



# **A 2021 Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic**

National Youth Council of Ireland

September 2021

## **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.

[www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie)

Researched, Written and Edited by Deborah Erwin & Lorraine Thompson

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## Foreword



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pervade our lives in a very significant way, this report captures how the youth sector has adapted and responded to the ongoing situation over the last year. I welcome the publication of this research, which provides a valuable insight into the issues affecting the provision of youth work and highlights how the youth sector has adapted and responded to these challenges. The report captures the variety of methodologies and youth work approaches used to deliver services and supports to young people during this period; explores the well-being and capacity of youth work staff and volunteers; and identifies the supports required to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the youth work sector in the short to long-term.

This is the second review of its kind and contributes important and useful data to inform the development of youth work policy and practice at an uncertain and difficult time in its history. 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.

The research highlights the pivotal role youth work continues to play in supporting young people to thrive in the future and to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID on the lives of young people. It is refreshing to read about the breadth and depth of learning in the sector during this time, and how the sector has been nimble, adaptable and responded quickly to switching to digital youth work while constantly reaching out to young people. The research also highlights the limitations of the existing services and provides key questions for the youth sector to consider moving forward. Such insights serve to inform the development of youth work, ensure those working and volunteering in the youth work sector are supported in their work and that the services and supports provided are responsive to the needs of all young people, especially the most vulnerable.

As we start to enter a new phase of recovery and continue to live with COVID, we need to build back better and ensure youth work continues to build resilience and capacity for youth workers and volunteers. Investment in workforce development and support is essential. As outlined in the report, increased and sustained investment in the sector, greater recognition of the value of youth work, and increased strategic collaboration is also required.

**Mary Cunningham, CEO, National Youth Council of Ireland**

## Glossary of Abbreviations

CDYSB	City of Dublin Youth Service Board
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth
DOJ	Department of Justice
ETB	Education & Training Board
EYF	European Youth Forum
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GYDP	Garda Youth Diversion Project
HSE	Health Service Executive
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NOSP	National Office for Suicide Prevention
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
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 over 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 surveys 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. We would like to acknowledge our utmost respect and admiration for the youth workers, volunteers, and managers we met during this research, for how they showed the greatest care and compassion for the young people they work with and who time and again went above and beyond in adverse circumstances.

# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

In August 2020 the NYCI published an independent review of the youth work sector response to the Covid-19 pandemic and in May 2021 commissioned a further study to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector and to capture the sector's response 12 months on. The study is centred on four research questions:

- How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic?
- What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during this period?
- How are youth organisations supporting the well-being and capacity of youth work staff and volunteers?
- What supports are required to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the youth work sector in the short to long-term?

## 1.2 Methodology

The research approach involved:

- **Desk research:** a literature review of reports and articles examining the impact of the pandemic on youth work and a review of NYCI online 'check-in' sessions with youth workers.
- **Surveys with stakeholders:** 3 surveys aimed at different cohorts were distributed through the NYCI mailing list and promoted via social media. The **young people's** survey attracted 70 valid responses. The survey for **youth workers and volunteers** attracted 240 responses of which 129 are paid members of staff and 111 are volunteers. There were 54 valid responses to the **youth service managers'** survey.
- **Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders:** 12 interviews were carried out with 3 CEOs, 6 youth service managers, 1 youth worker and 2 young people.
- **Focus groups:** 2 youth workers' focus groups (7 participants), 1 volunteers' focus group (3 participants) and 5 youth focus groups (20 participants) were facilitated.

## 1.3 Literature Review

The literature review examines national, cross-border and international research which seek to uncover what the pandemic signifies for youth work as a practice and for youth-focused organisations as part of a wider sector. It includes several reports which highlight the extent to which marginalised young people face greater impacts arising from the pandemic and reveals that many young people who may not previously have been deemed 'at risk' suffered exposure to negative influences when the safe sanctuary of youth centres closed. There is an argument for adequate resourcing and capacity-building for the sector and collective action to enable services to meet the needs of marginalised and vulnerable young people and a European Youth Forum report makes an evidenced case for a 'youth-inclusive recovery' (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Some of the articles give recognition to the youth sector's versatility in shifting to online delivery but emphasise this is never a substitute to face-to-face engagement with young people. Other documents focus on the contribution of youth work across multiple areas

including mental health, education, recreation, and social policy, and identify the need for blended skills and practices in virtual and face-to-face worlds. There is also research that acknowledges how informal, relationship-based youth work doesn't necessarily transfer well to digital platforms.

