
Housing First and Structural Change in Ireland

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Introduction

Looked at from the perspective of an NGO committed to delivering Housing First and to ending homelessness, the development of Housing First in Ireland is something of a paradox. In one way of looking at it, Ireland has one of the better developed and systemic Housing First programmes, with Housing First named in the national strategies on housing and homelessness for almost a decade, along with ambitious growth targets. A state agency provides a National Director for Housing First along with a resourced and well-regarded National Office. Ireland is now well into its second National Implementation Plan and, as of mid-2023, 923 Housing First tenancies and an 86% success rate of providing homes for people with long histories of homelessness and street-based sleeping, strongly rooted in the Pathways Model (Housing Agency, 2023).

On the other hand, Ireland has one of the highest and fastest growing levels of homelessness, as measured by current emergency accommodation usage, in Europe, with single persons' homelessness increasing by nearly 69% since the first national Housing First Implementation Plan was published in September 2018. During that time, for every person who left homelessness through a Housing First tenancy, three new adults became homeless. Access to Housing First is largely restricted to adults over 24 living in one-bedroom units and, while there are pilot programmes to support families and under 24-year-olds with complex support needs, they are not formally part of the Housing First programme. While housing is recognised as a right within the Housing First programme, the existence of such a right for the wider population is contested politically and is to be the subject of a long-promised, but currently unscheduled, national referendum to establish a right to housing.

In short, Ireland has a successful, ambitious, but closely targeted, Housing First programme which has high levels of 'fidelity' (Greenwood et al, 2022) and is firmly embedded in the State housing policy system, while at the same time, the principles and practice of Housing First remain relatively isolated within the programme with, as yet, limited impact on wider social housing and homelessness practice or policy.

To a significant extent, this paradoxical situation can be understood as arising from the policy trade-offs which have been required to obtain and mobilise the cross department/agency collaboration needed to deliver the programme.

A short history of Housing First in Ireland

The first Housing First project in Ireland was a Dublin City Council based 'demonstration project' which created its first tenancy in April 2011. The project grew from a 2010 conference convened by the Homeless Agency¹, but also involved collaboration with several NGOs, including Focus Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust, Dublin Simon, and an Approved Housing Body (AHB) (Greenwood, 2015).

While this Housing First Demonstration Project was preparing to provide its first tenancy, a new Government was elected and its Programme for Government, published in February 2011, included the first national policy commitment to introduce a Housing First approach to "alleviate the problem of long-term homelessness" (Government of Ireland, 2011, p.15).

Toward the end of 2012, the demonstration project ran into difficulties and was restructured in March 2013 after an extensive mid-term review (O'Donogue Hynes and Butler, 2016; Greenwood, 2015). By 2014, the project had identified and supported 23 individuals who had a long-term experience of homelessness and street-based sleeping and was deemed to have demonstrated that Housing First could be applied successfully in an Irish context.

In October 2014, the programme was expanded across the broader Dublin region following a tender process. The Dublin Region Housing First Service, jointly operated by Focus Ireland and the Peter McVerry Trust, delivered the service from 2014-2018. The target at this stage was to provide Housing First tenancies for the up to 100 people who were habitually sleeping on the street in Dublin. While an evaluation had been an integral part of the demonstration project (Greenwood, 2015), evaluation was not included in the tender for the 2014 service and was not subsequently funded.

Housing First targets and success in Ireland have been largely focused on the number of Housing First tenancies established. The target for Housing First tenancies in Dublin from 2014-2018 was set at 100 tenancies, this was later expanded to 300 in 2016 following the publication of a new national housing strategy, *Rebuilding Ireland*. The increased targets widened eligibility for the

¹ The Homeless Agency was then the statutory body responsible for tackling homelessness in Dublin, and has since been succeeded by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE). The Homeless Agency is entirely distinct from the Housing Agency where the National Housing First office is now situated.

programme to long-term shelter users with complex needs, as most of those who were habitually sleeping on the street had already been housed. By 2018, 250 Housing First tenancies had been established in Dublin.

A National Director of Housing First was appointed in February 2018, and by September that year, the first Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018-2021 (Government of Ireland, 2018) was published jointly by the Minister for Housing and Minister for Health. Through an analysis of case notes on the national homeless database, PASS, this Implementation Plan identified 737 adults who had an experience of homelessness which indicated that they should be targeted for Housing First. The plan proposed to create 663 new Housing First tenancies between 2018-2021, on top of the 250 that already existed in Dublin, with tenancy targets to be set for each of the 31 local authorities.

