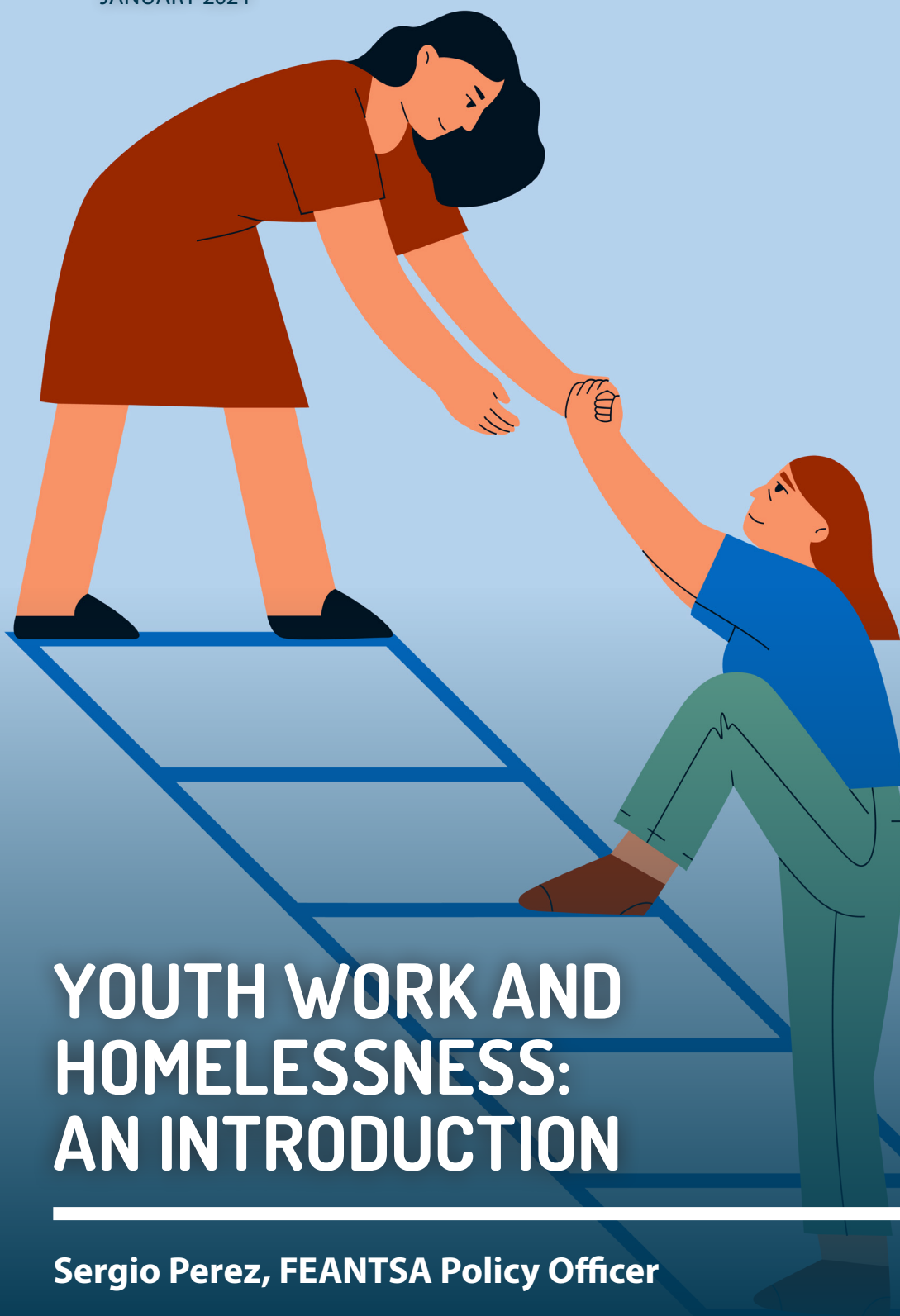


JANUARY 2024

REPORT



YOUTH WORK AND HOMELESSNESS: AN INTRODUCTION

Sergio Perez, FEANTSA Policy Officer



FEANTSA

European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless

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BACKGROUND

Young people experience homelessness differently from adults. Both the causes of and solutions to youth homelessness are different. Therefore, homeless services working with young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness should deliver youth-oriented solutions - designing services to meet the specific needs of young people.

