

Approved Housing Bodies as Landlords to People Moving out of Homelessness

Exploring the Experience of Third-Party AHBs

Ciara Morley
Morley Economic Consulting

**Challenging
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Foreword

A private rental tenancy with some form of rental subsidy has always been the most likely route out of homelessness for single people. While most households on the social housing waiting list are single person households, only a small proportion of social housing is constructed for single people, and much of that is allocated to older people or those with disabilities. For those single people trying to move out of a period of homelessness there may be additional challenges in remaining on the housing list in chaotic circumstances and there may be the further barrier of 'estate management' checks' if they have any history of rent arrears, anti-social behaviour or criminal record. Historically, the lower end of the private rental market asks fewer questions, and while providing lower quality housing with less security it offered a pathway out of homelessness. Sometimes this was combined with some form of tenancy sustainment for a 'settling in period'.

In more recent years, reduced supply at the lower end of the private rental sector, greater regulation and the failure of rent subsidies to reflect real rent levels have closed off the private rental sector as a route out of homelessness for many, contributing to a steady rise in single person homelessness, which has quadrupled in the last ten years.

For single person households who are eligible for the Housing First Programme, a new route out has emerged over the last number of years, linking the offer of housing with a range of 'as long as needed' tenancy and health supports. While Housing First tenancies can be in social housing or in the private rental sector, in the Irish context private tenancies have proven hard to obtain and sustain for a variety of reasons. While the majority of social housing tenancies are with local authorities or with specialised AHBs who also provide the Housing First support, a significant proportion have been with 'general needs' AHBs, with the support provided by another specialist NGO, such as Focus Ireland, Cork Simon or the Peter McVerry Trust. Although these 'Third Party' AHBs act as landlords for Housing First tenants where local authorities allocate HF tenants to them, their primary mission is to provide homes and communities to people who are on the housing list because of their low income and are not assessed as having other special or support needs. The recognised needs of Housing First tenants can create some concerns for general needs AHBs, particularly in relation to their impact on their other tenants if problems arise.

There is no indications that there are policy initiatives under consideration at present which would significantly increase opportunities in the private rental sector for Housing First tenants, and with the AHBs delivering a growing proportion of the new social housing stock, it is likely that these ‘general needs’ AHBs will be asked to provide homes for an increasing proportion of the 2,000 Housing First tenancies that the Programme for Government commits to creating.

Tenants in AHBs have the same tenancy rights and obligations as tenants with private landlords and fall under the regulation of the Residential Tenancies Board. Tenants in local authority housing, on the other hand, are not covered by this legislation and, while local authority tenancies tend to be, in practice, more secure than tenancies under the RTB, they experience little external regulation or legally obligated processes when problems emerge. In particular, AHBs face the risk of neighbours taking a case to the RTB where they believe the AHB has been negligent as a landlord, which can result in substantial fines and damage to their reputation.

Third party AHBs face the same regulatory regime as specialist NGOs providing support along with housing, but in practice sustaining tenancies for people with complex needs is less familiar territory for general needs AHBs. Furthermore, while specialists fulfil the Housing First principle of ‘separation of housing and support’, they are able to communicate about changing circumstance more effectively and to make more informed decisions about the balance of risks involved in tenancies which are in difficulty. Third party AHBs can feel themselves treated as external parties, with no greater interest in the well-being of the tenant than a for-profit landlord.

Specialist homeless NGOs which are also AHBs with significant amount of their own social housing stock are more developed in Ireland than in most European countries. As a result, Housing First across Europe is more dependent on general needs AHBs as Housing First landlords. Despite this growing importance of general needs AHBs in delivering an increasingly ambitious Housing First programme, there has been little study of the particular challenges they face, and the best practice that is emerging from their role. This study reveals some significant areas of frustration but strikingly these emerge from a strong shared desire to make this highly regarded programme even more effective.

For these reasons, Focus Ireland and the European Housing First Hub have undertaken this initial study of the experiences of Irish general needs AHBs who have actively engaged as Housing First landlords. Much of the legal framework which informs the study is unique to the Irish legislation, but many of the principles of collaboration, partnership and training will be common across the EU and beyond.

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Executive summary

The Housing First model, first introduced in Ireland in 2011, currently supports more than 1,000 people to live independently in their own homes. With a success rate of 83%, Housing First has proven to be successful in supporting people with long histories of homelessness and street-based sleeping, as opposed to the traditional ‘treatment-then-housing’ approach. This programme, along with others such as Tenancy Support Services (TSS) and Support to Live Independently (SLÍ), have made important contributions to helping individuals transition successfully from emergency accommodation, and homelessness, to their own homes.

Traditionally, Housing First nominations are allocated a home in local authority owned/leased social housing, or in properties owned or managed by an NGO Housing First service provider e.g. Focus Ireland, Peter McVerry Trust, Simon Community. In the case of the latter, the NGO AHB landlord will have a high level of tolerance and understanding for the challenges that may arise within the Housing First tenancy, as they are also engaged in the provision of the service.

More recently, with the chronic issues underlying the housing market in Ireland, third-party AHBs have taken on a greater role with respect to the Housing First model. These third-party AHBs e.g., Clúid Housing, Co-operative Housing Ireland, Túath Housing etc. are not-for-profit organisations who provide and manage social rented housing to ‘general needs’ tenants. The sector is currently supplying approximately 61,500 social homes to the market, representing 47% of the total social housing stock nationally. And while data is limited, it is estimated that Housing First tenants account for around 1% of all third-party AHB tenancies.

Although the overall proportion of Housing First tenants living in third-party AHB homes is relatively low, these third-party AHB landlords have accumulated extensive experience in providing tenancies to people moving out of homelessness. Thus, the purpose of this study is to gather this depth of experience and reflect it back to the sector as a constructive and practical guide to future best practice.

Stakeholder consultations formed the primary analysis component of the report, with seven of the largest third-party AHBs, four local authorities, and one NGO Housing First service provider making contributions.

In general, stakeholders acknowledge the important role of Housing First in supporting those in long-term homelessness.

Stakeholders unanimously recognise the model's effectiveness in reducing the levels of long-term homelessness and the growing role of third-party AHBs in helping to deliver the model.

"We shouldn't be resisting housing people that are in homeless services, and certainly individuals who are in Housing First. I do get [AHBs] concerns, and I think that's where it comes back to [stakeholders] having a good approach to this. If you can get the mix right, I think it can work." – Head of Housing, AHB 4

However, the success of third-party AHBs within the Housing First model is dependent on several factors.

This research identifies three key challenges that, if addressed, would enhance the role of third-party AHBs as landlords to Housing First tenants and, importantly, help to increase the number of AHBs engaging with the programme. Namely communication and information sharing; the allocation/nomination process; and tenant engagement and community impact emerged as priority intervention areas to strengthen the overall Housing First model, and the experience of the stakeholders involved in it.

Communication and information sharing were raised as significant challenges of the Housing First model, particularly between local authorities and third-party AHBs.

While local authorities appear to maintain effective communication with NGO Housing First service providers, who also typically oversee the tenancy, third-party AHBs often struggle to understand tenants' histories and needs due to limited information flow.

GDPR restrictions further complicate this. For local authorities, the tenant is trying to make a fresh start, and this may be impacted by the sharing of sensitive information. Third-party AHBs, on the other hand, feel that the withholding of certain tenant information hinders their ability to anticipate potential tenancy issues.

"Getting that information helps me in my role in supporting that tenant. That information is key. You'll know the needs. You'll know the circumstances. It helps you in dealing with them when issues do arise, you have that bit of understanding. It helps me build that relationship, develop that relationship. You're that little more patient [because] you want to help them sustain that tenancy. You want to help them stay in that property." – Housing Officer, AHB 5

Communication with the NGO service provider is just as important in helping to build trust between the landlord and the tenant.

Once a Housing First nomination is approved, the relationship between the tenant, the service provider, and the AHB is crucial for a successful transition to the new home. The Housing First support worker supports tenants with essential tasks, such as setting up utilities and navigating their treatment journey. While some relationships are strong, others suffer from poor communication and challenges related to staffing.

A low client-staff ratio is vital for maintaining effective support; however, high caseloads, burnout, and staff turnover hinder this. Such trends lead to tenant frustration with the need to rebuild trust with new caseworkers. Third-party AHBs note how staff turnover can disrupt continuity of care, leaving tenants without critical support to maintain their tenancies.

“[The service providers] are so stretched because of the workload... They have so many clients, but all of those clients are extremely demanding... The men and women supporting these people, their workloads seem to be huge, and they don’t have the time to get to these people, or they’re not in a position to give that person the time that they may need... Even to link in once a week seems to be extremely difficult with staff because the resources are not there.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

Third-party AHBs want to see greater collaboration with the local authorities when it comes to the allocation process.

Under the Housing First model, local authorities control the allocation process, typically nominating tenants to social housing units owned/managed by local authorities or AHBs. Key factors considered in allocations include tenant preference, location, proximity to support services, and property suitability.

Third-party AHBs can share their expertise in matching the right properties with the right tenants, and to improve outcomes.

Third-party AHBs expressed concerns that local authorities often seem to overlook criteria, leading to problematic placements that could jeopardize housing sustainability. In many cases, this is a direct result of the shortage of appropriate one-bedroom units in the market. Given this challenge it can be difficult for local authorities to adhere to a checklist.

Greater collaboration with local authorities may help to address potential challenges with, for example, too many Housing First tenants being placed in one development, the incompatibility of tenants to certain locations, and the use of “pepper-potted” homes that may require a level of oversight that is not feasible.

“I can’t tell the local authority what to do but I can try to inform their decision making... We have to be more thoughtful about where we’re allocating and why we’re allocating. At the end of the day [with] Housing First, we want it to be sustainable... Sometimes I think we’re setting people up to fail if we nominate and allocate them a property where we know there is active drug use, violence and issues.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

Third-party AHBs also expressed concerns about tenancy sustainability when tenants disengage from support services.

At the core of the Housing First model is the provision of permanent housing to individuals experiencing homelessness, without prerequisites like sobriety. Unlike other models, once allocated a home, tenants are free to engage, disengage, and re-engage support services at any time. From the perspective of third-party AHBs, disengaging from services can lead to increased risks of termination or reallocation.

“But quite often when you end up in a situation where it’s not going particularly well, that’s generally where you’d see someone is also disengaged from their service provider... That can be difficult... People can retreat into themselves... It’s then up to the landlord to address it. Our first port of call is to save the tenancy and salvage it where we can... It’s better for the tenant and it’s better for the organisation if we can put things right and salvage the situation.” – Head of Tenancy Management, AHB 2

Issues such as “cuckooing”, where others unlawfully occupy the tenant’s home, often exacerbate community tensions and potentially jeopardise tenancy security. Third-party AHBs must therefore navigate these challenges carefully, balancing their responsibilities to their tenants and the surrounding community.

Third-party AHBs noted the apparent disconnect between the tolerance levels for anti-social behaviour for the support NGO versus the third-party AHB.

Third-party AHBs also feel that when anti-social behaviour does arise the Housing First support worker often does not appreciate the potential implications this can have for the AHB who falls under the remit of the RTB and can ensure significant financial penalties if they do not adhere to the regulations.

