



# **Comparative Overview of Mobile Youth Centres in Europe**

**Findings and reflections from the database mapping**

**DATABASE**

## **Mobile Youth Work**

Engaging Youth and Communities.

Promoting the recognition of Mobile Youth Centre initiatives.



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This publication was developed by the Mobile Youth Work project team, a collaboration between Roter Baum Berlin (Germany), Curba de Cultură (Romania), Strauss APS (Italy), and Le Fagotin (Belgium).

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# 01 Introduction

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This report presents a **comparative analysis of 19 Mobile Youth Centres across Europe**, based on a **structured database mapping**. The cases represent a wide diversity of practices, including municipal services, NGO-led initiatives, rural outreach units, urban public-space youth work, and hybrid mobile formats. These include vehicle-based centres as well as street-based and outreach approaches.

The aim is not only to **rank models**. It is also to **identify patterns, differences, strengths, and structural challenges**. The analysis confirms that Mobile Youth Centres are not a single fixed solution, but an adaptive response shaped by territorial, social, and institutional contexts.

A central conclusion emerges: a Mobile Youth Centre is not defined by the vehicle itself, but by its function - **bringing youth work into the everyday environments of young people**.

## Methodological notes

- The findings are based on **self-reported data collected via a mapping questionnaire**. Therefore, the analysis reflects how organisations describe their own Mobile Youth Centres.
- This mapping exercise has some limitations. Firstly, the database is based on only 19 self-reported cases, so **it does not cover all existing Mobile Youth Centres in Europe**. Furthermore, the level of detail provided in the responses varies, as does the amount of information available across countries and organisations. The findings should therefore be understood as an exploratory, comparative overview.

## 02 General definition: What is a Mobile Youth Centre?

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A shared understanding emerges across all cases.

**A Mobile Youth Centre is a youth work service that moves towards young people** rather than expecting them to attend fixed spaces. It operates in public, rural, suburban, or underserved environments. It provides informal, non-formal, voluntary, and low-threshold activities, including opportunities for leisure-time and free-time engagement. It builds relationships through presence, trust, continuity, and mutual respect. It adapts to local needs and interests. And it creates **a safe and accessible youth work space in temporary or non-institutional settings**. In some cases, **it also connects young people with other services, specialists or community actors**.

**The physical form is secondary**, whether it is a van, caravan, boat, trailer or mobile team. The defining element is the ability to create a meaningful youth work environment wherever young people are.

Mobile Youth Centres should therefore be understood as Mobile Youth Work spaces based on **accessibility, voluntary participation, active participation, confidentiality, relationship building and responsiveness to young people's needs**.

## 03 Target group: 12–25 years old

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While the official target groups vary widely across cases (from children to young adults), the comparative analysis indicates a **strong concentration around the 12–25 age range**. The most consistent lower boundary is 12 years old. Within this range, a particularly strong cluster emerges around **12–18**, representing the most frequent and consistent group of participants across most Mobile Youth Centres.

Older groups (**18–25 and over**) are also present in many cases and are particularly important for **participation, engagement and transition-related support**.

This suggests that Mobile Youth Centres fulfil a **dual role**, serving not only as **recreational facilities** but also as spaces that promote **youth development, engagement, and social inclusion across various stages of youth**.

## 04 Territorial differences: Access vs. engagement

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**Territorial variation** is one of the most striking findings in the dataset. While most of the mapped Mobile Youth Centres operate in **rural or peripheral areas**, a smaller number work in **suburban or urban contexts**.

**In rural and peripheral areas**, Mobile Youth Centres primarily **facilitate access**. They address issues such as the absence or scarcity of youth services, geographical distance, limited mobility, a lack of leisure opportunities and reduced access to safe spaces for young people.

**In suburban areas**, their function is **often more varied**. These models combine access to services with a regular presence in public spaces and engagement with young people who may not use fixed youth centres.

**In urban areas**, Mobile Youth Centres place a stronger emphasis on a **presence** in public spaces, cultural and social activities, and engagement with young people outside of institutional settings.

**Key insight:** rural models primarily address access to services, while urban models emphasise presence and engagement in public spaces more strongly. Suburban models often combine both functions.

## 05 Management and governance

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The database shows **three main types of governance**.

The **public or municipal types** are run directly by municipalities, public institutes, youth services, or public-sector institutions. They tend to show stronger institutional integration, clearer continuity, and more stable staffing.

**NGO-led structures** are run by non-profit organisations or associations. They often show high flexibility, strong community connection and capacity for experimentation, but their continuity depends heavily on available funding and project cycles.

**Hybrid governance** structures combine public, private, EU, foundation or organisational resources. They can balance stability and innovation, but they usually require more complex management and coordination.

**A key finding** is that governance and funding should be analysed separately: some NGO-led centres receive public funding, while some public or municipal models were initially developed through external grants or mixed funding.

