



A Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

National Youth Council of Ireland

August 2020

National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. We use our collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

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Foreword

We are living through extraordinary times. The COVID-19 pandemic has engulfed the world and set in train a series of rapid and unprecedented conditions which have greatly affected our lives in a very significant way. It is a challenging time to be a young person. The pandemic has meant the introduction of public health measures, which are restrictive and have greatly impeded on their lives. Social distancing and restrictions on mobility have meant physical isolation from their friends and for some young people their families, at a very uncertain and precarious time.



I welcome the publication of this research, which provides a valuable insight into the issues affecting the provision of youth work at this time and highlights how the youth sector has responded to these challenges. Through the voices of youth work managers, practitioners and young people, the report captures the phenomenal youth work practice that has taken place during the COVID pandemic, and demonstrates the extraordinary role the youth work sector continues to play in supporting young people and their families. It also provides insights into the limitations of working in this way and highlights areas of practice that require further investment to support youth work. It highlights the need for the youth sector to update skillsets and to pay attention to specific platforms and ways of working digitally, while at the same recognising the limitations of online engagement with young people. Overall, the report highlights the importance and preference for face to face youth work and the prevalence of 'zoom fatigue' amongst some young people and a reluctance to engage online.

I would like to thank Deborah Erwin and Lorraine Thompson for conducting this research and producing an extremely comprehensive review of the youth sector's response during this COVID period. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues: Marie-Claire McAleer for managing this project, the members of the research advisory group, James Doorley and Alison Fox, and Daniel Meister for overseeing the design and publication of this report.

This report demonstrates how the youth sector will be vital in ensuring young people recover from the detrimental affects the pandemic has imposed on them. It acknowledges the instrumental role youth work will play in supporting young people to thrive in the future and to counter the negative impact on their personal and social development, their education their future employment and their mental health. It also highlights the need for investment of adequate resources to enable the youth sector to respond to the needs of all young people.

Despite the public health restrictions in place the youth work sector in Ireland has continued to provide an enabling, supportive environment for young people to develop valuable social and personal skills. Youth work serves to build resilience and empower young people with the skills to survive and withstand the challenges of day to day life. Sustained investment in youth work is critical now more than ever, to ensure social and economic returns for young people. Youth work changes lives and as this report demonstrates requires sustained investment to ensure this vital work continues to support all young people at a critical time in their lives.

Mary Cunningham, CEO, National Youth Council of Ireland

Glossary of Abbreviations

DCYA	Department of Children & Youth Affairs
ETB	Education Training Board
GYDP	Garda Youth Diversion Project
HSE	Health Service Executive
IYF	Irish Youth Foundation
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NYA	National Youth Agency
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
YSI	Young Social Innovators
YWI	Youth Work Ireland

About the National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland is a membership organisation that represents the shared interests of voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. They currently have 51 full member organisations and 3 affiliate members which work with and for over 380,000 young people.

Vision:

An Ireland where young people in every community are empowered through excellent youth work to realise their potential and actively participate in an inclusive society.

Role:

The council uses collective expertise to act on issues that impact on young people. They do this by:

- Representing the shared interests of voluntary youth organisations.
- Building solidarity among our members.
- Advocating on issues that impact on the lives of young people.
- Promoting the development of evidence informed high quality specialist youth work practice.
- Capacity building and professional development.

Mission:

To represent the collective voice of the youth work sector and build capacity, leadership and influence to deliver better outcomes for young people.

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About the Authors

As professionally qualified youth work practitioners, Deborah Erwin and Lorraine Thompson have almost 40 years' combined experience of youth work and youth service management primarily in the community and voluntary sector. Having previously worked in a range of youth work settings both chose to set out in new career directions in March 2015. Whilst individually they have developed successful freelance portfolios, they have also formed a solid working partnership delivering a range of strategic review processes and research work together. Previous clients include the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast, Youth Work Alliance, Ballyfermot Youth Service, Trinity Youth Service and YWCA Ireland.

Authors' Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all the youth workers, managers and young people who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups and interviews – we appreciated the time everyone gave in sharing their experiences and the insight they brought to this study.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

In June 2020 NYCI commissioned Deborah Erwin and Lorraine Thompson to conduct an independent review of the youth work sector response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is centred on three research questions:

1. How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during the pandemic?
3. What are the limitations of working in this way?

This research was open to the whole youth sector and responses were received from a variety of different types of youth-focused organisations and youth services. Aware that many youth organisations operate a range of initiatives and programmes as part of their service delivery and sometimes in multiple locations, we encouraged responses to the survey from individual projects, programme strands or units within organisations in order to get a sense of how they took action in the face of the pandemic.

1.2 Methodology

The review approach involved:

- **Desk research:** A review of NYCI members' websites and social media platforms; a review of data and research from other jurisdictions on advice and responses to the pandemic; a review of NYCI online 'check-in' sessions with youth workers.
- **Survey with sector projects:** the survey was distributed to youth sector organisations running from 24th June-10th July 2020. There were 256 valid responses to the survey. Respondents were representative of a wide range of thematic and geographical areas.
- **Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders:** 15 interviews were carried out with representatives from youth sector projects and took place in July 2020 via Zoom or WhatsApp.
- **Focus groups with young people:** 5 focus groups from 4 organisations were facilitated via Zoom during July and early August. A total of 16 young people participated from the ages of 14-25.

1.3 Context

Ireland confirmed its first case of coronavirus on 29th February 2020. On 12th March the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced all schools, colleges and childcare facilities were to close initially until the 29th March. A mandatory order for people to stay at home was announced on 28th March. Youth provision, in line with schools, closed abruptly with little initial guidance on how they could continue support for young people. Since the global spread of COVID-19 there has been substantial research conducted to identify the immediate and possible long-term impact on young people. The research shows that young people have and will be adversely affected in the areas of mental health, education, economically and

socially (OECD, 2020). The OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience publication (2020) recognises the vital role the youth sector has played and will continue to play in helping young people recover from these detrimental effects and to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. The report recommends governments should partner with youth sector organisations during the recovery phase. In the Irish context, it is imperative adequate resources are invested to enable the youth sector to do this and to respond to the needs of all young people.

1.4 Summary of Findings

Impact

- **Mental Health** - there is a high level of concern over the negative impact on young people's mental health.
- **Education** - young people are worried about the uncertainty around results and the impact this will have on their future, they are missing the emotional support schools provide and there is concern around the conditions for reopening schools.
- **Economic impact** - young people already experiencing poverty became even more isolated.
- **Personal and social impact** - a lack of social contact and the lack of structure and routine did not help young people function and ultimately had a negative impact both physically and emotionally.

How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- **Maintaining a service** - the majority of services were able to maintain a full service (22%) or a reduced service (64%) (n=256). 14% of respondents could not continue to provide a service during the pandemic lockdown. The most frequent reason given was that the organisation did not have an adequate digital infrastructure (33%).
- **Engagement with Young People** - 59% of projects (n=151) had a reduction in the number of young people they were able to work with. The 151 respondents who had a reduction in the number of young people they engaged with indicated figures fell from 59,822 to 18,391 (approximate numbers) equating to a drop of 70%. 36 projects discontinued engagement with young people which represented approximately 6896 young people. Eight projects saw an increase in engagement in virtual activities.
- **Youth sector responses to the pandemic** – several services immediately went online via Zoom and other platforms. There were some projects that continued their outreach services e.g. detached work, socially distant house visits or delivery of activity packs as a form of outreach and connection. A number of the projects had a particular emphasis on supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of the young people they engaged with. Almost two thirds of NYCI members generated social media or website content in relation to health and wellbeing. Some services made use of surveys to assess needs and adapt accordingly. Some projects engaged directly with parents as a way of making contact with young people.
- **Young people's perspectives of the youth sector's overall response** - overall the young people shared very positive experiences of youth work during this time and felt that youth organisations were responsive to their needs and provided vital interaction.

- Factors that enabled organisations to respond effectively included resourcing by organisations with a national headquarters for volunteer-led groups; links, networking and partnerships fostered with other organisations; an effective ICT infrastructure; already established relationships in local communities; support and guidance from external agencies; understanding from funders; flexibility and good communication within organisations.
- Key challenges/implications faced by organisations in responding - the world changed overnight; organisations faced a host of technical issues; Youth projects were unable to contact some young people; difficulties in managing staffing levels.

What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during the pandemic?

- Survey results: most survey respondents used Zoom or other video conferencing to engage with groups of young people (82%). 77% kept contact through text messaging or platforms such as WhatsApp. 64% used phone or video contact to offer one to one engagement. 36% provided food boxes and 20% provided access to digital equipment. 31% signposted or referred young people to other services.
- Projects adopted a wide range of methodologies to continue engagement: Online group engagement included interactive activities; online events and virtual activities; new groups; arts-based activities; Youth Information; local community engagement; innovative use of digitally-based youth work. There was also engagement via telephone and text. Engagement via social media kept young people updated with links to health advice, sharing ideas and updates on events. Some engagement continued in person while observing social distancing. Some organisations delivered care/activity packages. Other interventions indirectly supported young people through training for youth workers and teachers and research within the field. Responses reflect the extent to which interaction with youth organisations served as a lifeline for some young people.
- Learning and unexpected outcomes of online engagement included an extension of geographical reach; relationship-building with parents and families; recognition of the potential e-learning can have; greater digital competency; some young people benefit from online engagement; there is value of a blended approach to digital and face-to-face work with young people going forward; there has been more opportunities for staff collaboration and the importance of innovation and experimentation.

What are the limitations of working in this way?

- Survey results: The two most common limitations cited by respondents were that they found young people were reluctant to engage digitally (68%) and it was difficult to engage with 'at risk' or marginalised young people (67%). Almost one in four projects experienced difficulties with the switch to digital youth work because young people did not have adequate digital access and similarly 24% found staff lacked digital skills. There were also concerns about safeguarding mechanisms not being in place for digital service delivery (17%).
- Programme delivery limitations: The research indicated a compounding effect when online engagement is significantly hampered for young people already experiencing marginalisation in various ways. As one survey respondent put it, *"those most at risk*

were most disconnected during the pandemic.” A range of issues were highlighted by the findings:

- Barriers to young people’s digital engagement.
 - Difficulty engaging with young people described as ‘at risk’ or experiencing marginalisation.
 - Access to technology and digital poverty.
 - Safeguarding concerns.
 - Not being able to see and respond when a young person needs support.
 - Online engagement tailed off.
 - Lack of structure and lack of support from parents and online engagement sometimes compounded pressure for families.
 - There is a paradox of encouraging online engagement in lockdown when previously discouraging device dependence pre-COVID-19.
 - Online engagement prevented developmental work and experiential learning.
 - There has been a loss of young person’s voice and agency.
 - There have been limitations associated with outreach work.
 - Online events versus in-person engagement.
 - Many ultimately feel you can’t replace face-to-face youth work.
- Limitations of digital youth work methodologies at the organisational level included IT skills and capacity among workers and within organisations; stress and anxiety for workers; challenges in relation to boundaries for workers; time and effort to make contact with young people and to adapt and compliance with changing funding arrangements.

Adapting for the Future

- **Concerns for the Future** around uncertainty where no one can be sure of how things are going to be in the coming months with the possibility of increased outbreaks of COVID-19. Concerns around understanding and keeping up with regulations, keeping staff and young people protected from the virus while continuing to offer a vital service to young people, an increase in bureaucracy and paperwork. Some projects are apprehensive about the available space and facilities to allow for social distancing and the consequential costs if larger premises are needed. There is apprehension over funding and investment particularly in terms of resources to offer both face-to-face and online provision. Rebuilding relationships could be difficult following the lockdown period and the summer months and future involvement of volunteers are in question where they may have increased home-life pressures, fear of getting the virus or having had a break will not want to return. Mental health will continue to be a great concern for young people themselves and youth workers as they try to mitigate the long-term damage this could have on young people’s well-being and development.
- **Adapting for the future** – projects will follow government guidelines and observe social distancing, use masks, meet outside in small group. Many are intending to utilise a blended approach of both digital and in-person activities. Some stated they would consider how to improve digital equipment to enhance digital creativity.
- **Help and Support for Organisations** – projects have requested extra funding both to enhance digital equipment and to prepare for combating COVID-19 such as PPE equipment, hand-sanitizer and signage, advice on digital practice/programmes, access

to appropriate equipment and software and how to maintain engagement with young people and digital training for staff.

1.5 Good Practice Examples

- Passing on Public Health Information: Examples:
 - Macra na Feirme regularly encouraged members to stick to safety guidelines.
 - Irish Red Cross Youth consistently updated young people with advice on staying safe and used accessible info guides.
- Changing to Virtual Activities: Examples:
 - Foróige produced an interactive map of how local groups have adapted during pandemic.
 - Gaisce #GaisceAtHome campaign encouraged young people to stay active and engaged in their personal development and community action
 - Irish Girl Guides held a 24 in 48 challenge with the aim of completing 24 Ladybird Badges in 48 hours.
 - Foróige 'Feed Your Body Fuel Your Life' was launched as a social media campaign to encourage young people to focus on mind, body and soul addressing empathy and self-care through music, art, craft and design and food.
- Sharing the impact of the pandemic on young people: Examples:
 - The Happiness Jar is a podcast developed by a group of YMCA Youth Advocates from YMCA Cork Region. It aims to tell the story of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of young people.
 - Irish Wheelchair Association Youth 'Teen Talks' podcast produced two special edition episodes during the pandemic – 'You know it's 2020 when...' and 'Testing Times in 2020'
- Reaching out to the community: Examples:
 - Girls Brigade in Tallaght – members engaged in a COVID Hearts project where they sent handmade knitted or crocheted hearts to patients at Tallaght University Hospital.
 - Localise Youth Volunteering supported young people during Lockdown to reach out from the safety of their homes to combat COVID-19 with compassion, creating videos, tables-quizzes, cards and much more to encourage over 2000 isolated individuals in nursing homes and care facilities, and frontline workers.
- Support with Mental Health and Wellbeing: Examples:
 - Swords Youth Service, Crosscare – made up Positivity Packs to distribute to young people at risk.
 - Sphere 17 consistently posted reminders of where to get help for mental health.
- Help and Support for Specific Needs: Examples:
 - Blossom - Blossom hosted an accessible webinar giving young people practical advice on looking after yourself and planning your day during the pandemic.
 - Crosscare Outdoor Learning Team was redeployed when they couldn't do their usual role to provide one to one support to 'at-risk' young people.
 - Spunout.ie/YMCA Ireland/Crosscare/Youth Work Ireland Youth Information Chat service. The chat service is staffed by Youth Information Officers from centres across Ireland.

- Consultation and research on young people's experiences: Examples:
 - Young Social Innovators launched a Youth 'Check In' survey - asking how young people are and how are they coping in this new reality. YSI also coordinated an initiative asking young people to submit ideas to tackle the problems being faced by communities as a result of coronavirus - #YSIOpenCall
 - BelongTo conducted an 'LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown' survey. Almost 300 LGBTI+ young people from all over Ireland shared their experiences of how lockdown, due to COVID-19
 - DCYA conducted a survey 'How's Your Head – Young Voices During Covid-19' to hear directly from young people about what they have found hard during the pandemic, what changes in their lives they would like to retain, and what would help young people improve their mental health and well-being.

1.6 Conclusions & Recommendations

Broadly the pandemic has served to expose a whole range of inequalities and exacerbated vulnerabilities and while it is great that youth workers showed their creativity and flexibility in numerous ways, it does not make the marginalisation experienced by young people any less challenging. The drop in engagement levels (70% reported by survey respondents) paints a stark picture and along with stakeholder feedback demonstrates just how important face-to-face youth work is, particularly for those in marginalised and vulnerable situations.

What youth workers and projects have managed to achieve in the midst of a global crisis is highly impressive and commendable. Youth workers have been thrown into the deep end yet have stepped into the gap and embarked on a steep learning curve to support young people and their families in whatever way possible within public health guidelines.

All this has come at a significant cost for youth workers and youth organisations, however, in terms of exhaustion, emotional labour, stress, unhealthy work/life boundaries, isolation from colleagues, challenges with regard to poor broadband connectivity and digital poverty, and safeguarding concerns. Furthermore, young people have lost out in so many ways including key experiences and 'rites of passage' such as sitting key examinations, finishing the school year, graduating from school or college, participating in youth exchanges or overseas trips etc. Young people now face all sorts of challenges ahead in terms of education, job prospects, health and wellbeing, personal and social development.

What is important now, is for the youth sector to get into a stronger position to meet the current and emerging needs of young people in the face of challenges arising from the pandemic – youth organisations need to be ready to change at a moment's notice and prepare to offer a 'blended' approach to youth services combining digital and face-to-face methods.

Advocating for the sector

Advocacy will be vital for the youth work sector in the coming months, particularly regarding funding and investment, technological innovation and ICT infrastructure, training for digital skills and on various digital platforms, and COVID-19 compliance.

Recommendations for youth organisations to take forward:

- *Keep relationships central* – young person-centred approaches are core to good youth work practice whether online or face-to-face.
- *Pay attention to key transition points in the lives of young people.*
- *Learning & evaluation* – seek feedback on practice delivery during the lockdown to learn about what works and what can be improved or enhanced.
- *Get skills into the sector* – particularly IT training and guidance on social media and different IT/social media platforms to facilitate digital engagement.
- *Get tech into the sector* – identify and supply the technology that will facilitate young people's participation and resource organisations and workers.
- *Accessibility* – particularly for young people with intellectual and other disabilities.
- *Invest in people* – in terms of staff and volunteer capacity for COVID-19 compliance as well as wellbeing.
- *Embrace the challenge* – of experimenting with different digital methods and trying new mediums.

2. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a seismic impact all around the world and no less in Ireland where at the time of writing there have been over 27,000 confirmed cases and over 1700 deaths since the first reported case at the end of February 2020.¹ While social distancing measures have been effective in ‘flattening the curve’ to avoid overwhelming health services, there have been significant impacts across various aspects of Irish society including youth services. Recent increases in the numbers of cases have shown the continuing threat posed by COVID-19 and are a reminder of the need to adapt to life with the virus while seeking to suppress community transmission.

In June 2020 NYCI commissioned Deborah Erwin and Lorraine Thompson to conduct an independent review of the youth work sector response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is centred on three research questions:

1. How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during the pandemic?
3. What are the limitations of working in this way?

In this report we provide an outline of our research methodology, document our findings and identify a number of good practice examples from a variety of youth-focused organisations. It is our intention to draw attention to the sector’s role and contribution in supporting young people and their families and to provide evidence of the contribution of youth work in these unprecedented times. We also make a number of recommendations that highlight aspects of youth work provision and infrastructure where capacity building will strengthen the sector’s ongoing response and enable it to ‘build back better’.

It is important to note that this research was open to the whole youth sector and we received responses from a variety of different types of youth-focused organisations and youth services regardless of whether or not they are in receipt of DCYA funds. Moreover, aware that many youth organisations operate a range of initiatives and programmes as part of their service delivery and sometimes in multiple locations, we encouraged responses to the survey from individual projects, programme strands or units within organisations in order to get a sense of how they took action in the face of the pandemic.

¹ <https://www.hse.ie/>

3. Methodology

The methodological approach adopted for this study on the youth work sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic sought to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to capture broad organisational and project responses and specific methodologies deployed to deliver supports and services to young people. This approach also served to identify the limitations of these adaptations and interventions and challenges faced. The following activities were carried out:

Desk research:

- Review of NYCI members' websites and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube). This focused on communications output from when school and colleges were closed, and 'lockdown' measures were introduced in the three months between 12th March 2020 and 12th June 2020.
- A literature review of research from other jurisdictions on advice and responses to the pandemic was also undertaken. The following documents and articles were reviewed:
 - Advisory Council on Youth (2020) *Statement of the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ) on responses to the COVID-19 crisis*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
 - Bawden, A. (2020) 'Meeting my youth worker is the only time I eat a meal with another person'. *The Guardian* [online] 29 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/29/youth-worker-coronavirus-youth-services-young-people-pandemic> (accessed 9 June 2020).
 - Enn, Ü. (2020) In distance but not apart: The case of COVID-19 crisis management in youth field in Estonia. *Estonian World*. Available at: <https://estonianworld.com/opinion/the-case-of-covid-19-crisis-management-in-youth-field-in-estonia/> (accessed 9 June 2020).
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 - European Youth Forum (2020) *The European Youth Blueprint to Recovery*. Brussels: European Youth Forum.
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 - Irish Youth Foundation (2020) *Youth Sector COVID-19 Response Survey – March-April 2020*. Dublin: Irish Youth Foundation.
 - McGreevy, R. (2020) Years of Youth Services 'wiped out' by COVID-19 Pandemic, warns charity. *Irish Times* [online] 3 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/years-of-youth-services-wiped-out-by-covid-19-pandemic-warns-charity-1.4269051> (accessed 9 June 2020).
 - National Youth Agency (2020) *Out of Sight. Vulnerable Young People: COVID-19 Response*. Leicester: National Youth Agency.

- OECD (2020), *Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience*, Paris: OECD.
 - Public Health England (2020) *Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19*. London: Public Health England.
 - The Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland (2020) *Lockdown Lowdown: What young people in Scotland are thinking about COVID-19. Key findings and data analysis*. Edinburgh: Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland.
 - UK Youth (2020) *The impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector*. London: UK Youth.
 - Young Social Innovators & Amárach Research (2020) *Covid-19 Youth 'Check In' Survey*. Dublin: Young Social Innovators.
 - YouthLink Scotland (2020) *The COVID-19 Crisis. Impact on Youth Work and Young People. A survey of Scotland's Youth Work Sector Leaders*. Edinburgh: YouthLink Scotland.
- Review of NYCI online 'check-in' sessions with youth workers – Staff from NYCI facilitated 6 online 'check-in' sessions with approximately 75 youth workers in early April 2020. The youth workers represented a wide range of organisations (see Appendix 1). NYCI staff made notes from these sessions available to the researchers. The discussions focused on the following questions:
 - How are you getting on?
 - What is the impact of the current situation on you as a youth worker and your team?
 - What are the challenges you're facing in delivering your work?
 - How can NYCI support you?

Survey with Sector Projects:

An online survey was made available using the SurveyMonkey platform and was distributed via the NYCI mailing list and promoted via social media (see Appendix 2). The survey asked for feedback from individual projects or units within organisations.² It focused on their response and methods of engagement, numbers of young people who engaged and limitations experienced during the 'lockdown' period between 12th March 2020 and 12th June 2020 (when Ireland moved into phase 2 of the pandemic response). The survey was live from 24th June to 10th July 2020.

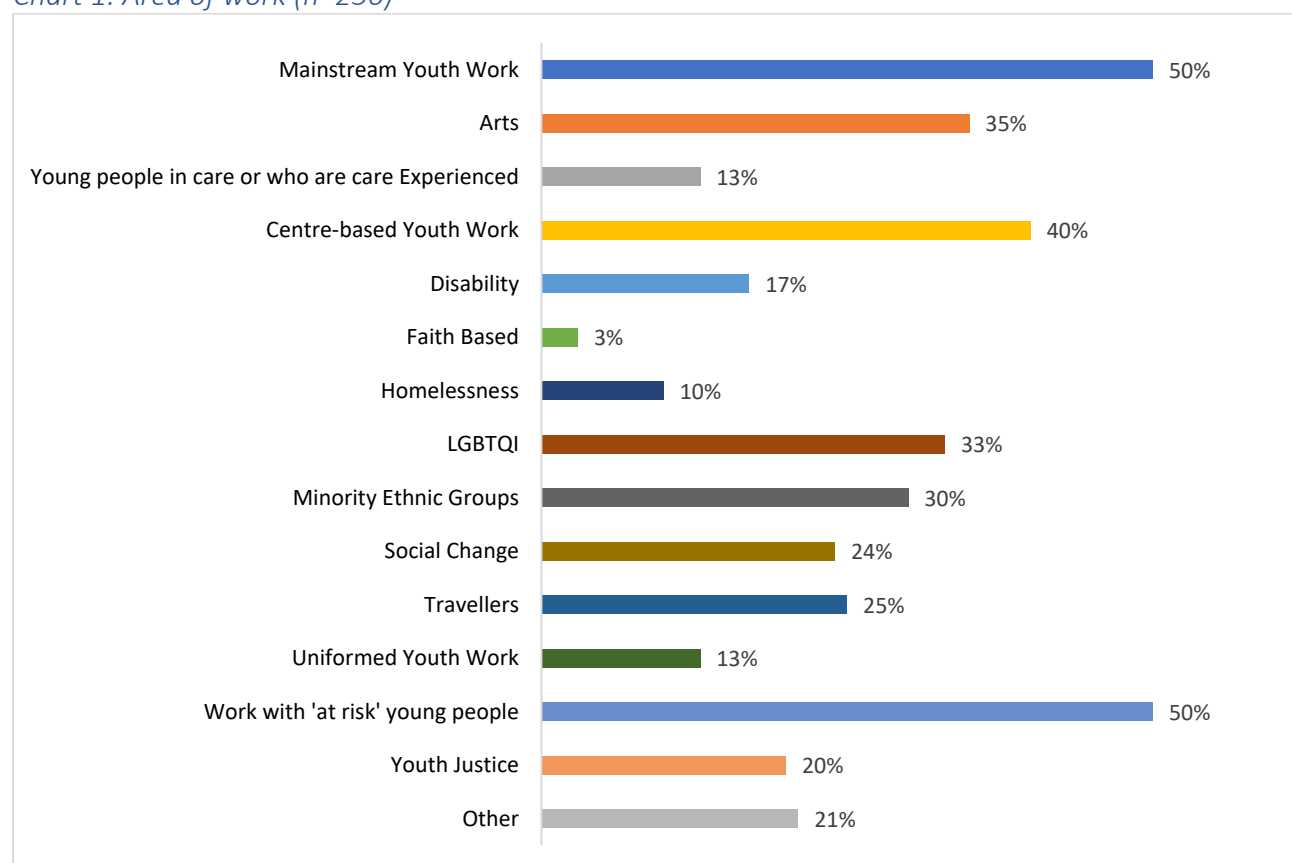
There were 272 responses of which 256 were valid³ consisting of national, regional and individual organisations. It is worth pointing out that while the survey results are not necessarily representative of the youth sector at large, the wealth of data yielded provides a good indication of how and in what ways youth organisations were able to respond.

² It should be noted that as staff from specific projects or units were encouraged to complete the survey there are entries completed by several staff from the same organisation but working on different projects or in different locations.

