
Mapping the Implementation of Housing First for Youth in Europe: Practices and Challenges

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➤ **Abstract_** *This article explores the deployment of the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) model across various European countries. HF4Y, an adaptation of the Housing First approach tailored for young people, prioritises immediate access to stable housing without preconditions, alongside personalised support services. The study highlights significant variability in the implementation and fidelity to the HF4Y model across different contexts. Key findings reveal diverse strategies and success levels in addressing youth homelessness, influenced by local policies, financial investment, and the degree of national cohesion. The research underscores the critical role of sustainable housing solutions and collaborative efforts among stakeholders. It identifies challenges such as funding constraints, service coordination, stigma, and housing availability, calling for enhanced policy support, standardised methodologies, and sustained funding mechanisms to improve the HF4Y model's impact. The study concludes with recommendations for future research and policy development to better support youth experiencing homelessness in Europe.*

➤ **Keywords_** *Housing First for Youth (HF4Y); youth homelessness; policy implementation; Europe; Social Support Services; Sustainable Housing Solutions*

Introduction

Homelessness in Europe is complex and multifaceted, impacting diverse populations and presenting unique challenges across the continent. More countries are seeking for effective solutions to address homelessness, especially for individuals facing complex needs and vulnerabilities.

Housing-led approaches focus on prioritising stable, long-term housing as the primary solution for individuals facing homelessness, emphasising immediate access to independent housing in combination with supportive services tailored to individual needs. This model aims to bypass the traditional shelter-based or “staircase” systems that require individuals to meet specific conditions before qualifying for housing (Allen et al., 2020; Busch-Geertsema, 2013; Padgett et al., 2016; Shinn and Khadduri, 2020).

Housing First (HF) as a specific element of housing-led initiatives has been successfully established across Europe. This innovative model, prioritising immediate independent housing without preconditions, has been adopted within six European countries in 2013, reflecting modifications to accommodate local contexts and needs (Greenwood et al., 2013; Pleace, 2016). The HF model has grown significantly, more than doubling to include 19 countries by the end of 2018. This expansion is detailed in the report “Housing First in Europe: An Overview of Implementation, Strategy, and Fidelity, commissioned by the Housing First Europe Hub and authored by Pleace et al. (2019). Notably, the fidelity to the original Pathways model varies, highlighting the dynamic nature of implementing HF across different social and policy contexts.

After the positive results of HF in North America (Gaetz, 2017; 2019), a new HF model emerged in Canada that specifically aimed to target youngsters, Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). Gaetz (2017) explains:

The adaptation of HF4Y is based on the understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adults, and therefore the solutions must be youth-focused. HF4Y is grounded in the belief that all young people have a right to housing and that those who have experienced homelessness will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing. (p.1)

Targeted intervention measures for youth experiencing homelessness are essential, as this group faces challenges such as disrupted education, increased mental health risks, and instability that can impair healthy development (Morton et al., 2018). Providing specific support is crucial to breaking the cycle of homelessness and facilitating the transition to independent adulthood, thus helping to reduce long-term homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2013; 2021).

Review of the literature

Although the knowledge base regarding HF4Y is still in its early stages compared to HF for adults, there is a growing body of evidence indicating that HF is effective for young people (Blood et al., 2020; Lawlor and Bowen, 2017). Most research primarily originates from North America, particularly Canada. Within Europe, Ireland stands out as the only country with academic literature explicitly referencing HF4Y, as demonstrated by the work of Mayock and Parker (2023).

The lack of uniformity among European countries in both legislation and practice regarding the definition of “youth” and “homelessness” complicates cross-country comparisons (FEANTSA, 2020). The lack of a uniform range of age defined as “youth homeless” affects youth access to services and the specific policies and interventions they need (FEANTSA, 2020).

HF4Y, though still in its early stage in several countries, aligns with programmes that advocate a transformative paradigm, highlighting a comprehensive and integrated approach prioritising prevention and early intervention to effectively end youth homelessness (Mayock and Parker, 2023). In their study, Mayock and Parker (2023) demonstrate that research on youth homelessness is increasing, particularly regarding their experiences and the factors influencing youth transition out of homelessness. The importance of early supportive interventions emerges as critical, enabling young individuals to exit the assistance system, with secure and sustainable housing playing a crucial role.

In contrast, non-academic resources on HF4Y are notably well-established. This is particularly evident for HF4Y in Ireland and Scotland, as well as the efforts of the Housing First Europe Hub. Established in 2016 by the Y-Foundation (Finland) and FEANTSA (the European Federation of National Organisations Working with Homeless People), alongside over 15 partners, the Hub aims to end and prevent homelessness across Europe. Their mission is driven by promoting a shift in mindset and fostering systemic change through the HF approach. This includes advocacy, training, practical support, research, communication activities, and capacity-building efforts.

