

NEWS

PROJECT

Home Silk Road -
Housing toward
empowerment

📍 Lyon Metropole,
France

TOPIC

Housing

EDIT 13 DECEMBER 2020
BY RUTH OWEN, UIA
EXPERT

Home Silk Road and Housing First in the Metropole of Lyon

See on UIA
website



This Zoom-In takes a close look at how the Home Silk Road UIA Project fits into the broader Housing First strategy of the Metropole of Lyon. Housing First is a way of addressing homelessness that implies radically rethinking well-established policies and services. Home Silk Road is an urban renovation project whereby a brownfield site destined to deliver more than 200 units of social housing is transformed into a hub for inclusion and culture from the outset of the redevelopment process.

The Metropole of Lyon is an interesting setting for housing policy and urban governance because its creation in 2015 involved the absorption of many competencies previously held at the Regional level. Competence for solidarity, housing, planning, social exclusion, and other areas, mean it has many of the important levers for tackling homelessness and housing exclusion at hand. This, combined with strong political commitment, has enabled the Metropole to become a “pioneer territory” for ambitious policy to address homelessness and housing exclusion. Housing First has become a cornerstone of this ambition. Lyon’s experience in pursuing an ambitious Housing First strategy provides much learning and inspiration for other cities embracing the same challenge. The Metropole of Lyon is an interesting setting for housing policy and urban governance because its creation in 2015 involved the absorption of many competencies previously held at the Regional level. Competence for solidarity, housing, planning, social exclusion, and other areas, mean it has many of the important levers for tackling homelessness and housing exclusion at hand. This, combined with strong political commitment, has enabled the Metropole to become a “pioneer territory” for ambitious policy to address homelessness and housing exclusion. Housing First has become a cornerstone of this ambition. Lyon’s experience in pursuing an ambitious Housing First strategy provides much learning and inspiration for other cities embracing the same challenge.

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an important innovation in homelessness service and policy design that has gained ground internationally over the last 40 years. The term emerged in New York in the 1980s to describe the Pathways Housing First Programme developed by psychiatrist Sam Tsemberis. Housing First is increasingly being scaled-up, at different levels and in various forms, across Europe and internationally. For example, Housing First is the basis of national homelessness policy in Finland. It has helped make Finland the only country in the EU that has successfully reduced homelessness since the late 1980s (see fig 1).