³ Some entries completed the first 3 questions and provided no further information, and some were from outside the jurisdiction of Ireland – these have been omitted from analysis.

Responses to the survey represent youth service delivery across a wide range of thematic areas and demographics as shown in Chart 1. Half of respondents offer 'mainstream youth work' and 'work with 'at risk' young people'. 40% offer centre-based youth work, almost one quarter work to create social change and 35% offer arts-based youth work. 13% represent uniformed youth work and 3% are from faith-based organisations. 10% work within the area of homelessness and almost 20% work within the area of youth justice. Approximately a third of respondents work with young people from LGBTQI and Minority Ethnic communities and a quarter are working with young people from the Traveller community. 13% are working with young people in care or who are 'care experienced'⁴ and 17% work with young people who have a disability. 'Other' areas of work represented among the responses include those working within climate change and environmental issues, sport, digital creativity, outdoor learning, family support, drugs education, youth information and counselling.

Chart 1: Area of work (n=256)



Q: What thematic area(s) does your project/unit cover?

Semi-Structured Interviews with Stakeholders:

Interviews focused on the project's initial response; initiatives and methods introduced to maintain a service; examples of good practice; limitations of digital adaptations, challenges and lasting impact, and concerns for the future and practice moving forward (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the interview discussion guide). Interviewees were chosen to reflect the

⁴ 'Care experienced' is a term used to refer to anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked after background and this can include care in a children's residential home, foster care or kinship care.

diversity of youth services in different parts of the country including those working with young people from marginalised or minority groups, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those living in both rural and urban settings. Fifteen interviews were carried out with representatives from the projects listed in Table 1 below and took place in July 2020 via Zoom or WhatsApp. Interviewees comprised of 3 CEOs of youth-focused organisations, 5 programme managers or project coordinators, 6 project workers and 1 volunteer leader.

Table 1: Project/Organisation Background of Interviewees

Project/ Organisation	Geographical Area	Area of Work	Purpose
BeLongTo	National, but face-to-face services in Dublin	LGBTQI+	To provide support and empower young LGBTI+ people and to work with them in equal partnership to combat anti-LGBTI+ stigma and discrimination in Ireland.
Blossom Ireland	Dublin	Disability	Supports young people with intellectual disabilities.
Clondalkin Youth Service, Crosscare	Dublin West	Youth Information; Mainstream Youth Work; Arts; Centre-based Youth Work; Disability; Faith-based; Homelessness; LGBTQI; Minority Ethnic Groups; Social Change; Travellers; Work with 'at-risk' Young People; Youth Justice.	Supports young people in the Clondalkin area to tackle issues that affect them on a daily basis.
County Longford Youth Services	Co. Longford	Young People in Direct Provision; Work with Young People who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET; Centre-based Youth Work; LGBTQI; Minority Ethnic Groups; Travellers; Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	To engage with young people who are, or at risk of, becoming NEETS. Young people who are experiencing disadvantage, either economic, social or educational.
EPIC	Advocacy - Southern Region, Research - All Ireland	Young People who are in care or who are care experienced.	To amplify the voice of children in care and to support care leavers.
Involve Youth Service	National	Work with young Travellers; Centre-based Youth Work; LGBTQI; Minority Ethnic Groups; Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	To provide out of school youthwork activities primarily for young Travellers aged 10-25

Irish Girl Guides, Kinsale District	Kinsale and surrounding areas of Cork	Mainstream Youth Work; Arts; Centre-based Youth Work; Disability; LGBTQI; Social Change; Uniformed; Youth Justice.	To instil the Guiding ethos, teamwork, promote self-confidence, independence and world citizenship
Irish Second-Level Students' Union	National	Education; Social Change.	To provide support, training and assistance to second-level student councils and give students a platform through which the voices of the Irish Second-level students will be heard.
Leixlip Youth and Community Centre	Leixlip	Mainstream Youth Work.	Providing a space for the young people of Leixlip.
Little Red Kettle Theatre	Waterford City centre and suburbs	Arts; Minority Ethnic Groups; Travellers.	To engage with young people aged 10-24years, through arts-based projects
Loft Letterkenny, Donegal Youth Service/Foróige	Letterkenny and outlying areas	Mainstream Youth Work; Arts; Centre-based Youth Work; Young people in care or who are care experienced; Disability; LGBTQI; Minority Ethnic Groups; Travellers; Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	A support service for young people aged 12- 25, to engage in activities and personal development programmes and overcome difficulties in their lives.
Bonnybrook Centre, Sphere 17	Coolock	Mainstream Youth Work; Arts; Centre-based Youth Work; Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	Help young people address and meet their own needs.
Strive Donegal, Include Youth	Co. Donegal - Lifford, Castlefinn, St Johnston, Milford, Raphoe, Killea	Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	To deliver youth-led good relations, personal development and citizenship programmes to young people aged 14 to 24.
East Galway Youth Project, Youth Work Ireland Galway	Ballinasloe Co Galway	Mainstream Youth Work; Arts; Centre-based Youth Work; Young people in care or who are care experienced; Disability; LGBTQI; Minority Ethnic Groups; Social Change; Travellers; Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	Provide a safe space for young people to realise their full potential.
Advocacy & Youth Information Service (Cork region), Comhairlí na	Co. Cork	Youth Information; Digital Creativity; Mainstream Youth Work; Arts; Centre-based Youth Work; Disability; Faith-based; Homelessness; LGBTQI;	Youth information is a non-formal educational process that enables young people make informed decisions so that they can be fully active as citizens.

nÓg, YMCA Ireland		Minority Ethnic Groups; Social Change; Travellers; Work with 'at-risk' Young People; Youth Justice.	
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Focus Groups:

Focus groups with young people were arranged in conjunction with youth organisations who had responded to the survey and took place via video conferencing. These discussions sought to identify the impact the pandemic has had on them; the support and engagement they have had with their youth provision; what more the youth organisation can do to support them and what their concerns are for the future (see Appendix 2 for the focus group discussion guide).

All focus groups were carried out at the end of July/early August and given the summer holiday period it proved challenging to coordinate. Twelve organisations were approached however only four were able to facilitate focus groups. Some youth workers told us that many of the young people had 'Zoom fatigue' and did not want any extra digital engagement particularly as lockdown restrictions had eased by this stage.

Table 2: Focus Groups

Project/Organisation	No. of young people	Ages of young people
Curtain Call, Clondalkin Youth Service, Crosscare	4	2 x 18 years, 2 x 14 years
Irish Second-level Students' Union	3	3 x 17 years
Strive Donegal, Include Youth (2 focus groups facilitated)	5	i) 1 x 18 years, 2 x 17 years ii) 1 x 15 Years, 1 x 14 years
YMCA Cork Region	4	1 x 19 years, 1 x 20 years, 1 x21 years, 1 x25 years

4. Context

Ireland confirmed its first case of coronavirus on 29th February 2020⁵, which activated an exceptional national response to slow down the spread of the virus. On 12th March the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced all schools, colleges and childcare facilities were to close initially until the 29th March⁶, this date was extended on a number of occasions and at the time of writing, schools will not reopen until the new autumn term at the end of August. More and more facilities were asked to close and a mandatory order for people to stay at home was announced on 28th March.⁷ Youth provision, in line with schools, closed abruptly with little initial guidance on how they could continue support for young people.

Since the global spread of COVID-19 there has been substantial research conducted to identify the immediate and possible long-term impact on young people. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published a paper *'Youth and COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience'* (OECD, 2020) which looks at the impact of the crisis on young people (aged 15-24). The paper was informed by a survey carried out between 7th - 20th April 2020 involving 90 youth-led organisations from 48 countries. Another survey, *'Living, Working and COVID-19'* by Eurofound went live on 9th April publishing its first set of findings in May 2020 (Eurofound, 2020). During the summer, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland also commissioned a national consultation with young people to ascertain their experiences of COVID-19, focusing on the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and well-being.⁸

In the UK the National Youth Agency (NYA) published a report *'Out of Sight? Vulnerable young people: COVID-19 Response'* (NYA, 2020) which examined the impact of the virus on young people and the youth sector using data collated in March and April, including from helplines, sector reports and grassroots evidence. The Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot and YouthLink Scotland published a report *'Lockdown Lowdown: What young people in Scotland are thinking about COVID-19'* which presents the findings of a survey carried out with 2,421 young people across Scotland (Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot and YouthLink Scotland, 2020).

Within Ireland research has also looked at the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. The Irish Youth Foundation (IYF), a charitable trust dedicated to meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people, carried out a survey with 700 youth groups, after school clubs and sports clubs across the country (IYF, 2020). Alongside this IYF commissioned Amárach Research to conduct a tracking survey with marginalised teenagers and young adults (age 15-23) on the impact of the pandemic. The surveys found that mental health, isolation and education were the burning issues for most vulnerable young people.⁹ Young Social Innovators (YSI) and Amárach Research carried out a Youth 'Check In' Survey

⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2f75fd-statement-from-the-national-public-health-emergency-team-sat-29-feb/>

⁶ <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0312/1121820-coronavirus/>

⁷ <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0320/1124382-covid-19-ireland-timeline/>

⁸ Findings had not been published at time of writing.

⁹ <https://iyf.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/IYF-Generation-Pandemic-Release.pdf>

with teenagers (aged 16-19) across Ireland through an online survey designed to find out how they are coping in the midst of the pandemic (YSI & Amárach Research, 2020).

All of the above research collectively found that the pandemic is having negative effects on young people and predicts that the impact will be experienced long-term over years to come. Public health-focused research acknowledges that under 18s are proportionally less likely to have severe or life-threatening symptoms from the virus compared to older people (Public Health England, 2020), however, as an article published in the Irish Times in June 2020 highlighted:

“Though not generally as physically susceptible to coronavirus as older people, young people may well suffer most psychologically and economically as a consequence of the pandemic” (Freyne, 2020).

Mental Health

The OECD (2020) survey confirms significant psychological impacts of social distancing and quarantine measures on young people causing stress, anxiety and loneliness. Youth work professionals and young people themselves have been greatly concerned about the negative impact the pandemic has had on mental health. The NYA (2020) research reported increased mental health problems stating that over a million young people have self-reported mental health issues with a spike in calls to helplines where 84% are reporting worse mental health following school closures or being no longer able to access mental health support. In the Scottish ‘Lockdown Lowdown’ report findings include: 39% of young people stated they felt moderately or extremely concerned about their own mental well-being; increased issues with social isolation, mental health, anxiety, unsafe home environments, loss of learning and social interaction; reduced access to youth work provision; increased demand on services; young people having less support for other issues beyond COVID-19 (Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot and YouthLink Scotland, 2020).

The IYF (2020) research found that 70% of youth workers predict that mental health issues will be areas for major long-term concern and 53% of young people surveyed have mental health concerns. The YSI ‘Youth Check-in survey’ (YSI & Amárach Research, 2020) found 53% of respondents were feeling anxious, stressed or depressed.

Education

The OECD (2020) research highlighted that closure of schools and universities has affected 1.5 billion children and young people worldwide. Its evidence shows that every week of school closure implies a loss in the development of human capital with significant long-term economic and social implications. This research also refers to another OECD study across 59 countries demonstrating that although most countries put in place alternative learning opportunities, just about half of the students were able to access all or most of the curriculum. A digital divide in connectivity and access to electronic devices risks further amplifying inequalities among young people during the pandemic. The NYA (2020) report highlights as few as 5% of young people are currently engaged in school and have limited or no access to youth work.

The IYF (2020) survey found that 35% of young people are concerned that they are falling behind in school and 47% of youth workers are concerned that the young people they are working with are falling behind with studies and schoolwork because of Covid-19. The IYF survey found 9 out of 10 young people were missing school.

Economic Impact

The OECD (2020) has highlighted that for young people the disruption in their access to education and employment opportunities as a result of economic downturn is likely to put the younger generation on a much more volatile trajectory in finding and maintaining jobs and income. Young People were already experiencing difficulties due to the lasting effects of the 2007-08 financial crash. There are difficult trade-offs between public health and economic considerations. Young people born between 1990 and 2005 have already experienced two major shocks – the financial crisis of 2008-09 and now the COVID-19 pandemic. This has long-lasting consequences for their health and other dimensions of wellbeing, access to decent employment and for opportunities ahead. The IYF survey found 40% of young people are worried about a recession and these concerns are reflected in the IYF (2020) report which shows that a substantial proportion of 64% of young people are concerned about the lack of employment opportunities and access to learning new skills that will arise with what they regard as an inevitable follow-on recession.

Personal and Social Impact

The NYA (2020) research highlighted one of their biggest concerns was the risk some young people would be faced by having to stay at home – over a million young people are at risk from any of the so-called ‘toxic trio’ of addiction, mental health, and domestic abuse and despite this, child protection referrals plummeted by 50% in some areas meaning young people were not going to have access to safety when necessary. The IYF (2020) research concurs with 39% of respondents experiencing social isolation and over one in five living with family conflict.

Youth Sector Response

Many young people rely heavily on the youth sector to give them support with the issues outlined above and given the impact of the pandemic there is arguably an even greater need for them to have access to youth work support. From a broader European perspective this creates a wider challenge for youth organisations as noted in a report published by the European Youth Forum, *‘The European Youth Blueprint to Recovery’*:

“It is worrying that youth organisations will have to overcome additional barriers to be able to do their work, provide quality youth work opportunities and foster meaningful youth participation, because of COVID-19. Exit strategies will have to prioritise essential youth services to reopen to avoid further negative impact on civic space, already at risk with economic downturn” (European Youth Forum, 2020).

The Guardian’s reporting of the NYA report reiterated this point stating,

“For many, youth clubs provide a vital lifeline offering somewhere to go, something to do and a trusted adult to talk to. But lockdown means youth

services, already decimated after a decade of austerity, are not easily able to meet this extra need for help...while voluntary, sector-run youth clubs and centres have shut their doors and are providing limited services online. Most street-based youth work has ceased” (Bawden, 2020).

NYA’s research estimates 1 in 5 youth clubs will not reopen. It called for an emergency youth fund highlighting that while digital support is better than no youth service at all, there are growing calls for youth centres to reopen. The report calls for youth services to be designated as key work, so that youth workers can provide face-to-face support to vulnerable young people.

At a worldwide level the OECD (2020) also found youth organisations have swiftly stepped in to disseminate information among their peers and help contain the spread of the virus. They report that youth services have provided access to educational, peer-to-peer contact, mental health advice and other programmes to support adolescents and young adults in confinement. These initiatives have been crucial to mitigate the closure of schools and support services, addressing loneliness and anxiety and promoting social cohesion. Around 3 in 4 organisations have created online campaigns to keep young members informed on the measures to protect themselves and others. More than half of organisations have turned to digital and online tools to provide practical advice to young people on how to deal with mental and physical health, stigma and discrimination. Youth organisations have been pivotal in ensuring the continuity of day to day activities especially for vulnerable groups.

The OECD report goes on to argue that partnerships will be necessary between the youth sector and governments when recovery measures are implemented because youth-led organisations have been active in building for recovery, sometimes in partnership with government. In the Irish context, it is imperative adequate resources are invested to enable the youth sector to do this and to respond to the needs of all young people. While further assessment would be necessary regarding relevance in the Irish context, YouthLink Scotland found that Government approaches and policies were preventing engagement with young people as reported in their survey findings on ‘The COVID-19 Crisis. Impact on Youth Work and Young People. A survey of Scotland’s Youth Work Sector Leaders’:

“Almost two thirds of youth workers working for councils are facing digital barriers in trying to connect in with young people. The problem is created by a range of factors, from corporate policy decisions, where councils are preventing staff from using relevant platforms where youth workers can connect with young people, through to poor IT infrastructure and the issue of data poverty, with young people not having access to smart phones, laptops and/or connectivity. The decision to prevent council staff from using Zoom and other online platforms, for example, has been particularly damaging to efforts to engage with young people online. Voluntary organisations have had more freedom to make changes, but require capital resources, training and extra staffing capacity to invest in this” (YouthLink Scotland, 2020).

The Council of Europe’s Advisory Council on Youth issued a statement on responses to the COVID-19 crisis (Advisory Council on Youth, 2020). It asks for funding agencies (private and

public), trusts and foundations to secure the sustainability of youth organisations which have already been facing financial challenges to be supported as they will play a crucial role in the recovery of civil society. The Advisory Council on Youth encourages close co-operation with National Youth Councils and other umbrella youth organisations:

“Youth Work remains an indispensable tool to support young people on lockdown, especially those who are particularly affected by the crisis, as well as to ensure healthy civil and economic recovery” (ibid.).

It is clear from the evidence reviewed that the youth sector will be vital in ensuring young people recover from the detrimental affects the pandemic has imposed on them. Youth workers will be instrumental in supporting young people to thrive in the future and to counter the negative impact on their personal and social development, their education, their future employment and their mental health. In the Irish context, it is imperative adequate resources are invested to enable the youth sector to do this and to respond to the needs of all young people.

NYCI’s online ‘check-in’ sessions

The NYCI facilitated 6 online ‘check-in’ sessions with approximately 75 youth workers from a wide range of voluntary sector organisations. A review of these sessions gives an initial insight into how youth workers responded to the pandemic and shows they responded quickly and creatively when they found their buildings had closed and in-person contact was not possible. Staff teams worked from home and moved meetings online. They discussed the importance of self-care and shared online meditations and mindfulness resources or did guided meditations together, and named approaches such as getting fresh air, walking, muting social media, shorter workdays if part-time, weekdays off to spend time with children as beneficial approaches.

Youth workers began to engage with young people directly using various means including text, email, phone-call, social media, online, contact with parents, writing a letter/invitation. Youth workers supported families by providing activities and resources that young people and families could access in their own time. There was a steep learning curve with experimentation with different platforms including Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Messenger, Houseparty, Zoom, Discord, Google Hangouts. Eventually some developed rules around online engagement with young people. In one group workers shared that *“staff broke up their service users into age groups, so that one person becomes familiar with the requirements and best digital platforms for that age group.”*

The check-ins also highlighted a number of limitations youth workers experienced. In relation to young people some felt uncomfortable using online engagements and some had limited digital access, devices were often shared between family members or were not adequate for online activity. Youth workers were also aware some had a lack of boundaries for example with photo sharing and there was an attempt to get group contracts in place so that young people understood boundaries and appropriate online behaviour. For youth workers themselves there were the same digital drawbacks; for some living rurally broadband was inadequate and digital skills needed to be developed. The online environment became overwhelming for some with a bombardment of messages and advice.

Youth Worker Learning During Lockdown

The discussions allowed youth workers to voice the learning they had experienced during the lockdown period. Some of their comments are listed below and show the benefits of reflective practice in developing effective professional youth work:

- Relationships are critical to ongoing engagement and the switch to digital youth work, *“it’s important that you know your group.”*
- Adaptation is necessary – smaller groups; learning as you go, experimentation; speed of adaptation; *“found so many avenues and ways to engage with young people.”*
- *“No one trick will fit all”* – requires flexibility.
- Pandemic presents an opportunity to develop digital skills, digital youth work practice – upskilling.
- Paradox of encouraging young people to use digital devices to engage whereas previously youth workers would have been discouraging young people from a lot of screen time. Youth workers now also tracking engagement with analytics.
- Importance of youth workers doing the activities they give out to the young people.
- Some will continue aspects of digital youth work or carry forward some digital engagement and online groups: *“These platforms are a way to continue working with young people when they’re not in the centre.”*
- *“Get your head around all the controls that YOU have, explore all the measures you have available to you e.g. don’t use your name, using passwords and invitation.”*

The check-ins reiterated the research findings above observing the same negative impact on young people especially those who are most vulnerable. They named increased isolation, feeling unsafe in the family home, lack of privacy and educational inequalities. Youth workers valued the NYCI facilitating the check-ins. They had a sense of feeling empowered and felt a part of something bigger. One youth worker said, *“just to feel you’re doing your best, this space was great to share and learn from each other and that you’re trusted that what you’re doing is ok, get a sense that we are all in the same boat.”*

5. Findings

Section 5 presents findings in relation to the 3 research questions underpinning the research:

1. How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during the pandemic?
3. What are the limitations of working in this way?

5.1 Impact of COVID-19 on young people

Before outlining the findings under the above questions this section will briefly consider the effects of the pandemic on young people. The negative impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives as highlighted by the participants in this study and reflected in similar findings from wider research cited in Section 4 is significant. It is the youth work sector that will play a key role in responding to the needs of all young people and in mitigating against the negative impact of the pandemic on their lives both now and in the long-term.

Mental Health

Feedback emphasised the high level of concern over the negative impact on young people's mental health. The sudden withdrawal of school and youth work provision was named in several interviews as a key factor on mental health meaning young people were left at home all the time increasing isolation and loneliness. As the following quotes reflect, for some young people who were already vulnerable or at a disadvantage the pandemic has only served to compound existing mental health problems.

"Full gambit of issues – from young people with not enough to eat, feeling really lonely, mental health issues, right up to suicide ideation, suicide – we lost some young people, young people engaged in sex work without access to condoms and health clinics" (CEO).

"The feeling of isolation is a big part of it, young people in care experience a lot of isolation anyway, but the pandemic has added to that ...not having family access was massive for them all – not being able to see parents, brothers, sisters" (Programme Manager).

"We lost the opportunity to do our exams. Our mental health sort of suffered because we've no kind of distractions, you're just constantly in the house thinking. And also, the worry of it, you're worrying like about things like 'aw I've to go to the dentist like what if I caught it going out" (Young Person).

Participants in one of the focus groups stressed that the impact of negative news stories or arguments on social media was draining. One youth worker talked about the effect of conspiracy theories on some young people:

“...some young people, some very young – 11 years old – had got caught up in believing conspiracy theories – they were expressing fear of the illuminati, that the virus is all tied up with paedophilia, stuff about Madeline McCann. It was very hard to challenge that what they were saying wasn’t true. They’ve got to a very dark place” (Project Worker).

Many aspects of young people’s lives have contributed to an increase in anxiety including worry about their friends and families getting the virus and financial worries:

“In general, there is a lot of anxiety. Anxiety has been on the increase over the last couple of years, but this has completely accelerated that. A lot of worry about their family and grandparents and about getting ill themselves. And worry about the future for transition year pupils and around the Leaving Cert, some 17-18-year olds were getting temporarily laid off, so anxiety around money. We’ve had a lot of families where the parents were temporarily laid off so there were young people taking on the family stress about finances and putting food on the table” (Programme Manager).

Education

Young people expressed concern about the uncertainty around Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations and the impact this will have on their futures. They were not informed about the process for allocating grades until well after schools were closed. Schools tend to provide emotional support to young people which for many terminated when the school buildings closed. There was also concern around the conditions for reopening schools and whether that will be full-time:

“Impact on education has been awful – we were just focusing on leaving and junior certs students but now we’re looking at reopening of schools...not a lot of support and very differing levels of support between schools both in terms of academic support but if they wanted to talk to the guidance counsellor or the school chaplain things weren’t in place for students to get that” (Project Worker).

“I’m in that stage of wondering what’s going to be happening with my Leaving Certificate and also how I’m going to be going back to school” (Young Person).

“...I’ve seen first-hand that education has had the biggest impact and has been impacted the most for me especially during the start of quarantine when we were still in school, it did have a large impact on the process of education, how effective education was and will have a lasting impact certainly on my secondary school experience” (Young Person).

Economic impact

Young people who are already marginalised and experiencing poverty became even more isolated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. Digital poverty has contributed to the isolation of many young people. One young person shared that they had a lot of friends who lost jobs, were unable to pay rent and had to move home.

“The other issue linking with that is digital poverty where parents or young people don’t have smartphones or tablets etc. So, they haven’t all been able to see each other visually” (Young Person).

Personal and social impact

The lack of social contact had a detrimental effect on young people. The lack of structure and routine did not help young people function and ultimately had a negative impact both physically and emotionally:

“Many of the young people are struggling with a lack of structure and routine. They’re staying up late at night and up late during the day – some would have been struggling with that before the pandemic but more are as a result of it – also, young people not having any kind of sense of purpose to their days” (Programme Manager).

Some already vulnerable young people became even more susceptible to unhealthy influences. One young person reported that they observed an increase in drinking among their friends:

“I found for some of my friends they started drinking and drinking very heavily because they had nothing else to do – I thankfully went the opposite direction and stopped drinking at all. I just don’t like it so that was a positive that came out of it. But I know for others certain vices would have become much more prevalent and that’s very worrying” (Young Person).

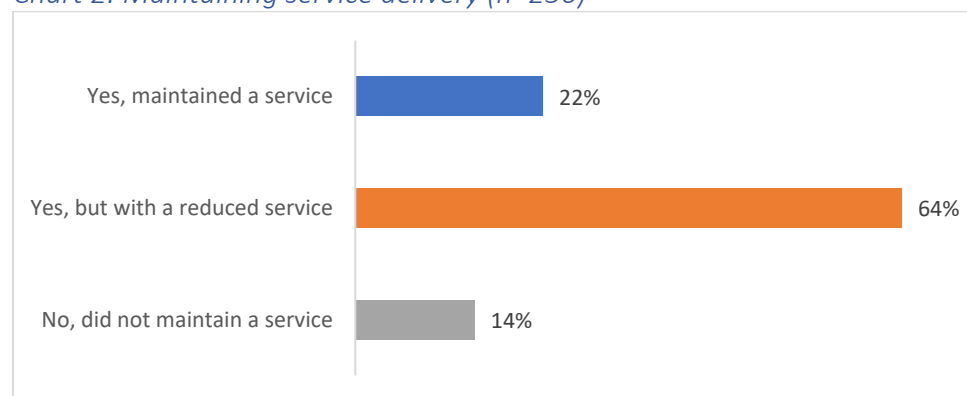
5.2 How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Survey Data

Maintaining a Service

The survey asked respondents if their project was able to continue delivering a service during the pandemic lockdown. As indicated by Chart 2, 22% of respondents were able to maintain a full service while the majority of projects were able to continue but with a reduction in their service delivery (64%). 14% of respondents could not continue to provide a service during the pandemic lockdown.

