- Psychologically informed practice
- Harm reduction techniques
- Trauma informed care
- Motivational interviewing
- Asset-based approaches

Staff spoke of the need to balance developing skills, spending time with Housing First clients and managing expectations of being 'all things to all people'. In many ways, staff stated that informal, interpersonal skills were a greater necessity than many of the

professional skills they had already developed, and they recognised that 'skilling-up' these roles could diminish some of these 'softer' skill-sets. A balance was being created between being seen '*as another worker*' and offering the sort of support that an individual may value.

Staff also spoke of the greater value of having the space to explore personal skills and put them into practice. As one staff member remarked, being given greater autonomy to make decisions rather than follow restrictive procedures enabled them '*to release a lot of baggage*'.

Training and skills building were valuable but only in the context of a working culture that allowed them to be practiced. In particular, staff highlighted that they valued:

- A working culture that recognised that mistakes can be made and learnt from
- A chance for learning and development in practice – To explore different ideas to supporting people
- Reflective Practice – A chance to reflect on one's own practice in a process of continuous learning
- A supportive team who could share both challenges and achievements

This cultural environment helped to situate complex roles and enabled staff to develop their critical thinking and reflection skills that typically need time and space to build. This helped staff to develop solutions to potentially difficult situations. For example, where an individual could suddenly stop engaging with support, spend nights away from their home, start to engage with new harmful behaviours, or develop harmful relationships, staff could be given the space to reflect on their own role in relationship to these and consider what the best course of action was to take.

The role of reflective practice was considered a critical part of the project and time was taken to build reflective practice sessions into staff schedules. An individual with experience of delivering these was commissioned by the project and they were delivered every 2 months to staff. Staff described these sessions as places where emotional stress could be released and time taken to self-reflect on their roles. They became invaluable in helping staff to maintain their personal well-being in often difficult circumstances where challenges could be raised at any point.

Overall, the working culture of the project was to play an important part in its evolution and helped to situate the work of staff within a broader agenda of person-centred working, harm reduction and critical practice.

Key Learning and Conclusions

Through the 4 years of the Inspiring Change Manchester Housing First project a broad range of learning and reflection has helped to both shape the project and grow this from its early stages .

Through this we have built some key areas of learning that we want to voice from the project. These include

- **Beginning to plan for independence from Housing First at an early stage can help to overcome any fears at a later stage about leaving the project**
- **Housing First should be situated within a wider support network that promotes whole-person approaches. This considers an individual's life history, their personal goals and well-being as well as the potential for setbacks when developing support**
- **Developing outcomes frameworks that help to recognise and measure personalised goals at an early stage can encourage person-centred approaches to be embedded within the project**
- **Reflective practice built into Housing First projects can help overcome common challenges and protect staff well-being.**
- **A supportive working culture that helps to develop critical and reflective practices can enable staff**

to develop solutions to complex problems that arise during a Housing First project

These only form the key parts of the learning that was developed from the project that took place over the space of 4 years (and worked with a limited number of people across this period). Further learning can still be developed and built upon from this, especially as, over time, Housing First clients come to a natural end in their time on the project.

Further reading

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