
Moving Beyond Shelter Culture: Embedding the Housing First Model in the Lyon Metropolitan Area

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Introduction

Since 2018, Lyon Metropolitan Area has been recognised as a region which is “accelerating its implementation of Housing First (HF) and its fight against homelessness.” With this in mind, it responded to a call for expressions of interest piloted by the State and DIHAL (France’s Interministerial delegation for accommodation and access to housing). This ‘accelerated implementation’ is part of France’s national top-down public policy that explicitly refers to HF principles and “offers a transformation of the existing model. It aims to quickly and sustainably reorient homeless people from the streets or shelters to housing, and offers them adaptable, flexible, and multidisciplinary support.” (Ministère De La Cohésion Des Territoires, 2018).

For the Lyon Metropolitan Area, this call for expressions of interest arrived at an opportune moment. As the staircase model had been widely criticised at local level for its ineffectiveness despite proactive partnerships, local stakeholders – and particularly housing associations and public bodies – had already been moving toward HF since 2016. This confluence of reflection and determination enabled Lyon to respond to the call for expressions of interest with a genuine aspiration to change the existing paradigm and thus reduce homelessness. However, it takes more than a declaration to turn aspiration into reality. A plan was needed that took a systemic approach to change, and dealt with shelter culture from the outset.

A New Political Directive to Transform Shelter Culture

When DIHAL launched its 'Five-year Plan for Housing First and for Combating Homelessness' in 2018, use of the HF model in France was still limited to the '*chez soi d'abord*' experiment, which exists on the fringes of a shelter culture that is still strongly ingrained in practices and institutions.

A dominant shelter culture

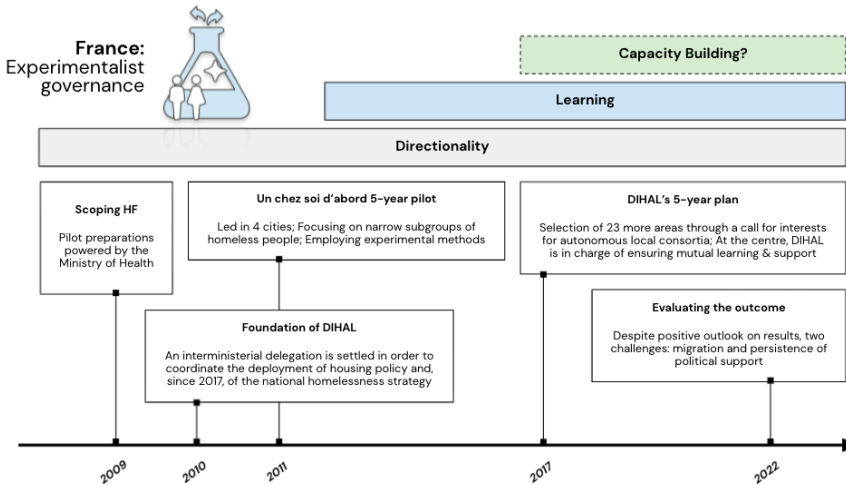
The HF process was in direct conflict with the 'staircase model' that had been dominant in France (and across Europe) since World War II. This model was (and indeed still is) the benchmark professional culture in the shelter and homelessness sector in France. This shelter culture is primarily an economic model for a significant number of associations that manage these long-standing establishments (15-year accreditation, cost-per-day, etc.). This model is also a legacy of the 1990s and 2000s when researchers and politicians had a vision of housing as the natural destination to the pathway through shelters for vulnerable people (considered unfit to access housing). The literature abounds with examples validating the staircase model. Furthermore, the dominant social work culture has always reaffirmed this approach. The beneficiary has little role to play in the decisions that impact them and the normative approach prevails, whereby the social worker judges the person's 'capacity to access housing'. This is still the case within Lyon's shelter sector where there is a local practice, between housing corporations and social institutions, of deeming the person experiencing homelessness 'ready to leave' once it is decided that they can access public housing.

The wider housing sector also aligns with these principles: the collective imagination is based on a social elevator which entails progressive integration and residential solutions from less to more – from night shelters to accessing social housing. Each step in the staircase model corresponds to a housing or accommodation product: night shelter, accommodation and social rehabilitation centre, social residence, sub-let tenancy, social housing, etc.