While it is difficult to compare data across Europe, due to the lack of a clear definition for both youth and homelessness, there is evidence that homelessness among young people is increasing. For many young people experiencing homelessness, exclusion from the housing market is associated with histories of state care, LGBTIQ+ identification, racial discrimination, or abusive family situations. The experiences of homelessness also differ from those of adults, given that trajectories often involve moving back and forth from home, temporary accommodation, staying with relatives or friends, sofa-surfing, etc.¹

In addition, young people have distinctive characteristics that should be acknowledged in the homelessness sector. For example, many have left homes and relationships on which they were dependent both economically and for their well-being; as young people, they continue to undergo social, cognitive, and physical development until at least the age of 23; and the transition into adulthood is equally important as that into independent housing.²

As paths into, trajectories, and solutions out of homelessness for young people often differ from those of adults, it is necessary to integrate the foundations of youth work into homeless services.

1 O'Sullivan et al. (2023), *Homelessness in the European Union*, p. 17

2 FEANTSA (2020), *European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness*

WHY YOUTH WORK?

Youth work provides a framework to assist homeless services by ensuring that the support offered, and their means of working are adapted to the needs of young people. Adapting the principles of youth work into social services requires a mindset shift. Rather than being a homeless service working with young people, the starting point is being a youth service whose clients happen to be experiencing homelessness.

This approach enables support services to start by recognising the needs of the young person in a way that empowers their voice. Doing so not only helps them to exit homelessness but supports their transition into adulthood.

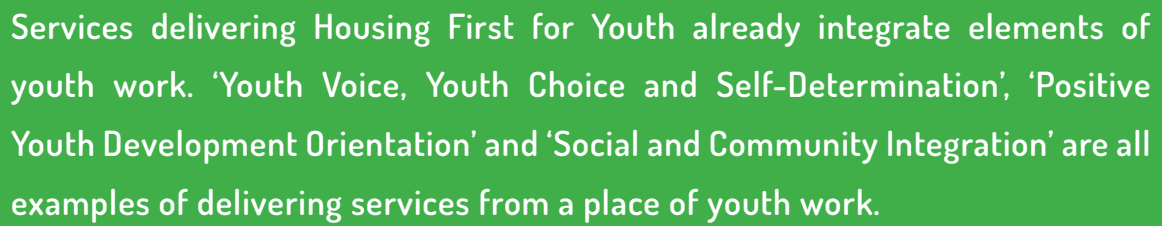
Services following the principles of Housing First for Youth, Harm Reduction models or trauma informed care may find elements of this toolkit familiar. Each of these models take a client-centred and non-judgemental approach. However, adapting a youth work approach for use in homeless services can specifically empower young people, build trust, and support

their long-term and sustainable exit from homelessness.

Many young people have negative experiences of social or homeless services and subsequently present with low levels of trust for such institutions. This can be contrasted with youth services, tailored to young people and their needs, where youth feel empowered and equal. While data is limited, one Australian study demonstrates that young people experiencing homelessness avoid social services in favour of youth services.³ Among the findings of the report was that homeless services that aim to support youth should be re-designed around the needs of youth.

Young people experience shame and stigma with their experience of homelessness. Hence, adapting a youth work approach in how services support youth can empower them to not feel alone, enhance their resilience and self-esteem, and validate their need for support while decreasing stigma linked to their experience.

3 Youth Coalition of the Australian Capital Territory (2018), *Youth Workers' Perspectives on Youth Homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*



Services delivering Housing First for Youth already integrate elements of youth work. 'Youth Voice, Youth Choice and Self-Determination', 'Positive Youth Development Orientation' and 'Social and Community Integration' are all examples of delivering services from a place of youth work.

WHAT IS YOUTH WORK?

Across Europe, youth work has different meanings - in some countries, it is regulated and well-defined with training programmes to become a qualified youth worker, while in others it remains a more informal sector. Therefore, youth work can take many forms.⁴ In general, youth work concerns the personal development, social integration, and active citizenship of young people, and has been used within youth services for many decades. It comprises many activities around political, social, educational, and cultural engagement. At its core youth work seeks to create opportunities for young people to shape their own futures and fulfil their social, economic, and cultural rights.