Until this point Housing First had been led and delivered almost exclusively by agencies responsible for housing: The Department of Housing and Local Authorities. While SafetyNet, a medical charity providing health care to marginalised people, was an active partner in Dublin Housing First from 2014, the engagement with the broader health service was on an *ad hoc* basis. Under the first National Implementation plan, the Department of Health and the Health Services Executive (HSE) were to provide funding for physical health, addiction, and mental health supports for people on the Housing First programme. National funding was also made available by the Department of Housing to each region to deliver the housing in accordance with the Housing First model and a national tendering process to choose an NGO or NGOs to lead the delivery of Housing First across each region was to be rolled out by the end of 2018. Housing for the programme was to be provided both from local authorities' own social housing stock and by Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). The NGOs tendering for the service in each region were also to commit to supply a certain proportion of the housing units needed.

As the First Implementation Plan came to an end, Housing First was expanded to every region in Ireland and 722 tenancies were created as part of this Plan with 560 individuals in a current Housing First tenancy by the end of 2021.

In the meantime, the political landscape shifted, and a new coalition Government was formed in 2020 with a new housing strategy – *Housing for All* – published in late 2021. This new housing strategy reaffirmed a commitment to Housing First for individuals with both a history of street-based sleeping/long-term use of emergency homeless accommodation, as well as complex needs. It was soon followed by the second National Implementation Plan from 2022 to 2026.

The Second National Implementation Plan largely seeks to build on the previous plan, to deepen the engagement with the health system, concentrate on the same target group (single adults over 25, with complex support needs), and focus on expanding the number of Housing First tenancies across each local authority area. This plan also continued the strong alignment with the Pathways model, with Sam Tsemberis commissioned to draft the Irish Housing First manual and also a frequent speaker at launches and training events organised by the National Office.

A target of 1 319 new Housing First tenancies was set under the new Plan. By mid- 2023, 372 new tenancies had been established and, including the tenancies from earlier phases, a total of 923 individuals were living in a Housing First tenancy. The Minister for Housing has made clear that the current target of 1 319 tenancies could and should be surpassed, but when it is achieved there will be some 1 800 Housing First tenancies in Ireland. Ireland is a relatively small country, so by way of perspective it is useful to note there are around 185,00 social homes (approx. 140 000 owned by local authorities and the balance by AHBs), so that at this point 1% of all social housing would be occupied by Housing First tenants. It is also worth noting that the vast majority of Housing First tenancies in Ireland are social housing tenancies, with over 90% of tenancies analysed for the national evaluation of the programme in 2022 provided by either local authorities, NGOs, or Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) (Greenwood et al, 2022).

Structural Change – Institutional Levels

The appointment of the first National Director of Housing First in February 2018 was shortly followed by the establishment of a National Implementation Group which included representatives from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (now the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage), the Department of Health, the National Health Service (HSE), Local Authorities, and the newly appointed National Director of Housing First. A representative from the criminal justice sector, representing both the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service, later joined the Group in September 2021. The Group has been meeting bi-monthly since January 2019, and is the key operational driver and oversight body of the programme.

The publication of the Second Implementation Plan was accompanied by several significant structural changes to the management of the Housing First programme. The National Director, who had been based in the offices of the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, despite having a national remit, was relocated to the Housing Agency, a national state agency with a wide range of functions related to state housing policy, and a new National Housing First Office was established.

These structures represent a high level of structural integration across government functions, and a successful attempt to establish a single centralised point of state authority. However, it is also notable that the implementation group does not include any representation from the NGOs who are delivering the Housing First services. Input from these services is gathered through a range of consultative and discursive interactions and, during the first implementation plan, an ‘action research’ strand.

Structural Change – The Health Service

Since the Housing Act, 1988 transferred lead responsibility for responding to homelessness from the health to the housing system, the health system gradually disengaged from a role in responding to homelessness. While health services in some areas had much higher ambitions, the annual health strategy set its annual objectives solely in terms of the percentage of individuals experiencing homelessness who had their health needs assessed within two weeks of entering emergency accommodation (HSE, 2015). Both Implementation Plans exhibit a strong emphasis on reversing this trend and fully engaging the health services as a partner – and part funder – of the Housing First programmes.

While some aspects of the Irish health service are highly centralised, there is considerable regional autonomy as to how some services are structured and delivered. As a result, there is considerable regional variation in the extent and mechanism of health service involvement in Housing First teams. For instance, in some areas the local HSE provides funding for a mental health expert to be recruited as an integral part of the team, while in other regions the mental health professional remains part of a health team and works with Housing First for a period each week. In other areas, the local HSE effectively provides very limited dedicated mental health resources to the Housing First project. While there has been an evaluation of the programme over the period of the first Implementation Plan (Greenwood et al, 2022), there is no evaluation of the impact of these different delivery models on tenants.