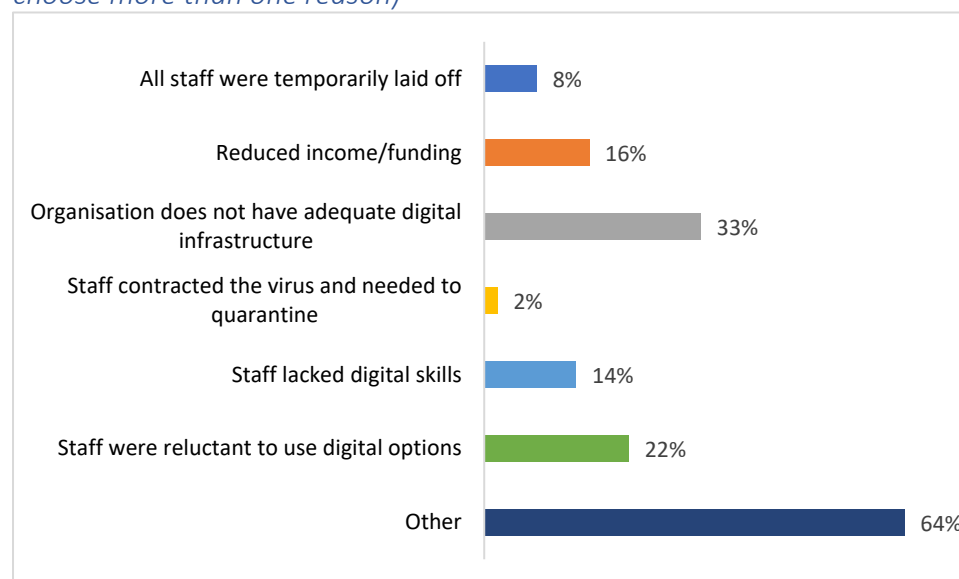
Chart 2: Maintaining service delivery (n=256)



Q: Have you been able to maintain a service during the pandemic (12th March – 12th June during lockdown)?

Chart 3 outlines the reasons some organisations would not continue. One in three respondents stated that they couldn't maintain service delivery because they did not have adequate digital infrastructure (33%).

Chart 3: Reasons projects could not continue during lockdown (n=36; respondents could choose more than one reason)



Q: What prevented you continuing your project/service provision?

Most respondents cited alternative reasons than listed in the suggested categories (64%); the majority of these were due to the closure of buildings, this was particularly difficult for Arts organisations because of the requirement for face-to-face rehearsal space. Some projects made the decision to close because of government directives and for some there was a heavy reliance on volunteers who could not fill the gap via online engagement:

“Our rehearsal venue was closed, and our concert was cancelled due to Covid restrictions” (Arts/Music Tutor).

“As per all government restrictions we imposed a mandatory closure of our facilities and service provided, ensuring that the health and wellbeing of all members was No1 priority and prevent the risk of spread of the virus” (Arts/Music Tutor).

“Many volunteers had to cocoon” (Youth Worker).

“Some Volunteers reluctant to engage digitally or with [the] provided challenges to our YP and [we’re] waiting for face to face measures come September” (Youth Worker).

One organisation cited the reason was due to staff contracting the virus however this respondent highlighted that while the project could not continue, contact was still maintained with young people and parents through another worker:

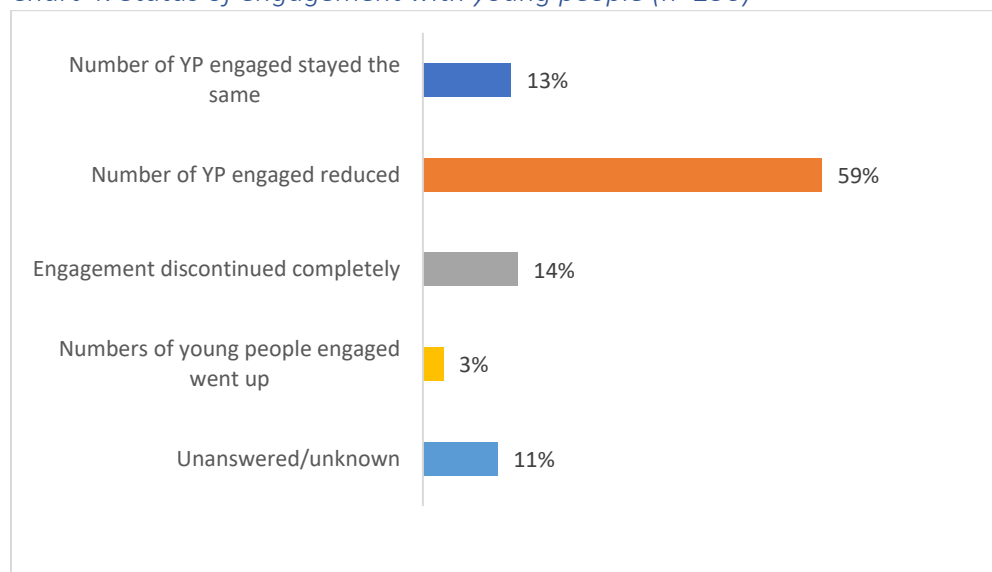
“[Name of organisation] is only funded for three part-time youth workers to work with the Y.P of [name of town]. One of the staff contracted Covid-19 and had to cocoon. The other staff kept in contact with young people and parents by phone and social media as well as some street work. Because we were not allowed to have any young people in our building and following the Government recommendations this reduced our daily contact” (Youth Worker).

Engagement with Young People

Respondents were asked to indicate the number of young people they regularly engaged prior to the pandemic lockdown and how many were engaged during the lockdown. Chart 4 shows that 59% of projects (n=151) had a reduction in the number of young people they were working with. 13% projects (n=33) maintained engagement with the same number of young people as before the lockdown and 3% (n=9) saw an increase in numbers. 14% (n=36) of projects were unable to continue any engagement.¹⁰

¹⁰ 3 of the 36 projects did not indicate the number of young people the project engaged with prior to lockdown and therefore these are accounted for in the figure for unanswered/unknown.

Chart 4: Status of engagement with young people (n=256)



Q: How many young people were regularly engaged with the project or local unit before the pandemic hit?

Approximate figures given by projects responding to the survey provide further insight into the number of young people who were not engaging with youth provision during the lockdown period and a breakdown is outlined in Table 3. For the 151 respondents who indicated a reduction in the number of young people they engaged with, this equated to a drop of 70% moving from approximately 59,822 to 18,391 young people. The 36 projects which were unable to continue engagement with young people represented approximately 6,896 young people (three of these respondents did not indicate the number of young people they worked with). It is important to underline that these figures are not representative of the entire youth work sector, but they do provide an indication of the scale of the potential reduction in engagement levels in youth provision. It is likely the 'stay at home' measure introduced on 28th March and the prior closure of schools with a move to online learning will have had an impact on young people's capacity to engage in youth provision. In addition, it is possible that young people may have engaged with a different service other than the service they attended prior to the pandemic.

Table 3: Numbers of young people engaged during lockdown

Status of engagement	No of Projects	No of YP prior to lockdown	No of YP during lockdown
Number of YP engaged stayed the same	33	5,496	5,496
Number of YP engaged reduced	151	59,822	18,391 This represents a drop of 70%.
Engagement discontinued completely	36 (3 organisations did not indicate the number of yp they	6896	0

	worked with prior to lockdown)		
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The survey indicates that some projects saw an increase in engagement in virtual activities. Four projects saw an increase of between 2 to 5 young people. Another organisation which operates a case load system kept similar numbers to pre-lockdown and were able to recruit around 10 new young people each month. SpunOut.ie, a national online youth information provider for young people aged 16-25, saw an average monthly increase in their readership from 136,983 to 156,000. Kerry County Council reported that before the pandemic they would usually engage at least 200 young people between film, creative writing and dance activities, however they reached 500 extra young people via their Cruinniú na nÓg¹¹ programme. Fresh Film also increased their reach from 1,000 to approximately 1,500 young people via online platforms.

Data from Interviews & Focus Groups

The information yielded from the interviewees and focus groups provides a more nuanced representation of how youth organisations responded to the pandemic. This section provides an overview of that response while section 5.3 explores specific youth work approaches to engage with young people in greater detail.

Remote Working

All organisations represented by the interviewees immediately stopped all face-to-face meetings and events with staff making the move to remote working. One of the organisations was unable to continue any kind of engagement with young people because its youth worker had recently moved from being a paid worker to a volunteer and the interviewee, the centre manager, had taken on the additional responsibility for the organisation's informal youth club which was lacking in staff capacity and felt that their activities could not be replicated online.

The picture that emerges from the interviews and focus groups is one of proactive availability on the part of these organisations. Most interviewees took the initiative in trying to reach out to young people and families to let them know of their availability by means other than face-to-face:

"We were sending out texts and making phone calls to families saying that normal groups were stopped but we're still here" (Programme Manager).

Online Adaptation

Of the organisations represented by the interviewees, several services immediately went online via Zoom and other platforms, while others went online after making contact with young people via text, phone, email etc. One of the organisations we interviewed used the initial phase to take a step back and put the necessary measures in place. Apart from the informal youth club mentioned above there was just one other group from the interviews that did not do any kind of online meetups with young people. This was because they were

¹¹ Cruinniú na nÓg is Ireland's national day of free creativity for children and young people under 18 and took place virtually in 2020: <https://cruinniu.creativeireland.gov.ie/news/cruinniu-na-nog-to-take-place-on-13th-june-2020/>

a volunteer-led project and lacked capacity to offer an online programme. In their case, the task of managing work, parenting and home-schooling responsibilities – that many volunteers – encountered curtailed the time they could contribute to facilitating online programmes. Furthermore, two of the leaders live in rural areas with unreliable Wi-Fi.

Engagement via phone, text, social media

Some services placed emphasis on engagement via phone, text, social media output, and some were proactive in contacting every young person as much as possible. Most of the interviewees worked for organisations operating a membership-based system however one of the projects operated on an ‘open access’ basis meaning that they only held contact details for specific programmes or for 1-1 mentees. This created a significant challenge in trying to switch to digital engagement when they were unable to reach young people directly. EPIC¹² and BeLonG To Youth Service¹³ established dedicated helplines and YMCA Cork – as part of a collaboration with YMCA Ireland, SpunOut.ie, Youth Work Ireland and Crosscare – established an online Youth Information Chat Service.¹⁴

Outreach

Some projects continued their outreach services e.g. through the provision of detached work, socially distant house visits or delivery of activity packs as a form of outreach and connection. One of the interviewees explained how they were prepared to offer emergency support to young people on a 1-1 basis as necessary. A few of the interviewees (representing Involve, Co. Longford Youth Service and Clondalkin Youth Service, Crosscare) told us of how they facilitated ‘in person’ contact in the outdoors as the lockdown eased with compliance to COVID-19 measures, for example, through fishing trips, community gardening activity, and cycling.

Emphasis on Emotional Support

Cognisant of the challenging circumstances created by the lockdown restrictions, a number of the projects reported that they had placed a particular emphasis on supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of the young people they engaged with. For example, they attended to young people’s coping skills and supporting them to manage stress and anxiety. Our desk research scan of member organisations showed that almost two thirds generated social media or website content in relation to health and wellbeing whether signposting to organisations, sharing advice and resources from expert organisations, posting during mental health awareness week, promoting their activities as part of self-care or sharing inspirational quotes.

“We’ve had to focus more on supporting their mental health, giving them some kind of routine, making sure they’re still able to keep learning in some way that’s meaningful” (Programme Manager).

Engagement with Parents

Some of the interviewees engaged directly with parents as a way of making contact with young people whether through sending specific resources for group activities to parents’

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/epicireland/photos/pcb.4043001662437238/4043001369103934/>

¹³ <https://www.belongto.org/we-are-here-for-you/>

¹⁴ <https://spunout.ie/education/article/youth-information-chat>

phones via WhatsApp or email or through sending out activity packs. Two projects reported that they had greater engagement with parents and families as a result of the lockdown with one of these becoming more involved in family support work, while another project found that they had less contact with parents because without face-to-face sessions they weren't physically seeing parents doing drop-offs or collections.

A couple of services were able to establish completely new groups during the lockdown period. These will be discussed in greater detail in section 5.3 of this report. A couple of the projects were able to continue receiving new referrals to their services, however as discussed in section 5.4 this has been challenging.

Listening to Service Users

Some services made use of surveys to facilitate contact, to assess needs, to learn about what was working with their provision and adapt accordingly, and to provide data for advocacy work and we cite a couple of specific examples in section 6:

"We did an online survey around mid-May to ask the young people what they thought about how we were operating as a service, what have you found beneficial about engaging with us, what medium do you prefer like WhatsApp, Zoom etc? From that survey their response was that they liked the quizzes and the interactive things like that" (Programme Manager).

Many groups tried to be as responsive as possible to young people's needs and feedback. The work of BeLonG To stands out in terms of how its staff saw a picture of two clear groups of young people emerge:

"There were young people who had access to all technology and enough privacy to contact us and were checking in regularly – they were very, very lonely, really missing peer connections. Over half reported living in unsupportive households, but even if in a supportive household that lack of connection with peers, with young people with similar life experience, who they can be themselves with, that isolation was acutely felt and some mental health spiralled. Then there were vulnerable or hard to reach young people – some with not enough access to food, a young person engaging in sex work, some with no Wi-Fi, no privacy, or in abusive or unaccepting household and therefore hard to engage" (CEO).

In response, BeLonG To tailored their services accordingly by continuing online engagement with young people in the first category and creating a specific process to support young people new to their services to get into online groups. The organisation also opened their doors to young people in the second category. In relation to opening the service, BeLonG To used the NYCI/DCYA roadmap and complied with all the necessary public health measures in place. They intend to maintain this approach for the time being.

Young people's perspectives of the youth sector's overall response

The young people interviewed in the focus groups were very complementary of the youth work they engaged in during the COVID period. When asked what it would have been like if

the project they were part of had not done what it did during the pandemic, two of the young people in one of the focus groups shared the following responses:

“We’d have been really stuck, we’d have been stuck looking at a wall... To be fair, I’m not even being biased or anything they have done everything they could do because they were always texting you and looking to chat, and if we couldn’t they would always rearrange it” (Young Person).

“It has helped connect with other young people. There was nothing they could have done better; they are the best I’ve ever had” (Young Person).

Overall, the young people we spoke to shared very positive experiences of youth work during this time and felt that youth organisations were responsive to their needs and provided vital interaction:

“I think youth organisations were able to recognise that young people were feeling lonely during this time and not able to meet up with friends so they acted quickly to move their events online so that students and young people could interact with them and not feel disconnected from the environment” (Young Person).

“I think it has been amazing we have been able to put everything online and the technology is there to do all this -it’s great the likes of SpunOut is there online for young people and counselling services are there because I know COVID has taken its toll on young people and it’s just been brilliant that they’ve been able to help” (Young Person).

“They’ve had activities near enough every day and if not at least once a week that we could go online, it gives us something to do. Like we got to play bingo, they did a quiz night, and even sometimes just a zoom call for a catch up and your mentor would text you to see how you’re feeling just giving you that someone outside of your own family to talk to” (Young Person).

In fact, one of the young people felt that their involvement in youth programmes increased:

“I was surprised how quickly organisations mobilised. My first thought was that it would go down in involvement and that kind of thing but if anything my involvement was able to go up and I was able to get more involved than previously and I think that says a lot about how previously youth organisations might not have been taking advantage of online communications as much as they could have been to include people who might not have been able to get transport or might not have the funds to get to these things where I know a lot of these things are prefunded and stuff but sometimes people just can’t afford it and I think moving forward looking at that it could be a very good opportunity for growth for a lot of organisations” (Young Person).

Factors that enabled organisations to respond effectively

As a result of the interviews we were able to identify a number of factors that contributed to effective responses by youth groups/organisations:

Resourcing by organisations with a national headquarters for volunteer-led groups

For example, through our desk research we discovered that Boys' Brigade encouraged companies in Ireland to use the #BBATHOME resources¹⁵ and similarly Girls' Brigade developed resources for GB@Home¹⁶. In addition, some scouting and guiding organisations ran various national initiatives and then invited local units to encourage their young people to take part at home e.g. 'Camp-at-home' weekends, and to share photos via social media.

Links, networking & partnerships with other organisations

A number of the interviewees mentioned a variety of partnership initiatives such as supporting young people to take part in PRIDE activities or the Pieta House Sunrise Appeal. One of the project coordinators we spoke to talked about being part of Youth Work Ireland's Innovative Practice Committee which was established to enable organisations to explore tools being used to engage with young people online. Members of this committee used a 'Trello' board to share practices and the interviewee emphasised the value of peer support from other agencies and youth organisations. In addition, as their organisation works with young people in Direct Provision, they joined the Irish Refugee Asylum Network and found this particularly valuable in terms of keeping up-to-date with latest developments and keeping these young people informed:

"Since the pandemic I've joined the Irish Refugee Asylum Support Network, so I've been able to see what's going on with all the [direct provision] centres, so we have been keeping the lads up to date with transfers, masks, hand sanitiser and linking in with centre management"
(Programme Manager).

Another project coordinator mentioned the value of being part of an organisation operating a variety of social supports including food and homeless services. Her team was able to collaborate effectively with these services as well as other community groups at the local level:

"Some staff weren't redeployed but helped to lead local community responses – we started hearing about families struggling with food, so we linked in with local and [internal] supports and looked at delivering food hampers, activity packs and resources for young people" (Programme Manager).

ICT infrastructure

One interviewee's organisation had in previous years invested in ICT infrastructure so that they had all the necessary hardware and software. Most of its staff were trained accordingly. They had their database and cloud set up. It was a secure system and GDPR compliant therefore everything was in place to enable workers to work from home. This

¹⁵ <https://boys-brigade.org.uk/bbathome/>

¹⁶ <https://www.girlsbrigadeirl.ie/gbathome/>

made transition to remote working much easier. A survey respondent also appreciated the benefit of having a remote access option in place:

“In recent years we were lucky to have a remote access option set up by the technical support company. This option came in to its own during COVID and I have access to all my usual online files and resources and emails when logged on” (Youth Worker).

Already established relationships in local communities

There were two organisations we spoke to where the value of having already established relationships in local communities and with particular marginalised communities was vital in providing an effective response:

“You needed – especially when working with more disadvantaged and marginalised young people – you need that connection in the community – the contact needs to be already established. A lot of youth organisations struggle in their engagement with young travellers. They’ll have a policy where they don’t do house visits and community work, they want the young people to come voluntarily to the club, but the young people from those communities potentially don’t feel welcome to walk into a building like that, but secondly you have to have trust with the families, parents don’t trust their young people are going to be safe in your space. A very standard organic way of working for us is that reach into the community because otherwise it just won’t work” (CEO).

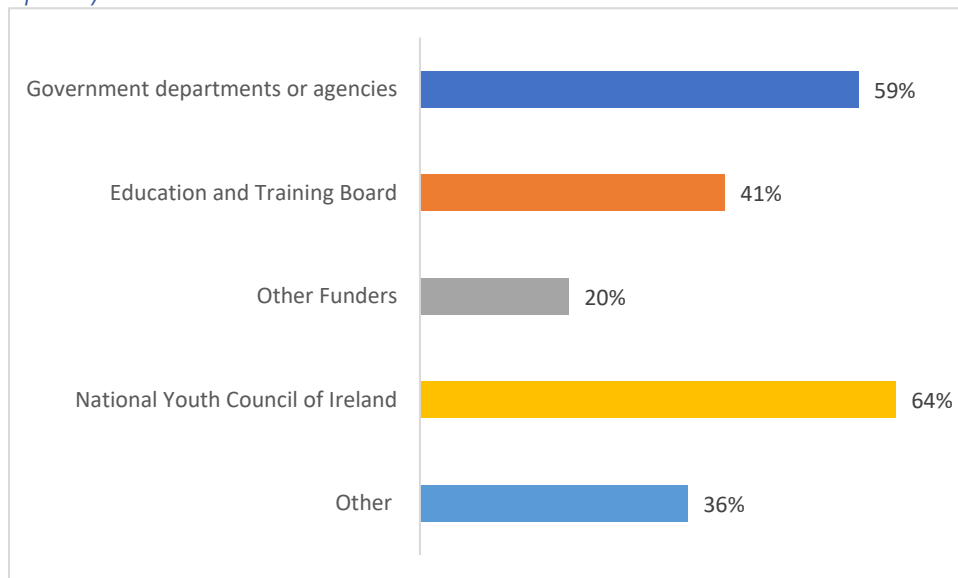
This enabled such services to be an effective conduit and to partner effectively with social services:

“Where we had any issues, we were able to link back in with social workers or with the guards to say we were worried about these young people. We also linked in with the HSE in the area. They had established Roma groups. We had already translated posters ourselves and delivered them by hand prior to that, but in conjunction with HSE we asked that if the youth service staff could go to the Roma families because we had the relationship established, that was agreed in our area and worked really well because it wasn’t as much of a threat than if HSE staff had done it. We had a lot of contact there and continued a detached format every week with them in their space” (Programme Manager).

Importance of support & guidance from external agencies

Some of the projects we heard from felt that NYCI was very proactive and appreciated the support that was made available in terms of guidance, resources and the roadmap for youth services. According to the survey, 64% of respondents received support from the NYCI and 59% from Government departments or agencies - see Chart 5. Other agencies that were mentioned in the surveys and interviews included the Department of Children & Youth Affairs, the Wheel, ETB, HSE, the Irish Development Education Association, Charities Institute, Eurodesk and the Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force. Projects also received support from other voluntary and youth sector agencies.

Chart 5: External support (n=228, 28 unanswered; respondents could choose more than one option)



Q: What external organisations/agencies have you received support or advice from?

“Similar to the NYCI... other umbrella agencies provided very strong supports online most notably The Wheel, Irish Development Education Association and Eurodesk. Other youth organisations continue to collaborate with programme staff on youth information as usual and this is also a very significant support to the project” (Youth Worker).

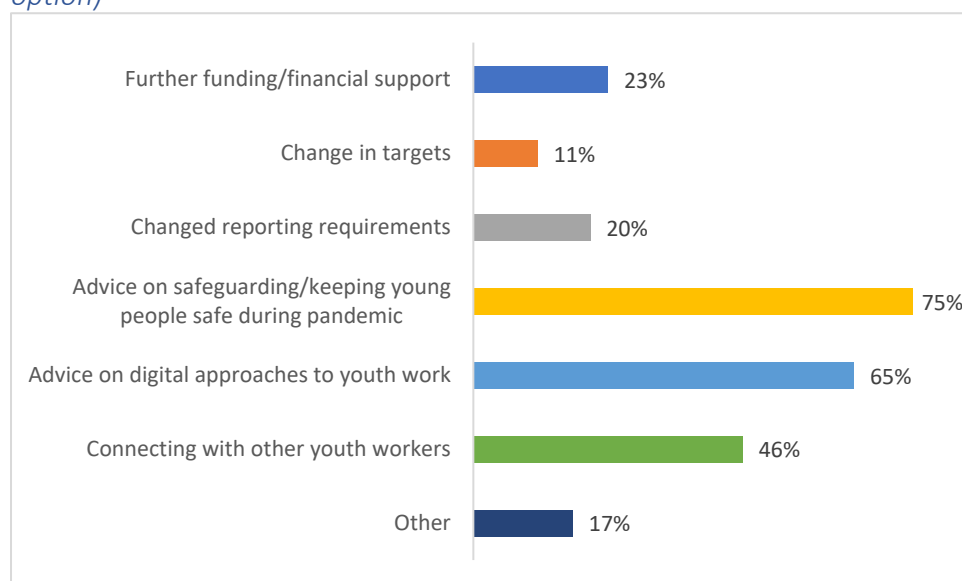
“The Wheel, Charities Institute of Ireland, Remote Working experts and blogs, coach” (Youth Worker).

“Southern Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force” (Youth Worker).

“Galway Rural Development were in constant touch with health advice and advice on how to get back to work going forward” (Youth Worker).

Regarding the type of support received as Chart 6 shows 75% of respondents said they received advice on safeguarding/keeping young people safe during pandemic. 65% got advice on digital approaches to youth and 46% accessed help to connect with other youth workers.

Chart 6: Type of support (n=228, 28 unanswered; respondents could choose more than one option)



Q: What support did you receive from these organisations?

NYCI were commended by respondents for playing a key leadership role for the youth work sector during the pandemic in terms of guidance and support. The officials in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs were also acknowledged for the role it played to support the sector during this time. In relation to the sort of support youth workers received the following quotations reflect the nature and scope of the support provided:

“The guidelines from DCYA and NYCI on the roadmap were hugely helpful – it was easy to understand, and everybody could know what to do and when to do it. That was one of the most helpful things. We managed to keep up to speed with all of it” (CEO).

“NYCI was great with training and guidance around online stuff. In the first couple of weeks we were winging it and trying to do things as safely as possible. Then when the guidance and documents came through that put our minds at ease” (Programme Manager).

“It’s been good, on the NYCI mailing list, very quick response at the start of lockdown with 4-5 emails – they were brilliant with links to resources and we were able to signpost stuff to young people – don’t know if they ever used it but it was good to have it to share e.g. being able to virtually visit galleries etc. NYCI were very quick off the mark” (Project Worker).

“I can’t remember a time when things were so positive with the department – a sense of recognition and acknowledgement of the worth and importance of youth work, and the critical role it plays as a safety net for young people, especially vulnerable young people. especially with schools closed, teachers don’t have the same skills to be able to engage with vulnerable young people. Even within the leadership of the

Department we felt an appreciation and acknowledgement of that – really supportive, good about checking in with us” (CEO).

One interviewee observed a more collegial and collaborative way of working in their relationships with external agencies:

“The roadmap has been really helpful, other NYCI resources, great sense of collegiality, a lot of learning from each other, sharing with each other. The Wheel, Charities Institute, members resources are free – guidance, great sense of community and people pulling together – we would like to maintain that” (CEO).

Just one of the interviewees reflected a level of disappointment with follow-up and there were a couple of comments on the need for quicker responses to provide training in specific online platforms, and the need for greater clarity sooner about the roadmap. This may indicate the need for funding to provide more practical supports to navigate the changing circumstances.

“There was a NYCI youth worker chat at the beginning, linked in with each other, that was ok, but I didn’t get any follow-up after that, it fell off and didn’t go anywhere. Now with the reopening bit, roadmaps, a lot of them didn’t specify youth services, we had to guess where we fit in, the last one cites youth services but prior we had to guess. The DCYA roadmap can’t be used across all our youth services. We don’t have any spaces we can make safe to bring young people in without going online. If detached work, the reality was that there were probably some young people out and about, if we’d been able to go and do more detached work” (Programme Manager).

“DCYA road map came too late for our organisation. We had already done our own reopening plan following government guidelines. This was very time consuming and nearly isolating as not many other organisations were at the same stage as us” (Youth Worker).

Importance of understanding from funders

Some interviewees said that their funders understood the extraordinary circumstances and that there would be delays with completing projects or reaching targets and outcomes, but some also recognised they would have lower numbers.

