



Wise in 5: Housing First

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published April 2025. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

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	Housing First pilots at local level	National Policy	Local Authority Implementation	National Funding
Scotland	+	+	+	+
Wales	+	▲	+	+
Northern Ireland	+	▲	+	+
Ireland	+	+	+	+
England	+	▲	+	▲
Key	+ Yes		▲ No	

Wise in 5: Housing First

With numerous media reports of [increasing levels of homelessness](#) and local authorities in Scotland [declaring housing emergencies](#), what are the nations of the United Kingdom and Ireland doing to tackle homelessness in their policy approaches?

Over [10,000 children are part of homeless households in Scotland](#), a national figure unparalleled in history. In late 2024, [1 in 23 people](#) were estimated to be homeless in Northern Ireland, and homelessness in Wales saw [record highs](#) since 2015. All governments of the UK and Ireland agree that homelessness is a major issue and is at the forefront of policymakers' priorities.

Historical housing policy responses in each nation have had major impacts, not only on housing, but the wider social makeup of our communities. From post-war building to 'Right to Buy', housing policies have altered social relations and built communities across the nations.

In light of policy failures to reduce homelessness, our different governments looked to one particular international policy approach, Housing First, as the next intervention.

Housing First

Housing First (HF) is an international policy response to homelessness which has been adapted and translated into many national contexts. This novel approach to housing homeless people was [developed in New York city](#) in the early 1990's. It provides a secure tenancy as the basis for additional support the tenant might need from health care, addiction support or mental health services.

The approach differs from the traditional 'linear model' of housing support which "is [founded on a 'treatment first' philosophy](#), with homeless people typically only placed into 'normal' housing when they exhibit evidence of 'housing readiness'". Inverting this model, Housing First does not view a settled and secure tenancy as the end goal, but as an essential starting point for additional support. [This research by Johnsen and Texiera \(2010\) shows the differences between Housing First and linear models.](#)



Nation by Nation

Scotland

In 2010, The [first Housing First \(HF\) project in Scotland](#) was launched in Glasgow as part of a Europe-wide pilot managed by the European Observatory on Homelessness, which included initiatives across the continent. Following this, HF was implemented locally through individual projects led by third-sector organisations and funded by local authorities.

In 2018, Homeless Network Scotland established [Housing First Scotland](#) to provide a framework and best-practice model for HF implementation across third-sector organisations. Following this, and [recommendations](#) from the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group in 2017, the Scottish Government formally adopted the HF model as best practice for housing homeless individuals with additional support needs.

The [Ending Homelessness Together: High Level Action Plan](#) made Scotland the first jurisdiction of the UK to introduce a national framework for HF in 2018. The plan emerged from Scotland's "rights-based" approach to housing, strengthened by the [abolition of the Priority Needs Test](#) in 2012, and was widely seen as a divergence from housing policies in other UK nations regarding homelessness. To support implementation, the government allocated £50 million to local authorities through the [Ending Homelessness Together Fund](#).

From 2019 to 2022 a "[path finder](#)" of 5 local authorities developed Housing First with partner third sector organisations. This was expanded to include all local authorities in 2021, when the Scottish Government also began publishing yearly reports on the implementation of HF policy.

Wales

The first Housing First project in Wales was opened by The [Wallich](#), a third sector organisation with funding from a local authority. Similar applications appeared unevenly throughout the country until 2017, when the Welsh Government provided additional funding and guidance for local authorities to develop Housing First projects.

[Guidance from the Welsh Government endorses](#) the scaling up of Housing First, but states that

decisions on policy reach and aims remain local. It points out that target population and configuration of the projects should be agreed between the local authority commissioning the project and the implementing third sector organisations involved.

According to [Cymorth Cymru](#), an umbrella organisation for homelessness service providers in Wales, 701 housing first tenancies have been provided in Wales from February 2018 to September 2022, across 17 providers producing a tenancy sustainment rate of 91%.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland launched its first Housing First (HF) pilot project in 2013, led by the third-sector organization [Depaul](#) in Belfast. The project became an independent initiative in 2014. As in England and Wales, Housing First policy developed gradually and in a fragmented manner until the "[Homelessness Reset Plan](#)" was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce rough sleeping. During this period, Housing First was expanded through local third-sector organizations to support individuals experiencing street homelessness, or chronic homelessness which is described in the [Chronic Homelessness Action Plan](#) as a "group of individuals with very pronounced and complex support needs who found it difficult to exit from homelessness."