As Mayock and Parker (2023) note, HF services for youth were introduced in Europe in 2013, with implementations in the Irish cities of Limerick, Cork, and Waterford. In Scotland, the first HF4Y project was initiated by Rock Trust in 2017. Additionally, in France, the project “Logis Jeunes”, which began in 2010, offers housing and personalised support plans for individuals aged 18 to 25 (FEANTSA, 2020).

In 2020, the first independent evaluation of the Rock Trust’s HF4Y pilot project in West Lothian (Scotland) revealed that engaging with the programme directly led to positive changes in the lives of youth utilising the service during the two-year pilot

period. This project, the UK's first HF4Y service exclusively for care leavers, demonstrated high fidelity and has been followed by implementations in other cities. Further evaluations in Ireland (Focus Ireland's projects; Focus Ireland, 2024) and the Netherlands (Housing First Netherlands) indicate positive outcomes across key domains, specifically in housing stability, educational re-engagement, and employment reintegration. The final outcomes of the HF4Y project in Spain, presented by Fresno Consulting during the event "Llaves para el cambio: Transformando el sistema de atención al sinhogarismo" [Keys to change: transforming the homelessness care system] on the 3rd and the 4th December 2024 in Madrid, substantiated the efficacy of the model, including its economic advantages compared to the traditional framework (Soluciones al Sinhogarismo, 2024). Gaetz (2014; 2014b; 2017) showed how this fidelity to the original model is linked to the collaboration among different partners. Understanding the social context and of young people is also crucial. Furthermore, both the project and the model have shown cost-effectiveness and benefits in both the short and long term compared to other similar projects (Gaetz et al., 2023).

Emerging evidence suggests a growing effort to engage in strategic initiatives aimed at challenging mental health and other statutory service providers, as well as system-led processes that tend to stigmatise and marginalise care leavers and youngsters with complex needs (Blood et al., 2020).

Currently, a comprehensive overview of HF4Y in Europe is lacking. This research addresses the pressing need to understand the diverse implementations of the HF4Y-models across Europe. This study aims to develop a comprehensive mapping of active projects, analyse their operational structures, and promote widespread knowledge sharing. The initiative seeks not only to catalogue the various applications of the HF4Y model, but also to identify best practices, encountered challenges, and adopted solutions across different contexts. Through a literature review, interviews with key professionals, and case analyses, this research intends to construct a comprehensive database that can serve as a reference for future interventions, research, and policies related to youth housing.

Methodology

Due to the limited amount of research conducted in this field, explorative research with a qualitative and inductive approach was considered essential and advantageous. The primary research questions of this empirical study were:

1. How broad is the HF4Y model diffuse in Europe?
2. How faithful are the projects to the original HF4Y model?

3. What challenges are faced by HF4Y service providers?

Based on the existing literature and insights from the Housing First Europe Hub, we used the following categories for our study: housing, cooperation, target population, support, and evaluation. These elements were examined to compare different implementations of the HF4Y model and national policies across European countries. The categories selected appeared in need of deeper investigation with the goal to inspire further research on this topic.

We opted for semi-structured interviews with professionals, and included questions related to the five core principles (Gaetz, 2017) of the HF4Y model. This approach aimed to address the second research question, which focuses on understanding professionals' understanding of these principles. The research employed a 'green' methodology—used here as synonymous with sustainable research—using online interviews (Howlett, 2021). This type of research is environmentally friendly since it minimises the cost of long-distance travel and because it allows research fields to be explored beyond local and national borders. The questions covered a range of relevant topics, including the implementation of the HF4Y model and the application of its fundamental principles; familiarity with evaluative tools and the methodologies employed for outcome analysis; the method of quantifying the impact generated by the project; the needs articulated by the organisation to enhance the effectiveness of the service provided; and the primary challenges faced. Further questions were formulated to more precisely explore the adaptation of the model's core principles to the local context, specifically focusing on the target population in terms of age, distinctive characteristics, and selection criteria.

The study sample comprised professionals ($n = 16$) in Spain, The Netherlands, France, Ireland, Denmark, and Wales, with different educational qualifications and roles. Participants were recruited by email through organisations through a range of sources, including training programmes, the Housing First Europe Hub network, FEANTSA's network, and the researchers' networks. The sample includes frontline social workers (case workers), programme coordinators, social services coordinators, and city council members, all of whom were involved in HF4Y projects at the time of the interview. Their involvement in HF4Y projects was confirmed by both an admission by the project coordinator and further verification during interviews focused on HF4Y core principles, which also included questions to explicitly identify the relevant projects.