In the context of these findings, there is clear scope to address the role of third-party AHBs within the Housing First model. Where the Housing First landlord is a third-party AHB, they should be considered a partner in the programme, along with the local authority and the NGO support service. All three stakeholders have a shared commitment to a positive outcome of a sustained tenancy and a number of recommendations emerge that, if addressed, would go some way to improving the experience of all stakeholders.

Recommendations

Where the local authority has decided to allocate a Housing First tenancy to a “General Needs AHB”, the AHB should be considered as a partner in the programme by the local authority, the HSE and the NGO support organisation, with a shared commitment to a positive outcome of a sustained tenancy. Local authorities should use the CCMA (City and County Managers Association) agreed template “Supported Living Accommodation Nomination Notice” form.

The following recommendations, addressed to each of those parties would help support this approach.

Recommendations to all parties (Local Authorities, Support NGOs, and Third-Party AHBs)

- › Maximise information sharing (allowable under GDPR) between the local authority, the support NGO, An Garda Síochána Community Policing, and the third-party AHB.
- › Arrange a “pre-tenancy” meeting at the start of all tenancies involving third-party AHBs.
- › Facilitate collaboration between all stakeholders where there is a risk of tenancy breakdown or tenant re-allocation.

Recommendations to the National Housing First Office (NHFO)

- › Develop a Partnership Charter to build on the collaborative ethos of the Housing First model.
- › Encourage local authorities to include Housing First allocations as a letting priority in their Scheme of Lettings.
- › Engage with the RTB to explore protocols to support the re-location of Housing First tenants.

Recommendations to Local Authorities

- › Consider proposals from third-party AHBs on alternative allocations within their available housing stock.
- › Ensure that staff working on areas related to Housing First have received Housing First training from accredited trainers.

Recommendations to Support NGOs and Third-Party AHBs

- › Arrange regular (monthly or quarterly) meetings between the third-party AHB Housing Officer and the NGO Support Worker.

Recommendations to Support NGOs

- › Develop a policy for the timely sharing of support worker contact information at the outset of a new tenancy, and when/if staff change-overs occur. Share this policy with third-party AHBs engaging in the Housing First model.

Recommendations to Third-Party AHBs

- › All third-party AHBs should ensure that housing management staff have received Housing First training from accredited trainers.
- › Continue to review further development of in-house or contracted Tenancy Sustainment Teams to enhance their offering as social housing landlords.

Public policy recommendations

- › The National Housing First Office and the Department of Housing should seek to identify specific protocols to address high levels of staff turnover within NGO service providers.
- › All AHBs and Local Authorities should increase the proportion of single person occupancy units in their development plans.



Chapter 1

Introduction

Since its formal introduction to Ireland in 2018, the Housing First model has played a significant role in working towards ending long-term homelessness. As of end-2024, 1,067 Housing First tenancies have been created, with an 86% success rate.¹ This success comes in the context of a broad and deep housing and homelessness crisis playing out across Ireland over the past decade and a half.

Following the financial crisis, persistent underinvestment in Ireland's housing sector has culminated in a significant disequilibrium between supply and demand. The Housing Commission estimate that, based on Census 2022, there is a current housing deficit of between 212,500 and 256,000 homes in Ireland. This pent-up demand has resulted in both soaring house prices and rents.

The housing landscape in Ireland has changed dramatically over the past decade and every pathway out of homelessness requires access to housing. Social housing is a critical component in addressing and preventing homelessness. The Government, in their Housing for All plan, targets the provision of 90,000 social homes by 2030, with a new-build component of over 9,5000 social homes annually to 2026.² In 2023, the Government delivered just under 12,000 social houses through new-builds, acquisitions and leasing.³ While this marks a modest increase on 2022 output, the scale of intervention required is substantial in the context of the number of households qualifying for social housing support. In 2023, 58,824 households qualified for social housing, marking a 2% increase on the previous year.⁴

In the absence of an adequate supply of local authority housing, the Government has relied on 'social housing solutions' in the private rental market, where tenants eligible for social housing receive rent subsidies such as the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). As of 2022, some 59,000 households were in receipt of the payment at a cost to the

1 Homeless Quarterly Progress Report, Quarter 4 2024, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Allen, M. & E. Byrne (2023), Housing First and Structural Change in Ireland, European Journal of Homelessness, Vol 17, No. 2

2 Housing for All, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

3 Social and Affordable Housing Delivery Statistics Q4 2023, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

4 Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2023, The Housing Agency

State of €515 million. While HAP has played an important role in reducing social housing waiting lists, there are significant limitations to the scheme including: market rents are higher than allowable thresholds resulting in widespread top-ups on top of differential rent; tenants are at risk of eviction due to landlords wishing to sell-up or use the property for their own families; and the shortage of available properties.

Once approved for HAP, recipients are deemed to have their housing need met and are removed from the social housing list. The Parliamentary Budget Office estimate that at the end of 2022, the housing need, encompassing those on the housing list and those in receipt of HAP, totalled 241,452 individuals, or 116,886 households.⁵

Of the nearly 59,000 households that qualify for social housing, 53% rely on social welfare as the only source of household income (-3% YoY); 57% are a one adult only household (+4% YoY) and 14% are living in emergency accommodation or have no accommodation (+17% YoY).⁶

These figures reflect the consequences of continued underinvestment in private and social housing, and the impact on individuals and families ability to find and afford homes. Over the past 10 years there has been a greater than four-fold increase in the number of people living in emergency accommodation in Ireland. In July 2014, 3,258 people were recorded as living in emergency accommodation. By July 2024, this number stood at 14,429.⁷ Indeed, over the full decade, some 55,000 adults became homeless, with the number living in emergency accommodation for longer than six months increasing by 580%.⁸

While the majority of individuals and families leave emergency accommodation to a local authority or third-party Approved Housing Body (AHB) tenancy, or to a private rented tenancy with housing support e.g. HAP, some require additional levels of support in order for them to access and sustain their tenancy. These include, for example, Tenancy Support Services (TSS), Support to Live Independently (SLI) and Housing First. These services are provided by a range of service providers including Focus Ireland, Simon Communities and Peter McVerry Trust and recipients may be a tenant in the private rented sector, or of a local authority or AHB.⁹

It is on the latter that this report focuses its attention and, in particular, the role of third-party AHBs as landlords to tenants in receipt of Housing First support. The use of third-party AHBs is relatively novel in the context of the Housing First model as they typically provide 'general needs' housing, suitable for people who can live independently without any specific tenancy support. In that respect, they have the same rights and obligations as private landlords and thus fall under the remit of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB). This means that AHB landlords, and their tenants, are covered by the same legislation as those in the private rented sector e.g., minimum property standards, tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities, dispute resolutions etc.

5 Social Housing 'Ongoing Need' – Update 2022, Parliamentary Budget Office

6 Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2023, The Housing Agency

7 Homeless Report – July 2024, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

8 O'Sullivan, E., Byrne, E. and M. Allen (2024). A decade of Homelessness data: Significant developments in homelessness 2014–2023, Focus Ireland

9 The primary focus of this report is on third-party AHB landlords who are not also responsible for the provision of Housing First services.

The use of third-party “general needs” AHBs within the current Housing First model therefore presents certain challenges, specifically around notices of termination where there is a breach of tenant obligations or if rent arrears are incurred. In the event of anti-social behaviour too, third-party AHBs may have complaints taken against them by the community that can result in potential financial implications. Local authorities do not fall under the same legislation, and so there is a perceived imbalance between the security of tenancy for those allocated a local authority social home versus those in a third-party AHB home.

Since the inception of Housing First at a national level in Ireland, there has been no research on the AHB experience of the programme in this context. Despite the extensive research literature on Housing First, the issues arising for third-party AHB landlords have been little documented. This report aims to gather together the depth of experience that third-party AHBs have accumulated in providing tenancies to people moving out of homelessness with Housing First, TSS, or SLÍ supports. The purpose of this study is to reflect findings back to the sector as a constructive and practical addition to the broader policy literature.

Chapter 2

The role of Approved Housing Bodies as landlords to tenants exiting homelessness – an overview

Over the past two years there has been a steady rise in the number of households entering into tenancies with supports in place – namely in the form of TSS, SLÍ and Housing First. In Q2 2022, a third of single people and families moving from homelessness into a home, did so with one of these support in place. While this proportion has declined slightly through to Q2 2024, the actual number of households availing of tenancy supports has increased by over 40% in the two-year period.¹⁰

Over the same period, the proportion of those households moving into a third-party AHB tenancy with support in place has also increased. In Q2 2022, amongst all supported households, the proportion moving into third-party AHB accommodation stood at just over one-in-every-three, broadly similar to the proportion moving into local authority housing. By Q2 2024, the proportion of supported households moving into an AHB home stood at one-in-every-two.

Dependency on AHBs as a form of social housing, in particular for those exiting homelessness services is increasing. There has been a modest two percentage point increase in the number of single people and families securing AHB accommodation with and without the aforementioned supports since Q2 2022. This compares to a close to 10 percentage point decline in HAP supported private rented tenancies. This clearly demonstrates the growing challenges for those exiting homelessness services to secure housing in the private rented sector, and the important role that AHBs now play in filling that gap.

Recent trends in Irish housing, homelessness, and Housing First have been covered extensively in previous research, in particular research supported by Focus Ireland, including, for example, *From Rebuilding Ireland to Housing for All: International and Irish Lessons for Tackling Homelessness*¹¹; *Housing First and Structural Change in Ireland*¹²; and *Transitions Into, Through and Out of Homeless: Quantitative Analysis of Administrative*

10 Local Authority Homeless Performance Reports Q2 2024, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

11 Baptista, I., Culhane, D. P., Pleace, N. and Eoin O'Sullivan (2022). *From Rebuilding Ireland to Housing for All: international and Irish lessons for tackling homelessness*, Focus Ireland

12 Allen, M. & Byrne, E (2023), *Housing First and Structural Change in Ireland*, European Journal of Homelessness, Vol 17, No. 2

Data on Single Adults' Emergency Accommodation Use in the Dublin Region between 2016 and 2018)¹³. For this reason, the remainder of this Chapter will provide a brief overview of the various tenancy sustainment schemes covered in this report, and the role that third-party AHBs are now playing in helping the Government to achieve its targets with respect to social housing delivery over the next decade.

TSS and SLÍ are broadly similar programmes providing support to those with low or moderate needs living independently –

- ▶ **TSS** provides support to households who are moving out of homelessness into a new home or are at risk of losing their tenancy and becoming homeless. It assists individuals and families by providing ongoing practical supports around accessing entitlements, facilitating access to health and budgeting services, and establishing routines that strengthen households' capabilities to sustain their respective tenancies into the longer term.¹⁴ The case management support is provided for a limited period, typically six months.
- ▶ The **SLÍ** initiative is part of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive's (DHRE) Pathway to Home model and has been in place since 2010. It provides visiting support services to those with low or moderate needs who have secured independent accommodation after leaving homeless services.¹⁵ Supports include day-to-day housing tasks, linking in with social and community services, community integration. Similar to TSS, the support is for six months and can be extended for a further six months if required.