The engagement with the health system is also evidenced by the roll-out of a health monitoring tool which aims to provide an evidence base for identifying – and filling – gaps between health needs and provision. These efforts to draw health resources into the Housing First programme has been a major pre-occupation of the State, with ministers in the different departments taking a very visible lead through press events involving several ministers and publications with multiple forwards and ministerial signatures. This commitment was met with some significant success, as reflected in the HSE National Service Plan for 2023 which, in contrast to plans of a decade ago, include as its second key objective: “Improve and enhance access to

healthcare services for people who are homeless and other social inclusion groups...” (2023, p.42) along with commitment to “wrap-around health supports for an additional 269 homeless people in Housing First tenancies” (2023, p.42). Importantly, this engagement has also carried through into budgetary commitments, with the Minister of State for Health noting that the Department of Health contributed “an additional €11million in 2021 and €10 million in 2022” toward “the health needs of people who are homeless”(Government of Ireland, 2022, p.3), although the amount of this dedicated to Housing First as such is less clear.

Structural Change – Principles and Practice

In many ways the adoption of Housing First as national government policy has happened rather rapidly in Ireland compared to other European countries where Housing First programmes have been implemented more at local and municipality level. Government policy has made Housing First a main component of its response to homelessness. Housing First exists in every area of the country and local targets are set nationally for every region. As noted above, a particular success has been that, since the first National Implementation Plan, health and social care supports have been funded as part an all-government approach.

However, the expansion and adoption of Housing First nationwide has happened in the shadows of a housing and homelessness crisis that started around 2014. While the Housing First programme has been protected and grown, the policy response to rising homelessness has been largely unaffected by the lessons of Housing First and has largely comprised of opening new homeless emergency beds. Since the first Implementation Plan was published in 2018, three new emergency homeless beds have been opened for every Housing First tenancy established.

While Housing First in Ireland has retained tight eligibility in terms of single adults aged over 24, it has been accessible – and frequently proactive – to specific vulnerable groups within this demographic: people with a chronic history of street-based sleeping, those institutionalised in emergency accommodation, members of the Traveller Community, young adults between 25-35, and people being discharged from prison, acute care, or mental health facilities.

Family homelessness has increased by 450% since July 2014, and there are now families who have been long-term homeless with complex support needs which was almost unimaginable when Housing First was first conceived in Ireland in 2011. While there is no reliable estimate of the extent, NGOs working in the area report that a small proportion of homeless families have complex support needs and require a similar level of multi-disciplinary team support if they are to successfully

sustain a tenancy and integrate into their neighbourhood (Magee and O’Kane, 2023). While ‘Housing For All’ includes provision for pilot programmes to support these families, they are not included within the Housing First programme.

Similarly, the number of young people (18-24yrs) experiencing homelessness increased over 260% during the same period. Despite this increase and the international evidence supporting the benefits of Housing First for Youth for those who have high support needs, the National Youth Homeless Strategy (2022) includes a commitment to a pilot Supported Housing for Youth project, which is also not included within the Housing First programme.

As well as targeting who Housing First is for, there has been a tight focus in the types of homes that can be used. There has largely been a strict requirement that only properties with one-bedroom are used for Housing First, although a few two-bedroom properties have been approved in some areas. In the First Implementation Plan in 2018, it was highlighted that ensuring an adequate supply of one-bedroom units would be central to the successful implementation of Housing First. While in principle there is nothing wrong with focusing on using one-bedroom units for the Housing First programme, the policy ignores the reality that, while there is limited availability of all forms of housing in Ireland at present, one-bed units are the most limited: few local authority units are one-beds and these tend to be allocated to older persons, and the majority (55%) of local authority housing stock nationwide are three-bedroom houses (Norris and Hayden, 2018). Developers consider one-bed room units uneconomical to build (arguing that two-bedroom units have the same construction costs but have higher market value). While there has been a strong policy push to increase the number of one-bedroom apartments constructed, even if successful, this will take many years to have an impact. The outcome can be seen as making the success of Housing First contingent on one of the most challenging strands of housing policy rather than the policy priority in its own right that it has claimed to be.