As such, whether through the stakeholders and their professional practices, the institutions and their housing and accommodation solutions, or the public authorities and their decrees, the staircase model remains structurally embedded in the landscape. In the words of the Demos Helsinki study, the homelessness situation was being 'managed' through addressing an apparently inevitable and unsolvable need for accommodation (Demos Helsinki, 2022).

A new political direction

To deal with the professional culture that had been structurally embedded for decades, DIHAL chose to leverage local actors, on a voluntary basis, to establish the HF model. This was the objective of the first call for expressions of interest in 2018, followed by a second one in 2021, which led to 47 *départements* across France implementing HF in an ‘accelerated’ manner. This amounts to what the Demos Helsinki report calls ‘experimentalist governance’ (Demos Helsinki, 2022).



From DEMOS/HELSINKI p. 16

In this way, DIHAL hopes, through trials and the support of local authorities, to extend the HF model by establishing it firstly on a voluntary basis. It supports these trials through funding and supporting stakeholders in their implementation goals. It is not just about endorsing territories and funding them; it is also about creating conditions that promote transformation of the paternalistic model, by further expanding HF where it is already being rolled out by local authorities. This expansion relies heavily on the HF Guide (Pleace, 2016) as a reference.

The same goes for DIHAL which is itself also going through a transformation. Using the so-called ‘BOP 177’ – a budget line for the shelter sector – it has committed to change by promoting what it calls the ‘AHI trajectory’.¹ This trajectory aims to systematise the transformation of shelters into long-term housing units by the operators themselves. It is therefore vital that state services shift their mindset and come to grips with the HF framework.

¹ AHI stands for *Accueil, Hébergement, Insertion* [Reception, Shelters, Integration] which encompasses the entire accommodation sector.

How Lyon is Responding – Structural Change

In responding to the call for expressions of interest, the Lyon Metropolitan Area wanted to commit to structural transformation of the shelter sector and its paternalistic model, along HF lines. To do this, it worked proactively to set high ambitions and to structure its response to the issue in a transformative way. It was firstly necessary to avoid the pitfall of creating responses that would merely function as extra measures, and thus just be an addition to the status quo.

Ambition based around proactive objectives

The Lyon Metropolitan Area is still feeling the effects of endemic housing exclusion. There are multiple reasons for this situation, with much confusion between cause and effect: the strong economic and tourism value of real estate², booming property markets, migration policies leading to large numbers of people with limited rights³, increased precariousness among fragile populations, inadequate construction of affordable housing, etc. Nonetheless, in answering the call for expressions of interest, the Lyon Metropolitan Area immediately committed to – at least partially – ending homelessness. This ambition manifested in four pro-active goals over five years. They include:

1. Reducing by at least half the number of person experiencing homelessness within the metropolitan area;
2. Providing every young person experiencing homelessness without means with the supported housing solution they need to become independent;
3. Avoiding people leaving institutions, child protection services, prisons, or psychiatric hospitals without housing solutions in place; and
4. Avoiding evictions from private or public housing due to high rents or untreated psychosocial issues, unless an alternative solution is in place.⁴

One might ask why the ambition to completely end homelessness was not there from the outset, and the reason is that, initially, the planning was based on a five-year, medium-term horizon. Today it can be said that eradicating homelessness in the Lyon Metropolitan Area is no longer a utopian idea but an end goal that councilors expect to reach in the coming decade.

² It is thought that housing exclusion today affects about 24000 people from a total population of 1.4 million. In addition, there are more than 70000 applicants for social housing in the metropolitan area.

³ These people do not have the required administrative status to access public housing. They are eligible only for the shelter system.

⁴ Extract from Lyon's first response to the call for expressions of interest.

A project-focused response

To meet its goals, the Lyon approach was project based and uses the principles of HF.⁵ Lyon Metropolitan Area built its strategy around three pillars:

1. Developing the supply of affordable housing

Given the structural lack of affordable housing in the Metropolitan Area, it was – and still is – obvious that one of the priorities of HF policy has to be producing a supply of affordable housing, whether private or public, whether ordinary or specific, so that it is compatible with the new model.