These supports play an important role in helping individuals and families to transition out of homelessness, and to maintain their tenancy into the long term. As neither are formally part of a national strategy, there is relatively limited data on the up take of both schemes. Data collated for the four Dublin local authorities shows that 357 households were supported in Q2 2024 via both programmes – with close to two-thirds of those households in receipt of the SLÍ support.

The **Housing First** model, while aimed at tenancy sustainment, differs from the aforementioned schemes in that it specifically targets single individuals with complex support needs who require a greater level of intervention over a longer period of time. The model was first introduced in Ireland in 2011 as part of a demonstration project in Dublin, targeting 23 rough sleepers.¹⁶ At its core, the model provides 'a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing homelessness for people experiencing mental health, physical health, substance misuse, social, behavioural, and other challenges'.¹⁷ As opposed to the traditional 'treatment-then-housing' approach to long-term homelessness, Housing First endeavours to provide a permanent affordable home as a first step to recovery.

¹³ Bairéad, C. S. (2022). Transition Into, Through and Out of Homeless: Quantitative Analysis of Administrative Data on Single Adults' Emergency Accommodation Use in the Dublin Region between 2016 and 2018, UCD

¹⁴ Haran, N. and Seán Ó Siochrá (2017). Keeping a Home – Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless, Focus Ireland

¹⁵ Support to Live Independently (SLÍ) Evaluation (2021), Peter McVerry Trust and Focus Ireland

¹⁶ Greenwood, R. M. (2015). Evaluation of Dublin Housing First Demonstration Project Summary Findings, University of Limerick and Dublin Region Homeless Executive

¹⁷ The Housing Agency. Available at: <https://www.housingagency.ie/housing-information/housing-first>

Following the success of the 2011 demonstration project, a National Implementation Plan for Housing First was developed, setting regional targets over a five-year period to 2026. The plan targets the creation of 1,319 Housing First tenancies over the period, or 264 tenancies per annum across all regions and local authorities. Under this current plan, a total of 683 Housing First tenancies have been created with 1,031 (including those housed prior to the current plan) now living in a Housing First tenancy.¹⁸

Currently, there are no standardised eligibility criteria or intake procedures, with regions and local authorities developing their own approach to both. However, adherence to the following aspects help to maintain the programmes fidelity –

- Each local authority, in collaboration with the HSE and partner NGO, determines the referral, admission and prioritisation process tailored to the realities of the local context. For example, local authorities will determine the number of individuals in their area that are long-term homeless; rough sleeping; and/or with high support needs. The Cork Region Housing First service, for example, gives priority to those who appear in three main datasets – (i) have a history of long-term homelessness and rough sleeping, (ii) are most frequent emergency presentations, and (iii) are identified as most excluded or vulnerable, as identified by local NGOs and outreach service providers.¹⁹
- The required housing stock comes from social housing i.e., publicly funded housing managed by local authorities and AHBs, or subsidised private rental. No more than 20% of units in any one development should be occupied by Housing First tenants.
- In the majority of cases the local authority nominates Housing First tenants to either local authority or AHB homes. Typically, the NGO delivering the Housing First service in a particular area will also be the AHB responsible. In cases where a third-party AHB is used, the local authority and the NGO delivering the service will make the referral and the independent AHB will decide whether or not to accept it.
- Once housed, a Housing First tenant may decide to disengage from treatment and services. This is their right. However, they must continue to engage with their case manager, via home visits, at least once a week.
- Depending on preferences, and housing availability, a client will move into a home between four and 12 weeks after initial intake; relocation is permitted and an agreed procedure to facilitate relocations should be in place between the local authority, AHB and NGO.

A 2018 Depaul report²⁰ found that their own Housing First services in Northern Ireland operated with a high fidelity to the international standards of the programme, but that the supply of housing in the market, and in particular the supply of one-bed homes, was impacting capacity.

¹⁸ Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Q2 2024, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

¹⁹ Tsemberis, S. (2020). A Housing First Manual for Ireland, Pathways Housing First Institute

²⁰ Housing First Leading the Way Together, Report on Fidelity Assessment of Depaul Belfast and Derry/Londonderry Housing First Services, 2018

Similar pressures exist in the Republic of Ireland, in relation to the supply of one-bed homes. In Census 2022, just 6% of the national housing stock were one-bed homes, and with social housing accounting for 9% of the total stock in Ireland (2% of which is AHB social homes), the proportion of one-bed social homes is considerably low.²¹

While the aforementioned tenancy sustainment supports have proved successful in helping to support individuals and families to live independently in their own homes, their overall success is contingent on the availability of suitable social housing. The role of AHBs is critical in this respect.

The AHB sector has grown significantly, from delivering 357 new social homes to the market in 2014, to almost 6,000 new homes in 2023. The sector is responsible for the delivery of approximately 61,500 homes, or 47% of all long-term social housing, and 30% of all cost rental homes in 2023 alone.²²

Data from the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) show that, as of the end of 2022, fewer than nine large AHBs, representing just 2% of the market, were responsible for over two-thirds of all homes. The majority of AHBs (55%) are classified as ‘micro’ and account for 3% of social homes.²³ AHBRA forecast growth for the sector of approximately 36% over the three years to 2025. Much of this will be driven by the large AHBs, with their overall share of the market set to increase to over 70%.

AHBs provide a total of 537 Housing First tenancies, representing 29 AHBs nationally. This is over half (52%) of all Housing First tenancies. 241 of those tenancies are provided by third-party AHBs²⁴

Table 1: Breakdown of Housing First Units 2024

Tenancy Provider	Number	Percentage
Local Authority	482	47%
AHB (HF service provider)	296	29%
AHB (third-party)	241	23%
Other (HAP, RAS, etc)	11	1%
Total	1030	100%

21 The State of Housing in Europe 2023, Housing Europe
22 Housing Association Activity Report 2023, Irish Council for Social Housing
23 Second Sectoral Analysis of the Approved Housing Bodies Sector 2023, Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority
24 Figures compiled and provided by the Housing First National Office

Chapter 3

Methodological approach

3.1 Methodology

A mixed-method approach was applied across three phases. While tenants in receipt of all aforementioned tenancy sustainment supports are considered, the primary focus of this research is on those in the Housing First programme and the experience of third-party AHBs in supporting these tenants. As such, the remainder of this report will exclusively reference Housing First.

The first phase involved a review and analysis of relevant national and international literature relating to Housing First and third-party AHBs. While research relating to the prior is extensive, given the history of the Housing First programme dating back to the 1990s, there is relatively limited literature on the role of the latter as landlords to Housing First tenants. There has been some exploration of the issues across the UK and EU but a different legal and regulatory basis in Ireland means that this provides limited value.

This phase also involved an exploration of available data on the number of Housing First tenants living in third-party AHB accommodation. This exercise was required to inform the sample of third-party AHBs to be consulted in the second phase of the report. The Housing First National Office provided guidance in this respect with a short-list of 10 third-party AHBs identified.

The second phase of the project focused on third-party AHBs. Interviews were first held with two relevant NGO staff focus groups – (i) Housing First project workers and (ii) TSS project workers and case managers, to gain an understanding of the main themes and issues in the sector.

Of the 10 short-listed third-party AHBs, seven participated in this project. Amongst these AHBs, interviews were held with Housing Officers, Heads of Housing/Tenancy Management, Housing Services Managers, and Tenancy Sustainment Managers in order to obtain the full breadth of experience and insight.

Consultations were also held with a small number of local authorities for their perspective. One located in the Leinster Region and three in the Munster Region.

The third and final phase of the analysis involved a review and analysis of all qualitative and quantitative data collated. A SCOT Analysis was carried out with emerging themes broadly focusing on (i) communication and information sharing, (ii) the Housing First allocation process, and (iii) tenant engagement and the community impact.

Anonymised case studies were also provided by third-party AHBs to illustrate the various strengths and challenges of the Housing First model. These case studies reflect the first-hand experience of third-party AHBs as landlords to Housing First tenants. Each case study details an issue, the outcome and key learnings. These case studies are contained in Chapter 4 and have guided the policy recommendations of the report.

3.2 Methodological limitations

The number of participating third-party AHBs in this study is small in the context of the wider sector. Effort was made to include those third-party AHBs that are responsible for the majority of AHB tenancies.

Third-party AHBs maintain very limited data on the number of Housing First tenancies in their properties. Therefore, the experience and insights of a number of participants in the analysis are based on a very small cohort of Housing First tenants – typically fewer than 1% of all their tenancies.

Equally, because the majority of Housing First tenancies are placed with NGOs who operate both the Housing First programme and the AHB component, three of the four local authorities who participated in the study had limited experience with placing Housing First tenants in third-party AHB homes.

However, given the dearth of research on this topic, the findings of this report are considered to provide valuable insights.

Anonymised quotes from stakeholder interviews are used within this report and case studies have been edited to remove any identifying features to the third-party AHB or tenant, and pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity.

Chapter 4

Key themes raised by Approved Housing Bodies

All stakeholders acknowledge the important role of Housing First in addressing the issue of long-term homelessness in Ireland. As noted by one local authority, without Housing First, an entire cohort of homeless people would be “completely overlooked”.

“It’s very, very, very rare that you can’t make [Housing First] work somehow. It might take two or three efforts; it might take 10–15 years but if you’re looking at the Housing First model, that was the idea of giving them the wrap around supports to begin with because it’s a proven model.” – Housing First Co-ordinator, Local Authority 1

“People have a roof over their head and their own front door and if they can manage it, it’s a huge positive.” – Housing First Co-ordinator, Local Authority 2

There is a clear willingness amongst third-party AHBs to engage with the Housing First model and to provide that all important base for tenants to avail of the services they require.

“I think [Housing First] is working well, very well... It’s about us linking in with key workers, getting that key worker to support that tenant. It’s about us all working together and coming together to support them, and I think when you do that, they’re successful.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

“We shouldn’t be resisting housing people that are in homeless services, and certainly individuals who are in Housing First. I do get [AHBs] concerns, and I think that’s where it comes back to [stakeholders] having a good approach to this. If you can get the mix right, I think it can work.” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

From the AHBs perspective however, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed in order to increase the number of AHBs engaging with the Housing First model, and to improve the experience of the tenant. As the remainder of this Chapter sets out, issues around communication and information sharing; housing allocation; and engagement and community all play a role in the overall success of AHBs as landlords to people supported by the Housing First model.

4.1 Communication and information sharing

Currently, the majority of Housing First tenants are living in local authority owned/managed properties, or in properties owned/managed by the NGO providing the Housing First service e.g., Focus Ireland, Peter McVerry Trust, Simon Community.

From discussions with local authorities, this is the most common model for the provision of Housing First and generally it is a successful one, with “very good relationships” and “good information sharing” achieved through regular meetings. It appears that when third-party AHBs enter the provision model, the level of communication and information sharing is not as strong as required to ensure all three parties – the local authority, the Housing First provider, and the third-party AHB – are on the same page.

Third-Party AHBs and Local Authorities

Regarding the relationship between third-party AHBs and local authorities, one of the key challenges expressed related to the level of information sharing when a Housing First nomination is first made. For third-party AHBs, understanding the history and needs of a perspective tenant is very important in determining if an allocation will be successful.

