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# Housing First Europe: Progress Report on a Social Experimentation Project

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## Introduction

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In Vol. 5(2) of this Journal, the background to the Housing First Europe project (HFE), which is funded as a social experimentation project by the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion) under the PROGRESS programme was outlined (Busch-Geertsema 2011). Further details on the project with five “test sites” (Amsterdam, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow and Lisbon) and five “peer sites” (Dublin, Gent, Gothenburg, Helsinki and Vienna) involved in the project may be found on the project website [www.housingfirsteurope.eu](http://www.housingfirsteurope.eu).

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## Methodology and Progress to-date

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HFE builds on existing and on-going evaluations in the five test sites, rather than attempting to devise a common evaluation methodology for all test sites, primarily due to funding constraints. As a result, diversity in the test sites are observable, in terms of scale and development, in terms of data collection and evaluation methods (retrospective in Amsterdam and Budapest, ongoing in Copenhagen, Glasgow and Lisbon) which poses a challenge for analysis at a cross-national level, but also provide the opportunity to profit from different perspectives on a diversity of project practices.

At a EU level, a number of common key questions have been developed for all five test site projects, and by August 2012 interim results have been made available from the five research units involved in the local evaluations. The key questions were related to the following main topics:

- Numbers and profile of service users (Age, sex, ethnicity/places of birth/nationality, household structure, employment status/income, housing/homelessness history)
- Support needs (and changes over time)
- Support provided/received
- Housing stability / housing retention rate
- Changes of quality of life/recovery
- User's satisfaction
- Community integration/conflicts
- Costs and financial effects
- Specific positive effects, challenges and lessons learned

The mutual learning strand of HFE (involving the peer sites and the steering committee as well as the test site representatives and researchers) has facilitated intensive discussions of the test sites' interim results. At the HFE meeting in Budapest, in September 2012, invited guests from Sweden, France, Norway and Finland have reported about Housing First projects which are not involved as partners of HFE and have presented plans and first evaluation results regarding these projects. A number of themes and questions have been discussed at the HFE meetings, such as

- Why Housing First?
- Which target group?
- Which kind of housing?
- What type of support for whom under which circumstances?
- Needs assessment and vulnerability indices
- Cost effectiveness of Housing First

## Interim Results of the Evaluations

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Although none of the projects replicates exactly the Housing First approach developed by Pathways to Housing (PtH) in New York (see Tsemberis 2010), as far as it was possible to extract from the evaluations (which were not fidelity analyses in the first place), four of the five test site projects share most of the essential elements of the Housing First approach. This includes rapid rehousing of homeless people without pre-conditions; a commitment to working with clients for as long as they need; an emphasis on consumer choice and self-determination (within given structural constraints); and an orientation on recovery and harm reduction.

While it was a condition of HFE only to include projects rehousing homeless people with complex support needs, the profile of service users varied considerably between the different projects. Only in one of the projects (Lisbon), was a psychiatric diagnosis an eligibility criterion for admission, and in this project the proportion of service users with co-occurring substance use was relatively low at 29 per cent. In all other projects, problematic substance use was reported for at least two thirds of the service users, with the project in Glasgow exclusively targeted at problem drug users.

The type of support also varied considerably. Only in one of the projects (Copenhagen) was the support team adhering to the principles of Assertive Community Treatment and including doctors and nurses. In other projects alcohol and drug services were provided by other agencies in close cooperation with the Housing First Service.

Finally, interesting differences were to be found in the way of procuring the housing needed. Only one project replicates the example of PtH in exclusively using the private rented housing market for procuring housing for homeless people served. As in New York, the project in Lisbon rents apartments from private landlords and sublets the apartments to the service users. In contrast, three projects relied in part or exclusively on social housing. In three projects, direct rent contracts between landlords and the service users were the rule, thereby realising another principle of PtH, the separation of housing and services, in an even stricter sense than the original “model”. Most of the housing procured for the test sites are scattered-site independent apartments, while a mix of this type of provision and congregated housing with on-site support enabled the researcher in Copenhagen to contrast client’s views on both provisions. His conclusion was that:

As no randomization to the different housing forms is involved no conclusive evidence can be given on the relative effectiveness of either independent or category housing from the study. However, the experience from the project points towards a trend in the research literature in favor of independent housing as the most optimal form of housing even for homeless individuals with complex support needs. From the interviews it seems that this is also the form of housing which most of the citizens prefer. (Benjaminsen 2012: 30-31)

The test site in Budapest was an exemption in many ways, as it could not be described as a “Housing First” project. In that it aimed to rehouse homeless people who had lived in a forest on the margins of Budapest, and now had to leave this forest. This project – and also the shortcomings of it – is of particular value for showing the necessary conditions for success in rehousing homeless people with complex needs. Sufficient resources have to be made available on a long-term basis, not only for staff providing the support, but also for covering the housing costs and the costs of subsistence for service users with very limited chances to earn a living through employment.

For some of the Housing First projects, comprehensive data on the outcomes for service users after being rehoused is not yet available. The final evaluation reports, due in 2013, will provide information on these aspects of the projects, and also on the challenges and lessons learned. However, by August 2012 the housing retention rates of four of the five projects (including two projects where the majority of service users had been housed for more than a year) were high, all of them exceeding 80 per cent of those housed by the respective Housing First service. While such interim results need to be treated with caution, they do indicate that the Housing First approach is producing promising results in quite different European contexts, with different organizational frameworks and for different target groups.

## Outlook

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The final round of local evaluation reports are due in early 2013. All results of the Housing First Europe project will be presented at a conference in Amsterdam, which will be open to the general public and will take place 13/14 June 2013. Test sites will present their local evaluation results, a European synthesis and recommendations will be presented by the coordinator of the project and Sam Tsemberis, founder of Pathways to Housing in New York and one of the Housing First “pioneers” in the US will be one of the keynote speakers of the conference. There will also be room for discussing themes and questions in three parallel workshops. Further details will soon be available on [www.housingfirsteurope.eu](http://www.housingfirsteurope.eu)



### › References

Benjaminsen, L. (2012) *Experiences from an ACT-Program in Copenhagen*. Intermediary Report – August 2012 (Copenhagen: Danish National Centre for Social Research, Working Paper 01: 2012).

Busch-Geertsema, V. (2011) Housing First Europe: A ‘Social Experimentation Project’ *European Journal of Homelessness* 5 (2), pp. 209-211.

Tsemberis, S. (2010) Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Promoting Recovery and Reducing Cost, in: Ellen, I. and O’Flaherty, B. (2010) (Eds.) *How to House the Homeless*, pp.37-56 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation).