
From Fidelity to Adaptations: A Qualitative Analysis of Contextual Factors Shaping Housing First

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➤ **Abstract** *This article examines the relationship between the Housing First model and contextual factors influencing its implementation. Fidelity research in this field has aimed at minimizing differences in how Housing First is applied. Numerous studies have confirmed that high-fidelity implementations yield positive client outcomes, whereas variation might dilute the model. However, an alternative perspective has emerged, emphasizing context as an inherent aspect of Housing First implementation. This paper explores the question at the everyday level of Housing First practice and asks: (1) what contextual factors emerge during practical implementation in different countries and cities; (2) how they challenge or support implementation of Housing First; and (3) how the approach is adapted to meet contextual challenges. The study draws on qualitative focus group interviews (N=8) with frontline workers and clients across four European countries. Theoretically, the analysis builds on Lancione et al. (2017), who conceptualize context as a dynamic element to which the Housing First model must be actively adapted while maintaining fidelity to its core principles. The article identifies five key contextual factors shaping implementation and explores strategies developed to adapt the model in response.*

➤ **Keywords** *Housing First, fidelity, adaptations, qualitative research, front-line work, Europe*

Introduction

Housing First has gained prominence as a key strategy in efforts to combat homelessness. The policy outlined by community psychologist Sam Tsemberis and colleagues in New York in the 1990s highlights permanent, rent-based housing and related individually tailored support as central means of homelessness work and has been implemented in different contexts since its inception (Tsemberis et al. 2004; Padgett et al. 2012; Aubry et al. 2016). There is a wide evidence-based understanding that Housing First works. Several studies have shown positive results of the policy in terms of housing stability and resident well-being compared to traditional homelessness work, which relies on temporary shelters and conditional housing arrangements (see e.g. Roggenbruck 2017; Baxter et al. 2019; Aubry et al. 2020).

Where the research still lacks understanding is how Housing First is implemented in different contexts and how the principle could be adapted to achieve the best possible results in different institutional and cultural settings and with different client groups. Pleace and Bretherton (2013) highlighted the need to better understand the variability of Housing First interventions, as the model had drifted from the original approach in many instances. This need has been addressed afresh in recent discussions with a particular reference to the proliferation of Housing First policies in Europe (Lancione et al. 2017; Pleace 2019; Wygnańska 2020; Boesweldt et al 2024). Some limitations in the application of the original Housing First model have been identified as well. Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn (2015) highlighted that there is still insufficient evidence on how well the model serves different resident groups and responds to local needs. In a similar vein, Parsell et al. (2015) suggest that approaches beyond the original model, such as single-site Housing First, may be particularly beneficial for people with the most complex and severe support needs. Another set of criticisms has concerned the possibilities of Housing First being scaled up as a homelessness intervention, if certain problems, such as lack of suitable housing, are not addressed (Katz et al. 2017; Oudshoorn 2022).

This article approaches Housing First as practical work, which is surrounded by other practices and societal structures that create both possibilities and barriers for policy implementation. The article pays attention to the context surrounding the implementation of Housing First and asks 1) what contextual factors emerge during the practical implementation of the model, 2) how they challenge or support the implementation of Housing First, and 3) how the approach is adapted to address the challenges posed by the context. Empirically, the article draws on eight qualitative focus group interviews with a total of 72 participants, which describe the perceptions and activities of frontline workers and residents of Housing First gathered from four European countries, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain. The

countries represent different Housing First models and welfare systems and are also geographically situated in different parts of Europe and were chosen for the project to represent both the examination of diverse applications of the Housing First model and the contextual factors shaping them.

We start by briefly reviewing the current research on Housing First and positioning our own research in relation to it. Following this, we present the context, the data, the central concepts, and the analysis of the study, after which we present our main findings. In conclusion, we discuss the relevance of our results in light of previous literature.

Why Study Adaptations

Housing First research can be separated into different traits. First, there is the body of research, looking at the impact of Housing First as a homelessness intervention. These investigations employ both qualitative and quantitative methods and are based on extensive empirical evidence. In the light of this research, Housing First has been able to achieve better results than traditional homelessness approaches in terms of cost offsets, housing stability, and residents' wellbeing (Culhane et al., 2002; Padgett et al., 2015; Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn 2015; Aubry 2016; 2020; Roggenbruck 2017).

The second body of research links impact research to the fidelity of Housing First projects to the original model. Fidelity refers to certain 'critical ingredients' (Proctor et al., 2009), which distinguish the Housing First model from other interventions in the same field, such as staircase approaches (see e.g. Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009). These include housing as a human right, choice and control for service users, separation of housing and treatment, person-centered planning, and flexible support as long as needed. Also, principles of harm reduction and recovery orientation are highlighted (Pleace 2016, p. 13). The principles should be maintained to achieve the desired impact. To date, several Housing First-specific methodologies have been published to measure fidelity (Gilmer et al., 2013; Stefancic et al., 2013; Goering et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2017). One of the most widely used fidelity surveys (Gilmer et al., 2013) assesses adherence to the Housing First model in terms of housing choice and structure, the separation of housing and services, service philosophy, as well as the range of services provided and the structure of service teams. High fidelity to these principles has been seen as the aspiring goal of an organization implementing Housing First (Aubry et al., 2015).

However, systemic, organizational, and individual barriers can hinder the achievement of fidelity, making particularly high-fidelity models seem idealistic or unattainable in many settings (Samosh et al., 2018; Wygnańska, 2020). In this case,

adaptations of the model might be necessary. Pleace and Bretherton (2013) suggest a typology in which the term Housing First could refer to a specific type of service or intervention, such as the original model, as well as a broader concept. According to Chen (2019), the rapid proliferation of the Housing First model has led to models that may be very far from the original one and even opposite to it, which is why the requirement of fidelity is not completely without merit. However, at the same time, there is evidence that programs using, for instance, different types of housing can still adhere to the Housing First approach and achieve good impact, without being completely faithful to the original model.

Lancione et al. (2017) highlight the importance of context, which must be considered if Housing First is to be applied successfully. According to them, a desired outcome of policy drift from one context to another would be active adaptation, which in the case of Housing First would mean preserving the core ethos of the model but adapting the practical work to fit the context (see also Aubry et al., 2015; Greenwood et al., 2018). A similar view has been presented in the report of Demos Helsinki (2022) in the form of a compass metaphor. A compass, unlike a map, which easily provides too rigid solutions, would provide decision makers and practitioners with a goal and a set of principles to aim for, but also a possibility to find their own way of achieving them. At worst, too strict adherence to predefined principles can lead to inappropriate policy transfers and neglect of differences between contexts (Parsell et al., 2025).

Finally, a third, a more critical research tradition, has argued that some Housing First research and implementation debates may focus primarily on individual housing and support, thereby paying insufficient attention to structural drivers of homelessness such as poverty and limited affordable housing (Katz et al., 2017; Grainger, 2021). Concentrating on services may also hide disinvestment in housing and other structural measures, such as prevention (Oudshoorn 2022). Another structural-level challenge that has been identified is the cooperation between Housing First models and other sectors of society. The delivery of Housing First can be hampered, for instance, by cuts in health care costs (Boesweldt et al., 2024). Pleace (2024) has argued for an integrated strategy in which Housing First would be integrated into existing social and health services. However, there may be financial, administrative, and value-related barriers to this.

Research Setting: Adapting Housing First in Different Contexts

The context of this article is the development and research project “Adapting Housing First – Innovating Staff” funded by the European Union’s Erasmus+ program (see for example, Perälä 2025). The project involved four partner organisations from four countries, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain, and aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how Housing First has been implemented across Europe in diverse service and policy contexts. The participating countries and organisations reflected variation in Housing First implementation types, welfare systems, and geographical settings, and were therefore considered to provide a useful lens for examining contextual differences in implementation.

Previous research by Pleace (2019) and Greenwood et al. (2018) has analysed the state of Housing First in Europe. Pleace (2019) notes that many programs widely adhere to the core principles outlined in the Housing First Europe guide, and some operate with a high level of fidelity. Greenwood et al. (2018) identify factors that either support or hinder program fidelity in European Housing First organizations. In this study, we focused more closely on the types of implementations and adaptations that exist, and how these are developed in relation to their specific contexts.

