

How we made it work: Almond Housing Association Housing First for Youth Executive Summary Report 2022

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Executive Summary

Since 2017, Almond Housing Association (AHA) has been working in partnership with support provider, Rock Trust (RT) to deliver Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) in West Lothian, Scotland. Following the success of the pilot, and with a desire to share learning on this process, AHA commissioned Imogen Blood & Associates to carry out research to explore its contribution to HF4Y principles from their perspective as a housing provider. This included depth interviews with key staff, a survey of other staff and a review of data and costs.

Almond's decision to undertake a HF4Y project

Almond Housing Association (AHA) is the largest mainstream provider of social housing in West Lothian, managing nearly 2,500 properties. AHA describes its financial performance as 'strong' and its approach to risk as 'measured'.

With AHA describing themselves as a 'traditional housing association', the decision to undertake a HF4Y project was not an obvious one, but was felt to be 'the right thing to do' for a number of reasons:

- **The association's overall financial security:** AHA had sufficient reserves and capacity within a well-run housing management service
- **Alignment with AHA values:** Staff and trustees referred to the importance of the wider role of housing providers rooted in responding to the needs of the local community, particularly those falling through the housing gaps and with experience or at risk of homelessness
- **A partner that is trusted and invested:** RT already offered a well-established support service for young people in the local area and was trusted – and known - across operational and strategic staff, as well as also financially invested in the pilot.
- **The right 'place-based' setting:** As a housing provider situated in a specific geographical location, there was an opportunity to embed a place-based preventative intervention that would benefit the whole community in the long run.
- **Leadership and passion of key staff:** The AHA Housing Support Manager was keen to support the pilot and enthused the Board who wished to encourage and nurture this passion, also identifying the importance of staff development, morale and wellbeing.
- **Breaking new ground:** Of particular interest was that HF4Y was something that had not been done previously in Scotland at that time.
- **Compromise and management of risk:** Compromises were found where necessary to support the project in its early months, for example, initially offering a Short Scottish Secure Tenancy to tenants, and later changing this to a secure tenancy.

Running the pilot

A number of factors were key to the running of the pilot:

Contribution to resource:

- One- and two-bedroom flats – initially set at 5 and then increased to 10;

- £30k in funding - this constituted just under one fifth of funding across the pilot, supporting a furniture allowance and a Housing Support Manager (2 hours per month plus ad hoc support, 1-5% of full-time equivalent post); one dedicated housing officer (initially set at 5% of FTE post).

Single Dedicated Housing Officer (HO): AHA provided a dedicated HO who was trained up and mentored to support all HF4Y tenants, including where young people were placed on a different officer's patch. As the project developed, the dedicated officer also introduced a 'buddy' HO to the HF4Y project in order to provide cover.

Staff development and management: Staff skills, style and management were assessed as being key to the success of the project. Training and mentoring were also important, including on trauma informed working practices.

Working with the support provider: Regular meetings cemented the relationship with the support provider to ensure the most effective ways of working together were in place to respond to support and tenancy related issues.

Impact of Almond's involvement

There were a number of internal positive impacts on Almond as an organisation from being involved with the pilot:

- **Peer influence leading to a ripple effect:** There were examples of where learning gained through the HF4Y pilot was being cascaded across the wider housing officer team. In particular, some HOs now felt more confident accommodating younger tenants, and had practical ideas on working with young tenants (e.g. developing a behaviour contract).
- **Introducing a Trauma informed approach to other housing staff:** Other AHA staff have now attended trauma informed training, with this mainly being seen as a positive development by the staff team.
- **A more inclusive and place-based approach:** Taking part in the pilot encouraged AHA to explore similar challenges facing other groups, for example working with supported housing providers such as Women's Aid and Open Door. In addition, a new AHA Community Engagement Officer now works in partnership with a range of groups and agencies to provide improved or additional services in areas where AHA has properties.

There were also external facing impacts for Almond of being involved in HF4Y:

- **Raising the profile of AHA:** AHA's involvement in the pilot was seen as raising the organisation's profile across: the local community, regulators and Government, with other housing providers and at an international level.
- **Influencing wider policy:** AHA informants felt that the success of the HF4Y pilot had helped influence Scottish Government to scale up the Housing First model across the country, and include the needs of young people.