“Getting that information helps me in my role in supporting that tenant. That information is key. You’ll know the needs. You’ll know the circumstances. It helps you in dealing with them when issues do arise, you have that bit of understanding. It helps me build that relationship, develop that relationship. You’re that little more patient [because] you want to help them sustain that tenancy, you want to help them stay in that property.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

“There is a case to say, on all tenancies, but especially Housing First, or anybody coming from homelessness, the reason we’re asking [for information] is we want, as best we can, to provide a service that’s going to maintain their tenancy and have them living well after six months. Those processes aren’t set up yet.” – Tenancy Sustainment Manager, AHB 5

A Code of Practice²⁵ was published in 2022 to establish a collaborative approach to housing allocations between local authorities and AHBs. That document sets out standard procedures regarding the nomination and allocation process and the level of information that is shared between agencies. Templates, for example, are provided for Nomination Notices, Sample Meeting Letter, Sample Offer Letter etc. Within this nomination template, details are provided on the name, address, email, date of Garda check, current accommodation status, housing support need, and support worker details. For third-party AHBs this level of information is sometimes inadequate, especially when dealing with Housing First tenants.

“Quite often information is missing. There are cases where I know we’ve found out the history of an individual after they had moved in because it wasn’t disclosed to us by the local authority. That definitely posed a challenge to us in terms of managing the wider cohort of tenants that were in situ there.” – Head of Tenancy Management, AHB 2

The level of information shared by local authorities can make this transition more challenging, especially for the tenant themselves. The reason for this appears to be a combination of (i) agreed information on housing allocation forms being inadequate for Housing First tenancies and (ii) local authorities failing to include pertinent information like, for example, service provider contact information.

“I’d say it’s more frustrating for the person who is applying. They’re after giving all their information [to the local authority]. They’re after getting their Garda checks done by the council and they’ll have filled in a housing history with them, but we don’t get any of that so we’re starting from scratch with them.” – Tenancy Services Manager, AHB 7

“When a person comes to [us] and says, “Are you aware of my situation?” – nine times out of 10 we’re not because the local authority will say “We can’t share that data under GDPR.”” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

As part of the nomination process, the third-party AHB will interview and assess the nominee’s suitability. One AHB spoke on the importance of this interview process for all of their tenants, not just those in receipt of Housing First or other tenancy sustainment support. They have amended their process to ask the nominee about –

“...medical needs, physical needs, support’s that [they’re] availing of. Concerns around moving into [their] own property is a big one as well... Our goal is that we could risk assess our tenants and identify those that are vulnerable.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

25 Code of Practice AHB Allocation Process, County and City Management Association, May 2022

It is during this interview, or introductory meeting, that the third-party AHB has an opportunity to learn more about the tenant, their history, and needs.

“We will ask people about the supports they need and [their] history. If something comes up, we’ll discuss it with the tenant but it’s never a basis for us not taking somebody. It’s more “All right, what way do we need to be working here to support somebody.”” – Tenancy Services Manager, AHB 7

In many cases, AHBs will revert back to the local authority if additional information is needed. For example, a tenant may provide details of specific supports they require, or aspects of their history not disclosed in the nomination notice. Any further information required by the AHB must be dealt with via the local authority.

“The lack of information protocol sharing between the AHB and Tusla, the Gardaí... We don’t come under that. Any of that information we need, we have to write to the local authority who get it on our behalf and then submit it back. That can take forever, and you don’t always get it. That information is so important if you’re dealing with anti-social behaviour.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

“We’re not asking because we want to say no to the nomination. We’re asking so that we can work on it from the get-go... That’s a hard argument to have with some of the local authorities.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

The implications of GDPR when it comes to stakeholders working efficiently together for the benefit of the tenant is one that was raised by the majority of third-party AHBs. According to the Data Protection Commission²⁶, “the personal data of individuals should only be collected, stored, shared, or processed where it is relevant, essential, and necessary to provide them with public services or to carry out another public function.” From the point of view of the AHB, the ability to share relevant tenant information between stakeholders is vital if the tenant is to be supported and the tenancy sustained.

“I know GDPR is there from a positive perspective... But a local authority telling me they can’t provide certain details about an individual that is nominated to me, I find it crazy, because you have a stakeholder who is asking another stakeholder to house an individual or a family from the housing waiting list and they’re telling you they can’t share information.” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

26 Data Sharing in the Public Sector, Data Protection Commission

From the local authority's perspective, the third-party AHB is acting as a landlord, not as a service provider, and as such certain information is perceived not to be relevant to them. From their point of view, "the client has the right to a fresh start." AHBs appreciate the level of support that is required by many Housing First tenants and are eager to provide a positive transition to their new home. For them, this can be best achieved with open communication between all stakeholders.

"If you need information that is going to help an individual, or help an agency, we should be able to have that sharing information platform because all those agencies are working within social housing as well... There should be an information piece that should be available readily and quickly to support these individuals." – Head of Housing, AHB 4

"You're doing it for good estate management. You want to give thought to who you are placing next to a Housing First tenant. You don't want to make a poor decision and then have it impact two households down the line... We want to do our very best at the start to make sure they succeed." – Tenancy Sustainment Manager, AHB 5

While there is an understandable hesitancy from the local authority and support worker to share an individual's personal details, AHBs believe that any scope to increase the level of information received would leave them better positioned to support the tenant. This may include broadening the scope of the information sharing protocol between the local authorities, An Garda Síochána and service providers, to include third-party AHBs for Housing First tenants only.

"We're very reliant on the person on the day of the interview sharing information on vulnerabilities, personal needs, medical needs... If they don't share that with us on that day, we don't get that information from the local authority. So, the information sharing piece is important to ensure that the allocation is a) sustainable [and] b) fits the needs of the person." – Housing Officer, AHB 1

Third-Party AHBs and Housing First Service Providers

As part of the initial 'information sharing' piece with the local authorities, third-party AHBs also stated that they must be informed of the services the tenant is in receipt of, and critically, contact details for the service worker. In the best-case-scenario, the AHB and the support worker will work closely over a long period of time and so it is important that the relationship begins on a strong footing for the benefit of the tenant.

It is the service provider who will support the tenant during the initial meeting/interview with the third-party AHB; who will support the tenant in the transition to their new home i.e., setting up direct debits for rent payment, setting up gas and electricity connections, bin collections etc.; and who will support the tenant through their treatment journey.

For some Housing First tenants, there can be a strong reliance on this support service and so the relationship and communication between the AHB as landlord, the service provider, and the tenant themselves is critical. In some instances, this relationship is strong and working well for all parties.

“The [case worker] has been a great resource. They’re a great buffer between me and the tenants. I’m the Housing officer, I’m seen as the landlord and if there are situations arising... ESB, mental health challenges they’re free to talk to the case worker... sometimes you have that perception that if you tell the landlord you’re in trouble. They have been brilliant from that point of view... That partnership really, really helps.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

In other examples provided by the AHBs, the relationship and level of communication has been less positive.

“[The service provider] isn’t great, to be honest... I’ve been emailing [them] for the past three weeks, trying to ring their case worker. There’s been no contact. No contact with the tenant, I can’t get through to the tenant. Their rent account is in arrears and there’s been no payment since February... It shouldn’t be us chasing... We should be getting weekly, monthly updates here... It’s not really within our role to be chasing support workers.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

“I had a Housing First tenant move into an apartment block, and I knew from meeting her that she would be high needs... She had two support workers at sign up... And then I never heard from them again... Now this person is actually getting worse. She’s in services with Housing First, she’s been housed by us, and now her life is declining so there’s a massive gap there... It’s not up to us to get into the day-to-day lives of our tenants. We do not have the resources for that. We expect that to be managed by the wrap around services.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

From the service providers perspective there are a number of challenges, particularly around staffing levels, that are potentially impacting the extent to which Housing First services can be extended to tenants. A 2015 review of the Dublin Housing First Demonstration Project found there to be a client-staff ratio of lower than 10-to-one, in keeping with the fidelity of the model.²⁷ Maintaining a low client-staff ratio ensures that adequate weekly contact hours are maintained (minimum one contact meeting per week), and that the staff member has the capacity to build a strong, trusting relationship with the tenant. For AHBs, the high caseload for support workers can lead to delays in having tenancy issues resolved.

²⁷ Greenwood, R. M. (2015). Evaluation of Dublin Housing First Demonstration Project Summary Findings, University of Limerick and Dublin Region Homeless Executive

“From the Housing First team, this tenant wasn’t getting a great level of support, and I was informed that was partially down to staffing numbers and caseload numbers... There wasn’t enough staff there to support and I could see that in the level of support that that tenant was getting.” – Housing Officer, AHB 6

Staff turnover is a significant issue too. A 2022 review of the Housing First model found that Housing First clients described the difficulty and frustration caused by repeatedly building relationships and trust with new case workers.²⁸ A Canadian study²⁹ of turnover in the homeless services sector identified five primary reasons – (i) career advancement and growth; (ii) incongruence between providers’ needs, values and work position; (iii) mental health deteriorations; (iv) organisational stability and support issues; and (iv) staff dismissal, along with low sectoral wages and transitory work culture.

Although different jurisdictions, it is likely that some, if not all, of these factors are playing a role in Ireland. The Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022–2026 called for further exploration of the reasons for the high levels of turnover and, where appropriate, for additional training and support for frontline workers to be implemented.³⁰

“[The service providers] are so stretched, because of the workload... Their case load is so heavy, they have so many clients, but all of those clients are extremely demanding... The men and women supporting these people, their workloads seem to be huge, and they don’t have the time to get to these people, or they’re not in a position to give that person the time that they may need... Even to link in once a week seems to be extremely difficult with staff because the resources are not there.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

“The biggest concern from an AHB perspective is will the support services do what they’re supposed to do. Alleviating that concern, if we do email or ring the support services with an issue or a concern, that they would be proactive in supporting it.” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

“I don’t know what size the [Housing First] teams are now, but it does need reactive responses in a timely way. If a crisis is happening it’s not enough to make a phone call on a Monday to say, “This happened over the weekend, the person needs services.” and they say they’ll be out to them on Thursday. It’s now that it’s needed.” – Tenancy Services Co-ordinator, AHB 7

28 Greenwood, R. M., Byrne, S. and B. O’Shaughnessy (2022). National Housing First Implementation Evaluation Findings Prepared for the National Housing First Implementation Committee, University of Limerick

29 Voronov, J., Kidd, S. A., Tiderington, E., Ecker, J., Stergiopoulos, V. and N. Kierman (2023). Causes and decision paths of employee turnover in the homeless service sector, *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 1–11

30 Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022–2026, Government of Ireland

One Housing First service provider suggested possible reasons for the high level of turnover amongst staff –

- › The high staff turnover is an issue across all of our services and is not unique to Housing First;
- › Filling posts is slow across all services due to shortages of skilled workers;
- › Given that Housing First teams are small, a few people leaving at a similar time can cause significant disruption; and
- › Staff turnover is particularly problematic in Housing First teams because of the core importance of personal relationships and continuity of support for vulnerable people.

The implications, from the AHBs perspective, are that a tenant may potentially be left without the critical interventions required to maintain their tenancy. And, where a new case worker is assigned, AHBs noted the significant challenges they have faced with obtaining updated contact details, and the impact this can have on the tenant.

