

The 5BRIDGES project in Nantes

The 5Bridges project and Housing First: How to exploit the political momentum?

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In the autumn of 2017, the French government launched an ambitious 5-year Housing First strategy. The objective is to facilitate rapid access to housing for people experiencing severe forms of housing exclusion, including homeless people. The strategy is highly relevant for the 5Bridges project, but the details of its practical roll out have only started to become clear recently. That is why the project leaders could not integrate Housing First in the 5 Bridges project application.

In this article we argue that the city of Nantes and the homelessness people living in Nantes could benefit significantly from a strong link between the 5Bridges project and the recent national Housing First strategy. We want to encourage key people involved in the 5Bridges project, such as some leading figures in Les Eaux Vives and in the city administration who are already convinced of the potential of Housing First, to turn the 5Bridges project in to a model of Housing First for the region and the country, and maybe even for Europe.

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The origins of the 5Bridges project

The 5Bridges project, as submitted to UIA for funding, wants to provide a solution to the increasingly visible problem of street homelessness in Nantes. Instead of expanding the capacity of night-only shelters in isolated locations at the edges of the city, the authorities opted for the construction of a new and high-quality 24/7 homeless shelter in the middle of a large prestigious urban regeneration project. The site will also include other support services for homeless people as well as a modern social restaurant, an urban farm, and some social economy projects. The ambition is to create an urban space where people who are homeless interact with neighbours and passers-by. The project leaders rightly believe that this will facilitate the integration of homeless people in the society and change the mostly negative perceptions of the local community on homelessness. Such an approach to street homelessness is quite unique in Europe and should be welcomed.

The existing approach to street homelessness in Nantes has become unsustainable. Due to the lack of sufficient beds in 24/7 homeless shelters and the complicated set of rules regulating access to and funding of these shelters, a considerable number of homeless people have no other choice than to stay in one of the few night-only shelters in the city or on the street. To reserve a bed in one of the night shelters, they must call a free emergency help line (115). This sounds easy and straightforward but can be difficult because the emergency help line is often busy, and some homeless people have no easy access to a telephone. Those who do not get through or for whom there are no beds left can still try to find a bed for the night in a small *shelter of last resort*, which is no more than a large room with a few dozen camp beds, no privacy and minimal staff supervision. Every morning all homeless clients are expected to leave the night shelter and spend the day on the street or in other homeless services such as day centres or soup kitchens. For quite a few homeless people moving from one service to the other and securing a bed space for the following night is almost a full days *work*. The fact that the homeless are confronted with restrictions on the number of consecutive nights they can stay in a night shelter further jeopardises their chances to reintegrate into the society. The logic behind these restrictions is to prevent homeless people to get accustomed to the night-only shelter as a permanent living situation. The result, however, is that the many homeless who cannot move on to longer stay shelters because of lack of vacant spaces, spend consecutive nights on the streets of Nantes, which is bad for them but can also be a concern of public order and safety.



Night shelter of last resort 'La Halte de Nuit' in Nantes

There is a growing consensus amongst all relevant stakeholders in Nantes that this way of addressing street homelessness is flawed and does not promote the integration of homeless people in society. That is why the city authorities of Nantes are so determined to make the 5Bridges project a success.

We are convinced that the 5Bridges project as submitted to UIA for funding will have an important positive impact on the quality of life of rough sleepers in Nantes when in full operation. But we also believe that the recently launched Housing First strategy is an unprecedented opportunity to scale up the ambitions of the 5Bridges project and make a lasting impact on how the wider problem of homelessness is addressed in Nantes.

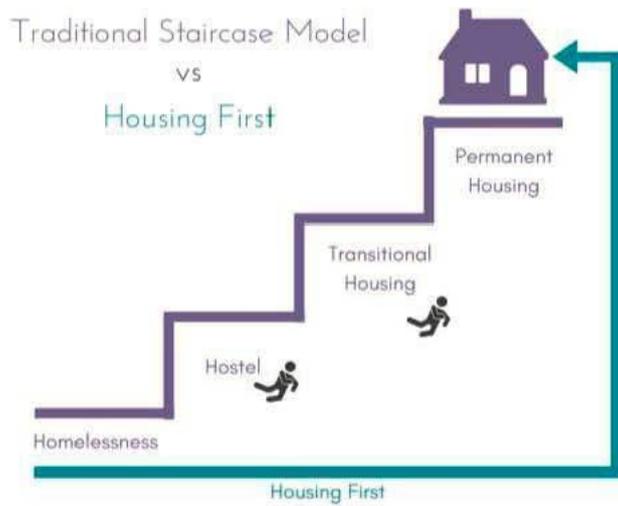
We will describe below what role we see for the 5Bridges project as key actor in the delivery of Housing First in Nantes.