Empirically, the article draws from eight (8) audio-recorded focus group interviews gathered in the project, which involved front-line workers, peers, and residents of Housing First projects in partner countries and were conducted during the autumn of 2023 and the spring of 2024. Two interviews were conducted in each country, one for the workers and one for the residents. In one of the countries, the groups were mixed. Altogether, 73 people from 8 different Housing First organizations participated in these focus-group interviews. They received information about the research in written form, and the purpose of the interview was also explained to them in the situation orally. All gave their written consent to the interviews and their recording.

Interviewed staff were front-line practitioners working with Housing First residents in day-to-day practice (n=46). Some of them also did management work. This group was intentionally recruited for the focus groups to examine Housing First implementation as it unfolds in everyday practice and to capture the practical realities of delivering Housing First support. In the project’s other datasets, we also interviewed other key stakeholders, ranging from policymakers and public authorities to leaders of Housing First organisations (Perälä, 2025). Twenty-seven residents with a background of long-term homelessness, ranging from a couple of years to more than ten years were also interviewed in the focus groups. All participants had been living rough and thus fell within category 1 of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS). For some, street homelessness had lasted for several years, whereas for others it was more episodic, with most of the time spent on temporary accommodation and emergency shelters (ETHOS

categories 2 and 3). Participants were approximately 30–70 years old. At the time of the interviews, they had been living in their homes on their own tenancy agreements, either in scattered-site housing or in a single site housing unit, for between two and nearly ten years. The interviewees included both men and women. In Germany and Finland, all resident interviewees were men, whereas in Ireland and Spain the groups comprised both men and women.

The interviews were semi-structured thematic interviews. The questions focused on Housing First and its adaptation and were structured around three central themes: housing, support, and training. Researchers guided participants in discussing these themes. The interviews were conducted in English, except in Finland, where they were carried out in the native language of the researchers. In two countries, Germany and Spain, the interviews were accompanied by an interpreter who translated the questions and answers into the interviewees' own language. The discussion on the interview themes was free-flowing. However, it stayed largely within the interview themes in all the groups. The resident interviews were characterized by the discussion of themes through personal experience. However, they also addressed the themes at a more general level, for example by expressing hopes for improved practice, suggesting training themes, or commenting on the situations of the people experiencing homelessness in general. Gender differences did not emerge prominently in the interviews. This may be due to the fact that the interviews remained at a relatively general level, with the primary focus being on residents' experiences of Housing First support. All interviewees reported experiences of violence on the streets, as well as feelings of loneliness and isolation, and experiences of discrimination related to homelessness.

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber. The transcription was done in English, except for the interviews conducted in the researchers' native language. For those interviews where an interpreter was used, the English parts translated by the interpreter were transcribed.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analysis followed the process of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019; 2022). This approach to data is qualitative and seeks to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data as well as to give an interpretation to these themes and patterns (see also Byrne, 2021). The process relies on coding, which is the process of exploring the data and identifying key themes pertaining to the research questions. The output of coding is codes, which capture or highlight these themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 52-53).

RTA acknowledges the central role of the researcher in the research process, from the decisions made in data gathering to the interpretations made of the data. The result of the analysis is an interpretation of reality, not an objective description. However, the interpretation is based on an open and systematic analysis of the data, which is further enhanced by the theoretical framework used by the researcher. In this analysis, interpretation was made by combining empirical data and literature on the Housing First principle, which jointly provided a particular perspective on the debate surrounding the principle.

The actual coding process was conducted with the Atlas Ti software. The process combined deductive and inductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2022, 55). First, the data were coded using keywords related to the project: Housing First, adaptation, housing, support, and training. The interviews were searched for passages where these issues were discussed, and the passages were labelled with the above codes. After the initial coding, the codes were further explored. This raised interesting new themes, such as the contextual factors, which, in the light of the interviews, affected the implementation of Housing First on the everyday level of work. This led to a search for further literature on the topic to support the analysis. A key source at this stage became the article by Boesveldt and colleagues (2024), which looks at the relationship between the implementation of housing strategies and the local context in the Netherlands. Context is also a central concept in the article by Clarke et al. (2020), who argue that rather than a paradigm shift, the implementation of Housing First should be understood as a process of policy translation, where complex contextual factors play a crucial role and create different approaches to the policy.