A total of 20 professionals ($n = 20$) were excluded from the study. These individuals were based in Belgium, Norway, Iceland, Italy, Germany, and Finland. Although they responded to email correspondence and/or participated in online meetings to contribute local and national knowledge, they reported no direct or indirect involvement in HF4Y initiatives, such as through projects within their respective organisa-

tions. Furthermore, it should be noted that not all potential participants responded to the initial email invitations. In some instances, multiple follow-up emails were required to secure their participation. However, certain representatives from organisations recognised in Europe -in the grey literature- for their significant contributions to HF4Y implementation within the sector did not respond to the invitations. The HF4Y programmes included in this evaluation are spread across urban and suburban areas in six different countries, obtained after a preliminary phase of explorative interviews.

The HF4Y programmes included in this evaluation were distributed across urban and suburban areas and/or interviews, which reported the implementation of HF4Y initiatives without differentiation between well-established programmes and pilot or more recent initiatives. Although HF4Y implementations existed in other countries at the time of publication, beyond the six included in this study, these were excluded either due to non-participation or because they were still in an embryonic or developmental phase at the time the interviews were conducted. In addition, the analysed projects were at various stages of implementation, mostly in the 'pilot' phase with possible variation in the number of youngsters enrolled in the project and social worker involvement during the period of interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The language used in all interviews was English and some of the participants made use of emails to add pieces of information in a written way after the interview was conducted.

The sessions were not recorded to avoid creating additional barriers between the participant and the researcher since the interviews were already online and the non-verbal communication was reduced. In the last three decades, the generation of transcripts for in-depth interviews and group discussions has become an established practice that is often unquestioned (Lee, 2004). In certain situations, opting not to record can be considered the optimal approach, rather than being seen as a secondary or inferior choice (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Data were collected through detailed notes taken during the interviews, which had a final sum-up section shared with the participants and interview scripts written directly after the interview. These data were systematically recorded in a unified paper log to ensure consistency and integrity in the information gathering process. Subsequently, to facilitate a rigorous and structured qualitative analysis, the recorded data were transcribed and imported into the NVivo software. This tool was utilised to encode the data, thus allowing for a systematic processing of the collected information. This methodological approach provided a robust foundation for thematic categorisation of the interviewees' responses and provided a solid foundation for qualitative analysis, in accordance with the prevailing academic standards for qualitative research.

Policy Context of the Implementation of HF4Y Model

This section examines the adoption of the HF4Y model across different countries and its implications for national policies. The focus is placed primarily on the countries where interviews were conducted. By exploring Ireland, Spain, France, Wales, the Netherlands, and Denmark, this study highlights how national policies, and local efforts work together to address youth homelessness. It reveals a range of strategies and varying degrees of success in tackling youth homelessness.

The adoption of the HF4Y model by most of the organisations reflects a proactive approach to combat youth homelessness must be contextualised within the broader policy frameworks in which these organisations operate. An examination of the role of these policies across different countries reveals the complex interplay between systemic approaches and grassroots interventions in the pursuit of alleviating youth homelessness.

The analysis of how different countries tackle youth homelessness demonstrates a variety of strategies and levels of success. France (Ministère de la Cohésion des Territoires et des Relations avec les Collectivités Territoriales, 2017; 2024), Denmark, Ireland, Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2022), and the Netherlands have embraced the HF model in their national plans, while Spain (General Directorate for Family Diversity and Social Services, 2023) has yet to fully adopt. Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2021), England (Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022), Wales (Welsh Government, 2021), and Scotland (Scottish Government, 2018) place significant emphasis on youth homelessness. Other countries, however, include youth within general homelessness strategies without addressing their specific needs.

Local autonomy plays a significant role in the effectiveness of these strategies. In the Netherlands, decentralised implementation of HF4Y projects results in considerable variations across municipalities, whereas Denmark and France have more unified national plans aiming for consistency. There is a noticeable shift from emergency-based solutions to long-term, housing-oriented models; however, progress remains uneven. For example, Spain still relies heavily on emergency shelters, despite adopting some HF principles.

Financial investment is key to the success of these initiatives. Ireland and Denmark have made significant investments, while Spain's level of support remains less defined. Pilot initiatives, like Ireland's Supported Housing for Youth (SHY) programme, highlight the importance of innovative approaches to developing tailored housing solutions. Effective strategies often integrate housing and social policies to address underlying issues, as seen in Denmark's comprehensive approach.

From this analysis emerges the need for youth-focused policies, the importance of national cohesion, the shift toward HF models, the critical role of financial investment, and the value of pilot projects in refining strategies. Some progress is being made, but challenges persist in achieving consistent nationwide implementation and securing adequate financial support. It is evident that well-resourced, integrated policies are essential to effectively combat youth homelessness.