What is Housing First?

Housing First is a *new* approach to homelessness which has been developed in the 1990s in the United States (New York). In its original form it targets homeless people with complex problems such as people with serious mental health and/or addiction problems. A key innovation and main strength of the Housing First approach is that it uses access to permanent housing as a powerful instrument of integration rather than as a reward at the end of a long reintegration process through a diverse, and therefore usually difficult to navigate, shelter *system*. Housing First breaks with the idea, still strongly held in the homeless sector, that homeless people with complex needs are incapable to sustain a tenancy if their social, psychological, relational, and other problems are not under control. It separates the access to housing from the support, and makes housing available to homeless people, even if they do not accept social support.

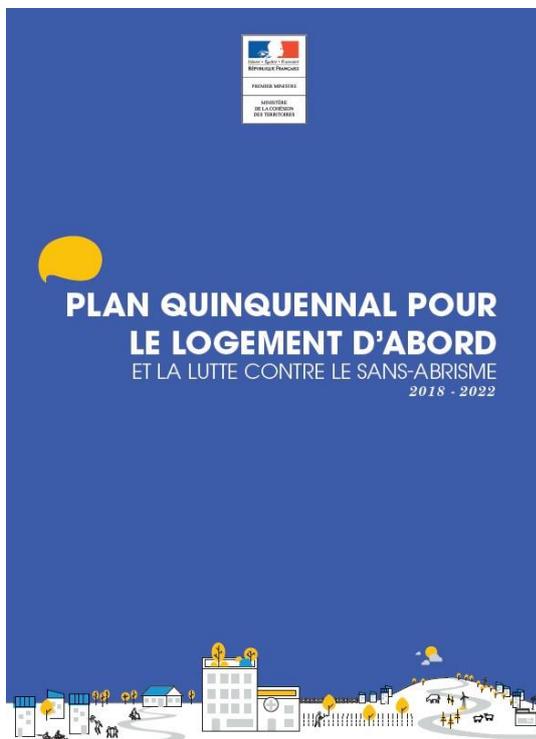
Housing First is the answer to the flaws of the *Staircase Model*, the most popular approach in Europe, which tends to lead to congestion in the shelter *system*. This model moves homeless people through a variety of temporary forms of accommodation (typically night shelter, short stay shelter, integration shelter, half-way house) depending on how well they progress with their non-housing problems. The *staircase model* tends to keep homeless people locked in temporary, often precarious, living situations because they are considered not *housing-ready* enough to move on to self-contained housing solutions.

In contrast to the limited outflow to permanent housing in the *Staircase Model*, the results of Housing First approach are impressive. The housing retention rate is very high with usually more than 80% of the Housing First tenants still housed after two years. Although the evidence is still somewhat underdeveloped there are strong indications that the impact of Housing First on the different aspects of well-being of the tenants is generally very positive. There is also proof that Housing First can be considerably cheaper than the *Staircase Model*, especially for the most vulnerable homeless people.



For more information on Housing First, the freely accessible Housing First Europe Hub is a valuable resource www.housingfirsteurope.eu

Finland is the only European country that for the last 20 years has consistently used the Housing First approach to address homelessness. The results are impressive including a reduction of chronic homelessness to functional zero. For more information <https://ysaatio.fi/en/housing-first-finland>



The French Housing First Strategy

The French Housing First strategy has a considerably wider target group than the Housing First approach as developed in the USA. It targets street homeless, but also homeless people in short and long-stay shelter, people living in very inadequate or insecure housing, and people who have been on social housing waiting lists for a too long time. The French strategy also includes a specific programme targeting chronic homeless people with severe mental health needs (*Un Chez Soi d'Abord*) which resembles best the *original* Housing First model. The strategy includes 4 streams of action: production of affordable housing; speeding up the transitioning to stable housing solutions; organisation of social support, tenancy sustainment and prevention of homelessness; and mutual learning and research.

The Housing First strategy in France has the explicit endorsement of the President of the Republic. During a speech in Toulouse 11 September 2017 Emmanuel Macron announced the development of a national Housing First strategy, and promised the production of 40.000 very social houses every year during 5 years, and the production and mobilisation of 10.000 new places in group homes for homeless people (*maisons relais*) and 40.000 new dwellings through social rental agencies for very vulnerable people such as the homeless over the entire 5-year period. This shows the determination of the government to make Housing First a success, and it makes France one of the most ambitious European countries in terms of bringing Housing First to scale.