Financial impacts

Almond's main expenditure was on furniture and on staff time, both to establish the partnership and the pilot, and to deliver ongoing housing management. Additionally, AHA gifted £15,000 per annum over the project life to the Rock Trust to contribute towards their running costs. This constitutes more than the operating surplus of the eight tenancies.

- **Furniture:** Average expenditure on furniture was around £4.5K per person, though this varied from £3.9K to £5.7K per tenancy. AHA reports that they were able to identify better value suppliers over time, so the young people joining the pilot later on received more furniture for their budget.
- **Housing management input:** Weekly catch-ups with Rock Trust and visits to HF4Y tenants were recorded over an 8 month period (September 2018 to April 2019) showing a monthly average of 4.75 hours' housing management time per month, costing AHA £125.50 (with on costs). However, this decreased over time once tenancies reached steady state.

In addition, AHA carried out an exercise to compare the costs related to 8 HF4Y tenants with those related to 15 younger tenants who were not part of the HF4Y project. The small numbers mean findings must therefore be interpreted with some caution, however:

- A snapshot of rent arrears suggests that, despite arrears building up for technical reasons during the set up phase, these were mostly ironed out once payment arrangements with local authority and/or DWP were established. Overall, arrears for the HF4Y cohort were 5% - higher than the whole organisation (2.64%), but lower than the comparison group (7%).
- The responsive (and potentially rechargeable¹) repairs bill is around two to three times higher for the HF4Y cohort, than for the non-HF4Y comparison group. However, this was in some part due to higher surveillance and repairs being carried out earlier.
- Apart from in one case, HF4Y tenancies have been sustained and/or moves between tenancies managed. There were fewer void losses and no legal costs for the HF4Y cohort compared to the non-HF4Y cohort. This suggests a strong invest-to-save argument for housing providers as well as for wider systems.

Replicability considerations

AHA attributes the success of its involvement in HF4Y to a number of critical success factors – each of which would need to be considered by potential new providers of HF4Y:

- The calibre and commitment of the support provider to minimise risks in the future of tenancies that needed ongoing support; effective partnership working and understanding of the differences between 'housing' and 'support' and acceptance of some blurring of roles where accompanied by ongoing reflection;

¹ Where repairs are classed as rechargeable, they have been deemed to be the fault of the tenant.

- The vision and passion of staff and managers within AHA to develop an effective housing and support offer for young care leavers; and
- The fit with its own stock, size, financial position and values. In particular the availability of flats in dispersed locations (not next to each other); and also opportunities to link to community development work and place-shaping strategies.

How much HF4Y might Scotland's care leavers need?

Children's Social Work statistics for Scotland suggest that just over 1.8K young people left local authority care in 2019/20, whilst around 6.5K were eligible for aftercare services in that year. However, only a very small minority of these young people will need a HF4Y offer. It is broadly estimated that around 100 young people exiting the care system each year in Scotland might be suitable for a HF4Y offer. There are around 160 housing associations in Scotland, and most local authorities still own significant stock, so this feels like a manageable in-flow if reliable funding for high quality wrap-around support is available.

Tips to other housing providers considering HF4Y

"Give it a go. It's the right thing to do." (Chair of Almond's Board)

- Expect quite a bit of upfront work: the groundwork is critical, but it will taper off considerably over time.
- However, people's journeys will not necessarily be linear – you must expect and plan for lapses, crises and set-backs.
- There are financial risks and ethical implications from deciding to spend some of the organisation's reserves on buying furniture for a relatively small number of individuals, and in departing from the allocations policy, so it is important to 'go in with eyes open' and really weigh this up.
- Do it at the right pace and scale for the size and financial position of your organisation.
- There is no half way step – you are either all in or not; it would be more damaging to offer this for a while and then withdraw than not to do it at all.
- Do it with trusted partners, commissioners/ funders
- Record staff input and other data (what you spend on furniture, hidden costs) clearly and consistently from the output, so as to more accurately monitor and track progress – 'wish we had done this from the start'.
- Keep staff across the organisation and the Board updated on the initiative: wide understanding and buy-in is key to success, and also allows for benefits to ripple out.