## 06 Funding as a structural determinant

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The funding available determines the continuity, staffing levels, scope and operational capacity of Mobile Youth Centres.

**Public or municipal funding** generally supports greater stability, integration into youth services, as well as enabling long-term planning.

**Project-based funding**, including EU programmes, foundation grants, corporate social responsibility (CSR) grants, and short-term calls for proposals, can encourage innovation and the development of new mobile formats. However, it can also lead to discontinuity or limited provision.

**Private, donation-based or organisation-funded models** offer flexibility but may struggle to sustain regular activities, dedicated staff and long-term development.

In some cases, funding limitations can directly affect the intensity of service provision. For example, if funding is only available for a few hours per week or if the mobile youth centre can only travel a limited number of times per year.

**Key insight:** Funding influences not only material resources, but also staff continuity, the frequency of activities, relationship building, evaluation capacity and the long-term sustainability of Mobile Youth Centres.

## 07 Activities: Entry points for relationship-building

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The activities recorded in the database are **highly consistent**. The most common activities include sports, outdoor games, board games, creative workshops, music, cooking, digital and console gaming, informal conversations, counselling, youth information services, non-formal education and youth-led initiatives.

While most Mobile Youth Centres offer **free-time and leisure activities**, these are often combined with broader **educational, social and participatory functions**. In some cases, activities also encompass health and well-being information, political education, mentoring, practical support, career guidance, and support for youth-led projects.

The database shows that **activities are rarely an end in themselves**. Instead, they serve as **low-threshold entry points** for establishing contact, building trust, encouraging engagement, and fostering relationships with young people.

**Key insight:** the activity is often the visible part of the service, while the relational dimension is its core youth work function.

## 08 Staffing and professionalisation

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The database reveals significant **variations in the staffing structures** of Mobile Youth Centres. **Three main patterns of staffing can be identified.**

Some centres employ youth workers who often have formal training or professional experience in youth work, social work, education or municipal youth services, and who form stable teams.

Other centres combine employed staff with volunteers, students or project-based workers. While these teams may have relevant youth work competencies, they do not always have specific training in mobile youth work.

A third group relies mainly on volunteers, part-time workers, or staff not specifically assigned to the mobile youth centre. In some cases, there is no dedicated staff or specific training for the mobile unit.

**This is directly linked to management and funding:** stable public or municipal structures tend to support more continuous staffing, while project-based or privately funded models are more likely to depend on volunteers, part-time staff or mixed teams.

**Key insight:** the quality and continuity of a mobile youth centre depend more on the competence, stability, and relational capacity of its operators than on the vehicle itself.

## 09 Evaluation

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**Evaluation practices** vary significantly across the database.

Some Mobile Youth Centres use **structured evaluation approaches**, such as collecting attendance data, using logbooks and reports, conducting surveys, encouraging self-evaluation, carrying out periodic reviews and using formal feedback tools. Other centres mainly rely on **semi-structured or informal methods**, such as team meetings, conversations with young people, feedback after activities, and informal reflection with volunteers and staff. A smaller number of cases report **no formal evaluation process**, or indicate that no evaluation is currently in place.

This variation is connected to differences in funding, staffing, and institutional context. Centres with more stable public or municipal support tend to use more structured evaluation practices, while project-based or less institutionalised models tend to rely more on informal feedback.

**Key insight:** evaluation is present across the field, but approaches are inconsistent and rarely comparable between cases. This may limit the documentation of outcomes and reduce the visibility and recognition of Mobile Youth Centres as structured youth work services.

# 10 Needs Assessment and participation

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The **needs and interests of young people** are most effectively identified through **direct interaction**, observation in everyday environments, informal conversations, surveys, feedback tools and participatory processes.

In most cases, a needs assessment is an **ongoing, relational process** rather than a one-off administrative step. Youth workers identify needs by being present, listening, observing, asking questions and adapting activities over time.

Some centres use **more structured tools**, such as questionnaires, Google Forms, logbook evaluations, youth surveys, seasonal mapping and feedback forms. Others rely mainly on conversations during or after activities.

**Participation also emerges as a recurring element.** In some cases, young people are involved in proposing activities, shaping projects, taking part in crew meetings, voting on activities, engaging in participatory budgeting or developing youth initiatives.

**This pattern emerges across different organisational models:** centres with more structured systems tend to document needs more systematically, whereas less formal approaches often rely on relational knowledge and direct interaction.

**Key insight:** a relational understanding of needs is prevalent throughout the database, but documentation and systematisation remain inconsistent.

## 11 Seasonality and continuity

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The database shows **different levels of operational continuity**.

Some Mobile Youth Centres operate **year-round** and are often supported by municipal structures, public funding, stable teams, or integration into existing youth services. Others operate **seasonally** due to weather conditions, outdoor settings, vehicle limitations, rural logistics, or funding constraints. A third pattern also emerges: **centres designed to operate year-round but adapting activities** in winter by reducing mobility, using indoor spaces such as schools, or operating less frequently depending on weather and available resources.