Nantes is one of the 24 areas chosen and supported by the government to put the national Housing First strategy into practice. The discussion with all relevant stakeholders in Nantes started in the autumn 2018 and an action plan is currently being finalised. An important lever for the strategy will be the commitment of the city, outlined in the local housing strategy which was adopted in December 2018, to ensure the construction of 6000 new dwellings, of which 2000 social dwellings, each year. Of the 2000 social dwellings probably 200 to 400 will be reserved for the most vulnerable people such as the homeless. On top of this, Nantes also wants to invest in permanent collective housing solutions for homeless people and other very vulnerable groups such as the *maisons relais*.

It would of course be a wasted opportunity if the implementation of national Housing First strategy in Nantes would happen in parallel to the delivery of the 5Bridges project. It is a welcome coincidence that the accumulated delays with the construction of the 5Bridges site allow for a smooth integration of the 5Bridges project in the delivery of Housing First in Nantes. The fact that some of the key stakeholders involved in the project believe in the potential of Housing First will make a successful integration even more likely.

How to link 5Bridges & Housing First?

As explained above, the site of the 5Bridges Project will include a 24/7 shelter for approximately 40 homeless people. There is a risk that these people could get *stuck* for prolonged periods of time in the shelter because of the lack of focus on swift permanent housing solutions in the project. The 5Bridges project is innovative and exemplary in many respects, but it does not explicitly embrace the Housing First approach to homelessness.

One could even argue that 5Bridges project includes some features of the *Staircase Model*. The 5 temporary social housing units which will be available for the shelter users are a good illustration.

Partners involved in the project refer to these units as *trampoline dwellings*. The idea is that housing units will be used as a sort of *training houses* in which shelter users, who have made sufficient progress on their non-housing problems, can test whether they are ready enough to move on to permanent mainstream (social) housing. We know from evidence from several large Housing First experiments, including some in France, that even homeless people with complex problems do not need to be *trained* to become *housing-ready*. Most homeless are able to sustain tenancies from the very start on the condition that the right social support is readily available, and the tenant is empowered to make his/her own decision if and when to take up the offer of support. But even in the logic of the *Staircase Approach*, only 5 training houses for 40 shelter users seems too limited.

This is not a criticism of the quality of the shelter as compared to what exists in terms of emergency shelter in Nantes at the moment. On the 5Bridges sites homeless people staying in the 24/7 shelter will have individual rooms, more personalised support, and will be able to stay for longer periods. But the idea that rough sleepers need some time in a shelter to regain their calm, rebuild strength, and get the basics of their life back under control (a sort of stabilisation period) is at odds with the Housing First approach. In a country as Finland where Housing First has become the main offer for homeless people, there still is limited shelter capacity. But in Finland the shelter functions as a crisis and assessment centre where homeless people stay maximum 2 weeks before they transfer to a permanent housing solution. That is not (yet) the function envisaged for the 5Bridges project.

It is not unthinkable that a limited turn-over of shelter users will impact negatively on the 5Bridges site as a whole. It risks becoming an expensive high-quality shelter for a relatively stable group of 40 homeless people with too few opportunities to move on to a more independent life. It might affect the dynamic interaction with the neighbourhood as envisaged by the project leaders. We know from other projects that shelters with a very stable client base are likely to facilitate more traditional and charitable forms of support. A more empowering interaction with the neighbourhood is more likely when there is a clear outflow of the shelter population to permanent housing solutions on and off site. When there is visible evidence that a social intervention works, the local inhabitants are more likely to reach out in a more dynamic and empowering way.

That is why we think the 5Bridges project should fully embrace the Housing First approach which is currently being developed in Nantes. First steps, such as an action lab devoted to Housing First, are already being taken, but they might be too prudent and too slow.

We believe the 24/7 shelter of the 5Bridges project could become a Housing First assessment centre from where homeless people transition to permanent housing solutions. As the 5Bridges shelter will be one of the most modern and best equipped 24/7 shelters in Nantes, it will probably *attract* many homeless clients. This will make the quick outflow to permanent housing even more important. The social restaurant, urban farm and other social economy activities located on the 5Bridges site could continue to work with former clients when they are permanently housed elsewhere. We know from research that loneliness and lack of purpose in life are problems encountered by Housing First tenants. The 5Bridges project could provide an answer to these problems.