“The turnover of staff. Trying to get the new persons contact details. Them obviously bedding into a new role... it’s chaotic from the key workers point of view but also for the Housing First applicant.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

The Housing First staffing issues have also impacted the level of information sharing and engagement between the support team and the AHB. Across the board, AHBs would like to see a more standardised approach to communication and information sharing between themselves and the service provider.

“Even at the pre-tenancy assessment stage, where we make initial contact with the nomination, that can be quite difficult as well in terms of trying to get the required information – proof of income for a rent assessment... Having the case worker on board at that first instance, you build that relationship. They’re working with the tenant. We’re working with the tenant and the case worker. There might be a good relationship building piece there as well, at the first instance.” – Housing Services Manager, AHB 3

“If you’re linking in at least once a week... Helping them, supporting them... At least then if you see them going down you can be more proactive, rather than constantly reactive to situations when they blow up.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

“Is there any sort of agreement or an obligation that we would get feedback from the case workers on a regular basis? It always seems like we’re chasing them... An update on the tenancy, how things are going... A monthly or a quarterly update just to keep everybody in the loop.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

The Housing First Manual for Ireland³¹ sets out the importance of the relationship between Housing First services and landlords. The manual clearly states that services “must respond to [a landlord’s] concerns immediately and follow up to ensure the situation is being addressed, even if it cannot immediately be resolved” and that they “check in with landlords on a regular basis – not only when there is a concern.” This level of intervention is required not only to build landlord trust but to also increase their willingness to participate in the programme.

This communication piece becomes even more critical when the Housing First tenancy is breaking down. In many of the examples of tenancy breakdown or anti-social behaviour provided by the third-party AHBs, there was a perception that service providers did not view the situation with the same level of urgency as the AHB expected.

Third-party AHBs fall under the remit of the RTB, and so cases may be brought against them in the event of anti-social behaviour. The consequences for AHBs are potentially significant and there is an impression that the Housing First service providers do not appreciate this risk. There may be scope, within that communication and relationship building piece, for greater consideration to be given to the broader implications of disengagement from services for both the tenant and the landlord.

“I can certainly see how if you’re purely a support provider that you’re not going to necessarily appreciate the risk to the housing provider, where a tenancy is in difficulty. Or you may not feel at all like that’s your role. That’s what the breakdown in communication has been, that a tenant has disengaged from Housing First [and] we haven’t been notified that that’s the case. So, you would take from that that the person is looking at it purely from the service provision point of view, that they don’t need to notify the housing provider. That’s the challenge essentially.” – Tenant Support Manager, AHB 6

Third-Party AHBs, Local Authorities and Housing First Service Providers

When it comes to the efficacy of the Housing First model, stakeholders acknowledge that communication between all parties is of utmost importance. Without pragmatic and transparent communication channels between stakeholders, issues are more likely to arise and go unaddressed, to the detriment of the tenancy itself.

“It comes down to the relationships and the communication between all of these agencies – between the council, ourselves [AHBs], social workers, and the support agencies.” – Tenancy Support Manager, AHB 5

³¹ Tsemberis, S. (2020). A Housing First Manual for Ireland, Pathways Housing First Institute

AHBs would like to see a more standardised approach around that initial relationship-building piece. While the AHB acts solely as the landlord, their engagement is critical for the effective role out of the model into the future. The creation of an initial ‘pre-tenancy meeting’ between the local authority, the Housing First service provider, and the third-party AHB may go a long way in helping to address concerns and build an understanding of the level of potential vulnerability and support requirement for any individual tenant.

“I would like anytime there’s a nomination for Housing First that there’s a case conference between the council, the housing body, and the supports on the ground. Have a plan put in place before the nomination goes through.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

“I think a conversation with the local authority, the intake team, and the new landlord (AHB) – a three-way conversation just to ensure that the property that they’re being allocated actually fits the needs of that person.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

From the perspective of the AHB, there needs to be a high level of trust between them, the local authority and the service provider, that all parties will act in the same interest of tenancy sustainability when or if issues arise.

“[AHBs] will have concerns but that comes back to the relationship that you have with the local authorities and the support services and how you actually plan ahead and work together as stakeholders to make sure everybody has the information, everybody knows what your responsibilities are, there’s clear guidance, there’s clear indications as to issues, concerns – “we will resolve them.”” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

“Wrap around services, that was always the type of support that was spoken about when it came to Housing First. That’s crucial and it must be ongoing, or it has to be available where needed. There’s a huge demand out there for that level of support and that’s why Housing First was introduced. That level of support must be available and must be well resourced.” – Housing Officer, AHB 6

Case study 1: Communication and information sharing

Issue

- John, a single male, moved into his new home from homeless services. Within 72 hours the AHB received complaints from neighbours regarding anti-social behaviour. The AHBs Tenant Relations Officer contacted the local authority and was advised that a Housing First Support Worker had recently been appointed to John and forwarded their contact details.
- The Tenant Relations Officer contacted the Support Worker and a meeting with John was arranged. John was 40 minutes late to the meeting and during that time the Tenant Relations Officer and Support Worker got acquainted and discussed what levels of support were available and required for the tenant. When John arrived, he was deemed to be under the influence and the meeting concluded quickly. He was asked to meet with his Support Worker in their offices the following morning.

Outcome

- Following this meeting, John did not behave in an anti-social manner again, and no subsequent complaints were received. The Tenant Relations Officer made themselves available for weekly or monthly updates with the Support Worker, as required.

Key learnings

- Accessibility and quick availability of the Support Worker was imperative. The follow-up meeting, off-site, between the Support Worker and John had a great impact and reassured the Tenant Relations Officer of the integrity around tenancy sustainability.
- The actions of the stakeholders in a speedy manner with a vulnerable resident demonstrated that there was a level of care for the future of John and his home.

Case study 2: Communication and information sharing

Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Michael, a single male with two children, moved into his home from homeless services. Support services were not in place at the time when he moved in and he found the moving-in process, along with domestic issues with his ex-partner, extremely overwhelming.› The AHB Tenant Relations Officer notified the newly appointed Support Worker and advised them of the heightened level of anxiety around the situation. The Support Worker linked in with Michael consistently over a period of five weeks, with weekly calls to the Tenant Relations Officer for updates, and to address any further issues.
Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› The Tenant Relations Officer met with Michael casually following up on the recent events. They advised Michael that the Support Worker had been keeping them abreast of the situation and reassured him that everyone was very happy with his progress.› The Tenant Relations Officer reiterated the availability of support by reminding Michael that he can raise any issues or uncertainties with the Support Worker.
Key learnings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› On appointment of a Support Worker, immediate contact was made with the Tenant Relations Officer by way of introduction phone call and update on contact details. The proactive approach by the Support Worker set the standard for interactions. The weekly phone calls were also of huge benefit to both stakeholders by way of a true snapshot of issues, both negative and positive. This demonstrated the importance of communication between all parties and reassured Michael that communication was open and frequent.

Case study 3: Communication and information sharing

Issue

- › Claire moved into an apartment with Housing First supports in place. These supports were only approved after the AHB Housing Officer raised concerns that they were a general needs AHB, and the tenant clearly required a high level of support.
- › The Housing Officer met with two Intensive Case Managers at sign up and they outlined the levels of support they would provide. Daily visits with Claire were agreed. This was a relatively new tenancy and on a number of occasions the Housing Officer had been concerned about Claire's ability to successfully live in the home.
- › On one occasion the Housing Officer found that the gas account was not set up as agreed, and Claire was unable to access hot water for a long period of time. Claire did not have the ability to manage issues like this, or to report them when they arose.
- › On another occasion, the Housing Officer contacted Claire in relation to rent arrears. She advised that she was being moved onto a different form of welfare payment and was unclear on her supports and the level thereof.

Outcome

- › In the first instance, the Housing Officer contacted the Support Worker, and the issue was resolved for the tenant.
- › In the second instance, the Housing Officer contacted the Support Worker and was advised that they were no longer employed with the NGO and that Claire had been assigned another Support Worker. The Housing Officer was unable to make contact with the new Support Worker.

Key learnings

- › The Housing Officer felt that the issue regarding rent arrears and the change of social welfare payment should have been flagged earlier, with the Support Worker assisting Claire with the transition.
- › The Housing Officer felt that there should be greater contact between them and the Support Worker, with weekly or monthly updates, especially for more vulnerable tenants. This would help to avoid the aforementioned issues from arising and ensure that Claire's tenancy could be sustained long-term.

4.2 Housing allocation/nomination process

Under the Irish Housing First model, local authorities hold 100% rights over the allocation process. All placements must take into consideration the clients expressed choices and preferences and should involve collaboration between the Housing First service provider and the local authority. Once a person is admitted into Housing First, all stakeholders involved in the support plan, including third-party AHBs, “must commit to and practice a ‘no discharge’ and ‘commitment to rehouse’ policy”.³²

While there is no standardised checklist for the allocation of Housing First tenants to a home, local authorities typically take the following into account –

- › Location: This a primary consideration for Housing First clients. Clients may express a preference in where they will be located. Consideration is given to the type and suitability of a particular property i.e., an apartment in a complex, or a single unit in an estate. Where possible, consideration will be given to health/mobility needs. Every effort is made to match the home to the client’s preferences but sometimes, due to housing supply, this may not be possible.
- › Supports: Where possible, Housing First clients will be allocated a property in close proximity to their primary support services. Consideration will be given to the degree of access required and the duration of access required to the service.
- › No more than 20% of any development will be used for Housing First.

All but one of the AHBs spoke in very strong terms on their concerns with the allocation process employed by local authorities for Housing First tenants. From their outside perspective, it appears that little consideration is given to the aforementioned factors, likely due to supply and demand factors. AHBs would like more clarity on the approach taken by the local authority and the factors that are considered, as it appears that Housing First tenants are being “set up to fail” under the current approach.

“I can’t tell the local authority what to do but I can try to inform their decision making... We have to be more thoughtful about where we’re allocating and why we’re allocating. At the end of the day [with] Housing First, we want it to be sustainable... Sometimes I think we’re setting people up to fail if we nominate and allocate them a property where we know there is active drug use, violence and issues.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

“My concern is, especially with the Housing First nominations that I have... I’ve received four nominations in a block that has a reputation, in an area that has a reputation, that would be well less than ideal for the issues that some Housing First tenants present with. It really isn’t giving them the best chance to make this change in their life. – Housing Officer, AHB 3

32 Tsemberis, S. (2020). A Housing First Manual for Ireland, Pathways Housing First Institute

“Maybe local authorities need to be more mindful... Someone who’s vulnerable in those [areas] can really stick out and can be taken advantage of. There is a role for the local authority to make more suitable nominations depending on the area.” – Housing Officer, AHB 6

The potentially negative impact on housing sustainability associated with multiple Housing First allocations in the same area was also raised as a concern for AHBs. While local authorities adhere to a threshold of 20% of any one development, this can still present challenges for the tenant themselves, and for the AHB as the landlord.

