

## **Housing First (Belgium, 16-17 March 2016)<sup>1</sup>**

**Irene Bauer**  
Fonds Soziales Wien

**Ulrike Knecht**  
Mobile Wohnbegleitung, Salvation Army Austria  
Lecturer, FH Campus Wien

**Michael Langwiesner**  
Fonds Soziales Wien

**Bettina Steffel**  
Municipal Government Vienna,  
Department for Health and Social Planning

### **1. The “Housing First” approach in Vienna and its implementation**

#### **The current situation in Austria/Vienna**

In Austria, the nine federal provinces are responsible for providing support measures for the assistance for the homeless. Each province has its specific regulations and services<sup>2</sup>; hence there are also different strategies and approaches in each province. As a consequence, the following report reflects the Viennese situation according to Housing First. It should be mentioned that there are also other Austrian cities like Salzburg<sup>3</sup> where Housing First is implemented.

#### **Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe (WWH) (The Viennese Assistance Programme for the Homeless)**

The Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW) (Vienna Social Fund), funded by the City of Vienna, plans, steers and monitors the varied services for homeless persons in close contact with its partner organisations. The FSW cooperates with more than 90 facilities of different organisations and funds their services. Developments of the WWH focus since 2011 on adjusting services better to homeless people’s needs by offering floating support in permanent apartments with secure tenancy instead of providing support in institutionalised, temporary settings. These developments include also the implementation of Housing First and are meant as a process of de-institutionalisation: In-patient facilities like transitional accommodations and night shelters will be reduced in favour of mobile services in apartments<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared for the Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion programme coordinated by ÖSB Consulting, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Applica, and funded by the European Commission.

© ÖSB Consulting, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Magistratsabteilung 24 der Stadt Wien (Ed.) (2012) Wiener Sozialbericht 2012, Vienna (p. 185)

<sup>3</sup> VinziDach Salzburg, <http://www.vinzi.at/de/vinzidach-salzburg/> - download: 2016-02-22

<sup>4</sup> Housing First – The Viennese Model (abstract), Vienna 2012 – <http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/20130304> - download: 2016-02-15



## Housing First – The Viennese Model

When the City of Vienna stipulated the Housing First approach in 2010 in the governmental agreement, the FSW and his partner organisation neunerhaus developed together with experts in the field of homelessness a Viennese model of Housing First according to local requirements and structural conditions. The Viennese Housing First-Model contains the following five principles<sup>5</sup>:

1. Direct access to one's own permanent housing. Direct access to one's own apartment is the focus at the beginning of the professional support relationship. The leases in Housing First projects offer long-term residential security, which is essential for stabilisation.
2. Separation of housing management and personal assistance. The mandates of housing management and social support are generally not connected. The dual roles of employees as social supporters and landlords/ladies in one person are avoided.
3. Promoting social inclusion. One's own permanent housing is offered in a conventional housing environment, and social inclusion is promoted by supporting the development of social networks and daily routines.
4. Self-determination and participation. Social support is based on normalisation as well as self-determination and participation on the part of users. This applies to the location and layout of the apartment as well as social inclusion.
5. Flexible support for individual needs. Individual support is given to ensure stabilisation as regards the psychosocial situation and housing. If required, the support service co-operates with external resources and assistance systems. Advice and support can be continued even during long stays in hospital, imprisonment or loss of accommodation, thus ensuring continuity in crises.<sup>6</sup>

Over the last years the FSW extended floating support services according to the required process of deinstitutionalisation. These services offer mobile support with different approaches and include Housing First services, floating support services in own, permanent apartments for formerly homeless people after institutionalised living in transitional accommodations and affordable housing with support offered. The FSW also developed a Housing First barometer<sup>7</sup>, which helps existing and planned support services to make a differentiated check of their concrete implementation of the Housing First approach according to the five principles of the Viennese Housing First-Model.