In the second stage, the interviews were coded with these ideas of context. Our understanding of the context was wide, entailing a range of factors that affected the implementation of Housing First, according to the interviewees' accounts. They included both concrete actors (clients, other organizations, politicians, neighbours, etc.) and more abstract things (funding, housing, legislation, culture, and values). The first code list contained a lot of overlaps, and some of the codes entailed only a couple of interview quotations. In the third and last phase, the codes were summarized for analysis and named as follows: client's needs, material resources, community, policy and politics, and service system and culture.

As for adaptations, we read through the interviews and marked with a code "adaptation" all the segments where the interviewees, according to our interpretation, talked about adaptations of Housing First. The notion, adaptation, was taken from Lancione et al. (2017), who look at the application of Housing First policies in different contexts. Here, adaptation refers to the link between a locally applied policy and the underlying initial policy model. After the first round, we divided the adaptation code into subcodes. First, we had two subcodes: adaptation related to

housing (adaptation housing) and adaptation related to support (adaptation support). These were the most often mentioned adaptations in the data. This could be expected as the interviews guided the interviewees to discuss these themes. After this, we separated in more detail what kind of adaptations these two subcodes entailed. We got a list of adaptations related to housing and support, which we then analysed for similarities and differences.

We now turn to a more detailed presentation of our results. We start by looking at the contextual factors and describing what the codes related to the context include. In the second section, we look at the adaptations of Housing First, which could be found in the interviews.

Results

Contextual Factors Affecting Housing First

We identified five contextual factors that affected Housing First work on the everyday level of work, based on interview data. We labelled them client's needs, material resources, politics and policies, community and service system, and culture. The contexts and what they entail are explained in Table 1.

Table 1. Contextual Factors Affecting Housing First

Contextual Factors

Client's Needs	Material Resources	Community	Service System & Culture	Policy & Legislation
Client's needs for housing and support	Available housing Different forms of housing	NGOs, other organizations, volunteers, and neighbours affecting Housing First	The way of doing things in the homelessness field and in official organizations Prevailing thoughts and values related to homelessness	Prevailing homeless strategies and policies at country and local level Legislation affecting support work and housing
Professional views of clients' support needs	Resources for support and for Housing First projects			

The most often mentioned contextual factor that affected Housing First work was clients' needs. On the one hand, this reflected the key principles of Housing First, flexibility, and person-centered planning (see e.g. Pleace, 2016), which were often referred to in the interviews and used as a central justification for the Housing First work and how it was carried out. On the other hand, the needs of the clients were described as a challenge to Housing First work, hence the need for adaptations. Extracts 1-4 from focus group interviews in Table 2 illustrate the typical client needs in need of Housing First adaptations mentioned in the interviews. They were drug

addiction and related life management issues of the residents, youth homelessness, loneliness and isolation, immigration (undocumented status in particular), and problems of families and couples who are experiencing homelessness.

Table 2. Client's Needs as a Contextual Factor of Housing First

Extract 1: Addiction and Mental Health

Some people that are not successful in the Housing First program. Maybe because they have behavioural problems, maybe because they have mental issues, or maybe because they have addictions, or even everything at the same time. So, this gives us a very complex profile, and people that cannot live in the housing options that we offer them. (Spain)

Extract 2: Young People

Engaging and motivating them (young people) is something that I find challenging nowadays, because then it's just substance abuse. Their everyday life is built around that use. If there is nothing sensible for a resident to do, then no one controls it. That's the challenge (Finland)

Extract 3: Isolation and Loneliness

R2: We also talk a lot about this isolation issue (...) I think there's a camaraderie in the likes of this unit (single site housing). You're in the same corridor and you can just knock in to say hello. They won't knock around for a cup of tea or drop a milk or whatever it is (in scattered housing) (Ireland)

Extract 4: Undocumented Status

I had trouble with finding a place. They say, oh, you're from different country, you cannot have nothing, go away, like something like this. There was also this paper, and you need to also this here, this paper. I didn't know it, what all I needed to have a flat. (Germany)

Client's needs often appeared in interviews in relation to another central contextual element affecting Housing First work, namely, material resources, which included the available housing and resources for support. The impact of resources is described in extracts 5-9 in Table 3. Ideally, Housing First organizations had housing that met the needs of the residents and resources for sufficient support (Extract 5). Very common, however, were situations where either suitable housing was not available or the support was perceived to be too scarce. In the worst case, Housing First organizations lacked both suitable housing and resources for support (Extracts 6-9).