The multi-faceted and polyvalent characteristic of youth work is one of its strengths. The ability to practice in different settings, the range of structure in its activities, the large diversity of targeted young people, the various degrees of professionalisation or volunteering, or the intersection with many other disciplines, all provide a great versatility that enriches the concept and practices of youth work.⁵ This diversity is combined with common, transnational understandings that help differentiate youth work from other types of work with young people, such as:⁶

- a focus on young people's lives and concerns;

4 Council of Europe and European Commission (2009), *The socio-economic scope of youth work in Europe: final report*

5 Council of Europe (2009), *The history of youth work in Europe: Relevance for youth policy today*

6 Cooper, T. (2018), *Defining youth work: exploring the boundaries, continuity and diversity of youth work practice*

- attention to the social connections and context of young people;
- building supportive and friendly relationships;
- a holistic approach to young people, involving informal education, care for their development, and the facilitation to exercise their rights.

For organisations working with youth experiencing homelessness, integrating the principles of youth work can support services improve their relationships with young people, build trust and facilitate young people crafting solutions for them.

HOW TO INTEGRATE YOUTH WORK INTO SERVICES?

The 6 E's of Youth Work

When considering how to move towards a youth work approach in the delivery of services, the 6 *E's of Youth Work* can provide a framework for the type of atmosphere services should create and what they should strive for when working with young people.⁷

1. **Enabling:** Young people are given the support and space to enable them to do the things they want to do, either on their own or in groups. This also brings a voluntary component as young people's behaviours shouldn't be mandated by the service and access to the service shouldn't be conditional on engagement

IN PRACTICE

In general, professionals working with young people in homelessness should first realise the different life experiences and consider social, cognitive, and developmental stages in comparison to adulthood. Integrating a 'youth work perspective' also means being flexible enough to adapt to other communication patterns, like the use of social media or mobile applications when doing social work, or to different levels of engagement in the service.

7 Council of Europe (2015), *Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio*, p. 7

in activities. Despite certain limitations around what is reasonable support, services should in general listen to what young people want and enable their participation.

2. **Empowering:** Support services should support youth in an empowering way, building their confidence and self-esteem in an environment where young people can make decisions about their future and welfare: Empowerment means supporting young people to both take responsibility for their actions and behaviour, and help them to make positive changes in their lives and community. Creating empowering services also supports the active participation of young people.

3. **Emancipate:** Through delivering principles of youth work, services should support young people in their autonomy and independence at a pace that feels comfortable to them. In the context of working with youth experiencing homelessness, services should provide opportunities for them to take decisions, that are respected by the support services, concerning their use of homeless service providers and their options to exit homelessness.

4. **Engage:** Young people should be able to engage with power and policies. Services supporting youth experiencing homelessness should ensure that there is space for meaningful participation of young people within the service.

When compared to adults in homeless service providers, staff working with young people should exhibit greater flexibility. For example, working plans to attain income and housing stability may often change in a relatively short period of time. This is in line with young people's motivation to experiment with different options, working styles, priorities, aspirations, and so forth.

Likewise, services should be mindful that, for many young people in their transition to adulthood and housing stability, there are many 'first moments'. Examples of this include paying bills, maintenance of the accommodation, budgeting for monthly expenses, etc.

Rather than delivering the services, there should be frequent spaces where the needs of young people and how they navigate the service are not only heard but also acted upon.

5. **Enjoy:** When bringing a youth work perspective, young people should enjoy themselves while they are in the service. In

the homelessness context, services should be mindful that they are not just safe and healthy, but that there are also opportunities for leisure. This means creating space for peers to socialise as part of their development and care.

6. **Education:** When working with young people, services should be mindful of

COUNCIL OF EUROPE & YOUTH WORK

FEANTSA's partnership with the Youth Department of the Council of Europe has shaped how homeless services approach young people. The Council of Europe is regarded as an expert on youth work and defines youth work with the following characteristics:¹

1. **Value-driven:** Youth work tries to serve the higher purposes of inclusion and social cohesion

2. **Youth-centric:** Youth work serves key needs and aspirations of youth, identified by young people themselves

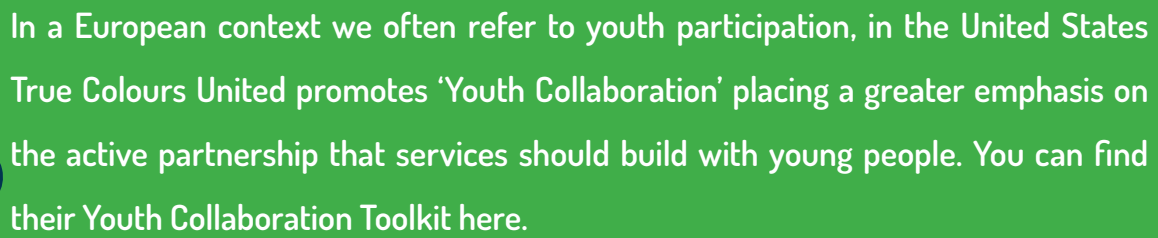
3. **Voluntary:** Youth work is not obligatory, and relies on the voluntary participation of young people

4. **Developmental:** Youth work aims at the personal, social and ethical development of young people

5. **Self-reflective and critical:** Youth work tries to make sure it is doing its best to live up to its mission

6. **Relational:** Youth work seeks authentic communication with young people and contribute to sustaining viable communities.