“[There was] an understanding that the emphasis had to change, that it wasn’t going to be work as normal, they’ve [funder] been very well aware of how different programmes and projects have responded” (CEO).

“Our ETB Youth Officer has always been flexible. Obviously, our numbers of engagement through face-to-face on Zoom would be down, they’re there on the phone calls, but in the last month the numbers would definitely be low...DCYA was good to acknowledge that youth workers were adapting but a statement that they were expecting our outcomes and numbers to change, we heard bits and pieces but there was no collective statement on it” (Programme Manager).

Flexibility & good communication within organisations

A few of the interviewees noticed how greater internal flexibility around working hours was really helpful for staff with home-schooling and parenting responsibilities in the transition to work from home.

“The big thing was to make sure we were all in communication with each other and there was a lot more flexibility around our working patterns. 9-5 suits me but doesn’t for some of my colleagues, some were working late at night instead. It’s great to hear that, we’re a small charity, we’re trusted in what we do. The flexibility and communication have been the big things for us” (Programme Manager).

There was also an appreciation of the merits of thinking creatively and experimenting with programme delivery:

“It’s definitely been challenging. We’ve had to think more creatively and flexibly. We can’t do everything through Zoom because that doesn’t work either. We’ve had to think how to keep the programme running in a meaningful way. We’ve had to rethink a lot of things” (Programme Manager).

Key challenges/implications faced by organisations in responding:

Section 5.4 will provide a more in-depth examination of the limitations groups experienced in the switch to digital youth work activities, however it is worth highlighting here that some of the broad organisational implications and challenges faced by projects in making their response to the pandemic relate to structural barriers. For example, as one survey respondent puts it:

“A lot [of challenges]. Staff working remotely - child care implications. working remotely with young people rather than in person. Upskilling staff, up dating child protection guidelines, reimagining projects on line, cancelling events, rescheduling and stress on working in increasing uncertainty” (Youth Worker).

The world changed overnight, and this required an immediate response triggering a whole set of adaptations, cancellations, programme amendments and re-imaginings, rescheduling, policies and procedures updates – all in a very short space of time. Staff had to face into the uncertainty, move quickly and learn “a whole new way of working literally overnight” as one survey respondent described it, and another commented,

“Overnight a very thought out work plan became useless and a new way of work had to be developed whilst trying to set people up to work from home, close the building while still having to manage it in some shape and keep it safe. Trying to engage in new ways of work while trying to ensure we were doing so in a safe best practice way” (Youth Worker).

Some groups admitted thinking initially that the lockdown would be short-term and last only a few weeks rather than stretching for months:

“When we finished in March, we thought we still would have the summer for activities. We didn’t realise it would go on for longer... It was because it was so sudden, and we weren’t sure ourselves what was going to happen. We shut down completely and it took us 2-3 weeks to realise this was going to be an ongoing thing and how were we going to go about it”
(Volunteer Youth Leader).

Once the public health measures began to relax there seemed to be a tacit expectation that all organisations would have the capacity to ensure COVID-19 compliance in their facilities, but we heard from at least one community organisation where the centre manager felt isolated in trying to adhere to guidelines:

“Because we are independent and don’t have a parent organisation we’re really out there on our own as in we’re not getting guidance or following someone’s guidance from up above – so we’re kind of waiting to see what others are doing first and making our decisions based on that, obviously the youth council (NYCI) and others are sending out lots of information but for us we just don’t have the resources to implement some of those things – as in people resources and financial resources” (Programme Manager).

Adaptation to working from home was a significant adjustment for many youth workers and had a knock-on effect on how they managed work-life boundaries and team collaboration as well as how they dealt with having less opportunities informal support and interaction with colleagues.

“We had to change our line management and check-in processes – much more people minding with remote working because a lot of the informal support, info, advice etc [was gone], had to be much more structured. Plus, everyone is still going through the pandemic, not like normal working from home, we were working from home in a global pandemic. We put a lot of thought and energy into that, it still takes up a huge amount of my role”
(CEO).

“It was practical stuff for staff – having IT stuff at home, not having daily contact with colleagues face-to-face, bouncing stuff off each other isn’t happening as much because you have to make an effort to make a phone call, that ‘water cooler’ support isn’t happening. Time and parents at home with children – a practical thing that wasn’t taken into account”
(Programme Manager).

“Our whole team has become disconnected. I have had little or no contact with a few team members” (Youth Worker).

“I miss the diversity of the working day and the out of office into the community visits and meetings. I miss the person to person and team interaction by being at home” (Youth Worker).

Organisations faced a host of technical issues including staff members contending with poor connectivity in their homes or poor mobile phone signal; the need to get quickly up to speed on the security of different online platforms; staff without equipment – there were

instances where some workers did not have a work laptop and were trying to do their jobs using only their phones; a lack of storage space for homeworking; staff lacking strong IT skillsets to facilitate digital youth engagement.

“Staff didn't have access to IT equipment that they could use to work from home” (Youth Worker).

“I miss some of the hard copy materials that the physical office provides including a printing option” (Youth Worker).

Managing staffing levels was highlighted as an issue in relation to best practices, particularly safeguarding, and also in terms of making effective responses in the crisis. One of the interviewees highlighted that some colleagues were redeployed internally to homelessness or food services in other parts of their organisation – some on a part-time basis – and so they were juggling between their redeployment activities and ensuring contact with young people. This was accepted as being responsive to need in the circumstances and they were able to make it work:

“With redeployments it was a bit of a juggling act trying to get in touch with young people, and then people were eager to get back to youth work once restrictions were being lifted” (Programme Manager).

By contrast the survey results indicated that where there were redeployments some youth workers felt they were having to fight to maintain engagement efforts with young people:

“[Name of Organisation] taking a one size fits all approach to staff from youth work services being redeployed to work in other services without first considering the crucial work being carried out to engage young people that would then stop if all staff were redeployed. There seemed to be an assumption made that youth workers we are "at home doing nothing" and rather than checking to see what work the youth services were doing by speaking to the youth workers, decisions to redeploy staff were made based off this assumption until youth workers pushed back and advocated for their young people's provisions to continue” (Youth Worker).

Contacting young people may have been difficult for drop-in services operating on an open access basis rather than a membership-based system and one of the interviewees in this situations felt stymied in trying to offer a service to young people without being able to make direct contact and another reflected that even with an information service young people need to know that it's there in the first place:

“I'm not allowed to use Facebook to contact the young people. We're discouraged from looking for young people via social media. Sometimes if you're concerned about the welfare of a young person, that is the go-to means if you've no other means of contacting them. That's the biggest challenge we face – the vast majority of those who use the centre we don't have the contact details for. If they don't have a means of reaching out to us for whatever reason, then we're stymied. We do have a Facebook page, but we can't reach out with that, we can only respond if someone reaches out to us. There needs to be a separation and appropriate use of social

media, but it would be better if we could use the [project's] page to contact young people, I don't think there are any negatives in that"
(Project Worker).

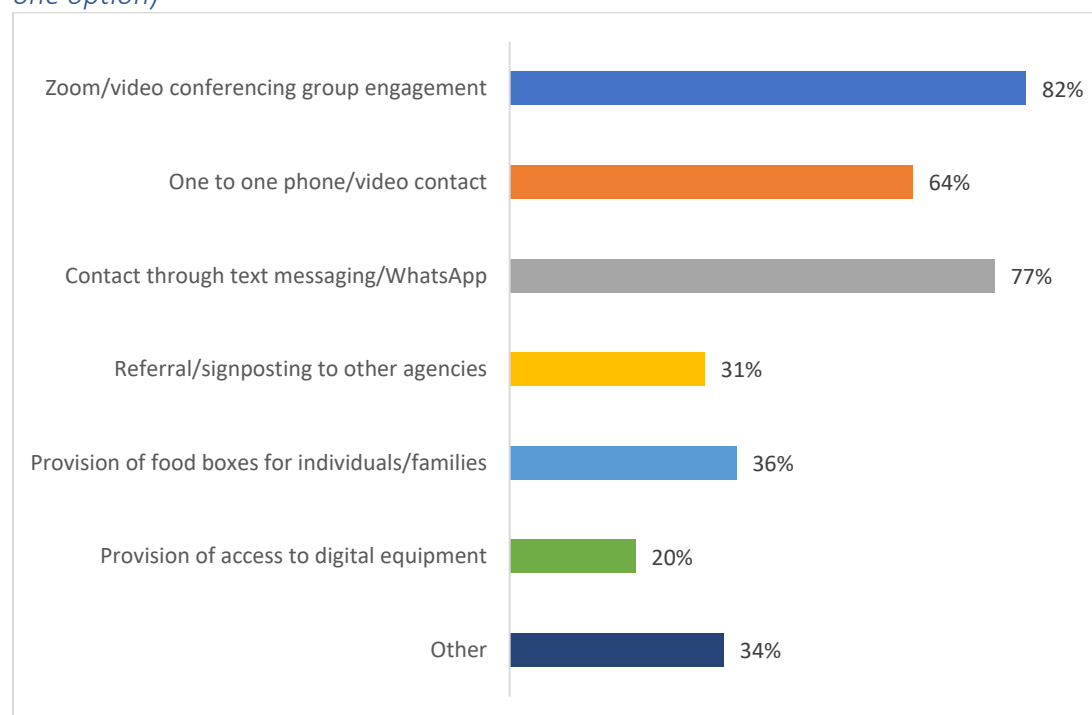
"So trying to get through the pandemic, you're trying to look out for the young people, you really only have a way of contacting the ones that you know, so in offering the free information service they have to know about you first. I made available a helpline from the start but in fact it was the other way I was calling them" (Project Worker).

5.3 What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during the pandemic?

Quantitative Data

The survey indicated that projects utilised a range of methods as illustrated in Chart 7. The vast majority used Zoom or other video conferencing platforms to engage with groups of young people (82%). 77% kept contact through text messaging or platforms such as WhatsApp. 64% used phone or video contact to offer one-to-one engagement. 36% provided food boxes and 20% provided access to digital equipment. 31% signposted or referred young people to other services. Within the 'other' category (12%) respondents said they supplied activity/care packs to young people, some of which were mental health packs. Some youth workers also wrote letters (sent via post) or emails to the young people. Some produced online videos/workshops teaching new skills or providing helpful information. A few organisations were able to continue with detached street work.

Chart 7: Methods used to continue engagement (n=220; respondents could choose more than one option)



Q: What methods have you introduced to maintain a service for engagement with young people?

Qualitative Data

The desk research social media scan, survey, interviews and focus groups revealed a wealth of creative adaptations and ingenuity exercised by youth workers and organisations to provide services and supports for young people in the face of the challenging circumstances of the pandemic. It is important to note that this study was unable to assess the level of uptake for all of these creative adaptations and initiatives, but this does not detract from getting a sense of what youth organisations made available to young people.

It is not possible to cite every example of how youth work providers went online or adapted their activities, but we have grouped interventions according to the following broad categories and the next section will explore each of these in turn:

- Online group engagement
 - Interactive activities
 - Online events & virtual activities
 - Programmatic work
 - Online learning, training & skills development
 - New groups
 - Arts-based activities
 - Youth Information
 - Local community engagement
 - Innovative use of digitally based youth work
- Engagement via telephone
- Engagement via text
- Engagement via social media
- Engagement in person
- Delivery of care/activity packages
- Other interventions indirectly in support of young people

Online group engagement

Interactive activities

Youth workers were able to engage with young people in online meet-ups on platforms such as Zoom and Skype and facilitate a wide range of interactive activities from quizzes, challenges, games such as bingo, charades, and Pictionary, and music sessions, to fitness classes, cooking and baking, arts and crafts such as draw-along sessions, and watch parties.

“3 Rock Scout County Virtual County Cup (activity weekend involving about 8 scout groups in the area together). Many zoom activities including kahoot quizzes, skribbl.io pictionary, actual pictionary, virtual escape rooms, virtual scout challenges, geoguessr and exploring world virtually”
(Youth Worker).

“Regular Skype groups which involved games, participants doing presentations on their LGBTI+ role models, music sessions and homework club” (Youth Worker).

“Careleavers having a Netflix night every Friday with our youth council”
(Youth Worker).

“Online youth cafes / quizzes / music sessions / music lessons / cooking classes / fitness classes / tutorials / one to one engagements online / online education initiatives / online addiction and problematic drug and alcohol use supports / online counselling and therapeutic supports” (Youth Worker).

“We are running an online cooking programme. We deliver 40 food packs each week and do three live zoom calls a week. Each day the group learn

how to make a new dish. A short demo video is available after the call for those who don't like zoom. A number of young people use these instead of zoom. We also have a YouTube channel set up with all the videos so far and 10 painting demo videos. Each participant also received a painting pack with all the supplies required” (Youth Worker).

Gardening and environmental initiatives were also a feature in the various sources of data with some groups supplying pots, soil and seeds to young people and encouraging them to share signs of growth with their new plants:

“We started gardening activities then, providing soil, pots and seeds and asked for photos of any growth” (Youth Worker).

Some projects also used social media platforms to provide interactive group experiences such as the Dublin-based project that held *“Tik Tok European nights with other young people in Spain, Italy, Malta.”* While members of Irish Red Cross Youth were invited to participate in ‘Tea Parties’ on Zoom organised by the European Youth Network as a means of informal exchange with volunteers involved in the Red Cross movement.

Online events & virtual activities

A scan of NYCI members’ social media channels indicated several annual events were moved online such as a Boys’ Brigade display, the No Name Clubs’ National Youth Awards, Union of Students in Ireland Student Achievement Awards, Young Environmentalist Awards, and other conferences.

Another example of this is the Irish Second-level Students Union (ISSU) which moved its AGM to an online event format and arranged a number of pre-AGM webinars in preparation for the main event. This hadn’t been done in previous years and seemed to enhance the level of engagement in the event itself:

“Usually our AGM is a one day event in Dublin where people travel up to it... generally the people who came to the AGM were people who have been involved already and who liked policy but we completely overhauled all that. It was a 6 week project, pre-webinars for anyone who had never done it before, we had private webinars for those who were thinking of running for election and then for those who actually did run for election and the engagement just sky rocketed ... in terms of our methodology during the day we tried to keep it interactive... with the webinars beforehand people were prepared, they understood what they were voting on... it allowed us to bring in people who would never have travelled to Dublin, we had fairly good geographical spread” (Project Worker).

Virtual festivals, online camps and online talent competitions were facilitated as an alternative to ‘in-person’ events and these offered ‘together while apart’ experiences for the young people:

“We have produced a 3-day youth circus online festival that included seminar where international speakers were involved, quizzes and physical games through zoom, a watch party of youth video submissions from our

organisation but also from other national and international partner youth circuses” (Youth Worker).

“Gaisce abhaile - adventure section in a weekend, zoom campfires, camp at home, bake at home...” (Youth Worker).

There were several examples of programmatic and developmental work through online platforms to support young people’s personal and social development. For example, there were groups that ran photography projects. An organisation adapted the MindOut mental health programme for use on Zoom and also ran a schools transition programme via online sessions, and a cross-border project facilitated some online meet-ups bringing together young people from 3 different communities (Donegal, Derry, Sudanese young people from Belfast).

Online learning, training and skills development

A frequent feature of many organisations’ approach was to provide a range of learning, training and skills development workshops online. Some offered opportunities to learn new skills via YouTube recording their own video content enabling young people to pass on their own skills to other young people. Some facilitated leadership training, some invited speakers or experts to join Zoom calls with youth groups, and a number of projects offered driver theory learning. The CoderDojo Foundation created a ‘Digital Making at Home’ video series so that members of local CoderDojo clubs could continue with coding activities at home¹⁷. There were also examples of webinars, videos and documents tailored to introduce topical and relevant subjects for young people and their families. For example, Blossom developed an accessible webinar for young people intellectual disabilities (see Section 6) and Kerry Diocesan Youth Service created some explainer content for video:

“We developed a range of age related videos for younger children, teens and parents including wally explains the coronavirus, mindfulness, understanding the teenage brain etc” (Youth Worker).

“...master classes for youth in areas of interest outside [project name] via zoom such as marketing and graphic design, Circus classes both live on zoom and pre-recorded on YouTube, Instagram stories, surveys, Circus shows hosted online, Panel talks about Circus (within the Mayhem Festival) and regular email communication with our membership to keep them up to date with everything going on” (Youth Worker).

New groups

It is noteworthy from the interviews that two organisations were able to establish new groups in the midst of the lockdown period. The Strive Programme operated by Include Youth got a new group up and running in St Johnson, Donegal recruiting 11 young people to the group who went on to engage in a number of online workshops before meeting face-to-face for the first time after restrictions eased. The youth worker’s description of how the group was recruited via smart usage of the networks of young people they had previously worked with and via text, email and telephone was impressive:

¹⁷ https://www.raspberrypi.org/at-home/?utm_source=shortlink&utm_medium=shortlink&utm_campaign=dmah

"I contacted the [previous] cohort of girls knowing that a few of them had younger sisters that were now the age and the girls basically set up a group and added about 20 young people. We went onto the group just initially messaging telling them about the programme and checking who would be interested – obviously we were limited what we could do before we got consent to be chatting to these young people so it was very much just who is interested and then sent out consent forms and enrolment forms and made contact with parents, so the 20 dropped to about 13/14.

So we sent out the forms through email which was all different as well because normally we'd just hand out forms and they'd be handed back – email was so much better, sometimes we find when they're hand written and we get them back there is gaps in them where through the email they were all filled out and then obviously it was just typed signatures, so it might have been easy to type a parent's signature. So, we followed up with phone calls to parents and were able to tell parents a wee bit more about Strive and how we would foresee it in the future should the restrictions be lifted. So, from that then we settled with 11 in the group" (Project Worker).

Secondly, Co Longford Youth Service started 2 new online groups for guitar lessons having recruited the young people through detached work:

"We started 2 new youth groups during the pandemic for guitar lessons – two guitar facilitators – one paid and one volunteering - and two separate groups of marginalised young people came together to learn, we provided the guitars to the young people, dropped them out to them. We had met them on detached work, chatted to the parents and asked if the young people were interested in getting involved in something, got consent, told the parents they could sit in if they wanted because it was online. It was really good" (Programme Manager).

Arts-based activities

Music and drama-based youth providers have been extremely innovative in transferring to online provision supporting young people to record performances and use digital technology as an alternative to live performance, some theatre groups moved rehearsals onto Zoom, and another set up a young writers' group meeting on Zoom:

"Choir and Orchestra have produced a number of online performances using Logic Pro X and iMovie. They are all posted on our Facebook page" (Arts/Music Tutor)

"1. Structured conversation at the start of any group zoom e.g. If superpowers were real, should we be able to use them to fight crime. All zoom members have a chance to talk, there is no correct answer. 2. While group playing is impossible online due to the lag, one can play duets, scales in canon with the teacher's speaker on and the students' speaker off. 3. Presentation of a piece by PING PONG. This is where all students can hear everyone else. Each student presents one bar of music and PINGS

the next bar to another student. It allows the students to interact with each other” (Youth Worker).

“Instagram interviews. Peer made 'How to' Videos, Zoom international collaboration - critics workshop and masterclass programme, Online filmmaking workshops for children and young people, Special online views award” (Youth Worker).

“We use zoom for our weekly workshops and introduced a new series of Q & A sessions with professionals. We used zoom to devise, rehearse and perform a play and a radio play and are using it to create our annual big show in August. We are using social media to showcase members' own work, made on their phones and edited professionally by former members as part of the Quaranscene series” (Youth Worker).

Youth Information

Youth information services have adapted to become more interactive and include live chat:

“Youth Information services during the last couple of months this year has continued to be offered by phone and email. The annual YI publications have been enhanced to include a more interactive element. The YI team have been working with Loom. YI in Clondalkin has contributed an educational supplement/component to the Youth Services June '20 Newsletter. As mentioned the Live Chat & ticket services provides 24 access to YI services and the option of individual person to person contact with follow-up if required” (Youth Worker).

“Youth info has done specific posts targeting youth and highlighting the service remaining open remotely to them. Video clips on themes like CVs. Youth Info Live chat evening service” (Youth Worker).

Local community engagement

There were projects which responded by supporting young people to reach out to their local community, for example, one group was encouraged to send letters to vulnerable people in their community such as residents of local nursing homes, another group made PPE such as face masks and created 'thank you' videos for frontline workers from their locality:

“Members have been engaged in making PPE equipment ie gowns, face masks for health care workers. Delivering food to the needy...” (Youth Worker).

Catholic Guides Ireland ran a series on social media called “CGI heroes” where they profiled CGI members working as key workers and in health services.

Innovative use of digitally based youth work

The research produced several examples of utilising technology effectively and creative digital innovation whether through making good use of existing features in platforms such as the Zoom whiteboard feature to play Pictionary with a group online or more elaborate

initiatives such as developing an app called 'Leaving Well' to support work with young people leaving the care system.

There were several examples of young people generating content for group videos to share their experiences of lockdown or to share positive messages about keeping people safe, for example a short film created by young people involved in Youth Work Ireland Laois¹⁸.

Producing its Annual Report in video-format worked well for one of the organisations we spoke to, it seemed to be a more participatory and young person-centred way of reporting on the organisation's activities:

"Every year [name of organisation] try to produce an annual report in video format – staff and young people are interviewed on video. This year we put that out there as a competition – young people creating their highlights of 2019 on video on their phone and sending them in. We have a Youth Action Group and they sat down and edited the videos. So, the views and the opinions of the young people were at the heart of the video. It was lovely looking at what was important for them... It got all the workers connected as well and it was young people motivating young people. It was even more achievable this year because we were in touch with the kids on their phones" (Project Worker).

Other groups experimented with animation and podcasting. One such group was a Comhairle na nÓg supported by staff and volunteers from YMCA Cork who worked on a podcast called the Happiness Jar (see Section 6). Their approach stands out because they made use of Slack as a platform to facilitate collaboration and complement their weekly meetings on Zoom. This enabled sub-groups to work together virtually and facilitated internal communications thus enabling the group to save a lot of money that in normal circumstances it would have had to spend on travel and demonstrating the potential to create new digital tools to enhance collaborative work.

"It's a bit like having the Google suite and a Facebook group or something all on the go at the same time, all in the one platform though... I just throw in the time of the meeting with the Zoom link on Slack they can be working away in their sub groups – one of them is doing a music project they're uploading sound clips, another group is putting together a survey but they're working away on their own time whenever suits them and then we come in then once a week for a meeting" (Project Worker).

Another group set up an online radio station:

"Have also started our own radio station online which is planned and produced by young people and then streamed live on a Friday afternoon with the help of a zoom call" (Youth Worker).

Engagement via telephone calls

It may seem old-fashioned in an increasingly digital and online world but there were a number of youth projects that contacted young people directly via telephone calls including

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/laoisywi/videos/855962748218401/>

some that did so on a regular basis such as weekly phone call check-ins. A project providing advocacy for young people in care was reliant on carrying out that work through telephone calls. A volunteer-led organisation in a rural area struggled with poor connectivity and was working with a younger age group so used phone calls to contact parents in order to pass on messages to their children.

Engagement via text

We heard from a number of organisations that connected with young people via text message, and platforms like iMessage or WhatsApp.

“All the young people were on WhatsApp – every day an informal chat, how you doing, what’s happening, never too deep, but they knew you were there for them and there in the background. Kept it short, 5-10 minutes every day seemed to be enough” (Project Worker).

Some used texts on a 1-1 basis to see how young people were doing and some used group messaging to check-in or to run interactive quizzes. An organisation working with a group of young people in Direct Provision were able to keep in touch with them daily via a WhatsApp group. One of the interviewees felt that they could be more available to the young people in comparison with work routines prior to the pandemic:

“...because we’re talking to them one to one and on that sort of level so we’re really finding the time to mentor more so and give them that time because sometimes it can be really busy when you’re out and about and you’re meeting up somewhere else. But when you’re at home and you’re sitting saying text me, ring me, we’re here – it’s been a bit easier that way because you’re not on the go all the time” (Project Worker).

Engagement via social media

“We post daily information on activities, Covid updates, our online sessions, riddles and secret sound competitions. We also done a snapchat take over with a makeup artist, a musician & our neighbouring youth project in Weston. This was a huge hit with the young people. Staff filmed sports challenges and tutorials in arts and crafts and makeup for Facebook” (Youth Worker).

The desk research scan of organisational social media platforms provided a useful means of seeing how organisations used social media in a variety of ways to engage young people, promote their services and to build a sense of community among members. However, it is important to acknowledge that organisations’ use of social media tends to broadcast positive stories only and consequently the survey responses and interviews were useful to get a more nuanced picture of what went on ‘behind the scenes’ and how initiatives worked out in practice. Broadly, the social media output of most NYCI member organisations fitted into at least one if not several of the following categories:

- Sharing public health information and advice, often in youth-friendly ways.
- Providing information about cancellation of events or service updates.

- Promoting their own services and opportunities to join groups or volunteer or to support fundraising efforts.
- Signposting to other organisations, their services and relevant sources of information or support.
- Sharing resources and ideas for things to do at home – everything from recipes, music playlists, craft ideas, and book clubs, to ‘how-to’ resources, riddles, eco-tips, and time capsule projects.
- Addressing issues such as mental health and wellbeing e.g. #MotivationMonday or #mentalhealthMondays posts, wellbeing kindness planner, ideas for self-care, meditation and mindfulness videos, and tips for exercising at home.
- Sharing video messages from organisational leaders and from youth workers to young people to encourage members during the lockdown and to reinforce public health messages.¹⁹
- Advocacy – some organisations sought to represent specific groups of young people impacted by the pandemic, for example, Foróige ran a digital focus group with young people to get a sense of their experiences and concerns²⁰, ISSU led advocacy on the issue of Leaving Certificate Examinations²¹, and ECO-UNESCO highlighted the importance of environmental education with young people during the pandemic²².
- Sharing from the archives – Some organisations shared photos, videos and newsletters from previous events, award ceremonies and gatherings using hashtags such as #ThrowbackThursday and #Flashback Friday. For example, Catholic Guides Ireland held a virtual St Patrick’s parade on Facebook sharing photos from previous years’ parades.

Challenges galore

A significant amount of output from projects was the promotion of a plethora of challenge activities and competitions as a way of nurturing online interaction, building a sense of digital community and encouraging involvement in healthy activities or as part of fundraising efforts. Participants were encouraged to share photos and videos of how they got on with the challenges on social media. Activities included all sorts of health, fitness and wellbeing, cookery or baking, arts and crafts challenges such as 5K walks, ‘keepy-uppy’ competitions, gaming competitions, chore challenges encouraging young people to help out with household chores, best bin shot challenge, poster-making competition, art challenge to thank frontline workers, 60-second film-making challenges, Fitness Friday plank challenge, and gif design challenge.