## 2. The main measures of the "Housing First" approach in Vienna

Until now, two Housing First projects were successfully implemented in Vienna: The Housing First pilot project operated by neunerhaus (since 2012) and the Housing First project operated by Caritas (since 2013). Both services support a broad target group, which includes homeless single persons, couples and families. The allocation of the Housing First support to homeless people is operated by the Beratungszentrum Wohnungslosenhilfe (bzWO) (advisory centre for homeless support) of the FSW. The support contains finding affordable and suitable housing

<sup>5</sup> Housing First – Das Wiener Modell. Fachliche Standards und Rahmenbedingungen für die Umsetzung. Endbericht, Vienna 2012  
[http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/201210\\_HousingFirst\\_DasWienerModell\\_Endbericht.pdf](http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/201210_HousingFirst_DasWienerModell_Endbericht.pdf) - download: 2016-02-15

<sup>6</sup> Housing First – The Viennese Model (abstract), Vienna 2012 –  
[http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/20130304\\_ABSTRACT\\_HousingFirst\\_DasWienerModell\\_EN.pdf](http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/20130304_ABSTRACT_HousingFirst_DasWienerModell_EN.pdf) - download: 2016-02-29

<sup>7</sup> Housing First - Das Wiener Modell: "Housing-First Barometer", Vienna 2012 -  
[http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/20121105\\_WienerModell\\_HousingFirstBarometer.pdf](http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/20121105_WienerModell_HousingFirstBarometer.pdf) - download: 2016-02-15



and offering flexible social support by social workers for individual needs by conveying to further specific support through mainstream services. The median duration of support through both Housing First services is 15 to 23 months<sup>8</sup>. The Housing First projects extended their support capacities since their beginning, currently the total capacity of Housing First in Vienna counts 201 support places.

Both *neunerhaus* and Caritas also acquire the required apartments (mainly of housing associations), provide their service users with direct access to them and make stable tenancies for landlords/ladies and tenants available. A significant difference between the two Housing First projects lies in the form of tenancy for the service users. The service users of Housing First *neunerhaus* get their own tenancy agreement with housing managing companies as their landlords/ladies from the start. The personal support objectives are formulated in a care agreement between the support user and the social worker. The service users of Housing First Caritas get a user contract with Caritas in the first instance, after a certain time of support the tenancy agreement is passed on to the service users. According to the Housing First-principle of separation of housing management and personal assistance Caritas has implemented an intern real estate management to be able to approximate to the disconnection of mandates of housing management and social support. Besides the user contract the service users of Caritas also get a care agreement for their personal support through a social worker.

The Housing First pilot project by *neunerhaus* included also an accompanying evaluation<sup>9</sup>, which was also meant as support for the project development. The core element of the evaluation was a series of case studies with 30 service users who were interviewed on three separate occasions (beginning of the Housing First support, shortly before the end of the social support, after the ending of the support); at the same time the viewpoints of the social workers were explored<sup>10</sup>. The accompanying evaluation was recently finished; hence final results should be available soon. Initial findings already revealed the positive development and the fitting accuracy of the provided support<sup>11</sup>.

Another essential measure of the Viennese process of deinstitutionalisation is floating support for formerly homeless people, who live in own, permanent apartments (mainly council housing) after institutionalised living in transitional accommodations. Since 2011 three floating support services have been implemented in Vienna: *Mobile Wohnbegleitung* by Salvation Army Austria, *wohn:mobil* by "wieder wohnen" GmbH and *Mobile Wohnbetreuung* by WOBES. Altogether they provide a support capacity of 211 support places. The main goals of this measure are the shortening of duration of stay in transitional accommodations and maintaining the apartment through individual social support by social workers. This also includes the possibility of aftercare in terms of short-term counselling or resumption of the floating support if needed. Formerly homeless people who are moving in their own apartment and who need and want further support can apply therefore at the *bzWO*, which allocates the floating support. The middle duration of support through floating support services is 6 to 9 months<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Interner Jahresbericht 2015 Mobile Wohnbetreuung (intern annual report on floating support 2015), FSW.

<sup>9</sup> Conducted by L&R Sozialforschung.

<sup>10</sup> *neunerhaus*: Housing First Pilot Project, Vienna 2015 (p.28) - [http://www.neunerhaus.at/fileadmin/Bibliothek/Neue\\_Website/Neunerhaueser/Housing\\_First/20150925\\_HousingFirst\\_Report\\_english.pdf](http://www.neunerhaus.at/fileadmin/Bibliothek/Neue_Website/Neunerhaueser/Housing_First/20150925_HousingFirst_Report_english.pdf) - download: 2016-02-17

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Interner Jahresbericht 2015 Mobile Wohnbetreuung (intern annual report on floating support 2015), FSW.



