



## Urban Agenda Platform

*The global platform for sharing progress, action and knowledge on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda to achieve sustainable urban development.*

# Discus Housing First

Region	Europe and Central Asia
Award Scheme	World Habitat Awards
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

## Summary

Adapting Housing First to reduce homelessness in Amsterdam Cities across Europe face a growing homelessness problem. Homeless people can be vulnerable, which can make maintaining a tenancy difficult once rehoused. The usual approach when tackling homelessness is to address these issues first, before a permanent home is found. Housing First turns this model on its head by providing clients with a safe and secure home first.

## Background and Objective

Homelessness is a growing problem across Europe. In Amsterdam, high private sector rents and a shortage of 70,000 homes has put the city's affordable housing supply under extreme pressure. The average waiting time for one of Amsterdam's 186,000 social homes is now 11-15 years. More people find themselves living in hostels or on the streets, where they are vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and drug and alcohol abuse. Tackling homelessness requires the collaboration of several different agencies in the effort to make real and lasting change to the lives of people who often have multiple, complex needs. In the Netherlands, the 'staircase model' has been the dominant approach to tackling homelessness. This means 'treatment first' for homeless people, who need to progress through a series of stages before they are deemed to be ready to move into a more permanent home. Discus Housing First is adapted from the American model of Housing First. This innovative housing programme aims to eradicate homelessness in Amsterdam by turning this traditional model on its head. Discus Housing First moves homeless people into permanent housing as quickly as possible and provides ongoing, flexible support for as long as it is needed, but on a voluntary basis. The approach empowers homeless people to instigate real positive change by focusing on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. The programme was the first of its kind in the Netherlands and started as a joint initiative between Jellinek Mentrum, Alliantie Amsterdam and the city council. In 2007 Discus became a department of HVO Querido. Jellinek Mentrum provides treatment and counselling for people with mental, psychiatric and addiction problems. Alliantie Amsterdam is a housing association and HVO Querido offers guidance and care to vulnerable people. Discus began its Housing First programme in April 2006 with the goal of ending street homelessness, empowering people, respecting their choices, helping to modify harmful drug and alcohol use, and supporting them to participate in society again, in a way they choose to. Since then, more than 600 homeless people have been housed through the Discus programme. Early in 2019, HVO-Querido's 1,000th Housing First home was created in Amsterdam.

## Actions and Implementation

Discus starts the process by addressing an individual's basic needs – a home, safety, and basic care – and then supports them to make decisions about how they wish to improve their lives. Clients are in control and have the power to make fundamental decisions, including who they want to work with and the type of support they wish to receive. This includes the location of their housing, activities, volunteering work, and the length, time and frequency of support sessions. With the client's permission, Discus involves neighbours and family members in the process, as they can play a vital role in encouraging the client to rebuild their lives and participate in society as much as possible. Discus believes having a secure home provides the foundation from which clients can work to overcome other challenges in their lives and achieve their goals. Through Discus, Housing First clients rent apartments provided by nine housing associations in Amsterdam. Clients are helped to maintain their home and offered other support, including psychological and social rehabilitation. Clients can decide for themselves how they wish to organise their lives, as long as they pay rent and do not act anti-socially. At the start of the project, Discus housed people directly from the streets. Over the years the target group has expanded and they now house people from night shelters, 24-hour shelters and halfway houses. Clients are referred to Discus by De Veldtafel, a group of professionals from separate care organisations under the supervision of Amsterdam's municipal health service. The Discus approach is different to most Housing First models. Each client is assessed in order to identify the right caseworker to support them. Discus believes the success of the programme depends on this crucial relationship, with the client having a say in the caseworker they are matched with. It currently employs 85 caseworkers and recruitment focuses on finding people with the right personality and behavioural characteristics, rather than technical or academic skillsets. Caseworkers follow a methodology created by Discus Housing First called 'It-can-also-be-different'. This encourages a more creative approach to social work to achieve small successes. For example, when a client was not managing to live in a house, Discus worked with the municipality of Amsterdam to get a permit for him to live on a small boat. With this kind of adaptive support, many clients are able to overcome old negative patterns of behaviour. In addition, if a client feels their support programme is not working effectively, they



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can change it. The annual budget for Discus Housing First is €10 million (\$11.2 million USD). On average, Discus receives €22,000 (\$24,810 USD) per client, per year, from the municipality of Amsterdam to cover support costs. The municipality also provides financial support to each client, who receive around €1,000 (\$1,122 USD) per month, plus extra support for the rent (€300 / \$337 USD). The rental cost of each Housing First unit is €500-700 (\$560-785 USD). A housing allowance subsidy reduces this cost by around €200 (\$224 USD) per month, leaving clients to pay around €300-400 (\$336-449 USD) per month. In contrast, social housing rents are around €700-800 (\$785-897 USD) without extra financial support and private rents in Amsterdam are around €1,000 (\$1,122 USD) per month.

## Outcomes and Impacts

When it first started, the 'staircase approach' was the dominant method for tackling homelessness in Amsterdam. By involving the municipality in the programme's development – including powerful presentations from clients – Discus has been able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Housing First approach. This has led to the continuing expansion of the model across the city and to the adoption of Housing First as official local homelessness policy in 2017. To date, Discus has housed 600 formerly homeless people. Research by Radboud University in 2013 showed an impressive 93% housing retention rate within a group of 100 Discus clients. Clients face complex and multiple issues when they are first housed. However, a 2013 European project to evaluate the effectiveness of Housing First, found almost all Discus clients experience improvements in their living situation (91%), general quality of life (89%), daytime activities (79%), and resilience (79%). A majority also experience an improvement in their physical condition (73%), mental condition (70%), reduction of substance abuse (71%), finances (70%), housekeeping and self-care (68%), and relationship with their children (67%). Discus aims to have a similarly positive impact on the environment. Employees do not have a central office, instead they work around the city and are encouraged to use bikes and public transport as much as possible. Last year they introduced a project called 'Stop wasting, start sharing', which collected and distributed second-hand items among clients. Discus has also introduced energy-saving measures into Housing First homes, such as LED lighting, thermostatic valves, water-saving features and automatic light switches.

## Conclusion

The 2015 Social Support Act ensures the support costs of the Discus Housing First programme are covered by the municipality of Amsterdam, securing the future of the model and its continued growth. Discus is supporting the implementation of the Housing First approach in other parts of the country through its professional training courses. More than 20 cities in the Netherlands have now adopted the Housing First model and Discus has contributed to training workers. This year an expertise centre was opened to offer training to care organisations. Discus is also playing a vital role in the growth of Housing First across Europe, sharing best practice with organisations including in the Czech Republic, Norway, Spain, Macedonia, England, Scotland and Belgium. Through its innovative approach, Discus is transforming the way homelessness is tackled across Europe and helping hundreds of vulnerable people access – and keep – a secure and affordable home.