2. Implementing innovative, multidisciplinary supports whose goal is direct access to housing (pilot projects) by partners in the Metropolitan Area

Lyon's idea was to involve its housing and shelter sectors as much as possible by asking them to develop their own project(s) on condition that they followed HF principles. This led to more than 30 pilot projects organised around five themes: maintaining residential continuity, preventing rental evictions, housing for young people, support hubs⁶, and employment. These projects aim, on the one hand, to trial new ways of working through HF principles, and on the other hand, to share their results and new forms of intervention throughout the local ecosystem. It is mainly about leaving behind practices that are based on the paternalistic model, such as prescribed support, predicting 'readiness to house', housing as the end goal of support, mandated stays in shelters, etc. The Lyon Metropolitan Area is currently in a phase of evaluating and funding these projects with a view to further rolling out the most inspiring actions.

3. Supporting the change in culture and professional practices for all local actors

This third component of Lyon's policy is particularly important in the context of this article. To properly achieve the ambition of transforming the sector, Lyon focused on a policy supporting change among local stakeholders. Embedding HF's model of a new paradigm for social intervention thus called for a systematic approach to change that it calls MAPLA.

⁵ And the Y Foundation definition: 'an unconditional rehousing, and adequate provision on non-mandatory support services', Juha Kaakinen in the introduction of the Demos Helsinki report.

⁶ These are places where people who have been given direct access to housing can meet in a convivial space and thus avoid becoming socially isolated.

MAPLA – Permanent Improvement Mechanism for Housing First

MAPLA (in French, *Mécanisme d'amélioration permanente du logement d'abord*) covers a wide range of projects simultaneously. Lyon Metropolitan Area supports the development of introductory and continuous training aimed at HF operators which is currently addressing needs on the ground. For example, at the initiative of local stakeholders, a HF academic course was created and has been on offer for the last two years at Lumière University Lyon 2.⁷ To date this is the only such university course in Europe that we are aware of; it enables students to better understand the HF model in light of their own professional experience, and aims to establish a community of HF-oriented practices. MAPLA also supports academic research and evaluations that document the transformation from one model to another, evaluates methods, and provides local and national partners with thoughtful input and knowledge. Currently, the PUBLICS⁸ Chair of social policy (University of Grenoble) is completing qualitative research for the Lyon Metropolitan Area that aims to follow up on two cohorts of 40 HF beneficiaries over three years, mainly focussing on the individuals' own reported experiences. Similarly, it supports a research programme managed by CAPDROITS⁹, in which people affected by the issue work toward changing their environment, in a housing inclusive way. The Lyon Metropolitan Area believes that those directly affected by the issue have a vital role to play in transforming the social intervention model from a paternalistic one to an emancipatory one, with HF fully integrated. With this in mind, it is also funding a peer-work resource centre to support stakeholders looking for – or interested in – experiential knowledge.

Furthermore, Lyon believes strongly in creating a lively network of local partners through organising various opportunities to interact (such as seminars, conferences, on-site visits, etc.) and taking part in national and European HF networks. This led, for example, to a delegation of shelter operators from Lyon being invited to Helsinki in June 2022 to learn about the Finnish HF model, with the aim of convincing them of the merits of this approach and encouraging its deployment in Lyon. Furthermore, Lyon Metropolitan Area wanted to develop its evaluation tools to better understand housing exclusion and to measure the impact of its policies. It used the ETHOS typology (FEANTSA, 2005) to create this analytical tool and has thus had reliable and local data at its disposal since 2019. We can thus state that the number of people experiencing homelessness sleeping on the street has fallen by half since HF was put in place! Similarly, we have specific indicators for pilot

⁷ <https://www.orspere-samdarra.com/evenements-et-formations/diplomes-universitaires/du-logement-dabord/>

⁸ <https://www.pacte-grenoble.fr/en/projects/chaire-publics-des-politiques-sociales>

⁹ <https://confcap-capdroits.org/>

projects that enable quantitative evaluation of these actions. The Lyon Metropolitan Area also works on a future-oriented basis. It solicited FAS (France's Federation of Solidarity Actors) to carry out a survey on how shelter operators were planning for the decade ahead, particularly with regard to establishing the HF model in France. It was clear from this survey, unfortunately, that there is still a lot to do to ensure that these actors assimilate deployment of the HF model into their institutional plans. Lastly, Lyon remains proactive in finding new funding sources, mainly at the European level. For example, an ongoing HF project for young people was recently selected for EaSI¹⁰ programme funding. It is through these projects that the Lyon Metropolitan Area supports local actors in the change of paradigm required for establishing the HF model. Once again, it is vital to avoid the pitfall of creating simplistic measures but rather the model should be seen as a systemic change.