1 Council of Europe website: Youth work essentials



In a European context we often refer to youth participation, in the United States True Colours United promotes 'Youth Collaboration' placing a greater emphasis on the active partnership that services should build with young people. You can find their Youth Collaboration Toolkit [here](#).

educational opportunities. These can take place in non-formal settings and outside of the classroom to develop their competencies and other life skills. Likewise, collaboration between homeless service providers and partners in the education field should be enhanced, as more educational opportunities may increase the likelihood of housing and financial stability.

The 6 Es should act as a helpful reminder to homeless services that supporting youth is more than exiting homelessness. Hence, services should include a holistic approach that promotes their well-being and a healthy transition to adulthood and independent living.

A FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH WORK

The Youth Department at the Council of Europe has developed a framework around the functions

of youth work,⁸ this section aims to contextualise the 8 functions around the homeless sector.

It's important to note one of the pillars of youth work is the focus on the competencies of support workers and their skills. These competencies do not refer to young people, but rather the skills required by youth workers to best support youth to exit homelessness.

Function 1. Address the needs and aspirations of young people

The starting point for homeless services working with young people should be building positive relationships that are built on trust and non-judgement. In this context, youth shouldn't be judged for previous decisions or blamed for their situation of homelessness. This requires support workers to take the time to understand the young person's background, family situation, education and skills etc, remembering that the

8 Council of Europe website: *Youth work competence*

experience of homelessness is a part of the young person's life but not the sum of who they are. By taking this broader approach from the outset, services can better understand the needs of individual young people beyond their housing deprivation.

Support workers should be given the competencies to discuss personal and emotional issues raised with young people. In particular, if young people discuss topics related to sexuality, gender identity, drug use, traumatic experiences, anti-social behaviour, gambling, etc. these topics should be addressed in non-judgemental ways and the service should be able to meet arising needs.⁹

This doesn't mean services should necessarily build exhaustive in-house knowledge or competencies, but should refer youth to additional supports, and when required help them navigate different systems that could be helpful.

Function 2. Provide learning opportunities for young people

While the overarching goal of homeless services is to support people in their pathways to exit homelessness, fostering learning opportunities is also a complementary but crucial goal for young people experiencing homelessness.

This shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all approach,

IN PRACTICE

It should not be assumed that all young users of homeless services have the same needs. Services should adapt to different communication patterns, learning styles, or other cognitive, cultural, and social aspects of young people. For example, in a meeting organised by Focus Ireland between young people in one of its centres and professionals from several backgrounds, neurodivergence was acknowledged. As a result, among others, introductions were made by drawings instead of by oral presentations.

⁹ Adopting a Trauma-Informed Care methodology can be useful in this regard. For a practical application of this methodology to the homeless sector, have a look at the website of the EU-funded project 'PIE4shelters'

but rather an individualised one: identifying the needs of young people, what they want to learn and their preferred style of learning. This will require services to offer a variety of learning settings -formal, non-formal and informal- that fosters their motivation for learning on both an individual level and in groups.

While learning should be voluntary on the part of the young person, it should be encouraged by services that inform clients about the different opportunities available, and where relevant help them to apply or navigate other educational supports.

Function 3. Support and empower young people to make sense of the society they live in and to engage with it

When supporting young people, it is important for homeless services to guide them to identify and take responsibility for the role they want to have in their community and society. This may be particularly challenging as most young people experiencing homelessness may feel they have been failed by society. This can involve creating or facilitating spaces for young people to identify goals or solutions for the pressing

problems they have, or encouraging them to engage in voluntary work or other initiatives of their interest.

Peer groups can be an effective tool for young voices to address issues within services or to feed perspectives around the wider advocacy of the organisation. Such groups can be youth-led spaces that support critical thinking skills and help young people understand society, power dynamics and how to influence political systems. At the same time, peer groups can enhance the building of a support network among young people themselves, which can be a crucial step in their way out of homelessness.

This function supports young people to be active members of their society and demonstrates their power as individuals and groups to enact change.