Some *ex-homeless* could be employed as *peer workers* by the 5Bridges project leaders. With their life experience they often connect more easily and effectively with homeless people than professional staff. After some training the *peer workers* could help to make the swift transition to permanent housing an equally successful experience for the homeless still living on the 5Bridges site. Recent research has highlighted the important role *peer workers* can play in Housing First strategies.

Some obstacles to overcome

In our view, there are two important obstacles to overcome to turn the 5Bridges project into a key player in the delivery of Housing First.

The first obstacle relates to the possible resistance of staff and volunteers. Housing First requires a drastic shift in the way of working with homeless and formerly homeless people. To make such a shift most staff and volunteers require training and support. Some might not be able to make the shift, but we know from other Housing First experiments that they are usually a small minority. Training programmes on Housing First are available (for instance from the Housing First Hub) and are being developed in France as part of the national strategy.

We know that the interest in Housing First is rapidly growing among staff of most of the partners involved in the Housing First project including the lead partners, the city of Nantes and LEV. The latter is even involved in the setting up of a Housing First project in Nantes independently from the 5Bridges project. But we know from experiences elsewhere in France and abroad that there is a big difference between a healthy interest and applying the Housing First approach in one's daily work. There are ongoing efforts to raise awareness about Housing First among some of the 5Bridges partners and their staff, but we believe there is a need to reinforce these efforts.

The other obstacle concerns the provision of housing. Nantes is a booming city with an increasingly stressed housing market. To make Housing First work, a sufficiently large offer of affordable housing solutions must be made available. During the last year, we spoke with several key people involved in the 5Bridges project about a stronger link with the national Housing First strategy, and their first reaction was, perfectly understandably, rather sceptical. They were not sceptical about Housing First as a theoretical model, but about its practical implementation. Most did not see how it would be possible to find enough affordable and adequate housing units to ensure the fluidity required to make the 5Bridges shelter function as a Housing First assessment centre.

To find out if the scepticism is justified, we met with some major affordable housing providers in Nantes in January. Following in depth discussions, we think we have a better idea of how realistic it is bring Housing First to scale in Nantes and what role the 5Bridges project could play in the scaling.

Is there enough housing?

The demand for social housing is high in Nantes. More than 30.000 people are on the social housing waiting list. Nevertheless, there seems to be appetite among the key housing providers in Nantes to do more for homeless people.

Social housing

There are a dozen social housing providers active in Nantes including 4 operators with a stock of more than 10.000 dwellings. We spoke in some detail with the social housing provider which is involved as a key partner in the 5Bridges project (CDC Habitat Grand Ouest). We were surprised to learn that they

considered their role in the 5Bridges project to be limited to the more technical aspects of the project related to the construction of the site. They would, however, be keen and available to be more involved in the core dynamics of the project but were, apparently, never asked. We learned that they would also have the capacity to provide more dwellings for the homeless users of the 5Bridges shelter than the 5 *trampoline* dwellings available on site. We were told that all social housing operators together should, in principle, be able to make 50 social dwellings available for the homeless clients of the 5Bridges shelter on an annual basis. That would probably not be sufficient to ensure a proper Housing First dynamic, but it would increase the outflow towards housing solutions drastically.

It is interesting to note that the cost of the rent for the social dwelling would most probably be covered entirely or almost entirely by the housing allowance to which the tenant would be entitled. The fact that most ex-homeless, certainly those with complex needs, are unlikely to become economically productive and financially independent, and would therefore retain access to the highest housing allowance, makes them potentially an *attractive* target group of social housing providers. Housing allowances are a relatively stable and secure stream of income.

The representative of the social housing sector we spoke stressed that the crux of effective involvement of the social housing sector was the absolute guarantee that the right social support for the ex-homeless tenants was available for as long as required. He was happy to accept the delivery of the social support as defined by the Housing First approach (housing not conditional upon accepting social support), but he was not convinced the funding for the necessary support could be guaranteed under the current rules. It would be useful to investigate whether some of the funding available for support in the homeless shelter *system* could be *recycled* to finance (part of the) support for homeless people moving into social housing.

It is important to stress that the representative of the social housing sector we interviewed was not aware of the Housing First approach. He was interested to learn more but in the time frame of the interview it was not possible to provide extensive information. The positive reaction might therefore be explained partly by a limited understanding of what Housing First entails.