Sustainability for the sector was a common theme in the literature, as was the need for national recovery plans to support youth work structurally and greater recognition for youth work more broadly in society that acknowledges it as a *"life-saving practice"*. At the more individual level there was awareness of the additional level of strain experienced by youth workers in seeking to support young people and their families underlining the need to ensure that *"philosophies of care"* inform staff well-being strategies and workforce development so that youth workers can in turn support young people effectively.

## 1.4 Summary of Findings

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

- **Maintaining a service:** The combined data from the surveys with youth service managers and with youth workers and volunteers shows that 32% were able to maintain a service, 63% continued but with a reduced service and only 5% of respondents discontinued their service (n=261). The youth service managers' survey asked respondents to provide figures for 2019/20 (pre-Covid) and 2020/21 (the first year of the pandemic) in relation to the following aspects (n=54)<sup>1</sup>:
  - **Change in numbers of groups/clubs/units:** 30% of organisations maintained the same level, 9% saw an increase but there was a significant decrease in service provision for 24 organisations with an overall 62% reduction equating to a loss of just over 1000 groups/clubs/units and these respondents overwhelmingly (92%) attributed the decrease to the pandemic.
  - **Staffing levels during the pandemic:** most organisations (60%) maintained the same number of staff, 20% had a decrease in personnel equating to a small loss of 35 staff, while 13% increased their staffing levels equating to 49 staff.
  - **Volunteer levels during the pandemic:** only 6% of organisations kept the same level of volunteers for both years and 15% increased the number of volunteers (equating to 108 volunteers) but most organisations (61%) saw a decrease in volunteer involvement during the first year of the pandemic, with a 64% reduction representing a loss of over 7,000 volunteers. A significant majority of these organisations (85%) attributed this to the pandemic.
  - **Levels of engagement by young people:** only 7% of organisations maintained the same number of young people and just 11% increased their engagement with young people which equated to 3,655 young people. A substantial majority of organisations (69%) experienced a decrease in the numbers of young people engaging with their services – a 50% reduction with more than 80,000 less young people engaged in comparison with the pre-pandemic figures. Four in every five of these organisations (83%) attributed the drop to the pandemic.
- **Change in young people's engagement:** Reasons for disengagement included the digital divide or lack of hardware, social, familial, and personal challenges, doing digitally-based

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed findings are available in section 5.1 of the main report.

youth work on top of online school and some home situations that weren't conducive to digital engagement for example lack of private space.

- **Young people's perspectives on engagement:** young people who didn't engage with youth services during the pandemic gave a variety of reasons including the closure of services, not being able to meet others 'in real life', a lack of interest among other members or simply not wanting to. For young people who engaged with youth services to a lesser extent, explanations included connectivity issues, busyness, meetings happening less regularly and social anxiety. The impact of reduced or no engagement included social isolation, missing seeing their friends, missing meeting new people as well as a loss of motivation and loss of skills development opportunities.
- **Youth Work Sector Response to the Pandemic:** Initially the emphasis was on reaching out to young people through phone calls or group chats and on making the shift to online work with some services quicker than others to make the move. In terms of maintaining engagement, while Covid-compliance and safety were paramount, it was the limitations within the restrictions that represented a key challenge for the sector.
  - **Characteristics of the sector's response** – adaptability; young person-centred approaches; strategic and collaborative outlook; enhancing the visibility of youth work; internal capacity-building.
  - **Young people's perspectives of the youth work response** – young people appreciated their youth leaders' efforts in facilitating groups, encouraging a sense of connection, and making regular check-in calls, as well as their availability, compassion for others, and their willingness to go above and beyond.
  - **Organisational challenges in making a response to the pandemic** – organisational infrastructure and practices; managing risk; adjustment to different formats of service delivery; financial implications.