Table 3. Housing and Support as Material Contexts of Housing First

Extract 5. Enough Housing and Support

They get to know you, they find a place where you fit, and now I live in a flat with two other people. Everyone lives their own life. And I have been like this for two years. X (HOUSING FIRST organization) gives me all the support I need, therapy, help. And I'm really happy. They have changed my life. I'm more relaxed now and I'm thankful. (Spain)

Extract 6. Not Enough Permanent Housing

Ten years ago, you paid 400 euros a month for a bedsit. It has shifted a lot. Accommodation has gotten very expensive, housing crisis, I think (...)

There's too many STAs (short term accommodation) and not enough LTAs (long term accommodation) and I would love to see that change. (Ireland)

Extract 7. Not Enough Suitable Housing

Sometimes, we find this snap moment where it's the right time to give a housing to this person, however, maybe the apartment that we have available doesn't have an elevator and they have to wait longer, and it's very frustrating to see all the work that we have been doing, and when this exact moment comes, we can't offer them a good solution. (Spain)

Extract 8. Temporary Funding of Housing First Projects

We have funding for two years, and we would like to be part of the regular service system, and it is hard for the administration of the regular system to imagine how this (Housing First) works here. (Germany)

Extract 9. Poorly Resourced Service System

Then, there's the rest of the service system. There is a decline in services. Substance abuse services have deteriorated, and mental health services have also deteriorated, but perhaps substance abuse services have deteriorated the most. (Finland)

Extract 6 is, for instance, an example of a typical situation that particularly the big cities involved in the project faced with their growing number of homeless people, who were impossible to address through Housing First without new housing or with rents being too high. Extract 7 shows another typical problem with housing, which is the availability of suitable housing, i.e., housing that would meet the support needs of the residents, in this case, accessibility.

The lack of adequate support resources was pointed out as a very common challenge of Housing First projects: Firstly, there was project-based and temporary funding, based on, for instance, tendering or other kinds of arrangements with the public stakeholders, which brought uncertainty about the continuation of the work (Extract 8). The situation was considered paradoxical in the interviews. For instance, sometimes there would have been available housing, but the Housing First project did not have sufficient resources to support their homeless clients moving into it. It was also hard to expand the project, as the future of the project was considered unclear. Another set of problems with the resources for support arose from the surrounding social and health care sector. For example, if the operation of these sectors suffered due to, for example, cuts in the budgets, the operation of Housing First was also compromised as housing itself wasn't considered enough support (Extract 9).

As for the rest of the contextual factors, politics and policies played a role in legislating, funding, and promoting attitudes towards homelessness and Housing First work. The local authorities had, for instance, different rules regarding the client's choice of apartments, which then created boundaries for the implementation of Housing First, where choice is one of the core principles. The Housing First approach was also challenged by different forms of bureaucracy related to, for instance, renting, which could make the housing process sometimes very slow or even impossible. As one staff member in Germany summarized in the interview: "*Sometimes, you could really move in already, but you are missing that one piece of paper*". Other kinds of problems with bureaucracy emerged in cooperation with the social and health care system and public stakeholders. For instance, support for the client was sometimes very hard to get, even with the assistance of Housing First professionals.

Community appeared as a very important context for the work, including various NGOs and other organizations, volunteers, and people in neighbourhoods where the residents lived. The first three were described as facilitating partners, offering, for instance, job opportunities or assistance for the residents, while the neighbours often complicated the work in the form of complaints and negative attitudes towards tenants of Housing First. Interviewed residents often stressed the importance of community in their talk. For example, visits by volunteers or activities organized by NGOs brought meaning and content to life. On the other hand, negative attitudes in the neighbourhood contributed to feelings of exclusion and loneliness. Extract 10 illustrates the importance of community to the residents, alongside housing.

Extract 10

In my case I have a flat thanks to X (organization). They took me off the streets. I was lost in alcohol too. And now I work in the clothing department, washing the clothes from people who are showering. And I'm very happy here. I know everyone, we are all fond of each other. We play domino and board games and we're like a family and that boosts your self-esteem.