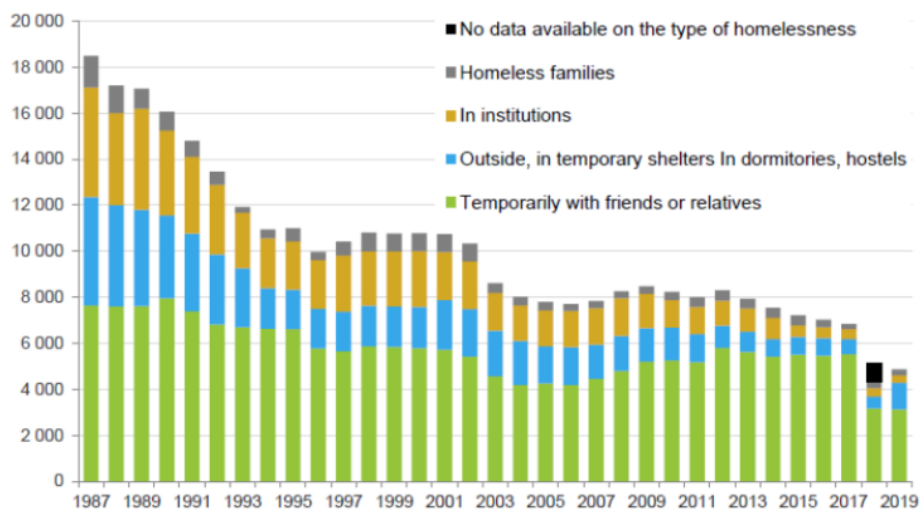


Fig 1: Homelessness in Finland, 1987 to 2019, Source: ARA, 2019

Housing First represents a significant departure from the status quo when it comes to dealing with homelessness in developed countries. Governments and the voluntary sector have traditionally responded to homelessness through the provision of temporary accommodation. Over time, this has led to the development of a distinct and growing sector of emergency and temporary accommodation for homeless people in most countries. Emergency and temporary accommodation constitutes the bulk of the response to homelessness in most of Europe. It has come under increasing criticism for “warehousing” homeless people and failing to solve homelessness. Too many homeless people get stuck in a system that fails to provide a springboard to permanent housing and social inclusion. In a context of growing homelessness across the EU, homeless accommodation systems are increasingly saturated, costly and unable to provide an adequate response to the problem they seek to address.

Housing First constitutes a shift away from emergency and temporary accommodation as the main response to homelessness. It sees housing as a human right and a pre-condition to social inclusion. Housing First thus provides homeless people with access to housing as quickly as possible, combined with a flexible package of support adapted to their needs. Housing becomes the point of departure for social inclusion, rather than the end destination. Housing First has proved highly successful at ending homelessness in a broad range of contexts. In most cases, European Housing First services end homelessness for at least eight out of every ten people^[1]. Whilst Housing First programmes may look quite different in different operational contexts, they share several common features, as shown in figure 2.



Fig 2: The 8 Key Principles of Housing First, Source: Pleace (2016)

For more information on Housing First, see the [Housing First Europe Hub](#).

[1] Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2013) The Case for Housing First in the European Union: A Critical Evaluation of Concerns about Effectiveness European Journal of Homelessness, 7(2), 21-41

<http://housingfirstguide.eu/website/the-case-for-housing-first-in-the-european-union-a-critical-evaluation-of-concerns-about-effectiveness/>

[NV1] I am not able to open the link. Could you please check it and replace it?

Housing First in France

France has experienced decades of increases in recourse to emergency shelter. Fig 2 shows the evolution of government spending on shelter between 2007 and 2017. 49,733 homeless people are put up in hotels every night in France. A growing proportion of the demand for shelter goes unmet because the system is so saturated. Nationally, half of the calls made by single men to the 115 hotlines for shelter are refused. Men, women and children of all ages sleep on the street every night. All stakeholders agree that this is an ineffective, inefficient, and inhumane response to the problem. Booming cities like Lyon are most affected by the shortage of shelter places in relation to demand, as well as by shortages of affordable housing available and accessible to people to move on to from shelter. A recent survey in Lyon revealed that almost half people sleeping rough had given up calling the 115 number to try and get a shelter space for the night.