“Most recently we’ve come into huge estate management issues and when we dug a little deeper, we found the link straight way. We had five Housing First tenants in the same block... All of them are coming from the same service so they all know each other, and from speaking to some of the tenants’ face to face they would say that it’s so hard to try to take positive steps when their environment is so familiar.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

“My last five nominations from the local authority have all been Housing First, which is a high concentration. I have four in one block. While it’s a small proportion of my tenancies, it’s high in terms of [concentration].” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

“They selected four within a small development of 12 and we felt that was a bit of a risk... If we’re looking at 12, maybe a max of two would be priority here and see how they get on... That’s [a third] of the lettings for Housing First... If it didn’t work out, what would the consequences be for the other [tenants].” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

Related to the concerns around communication, AHBs noted that attempts to signal issues with a Housing First tenancy allocation, and the potential for a positive outcome varies between local authorities.

“It really depends on the relationship you have with the allocations team in a particular local authority. It does come down to the strength of those relationships. In some cases, you get a very direct and blanket “no”... That can be challenging. Whereas others do exercise a degree of flexibility.” – Head of Tenancy Management, AHB 2

“It very much depends on your relationship with the local authority... some of the local authorities are brilliant... some might not entertain the conversation whatsoever.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

AHBs have front-line knowledge and expertise when it comes to their own properties and which properties may suit certain tenants best. Some third-party AHBs raised concerns around the use of ‘pepper-potted’ homes i.e., an AHB owned/managed apartment in a privately owned apartment complex. While these properties can be suitable for certain Housing First tenants, providing them the opportunity of a fresh start and a level of independence, for others, issues can arise quickly without regular oversight by either the AHB or the Housing First support worker.

“Integrating people into the community as part of an overall recovery model is quite important so it is intentional that we don’t only cluster our properties... we do intentionally veer away from just that specific type of housing because we do acknowledge that people are just trying to get on with their lives and are trying to progress their recovery. And for people with addiction and particular mental health goals, sometimes what they’re looking for is that you’re normalising the environment around them. That permanent home becomes really important in the perspective of their wider recovery journey and that environment that’s around them... is quite a positive impact to the right person.” – Tenant Support Manager, AHB 6

“We have a void in an apartment complex where we manage 100 apartments... We have a caretaker; a housing officer does a clinic in it twice a week... If this person started to fall by the wayside, we’d pick it up straight away... We’d have a better understanding because we’d have better visibility. Whereas we’re not in these one-off apartment complexes... We’re not there unless we need to be... If that person was to go into that complex, you’re giving the opportunity to make this a success. Whereas the other way, through the one-off properties, you’re setting some people up to fail.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

On foot of the housing shortage, third-party AHBs perceive there to be two sources of pressure when it comes to the types of allocations that are being made. On the local authority side, there is a perception amongst some AHBs that allocations are being made more quickly than they should, without due care to the suitability of the location. On the AHB side, there is a pressure to reduce the number of voids or empty properties, and so allocations will sometimes be accepted, knowing that the location may not be suitable for the nominated tenant.

“We’re under pressure to get our voids down... The number of days a unit is empty has to be as minimised as possible. If we get sent an allocation and it’s someone from Housing First, once the paperwork is OK, I’m going ahead with that allocation. I don’t have the luxury to go “Hang on, I don’t think this is a good idea.”” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

The reallocation process for Housing First tenants, while an inherent part of the overall model, is one considered by AHBs to be protracted given the potential vulnerabilities of the tenant.

“At times there can be some resistance from the local authority to agree a transfer, even within their own local authority area. Sometimes that’s to do with the pressure their experiencing with their own list. But unfortunately, what that results in is the persons tenancy becoming more at risk. There has to be that level of acceptance or appreciation that AHBs are probably in the best position to make decisions around their own internal transfers. And it’s really important that they’re given that autonomy.” – Housing Officer, AHB 6

For all stakeholders, when tenancies do breakdown and a reallocation is required, the ‘lessons learned’ piece is very important. Were supports in place? Did they engage? What are the alternative options? Understanding the factors that play into a tenancy breakdown better help to inform the next allocation.

“If Housing First is going to work successfully you have to allow for tenancy breakdown... They lose the property but they’re moving into somewhere else and it’s not back into the cycle of hostels or homeless accommodation or rough sleeping. It might be on the third [property] that there’s issues being worked on as to why it’s breaking down and seeing can this be worked on when their moving in somewhere else.” – Tenancy Service Manager, AHB 7

Each local authority’s approach to reallocation should include collaboration with service providers and the third-party AHB. Learnings will have been made by all stakeholders, and it is important that these are taken into consideration to ensure that the next property will be more suitable for the tenant’s needs.

From their own experience with both general needs and higher needs tenants, AHBs are moving towards establishing their own tenancy sustainment teams in help with estate management. For some, this is a direct result of the higher number of individuals and families coming from emergency accommodation. While classed as ‘general needs’, additional supports are usually required to help with the transition to their own home. Such tenancy sustainment teams will also expand the tools available to AHBs when taking on Housing First tenants.

“We don’t have a tenancy sustainment team... From a housing management perspective, we very much see the need for that. We very much see the need to be more trauma informed in our approach, and to know and understand our tenants.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

“Are we big enough to have that tenancy sustainment service... I think where we’re going it will eventually come in because a lot of the lettings and allocations are coming from homeless services... I think we’ll get to a stage where all AHBs will have to look at tenancy sustainment because a lot of families still need that support; they do still have those vulnerabilities. Going through homelessness isn’t easy.” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

“We’re starting to go down the route of specialisation where we have tenancy sustainment officers where, the really high-end cases, close to notice of termination, they work with the person... They have a case load of 30–40... That could be a general needs family, or it could be Housing First. Everybody gets the same approach to tenancy sustainment because that’s all we can do within our remit.” – Tenancy Sustainment Manager, AHB 5

4.3 Tenant engagement and community impact

At the centre of the Housing First model is the ‘provision of permanent secure housing to people rough sleeping and in homeless accommodation, without any preconditions around sobriety or housing readiness.’ The move towards engaging ‘general needs’ third-party AHBs, from the perspective of AHBs, presents some challenges to the fidelity of the above Housing First principle – namely the fact that AHBs fall under the remit of the RTB.

This means that, amongst other factors, AHB tenancies, like tenancies in the private rental sector, may be terminated within the first six months without reason, and AHBs may validly end a tenancy as long as they meet all the legal requirements.³³ It is in that context that many of the AHBs that contributed to the project, while eager to actively engage in the programme, raised concerns around the suitability of general needs AHB housing for the specific purposes of Housing First.

“We get Housing First [tenants], but we have to apply this legally binding tenancy agreement that says, “If you don’t pay your rent, we’re going to evict you.” It’ll take time but we’re going to issue a notice of termination, and we want the keys back. If there’s any anti-social behaviour and the impact and the seriousness gets to a certain level where we can’t sustain the tenancy anymore and it’s impacting too many people [they will lose their tenancy].” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

33 Approved Housing Body Tenants, Citizen Information

“These are general need tenancies that [Housing First] are being put into. They’re not really fit for purpose... It’s Housing First almost in name only... They have a legally binding tenancy agreement, technically they need to do what everyone else does but they might not have the experience or skills to do that... To rely on Housing First going into general needs housing is not great.”
– Housing Officer, AHB 5

One local authority did not necessarily see this as a negative to the Housing First programme. For them, third-party AHBs can still provide secure tenancies for Housing First tenants as long as they abide by the rules. And where tenancies do breakdown, the local authorities take the view that there is an advantage with AHBs in that the termination process is much quicker through the RTB, than it is for local authorities where most cases end up in court.

Where a particular tenancy is breaking down, attempts will be made to reallocate the tenant. The local authorities that participated in the study noted that this is a relatively rare eventuality and where possible, necessary steps will be taken to maintain the current tenancy in an effort not to “retraumatise the person”.

Notwithstanding that, relocation is a key aspect of the Housing First model, particularly in cases where the tenant is struggling to settle into the community or in cases of ongoing anti-social behaviour. Up to one-quarter of all Housing First allocations will end in either a tenancy termination or reallocation to another property.³⁴ As noted by one AHB, the reallocation process can be drawn out and under the current structure of the model, it is not possible to reallocate the tenant within the AHB’s own stock – the reallocation is decided upon by the local authority.

“It’s not as easy for us to just pick someone up and move them. We don’t have the authority to do that. So, we [and the local authority] really need to be working together.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

Housing First is a client-directed programme, allowing clients to make their own choices about the types of services they require, the intensity of intervention needed, and their overall level of engagement with said services. It is within the client’s right to engage, disengage, and re-engage with Housing First model as they deem personally appropriate, without fear of losing their home. There are significant benefits to this holistic housing and treatment approach for individuals who have experience of long-term homelessness – including reducing stigma and building self-reliance and independence.

AHBs noted that in their experience, tenancies are at a much greater risk of being terminated or reallocated if a Housing First tenant decides to disengage from the services provided.

³⁴ Tsemberis, S. (2020). A Housing First Manual for Ireland, Pathways Housing First Institute

“It’s only as good as the level of engagement from the tenant as well... Some weeks are progressive, others aren’t... It’s two steps forward and it can be three steps back at times... it’s so individual.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

“The Housing First model is a person-centred approach so if that person doesn’t want to engage a recovery programme, there’s nothing [we or the service provider] can do... The person has to be willing to engage and want to help themselves.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

“But quite often when you end up in a situation where it’s not going particularly well, that’s generally where you’d see someone is also disengaged from their service provider... That can be difficult... People can retreat into themselves... It’s then up to the landlord to address it. Our first port of call is to save the tenancy and salvage it where we can... It’s better for the tenant and it’s better for the organisation if we can put things right and salvage the situation.” – Head of Tenancy Management, AHB 2

For AHBs, who fall under the remit of the RTB, a tenant disengaging from Housing First services can end up having significant implications for tenancy sustainability, and for the wider community.

“Housing First is voluntary; you can step back from it at any stage. That’s in the back of your mind, “What happens if they drop [the supports]?” Then you’re balancing the needs of all the tenants around them who are complaining about anti-social behaviour. It is a real balancing act.” – Tenancy Services Manager, AHB 7

The issue of “cuckooing” is a prevalent concern for Housing First tenants. This is the practice of people moving into a vulnerable person’s home unlawfully. When it occurs, it can lead to community discontent and complaints being lodged against the AHB. Although it is typically beyond the control of the tenant, they are the ones left in a state of tenancy insecurity as a result.

“For us it’s the unpleasant side of the job, it’s the things that brings you the most worry, for the tenant themselves, “is something going to happen to them? Is someone going to be in danger?” and then for the neighbours as well.” – Tenancy Services Co-Ordinator, AHB 7

“A lot of the times with the tenants, it’s not the tenants causing the issue, but it’s the visitors that cause the issue... If they get a breach of tenancy they can’t understand why.” – Head of Housing, AHB 4

Beyond the issue of “cuckooing”, anti-social behaviour more generally is one that each of the third-party AHBs spoke about. For some, given the responsibilities to neighbours and other AHB tenants, the tolerance level is quite low when issues like this arise.

“Anyone who’s Housing First, we expect their supports to be in place to look after the tenancy... If there’s issues with anti-social behaviour or drug use, I’m issuing an eviction notice... We have a legal obligation to protect our landlord obligation... I don’t want to see anyone homeless again but it’s almost like the [local authority] is doing the tenant a disservice putting them into an area where there’s a high concentration of drug use.” – Housing Officer, AHB 3

Whenever anti-social behaviour is a factor in a termination or reallocation, the viability of future Housing First tenancies in the area is often challenged by the community, particularly private property owners/renters. In so far as is possible, AHBs will work closely with the community to assuage their concerns but communities can get frustrated when it appears nothing is being done to address the problems.