Table 1. Overview of Homelessness strategies in the 6 countries interviewed with HF4Y projects.

Country	Overview
Ireland	The Irish government's housing strategy for 2030, "Housing for All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland" (published in September 2021), outlines a nationwide approach to improving housing infrastructure, supported by substantial financial investment. The plan focuses on four key areas: Supporting Homeownership and Increasing Affordability, eliminating homelessness, increasing the delivery of social housing, and promoting social inclusion. As part of this strategy, a specific youth homelessness initiative has been introduced to address the needs of people aged 18-24, demonstrating a clear focus on young individuals. Central to this is the HF4Y model, which prioritises providing secure housing as a first step for young people facing complex challenges, including homelessness. However, the implementation of HF4Y is currently limited to localised contexts and has not yet been adopted as a fully national programme.
Spain	The "National Strategy for Combating Homelessness in Spain 2023-2030," published in June 2023, aims to address the shortcomings of previous plans, but does not explicitly prioritise youth homelessness or mention the HF4Y model – which is still implemented as pilot project. While the strategy includes young people experiencing homelessness within its general scope, it lacks a dedicated focus on their specific needs. The HF approach has made progress, reflected in efforts to shift toward a housing-oriented model, but this progress is not explicitly tied to youth. Additionally, the homelessness assistance system continues to rely heavily on emergency solutions. Local governments have implemented their own initiatives. Spain does not currently have a national youth homelessness strategy, and HF4Y is not embedded within the existing framework.
France	France's "Plan quinquennal pour le Logement d'Abord et la lutte contre le sans-abrisme" represents a national strategy aimed at tackling homelessness. It incorporates HF principles, focusing on immediate housing solutions alongside tailored support for specific subpopulations, including young people. While the plan addresses youth homelessness as part of its broader objectives, it does not constitute a distinct national youth homelessness strategy, nor does it explicitly embed HF4Y within its framework. This approach acknowledges the multifaceted nature of youth homelessness, linking it to broader housing and social policies.
Wales	In Wales, a national strategy addressing homelessness is in place, spearheaded by the Ministry for Housing and Local Government. This strategy includes significant financial investments aimed at improving temporary housing facilities and expediting transitions to stable accommodations. It explicitly addresses youth homelessness through initiatives such as the "rapid rehousing" approach, designed to minimise the time young people spend in temporary housing. Furthermore, the Welsh action plan incorporates input from individuals with lived experience of homelessness to inform and shape policymaking. While the strategy reflects broader HF principles, it does not explicitly reference a dedicated national youth homelessness strategy or confirm that HF4Y is formally embedded within it.

Country	Overview
Denmark	Introduced in 2009, Denmark's homelessness strategy centres on the HF approach, with key elements embedded into national legislation since October 2023. The 2021 political agreement aims to reduce homelessness and eradicate long-term homelessness by aligning housing and social policies. While the strategy acknowledges youth homelessness, emphasising alternatives to hostels for young people, it lacks a dedicated youth homelessness strategy or integration of HF4Y. Despite these gaps, the approach represents significant progress, offering hope for more sustainable solutions to homelessness.
The Netherlands	The Netherlands' National Action Plan on Homelessness incorporates the HF approach and acknowledges the importance of addressing youth homelessness. Although it does not explicitly reference a dedicated HF4Y model, the plan's focus on young people indicates a commitment to supporting this vulnerable group within the broader HF framework. The HF4Y model operates within local municipalities' autonomy, leading to significant variations in decision-making and implementation. The absence of a standardised national framework results in differing levels of commitment and resources allocated to youth homelessness. Local autonomy allows for tailored responses but introduces complexities in achieving a coordinated approach. This decentralised context can hinder the cohesive and widespread adoption of the HF4Y approach.

Results

The results obtained during the interview phase, as previously discussed in this article, are presented here according to the key categories outlined in the methodological section.

Table 2. HF4Y programmes and number of cities involved.

Country	Number of Unique HF4Y Programmes	Number of Cities Operating HF4Y Programmes	Age for HF4Y projects
Ireland	2	1	18*-26*
Netherlands	5	8 cities	16-27**
Denmark	4	4 municipalities in multiple regions	14*-25
Wales	9	6 Cities	18-24*
France	3	3 Cities (experimental projects)	18-25
Spain	2	2 Cities (experimental projects)	18-25

*With some exceptions

** It can vary depending on the single municipality

Note: It is important to acknowledge that certain countries, such as England, also implement HF initiatives aimed at addressing youth homelessness. However, these initiatives are excluded as they diverge from the HF4Y model examined in this study.