“We had a 3pm challenge daily and this had a great up take until the last few weeks. We used all different types of challenges for it” (Youth Worker).

“We have also offered daily and weekly challenges on instagram and tiktok” (Youth Worker).

¹⁹ One such example is this one by the No Name Club Youth Council:

<https://www.facebook.com/thenonameclub/videos/2477337792557948>

²⁰ <https://www.foroige.ie/blog/young-people-ireland-speak-out-life-during-covid-19-pandemic>

²¹ <https://www.issu.ie/news/issu-campaign-for-clarity-continues>

²² <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/environmental-education-1.4218108>

Other challenge examples include:

- ECO-UNESCO ran a 'Eco 30-day challenge encouraging young people to work towards a more sustainable and eco-friendlier lifestyle in their day-to-day lives.'²³
- Enable Ireland set up a fundraising 'Wheel 100' challenge where they encouraged young people and adults to *"wheel 100 times in your own way, in your own time. You might like to cycle, skate, wheel, scoot, or push a walker or buggy. It's up to you whether you do 100 laps in your garden, 100m in your park or 100km within your local area."*²⁴
- Members and leaders of Ratheniska Foróige ran the equivalent of 25 marathons in 8 days.²⁵

Some services established new dedicated Facebook pages and one of the interviewees explained how their organisation made use of Facebook 'noticeboards' so various project groups could share photos. Some groups also made use of social media to consult young people about their ideas for activities.

"We done a FB poll to see what social media platform young people would prefer to use. Snapchat won" (Youth Worker).

"WhatsApp included making a group bucket list for when groups where back to normal and appreciation Friday, where each person said what their favourite thing of the week was." (Youth Worker).

Engagement in person

As mentioned previously in section 5.2, there were some organisations that began to engage face-to-face with young people once lockdown measures began to ease, for example through socially distanced outdoor activity – fishing, cycling, community gardening or walks in the park. There were also some organisations that continued as much outreach as possible throughout the lockdown period to offer 1-1 support and check-ins with vulnerable young people while staying compliant with public health advice.

Delivery of care/activity packs

"The activity packs were received extremely well; parents were very happy to get them. The vast majority of families were saying that the youth projects couldn't have done any more and they were very happy that projects had kept in touch with the families and the young people" (CEO).

Various kinds of activity packs/care packages – not just food parcels – were delivered or posted to young people's homes by a number of projects. Many of these were intended to support vulnerable young people and their families. However one of the interviewees explained how they used food parcels on a 'treat' model rather than a charity model and made no distinction between who might have been in more need of the parcel compared with others in order to avoid stigmatisation:

²³ <https://www.yea.ie/30-day-challenge-keepiteco>

²⁴ <https://www.enableireland.ie/events/wheel-100>

²⁵ <https://www.foroige.ie/blog/ratheniska-foroige-club-members-and-leaders-run-equivalent-25-marathons-8-days>

“We got permission from the guards to be out and about on the ground, so we could see the young people that we felt were most vulnerable. We used those food parcels and treats as a tool of engagement and we didn’t differentiate between anyone, they went to everybody even though we knew some might be more vulnerable than others because we didn’t want there to be a stigma around it. We would have some families who are extremely vulnerable we’re aware of through social services, and because we had the relationship established, we delivered to them rather than the partnership company doing it through their food services. We put together activity packs with hula hoops, balls etc and a little booklet of how to use those and that gave us another means of making face-to-face contact”
(Programme Manager).

As a result, this approach enabled youth workers to physically check-in with young people even while socially distanced. Another service provider described how their drugs worker was able to maintain a connection with vulnerable young people through linking with food service colleagues in the same organisation:

“We were lucky that [name of organisation] runs a food bank, particularly in terms of our drugs projects, it was a big help in keeping links with families, our drugs worker was able to offer support with food, it was a way for him to continue to engage with families” (Programme Manager).

Some organisations delivered care packages that focused on positive mental health and wellbeing and an example of a ‘Positivity Pack’ is included in Section 6. ‘Pride’ care packages were also delivered to over 500 LGBTQI young people as part of a partnership between BeLonG To and Youth Work Ireland.

There were instances where the packages delivered facilitated online contact such as a survey respondent whose project ordered pizzas to be delivered to the young people and then the group met online and ate the pizzas together. Another group delivered baking ingredients for an online ‘bake-along’ session:

“Our activity packs were very popular too with online baking being the most popular. We dropped off the ingredients and they followed our youth workers from their own homes” (Youth Worker).

Other interventions indirectly in support of young people

There are two further initiatives worth noting that are not examples of direct youth work but indirectly served to support meeting the needs of young people. One is the online training delivered by BeLonG To Youth Service aimed at youth workers and teachers with 500+ signing up:

“That’s another silver lining, because we have these online resources and so much of our business is done online, it’s made our services a lot more accessible to parents and professionals as well as young people. We’ve been adapting our training to move online for other sectors, doing a lot of webinars, more with private sector. You can squeeze a lot more into your day because not travelling around to meetings” (CEO).

The second initiative is a piece of research by EPIC surveying children's residential care services in Ireland during the pandemic²⁶. A questionnaire was sent out to all residential centres in Ireland as a means of getting in touch with as many people as possible and to see how they were getting on in the pandemic and served as a national piece of advocacy. While it was sent to centres rather than young people, it enabled EPIC to get the word out about their services to young people as well as centres. It also enabled the organisation to make new connections with providers they had not been aware of previously.

The importance of social connection & young people's perspective of online engagement

Our review of different ways in which youth organisations digitally engaged with young people revealed an emphasis on fostering social connection to facilitate check-ins and informal conversation.

"The Zooms worked really well for some – initially just checking in, conversation, giving space for the young people to express their feelings about everything that was going on" (Programme Manager).

There were some groups that had drop-in Zoom sessions so that young people could join in when they wanted. This is one way of services demonstrating their availability while also honouring young people's voluntary participation. Some groups deliberately focused on encouraging young people's engagement rather than facilitating developmental work while there were others that were able to facilitate opportunities for meeting new groups of young people and fostering informal learning together:

"You couldn't do as much of the developmental stuff than you might have done otherwise because when they're meeting on Zoom, they're not interested in sitting for 2 hours doing climate justice, they're wanting a bit of craic and a bit of fun. That's ok... The outcomes for us was engagement – if you can get them to engage then your job is done" (Programme Manager).

"...A lot of them would have said [name of project] was really good for doing that and keeping them in touch and keeping them connected because we had certain where they were coming on and meeting and we had the quizzes which was a cross-border activity once a week so they were actually meeting young people from the likes of Derry, and actually there were a few Sudan young people who had come on from Belfast – they joined the quiz. They did get opportunities during lockdown that they never would have got" (Project Worker).

One of the young people in a focus group spoke of the value of being able to connect and catch up with others in their group via Zoom:

"We were kind of lucky with [name of organisation] – one of the things they did was a podcast over a couple of weeks, it was nice aside from what

²⁶ <https://www.epiconline.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EPIC-Empowering-People-In-Care-The-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Childrens-Residential-Care.pdf>

we were doing just to meet with everyone once a week to see how everyone was doing and just talk about what it was we were talking about, that social aspect that you just didn't have was nice even over zoom, that was one of the things that was well done especially in the [name of organisation]" (Young Person).

Another young person felt that the online sessions enabled their performance arts group to get to know each other better:

"The good thing about the pandemic in relation to the group is that I've actually connected more with people, it's not just dancing and singing, I've actually talked more to people. I talked before but we didn't get to bond... I think even sitting on a call for 2 hours or whatever it is just chatting with everyone is refreshing because – you can stay on the phone with your friends but for example at the start of quarantine I was on the phone every night with my friends and now I just can't do it because we've used every topic of conversation, we're kind of bored of each other at this point. So talking to the musical group, it's like there's so many of us with such different lives that it kind of balances out, we always have something to talk about" (Young Person).

In this same focus group, there was a young person who talked about her growth in confidence as a result of the Zoom meetups:

"The best thing is that I got to open up more and it made me feel more comfortable as I talked more and more" (Young Person).

Another member of this group reflected,

"I've learned a lot about the people in the group from the calls – you learn more in 2 hours on the calls than just during the breaks in between singing or dancing on a Saturday morning. It's a lot more personal as well" (Young Person).

For those youth groups active in advocacy work, this young person's viewpoint underlines the need for a balance between socialising and activist/advocacy work via online engagement:

"I think what might be valuable to youth orgs moving forward is more just casual social Zoom meet-ups... A lot of the things I've been involved have had a certain purpose to it and a certain drive. I am concerned for myself... most of my socialising comes from these things and engaging with activism and advocacy and that kind of thing. I love it and live and breathe it but I am concerned that it is a lot more intense in an online environment. A lot of my friends are suffering from burnout because they've felt that this free time in this new environment they should be doing more and using that time rather than just using that time to maybe link in and connect with your fellow activists and advocates... More than ever what's very important is and what people don't seem to consider as much is that if you have a happy healthy and mentally strong advocate you are going to do so

much more and your work is going to be so much stronger. But if you're forcing it then it's not quite the same. I found with some groups we were just meeting up, having a check-in and chats... we didn't actually have a purpose to the meeting which was really helpful. I've found our team has actually worked better together because of these little interactions we've had" (Young Person).

It is also striking that some of the responses indicate how much **the interaction with youth organisations served as a lifeline for some young people:**

"Families were saying that these Zoom sessions are keeping everyone going – it's their [the young people's] time when they have something scheduled in and they see their friends" (Programme Manager).

A young person in a focus group said, *"talking to [name of youth worker] kept me going a lot through lockdown."*

"Definitely agree with that I think having something to look forward to is really important in such an uncertain time, having those little interactions to look forward to when things are just so uncertain, you don't know how college is going to go, you don't know, you don't know what's happening with the leaving cert, these things are so uncertain and it's so nice to have something definite in lives is really important" (Young Person).

Some youth workers highlighted the isolation of young people in Direct Provision during lockdown and how they were able to provide regular contact and support:

"We've been meeting them twice a week on Zoom. We do fun activities and a few of them are registered on the Gaisce scheme so we've continued to do that with them. Gaisce had a couple of Zooms and we were able to link them into that, we could be the conduit for any national stuff. We have daily contact with them on a WhatsApp group with them. They were the first group to come back to face-to-face work because we're classing them as the one household so we can meet them safely outside" (Programme Manager).

This same interviewee went on to emphasise the importance of a relational approach to the work:

"That's what youth work is about – building relationships, we haven't been able to do a huge amount of empowerment, political and social change but when you have the relationships that will come when you get back into face-to-face" (Programme Manager).

An arts director reflected on how online meetups served to 'hold space' effectively for their organisation when face-to-face work was not possible.

"I had to really start thinking outside the box so obviously the buzz word for everyone was 'online', it was about looking at ways we could generate engagement with the kids and do it in a safe way and the online has worked for us. It just means we're working with less children, not every kid

wants to do that, or every parent wants their young person doing it, but it has worked... Engaging with young people on Zoom – I see that very much as holding the space for us” (CEO).

From a practical point of view, one of the young people in a focus group felt that online engagement was easier because they *“didn’t have to worry about lifts and stuff”* and this is likely to be true for other young people living in rural communities.

The young people we spoke to in the focus groups were very appreciative of the adaptations made by their youth workers and youth organisations – one noted the creativity exercised by their youth worker:

“They used their initiative too and unique ways of thinking and creative too in a way because they had to be creative in how to get young people to engage” (Young Person).

Another young person seemed to be accepting of current restrictions even if it’s less than ideal and understands the youth workers are there for her and her peers:

“There’s not much more they could do, there’s obviously things we would all want but they’re not possible right now so it’s kind of, I think they’re doing a good job. I know for a fact if I have a problem and it’s not on a Zoom call, I know I can text one of the adults and say I’m having a problem and they’ll help me through. The being there in person is the nicest thing and that’s not what you can have right now” (Young Person).

Learning & Unexpected Outcomes of Online Engagement

In this section a number of key lessons and unexpected outcomes expressed by those we interviewed are highlighted:

Extension of geographical reach

Two organisations whose representatives were interviewed as part of the study were able to extend their geographical reach beyond Dublin through online activities. In both cases the target groups these organisations work with have distinct experiences of marginalisation and live in rural areas. For those living in rural areas the sense of isolation is exacerbated by fewer opportunities to access organisational supports due to their geographical setting. The ISSU online AGM resulted in a good geographical spread of participants in comparison with previous years. An arts group reported having a participant from a different county and a participant from Poland join their group Zoom calls. When EPIC’s Youth Council held Friday night Netflix watch parties, they were often joined by young people from other countries in the 5 Nations Network. An EPIC member of staff stated that he felt that this was a great way of preventing isolation and ensuring a sense of inclusion for the young people. Young people from the focus groups could also see the benefits of online engagement through removing geographical barriers:

“In terms of getting involved with youth organisations for me personally I found getting involved to be somewhat easier in some respects because obviously there were a lot of things online and there were meetings online

all the time with NYCI and SpunOut and ISSU. There was a lot more opportunities and it was easier for me because I live in Monaghan away from Dublin which would be the centre for a lot of organisations so it was easier for me to get involved more actively in these organisations. It has definitely slowed down a bit the work that you could do. In Comhairle locally we weren't able to meet up as often, so the work was slowed down, but I did get an opportunity to get more involved in some organisations and break into these organisations as well" (Young Person).

Another young person from a focus group commented on the ease of gathering online:

"Almost every organisation's response had been to move everything online, to Zoom or Google and what that has done is it's highlighted the opportunity that we don't necessarily have to pay for tickets to here there and everywhere for an hour long meeting that we can access things online, also ironically people are apart but it has shown a way to bring people together, so people who would be geographically isolated from each other and could only meet maybe 2 or 3 times a year have been able to add one or two more meetings and do it online" (Young Person).

Relationship-building with parents & families

One youth worker interviewed stated that she felt that they had lost a lot of informal contact with parents as a result of the switch to online engagement and that this undermined their capacity to support young people effectively when not seeing them face-to-face:

"We also don't get to speak with parents as much either because you know, especially with the younger kids you'd get the parents generally coming in to collect them and drop them off so you'd always get a chance to catch up with the parents and have a chat with them so you don't really get that, so you're missing that contact and missing a lot of the context actually behind how the young person is at the moment by doing everything digitally. It's fine for certain things but long term it's not ideal" (Project Worker).

Another interviewee, a Programme Manager, described how their organisation was able to make a lot of meaningful interventions at the family level having initiated phone calls with parents at the start of the lockdown to check in with young people. As a result, her colleagues were involved in providing informal family support, making referrals and signposting to specific services, and facilitating connections between parents in similar circumstances for peer support. Involvement in a local crafting project was used by a youth worker in the team as a way of connecting with parents of young people using their services. This was activity that their organisation usually wouldn't have time for and would like to maintain going forward:

"...in terms of developing relationships with the family, we wouldn't have a lot of time to do that normally, and we were able to make some referrals to the parents, pass on information about other services – a domestic violence referral, and to drug agencies, and we organised a bit of

counselling... We're still taking in referrals and making contacts that way, that's still going on, we were able to link up two parents of transgender young people via Zoom for peer support. I don't know if that would have happened in other times... Relationships that were established with the parents – there were really positive things out of that because you're getting a full view of what's going on with the family. We'd like to maintain that going forward, perhaps we'll do open days with parents coming in but would love to keep the links with parents" (Programme Manager).

Potential of e-learning

In terms of reach there was a specific piece of learning for a couple of organisations with how they could use online learning modules to enhance their work, particularly if well produced, and one of these groups felt it would mean they could resource parents and professionals in addition to their work with young people:

"We realised that if the e-learning component is done really well, really accessible and engaging – takes a lot of work to make it accessible for young people with ID, has to be very visually done and properly to be effective – these young people aren't reading or writing. If done very well, alongside face-to-face sessions, alongside support say weekly tutorials – it would be a really beneficial way of extending the reach of our services to more rural areas people that can't come on-site every week" (Programme Manager).

"...because we have these online resources and so much of our business is done online, it's made our services a lot more accessible to parents and professionals as well as young people" (CEO).

One of these organisations – working with young people with intellectual disabilities – carried out a survey with families and found that the young people were getting much more out of the online sessions with them than with school:

"In a survey we did a high percentage of parents told us that even though we only met with the young people once a week, that one hour was equal to or more impactful than the schools' support. A lot of schools just didn't know what to do or how to engage online" (Programme Manager).

A driver for greater digital competency

The situation of having been forced to close down face-to-face services and switching to online engagement more or less overnight served as a driver for upskilling staff and we noticed how many organisations seemed to have learned a lot and developed greater digital competency:

"None of us had heard of Zoom before this and now everyone is on Zoom, but what we've found out is that Zoom is not secure, and we should be using different platforms. There's been an upskilling there" (CEO).

“Definitely the online stuff is a gain, the staff that wouldn’t have been as comfortable doing things online have been forced into a situation of having to up their skills in that area” (Programme Manager).

The benefits of online engagement for youth participation

One of the organisations we spoke to realised that – while it did not apply across the board – there are some young people who really take to the online approach:

“Some things took us by surprise – some people really seemed to take to learning and communicating online, really seemed to thrive. Not true for everyone but for some and would definitely prefer to be in person... One of the peer mentors absolutely thrived online, just shined, really comfortable compared with when he’s doing it in person, really engaged and engaging. Made us realise this really suits some people” (Programme Manager).

Value of a blended approach to digital & face-to-face work with young people going forward

As a result, there were a few organisations which now appreciate the value of having a blended approach of continuing work with young people in online environments alongside face-to-face work and this is informing their programme strategies as public health measures have relaxed:

“Overall, the benefit is knowing that we can work with young people in different ways and be more flexible and meet their needs in different ways. There are some young people who have been referred to us who don’t do well in big groups or face-to-face situations, so having that option of doing things online – to begin with a Zoom chat as a first step then come to the youth service, then join a group – that might help with engaging with those who are extremely socially shy” (Programme Manager).

“The youth council in Co Cork because it’s such a big county and normal times we pay for their travel can be €30 return for someone and a 6 hour round trip – it literally costs hundreds of euros to have a meeting so we only have one meeting per month but since the pandemic started we have a meeting every week and we’re saving thousands of euros like it’s obviously not the way we want to do it but post pandemic there’ll definitely be a mixture of both” (Project Worker).

More opportunities for staff collaboration

One of the interviewees who works in an organisation operating out of 5 main locations across a county reflected on the benefits for youth workers to be able to collaborate online:

“As youth workers we all really supported each other on the transitions piece because it is a big piece of work so that was really nice actually that was definitely something positive out of it that we were able to really support one another as youth workers and because we didn’t have to travel to each other, we just did it through Zoom, like that is a real positive” (Project Worker).

Importance of innovation & experimentation

Finally, there was recognition of the value of being open to innovation:

“It has required us to become very flexible and innovative in our approach to technology and how we use it. Initially this was challenging but now is part of our normal working practice” (Youth Worker).

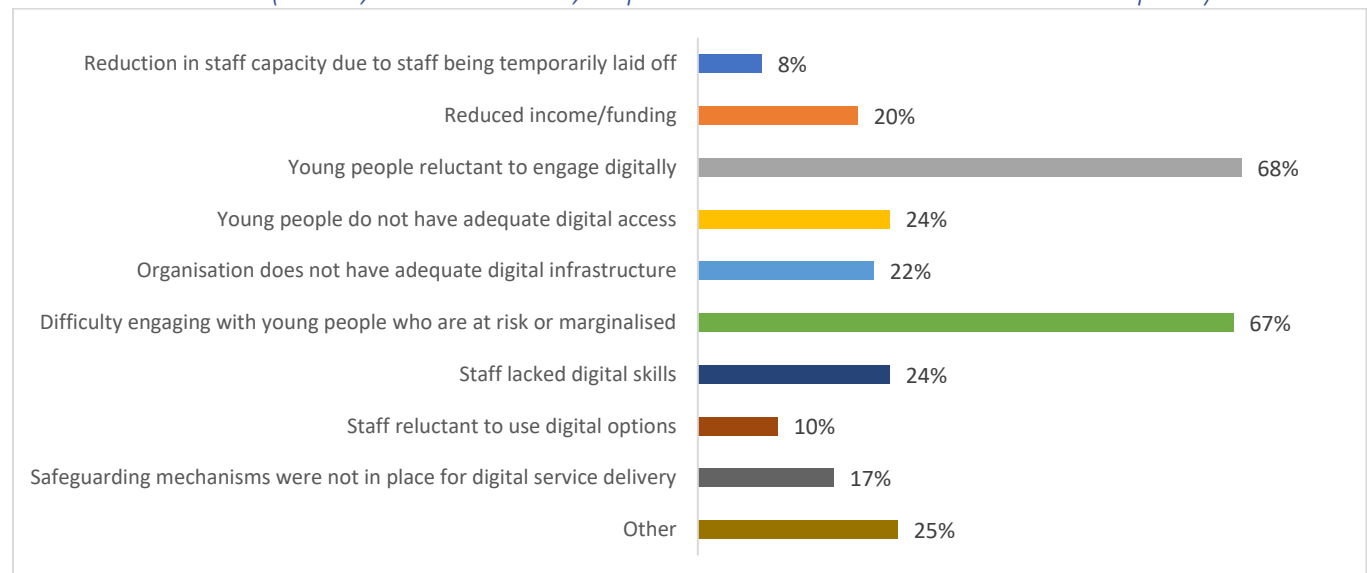
One of the interviewees shared from their experience of experimenting with new platforms how the participatory and developmental work their youth project was able to push ahead with was enhanced, and this underscores the value of exploring different digital methods and the potential to expand software capabilities that resource young people’s creative abilities:

“Slack is something I’ve discovered to be really good and then I’m trying to get more software licenses to be able to do individual digital creativity activities so that people who do have good hardware I can give them good software” (Project Worker).

5.4 What are limitations of working in this way?

Survey respondents were asked to indicate what limitations they experienced with this different way of working. As outlined in Chart 8 the two most common limitations cited by respondents was that they found young people were reluctant to engage digitally (68%) and that it was difficult to engage with 'at risk' or marginalised young people (67%). Almost 1 in four projects experienced difficulties with the switch to digital youth work because young people did not have adequate digital access and similarly 24% found staff lacked digital skills. There were also concerns about safeguarding mechanisms not being in place for digital service delivery (17%). A variety of limitations cited under 'other' (25%) included the added pressure on staff and readiness of the organisation to offer digital alternatives, reluctance of volunteers to engage online and reluctance of parents to let their children engage online.

Chart 8: Limitations (n=202, 18 unanswered; respondents could choose more than one option)



Q: What limitations has this different way of working presented?

These experiences and observations of the limitations of digital youth work methods were qualified by respondents' comments in the survey when asked to elaborate on limitations and challenges they faced, and these correlate with many of the perspectives shared in the interviews as well as those found in the notes from the NYCI online check-in sessions with youth workers in April 2020. This section firstly considers issues relating to programme delivery before going on to explore limitations at the organisational level.

Programme Delivery Limitations

We have grouped the youth workers' comments and observations under the following headings:

- Barriers to young people's digital engagement.
- Difficulty engaging with young people described as 'at risk' or experiencing marginalisation.
- Access to technology and digital poverty.

- Safeguarding concerns.
- Not being able to see and respond when a young person needs support
- Online engagement tailed off
- Lack of structure and lack of support from parents.
- Online engagement sometimes compounded pressure for families.
- Paradox of encouraging online engagement in lockdown when previously discouraging device dependence pre-COVID-19.
- Loss of developmental work & experiential learning.
- Loss of young person's voice and agency.
- Limitations associated with outreach work.
- Online events versus in-person engagement.
- Can face-to-face youth work be replaced?

Barriers to young people's digital engagement

It became evident to many survey respondents in highlighting limitations and challenges that some young people are not comfortable with online engagement and this might provide an explanation as to why there was a 70% drop in the numbers of young people engaged among survey respondents:

"Difficulty in maintaining relationships with young people that don't engage online for no reason. Limited amount of online activity options"
(Youth Worker).

"Drops in the level of participation. Young people being non contactable, particularly those in the Travelling community with no internet or phones. Cannot provide a safe space for the young people in their own homes with family members coming in and out while the young person is online. Some young people don't like their face on the screen" (Youth Worker).

"The challenges have been that our young people having been missing out on a safe environment to just be who they are. Some young people do not have a safe and inclusive environment in their own homes, and privacy issues in the home have been a major issue for our young people to continually engage with us through digital youthwork" (Youth Worker).

One respondent felt that a reason for less engagement online was *"a classroom vibe to groups rather than group setting"* and that *"young people [were] not enjoying the experience as much."*

A couple of comments indicated a tendency for boys to engage less online in comparison with girls:

"Disengagement of GYDP young people, some y/p didn't buy into digital youth work, boys especially" (Youth Worker).

"In particular the boys – because some of them just struggled, one of the difficulties we would have had was just using the zoom, you know them"

speaking and being seen, they just didn't like it, especially if they were maybe anxious or just shy" (Project Worker).

One of the interviews suggested phone contact was also difficult for some young people:

"There's a young lady I've been working with since last November, she's lovely but hopeless on the phone and she'll say that, 'I'm crap on the phone'. Her 'child-in-care' review was over the phone, she did her best and was fantastic but it just wasn't comfortable for her and it was weird because you don't know who's on [the call], everyone's jumping in at the same time, there's a horrible silence where no one says anything then everyone jumps in again. You're trying to limit it to an hour and a half, you're getting the results, but it's not the same as sitting in a room where you can see the whites of everyone's eyes and you see the reactions"
(Programme Manager).

Difficulty engaging with young people described as 'at risk' or experiencing marginalisation
As some of the quotes under the previous heading have suggested there were particular concerns about being able to reach young people considered to be 'at risk' or marginalised through digital engagement.

"The whole time we were concerned about those young people who we couldn't reach online. For the most part we continued the outreach and street-work as much as could, but we were still aware there were young people out there that we were still missing. It was difficult because there was so much work put in throughout the year to engage those kinds of young people and keep them engaged, even for the groups that normally weren't hard to engage but weren't interested in the online stuff there was so much work over the year building the relationships with them and then in a few months it feels a bit like we're starting from scratch trying to get those relationships back. That was the biggest challenge for us trying to figure out how we meet those young people's needs" (Programme Manager).

"Then there are the people that we never reached and they're the people that we have to be mindful of always that we're trying to reach so we were nothing to them" (Project Worker).