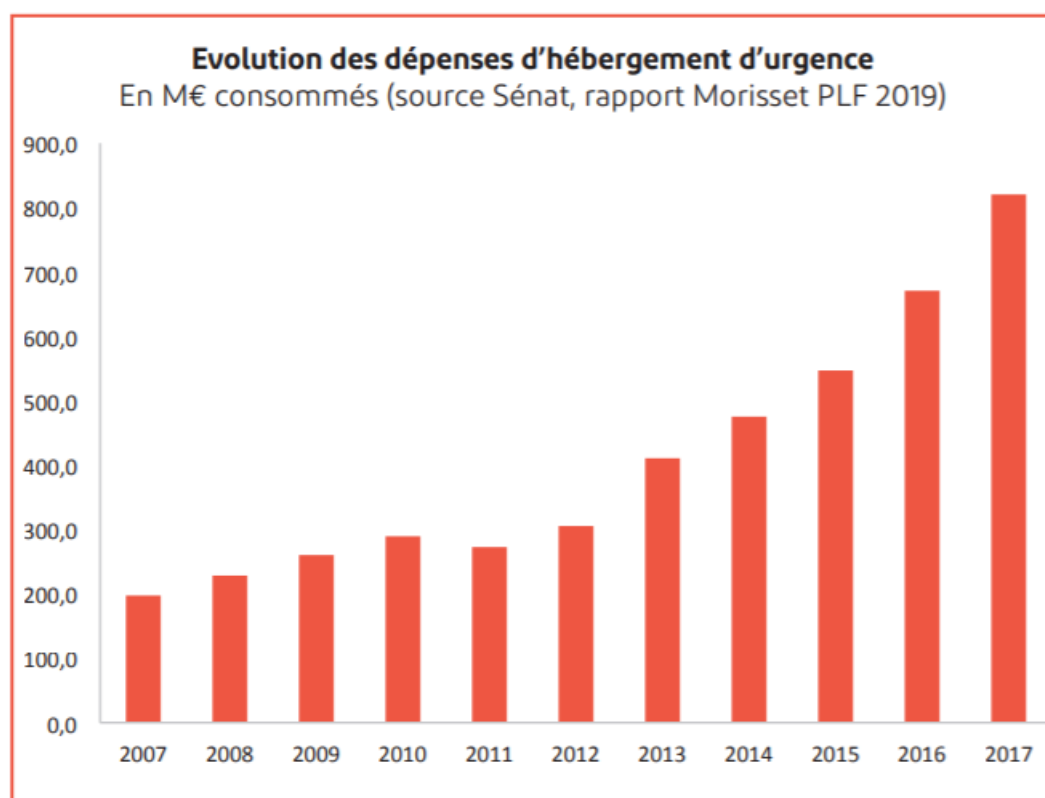


Fig 3: Evolution of spending on emergency shelter in France. Source: Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2019

In this context, Housing First was first introduced in France in 2011. A 4-year multi-site social experimentation project called Un Chez Soi d'Abord piloted Housing First in Marseille, Lille, Toulouse & Paris. Housing First was rigorously tested as a response to homelessness amongst people with psychiatric illness, using a Randomized Control Trial methodology. The successful experimentation was followed up with a national Five-Year Plan for Housing First, launched in September 2017. This plan involves the roll out of Housing First in 23 pilot cities, including the Metropole of Lyon. Pilot cities responded to a call for applications and received funding to support the accelerated implementation of Housing First.

Housing First in Grand Lyon

As mentioned in the introduction, the Metropole of Lyon has the relevant competencies to develop coherent and ambitious housing policies. It has a substantial offer of public social housing, brought together under a

metropolitan “public housing pole”. There is a strong network of social organisations working in the fields of shelter, temporary accommodation, social inclusion, health and housing. These are all important building blocks of the metropolitan approach to Housing First. Becoming a pilot city in the national Five-Year Plan meant a provisional budget of 1.5 million euros for the first year of the Housing First Strategy including more than 1 million euros allocated by the State.

Coordination of the Housing First plan by the Metropole entails providing an enabling strategic framework. This means laying out a vision, targets, resources etc. whilst creating space for bottom-up dynamics and for ownership of the strategy by actors on the ground. Housing First is framed as a paradigm shift for the entire system, rather than the roll-out of yet another programme to address homelessness.

The target group of Housing First in Lyon is people in the following situations: sleeping rough, in shelters or temporary accommodation, at risk of homelessness upon discharge from an institution, staying temporarily with family or friends because of a lack of alternatives, living in makeshift housing, and at immediate risk of homelessness. This contrasts with other contexts where Housing First is seen as a set programme model for homeless people with complex support needs, often who have been homeless for a long time.

The Metropole has set the following 5-year objectives for scaling-up Housing First:

1. Reduce by at least half the number of homeless people in the city,
2. Provide each homeless young person with a housing solution and the support they need to become independent
3. Ensure that no one leaves an institution (care, detention, psychiatric hospitals etc) without a housing solution
4. Stop evictions from public and private housing due to affordability or psycho-social problems without the provision of alternative housing.