Target population

In analysing the characteristics of the so-called 'target population' a first important variable has been identified: age of individuals primarily defined as 'young adults' or included within the HF4Y projects. In our interviews, we observed heterogeneity in defining the age range, which, in some cases, encompasses minors and indi-

viduals over the age of 26. While there is a commonly recognised age range of 18 to 26, in one interview it was noted that “in our context, at a local context, our project says 18 to 26, but in other areas there’s different dictations around what age group it is” it is also true that this this variability reflects the flexible nature of this ‘variable’, with exceptions observed. As emerged in some interviews: “If you’re under 18, um, you are considered to be the responsibility of the two said child and family agency and have protection of the state. So, in theory, no young person under 18 should ever be homeless in Ireland.”

This observation underscores how legislative frameworks influence the target population of HF4Y projects (national/local). It is worth noting that legislation on this matter varies from state to state, as highlighted in our interviews, and exceptions may arise in certain cases. It is crucial to acknowledge that both the legislative system and the social services and welfare policy frameworks play a significant role in determining the age at which young people can access HF4Y projects. Typically, this age aligns with the age of majority, as organisations face fewer challenges when the minimum age is set at 18, in line with existing legal and administrative structures. In many contexts, this approach facilitates the implementation of such initiatives, ensuring consistency with the regulatory frameworks and the broader social protection system. As highlighted in our interviews, exceptions are possible in some cases: “we’ve got young people who, by the very nature of the fact that they’ve been referred to the service means that they don’t have very much social support or family support.”

However, it is essential to recognise that legislation constitutes only one mechanism through which policy can be formulated and enacted. While some countries rely on legislative approaches, in other contexts, policy is articulated through comprehensive strategic frameworks. Furthermore, budget allocations and public expenditures not only serve as reflections of existing policy priorities but also function as pivotal instruments in shaping and defining policy directions.

Generally, young people who become part of HF4Y projects in Europe are those who, for various reasons, have already gone through traditional support channels and local social services without achieving positive results for various reasons. They also do not meet the access prerequisites for other services within the traditional scaled system. Others include young people who come out of the criminal justice system, have mental health disorders and are often already known to the reference services.

Finally, several organisations and projects have targeted individuals with mental health disorders who are often already known to healthcare services. They also focus on young people identified on the streets by healthcare professionals and social workers operating collaboratively. Overall, the criteria used to define the target population include the characteristics mentioned earlier.

Selection

The selection of young people, specifically those aged between 18 and 24 who are experiencing homelessness or are at high risk of homelessness, varies significantly in terms of the tools and methods employed. Vulnerability indices, like those utilised for adult HF services, are often employed. These indices typically consider factors such as mental health status, substance use, history of homelessness, and exposure to violence or abuse. Alternatively, the person's history and vulnerability are assessed during a series of informative interviews, which aim to gather comprehensive information about their background, current situation, and specific needs.

Depending on the geographical context, we identified different organisational structures and the participation of various professions and representatives of different public institutions. This involves collaboration among social workers, healthcare professionals, educational staff, and representatives from NGOs. This diversity is partly linked to the pilot project status of many HF4Y initiatives, which represents the majority at the time of interviews and this analysis.

In some cases, the initial screening is conducted by personnel from the national health service of the municipality. In two interviewed contexts, the initial selection process was conducted collaboratively between health personnel and social workers directly on the street. This street outreach approach allows for the identification and engagement of young people who might not access traditional services due to various barriers, ensuring that those most in need are included in the programme. The young people targeted by these projects often face multiple challenges, including, but not limited to, unstable housing, unemployment, mental health issues, problematic substance use, and limited access to education and healthcare. Many have experienced significant trauma and require comprehensive support to successfully transition to independent living. A significant proportion of the homeless youth population comprises migrants and LGBTQ+ individuals who face additional barriers such as discrimination and difficulties accessing social rights and services (McCann and Brown, 2021). However, our interviews did not reveal accurate data on LGBTQ+ individuals.

How is the support delivered?

In the domain of HF4Y projects, the primary objective is collaborative and sensitive engagement with individuals who have experienced significant trauma, requiring an approach rooted in trauma-informed care. The team works with young people from a trauma-informed perspective, recognising that they have experienced many negative events and need time to build trust. These young people, often referred to the service due to a lack of social or family support, require significant and ongoing assistance. The approach cannot be encapsulated in a rigid policy because each

individual is unique. Operating under a care and case management model, the HF4Y initiative adheres to established protocols within the broader framework of homeless services.