This situation was clearly very frustrating for youth workers despite their best efforts and heightened their concerns for young people's wellbeing:

"Also just not being able to reach out to certain young people who would be very at risk and you know the whole thing is really frustrating them as well but you can't really do anything whereas before it would be sure come on in or we'll go do something with them" (Project Worker).

"It was difficult to support vulnerable young people. It was difficult to watch young people drop further into the drug trade and see their drug use escalate" (Youth Worker).

“How do you really go the extra mile to ensure you keep contact with them so that they don’t feel there isn’t a way for them to reach out?” (CEO).

For an arts organisation with an annual interactive touring theatre project there was a frustration that digital engagement limits their capacity to enable young people who wouldn’t normally get the opportunity to be exposed to theatre:

“The brilliant thing about that project and I always get excited about it is the kids are in school anyway, they’re sitting there and [name of project] can come in and the magic happens and it’s really interactive, goes on for an hour and a bit and the kids participate the whole time, it’s a dream and it’s rooted in how [name of project] started in council estates around Waterford and for that project it’s like looking into a black hole, how are we going to do that type of work and bring the theatre to kid’s lives, kids whose parents would never come, never bring them to a theatre space?” (CEO).

There were also concerns about the limitations of online engagement in relation to the specific needs and particular experiences of marginalisation for young people with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties, LGBTQ+ young people, traveller young people, young people in care and young people in direct provision:

Young people with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties

One of the interviewees felt that Zoom sessions weren’t ideal for one of their young people:

“We have one boy who is on the Autistic Spectrum and has an additional learning difficulty, so it was hard to engage him through Zoom, now he still came on but didn’t do any of the activities but did chat, which was lovely, but he really misses everyone” (Project Worker).

“Our students usually present with poor social and emotional skills. They also present with specific learning difficulties which takes a lot of small group and one to one work. It was difficult to engage with these young people, so we worked with parents too” (Youth Worker).

Another provider pointed out the importance of opportunities to learn in context for young people with intellectual disabilities so that they can practice real life scenarios in a supportive environment, and while they were able to adapt some materials for video they felt this could not be a comprehensive substitute for face-to-face experiential learning:

“We’re working around teaching social skills, a lot of that has to be in person, you can do it up to a point on video, some things are lost with video – that’s challenging” (Programme Manager).

In Section 6, we highlight the work of Blossom in creating accessible materials for young people with intellectual disabilities. The production of these materials was prompted by the realisation that the young people in their groups were getting left behind during lockdown because they didn’t have the necessary online or IT skills. As a result, they were experiencing social isolation more acutely in comparison with family members who did have these skills:

“The families had said that the main impact was social isolation. A lot of the young people weren’t set up in the same way as their siblings in terms of social media, using Zoom etc. Everyone else [in the] house was able to adapt and had the skills to do that. A lot of the time the family would be busy, but the young person didn’t have the skills to set up those types of interactions” (Programme Manager).

A focus group participant pointed out how there needs to be more awareness of accessibility in online spaces to facilitate participation by young people with disabilities:

“Definitely an awareness and knowledge of general online accessibility, so for people who have visual impairments and that kind of thing – I’ve found that some things that are really simple but I wouldn’t have done before on a Zoom call is that if you have slides sending them into the chat so that people can follow them by themselves or certain fonts and that kind of thing, colour blindness, having those things because online, on a screen it’s so difficult at times, like I’m only slightly short sighted and I can’t see a lot of things and I find it hard to sit in front of a screen so awareness of physical needs like that – making sure people have breaks” (Young Person).

LGBTQ+ young people

Concern was expressed by one of the interviewees about the situation faced by LGBTQ+ young people who lack a safe space to engage digitally or broadband access. Therefore, they need safe physical spaces to engage directly with youth workers:

“For those young people with access to broadband, device, privacy it’s been great – they’ve found a space that’s been safe, where they belong. Still so many young people who can’t engage like that. We need to balance those, embrace the learning, the new ways of engaging with young people, build on those but realise they will never replace face-to-face, especially for more vulnerable young people, young people with high anxiety, with body dysmorphia, those without privacy, broadband. We’re going to need to continue to have safe physical spaces for them to engage with youth workers and peers” (CEO).

“Keeping young people engaged digitally, dealing more with older LGBTI+ young people who had to move back home from college, more young people “coming out” in general, fear of families finding out about their gender and/or sexuality, parental support has also increased” (Youth Worker).

Young people in care

In relation to young people in care, one of the interviewees highlighted the issue of digital poverty among many young people in care, with many lacking access to a smartphone which hampers ways in which they could be engaged in digital sessions during the lockdown.

Traveller young people

Another interviewee shared their difficulty in engaging young Travellers in online sessions:

“And then I brought back my 10-12-year olds as well and they were really hard to engage – there are a few from the Travelling community, one did come on and do one but didn’t do any others, it was just really hard to engage them...” (Project Worker).

Furthermore, a survey respondent working with Traveller communities observed *“an increase in mental health issues, poverty and domestic violence.”*

Young people in direct provision centres

A couple of the interviewees were involved in work with young people in direct provision whom they saw as particularly vulnerable, particularly at the start of the lockdown.

“Young people in direct provision – we didn’t have any access into the centre, at the beginning there was some panic with the lads there (aged 18-25), they were feeling vulnerable, so we introduced some practical supports, like supply them with soap plus treats and food to supplement what they get in the centre – we gave that to the centre and directly to the lads” (Programme Manager).

A young person also highlighted the issue of access for those residing in direct provision centres as a barrier to participation.

“I’d be worried as well, a lot of my work is with people living in direct provision like [name] was saying some people just don’t have access to that kind of thing I’m concerned that we will be leaving out a large portion of young people moving forward” (Young Person).

Access to technology & digital poverty

As previously highlighted, there was a significant issue around access to technology in terms of broadband and connectivity, including latency issues as well as digital poverty whether a lack of access to devices or credit. An additional barrier is the problem of young people not having privacy in the home or having to schedule access to a device with other family members. As one survey respondent explains in their survey response:

“Engaging young people regularly remotely was a challenge, because of digital poverty. Young people do not have or cannot access a computer, tablet or phone. In most instances where they could engage it was via a shared device. Most homes did not have internet connection / wifi and depend on phone data” (Youth Worker).

Many survey respondents emphasised the limitations for young people who live rurally, particularly the lack of access to equipment/devices and poor broadband restricting their opportunity to engage:

“While the digital technology was there for the young people, the infrastructure for internet access throughout Donegal is limited” (Youth Worker).

One of the interviewees related how poor rural Wi-Fi was one of the key factors preventing their group from delivering online meet-ups. As this group offers young people the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge through a badge award system the leaders tried instead to encourage their members to keep up with these award activities at home but struggled to get the young people involved and was limited to communicating with parents via WhatsApp because they didn't have sufficient connectivity to facilitate online engagement:

"We had to chase for work. Each year the girls do various awards, it's part of guiding. Most of the kids were finished by Easter but we had a couple of kids who still had some work outstanding and getting them to do it at home was like getting blood from a stone, we were putting in so much prep work. Normally you'd be doing this in a room with a group but now we were trying to send stuff home to parents on WhatsApp" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Young people in the focus groups shared their experiences of poor connectivity hampering their capacity to contribute to group work and group discussions:

"...online does have its drawbacks for people. Like I live in Laois and I have alright internet signal but I'd be in meetings and I wouldn't necessarily have the chance to raise the points I'd want to because there'd be a lag and every time I'd want to raise a point it would be stunted and missed" (Young Person).

"I found my Wi-Fi cut out a lot, I'd have been in and out in and out of the calls and missing parts, but no-one can really do anything about that" (Young Person).

For organisations too there were serious implications of poor connectivity in terms of how they allocated staff to group sessions, which had a knock-on effect in terms of the amount of staff time required to support any engagement:

"There hasn't been a call with a group where there hasn't been someone dropping out – not once. In terms of child protection, we had been rostering 3 workers on with groups in case a worker drops out because of Wi-Fi. It's time again" (Programme Manager).

These experiences resonate with the observation by a young person in a focus group that regardless of how much an organisation does to provide services and supports to young people the key factor is the young person's access to technology:

"I think as well, and I think this is a limitation in society generally, is that if people didn't have access to the internet a laptop or computer, things like that, they would not have been able to access anything that any youth organisation had – the youth organisation could have had the best fastest greatest out-rolling of support the world's ever seen yet if you don't have the device that allows you to access it you can't access it" (Young Person).

What is clear from the data is that many of these issues – particularly around access to technology, digital poverty and marginalisation – create limitations with digital youth work methods and there is a compounding effect when online engagement is significantly hampered for young people already experiencing marginalisation in various ways. As one survey respondent put it, *“those most at risk were most disconnected during the pandemic.”*

“Because the young people we’re working with are so marginalised of course there was the normal issues of trying to connect with them online – broadband, peace and quiet in the family home, access to technology, no Wi-Fi, no credit on the phones, and trying to get them out of bed at suitable times, because their structure was gone, their ability to commit to meet on Zoom was fairly limited for some of them” (Programme Manager).

Referring to young people in care, an interviewee reflected on the extent of digital poverty:

“Digital poverty is more prevalent issue than you’d imagine – you think everyone has access but then realise that’s not the case, we go along with things, you forget. That was big in our survey, the issue of digital poverty, for example, a lot of young people only having access to an old Nokia phone and maybe some parents only having one phone between them, then if the relationship breaks down that makes things really difficult. I think we’re going to hear more about it in the next few months and years, the pandemic has brought it into focus when children can’t get to their home and can’t get the access they’d normally have. At least WhatsApp or Facetime calls would have helped. A lot of it was down to the parents not having a device. That would be the major issue. We’ll see more of it in the coming months and years. Technology is changing rapidly. It’s hard for people to keep up. Depends what the unemployment rates settles at, that will lead to further issues” (Programme Manager).

The lockdown exposed the reality of lack of broadband access in the Traveller community for this interviewee:

“We hadn’t really been aware of the limitations around broadband in Traveller accommodation. There’s an idea that everybody has it but it’s actually not the case.” (CEO).

A youth worker talked about how they tried to provide young people with a device, but the offer was turned down:

“There was money there to get anyone who hadn’t access to a device a tablet but even when some were contacted and offered they were like ‘no it’s alright’ but I think some of that was about saving face” (Project Worker).

Another interviewee explained that ‘harder-to-reach’ young people who use devices in a more transient way. Their phone numbers are often changing, and they can be non-responsive to phone calls. If they have a smartphone it is more often used as a media device:

“The poorer parts of our attendance – those who live in more challenging circumstances – their contact details are constantly changing. They don’t necessarily use the phone as a phone but as a media device and they tend not to answer the phone. They’ll be on Snapchat, Instagram or WhatsApp”
(Project Worker).

One of the interviewees highlighted the equipment necessary to make online interactions work, especially with music activities, and felt that the associated cost was an instant barrier for their internal resources:

“I run a cookery programme every year in the summer programme – healthy eating, food preparation etc. Usually a couple dozen of kids over a week and this year we were going to run it over 2 weeks because it had been so popular. The issue with it is that you need two cameras to demonstrate stuff online, and to be effective you need to be able to edit rather than do it live – you need somebody there to film with 2 cameras then do the edit. That goes across the board. With ‘Tea & Tunes’ [a music group] we had latency issues – those delays and the feedback, between the visual and audio, it’s just a nightmare. There are some apps available that are meant to reduce those issues, but it doesn’t really work without specialised equipment. The set up to do these things is an issue, the cost is prohibitive” (Project Worker).

Safeguarding concerns

As stated already 17% of survey respondents felt their online provision was limited due to a lack of safeguarding mechanisms for digital engagement with one survey respondent stating that they had *“parents not wanting their young daughters on video calling.”* Safeguarding concerns seemed to be a particular issue in relation to work with younger age groups as illustrated by the following comments:

“With the younger ones – the older young people were more inclined to do the Zooms and be in contact by phone. We were unsure about how best to engage with the young ones – 10-12-year olds – in terms of online safeguarding” (Programme Manager).

“Most of the young people that we engaged with digitally were 14+ We were wary of engaging with 10-12 year olds digitally due to safeguarding mechanism. We tried to contact them through parents but the response rate was low” (Youth Worker).

These quotations highlight the challenge of trying to connect with younger age groups where these young people might often be reliant on going online via a parent’s device:

“For the younger kids in particular it’s difficult you know – they’re having to use their parent’s phones or tablet” (Project Worker).

In addition, most social media platforms have a minimum age limit of 13+ (WhatsApp is 16+)²⁷ so it is clearly not appropriate to encourage interaction and engagement using these

²⁷ <https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/what-age-can-my-child-start-social-networking/>

platforms with those who are underage and there needs to be transparency with parents in this regard. It means that there needs to be particular consideration of how youth services ensure that they can offer provision to the 10-12 age group in circumstances such as those presented by the pandemic. It is particularly relevant when those aged 10-12 are at a key transition point in their lives and are a key demographic in many youth centres and clubs.

A youth worker interviewed also expressed a reticence about facilitating online gaming with young people unless the appropriate safeguards were in place for staff:

“There was a lot of them wanting to do online gaming, but we were wary of child protection issues so didn’t go there. And we wanted to be able to do that when staff could be back working from a base with two staff present side by side rather than working from home etc” (Programme Manager).

Not being able to see & respond when a young person needs support

There were several comments in the interviews, survey responses and focus groups about the limitations with online meetups and group video calls in terms of spotting when a young person is in need of support. Some felt it is harder to read body language and that young people ‘present’ differently digitally in comparison with face-to-face settings.

“When you’re working with groups online, if someone needs some support with something that just comes up – face-to-face you’d see that straight away and be able to act, but that’s harder online” (Programme Manager).

“When someone comes into the club, you’ll pick up from body language when there’s something going wrong, you can get a moment with the young person where you can address that. You can’t do that in a Zoom meeting, the moment may be missed, or it’s unlikely you’ll pick it up. In face-to face group work a young person will pull the youth worker aside and say what’s bothering them. In a lot of our clubs snacks will be provided, if you see a young person wolfing down the food and they’re really hungry – stuff like that you can’t and won’t be able to pick up online” (CEO).

“If I’m having a bad day, someone else will come in, if someone sees me having a bad day, they give me a high five or hug, you instantly feel better – you can’t get that on Zoom” (Young Person)

One of the interviewees was concerned about the loss of informal chats with young people that can happen naturally in a club space and noted that some young people may not feel comfortable with reaching out to a youth worker on a group call:

“The biggest challenge is not seeing young people in person because you can’t have those little side conversations with them and I think that’s always so important... On Zoom there’s still 5 or 6 other faces and you can see in their faces they kind of don’t want to say anything – everything that they say is a bit more measured because of that... you pick up on people’s body languages way better in person. They present differently as well and

a lot of the time if they're not in a good mood or they're having an off day they just switch off their camera so you can't even see, there's no way of reaching out to them, and you just feel they're more lonelier" (Project Worker).

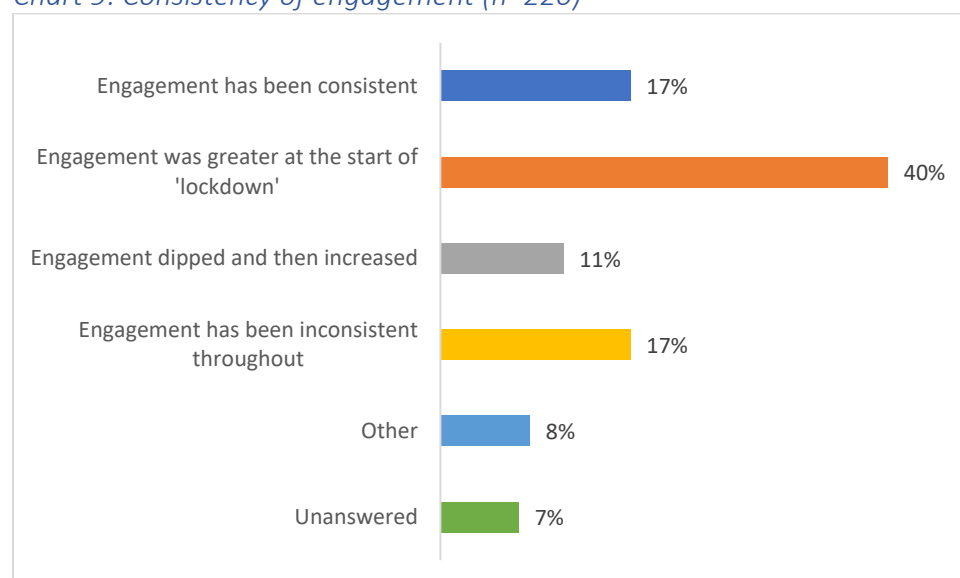
In a similar vein there are limitations to engagement that happens by phone in an advocacy setting:

"It's about picking up on the cues of the young people, you can sometimes tell if they want to give more information or if they're uncomfortable, and you don't know who's listening in on the call. If you're out visiting a young person in a residential centre or in a foster home, you can ask who else they want in the room. On the phone you don't know what's happening – if a foster parent is in the room with the young person etc – it's all the uncertainty" (Programme Manager).

Online engagement tailed off

Chart 9 outlines the consistency of engagement with services provided. Projects which were able to continue providing a service saw some variance in the engagement throughout the lockdown period. Of the 220 organisations that were able to continue some engagement, the majority found it was greater at the start of lockdown. Less than 1 in 5 (17%) found that engagement was consistent throughout and the same proportion found engagement was inconsistent.

Chart 9: Consistency of engagement (n=220)



Q: How has engagement changed over time?

The youth workers described a preference by the young people they engaged with for face to face youth work and referred to the emergence of 'Zoom fatigue' as time went on. They provided a variety of explanations for this ranging from a lack of incentives, the easing of lockdown restrictions after the initial phase, and the fact that young people were already having to be online for schoolwork. Youth workers highlighted the challenges of online engagement stating:

“Trying to keep them engaged online, keep them interested in stuff, keep them chatting. You had nothing to offer them – no incentive of trips or outings. You couldn’t promise them that, couldn’t say that’s something you’ve got to work towards. That was the biggest challenge” (Project Worker).

“In the last couple of weeks, some of our premises still hasn’t opened yet and we have to check that they’re ready and safe, and the young people are dying to get back in, some staff are seeing a huge need, young people are jumping at it. With that we’re starting to see a decline in the uptake for online stuff, our sense is that young people are getting sick of it, they just want to be out and about with their friends, young people on the Garda Diversion project are crying out for activities and trips” (Programme Manager).

One of the interviewees felt that low participation levels served to heighten young people’s sense of isolation particularly as engagement tailed off:

“It was a case of diminishing returns – it ended up that only 2 were turning up regularly, and those 2 were the same 2 that turned up for everything which was like putting a magnifying glass on their isolation, without having anyone else their it made their isolation all the more obvious” (Project Worker).

Ultimately it was clear to some youth workers that young people would much rather meet in person:

“It was a novelty to young people doing everything through Zoom for a while but it’s definitely wearing on them now and they really miss that physical contact... All the feedback we’re getting as well from young people is that they would rather meet in person, all our evaluations asking them what we could do differently, it’s all ‘do this in person’. It’s the socialising as well – a huge part of youth work is helping them to positively socialise with each other and that’s next to impossible to do through Zoom” (Project Worker).

Young people we spoke to in the focus groups also highlighted the way in online meetings can be a drain on energy and that pacing is essential:

“I feel you can only do so much stuff online I think, it can be very tiring doing a lot online – it’s very hard to stop and relax when you’re thinking, ‘oh I have another one now in 20 mins’ or whatever. I think it will be good to get back to doing stuff in person – it’s great that we can do it, but it will be better again when we eventually get to do things in person – it is what we have to do short term” (Young Person).

A survey respondent noted the *“online overload for some children. Age group 12-14 year olds seem to be the worst affected, manifesting with symptoms of anxiety.”*

Lack of structure & lack of support from parents

A lack of structure in the lives of the young people with the schools closed along with a lack of support from parents meant that a number of youth workers observed a lack of motivation among young people to engage digitally. One spoke of a young person without a phone and offered to equip him with a device but despite his best efforts the young person didn't seem motivated to get connected:

"I went out and handed him a phone but then he couldn't find the SIM card. Turned out he never got it sorted. We had to get the phone unlocked, I spent 3 hours online with Three unlocking the phone, we tried everything. That was very frustrating. Lack of structure created a lack of motivation. He and his peers would be quite vain, before the lockdown they would come in for drop-in dressed up, make an effort, but when I met him at the house, he looked unkempt, unwashed, he had let himself go" (Project Worker).

Another youth worker felt that those young people without parental support were losing out because all the usual supports they would get at school and in youth services were no longer accessible in the usual way:

"We didn't have the support of some of the parents, so the motivation wasn't there, they [young people] didn't have the support of youth workers and teachers that they normally would" (Programme Manager).

There was some critique of 'together but apart' activities, which didn't work for everyone unless there was support from the wider family:

"Guiding has a huge emphasis on teamwork, patrol work, helping each other, leading the way, and all that went out the window. With the Camp at Home, the girls who took part loved it, took photos, but it was one night of fun and that was it. It was an individual thing and depends on how much support they had within their own families to participate" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Online engagement sometimes compounded pressure for families

One of the factors in the lack of support from parents with young people's participation in digital youth work activities was the way in which online engagement may have compounded pressure in the home:

"The Challenge weeks – baking, cooking, arts and crafts etc worked well but worked better earlier on, by the time we were doing them again more recently the young people had seen a lot of that kind of thing. We sent them to parents of the younger age group, sometimes there wasn't great uptake, but we think the parents were getting inundated with stuff from schools etc, a bit of tiredness with the online stuff. I think people genuinely miss the face-to-face interaction" (Programme Manager).

Another youth worker observed just how much of a 'pressure cooker' situation families were experiencing as a result of the lockdown measures:

“It’s put a lot of pressure on families, I’m working with three families now referred by social services. Broadly it’s the same issues, everyone is in the house all the time – it’s a pressure cooker environment, or where parents are both working, and teenagers are at home all time, but it’s world war three in the house, it impacts on the family as a whole. There is pressure on the young people too because they’re in a situation they’ve haven’t been in for a long time” (Project Worker).

“The family cooking sessions went down well in some homes but for others it was too much to ask for as there were incidences of crowding and older people cocooning in the homes that made clearing the kitchen quite stressful” (Youth Worker).

One of the interviewees felt that as a result schoolwork was prioritised over extra-curricular activities:

“The motivation wasn’t there among the kids. The parents were already nagging their kids about everything – getting exercise, doing schoolwork etc. Anything that wasn’t school activity was bottom of the list. We found it quite frustrating because we were spending hours prepping while the kids were spending 10 minutes doing it and it took so much to pin them down for that 10 minutes of work... The girls and the parents seemed to be quite happy to switch off” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Furthermore, the flipside to all the innovative and creative ideas for activities and the trend in challenge activities may have exacerbated a sense of pressure for young people, particularly as there were so many of them on an ongoing basis organised by all sorts of organisations. As one youth worker reflected,

“From the beginning I really wasn’t in favour of all these challenges, the 5ks and all that, my fear was there were too many people getting too busy with stuff that was only an actual bigger burden” (Project Worker).

Paradox of encouraging online engagement in lockdown when previously discouraging device and social media dependence pre-COVID-19

Several of the youth workers interviewed named the irony of having previously discouraged social media usage among young people and now actively encouraging young people to go online to engage because of the lockdown. Moreover, one of the workers we spoke to was uncomfortable with how some organisations seemed to jump onto every platform available without thought:

“At the start some wanted to use every single platform. But TikTok is something we would never endorse and we wouldn’t do that just to engage the young people, some other organisations did but I sat on the Youth Work Ireland Innovation Practice Committee because I felt very strongly about youth workers not using platforms we’d normally stay away from” (Programme Manager).

Another youth worker pointed out that while social media platforms have enabled young people's engagement there are those young people for whom it does not have a positive impact:

"We know that while an awful lot of young people benefit from the use of social media, there is an awful lot of young people who have huge confidence and resilience issues around social media and its impact on their lives. We need to be really measured in our response" (CEO).

A young person shared their personal perspective around social media usage:

"Social media has become a positive in a way during the lockdown – I especially felt during the first 2 or 3 weeks maybe everything on social media was generally positive and it was quite a breath of fresh air but that has now reverted back to the normal of social media being in most cases not very good and a lot of information on it being quite negative or people trying to have arguments or trying to pick fights and so that is the big fear I have and I try to avoid social media where I can because I feel it often doesn't help my mental health to watch people having continual problems and putting forward their arguing online but then when you're only way to have any type of interaction is through a medium which may not be the most positive of mediums itself I think that brings a whole host of issues itself..." (Young Person).

Loss of developmental work & experiential learning

There is some evidence in the interviews that youth workers ended up having to focus their efforts on supporting young people to engage online through more social activities rather than developmental work:

"Now we did find it harder to do more serious stuff with them – you know to actually talk about youth issues – we did do a bit of that and they created a few memes and social media posts you know to promote safe hygiene and social distancing... but we found that they weren't as interested in that – they really missed the social aspect of it so I refocused that group then and I got better engagement and more engagement when we refocused to 'ok what would you like to do' so they made a list of things like charades and Kahoot quizzes and stuff like that and we just ticked off the list of stuff they wanted to do" (Project Worker).

There was also a certain amount of loss of exposure to new experiences, to learning in context, and to experiential approaches particularly where providers have an emphasis on nurturing progression through developmental activities. For example, a worker from a provider that facilitates cross-border 'good relations' work felt that the young people were losing out on significant learning experiences and growth opportunities. They felt that the online programme cannot substitute for those activities.

Another interviewee explained how the sense of progression that is normally present in her organisation's youth provision has now been lost for its members:

“They’re losing the camp experience this year, they [usually] get specific experiences – getting out on the water with the boats etc – as they move through each year of guides that give them a sense of progression, they’re stepping stones. This year’s 11-year olds will be in the same place as the new guides who have just come up from Brownies, they won’t have had the key experiences that would normally be part of the year.” (Volunteer Youth Leader)

We heard from a worker from a youth organisation that supports young people with intellectual disabilities and had to make significant adaptations, but as a result the young people have lost out on vital ‘real world’ experiences:

“Because a huge part of our programme was about learning how to do things independently outside in the world - that’s come to a halt, that’s a huge challenge. Work sampling and work experience – another big part of our programme – also came to a complete halt. We’re working on the assumption that it will come back. We can still work on some things to an extent without doing them but learning in context is what works for young people with ID, that’s what the research tells us. There are other things that became really important, we’ve been trying to fill in the gaps e.g. learning to plan their day, learning to manage anxiety – techniques and strategies” (Programme Manager).