Housing First has not been adopted as a national policy in Northern Ireland and remains locally commissioned by authorities and delivered by third-sector organizations. However, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive recommended Housing First as a key approach to addressing chronic homelessness and rough sleeping in its [2018–21 Integrated Homelessness report](#).

Republic of Ireland

Housing First has been present in Ireland since 2011, when a small pilot [project](#) opened. Like Scotland, the Republic of Ireland has adopted Housing First into national policy, under the national Housing Agency with a National Director appointed to oversee its implementation.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage published the '[Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022–2026](#)', aiming to ramp up provisions to over 1100 HF tenancies in all nine regions of the country.

In order to achieve this, the plan recognises that the delivery of more socially rented homes are required to meet demand and a key element of this is single person accommodation. The [interim evaluation report](#) recommends that an adequate national supply of one bedroom accommodation is required to scale up housing first effectively.

England

The earliest [Housing First projects in England emerged](#) in 2010, and were funded through local authorities who had identified a gap in service provision for homeless people with additional support needs. These policies were adapted to suit the needs of the particular local authority and the resources available, often working alongside third sector partners to provide cost-effective, context-relevant solutions. Until recently, HF implementation in England has mostly been coordinated through [Homeless Link](#), a national charity for homelessness organisations, but not through national policy.

Since these initial projects, England has developed a national pilot of Housing First, announced in the [Autumn 2017 budget](#) which committed £28 million. This project ran in the West Midlands, Liverpool and Greater Manchester for two years with an additional two years funding provided to continue the [pilot project to the end of 2023/24 financial year](#).

[Yearly progress reports](#) were published by the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government to highlight the impact that the pilot had in each geographical area. In addition, the UK Government have published a [national framework](#) for scaling up Housing First, with guidance for local authorities looking to procure third sector organisations for policy implementation. HF policy is yet to be rolled out on a national scale.

Internationally

Housing First was originally [developed in the USA](#) and still continues to play a significant role in homelessness prevention strategy and policy at state-level [across the country](#). Other nations such as Canada, France and Finland have developed Housing First as a national policy response to homelessness.

[Finland is the only nation which has](#) led with Housing First as its main policy response to homelessness and has invested heavily in the approach. Through purchasing redundant and derelict industrial buildings, many of the HF policies have focussed on reusing these buildings in inter-city areas to provide centralised HF projects with onsite support.

Other national approaches, such as Canada's, have focussed more on Housing First projects that employ a dispersed model of accommodation, with [flexibility to use other methods](#). This is closer to the original model, whereby units are acquired throughout the community and support is provided to tenants in their own homes.

Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations:

1. **Housing First as Part of Wider Policy.** All UK nations and Ireland are incorporating Housing First within broader homelessness reduction strategies. However, further research is needed to evaluate how wider welfare policies help individuals sustain tenancies. Housing First is resource-intensive, requiring greater staffing than traditional housing support models, and must be adequately funded for maximum effectiveness.
2. **Long-Term Commitment is Essential.** Housing First is not a quick-fix, and measurable outcomes take time to emerge. Models such as this require patience and recognition of the long-term nature of its impact.
3. **Local Implementation is Expanding.** Housing First projects are being commissioned at the local level across the UK and Ireland. Policymakers should acknowledge the growing demand for support in this area when shaping national strategies.
4. **Evidence and Research Gaps Remain.** While Housing First is an internationally recognized model, more UK-specific research is needed. Expanding studies and applications in different regional contexts will improve understanding and inform future policy decisions.
5. **Sustained Funding is Crucial.** The success of Housing First depends on stable, long-term investment. Without consistent funding, programs risk being ineffective, limiting their ability to support those most in need.



This briefing was led by Andrew Sproul, PhD researcher in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the Open University and current social housing practitioner based in Glasgow. With thanks to colleagues across the UK and Ireland for their feedback.



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Wise in 5

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