**Seasonality is not necessarily a limitation** when it reflects the local context or climate, or is part of realistic operational planning. However, in some cases it is linked to structural constraints such as limited funding, staffing challenges, or technical and legal conditions.

**Key insight:** continuity is not only about year-round operation, but also about maintaining a regular presence and predictable communication, and building ongoing relationships with young people over time.

## 12 Communication

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Although communication methods vary according to local context, age group, territory and organisational capacity, some recurring patterns emerge across the database.

**Digital tools are the main communication channels.** Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, TikTok, Snapchat, websites, and social media stories are widely used to share routes, schedules, activities, and updates.

**Offline and community-based communication** remains important too. Several centres communicate via schools, libraries, cultural centres, local authorities, community organisations, posters, postcards, word of mouth, youth ambassadors and a direct presence in public spaces.

Some centres publish regular schedules, while others use a more flexible approach depending on weather, seasonality, funding, or requests from young people. **This pattern relates to previous findings on territory and continuity:** many rural models rely more on local trust networks and community intermediaries, while urban and suburban models often combine digital communication with a direct presence in public spaces.

**Key insight:** effective communication combines digital outreach, reliable information, direct contact, and local trust networks.

## 13 Cross-cutting strengths

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Mobile Youth Centres demonstrate several **recurring strengths** across the database.

**They increase accessibility by bringing youth work directly to places where young people are already located**, particularly in rural, peripheral, or underserved areas. This helps reduce barriers such as distance, lack of transport, and the absence of local youth infrastructure.

**They facilitate low-threshold participation**, enabling young people to engage in activities without the need for formal registration, complex procedures, or prior commitment. This is especially relevant for reaching young people who may not access fixed youth services.

**Relational work is a core strength**. As highlighted in the sections on needs assessment and staff, a regular presence, informal interaction, and trust-building support the establishment of meaningful connections with young people and a better understanding of their needs.

**Mobile Youth Centres are adaptable**. Activities, formats, and approaches are often adjusted according to context, weather, group dynamics, and emerging needs. In some cases, young people also contribute to shaping or co-designing activities.

**They activate public spaces, rural communities, and underserved areas**, turning them into temporary environments for socialisation, learning, leisure, and participation.

Finally, Mobile Youth Centres can act as **connectors** between young people, communities, schools, local actors, and, in some cases, wider support services.

**Key insight:** the strength of Mobile Youth Centres lies in their relational, flexible, and accessible nature rather than in infrastructure or equipment.

## 14 Cross-cutting challenges

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Despite their strengths, several recurring **structural challenges** emerge across the database.

**Funding instability is a major challenge**, particularly for NGO-based and project-based initiatives. Reliance on short-term funding, including Erasmus+, ESC, local grants, or foundation support, can limit long-term planning and continuity.

**Staff continuity is another recurring issue**. While some centres have stable teams, others depend on volunteers, students, part-time workers, or staff who are not specifically assigned to the Mobile Youth Centre. This can affect consistency, relationship-building, and continuity of service.

**Evaluation remains uneven**. Some centres use structured systems, while others rely on informal feedback or have no formal evaluation process. This limits the documentation of outcomes and can reduce visibility and recognition.

**Seasonality can also affect continuity**. In some cases, it reflects climate, local context, or realistic operational planning; in others, it is linked to funding gaps, limited infrastructure, or technical and legal constraints.

**Policy recognition also appears to be inconsistent**. Some Mobile Youth Centres are integrated into municipal or public youth services, while others are more project-based or less structurally embedded.

Logistical constraints, including vehicle maintenance, fuel costs, weather conditions, and coordination across multiple locations, increase **operational complexity**.

**Key insight:** the main challenges are less methodological than structural, especially funding stability, staffing continuity, institutional recognition, and systematisation of practice.

## 15 Final considerations

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The database shows that although Mobile Youth Centres are implemented in very diverse contexts, they follow a consistent operational principle: reaching young people directly in their everyday environments, particularly in areas where access to youth services is limited or uneven.

Across the cases, they appear as flexible configurations rather than standardised solutions. Differences in governance, funding, staffing and territorial context lead to varied levels of continuity, structure and capacity, but these differences do not fundamentally alter their core approach.

The data also shows a clear pattern, namely that where funding, staffing and institutional support are more stable, Mobile Youth Centres tend to demonstrate greater continuity, more structured evaluation and stronger integration into local systems. Where these conditions are less stable, the centres' practices remain effective at a relational level, but are more difficult to sustain, document and scale up.

At the same time, several elements remain inconsistent across cases, particularly in relation to evaluation, documentation and terminology. These variations make comparison more difficult and can limit visibility and recognition at a policy level.

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