Loss of young person’s voice and agency

In one of the interviews there was a view that young people were losing the chance to have their say in decisions about group activities, essentially because lockdown enforced a completely different way of operating. This highlights an important issue that youth workers need to consider given that honouring young people’s agency is such a fundamental part of the youth work value base. The same interview described how their group had been planning an overseas trip, but the leaders had to make the difficult decision to cancel it to comply with Government guidelines and young people’s voice was taken out of any planning or decision-making:

“The kids who were supposed to go to Switzerland this year – we spent 2 years fundraising for that, every couple of months we were doing something towards the trip, they were involved in everything and in working towards it, but it all just stopped and they’ve been completely taken out of the decision-making process. In everything else they had been part of the decision-making for that trip – where we go, what we do. But we had to make the decision to put it off until next year and parents had to tell their daughters” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Limitations associated with outreach work

In relation to youth services trying to engage ‘new’ young people in services, some of those interviewed focused their energies on engaging existing cohorts online. While some services were able to promote their programmes via social media and respond to enquiries or referrals, some felt that outreach is inhibited in digital spaces:

“The negative side of that is that outreach has been completely out the door... over the summer we’d be able to hold events... because they don’t have school, they don’t have much to do... and that’s how we engage with them, now that’s completely gone... Schools are closed so we can’t get messages to them that way, youth cafés, youth services they’re all closed... So now we’re relying on what they see in their social media feeds and now it’s much harder to get to a student who has no idea what ISSU is. So we’re in the process of trying to re-imagine how we can do that” (Young Person).

As one of the interviewees experienced for themselves, it is also harder to advocate for young people when they are new to your service and you only have contact by phone:

“I was trying to do the information sessions over the phone – it’s very difficult, for a young person to talk to me, they’ve never met me, they don’t know who I am, where I’m from... It’s more difficult to put across the young person’s point of view when you haven’t physically met the young person, you’ve only spoken to them on the phone, you don’t know the social worker, that’s far more difficult than it normally would have been, you’re working in the dark... If you’re calling out in person then they know that you’ve done your best for them... If things didn’t go how they wanted they might think, ‘well does this advocacy thing really work?’” (Programme Manager).

Online events versus in-person engagement

One of the young people from one of the focus groups was very vocal in their comments comparing online events with ‘in person’ engagement and felt that there is more impact with the latter:

“I think one of the drawbacks and limitations is the effectiveness of what organisations can do. I mean it is great to have online events to organise social media campaigns and webinars and stuff but I just don’t feel they are as effective in getting a message across to young people... The European Youth Event that happens every 2 years... it was replaced with a series of Facebook lives, webinars and it was nowhere near the same experience at all because originally it would be a huge event... Replacing that with some speakers on a live Facebook event is just nowhere near the same impact and just cannot replace what an ‘in person’ event is like... When it’s online I feel that for people to interact properly and to connect and feel they have a chance to have their say, I think you need a smaller group. Because in person you can rely on body language and facilitate a group of 20 talking in a group, but online having a group of 20 people on a Zoom call it’s hard to get a word in” (Young Person).

Can face-to-face youth work be replaced?

Many youth workers we heard from felt strongly that ultimately you can’t replace face-to-face engagement with young people:

“Working with young people digitally is one-dimensional and takes the richness and relationship out of youth work” (Youth Worker).

“Being creative and innovative online was no substitute to the face to face work we do. I employed different tools to reach the young people, but the work didn't change” (Youth Worker).

“Our activities can't be replicated online it's very much an unstructured place to hang out. We don't have anyone here who are strictly trained as youth workers, they haven't gone and got a degree or anything like that – it's an informal youth club... It's a place to come and hang out...The success of our club is it's not structured they can come in and hang out and they're free to pick and choose the activities they want to do and who they want to hang out with and it just couldn't be replicated online” (Programme Manager).

These comments emphasise the significance of relational and person-centred approaches which are core to youth work values. One of the interviewees underlined the need to ensure that young people still have opportunities to access youth services casually and not purely by referral or target intervention:

“If this is going to be the way things continue, personally I wouldn't be looking to stay in youth work – it's that personal contact and personal interaction is so important. Online stuff can be great as part of a range of tools but it's not a replacement. The notion of not having drop-in or that you can't have the casual users come in, I would fight that strongly... The reason it's not valued particularly by management and administrators is because it's hard to quantify what the impact of it is. Not that everything that can be counted counts. We need to recognise that we're providing a service, if you've 15-20 kids coming in after school every day and you build relationships with these kids – what we've found over the years is that when you build that relationship you're the first port of call if there's an issue – if they need someone to talk to that isn't a parent either if they're needing to let off steam or get advice or whatever” (Project Worker).

Limitations of digital youth work methodologies at the organisational level

Stress and anxiety for workers

There were numerous comments in the surveys and interviews about the stress and anxiety experienced by youth workers as they grappled with the move to online engagement, some of which was compounded by having to juggle work, childcare and home schooling or caring responsibilities. There was also stress fuelled by concern for the welfare of young people:

“Staff struggling to adapt to a completely new way of working. There was a lot more emphasis on one to one support which could be emotionally draining for staff” (Youth Worker).

“Staff required a huge amount of support including line management, external supervision and sometimes counselling via our employee assistance programme with VHI. Informal support from colleagues in the

office not available. MSN Teams was brilliant but is not the same as being in the office to have informal chats after a tough call with a vulnerable young person” (Youth Worker).

The overnight change in the new way of working and the isolation from colleagues was clearly immobilising for some as illustrated by this stark comment:

“...The younger staff team, I started losing them – the pressure was very concerning. I know of other staff who went off AWOL a bit, in our case it was say somebody mourning the loss, not being able to deal with solitude. Like I’m kind of made for pandemic in a way but my colleague was stunned into paralysis.” (Project Worker).

Some workers battled with worry and guilt that what they were doing wasn’t enough:

“It was a mixed feeling – were we doing enough or too much? ...Some days I felt guilty, we’re not doing enough, and other days I felt well everyone has their own stuff going on, we’re beating ourselves up” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

“There will be plenty of colleagues like myself that would have found the first the month – I was in bits about it, so uptight and highly strung – I felt the obligation to do my job and a complete inability to do it in the circumstances. I managed to get talked out of that largely with the help of my line manager.” (Project Worker).

Some youth workers clearly felt external pressure to prove the worth of their efforts:

Having to continually show/justify that you are working or trying to engage young people” (Youth Worker).

“Managing self-care while remote working. Constant demands for information and descriptions of what was happening from many levels” (Youth Worker).

Another interviewee noted the intensity of the switch to online engagement:

“...it was a tough time and saying we should have paced ourselves better and we should have paced ourselves a bit better going into it but we kind flew into it like we were on Zoom the next day and rushing into it and there was a lot of stress then we felt ourselves as we were trying to learn all these new skills, digital skills and trying to be everything and everyone for everyone and then worrying about the young people that we couldn’t contact and updating social media as well – like my eyes were going cross-eyed” (Project Worker).

While there was a sense that things improved as time went on, the mental health impact for workers cannot be underestimated:

“Working remotely initially but that has been overcome now. Many supports are in place, but the mental health of workers has been tested”
(Youth Worker).

There were also physical impacts for workers with the change from face-to-face work to sitting in front of a laptop or on a smartphone:

“Increased screentime for staff, which can be stressful - increased headaches. Also working from home, no computer chair/desk - bad posture/uncomfortable” (Youth Worker).

Challenges with boundaries for workers

“There is also a blurring of home and workspace which is not something I particularly like” (Youth Worker).

As the above quote indicates, remote working blurred the usual separation between work and home life that exists when youth workers are based in youth or community centres, offices or are out and about with young people. One of the survey respondents commented that it was *“hard to switch off from work when home”* and an interviewee agreed saying that you might want to be strict with boundaries but it’s hard to put into practice:

“That was the hardest thing – you were never ever off duty. In our WhatsApp groups, you say you turn the phone off, but you never do. You’re replying to messages at 10pm. It’s hard to stick to boundaries, but it was hard to switch off from work when you’re at home” (Youth Worker).

Another interviewee reflected that there was a need to provide specific support to youth workers to help them recreate good boundaries and practices for this new paradigm:

“They’re doing a different kind of engagement, and now beginning to get back into action but I don’t remember the youth workers being as tired. They had good boundaries in place in relation pre-Covid, but with everything going online all that disappeared. There’s a need for some coaching and mentoring for the projects just to support them would be good” (CEO).

IT Skills & capacity among workers and within organisations

As previously referred to some youth workers were hampered because their IT skills were inadequate, and the lockdown generated a steep learning curve for individuals and organisations. One of the interviewees in an arts-focused organisation describes how sessional facilitators were unable to offer anything in the online space:

“When I realised this was going to be long-term I contacted all our sessional facilitators and asked them to please have a think about anything they could do. I had money I could pay them and not one came back... because their skillset is totally having the kids in the room and working with them and engaging with them [face-to-face] they just couldn’t see themselves doing it online. Now I have the one guy doing the writers group, but I was blown away by that that there wasn’t one of them

came back. They didn't feel they could do it; their work was face-to-face"
(CEO).

This highlights a need for the sector to update skillsets and to pay attention to specific platforms and ways of working digitally.

Time and effort to make contact with young people and to adapt

Interviewees provided insight into just how much extra time and effort was expended by youth workers to make contact with young people and adapt programmes. One worker described the extra time her colleagues were spending on the phone with parents and how this pulled them into a lot of family support work:

"For the first four weeks we found we were pulled into a lot of family support work, where it was parents who needed a chat, so you could spend a lot of time on the phone. There was pros and cons to it, the time constraints were hard – a youth worker spending all day on the phone and only getting through to 10 people because the parent hadn't talked to anyone outside the family" (Programme Manager).

On adapting for online meetups with young people with intellectual disabilities, a worker explained how it was a completely new ballgame for the young people and they had to quickly prepare new sets of materials to support the young people's participation:

"A lot of them had never done talking through video before, it was all new. Initially we were just trying to engage them online and get them to listen and contribute. We had to adapt things a lot – have lots of visual supports for whatever we were discussing – we had to create materials quite quickly" (Programme Manager).

"Long working hours. Online preparation and back up material takes a long time" (Youth Worker).

Another worker reflected that organising events online took up a greater amount of time, stating:

"Now things take a lot longer organising online training and facilitations what was an event which we've done before and I can nearly turn up and wing it because I know it, a lot of our events will be the same as what you did somewhere else but now you need to practice with the individuals on the ground and also our communications has really been lobbed on to both of our roles here" (Project Worker).

Changing funding arrangements

Another limitation that emerged in the data with the move to digitally based provision was concern about income, about potential changes with funding arrangements and the implications of the loss of revenue generated from fundraising. Youth workers interviewed were concerned that the current situation would result in the closure of projects and redundancies:

“Fundraising income plans had to be scrapped and re-designed” (Youth Worker).

“We were instructed by our funder to maintain as normal a face to face service as possible. This presented difficulties on a personal level for staff as human beings with the same fears and anxieties as everyone else. The fear of losing a job because of the short-term nature of funding that [name of funder] were providing (shortened from 12 month to 3 month) exasperated [sic] the situation” (Youth Worker).

5.5 Adapting for the Future

This study has provided the opportunity to get a sense of the views of managers, youth workers and young people regarding what happens next as we enter a different phase beyond lockdown while also living with the virus until a vaccine is developed. We have been able to gain insights into the concerns of both workers and young people about what lies ahead for the youth sector and what help and support is required to sustain the youth work sector now and in the future.

Concerns for the Future

Uncertainty

One CEO used the phrase *“it’s like looking into a black hole”* which captures the underlying sense of uncertainty amongst those who participated in this research. There are also some concerns from some quarters about the potential of further outbreaks of COVID-19.

Many of the young people expressed concern about family members, particularly older relatives. They are anxious that they might inadvertently infect a relative. They are also concerned about how their studies will be impacted, and ultimately what the future will hold. For some smaller organisations there is an attitude of ‘wait-and-see’:

“We’re trying to get this all sorted first before we move about the youth club side of things again because we just want to see how people are getting on first... We could be making loads of plans in one direction and then something changes in another direction and I feel that’s a drain on our resources at the moment which I don’t have. So we’re trying to see how other groups are going to manage and particularly we have some summer camps who are going to be in here and I want to see how their experience of social distancing and how they manage” (Programme Manager).

COVID-19 Compliance

Many projects have indicated that they now have a COVID-19 compliance officer. Staff are getting training on how to respond if someone has symptoms and how to establish practices such as social distancing and deep cleaning. Some organisations have concerns around understanding and keeping up with the regulations. This is a particular concern for smaller providers who do not have a parent organisation to take advice from with implications on time and resources:

“I don’t know if they have specific guidance for smaller groups, say even if they could offer some sort of mentoring... they could put us in touch with someone to review our plans before we reopen and see how we’re meeting all the health and safety requirements... It’s really important the parents are comfortable that their kids will be safe to come in and the perception of our centre and youth clubs is that it’s somewhere safe to go. That’s why I found the Health and Safety stuff so difficult... Even someone to review plans and say that looks fine or suggestions on what other organisations are doing and learn from each other” (Programme Manager).

Projects recognise the need to have a robust risk management process in place. Some projects expressed concern around keeping staff and young people protected from the virus while continuing to offer a vital service to young people. Some are predicting that with the risk measures in place there will be an increase in bureaucracy and paperwork. As one interviewee pointed out the bureaucracy and paperwork can be intimidating particularly for those without English as a first language or those distrustful of authorities, for example, Roma families. Some groups, particularly some youth theatres and drama companies, are apprehensive about having adequate space and facilities to allow for social distancing and the consequential costs if larger premises are needed. An organisation engaging in cross-border work between Derry and Donegal raised the issue of compliance disparities between different jurisdictions, for example, social distancing is 1 metre in Northern Ireland and 2 metres in the Republic. This is applicable to all-island organisations such as Scouting Ireland, Catholic Guides of Ireland and YMCA Ireland.

Funding and investment

“If we’re building back better, we need more funding, DCYA needs to acknowledge that youth services responded really well and kept those marginalised young people, shows the importance of youth work and the value of it, so put your money where your mouth is... Our building is not fit for purpose for a youth facility. We try and adapt because young people are the priority so we keep money for programmes, but maybe proper facilities will help us build back better” (Programme Manager).

Both survey respondents and the stakeholder interviews make clear that projects are worried about their future financial capacity not just concerning resources to meet social distancing requirements but also regarding the need to upgrade their facilities, digital technology and equipment. Doing so will enable them to offer a combination of face-to-face and online provision, which may be vital as we learn to live with COVID-19 for the time being. Many organisations have realised their technological infrastructure – software, hardware, security, licensing etc – is not fit for purpose for remote working and digital engagement with young people:

“The pandemic certainly focused our minds on what we need in terms of technology... that’s still going to be the big ask e.g. teleconferencing facilities, access to tablets etc” (CEO).

“We do have Zoom but we don’t all have premium Zoom programmes either. If we are to continue to do some stuff that is digital there needs to be some funding put in to helping us to do everything that needs to be done like people’s laptops need to be upgraded, we need headphones like my ears are so itchy from wearing these all day and you’re just tied to the same spot – there does need to be investment put into the technology side of things as well if that’s what we’re going to do – we’ll probably be doing some sort of blended provision” (Project Worker).

Tied in with this is a fear that the terms and conditions of funding grants will change if projects are not meeting their original intended outcomes as a consequence of the COVID restrictions. The view was expressed that there was a need for flexibility and ‘leeway.’ One

research participant stated that while running costs remain the same governmental funding may be looking for monies to be returned and it is important that DCYA is cognisant of the challenges of delivering youth work during this period:

“We will need an understanding that our new UBU projects might not be on target, that there might be a big shift in our original outcomes, we need an acknowledgement that that’s going to be ok as long as we have a rationale for it and that we’re not going to be threatened with losing our funding with something we’ve no control over. It’s always about funding, just an acknowledgement, that needs to be coming from the DCYA. Just a realisation that some things are going to work, and some aren’t, and it’s going to take some of us longer to get off the ground, and we might have lost some of the young people forever. Good youth work is based on the relationships, it’s going to take time to build that up again, just an understanding of that” (Programme Manager).

“There is the expectation that the work will continue and unfortunately all our running costs are still the same, even when the office is not open, we still pay our insurance, certain things. ... there is still expectations from the department that those funded projects will go ahead and if you’re not going to do the work what money is left over that you give us back. I’ve a document on my desk, a sectional review of 2020 so I now have to review the whole year and see have I any money I can hand back to the department – that’s purely down to COVID” (CEO).

There is worry around the implications of funding for staff positions, for instance, a survey respondent expressed the following concern:

“In terms of the overall organisation, some people have been temporarily laid off, staff will not be getting their increments which are due to them, our pension scheme will more than likely be cut if not scrapped” (Youth Worker).

Some youth workers are anxious about what kind of work funders might prioritise and how they will sustain their work with young people, particularly if it’s open access provision rather than targeted provision:

“Funding opportunities now all seem to focus on resolutions to the pandemic & the funding won’t come through quick enough” (Youth Worker).

“The need for a social hub isn’t considered a serious need – the idea that just having somewhere to hang out and meet other young people as a positive thing isn’t given the value it should be” (Project Worker).

Ultimately some projects are fearful of permanent closure:

“Something like this will ultimately threaten an arts organisation with closure. Financially our income streams have been frozen and the funding we had already been approved now comes with more surveys,

questionnaires, budgets, reviews etc. Since March 12 2020 [name of organisation] has been on crisis management and we do not see this levelling out until Feb/March 2021. With a small employee team, we have redirected to Crisis Financial Management, Member communication, Covid preparation, reimagining our business model, pivoting our business plan and the upskilling of employees. The [name of organisation] has had to lay off one staff member, reduce the contract of two and continue to deliver a workload that would be more suitable to a team double this size” (Youth Worker).

Rebuilding relationships

In the post-lockdown period and the transition from summer to autumn, there is recognition of the need to rebuild relationships with young people. Relationship-building is a central aspect of youth work. Some youth workers are hopeful that young people who didn't engage online will return to face-to-face services. Some are apprehensive that if virtual meetings have to continue this will may result in a reduction of young people returning:

“Young people who were naturally heading towards disengagement due to age and education, haven't engaged throughout the pandemic and will more than likely not come back once services resume. Overall numbers of young people has been drastically low. There is a risk that we may have to rebuild half of the service due to the potential of some young people not coming back once we open” (Youth Worker).

“The whole point of it is that they learn how to operate in a group and as a community. That's my worry going forward that if we can't get them back into that in the autumn, I'm worried we'll lose a lot of them because doing the work at home isn't the same thing. Given the nature of guiding, we don't even know if we'll get people signing up in September if it's going to be a virtual meeting every week. It's not what it's about” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Volunteering

There was some apprehension expressed over the future involvement of volunteers who may be experiencing greater home-life pressures, are fearful of themselves or loved ones getting the virus, particularly if they have been shielding, or that they have been demotivated altogether. There is concern that volunteer-led activities cannot compete with paid activities such as music or dance lessons and that these kinds of extra-curricular activities will not be prioritised by parents:

“Long break has demotivated our volunteer leaders and we expect a drop in numbers” (Youth Worker).

“Some of our companies may not have the volunteers or interest from YP to re-open come September. The schedules in Parish Halls (the Companies use on a weekly basis) may be changed and may not allow access” (Youth Worker).

“Guiding is patrol based but how that’s going to work with social distancing is beyond me. Will leaders be happy to work with groups for a couple of hours a week if it can’t be done safely? ...I got involved in guiding because I could see how much my daughters got out of it, but not everyone sees that. If you have to drop something, if you see it as being run by volunteers and has less value than activities paying professionals. We’re probably more committed to it than a lot of professionals, we do it for the love of it. I don’t think parents quite get that. If it becomes a choice, between activities, guiding could be one of the activities that gets cut”
(Volunteer Youth Leader).

Mental health

Sections 2 and 5.1 emphasise the detrimental impact of the pandemic on young people’s mental health. This will continue to be a great concern for young people themselves and youth workers as they try to mitigate the long-term damage for young people’s well-being and development. Some young people are anxious about re-entering ‘normal’ life such as going back to school after the time away from it. Youth workers are expecting young people to have more complex needs and want to be in a position to respond effectively.

“We’re looking at a tsunami of different mental health issues... For a lot of young people put into this situation, as well young people in the middle of their education who are so focused on achieving, to get to college etc, they’re going to be really struggling too. Pastoral care in the schools is going to be a huge issue... There’s going to be some sort of a legacy as a result of what’s happened” (Project Worker).

“So what’s coming back off some young people is they’ve actually enjoyed lockdown where they’ve had time just being themselves. And there’s almost a worry that when they try to come back into society, come back to meet their friends, it’ll be hard to reintroduce into that stressful environment” (Young Person).

“Young people are going to have more needs. They’re going to be more complex and there are going to be more young people in need of our service. This isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. It’s going to continue to impact on people’s lives in some way over the next couple of years anyway. Overall young people’s needs are going to be higher and youth services are going to be needed more than ever” (Programme Manager).

Adapting for the future

Many organisations have responded positively and as effectively as possible to the initial wave of the coronavirus and intend to continue provide a service to meet the needs of young people. Youth workers were asked in what ways their project might adapt when moving into the next phase of the response to COVID-19. Many stated that they would follow government guidelines and relevant public health protocols, such as social distancing and smaller groups.

Projects are also intending to utilise a blended approach of both digital and ‘in-person’ activities, for example an interview said,

“We’ve come a long way and we’ve learnt a lot about working online and the potential of it. There are parts of it we’ll definitely take forward. It allows for a lot more flexibility – if a group can’t meet with us face-to-face then we can do an online session. In the future we’ll have more of a combination approach in our way of working with people” (Programme Manager).

This worker understands the importance of staying true to relational and young person-centred approaches to youth work while also not holding back from innovation and the value of adopting digital approaches to youth work:

“If we’re given the flexibility that I’m used to – if we can hold onto that real innovation, as long as you know you have to be proactive to survive, really listen to what young people are saying and then figure out what that space is and definitely get better with technology and think it’s not one or the other, though I heard someone from the department unfortunately say digital youth work we know it’s tough, we know it’s not the same and actually I disagree because I think if you use the tools right and if you choose the in person opportunities well [you are still one youth worker]” (Project Worker).

There is a lot that is unknown about future operating conditions projects are responding to, the evolving guidelines and rising to the challenge. Some are consulting with young people and families to gauge their concerns and willingness to participate. A significant number indicated they would like to train staff both in health and safety and in digital methods:

“Greater outreach schedule, groups meeting up in outdoor spaces were possible, smaller group numbers indoors, more one to one work. Currently conducting some local research to check in with families and young people to get a sense of where things are at and what we need to do to best meet their needs in the coming weeks and months. We have a small outdoor space we did not use much...looking at revamping it and using more with groups. Staggered rotas for staff, all social distance signage set up in the building. Hand sanitizing stations and extra cleaning requirements being planned for” (Youth Worker).

“The big thing for us is the social distancing, when we reopen in September we need to put in place Perspex screens etc, to date the club has spent over €1000 in getting ready, money which we do not have. We will have a Covid response officer/volunteer to maintain the clubs Covid-19 protocols. We also intend to have a general meeting with the kids at the start of the year to inform them fully of the club’s protocols” (Youth Worker).

Help and Support for Organisations

Projects have been appreciative of the help they have received from government departments and organisations such as NYCI. Survey Respondents were asked what support

they would have liked but did not receive which provides some indication of what might be needed in the future. The most frequent request in the survey was for additional funding both to enhance digital equipment and to prepare for preventing spread of COVID-19 such as PPE equipment, hand-sanitizer and signage and so on:

“Covid 19 support – hand sanitizer, signage, disinfectant, Risk assessments for building and activities, steam mops” (Youth Worker).

When lockdown measures were introduced youth workers would have liked advice on digital practice and programmes and access to appropriate equipment and software and how to maintain engagement with young people. Other projects would have liked more digital training while a small number were looking for policy advice on issues such as safeguarding, GDPR and how to develop a COVID response policy:

“Maybe tech support. We had to learn it all ourselves. Policy development support regarding AUP, GDPR and child protection re digital working” (Youth Worker).

“At the beginning we could have had more engagement with schools and linking in to the young people through schools, if there was better relationships between schools and youth services – the teachers would never think to involve us in that. If training on Zoom or on different platforms had come out nationally in the first week that would have been ok... If there was more peer support and training for us on IT stuff” (Programme Manager).

6. Good Practice Examples

While it is impossible to catalogue every example, this section offers a sample of the many cases of good practice identified through this research thus demonstrating the ability, willingness and creativity of the youth sector to offer a continuation of service provision during the uncharted circumstances forced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Passing on Public Health Information:

Many projects encouraged young people to keep to government guidelines by promoting them through their social media accounts and on their websites.

Example: Macra na Feirme regularly encouraged members to stick to safety guidelines. They uploaded a video of their president demonstrating good hand washing and they advised members to keep a record of places they visited and who they were with to aid contact tracing.

Facebook post 26th March:

Our President Thomas Duffy shares his top tips for washing your hands to help prevent the

spread of Covid-19 🧼

[#washyourhands](#)



Example: Irish Red Cross Youth consistently updated young people with advice on staying safe and used accessible info guides. The link below demonstrates a video they shared encouraging young people to be K.I.N.D.

- Keep in touch with your friends
- Inform others if you have symptoms
- Never ignore your health
- Don't panic. We're all in this together.

<https://www.facebook.com/IFRC/videos/626322521482054>



Changing to Virtual Activities:

The majority of organisations have made some attempt to move their services online and have been very creative in trying to simulate the 'in-person' events they would normally facilitate.

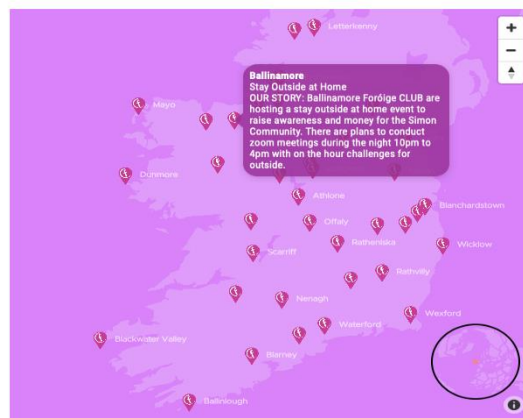
Example: Foróige produced an interactive map of how local groups have adapted during pandemic -

<https://www.foroige.ie/foroige-covid-19>

Our interactive map gives a snapshot of the inspiring ways in which young people, volunteers and staff from Foróige have adapted during the COVID - 19 pandemic. We're continuing to support young people in communities right across Ireland and we're finding new and innovative ways to do it. Navigate the map below and click the icons to read more about the quiet acts of heroism happening around Ireland.