The frontline project workers, specialised in youth and housing, act as case managers. The primary case managers collaborate with specialists to ensure tailored support services for each young person. When a young person faces issues such as problematic substance use, specialists are involved to provide the necessary support and help the individual access community services. This collaborative approach extends to other areas such as mental health, probation, and specialist educational services. The team encourages, but does not insist, that young people accept these supports, emphasising engagement through various methods such as in-person meetings, phone calls, and messaging apps. They also respect their need for space, allowing them to seek help during crises while striving to work proactively to prevent them.

Understanding that experiential learning is crucial for these young people, they support them as they navigate and learn from their experiences. The initiative aims to establish a coordinated and individualised approach, granting autonomy to young people by avoiding mandatory conditions. Caseload management maintains the recommended ratio of one worker to six youngsters, although variations may occur due to participant fluctuations and diverse needs. The overarching goal is to empower these young individuals by providing not only housing but also a sense of control over their lives, employing imaginative and flexible engagement strategies aligned with the principles of HF4Y.

The support delivered by HF4Y social workers is comprehensive and multifaceted, addressing the diverse needs of each young person. Social workers provide practical assistance, such as helping young people secure identification documents, access benefits, and navigate bureaucratic processes. They offer emotional support, creating a safe and trusting environment where young people can express their feelings and experiences. Social workers also facilitate access to healthcare services, including arranging medical appointments and ensuring continuity of care. They play a crucial role in helping young people develop life skills, such as budgeting, cooking, and maintaining a household. Additionally, social workers advocate on behalf of young people, ensuring their voices are heard in various systems, including legal and educational institutions. By offering consistent and reliable support, HF4Y social workers help young people build resilience, self-esteem, and the skills necessary for independent living. In summary, the core principles of HF4Y appear to exert a strong and consistent influence on the daily work of professionals. The youth-centred and unconditional approach is effectively implemented in practice, although there remains scope for further enhancement of the active social integration component.

Critical element of “housing” in HF4Y

“Housing is a challenge” was mentioned as most common first challenge during the interviews.

In the context of implementing HF4Y projects in several European countries, the provision of suitable housing emerges as a predominant challenge.

The HF4Y model is fundamentally centred on offering housing without imposing prerequisites and a broader range of support. Nonetheless, the scarcity of affordable and accessible housing poses a significant obstacle, which is exacerbated for vulnerable young individuals grappling with mental and social distress and experiencing homelessness. The existing inventory of social housing falls short of meeting the demand, often relegating young people to the bottom of waiting lists within conventional systems.

Moreover, effective collaboration between social services, local authorities, and other organisations operating in this sphere is notably lacking.

Consequently, organisations are frequently compelled to explore solutions in the private sector, which predominantly caters to a capitalist market and is often marked by inherent biases against the target demographic. Some organisations provide housing of their own, while others concentrate on innovating within the social housing sector and the private sector alike.

In other cases, social housing emerged as a key component in providing housing solutions, with significant uptake. Supported accommodation, including transitional housing, serves as the starting point for individuals embarking on their HF journey in some contexts, but isn’t a common path. “We had the transitional, and what happened was it wasn’t transitional because there was nowhere else for people to move to. Yeah. So, they couldn’t move out, so it was holding up the transitional.”

Interviews further underscore the intricate need for organisations and young individuals to access stable yet flexible housing options, thereby steering clear of the pitfalls of ‘transitional housing’ without renouncing the right to housing during temporary detention, “if the youngster could have, um, access to more benefits would be way easier to even find private accommodation instead of, uh, transition and reduce transitional accommodation.”

Only part of the participants in the interviews noted the diversity of accommodations offered, including one-bedroom apartments, two-bedroom townhouses, and three-bedroom houses in suburban areas. They also acknowledged the challenges associated with transitional housing, which, rather than serving as a stepping stone, can leave young individuals in a state of insecurity, contributing to their ongoing trauma.

Social housing emerged as a key component in providing housing solutions, with significant uptake. Supported accommodation, including transitional housing, serves as the starting point for individuals embarking on their HF journey in some contexts, but isn't a common path. A notable challenge is that, since long-term tenancies are granted, the houses no longer remain with the project once the young person's tenure ends. "The idea is to acquire more properties each year, but the housing crisis has posed a considerable obstacle to this effort," said some interviewees.

As interviewees noted, the demand for housing often outstrips the available space, emphasising the pressing need for more accessible benefits to facilitate the acquisition of private accommodation as an alternative to transitional housing. The availability of such benefits is closely linked to government policies and funding, which vary by country.