The following main activities are being undertaken across 3 priority axes:

Axis 1: Increase the offer of accessible, affordable housing

- Mobilise the private rental sector for social purposes
- Increase the offer of alternative housing such as pensions de famille [\[1\]](#)
- Increase direct access to social housing as an alternative to shelter/temporary housing
- Activate temporary plots by developing a modular housing offer and mobilise vacant housing

Axis 2: Combine housing & new types of support

- 25 pilot projects to develop new interventions across 4 themes: alternatives to eviction, residential continuity, youth, housing & employment
- Coordination bodies to oversee the social component of the pilots, funding & implementation
- Thematic working groups on different aspects of Housing First and support

Axis 3: Support a shift in professional culture and practice

- Collective facilitation through establishment of a Platform of Housing First actors, communications, events etc
- Strengthening evaluation, knowledge and understanding through data collection: diagnostic surveys, cohort studies, common evaluation frameworks across projects, service user participation
- Training, including the development of a Housing First University Diploma, in partnership with L’université Lyon II et l’Orspere-Samdarra. This is a first in Europe.

The current COVID-19 crisis has presented a huge threat to homeless people, who are medically and socially vulnerable in an infectious respiratory disease pandemic. Lockdown brought homelessness into sharp focus as a public concern. You cannot stay home to protect yourself and others if you are homeless. Shelters and “shared airspace” accommodation were recognised as a public health threat. In many cities, providing safe temporary housing for the homeless became an urgent priority overnight. Recent research in France shows that 55% of people tested at soup kitchens, homelessness shelters and/or living in foyers for migrant workers in the Ile De France region were seropositive for COVID-19 (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2021). Some public authorities have responded to this public health threat with unprecedented efforts to accommodate people safely and quickly. Hotels, tourist apartments, student halls, social and private housing and other stock was mobilised in cities like Lyon, Brussels, Dublin, Prague, Barcelona to provide homeless people with single occupancy living spaces. There is now an opportunity to use the current crisis into a turning point and to shift towards Housing First and other more sustainable solutions. The crisis has demonstrated unequivocally how inadequate many existing policies and services are, especially settings that offer shelter only on a night by night basis, with shared sleeping, eating and washing spaces. It has also shown what can be achieved in a short period with sufficient political will and a sense of urgency. More than 500 homeless households were provided with emergency shelter during the initial lockdown period in Grand Lyon. The Metropole has now produced a plan with stakeholders to ensure that no one accommodated during the pandemic will be returned to homelessness. In a first phase, 500 social housing units will be made available for rehousing. Social support will be provided according to the principals of Housing First. This is an inspiring approach that many urban authorities considering how to best protect homeless people as the

pandemic continues, and how to use the crisis as a turning point on homelessness, could learn from.

[1] Pensions de familles are a form of grouped housing for people who require social or psychological support in France. They offer individual housing units in a small community setting (up to 25 units). The French government has set an objective of 10,000 new housing units in pensions de famille by 2022.

Home Silk Road & Housing First

The Home Silk Road project is linked to the roll-out of Housing First in Lyon. At the heart of Home Silk Road is the ambition of an inclusive city where vulnerable groups can access affordable housing and participate fully in society.

Some of the social housing units being built on the Home Silk Road site are destined to house formerly homeless people in a Housing First programme. 15 of the 200+ units to be built on the site are “very social” housing (PLAI) that will be allocated to beneficiaries of Housing First. “Very social housing” (PLAI) is a category of social housing in France targeting people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Construction is financed by a specific loan for this type of social housing, to which various conditions are attached. The income ceiling for a single-person household in “very social housing” is 11,480 Euros in Lyon. These 15 units will be owned and managed by public social housing company Est Metropole Habitat, and the support services will be provided by Alynea. Boosting the production of PLAI is one of the main objectives of the Housing First strategy in France. It is a challenging task and so far production is consistently below target levels.