The Coming Challenges: It's Not a Map, It's a Compass

In its adoption of HF, the Lyon Metropolitan Area has not escaped the downsides of the French model:

... [t]he experimentalist approach promoted by the government has resulted in a paradox: that of achieving sustained success of HF in different cities – most notably, through continuous learning and positive feedback loops between the national and local levels – but failing to crowd out the old shelter-based model and change citizens' mindset towards the issue. (Demos Helsinki, 2022, p.15)

For all that, as a local public authority, we are making HF a long-term element of our governance. We fully endorse the idea, described by HELMOS HELSINKI, of a HF approach as governance built around directionality, capacity building, and supporting the transformation process. The Lyon Metropolitan Area is in the process of changing from planning mode ('HF as a map') to structural establishment of the model ('the logic of a compass'). Deployment of HF is still, however, being hampered by at least two significant issues.

1. It is difficult to access extra funds to adequately roll out the adapted support structures; how the State and associations divide competencies causes financing problems for these actions. The issue here is to ensure that the associations are not weakened by the funding process, but also to measure the financial impact of moving from a shelter-based model to a housing-based model (where one depends on the State and the other on associations).

¹⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1081>.

2. It is difficult to actually reduce shelter provision when a significant proportion of those accommodated cannot access housing due to current French laws. It is therefore not clear whether accommodation provision can be scaled down without public authorities changing their position towards rejected asylum seekers, and migrants in general, with regard to the criteria for accessing social housing.

Mission: eradication of homelessness

Despite the severe housing shortage hampering the achievement of this ambition, the eradication of homelessness by 2030 has become our political purpose – in line with the 2021 Lisbon Declaration on Combatting Homelessness – and HF is one of the technical means of achieving this goal. This mission, namely eliminating rather than managing homelessness, was set by the Lyon Metropolitan Area and its Vice-President for housing and habitat, Mr Renaud Payre. It now considers the HF model as the main axis for all local housing policies, bringing together all stakeholders in the local ecosystem. Achieving this mission involves carefully examining all public policies and programming from a HF perspective to ensure that due consideration is given to transforming the model in all ensuing actions. It will focus in particular on transforming shelters into the necessary affordable housing units, enabling “unconditional access to housing with, if needed, adapted social supports.”

Providing adequate resources to meet need

Answering calls for expressions of interest will no longer be enough to definitively change the model and we would like to see a ‘ringfencing’ of DIHAL credits to continue the process undertaken by territories to accelerate implementation of HF. Making such funding sacrosanct would give a sense of security to HF operators who have been weakened by the current financing model, i.e., annual funding via calls for proposals. Furthermore, the Lyon Metropolitan Area is working on creating a real-estate company, financed by solidarity investment funds and European funds, to enable it to buy housing on the private market and transform them into affordable social housing. Similarly, they have called on European bodies to contribute financially to local policies, for example during the conference that took place in Lyon on 1 March 2022 as part of the French Presidency of the European Union (‘La lutte contre le sans-abrisme: la parole aux territoires’ [The fight against homelessness: let’s hear from the regions]). Today, European structural support is a necessity. Lyon is thus working toward securing this.

Change management: MAPLA

By continuing its efforts to support paradigm change, it hopes to ultimately create a community of practice, within a HF-oriented learning environment. What is most important is getting all stakeholders on board and convincing those who are most reluctant to adopt the HF model. The latter are increasingly rare but as long as the

paternalistic model remains dominant in the French shelter sector, it will be difficult to convert all parties. It is often necessary to remind some partners that contrary to what they believe, HF is in fact not a specific measure but rather a wide-reaching policy, and Lyon is one of the territories undertaking its 'accelerated implementation'.

While there remain several weak points in Lyon's deployment of the HF model, the territory has been committed for a number of years already to this structural transformation with the ultimate goal of eradicating homelessness in the coming 10 to 15 years. With regard to changing the traditional paternalistic model, it is not easy. However, eradicating homelessness is now an achievable goal, not a fantasy. The transformation is ongoing and Lyon Metropolitan Area is working at its own pace. Slowly, but surely.

➤ References

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