Cooperation with housing associations

The collaboration among various service providers, both public and private, as revealed through interviews, displays a high degree of heterogeneity. The data shows how organisations implementing the HF4Y model have established diverse types of relationships and partnerships with local authorities, social services, organisations offering youth-specific services, and providers of housing, whether social or private. A positive local relationship, however, does not necessarily guarantee similar outcomes at the national level. Local agreements have facilitated better approaches to housing challenges and the creation of a more cohesive or cooperative service network, operating with greater systematicity. This is an example that emerged during the interviews associated to an umbrella organisation that facilitates relations among various involved partners, both private and public.

In connection with the concept of coalition, the notion of community has also emerged as playing a significant role in the reintegration of youngsters, such as those engaged in HF4Y projects, as highlighted in this interview:

Whether they are coming from homelessness or not, they are actually contributing to creating and building the community and being a part of it. And also, they're very supported in actually what do you want to get out of the community and what do you need to be able to take part in the community activities.

Regular meetings with the municipality and other partners within the healthcare system "help us with that so that we're not the only ones making that decision. So that we're all involved, the funders are involved, and the key stakeholders, not just from a funding perspective but in terms of the roles they play in housing and health."

As mentioned earlier, in some contexts, collaboration is less effective, and the primary challenge is related to the fidelity to the HF philosophy and its approach in the practice of social work. Furthermore, the lack of systematic collaboration, i.e., with uniform structure and levels of cooperation, results in varying levels of institutional support, which, in turn, impacts relationships and operations among service providers.

Strong relationships within the coalition allow the programme to gain visibility more easily, facilitating collaboration with services operating within the traditional system, such as shelters, and establishing connections between HF organisations, young individuals, and private landlords, thereby providing them with greater assurances.

Some coalitions involve private organisations operating nationwide, offering a wide range of services accessible to youth involved in the projects. However, their connection with local public authorities varies based on the specific context, active policies, and established relationships.

It is important to underscore that the analysed contexts differ in terms of culture, politics, urban density, and geographic characteristics, which is also reflected in the various interviews conducted.

In conclusion, the challenge of housing accessibility, encompassing affordability and cooperation with housing associations, remains a crucial issue in the successful implementation of HF4Y projects. Addressing these challenges is essential to fully realise the potential of the HF4Y model in providing appropriate housing options for vulnerable young individuals.

Project's evaluation

At the European level, a comprehensive intervention assessment tool has been developed for the HF4Y programmes, widely acknowledged by all respondents. Nevertheless, its consistent and faithful application across all examined contexts remains a challenge. This study observes a prevailing practice among organisations wherein a prevailing practice among organisations of adhering to an annual evaluation process, encompassing both internal assessments and evaluations directed towards public entities—whether local or at higher levels— which serve as the primary financiers of the projects.

The methodology employed for project evaluation is closely linked to the contextual nuances, the key project stakeholders, and the political dynamics interwoven among them. Emphasis is placed on the capacity for housing sustainability and ongoing requirements, thereby determining the extent to which team support should be provided.

Noteworthy is the pivotal role played by participant-involved evaluations in shaping the narrative of their trajectory within the HF4Y programme. This process holds significance in identifying positive and/or negative shifts in needs after programme enrolment. The collaborative evaluation with participants contributes substantively to the nuanced understanding of the programme's impact, fostering a deeper comprehension of the evolving dynamics within the HF4Y framework.

Discussion

Building on the themes presented in the introduction and literature review, this discussion aims to synthesise the findings within the broader context of youth homelessness in Europe. The introduction outlined the pressing need for an immediate and stable housing approach tailored for young people, while the literature review highlighted the variability and challenges of implementing HF4Y across different national contexts. This discussion demonstrates how these initial insights align with the empirical findings of this study, underscoring both the successes and obstacles faced in implementing HF4Y in various European settings.

The analysis from the semi-structured interviews has illuminated the successful implementation of the HF4Y model in various European settings, illustrating its potential as an effective approach to combating youth homelessness. Nonetheless, the challenges such as funding constraints, coordination of services, stigma, the availability of housing, and evaluation practices call for sustained efforts and collective engagement to further strengthen the HF4Y initiatives. By fostering collaboration and providing targeted support, organisations like the Housing First Europe hub can play a crucial role in bolstering these initiatives and propelling Europe towards a more inclusive and compassionate response to youth homelessness. The findings underscore the importance of continual evaluation and knowledge exchange to enhance the impact and sustainability of HF4Y implementations across the continent.

The variation in housing policies and cultural contexts across European countries further complicates access to housing for youth experiencing homelessness. While some nations may have more robust social housing programmes, others may lack sufficient resources and support systems to accommodate the needs of young individuals experiencing homelessness. This complexity highlights the necessity for tailored and adaptable approaches in the implementation of the HF4Y model to address the diverse housing challenges faced by youth across different European regions.