A 91-unit “social residence” (residence sociale) will also be amongst the housing solutions developed on the site. It will be run by Alynéa, which is a partner in Home Silk Road and one of the key NGOs involved in the Housing First plan. The social residence is an example of “alternative housing”. One of the objectives of the local Housing First strategy is to boost the supply of such housing in the territory. Social residences offer temporary housing for people who cannot access common law housing because of their social or financial situation. Residents have an independent dwelling, for which they pay a monthly fee determined in view of their resources. They are eligible for social support. Some advocates of Housing First are sceptical about this type of setting. They argue that grouping excluded people together with limited security of tenure and future perspectives is not in line with the philosophy of Housing First. However, the reality in Lyon, as in many European cities, is that a significant part of the homeless population has limited access to social rights because of their administrative status. For migrants experiencing homelessness, this is most often linked to their residency status. This is the situation of many of the families currently living on the Home Silk Road site. Unless Housing First can be adapted to such situations, it will become another mechanism for exclusion based on competition between people in dire housing need. By normalising living conditions and linking into social support services, inter alia to activate social rights, solutions like social residences can play an important role in the systemic change that the Metropole of Lyon is trying to achieve with Housing First.

The Home Silk Road site currently includes a homeless shelter, CHU Alfred de Musset where 21 families live. It was initially a winter-only shelter but has been made permanent. It is managed by Alynéa, which provides social support to the residents, covering issues such as access to social rights, employment, education and wellbeing of children, French language support, and integration into the community. More than 2930 hours of support work will be provided over the duration of the project. Currently, the shelter is located in a previously vacant building on the site. The residents will soon move into temporary wooden modular housing units for the duration of the construction process. From 2023, the aim is to provide long-term solutions to as many of the households as possible on-site.

Home Silk Road has provided a testing ground for using temporary plots and modular housing to try and deliver Housing First. 54 modular homes are being installed to house the families from the homeless shelter. About 100 people will live here for 3 years and continue to receive social support. Once the construction project is completed and the families have moved out, the temporary modules will be moved and deployed at other sites in the East of the Metropole of Lyon. Their mission will be to provide emergency housing on temporary sites. The 22 units will be transformed into 40 one-room apartments of 40m², intended to accommodate up to 40 individuals. The Metropole sees these units as an important tool in its efforts to tackle homelessness and housing exclusion.

Modular housing is increasingly used to provide temporary housing for homeless households in European cities. In the UK, for example, a growing number of local authorities have developed modular housing schemes to deliver on their legal duty to provide temporary housing to homeless families. The advantages of modular and mobile housing are that it can be produced quickly, and relatively cheaply. In fact, construction costs vary a lot. High-quality modular housing is not always particularly “cheap” to produce. A key factor is the cost of land. In dynamic urban growth centres like Lyon, the cost of land is the biggest obstacle to building affordable housing. Modular and mobile housing allows for the temporary use of land which is not available for permanent housing such as brownfield construction sites. It can be deployed as a short-term response and then recycled.

The use of modular and mobile housing as a public policy instrument raises concerns in terms of adequacy. Modular housing can mean a lack of space and light, noise, poor insulation, and ventilation. The temporary nature of the housing is a concern, especially in the context of Housing First. The stigmatizing effects of living in cheap, temporary housing on land that is temporarily available are potentially important.

In the case of Home Silk Road, 3 years is a long time to be in a temporary setting. Residents arguably have limited options available to them and therefore limited choice and control. There is uncertainty about final outcomes for individual households. These challenges illustrate how difficult it is to translate the principals of Housing First into operational reality, and how high the stakes are. One of the most important tests of the Home Silk Road project will be the medium- and long-term outcomes for the people living in the shelter.

It is important to emphasise that these modular units are built to a high-quality specification. The families who will live there have played an active role in the design process. The fact that the site is a cultural and social “hub” and that the residents-to-be are already established there is important, as is the ongoing support that they will receive.

CONCLUSIONS

Lyon is a pioneering city when it comes to scaling up Housing First. Two years into a 5-year Housing First plan, it can teach other urban authorities and stakeholders a lot about adapting to local realities whilst maintain the core principles that define Housing First. Home Silk Road needs to be understood in terms of the broader housing policy in the Metropole and the commitment to scaling up Housing First. It demonstrates very well how the principals of Housing First can be operationalised in a complex urban reality, notably in the context of intensive urban renewal where population and economic growth are driving local housing dynamics.

[See on UIA website](#)