Finally, with respect to the service system, there were ways of working that made Housing First work challenging in all the cities. A very typical situation was that the working culture in the surrounding service system did not recognize the Housing First principle, which made it difficult to carry out the work. In one of the interviews, a mindset of distrust present in the service system was discussed, which was also reflected in the behaviour of the clients. They had been forced to hide things, such as their drug use, and did not easily trust the staff working in Housing First either. This, then, complicated the support work.

Interestingly, also, the Housing First principle itself was seen to have created practices that were not necessarily always very responsive to the context, especially to the needs of clients. Extract 11 illustrates this kind of situation. The identified issue by Housing First worker is that national Housing First programs tend to focus exclusively on individuals experiencing the most severe forms of long-term homelessness, thereby excluding groups such as young people and families from access to Housing First projects.

Extract 11

They're trying to get people that are literally in and out of services for 10, 15, 20 years. They're at that stage, I think. They're not getting to the other stage, like the person that's 18-year-old or whatever that's coming out of care. They're not even focused on (foster care) leavers or young adults or families either. It's not on the plan.

Adaptations

The interviewees also described successful practices and cooperation taking place. In these kinds of situations, the Housing First work was able to respond, manage, or "actively adapt" (Lancione et al., 2017) to the challenges posed by the context. What made these practices adaptations, according to our interpretation, was that they involved some modification of the original Housing First model to meet the challenges of the local situation.

In extract 13, a Housing First staff member describes the various housing options their organization has for its clients. The depiction is a response to the question of what kind of adaptations can be found in their organization.

Extract 13

We have different apartments around the city. First, we have single apartments where there is just one person. Then we have housing for people that are not that autonomous, so they need more support. We also have some other apartments that are lower threshold solutions, and it's for homeless people that need somewhere to rest, maybe they also need to have dinner there, they have some space to wash up, et cetera. And then we also have a single building with apartments where they only share the kitchens, so each apartment is shared between two users and they only share the kitchen, but they have, for example, the room for themselves (...) It's a model that I like a lot, and that it works very well, because it gives them some autonomy, they are sort of free, but at the same time, they have support, so they have these two options. So, I think having more of this could work, it's working very well.

Typically, the adaptations were described as rising from the needs of the client. The extract 13 highlights, for instance, “single building” housing, which is depicted to offer some residents access to more intensive support than scattered housing. In the Housing First literature, this form of housing is referred to as communal Housing First (Pleace 2012), single-site housing (Kaakinen & Turunen 2021), or congregate housing (Somers 2017; see also Harris et al, 2019), where support for residents is available on site, but they nevertheless live independently in their own apartments with their own rental contracts. In the interviews, this form of housing was seen as the only functioning housing option for some of the residents, who were unable to live by themselves. As an interviewee summarized the key problem present in the scattered housing: *“The neighbour may tolerate very little of any disturbance. A lot of things can happen in a fast cycle. And then it will result in the termination of the lease. Then you’re in debt, and then it’s all over again”*.

Other housing solutions that were either considered to be working or welcomed as part of the Housing First model were those that would take better account of different homeless groups. The poor situation of young people was highlighted in all the interviews. Either they were not acknowledged in Housing First policies at all, or the support given was thought to be too scarce, or the housing arrangements were not suitable for them. Alongside youth, families and couples were raised to the fore as groups needing more attention in Housing First policies, particularly in the Dublin interviews.

Also, housing solutions that could change according to the life situation of the residents were sought. It was, for example, discussed that someone might need the intensive support and community provided by single-site housing at first, but later be able to cope with less. Temporary solutions were considered for those situations where the resident’s life situation was not clear, and they did not necessarily know what kind of housing they wanted. However, the temporary solution should include a promise of ongoing support and permanent housing.

Table 4 shows residents’ housing paths (Extracts 14-17). Also, they reflect the importance of housing options. Some like to live in a community, others prefer to live alone. Also, for clients, it was most important that housing was stable and provided intimacy and security, and that it could change according to their needs.