“The community can be worn out by the process and worn out by what they perceived as our lack of taking action... We have to be seen to be out there, so it can take up a lot of manhours. Going to visit the neighbours, trying to keep them updated, trying to get their buy-in because... You have to balance it as a landlord that if something is happening and you are seen to not be dealing with it, those other tenants are within their rights to take us to the RTB for disturbing their peaceful occupation of their home.” – Tenancy Services Manager, AHB 7

The first port of call for AHBs in these situations is the tenant’s Housing First support worker. AHBs questioned the level of support worker engagement when anti-social behaviour and other issues threaten the viability of a tenancy. They perceive there to be a disconnect between the priorities of the AHB, and the priorities of the Housing First service provider.

“Sometimes when you have a support agency coming in, their tolerance level to estate management might be different to ours. And it’s about trying to communicate what is acceptable... Our policy is zero tolerance on anti-social behaviour. It’s about trying to come to agreements with agencies that are there to support as to what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable. Their tolerance to some of the challenging behaviour might be different to ours... But I do think there is sometimes a lack of understanding to the fact that the RTB do govern us, and we can be liable for huge sums of money if we don’t address these things.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

“[The RTB] don’t understand the vulnerabilities [of some tenants] and we could be in a situation where the RTB award a private owner a sum of money for compensation. So, we have to be very, very strict on our estate management because we’re a not-for-profit organisation and it’s not going to be sustainable for us to provide the level of housing that we are if we are victim to huge sums of money being awarded to private owners or other AHB tenants.” – Housing Officer, AHB 1

Notwithstanding these concerns and challenges, the majority of AHBs clearly stated that they do what they can to ensure the tenancy is protected before turning to the option of termination or reallocation. There is a clear understanding amongst third-party AHBs that these are inherently vulnerable tenancies, and any termination may result in the individual returning to emergency accommodation or rough sleeping.

“From all angles we will do our best to reengage people; to engage with families; to engage with next of kin; to engage with community services... There’s a number of different avenues we will look at if someone is looking to disengage. Sometimes someone stepping back or changing the support level is good for everybody, so it depends where a person is at.” – Housing Officer, AHB 6

“If we had someone who was about to lose their tenancy, we would call; we would knock; we would email; we would text; we would ring their next of kin if we had consent... You’d do anything within reason.” – Housing Officer, AHB 5

Case study 4: Tenant engagement and community impact

Issue

- › Prior to moving into her new home, Sarah had been in rehabilitation for alcohol addiction. She was sober when she signed her tenancy agreement and was happy and positive about getting her own home. She had come from a very traumatic background and was looking forward to a fresh start away from her family.
- › Shortly after she moved in, her family found out where she was living and moved into the property. Sarah began drinking again and stopped attending her addiction counselling sessions. Complaints of anti-social behaviour were received from residents and intervention from local Gardaí was required.

Outcome

- › The Housing Officer had a number of meetings with Sarah, and her Support Worker, to try and help her sustain her tenancy and encourage her to re-engage with addiction supports. However, further anti-social complaints were received despite the Housing Officer advising that she could lose her tenancy.
- › Following further breaches of the tenancy agreement, the AHB issued a Final formal warning one year after Sarah had moved into the home. It was decided that a termination notice would not be issued, but that the final formal warning would be extended by a further six months to give Sarah one final opportunity to turn the situation around.

Key learnings

- › Sarah finally re-engaged with Housing First supports. She stopped drinking, and her family left the home. Two and a half years on from initially moving in, Sarah has successfully sustained her tenancy, with no issues paying her rent and she has never had arrears.
- › The AHB considers it vital that Housing First tenants earnestly engage with the support services in place in order to ensure a successful long-term tenancy.

Case study 5: Tenant engagement and community impact

Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Graham was approved for Housing First and linked in with addiction support services. He was allocated an apartment, and his Support Worker was involved in his nomination and allocation. The sign up went well and his Support Worker attended and helped with the move.› After moving in, the Housing Officer received contact from the apartment complex Owners Management Company (OMC) advising that they had received complaints of anti-social behaviour from other tenants. They advised the Housing Officer that they wanted Graham removed from the tenancy or action would be taken against the AHB.› As the tenancy was less than six months, a Notice of Termination was issued, giving Graham days to leave the property. The Support Worker reached out to the Housing Officer, asking them to reconsider the notice due to the risks that Graham would face returning to homelessness. The Housing Officer asked that Graham link in with all of his supports to address his behaviour. The Support Workers continued to link in with Graham for the duration of the notice period.
Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› When the notice expired, the Housing Officer contacted the OMC and was advised that there were no further issues or complaints. In light of that, and considering the high level of vulnerability, the Notice of Termination was not actioned.› The Housing Officer advised that any further complaints would be acted on, but the tenant has remained in the property and there have been no further complaints.
Key learnings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› The Housing Officer felt like they were taking the lead on the tenancy sustainment piece even though it was not their role. Graham had relapsed with alcohol and had several issues of anti-social behaviour, but it seemed that his Support Workers were unaware of this.› It took contacting them and issuing the Notice of Termination before they got involved. The Housing Officer was not sure if Graham had disengaged from the supports, or if the supports were not available.

Case study 6: Tenant engagement and community impact

Issue

- › Paul had been living in his home for a year, with Housing First supports in place. The Housing Officer carried out an annual property inspection and found a second mattress in the living room. Paul claimed there was no one else living in the home. The cleanliness of the property was a concern and there was no power.
- › The Housing Officer raised these concerns with the Housing First Intensive Case Manager, but they were not authorised to enter the property. Paul had signed a 'no consent to enter' form. The Housing Officer requested re-inspection in two weeks and for the issues to be remedied.
- › The Intensive Care Manager struggled to engage with Paul during this time. Following several more inspections, conditions were found to be worsening, and a family member was found to be living with Paul. The Housing Officer requested urgent intervention by the Housing First provider to support Paul. Two weeks after this request, a further inspection by the Housing Officer found there to be no improvement and the condition of the property had deteriorated significantly.

Outcome

- › The Housing Officer advised that Paul be temporarily rehomed so that the condition of the property could be addressed. They received push-back from his support team but eventually secured emergency accommodation. It cost the AHB €3,500 to clean the apartment.
- › Before moving back into the property, Paul agreed to remove the 'no consent to enter' and agreed to random inspections for a six-month period. The Housing Officer advised that he would be issued a Notice of Termination if conditions were not upheld. His Support Worker also came up with a support plan and a sustainable repayment plan was agreed with the tenant for the cleaning costs.

Key learnings

- › Paul had disengaged from the Housing First services and would not consent to Support Workers entering the property. This created significant challenges for both the Support Worker and the Housing Officer.
- › In the interim, the Housing Officer built up a very positive relationship with Paul and the Housing First Intensive Care Manager.
- › The AHB now hold monthly case management meetings where they determine if NGO Support Workers have accessed the property in the past month and they have increased the frequency of inspections. Early intervention is key to successful Housing First tenancies.

4.4 Other external factors

Broadly, the most important external threat to the Housing First model, and indeed the expansion of the role of AHBs as landlords, is the supply of housing. For more than a decade the Irish housing market has been in a state of dysfunction, characterised generally by affordability issues and inadequate levels of new supply. In 2024, 30,330 new homes were completed across Ireland – including 8,800 new apartment units and 16,200 new scheme houses – marking a close to 7% decline of 2023 output. One-third of all new completions were in Dublin.³⁵

In 2023 (latest available), 8,110 new homes were added to the social housing stock – across local authorities, AHBs, and Part V developments. A further 1,800 homes were delivered by way of acquisition.³⁶ While this marks a close to 50% increase in new stock over the past five years, the base is extremely low in the context of the level of social housing required and marks a shortfall of almost 2,700 on targets for the year. Of the close to 2,500 local authority new builds, just under three-quarters were delivered across the four Dublin local authorities. Third-party AHBs have played their role to helping to address the situation. In 2023, AHBs owned and managed 61,500 social rented homes, a 20% increase in the year.³⁷

In the context of Housing First, housing supply issues relate to the availability of one-bed homes specifically. A key driver of the Housing First model is the provision of one-bedroom social homes, which are in relatively short supply nationally. The local authorities that contributed to the project spoke on this issue and the challenges it creates for Housing First, especially in rural areas where most of the available properties are three- and four-beds, with very limited two-bed homes and even few one-bed homes.

Even where developments are coming on stream with one-bed homes, local authorities are limited to designating only one or two to Housing First, with others required to meet the needs of older people, people with a disability, etc.

The demand for one-bed social housing units is significant and growing. In 2023, some 33,700 people on the social housing waiting list were single adults, this represents a 4% increase on 2022, and 57% of the total housing list.³⁸ The government has committed to addressing the availability of one-bed social homes however not all local authorities have set out exact targets under their Housing Delivery Action Plan 2022–2026, or how targets are to be met.

The success of the Housing First model depends on the delivery of one-bed units nationally. Both local authorities and AHBs must work together to identify viable ways to address the shortfall through all means available to them – building, acquisition, and leasing.

³⁵ New Dwelling Completions Q4 2024, CSO

³⁶ Overall social and affordable housing provision, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, August 2024

³⁷ Housing Association Activity Report 2023, Irish Council for Social Housing

³⁸ Accurate Measurement is Essential for Addressing Social Housing Need, Social Justice Ireland, August 2024

Chapter 5

Conclusion and recommendations

The Housing First model has positively impacted long-term homelessness in Ireland. The model, first trialled to Ireland in 2011, currently supports more than 1,000 people to live securely in their own home. With a success rate of 83%, Housing First has proven successful in supporting people with long histories of homeless and street-based sleeping, compared to the traditional ‘treatment-then-housing’ approach. This programme, along with others such as TSS and SLÍ, have made important contributions in helping individuals transition successfully from emergency accommodation and homelessness to their own homes.

The relatively recent uptick in third-party AHBs as landlords to Housing First nominations warranted investigation into the strengths and challenges of this approach. While the proportion of Housing First tenancies within third-party AHBs is low, relative to the overall stock of general needs housing, these landlords have accumulated extensive experience in supporting these tenancies over the years, seeing some fail and many succeed.

This research, therefore, aimed to capture the depth of experience in the sector and add to the very limited international research base. The findings of the report will help to strengthen the overall model of Housing First and inform future iterations of the National Implementation Plan.

While all contributors spoke highly of the Housing First model and the evidenced impact it has had for those with long histories of homelessness, several challenges were identified in the current iteration of the programme that raise concerns for third-party AHBs and their ability to effectively support typically high-needs, vulnerable tenants, in general needs housing.

Communication and information sharing emerged as the most dominant challenge for stakeholders, particularly for third-party AHBs. For the four local authorities that contributed to the report, the vast majority of their Housing First allocations are with NGO Housing First service providers. For these local authorities, communication is considered to be quite strong as there are typically only two parties involved – the local authority and the NGO Housing First provider, who also acts as the landlord.