## Major challenges and learning elements

Like other European cities, Vienna is faced with a lack of affordable housing, which is necessary for pursuing the Housing First approach and can be identified as the major challenge. The organisations which provide Housing First are also severally engaged in acquiring affordable apartments for their service users through cooperation with companies of the housing industry. So far experiences in this field show that there is great potential in the cooperation with housing cooperatives. To build up consistent collaboration structures for an effective acquisition of sufficient affordable housing the FSW recently implemented the Wohnplattform Wien (WPW) (housing platform). Its task will be the coordination of all relevant stakeholders in Vienna relating to supported housing issues (housing industry, municipality, social organisations etc.) to provide affordable housing to target groups in need.

From the standpoint of Housing First service users the time of waiting until a suitable apartment is available can be a difficult period. Hence the WWH is challenged to ensure that this period of time is as short as possible to avoid that homeless persons don't have to wait in insecure housing situations, shelters or transitional accommodations.

According to initial sceptical attitudes against the implementation of the Housing First approach experiences of Housing First neunerhaus so far show that the acceptance of social support based on empowerment and participation is successful and appreciated by the service users<sup>13</sup>. The supported persons also acknowledge the separation of tenancy and social support and perceive it in a positive way<sup>14</sup>. A qualitative evaluation<sup>15</sup> of the service user satisfaction with the support provided by Housing First Caritas also showed that the interviewed persons have made positive experiences with the social support through Housing First.

As planned at the beginning of the implementation of Housing First in Vienna it was possible to reach a broad target group and to prove that Housing First fits to single persons as well as to families with many children.

Another important learning effect according to sustainability is the possibility of aftercare through floating support services. Experiences of the support teams show that even short-term counselling can be effective to prevent evictions.

The previous experiences with Housing First in Vienna prove the successful implementation. However, methods of showing evidence of sustainability in the long run still have to be explored in Vienna.

## 3. Comments about the host country report "Housing First" Belgium

In Austria, the nine federal provinces have each autonomous competence in providing support for homeless people. Therefore, the Belgian Housing First practice is an interesting example of how a bottom-up process started at communal level can be upscaled (or at least supported by) to the federal level. With this regard it would be of interest to know how common Housing First standards can still be guaranteed.

---

<sup>13</sup> neunerhaus: Housing First Pilot Project, Vienna 2015 (p.22ff.) - [http://www.neunerhaus.at/fileadmin/Bibliothek/Neue\\_Website/Neunerhaueser/Housing\\_First/20150925\\_HousingFirst\\_Report\\_english.pdf](http://www.neunerhaus.at/fileadmin/Bibliothek/Neue_Website/Neunerhaueser/Housing_First/20150925_HousingFirst_Report_english.pdf) - download: 2016-02-17

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>

[http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/201506\\_Endbericht\\_FHCampusWien\\_HousingFirst.pdf](http://wohnen.fsw.at/downloads/dokumente/201506_Endbericht_FHCampusWien_HousingFirst.pdf)  
(download: 2016-02-25)



Another important element is that the Housing First practice in Belgium stipulates an evaluation including two control groups. This makes sure that the results get the necessary attention and cannot easily be contested. However, in the Belgian paper there is little information on the selection process and on the cohort reached by the two differing support systems. More input on this would be very helpful for the interpretation of the results and for better exploring possibilities and limits of transfer to the Viennese context.

The authors appreciate the fact that the preliminary results in Belgium prove that Housing First is effective in terms of well-being of clients and housing stability. This reflects the experience made in the Viennese Housing First projects. It would be interesting to know which methods of support were applied and which professions were involved in the Housing First teams to achieve these positive results in Belgium.

The host country paper also mentions socio-professional integration and the creation of a new job profile. As the question of what Housing First can affect beyond housing stability and improvement of health status hasn't been dealt with in depth in current research, the authors welcome the exchange on this interesting issue. It should also be noted that activation of clients can have different forms depending on the individual health situation and need not necessarily lead to formal employment.

Information on cost-efficiency would also be useful to underpin the positive outcomes of the project and could eventually be a stronger argument for transfer to other cities/countries.

It goes without saying that the availability of affordable housing is at the heart of every Housing First strategy. Failures to find quality housing at low rents will put a successful implementation at risk. In the light of increased pressure on the housing market in most European major cities – also but not exclusively due to the rising number of migrants – an exchange of good practices to acquire affordable housing would be relevant.