Table 4. Resident's Housing Paths

Extract 14: From Shelter to Shared Flat

Organization X (name of the organization) came and talked to me. They took me to apartment X (temporary shelter) and then someone told me, hey, this is your key, this is your place. And now I live with two other people. We're very happy. (Spain)

Extract 15: From Single Site Housing to Supported Scattered Housing to Independent Housing

I've been completely homeless for a couple of years, and then I got to live in the main unit of X (single site housing). Then I got a job and lived in X (scattered support apartment) for a while. And then nowadays I'm completely on my own and I've got contracts and training and I'm going to school. In a way, through the Housing First principle, I've managed to reintegrate back into society, or become part of it, as I've never really belonged in it in the first place. (Finland)

Extract 16: From Friend's Houses, Pensions and Hostels to Own Housing

I've been three years on the street, and I have lived also five, six years around friends' houses or pensions- hostels where I would pay and stay. The money was little, and the money was given to me by my friends. Somebody put me on a waiting list at Housing First, and since April, I've had on own place. (Germany)

As for support, the interviewees highlighted very similar activities and principles in all countries. The client's support needs were individual, and support should be tailored according to client's needs and wishes. Here, the strengths of the original Housing First model as a specifically client-centered approach were often highlighted. However, what the original model missed, according to many interviewees, was a more caring and community-based approach to support. In fact, most of the support adaptations mentioned in the interviews seek to introduce these kinds of approaches to the Housing First model, where the residents would receive more than "only" housing.

These included activities in the single-site units to involve the residents in the community and thus increase their participation and quality of life. In the interviews, this meant shared spaces, activities, and encounters, community meetings, access to work activities for a small fee, shared parties, outings, and other activities. The residents were also encouraged to seek activities outside their apartments and were often also escorted to them. However, as stressed by the interviewees, the activities were voluntary and not linked to housing.

Support and a sense of community were also promoted in scattered housing. One discussed and highlighted feature was the visits to residents' homes, which were seen as an important sign of 'normal living'. In some organizations, these are also involved in the use of volunteers. The importance of the visits also showed in the interviews with the residents. As one resident described: *"Now I have someone coming to my place, and I must prepare coffee for them, just like in the old times. I feel like a person."* There were also aims to create a sense of community for the people living in scattered housing through activities at the Housing First projects. Some projects had also developed cooperation with the landlords in situations

where the tenant was at risk of losing their accommodation, for example, due to unpaid rent or other reasons. In the interviews, this was seen as a needed adaptation of the original principle where support and housing are separated.

The rest of the adaptations mentioned in the interviews were designed to meet the challenges of other contextual factors. Neighbourhood work was mentioned to deal with the problems stemming from the community, such as neighbours and their complaints. This entailed interacting with neighbours or arranging activities in the neighbourhoods. The adverse housing situation as a crucial material context affecting Housing First and its implementation was discussed particularly in the interviews conducted in the cities suffering housing shortage. However, the interviewees didn't present any suggestions or adaptations to tackle this issue.

In extract 13, the housing situation is discussed in a very similar manner to the research literature on Housing and homelessness, stating that Housing First cannot be scaled up without housing (see e.g., Parsell et al., 2025). However, in light of the quote, the central stakeholders seem to lack initiative with respect to this issue.

Extract 18

There is a lack of housing in general in Berlin. We went to a political meeting, and we had the chance to address a few of these politicians, and we noticed that they're like going in circles and there are no real solutions being found for this housing problem that is in Berlin. (BER)

To conclude the results section, some interviewees also made critical remarks about the housing solutions and support. Some respondents considered single-site housing as a solution that did not contribute to the well-being of the residents and, at worst, even undermined it. On the other hand, this also raised debate and was seen as a matter of poor resources of the some of the single-site units rather than the single-site housing itself. Moreover, a part of the criticism was not only directed at single-site housing, but at the Housing First approach in general, which, according to the interviewees, failed to take sufficient account of the support needs of residents both in scattered and single-site housing.

The interviews also identified a tense relationship between adaptations and the original Housing First model, making successful balancing between these two a key criterion for successful Housing First work and expertise. Extract 19 highlights this kind of expertise in the context of single-site housing, which recognizes both the residents' right to privacy and choice and seeks to actively care for and maintain contact with them.

Extract 19

Then obviously there are a lot of people... they don't want to see you because they're on a bender or whatever it is. You must respect it. They don't want to see you. They don't want to answer the door. You still potentially try. And we have a kind of clear policy on what to do when that happens. Don't just say, yeah, that's fine, I'll see you next month. So, you're keeping an eye maybe on cameras, or you're noticing them around. Okay, they were seen. They were seen yesterday or whatever, even though they might never have talked to you. It really kind of becomes around, are they still alive, are they still okay. It's kind of skill that keeps contact even though they don't want to.