For third-party AHBs the current level of communication with both the local authorities and the services providers is a cause of frustration. For them, understanding the history and needs of a perspective tenant is very important in determining if an allocation will

be successful. All third-party AHBs hold an introductory meeting with the Housing First nominee, and it is usually through this that they learn the needs of the individual. However, if the AHB identifies an issue that may make the tenancy unviable, it is often too late as the local authority has finalised the nomination/allocation process.

GDPR also limits the level of information that can be shared between stakeholders. For local authorities this is seen as a benefit to the tenant who is trying to make a fresh start. For third-party AHBs, it impacts their ability to understand and anticipate potential issues that may arise during the tenancy.

Communication channels with the Housing First services providers were also identified as a challenge. Some of the AHBs highlighted the positive role that the service providers have had with helping tenants successfully transition into their new home. Given the critical role of the service provider in the overall application of the model, open communication between them, the AHB as the landlord, and the tenant themselves is considered vital for tenancy success.

High staff turnover in NGOs has been shown to have an impact on the Housing First model. Staff-to-tenant ratios within the model should be low, less than 10-to-one, in keeping with the fidelity of the model. However, ratios are likely much higher than this and often times support workers can change without warning. This causes frustration for the tenant who must repeatedly build new relationships and trust, and for the AHB who does not know who to contact when issues arise.

Linked with the communication piece, the **housing allocation/nomination process** was also raised by third-party AHBs as sometimes creating challenges for them in effectively supporting Housing First tenants. When making an allocation, local authorities take into account the nominee's preferences and the services they are engaging. However, with chronic shortages in one-bed units, it is not always possible to find accommodation that 100% suits the tenant's circumstances.

Third-party AHBs have on the ground experience of their own units and which ones will suit certain tenants best. For example, some third-party AHBs spoke of the learnings they took from Housing First tenants, and other high-needs tenants living in pepper-potted homes in private developments and how placement in AHB owned/managed developments tends to lead to more positive outcomes.

Under its current format, third-party AHBs do not consider themselves "a partner" in the programmes even though they have a shared commitment to a positive outcome of tenancy sustainment. Formalising communication and collaboration channels between stakeholders may go some way to addressing a perceived trust issue between third-party AHBs and local authorities, in particular.

When there is a lack of communication, and inappropriate housing allocations have been made, Housing First tenants may be more likely to disengage from services – raising challenges for their own tenancy and the broader community.

Tenancy engagement and the community impact are therefore important aspects to the overall success of the Housing First model. From AHBs experiences, those tenants who continue to engage with services are much more likely to succeed in their new home.

With AHBs falling under the remit of the RTB, any issues of anti-social behaviour can lead to complaints being taken by neighbours and potential financial implications for

them as landlord. This is a concern for AHBs that they feel is not fully appreciated by the Housing First service providers. While AHBs do what they can to reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown, engagement from the tenant and the Housing First service provider is considered a necessity to ensure a positive outcome.

In the context of these challenges, a number of recommendations emerge that, if addressed, would go some way to improving the experience of all stakeholders –

- › Where the local authority has decided to allocate a Housing First tenancy to a “General Needs AHB”, the AHB should be considered as a partner in the programme by the local authority, the HSE and the NGO support organisation, with a shared commitment to a positive outcome of a sustained tenancy. Local authorities should use the CCMA (City and County Managers Association) agreed template “Supported Living Accommodation Nomination Notice” form.

The following recommendations, addressed to each of those parties would help support this approach.

1 Recommendations to all parties (Local Authorities, Support NGOs and Third Party AHBs)

- › There should be the maximum sharing of information allowable under GDPR between the local authority, the Housing First service provider, Garda Síochána Community Policing and the third-party AHB under the terms set out in legislation.
- › All tenancies involving General Needs AHBs should start with a ‘pre-tenancy meeting’, to include the local authority, the Housing First support team and the third-party AHB Housing Officer. This will provide an opportunity at the outset of the Housing First tenancy to openly discuss the needs of the tenant. It will also act as an opportunity to build relations between stakeholders.
- › Providing a ‘fresh start’ for Housing First tenants should not involve withholding information which could contribute to more effective support for their tenancy. Sharing appropriate information, in the context of Housing First principles and between trained and committed partners, will not only help to inform the AHB on the suitability of an allocation, it will also help to reduce the burden on the tenant themselves who must currently provide their details firstly to the local authority, then to An Garda Síochána for their Garda check, and finally to the AHB in the introductory meeting.
- › Where any party considers that a tenancy is at risk of breaking down, there should be collaboration between all three parties to assess the best approach to be taken, and in particular to avoid a return to emergency accommodation or street-sleeping. If re-location is required, as part of their collective commitment, Third Party AHBs should consider transfer to another property within their own stock as the first option. Reallocations should be made in a timely manner with adequate collaboration between the local authority, the service provider and the AHB. Learnings from the failed tenancy, from all parties, must be taken into consideration to ensure the next allocation is successful.

2 Recommendations to the National Housing First Office (NHFO)

- › The NHFO should develop a Partnership Charter to build on and sustain the collaborative ethos of the Housing First model.
- › The HFNO should encourage all local authorities to include Housing First allocations as a letting priority in their Scheme of Lettings.
- › The NHFO should engage with the RTB to explore whether protocols can be established which would support the re-location of Housing First tenancies which are at risk, without diminishing the rights of tenants.

3 Recommendations to the Support NGO

- › Support NGOs should develop a policy for the timely sharing of support worker contact details at the outset of a new tenancy, and when/if staff change-overs occur, and share this policy with Third Party AHBs where it is supporting HF tenants. This is the practice amongst the local authorities that contributed to this report, but challenges arise when the support worker leaves their position and the AHB is not provided with updated contact information. The relationship between the AHB and service provider is critical to the success of Housing First tenancies and AHBs must be able to trust that they will be able to contact a support worker, and that they will be available to intervene in a timely manner, when issues arise.

4 Recommendations to the Support NGO and Third Party AHB

- › There should be regular (monthly/quarterly) meetings between the third party AHB Housing Officer and the Housing First support worker. For all parties, early intervention increases the likelihood of a positive outcome when issues arise. For example, for the AHBs, it is important to know how the tenant is settling in, and for the support worker it can be useful to know if the tenant is paying their rent etc. Regular meetings will allow both parties fully assess how the tenancy is progressing and if intervention is required, at what level is it required, and from whom.

5 Recommendations to Local Authorities

- › Local authorities should consider proposals from General Needs AHBs about alternative allocations within their available stock where these are likely to result in better outcomes, but this should not result in delays in commencement of a tenancy. Third-party AHBs can utilise their first-hand knowledge of their own stock of properties to help inform the decision-making process of the local authorities. Aligned with the communication and information sharing piece that the 'pre-tenancy meeting' will help to address, it should also provide an opportunity for all parties to identify and openly discuss the most appropriate homes available for Housing First tenants.
- › Local Authorities should ensure that staff working on areas related to Housing First (in their allocations, housing and homeless sections) have received Housing First training from accredited trainers. Many of the approaches necessary to making Housing First successful differ from the mainstream policies of local authorities and require an understanding of the principles and evidence of the approach. The study found a high level of understanding and commitment to Housing First in local authority staff, but the level of staff turn-over requires an on-going training programme.

6 Recommendations to Third Party AHBs

- All General Needs AHBs should ensure that housing management staff have received Housing First training from accredited trainers and work with the HFNO to engage in this. Making Housing First successful while sustaining integrated communities can be challenging and frequently requires skills which are not part of mainstream housing management training. The study found a high level of understanding and commitment to Housing First in Third Party AHBs, but the level of staff turn-over requires an on-going training programme.
- General needs AHBs should continue to keep under review the further development in house or contracted Tenancy Sustainment Teams to further enhance their offering as social housing landlords. Many of the AHBs participating in this study reported that they are looking to establish tenancy sustainment teams to help support all tenants with support needs. With the growing number of individuals and families coming from emergency accommodation, with and without tenancy sustainment supports in place, the requirement for AHBs to develop tenancy sustainment teams, in addition to property management teams, is growing.

7 Public policy recommendations

- This study re-iterates the findings of Greenwood's most recent evaluation of Housing First, that high levels of staff turnover in the programme are undermining its effectiveness and impacting on its reputation with key actors. The National Housing First Office and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage should bring forward specific proposals to resolve this issue and ensure that experienced staff who develop skills and personal connections within Housing First are retained during their career.
- All AHBs and Local Authorities should increase the proportion of single person occupancy units in their development plans. The overall success of the overall Housing First model is predicated on the adequate supply of one-bedroom units, and this must be addressed as a matter of urgency. These are the units with the greatest level of demand and so both local authorities and AHBs should be working together, with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to identify the most viable routes to increasing the social housing stock of one-bed homes. At a national level too, prioritisation needs to be given to the construction of these units in new developments. The Housing First model, which has proven itself to be an extremely impactful model for addressing homelessness, can only be as successful as the provision of housing allows it to be. The aforementioned recommendations will go a long way to strengthening the overall offering but, with housing at its core, the supply of one-bed homes must be addressed.

Appendix

Checklists for engaging with key partners

Checklist – Local Authorities

Use this checklist as a guide to engaging with AHBs and Support NGOs in the Housing First model:

- › Consider the Third-Party AHB as a partner in the programme.
- › Schedule a ‘pre-tenancy meeting’ to include the Housing First support team and the Third-Party AHB Housing Officer.
- › Consult with Third-Party AHB about availability of appropriate homes available for Housing First tenants in advance of each Housing First allocation.
- › Promptly share maximum level of information permitted under GDPR between the Housing First service provider, An Garda Síochána, and the Third-Party AHB.
- › Actively engage with the Housing First support team and the Third-Party AHB Housing Officer as soon as a tenancy becomes at risk of breaking down.
- › Ensure Housing First staff (i.e., housing and homelessness sections) have received Housing First training from accredited trainers.

Checklist – Third-Party AHBs

Use this checklist as a guide to engaging with Local Authorities and Support NGOs in the Housing First model:

- › Consult with the Local Authority on availability of appropriate homes for Housing First tenants in advance of each Housing First allocation.
- › Schedule regular (monthly/quarterly) meetings with the Housing First support team to discuss tenancy progress.
- › Actively engage with the Local Authority and Housing First support team as soon as a tenancy becomes at risk of breaking down.
- › Identify an appropriate alternative property within your existing housing stock as a first option for reallocation.
- › Ensure housing management staff have received Housing First training from accredited trainers.
- › Review and/or establish in-house or contracted Tenancy Sustainment Teams to further enhance your offering as a social housing landlord

Checklist – Support NGOs

Use this checklist as a guide to engaging with Local Authorities and Third-Party AHBs in the Housing First model:

- › Consider the Third-Party AHB as a partner in the programme.
- › Promptly share maximum level of information permitted under GDPR between the Local Authority, An Garda Síochána, and the Third-Party AHB.
- › Promptly share support worker contact details with the Third-Party AHB at tenancy outset, and when/if staff change-overs occur.
- › Schedule regular (monthly/quarterly) meetings with the Third-Party AHB to discuss tenancy progress.
- › Actively engage with the Local Authority and the Third-Party AHB as soon as a tenancy becomes at risk of breaking down.



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