The voluntary/NGO sector has been a strong advocate of Housing First from the beginning and at every stage since. While providing unfunded support to the ‘Dublin Demonstration Project’, the sector successfully lobbied for the Government formed in 2012 to adopt the policy and provide national leadership for the programme. However, the success of these campaigns in convincing successive governments to adopt Housing First, and funding it has had the paradoxical outcome of reducing the influence of the sector on the shape and priorities of the programme. While most of the organisations delivering Housing First make efforts to bring its practices into all their own services, the model for delivering Housing First involves them periodically competing against each other for contracts to deliver the programme.

The relationship between NGOs operating in the homeless sector and the State in Ireland is complex. At one level, NGOs are seen as partners. They participate in the National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC), a governance and oversight committee chaired by the Minister of Housing focused on delivering policy measures and actions to address homelessness, on statutory Regional Homeless Forums, and they have ready access to consultation processes. However, in relation to specific services, including Housing First, they are regarded as specialist services which have been contracted by the State rather than partners in delivery. The reasons and implications of this are beyond this paper, but in any case, NGOs delivering Housing First are not represented in the 'Implementation Group' or other formal decision-making processes which would enable the systematic adoption of Housing First approaches.

The Strange Case of 'The Right To Housing'

While the core principles of Housing First vary to some extent in different jurisdictions, the idea that 'housing is a right' is included in virtually every example, including the Irish iteration. However, the idea that 'housing is a right' for people on the Housing First programme lives uneasily alongside an ambiguous – and sometimes even hostile – attitude to a right to housing in the broader system. The Irish Constitution includes the recognition of the 'right to property', but no recognition of the right to housing. Property rights are, to some extent, balanced against ideas of the common good, but in practice government ministers have repeatedly rejected proposals for greater tenants' rights or homeless prevention measures by declaring that they are 'unconstitutional' (Keyes, 2019). The most extreme example of the resistance to the right to housing – outside of the Housing First programme – is seen in Ireland's continued refusal to sign Article 31 of the European Social Charter (ESC) because the ESC commitment on the right to housing is regarded as in conflict with the Irish Constitution (European Committee on Social Rights, 2021).

Equally, while 'choice' is recognised as a core principle of Housing First and one of the foundations of its success, and while 'choice-based lettings' have been introduced by local authorities, the prospect of other social housing tenants exercising choice over the homes they are offered continues to excite considerable media and political controversy (Gataveckaite, 2023; Crosbie, 2023), with the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) attributing part of the rise in homelessness to households making such choices (Omorodion, 2023).

Conclusions

Housing First in Ireland exhibits many of the features which the European Housing First Hub has identified as required for 'systemic' Housing First. Successive Governments of different political perspectives have made Housing First a flagship programme, named it in their Housing and Homelessness strategies, and guaranteed funding. The funding is understood to be on-going, and while providers may change due to periodic tendering processes, it would be unthinkable that any government in the foreseeable future would seek to remove funding from supports for existing tenancies. The Central Government has set targets for local government to deliver and funded a national director and national office to drive and support the local delivery of these targets. Considerable political effort has been expended at a national level to reverse the disengagement of health services from homeless service provision and overcome the strongly compartmentalised nature of Irish public service delivery. While there is still much to be done, particularly in some regions, much has been achieved in just a few years.

It may be the case that this success could not have been achieved without holding the Housing First programme to a focus on single mature adults. Broadening it to encompass, for instance, young adults and families would have required bringing in an ever-increasing number of agencies and departments, making it much harder to deliver the political and organisational common purpose required for the progress that has been achieved. Delivering and imbedding such an innovative programme in a short period of time will always require policy trade-offs. The Irish case is notable for not trading off fidelity principles, quality of housing, or security of tenure. Trading-off the narrowness of focus in order to deliver an ambitious, cross functional national programme in a few years may seem reasonable in the context.

The development of Housing First in Ireland can be seen as a paradox. Ireland rapidly built up a substantial number of Housing First tenancies through ambitious targets and delivered high levels of fidelity to the Pathways model, with high success rates and strong cross-departmental political commitment. At the same time, homelessness has grown rapidly, with three emergency homeless beds being opened for every Housing First tenancy created. There has been a reluctance to broaden access to adults under 24 or to families with complex needs, and Housing First principles are rarely deployed across the wider housing and homelessness system. It is suggested that the relative narrowness of focus in the Irish Housing First programme has been a successful policy trade-off required to achieve the level of cross-departmental engagement and resources. The big question for Housing First in Ireland is whether the nature of these policy trade-offs has created a 'path dependency' which will compartmentalise the programme into



the future, or whether, having established such a level of success and large number of tenancies, a momentum has been created which can break out of the single programme approach and influence the wider housing and homelessness system.

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