Conclusions

The article explored the relationship between the Housing First model and its surrounding context, the latter of which emerged as an essential factor influencing Housing First work in the analysis of the focus group interviews. The contribution of the article to research on Housing First is twofold. First, the data from different countries shows how context shapes the implementation of Housing First, regardless of what the model itself is aiming for or hopes to achieve. Secondly, the article brings to the fore the different adaptations of Housing First, which have been designed to meet different needs and challenges posed by the context. This way, the results add to the discussion on the future development of the Housing First principle and the societal factors surrounding this development.

The article was built on Lancione and colleagues' (2017) understanding of the context in which the Housing First model is actively adapted to fit the challenges posed by the local context, but at the same time adheres to the key principles of the model. Moreover, context was seen as a factor that cannot, and should not, be fully minimized in policy implementation, as this may exclude important factors that need to be considered (Clarke and Parsell, 2020; Boesweldt et al., 2024). On this basis, five contextual factors, clients' needs, material resources, policy and politics, community and service system, and culture, were identified that influenced the work of Housing First and, secondly, the different adaptations that were made to meet the challenges posed by the context.

The results underline firstly the importance of developing Housing First policies that consider the needs of clients, and particularly the needs of different client groups. These needs may vary in different contexts, in which case we need to talk about a plural application of the Housing First model, rather than a single model. In the interviews, in practice, this meant, first, different forms of housing that would consider the needs of the clients, with the flexibility to change according to their

changing needs, as well as considering the needs of different groups of residents, in particular, young people and families experiencing homelessness. Similar conclusions have been reached in previous studies. Chen (2019) discusses the programmatic differences of Housing First, which can benefit the development of the model and the residents. For instance, housing type doesn't compromise the strengths of the model if different housing types and programs adhere to the central principles of Housing First (see also Brown et al., 2015; Clifasefi et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2019). Also, the Housing First studies on young people have stressed that the measures aimed at them must differ from those aimed at adults and take as their starting point the demands associated with adolescence and identity development (Slesnick et al., 2023). The findings on homeless families in the interviews were interesting. As they often have a roof over their heads, they are not counted as a target group for the Housing First model. In practice, however, families may live in temporary and poor-quality housing for years. The interviews, therefore, identified a need to develop and extend the Housing First model for families

Another important emerging context is that of material resources (available housing and support), which inevitably affect the implementation of Housing First work, regardless of the principles of the model. It was also clear from the interviews that the key question for the future of the Housing First principle is how to respond and find solutions to the constraints set by material resources. Regarding housing, what is alarming is that the interviewees did not have any solutions or adaptations to the housing crisis existing in their cities, nor, according to them, did other actors. Indeed, this issue has less to do with the homelessness field, represented by the interviewees, than it does with construction and urban development, as pointed out by, for instance, Meda (2009) and Parsell and colleagues (2025). As for resources for support, funding for Housing First projects should be secured so that they can be developed in the longer term. Cooperation with other sectors, such as the service system and civil society, must also be strengthened, as they provide both material and non-material support for the Housing First principle.

The third key finding of the article relates to the more communal, caring, and supportive Housing First approach that emerged from the interviews. According to the interviewees, these elements should and could easily be incorporated into the model without the original model suffering as a result. A similar question of social integration and support within the Housing First approach has also been raised in earlier research (Quilgars and Pleace, 2016; Marshall, 2024). Marshall and colleagues (*ibid.*) have considered its relationship particularly to the principle of choice, arguing that alongside formal rights and choice, it is also necessary to ensure that people have actual capabilities to pursue their rights and choices.

As for the limitations of the study, this was a qualitative study that provided descriptive information on the status of Housing First policies in four European countries. The interviewees were residents and front-line workers, which is reflected in the responses, emphasizing the daily and practical problems of Housing First. As such, the data is not comprehensive in terms of the state of the Housing First policy in different countries, nor in Europe. However, it brings to the fore critical insights into the everyday implementation of Housing First, shedding light on factors that might be overlooked by policymakers and authorities.

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