Function 4. Support young people in actively and constructively addressing intercultural relations

Intercultural competency is the ability to understand and respect others across different cultural barriers. Europe is diverse, which is reflected in the profiles of people experiencing

LEARNING STYLES¹

Formal: Formal learning takes place within educational systems with pre-defined learning outcomes, assessment systems and a curriculum, generally in a group setting. Primary, secondary, and third levels of education are examples of formal learning systems.

Non-formal: Non-formal learning happens outside of educational institutions but retains an organisational framework. It doesn't follow a curriculum or require assessment or accreditation, and typically happens in community settings. There is generally a strong focus on participation, with the application of learning into practice. Examples include sports clubs, book clubs, choirs, orchestras etc. Typically, there will be a main learning goal, but people will develop other skills, knowledge and attitudes in the process.

Informal: Informal learning occurs where there is no express desire to learn in the activity, it is involuntary and happens in every day of our lives either intentionally or incidentally. However, through debriefing and feedback, support workers can help young people experiencing homelessness to learn from their own experience and take stock of the different skills, competencies and knowledge they use.

¹ Johnson, M., and Majewska, D. (2022). *Formal, non-formal, and informal learning: What are they, and how can we research them?* Cambridge University Press & Assessment Research Report.

homelessness. Support workers should promote interaction between young people who come from diverse backgrounds in a sensitive manner that enables young people to learn about different political contexts, religions, beliefs and cultures abroad.

In particular, sharing the same time and space with people from different backgrounds may lead to misunderstandings or conflicts. Services should acknowledge this potential risk and provide tools that empower young people to constructively manage these conflicts and to appreciate the cultural richness that diversity brings into the organisation.

Function 5. Actively practise evaluation to improve the quality of the youth work conducted

The application of youth work principles does not take place at a single point in time, but it is to be continuously evaluated, assessing the delivery and the outcomes for young people. Taking a participatory approach, young people should be directly involved in the planning and organisation of such evaluations. This means evaluations should involve direct discussions

and dialogue with young people, and go beyond filling out a form.

The results of the evaluation should be integrated into the service delivery as much as possible since it can create frustrations among young people involved if otherwise. Where evaluations highlight challenges experienced by young people, there should be constructive action taken to solve such problems. When young people take the time to participate in an evaluation, the service must take the time to listen and act on their concerns.

Function 6. Support collective learning in teams

Youth work doesn't just concern young people themselves; the team of support workers should have a system whereby they can evaluate their teamwork, and how to improve their effectiveness in supporting youth through sharing common challenges, and co-developing solutions.

This can further involve reading into the latest developments and research in youth work, perhaps attending training, sharing learnings with the team or engaging with other sectors that use youth work methodologies. The goal is

to reflect on what works and what doesn't work in their practice, as well as on the next steps to be taken. Following a participatory approach from service users, they should also be involved in these team discussions when considered necessary, since they can contribute with their own perspectives on the collective learning of the organisation.

Function 7. Contribute to the development of their organisation and to making policies/ programmes work better for young people

When young people are treated as equals to the support workers, their expertise and experience should be valued to shape how policies and programmes are delivered, both around youth work and the wider organisation. This can help ensure the organisation can become

more accessible to young people experiencing homelessness, and ensure the supports on offer match the needs of young people who present to the service.

The inputs from youth experiencing homelessness should be equally recognised as those of support workers. They are the experts on their own lived experience and as such should be involved in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the service.

Function 8. Develop, conduct and evaluate projects

In order to ensure the sustainability and continuous improvement of youth work approaches, the support workers should be able to periodically evaluate the projects delivered to young people. This may require upskilling

IN PRACTICE

One simple but illustrative example is provided by Focus Ireland. The managers in one of its centres initially wanted to set up a vertical wall garden, believing it would be calming. However, young users rejected this because it would have made them feel uncomfortable. With their involvement in the process, the final space was more adequate to their needs.

Considering young people's input follows from the principle that people receiving support should have a say in how this is provided. But it can also help build a trust-based relationship with staff, resulting in better outcomes.

youth workers around learning, such as project management tools and approaches, or training to apply and improve resources for youth work within the organisation. Youth workers should also be able to give visibility to their projects, write reports and make presentations in order to promote the added value of adapting youth work to their services.



Co-funded by the European Union.
By the EaSI strand of the ESF+ programme.

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FEANTSA

**European Federation of National Organisations
Working with the Homeless**

194 Chaussée de Louvain, 1210 Brussels, Belgium

www.feantsa.org

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