Other housing

The organisations involved in the socialisation of the private rental sector (*intermediation locative*) and organisations offering collective housing solutions such as the *maisons relais* would in principle also be available to provide (more) housing and housing services to clients of the 5Bridges homeless shelter. The problem is that there are different *homeless routes* into housing, and that the organisations offering the above type of housing solutions have limited control over who to prioritise.

That is why it is of fundamental importance to involve the SIAO (*Service Intégré d'Accueil et d'Orientation*) in the roll out of the national Housing First strategy in Nantes. The SIAO is a public service that processes all demands for shelter and housing from homeless people. Most of the homeless people processed by the SIAO get referred to emergency or reintegration shelters (*Centre d'Hébergement et de Réinsertion Sociale*) because of the lack of affordable housing options available. The implementation of the national Housing First strategy in Nantes will not suddenly enable the SIAO to provide all homeless people with a permanent housing solution. But the political momentum and the extra funding that comes with the Housing First strategy will certainly increase the housing options available to the SIAO in Nantes.

The SIAO could help to ensure that at least all the clients from the 5Bridges shelter get rapidly referred to permanent housing options, and not to another short stay hostel or a reintegration shelter. In that way the 5Bridges shelter can profile itself as a *new type* of shelter that fits the Housing First logic and does not keep any of its homeless clients longer than is required for an initial very short stabilisation and a thorough assessment (with a maximum of a couple of months).

As the SIAO in Nantes is managed collectively by most of the major organisations involved in the fight against homelessness, it is important that there is a consensus between all the NGOs that Housing First should become the main offer for homeless people (especially those with complex needs), and that 5Bridges project offers a unique opportunity to transition people quickly from a state-of-the-art homeless shelter, which would specialise in assessment and referral, to permanent housing solutions.

We are of course aware that changes to the system in place for processing demands for support from homeless people and funding of homelessness and housings services is very complex. The system allows the many stakeholders to protect their part of the *market* and secure sufficient income from public sources. But we see no other option. If all shelters only do a little bit of Housing First and favour only the housing solutions they can offer themselves, the Housing First will get to scale at a very slow pace and the dynamic might get lost.

The example of Helsinki (larger urban area has 1.5 million inhabitants), which is considerably larger than Nantes (metropole has app 650.000 inhabitants), shows us that a city with an effective Housing First policy in place only needs about 50 places in shelter to assess all people becoming homeless and to refer them to the right housing solution. In Nantes that unique assessment centre could over time be the 5Bridges shelter that has a capacity of 40 beds. Of course, a transition period of several years will be required.

Conclusion

Many cities in Europe are thinking about bringing Housing First to scale. The transition from a shelter-based system to a Housing First system is complex. One way is to convince the entire homeless *sector* that Housing First is a good idea, and to change its approach. Another way is to show homeless people that swift access to permanent housing through Housing First is actually possible. Both ways together are likely to produce most effect.

That is what the 5Bridges project could do. By embracing Housing First, it would integrate one of the most effective social innovation of recent times in to one of the most daring and innovative urban renovation projects funded by IUA.

The 5Bridges project has the potential to change the way the local community will think about homelessness and interact with homeless people by integrating a site for homeless services into a large and prestigious urban renovation project. That potential can be further strengthened if the 5Bridges project would not just be a place for emergency support and possible move-on accommodation, but the place to be for homeless people if they want to benefit from Housing First.

Caveat

We have not raised the issue of migration in the above article. Nantes, like many other cities in France, is confronted with the dire situation of hundreds of undocumented migrants. The scope and purpose of this article does not allow for an in-depth reflection on the flaws of the past and current migration policies. But it is clear that as long as undocumented migrants are not regularised, one of the very few means of help that is (still) accessible to them is shelter. The unconditional right to shelter for anybody living on French soil is strongly enshrined in French law and is a unique piece of legislation in Europe. It should be noted that if the 24/7 shelter of the 5Bridges project transforms into a Housing First assessment hub, it cannot be accessible for undocumented migrants who are not entitled to permanent housing. It would also make the 5Bridges site ill-equipped to deal with the problems of undocumented migrants.

Many of the levers, such as funding and regulatory instruments, to transform to a Housing First approach lie in the hands of the national authorities. There is not a lack of will among the leaders of the 5Bridges project, but sometimes the ambition hits the bureaucratic reality. Therefore the integration of the Housing First logic in the 5Bridges project will require creativity and flexibility, and might have to drift away from some of the core principles of Housing First. But the swift move on to self-contained permanent housing for the homeless clients of the 5Bridges shelter should remain the objective.