Foróige For Good

#WeAreForóige



Example: Gaisce #GaisceAtHome campaign encouraged young people to stay active and engaged in their personal development and community action -

<https://www.gaisce.ie/gaisce-launches-gaisce-at-home/>



I can't believe I am already at half of the Morning Yoga Challenge for my @GaisceAward. These 10-minutes videos per day helped me in coping with our current situation and they are really relaxing. Can't wait to do second half in next 15 days ❤️

#YogaWithKassandra #GaisceAtHome

11:42 AM · Apr 15, 2020 · Twitter for Android

"I find doing Gaisce has been a welcome distraction as it's something else to focus on other than the Leaving Cert and the current restrictions.

It's hard when you're at home all the time to stay positive, but I'm finding working towards my Gold Award keeps me motivated and gives me something to look forward to. Gaisce for me is a way of promoting positive mental health and I think it's bringing an air of normality to daily life which I welcome wholeheartedly!"

<https://www.gaisce.ie/i-think-the-biggest-thing-we-all-probably-miss-is-our-freedom/>

Example: Irish Girl Guides held a 24 in 48 challenge with the aim of completing 24 Ladybird Badges in 48 hours. The challenge took place during the #IGGCampAtHome event. During the Camp At Home weekend (18-19 April) participants learned new skills, made crafts, learned dances from different countries, made TikTok videos and had plenty of online discussions. While earning their Europe badge, they met up online with Maria Walsh MEP to learn about life in politics at a European level.

- <https://www.irishgirlguides.ie/114-senior-branchers-take-on-the-24-in-48-challenge/>



"So many challenges were completed and also so many achievements. Just to name a few, over the course of the weekend we upcycled 78 t-shirts into shopping bags, we walked from Malin to Mizen Head, the Camino, to Pax Lodge and back and the Wild Atlantic way. 130 Senior Branchers camped on Saturday & Sunday, 95 Senior Branchers took part in our 100th birthday bash, 82 Senior Branchers cleaned up their local areas by doing a litter picking challenge and 2 Senior Branchers virtually climbed Ben Nevis and 3 climbed Carrauntwohill"

"It was a great experience for all of the girls to become involved with," said Rachael. "We are all sitting at home struggling to find something to do throughout these strange times, so having a list of challenges to complete made the weekend fly and was fun to do. I really enjoyed connecting with the other participants on Zoom. Even my siblings got involved and had lots of fun!"

Example: Foróige Feed Your Body Fuel Your Life was launched as a social media campaign to encourage young people to focus on mind, body and soul addressing empathy and self-care through music, art, craft and design and food <https://www.foroige.ie/blog/foroige-feed-your-body-fuel-your-life> it includes 'Feed Your Mind' - conversations with authors & focus on empathy, Feed Your Body with food - share photos of food



"Foróige's social media has been amazing, with workouts to keep you active. From the first week, it kept popping up everywhere on my screen. It's like a big family."

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/lifestyle/teens-coping-with-the-leaving-cert-in-the-time-of-covid-19-1001438.html>

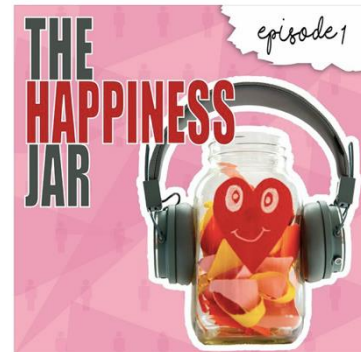
Sharing the impact of the pandemic on young people:

A number of organisations have been instrumental in supporting young people to share their experiences of the pandemic with a wide audience.

Example: The Happiness Jar is a podcast developed by a group of YMCA Youth Advocates from YMCA Cork Region. It aims to tell the story of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of young people. Ten episodes were produced with the first broadcast on 1 May.

<https://soundcloud.com/yiyoungevoices>

The Happiness Jar #1



Example: Irish Wheelchair Association Youth 'Teen Talks' podcast produced two special edition episodes during the pandemic:

- You know it's 2020 when...' – Young people with disabilities in Cavan share their experiences of life in lockdown and how life has changed. <https://soundcloud.com/user-200716104/you-know-its-2020-when-1> (May 2020)

- Testing Times in 2020' – Young people with disabilities from Leinster share how they're coping during the pandemic and what they're looking most forward to when things become a bit more normal.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-200716104/testing-times-in-2020> (April 2020)

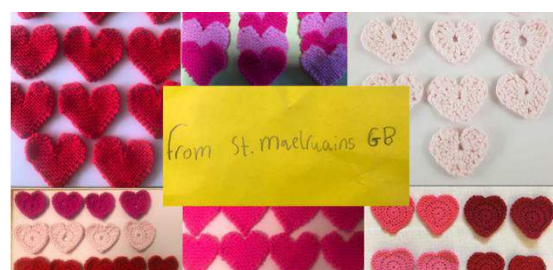


Reaching out to the community:

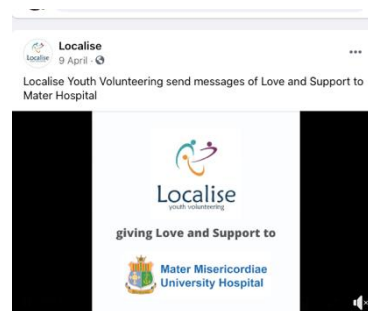
Youth organisations have facilitated and encouraged young people to reach out to their local community in a variety of ways including making PPE equipment such as masks for local people, sending handmade hearts to hospital patients, sending videos of thanks to frontline workers and writing letters to older people within their communities.

Example: Girls Brigade in Tallaght – members engaged in a COVID Hearts project where they sent handmade knitted or crocheted hearts to patients at Tallaght University Hospital – inspired by the work of an officer in their company who is a nurse at the hospital

<https://www.girlsbrigadeirl.ie/covid-hearts/>



Example: Localise Youth Volunteering supported young people during lockdown to reach out from the safety of their homes to combat Covid 19 with compassion, creating videos, tables-quizzes, cards and much more to encourage over 2000 isolated individuals in nursing homes and care facilities, and frontline workers. Localise completed its largest project during the pandemic where 200 young people from across the country submitted videos of love and well-wishes to the elderly living in nursing homes across Ireland. Localise received support from Dublin City Council with this project who donated 30 laptops to be delivered to nursing homes in the Dublin region for them to keep, so they can watch the videos made by young people, and so their residents can electronically reach out to their family and friends.



“Localise Youth Volunteering provided young people during this Covid-19 crisis with real and effective ways to contribute and support those in need in their community. Recently we’ve delivered numerous and very successful projects remotely and foresee much of our future work taking this form of blended learning (using technology and in person) approach when community settings and schools reopen. At the start of lockdown, many of the young people who have participated in Localise programming reached out to Localise to find a way to show their support to frontline staff. Localise comprised their video messages together as a montage” (Youth Worker).

<https://bit.ly/2BaXeEe> - Video message of thanks from young people (25.03.2020). Immediately, young people recognised a need to show even more solidarity and support with front line workers as infection rates continued to grow and developed messages of support to those in the Mater Hospital. We thank the National College of Ireland for their support with this project.

<https://bit.ly/3hbj1MF> - Message of thanks from Mater Hospital (09.04.2020)

<https://bit.ly/2AllEdc> - Digital version of the messages of support standee. The young members of Localise then wanted to be of service to those living in isolation. Localise youth volunteers created individualised messages and table quizzes to service users of Cheshire Ireland and to a women’s refuge in north county Dublin. <https://bit.ly/2ATzpkj> - A short video to showcase some of the videos created by Localise youth volunteers to Cheshire Ireland (29.04.2020).

Support with Mental Health and Wellbeing:

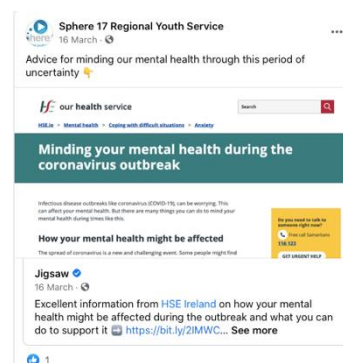
Many projects were intentional about promoting positive mental health by posting positive messages, links to helplines, discussing the impact of the pandemic and running online mental health programmes.

Example: Swords Youth Service, Crosscare – made up Positivity Packs to distribute to young people at risk.

The packs contained a journal and an activity pack "the great isolation book", a sensory toy for stress relief (also important for young people on the ASD spectrum) markers, highlighters, pens, post cards with stamps (to encourage them to keep in touch with older relatives who may not have technology), a plant pot and sunflower seeds, an adult colouring book, a movie night pack with microwave popcorn and drinks, leaflets on minding your mental health and a green mental health awareness ribbon along with hot chocolate and marshmallows



Example: Sphere17 consistently posted reminders of where to get help for mental health. Early on they shared phone numbers of youth workers encouraging young people to contact them if they needed to talk. Introduced 'Therapy Tuesday Posts' sharing ideas such as how to make a 'worry jar'.



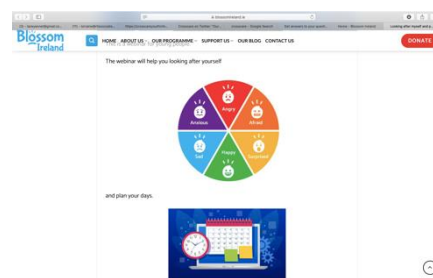
Help and Support for Specific Needs:

Organisations have been effective in providing information and support to young people to meet specific needs during lockdown.

Example: Blossom recognised the social isolation experienced by young people with intellectual disabilities in the midst of the pandemic and their need for predictability. In response they hosted an accessible webinar giving these young people practical advice on looking after yourself and planning your day during the pandemic -

<https://blossomireland.ie/regulating-your-emotions-and-planning-your-day/>

They also provided resources, advice and links for interacting online for example how to use WhatsApp and how to use zoom and produced social story resources (pdf files) e.g. 'If I have to go to hospital', 'Getting Tested for Coronavirus', 'If I get sick with Coronavirus.'



"We did an accessible webinar for young people so that they could learn to plan their own day and start to schedule their own things, teaching

them how to interact with peers online. We did a task analysis, breaking down activities e.g. using WhatsApp for video calls.”

Example: Crosscare Outdoor Learning Team was redeployed when they couldn't do their usual role to provide one to one support to 'at-risk' young people as this Facebook update from 29th May highlights:



“Our outdoor learning team should be running fun activities with at risk young people but as this is not possible, they are offering invaluable 1to1 support. For example, our staff member Dave was sought out by a 15yr old in crisis through his social worker because of the relationship he had built up with him. Since the Covid-19 outbreak he has been moved from one foster home or one night only emergency accommodation to another. This has resulted in considerable stress and confusion resulting in this young person rebelling and running away. Dave is now working with him in an outreach capacity which is having a very positive impact on him. Innovative youth work is now more essential than ever to ensure the safety and positive wellbeing of our young people. Keep up the good work guys! If you would like to support our work or find out more click here!”

Example: [Spunout.ie/YMCA Ireland/Crosscare/Youth Work Ireland Youth Information Chat service](https://spunout.ie/YMCA_Ireland/Crosscare/Youth_Work_Ireland_Youth_Information_Chat_service). The chat service is staffed by Youth Information Officers from centres across Ireland. Youth Information Officers are trained in providing information that is impartial, accurate, relevant to your question, in a non-judgemental and easy to understand way.



<https://spunout.ie/education/article/youth-information-chat>

&

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=49&v=wQh3yWeszd4&feature=emb_l
[ogo](#)

Consultation and research on young people's experiences:

A number of organisations have sought the views of young people on their experiences of the pandemic through surveys and opinion polls ensuring their voice is acknowledged and listened to.

Example: Young Social Innovators launched a Youth Check-in survey - asking how young people are and how are they coping in this new reality? Findings from survey posted on 20th April <https://www.youngsocialinnovators.ie/ysi-covid-19-youth-check-in-survey-report/>

Young Social Innovators also ran an initiative asking young people to submit ideas to tackle the problems being faced by communities as a result of coronavirus - #YSIOpenCall <https://www.youngsocialinnovators.ie/ysi-open-call/all/>

"We are excited to launch the #YSIOpenCall to Teenagers. We are looking for young people's ideas about how to tackle the problems in our communities as a result of #coronavirus." "Look around your home, your family, your community and see what has changed because of coronavirus. What is working? What is not working? What is bothering you?" Ideas were shortlisted and presented to a panel of business leaders and NGOs to decide on viable options to be developed.



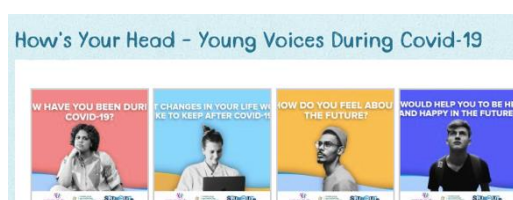
"We launched an Open Call campaign to enable teenagers to sign up online, receive digital supports via email and Instagram live and to submit ideas to tackle issues related to Coronavirus in their communities. We hosted a zoom workshop and WebEx events where young people presented ideas to panels of leaders across NGO, government and business. A week of specialised social media celebration allowed young people to share their stories in creative ways e.g through video, emoji challenges and daily discussions. National awards announcements were made via video with judging panels facilitated virtually" (Youth Worker).

Example: BelongTo conducted an 'LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown' survey. Almost 300 LGBTI+ young people from all over Ireland shared their experiences of how lockdown, due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus), has affected them.

<https://belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LGBTI-Life-in-Lockdown-Key-Findings.pdf>



Example: DCYA conducted a survey 'How's Your Head – Young Voices During Covid-19' to hear directly from young people about what they have found hard during the pandemic, what changes in their lives they would like to retain, and what would help young people improve their mental health and well-being over the coming summer months and beyond. The consultation was hosted on www.spunout.ie, from 24th June –



3rd July and was open to all young people aged 15 – 24. A Youth Advisory Group designed and piloted the questions and decided on the title.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

When the announcement came from the government on 12th March that schools and colleges were to close as a result of the spread of COVID-19 with further measures asking people to stay at home on 24th March, everything changed for almost everyone and not least young people and the youth sector. Every worker and organisation had to start thinking on their feet and consider how to pivot and adapt their services, almost at a wholesale level.

Based on data from 256 survey responses, 15 interviews and 4 focus groups and relevant desk research, this study has provided an overview of the sector's response (focusing particularly on the 3 months between 12th March-12th June), outlined a range of methodologies deployed, examined some of the limitations of the switch to digital engagement, and profiled a range of good practice examples. The research identifies factors that have enabled organisations to respond effectively, highlights key challenges that projects encountered, as well as key lessons and unexpected outcomes of digital methods of youth work. Youth workers have expressed a range of concerns for the future. This report highlights how youth workers and organisations might be best supported and resourced as they continue to adapt to a changing and uncertain landscape, and one where the coronavirus is yet to be eradicated. This is particularly pertinent given the latest rise in COVID-19 cases at the time of writing.

Broadly the pandemic has served to expose a whole range of inequalities and exacerbated vulnerabilities and while it is great that youth workers showed their creativity and flexibility in numerous ways, it does not make the marginalisation experienced by young people any less challenging. The drop in engagement levels (70% reported by survey respondents) paints a stark picture and along with stakeholder feedback demonstrates just how important face-to-face youth work is, particularly for those in marginalised and vulnerable situations. As one youth worker stated:

"It has been a huge learning curve and all our team worked relentlessly to continue contact with our membership. If more funds had been able to be directed to this area, we would have been able to provide training and buy equipment. This has really highlighted the need to be able to pivot the entire organisation online and what we need in house to enable this, also what support the young people need to be able to participate. Although our team done an excellent job in crisis and upskilling, we are very aware of the continued work needed here to really be able to engage with the entirety of the existing [name of project] membership" (Youth Worker).

What youth workers and projects have managed to achieve in the midst of a global crisis – the adaptations made, the innovation, and most of all the commitment and dedication to meeting young people's needs and seeking their welfare – is highly impressive and commendable. Youth workers have been thrown into the deep end yet have stepped into the gap and embarked on a steep learning curve to support young people and their families in whatever way possible within public health guidelines.

Young people in the focus groups have also noticed how youth organisations have sought to be available to young people and provide opportunities to engage:

“Just overall the youth sector has had energy and good organisation throughout the pandemic as in what activities they’re doing and what meetings they’ve had, there was always something going on, the organisations I’m involved in there was always something going on regardless if anyone attended them there was always an opportunity for something to tap into or something on” (Young Person).

“They have met the needs, but they weren’t able to do as much as they could without the restrictions, like there was no face-to-face contact. I’d say it would be very, very hard for them to find a way to meet all the needs, but they seem to have found a way that they can do the best they can with what they’re given” (Young Person).

However, all this has come at a significant cost for youth workers and youth organisations in terms of exhaustion, emotional labour, stress, unhealthy work/life boundaries, isolation from colleagues, technical issues, safeguarding concerns and so on:

“I don’t mean to be all doom and gloom but it’s the reality, let’s try not to make something of it. We’ve done everything... completely out of necessity and there have been things we’ve learned but by and large it hasn’t been a good time” (CEO).

Furthermore, young people have lost out in so many key experiences and ‘rites of passage’ during this period, such as sitting key examinations, finishing the school year, graduating from school or college, participating in youth exchanges or overseas trips etc. As the desk research underlined, young people now face all sorts of challenges ahead in terms of education, job prospects, health and wellbeing, personal and social development.

What is important now, is for the youth sector to get into a stronger position to meet the current and emerging needs of young people in the face of challenges arising from the pandemic. One such challenge is the potential of further localised lockdown measures as the battle to prevent and limit transmission continues across this island. Youth organisations need to be ready to change at a moment’s notice and the idea of offering a ‘blended’ approach to youth services combining digital and face-to-face methods as expressed by a number of workers in this study is one that requires intentional and serious preparation.

One of the interviewees provided an accurate summation of operational decision-making for these times:

“It’s about trying to look for ways of running effective services that meet the same aims under different conditions” (Programme Manager).

This points to the worth of understanding the purpose and values of youth work. It is somewhat surprising that few of the participants in this research named specific youth work values apart from some mentions of the importance of relational approaches or of youth voice. Perhaps this reflects the extent to which workers were thinking on their feet and in a

reactionary mode. Going forward youth workers and organisations need to be absolutely clear about whom they are serving, their beliefs about the dignity of young people, the values that inform all of their engagements with them and how these can be honoured in service delivery. Each organisation will need to consider what this means in their setting and context and with regard to the particular needs they are seeking to address.

Advocating for the sector

There are a number of areas where advocacy will be vital for the youth work sector in the coming months, particularly with reference to the points made in section 5.5. about funding and investment, technological innovation and ICT infrastructure, training for digital skills and on various digital platforms, and COVID-19 compliance. A wider issue is that of broadband access and connectivity, especially in rural communities:

“We need to push for better broadband – absolutely urgent, that needs to be available for loads of different groups, it should be a basic amenity that’s available to people” (CEO).

Based on the data reviewed there are some practical recommendations for youth organisations to take forward:

Keep relationships central

Following on from what was said above about youth work values, the centrality of the youth work relationship and young person-centred approaches are core to good youth work practice regardless of whether online or face-to-face.

Pay attention to key transition points in the lives of young people

Given that there were several comments about difficulties in engaging with younger age groups, particularly 10-12-year olds who are in a key transition stage, there needs to be deliberate consideration of how they can be appropriately engaged in digital activities if face-to-face settings remain limited.

Learning & evaluation

It was encouraging to hear how many youth projects were administering surveys to assess the needs of young people in their membership or communities and to get feedback. All youth organisations should be learning organisations and encouraged and supported to seek feedback on their practice delivery during the period of the public health restrictions to figure out what worked, what didn’t work so well, what can be done differently in future and to identify key actions for implementation.

Get skills into the sector

There is an appetite for training & guidance in relation to IT, social media and different platforms that can facilitate digital engagement. Equipping youth workers in this way will also serve to reduce stress and pressure levels.

Get tech into the sector

Similarly, there needs to be a focus on identifying and supplying the technology that will facilitate young people’s participation and resource organisations as well as workers.

Accessibility

Access to technology needs to be an even playing field for young people with intellectual and other disabilities.

Invest in people

In addition to digital skills training the learning from this study provides an argument for capacity-building for staff and volunteers with regard to COVID-19 compliance.

Furthermore, when asked about what might be needed to 'build back better', one of the interviewees immediately pointed to the need to invest in people particularly in terms of staff wellbeing:

"Looking after our own people. We've got a good small team, passionate, amazing to work with, we mind each other, we invest quite heavily in wellbeing in the organisation, with resources etc... My frontline team have access to their line manager, each other, external supervision, and also we have an EAP, so if they come off a bad call, or someone dies in their group, or there is some kind of trauma, there are layers of support for them. I was really surprised how that isn't universal and it needs to be. During austerity the argument was you can't cut services but cut services and mind your people, you can't spread people thinner... Look how amazing they were, now they're being recognised as frontline workers, given access to free counselling by HSE, we need to mind them, we need to resource them, otherwise they burn out and we lose our good people" (CEO).

The above statement about wellbeing is something that should also be applicable for those in volunteering roles in the youth sector.

Embrace the challenge

Finally, we will give the last words to a programme manager whom we interviewed and one of the young people from a focus group who both underlined the need to experiment with different digital methods and try new ways of working:

"It's also about not being afraid to get it wrong – you just put your best foot forward. These are young people like everyone else, with some other challenges in terms of how they learn, they need everything other teenagers need and social contact. You need to put your best foot forward with all the knowledge you can get around best practice and what might work and just go for it" (Programme Manager).

"Although I have been giving out about social media and the online space, organisations shouldn't fear it but embrace it – I think a lot of organisations fear to put things online and a lot of concerns were legitimate you know child protection concerns but I think a lot of concerns were just a fear of moving into a new medium – embrace it as a challenge" (Young Person).

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Appendix 1 – NYCI Youth Worker ‘Check-In’ Sessions

Youth workers who attended the sessions represented the following organisations:

- BeLong To Youth Service
- Blakestown Mountview Youth Initiative
- Bluebell Youth Project/Canal Communities Regional Youth Service
- Bruac Training Centre Good Shepherd Cork
- Canal Youth Project
- Carlow Regional Youth Service
- Children’s Group Link
- Cloyne Diocesan Youth Service
- Connect Bray Neighbourhood Youth Project
- Crosscare
- Eco-Unesco
- EPIC – Empowering People in Care
- Feachtas Óg-Ghluaiseacht na Gaeilge
- Ferns Diocesan Youth Service
- Foróige
- Involve
- Irish Architecture Foundation
- Limerick Youth Service
- Longford Community Resources
- Maple Youth Centre
- Riccys
- South West Inner City Network Clubhouse
- Sports Sligo
- St Andrew’s Talk About Youth
- The Hive Youth Hub, Kildare
- The West End Youth Centre
- Trocaire
- Waterford and South Tipperary Community Youth Service
- Youth Work Ireland

Appendix 2 - Survey Questions

What is the name of your organisation?

What is the name of your specific project or local unit?

What geographical area does your project/unit cover?

What thematic area(s) does your project/unit cover?

What is the overall purpose of this project or local unit?

How many young people were regularly engaged with the project or local unit before the pandemic hit (prior to 12th March)?

Have you been able to maintain a service during the pandemic (12th March - 12th June during lockdown)?

If no, what prevented you continuing your project/service provision?

If yes, how many young people have you retained engagement with during the pandemic (12/03/20 - 12/06/20)?

How has this engagement changed over time? (for example, some young people may have found online sessions a novelty at the start but then withdrew)

What methods have you introduced to maintain a service for engagement with young people?

Please describe any innovative approaches you have introduced since the pandemic hit?

What limitations has this different way of working presented?

What challenges has the pandemic presented to your organisation?

What external organisations/agencies have you received support or advice from?

What support did you receive from these organisations?

What support would you have needed which you did not receive?

Moving into the next phase of the response to COVID-19 in what ways might your project adapt?

Have you/do you intend to evaluate your approach/response to the pandemic?

Appendix 3

Discussion Guide for Interviews with Stakeholders

- Can you give me some background information about your project – What is the name and purpose of the project? How many young people were you working with before the pandemic?
- What is your particular role?
- What impact has the pandemic had on the young people you work with? (ask what evidence they have for this eg observation, withdrawal, direct reporting from yp)
- How has the young people's need for your organisation's services changed?
- Have you been able to maintain a service/engagement with young people?
- How did your organisation initially respond when you realised the seriousness of the pandemic?
- How did your organisation respond when lockdown was announced?
- What intended outcomes have been difficult for your organisation to meet as a result of the pandemic?
- What has been done to mitigate any difficulties?
- What initiatives/methodologies have you introduced to maintain the service/engagement with young people?
- Can you share any examples of good practice?
- What challenges have you experienced as you have introduced these new approaches? What have been the main challenges? (prompt – for staff, whole organisation, young people, community)
- What benefits have there been to delivering youth work during this time?
- What limitations are there with this way of working?
- What support have you received from government, funders, NYCI and others? What else could have been done to support you?
- What do you think the lasting impact of the pandemic will be on your organisation?
- When exiting the lockdown/current pandemic restrictions what support will you need?
- What changes might be required to adapt service delivery going forward as a result of ongoing challenges with the pandemic?
- Organisations and some governments are talking about how to 'build back better' – is there anything you would like to carry forward or change about the way you had been working as a result of learning from the pandemic crisis experience? (eg appreciating more thinking time/space in the diary – is there a way to maintain that?)

Discussion Guide for Focus groups with Young People

- Icebreaker (with guidance from youth worker) – if you could have self-isolated with any three people in the world who would it have been?
- How long have you been involved with this youth project? What do you like most about being involved? What does the organisation do for you/how does it meet your needs?
- What has been the best and worst thing about the pandemic crisis
- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected you as individuals and as a group?
- Do you think it has been worse for some groups of young people than others?
- To what extent have you continued to be connected/engaged with your youth organisation?
- Has it continued to meet the needs you mentioned earlier?
- How has the organisation helped you during the pandemic?