Considering these challenges, the HF4Y model's focus on providing immediate access to stable housing becomes even more critical. By prioritising housing stability and offering support services tailored to the individual needs of homeless youth, the model can act as a potent intervention to break the cycle of homelessness and foster positive long-term outcomes.

Addressing the multifaceted issue of affordable housing requires collaboration among stakeholders, policymakers, and social organisations. Sustainable solutions may involve increasing investments in social housing construction, developing supportive policies for affordable housing, and advocating for the rights of vulnerable populations, including young individuals experiencing homelessness. By recognising and addressing the various housing challenges faced by homeless youth, societies across Europe can work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable housing landscape, promoting social well-being and stability for the younger generation.

The wide use of the HF4Y model by many participating organisations shows a proactive and forward-thinking approach to addressing the urgent issue of youth homelessness. However, a closer look reveals that the success of these initiatives is closely connected to the housing and social policies of each country. This underscores the important link between policy frameworks and programme results. This phenomenon is particularly evident in countries such as Ireland, Spain, France, England, Denmark, and the Netherlands, wherein the integration of HF or HF4Y policies has not only guided the strategic approach to addressing youth homelessness but has also profoundly moulded the contours and dimensions of the interventions themselves.

Table 3. Implementation of HF and HF4Y on local and/or national level.

Country	HF Implementation (National or Local)	HF4Y Implementation (National or Local)	Notes
Ireland	National	Local	HF policy emphasises immediate housing access.
The Netherlands	National	Local	HF4Y model operates at municipal level.
Denmark	National	local	HF policy emphasises the rights of homeless individuals.
Wales	National	Local	In Wales autonomy allows for different policies and HF4Y implementation.
France	National	Local	In France, HF4Y is experimental in three cities. HF4Y policy emphasises tailored responses.
Spain	National	Local	In Spain, HF4Y is experimental in two cities. HF4Y policy aligns with a push toward HF.

Conclusions

Our study clearly indicates that the deployment of HF4Y across Europe is characterised by significant diversity. This variance in implementation underscores the intricate web of challenges encountered by organisations and local bodies spearheading these initiatives. One of the main challenges is the pressing need for a paradigm shift in social and housing policies at the political level, a shift that is crucial for the facilitation of such programmes and for instigating a substantive transformation within the system.

The efficacy of the HF4Y model is supported by a body of scientific evidence, with its effectiveness predominantly documented within North American and Anglo-Saxon contexts. Despite this, the research highlights a notable absence of a cohesive and standardised methodology in the model's application, which is critical for its broader adoption and success. Presently, a significant proportion of the HF4Y initiatives are either in their pilot phase or reliant on finite funding arrangements. This situation presents considerable risks to the sustainability of these interventions over the long term and their consistent alignment with the foundational principles of HF4Y.

Moreover, this study has identified that the target demographic for these projects can vary significantly, influenced by local conditions or the specific aims of a project. The absence of uniform evaluation metrics across different European settings exacerbates the difficulty of conducting a comparative analysis of the HF4Y model's implementation and outcomes. Consequently, while the HF4Y model is recognised for its innovative approach to providing "social support" to youngsters, its application tends to be localised or regional, rather than uniformly national or European.

The challenges of ensuring housing and economic sustainability are evident and widespread, indicating a pivotal area for future policy development and research. Therefore, this research not only contributes to the academic understanding of the HF4Y model's application across Europe but also underscores the imperative for enhanced policy support, standardised methodologies, and sustained funding mechanisms. Addressing these needs is essential for leveraging the full potential of the HF4Y model in transforming the lives of young people facing homelessness, ensuring that the principles of HF can be a reality for all who require them.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

In the context of this study, various challenges were encountered during the data collection phase through interviews, which inevitably affected the breadth and depth of the results obtained. These difficulties deserve to be disclosed to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the intrinsic limitations of the research.

Firstly, the participant selection process presented challenges, primarily related to finding a sample that accurately reflected the populations under study. This dynamic was influenced by the limited availability of some organisations to participate in the research project, which slightly reduced the variety of perspectives and experiences gathered.

Moreover, the linguistic and cultural diversity among the countries involved presented a significant challenge. Despite efforts to mitigate these barriers and defining key linguistic terms related to the national (or state) context, it is possible that some important nuances were lost, potentially affecting the fidelity with which the testimonies were reported and interpreted.

Finally, the temporal constraints imposed by the research project's schedule, along with the early stage of some of the projects examined, limited the depth and range of the analysis.

At the conclusion of the data analysis session, several recommendations for future research were put forward. These recommendations include expanding the research to involve a greater number of European cities, involving other professionals and services, and conducting long-term monitoring of the participants to assess the long-term effectiveness of the HF4Y Model.

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