1.4.2 What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during this period?

- **Methods introduced to maintain engagement with young people:** the most frequent method adopted by youth services during the pandemic was Zoom/video conferencing group engagement. Youth organisations facilitated a wide range of online activities such as competitions, quizzes, cookery sessions, podcasting and scavenger hunts. There was an emphasis on various outdoor activities such as 'walk & talks', outdoor learning challenges or outdoor Bootcamp groups. Many projects delivered online training in various topics, online well-being sessions and community initiatives were also popular. Eighty-one per cent of respondents to the youth survey (n=36) indicated youth organisations provided opportunities for social interaction and 75% said youth organisations helped them feel less isolated. Young people felt supported and experienced different kinds of help from youth workers whether it was advice, opportunities, or things to do. Young people described experiencing a sense of genuine care from youth workers and appreciated the regular contact. There was a very small number of negative comments about the repetitive nature of online meetings, a lack of learning or a lack of communication during the initial lockdown period.
- **Limitations to delivering youth work during the pandemic:** the combined results from surveys of youth service managers and youth workers and volunteers (n=212) had two clear frontrunners – young people not having adequate digital access and young people who are reluctant to engage digitally (72% and 71% respectively) while just around half

of respondents cited difficulty engaging with young people who are 'at risk' or marginalised (50%). Participants acknowledged the struggle to replicate in-person work online and emphasised the need for an informal environment in which to build rapport with young people. Some youth workers felt the online realm can be a step too far for marginalised or 'at risk' young people and others underlined how ad hoc in-person interactions help young people know they are safe, respected and valued and give them confidence to ask for help. Some youth workers and volunteers are concerned about the lack of young people re-engaging with in-person provision as restrictions ease.

- **Ethical issues:** The issue highlighted most frequently related to boundaries including privacy, confidentiality, and work/home life. Other issues included exclusion due to the 'digital divide' and how this might exacerbate disengagement for those already marginalised, and concerns about reductions in service delivery due to public health restrictions, particularly for vulnerable young people.

#### 1.4.3 How are youth organisations supporting the well-being and capacity of youth work staff and volunteers?

- **Impact of the pandemic on youth workers and volunteers:** concern about not being able to reach young people who disengaged was a key issue for youth workers and volunteers (74%), and managers (77%). The change in the youth work role and how youth work is delivered has had a major and often negative effect on some youth workers. Staff and volunteers found the lack of in-person contact difficult both on a personal level and professionally, in terms of collaboration and working from home caused isolation for some. Many reported experiencing burn-out with increased stress and there has been a substantial impact on the mental well-being of youth workers and volunteers. Some feel this increases the potential of youth workers leaving the role altogether.
- **Supporting staff and volunteers' well-being during the pandemic:** approaches to support staff by organisations included increased staff meetings, communication and supervision, flexibility, wellness initiatives and social activities, encouraging self-care, access to counselling and support from external agencies.
- **Gaps in support from organisations:** most respondents to the youth workers' and volunteers' survey were very happy with the support they received from their organisation. The most common issue raised was the need for more frequent and clearer communication for example through check-ins or more regular supervision.
- **Supporting staff and volunteer capacity during the pandemic:** organisations supported staff through training on working digitally and other relevant topics, improved digital infrastructure and extra resources, guidance on safety procedures and providing PPE and preparing for returning to in-person provision and youth work in the outdoors.

#### 1.4.4 What supports are required to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the youth work sector in the short to long-term?

- **External support for organisations:** the most frequent type of support, according to youth service manager survey respondents, was advice on Covid-19 compliance (91%). Almost two thirds (65%) received further funding or financial support, followed closely by 63% given advice on safeguarding/keeping young people safe during the pandemic.

- **Future support for young people:** young people recognised the need to create opportunities for socialising and connection. Mental health was a consistent theme raised in young people’s focus groups and the need to provide practical supports.
- **Future support to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic:** results from the youth service managers’ survey (n=43) showed the top two supports needed in the short-term is advocacy for the sector (60%) and the need for additional funding (56%). Similarly, the top two supports needed for the longer-term are additional funding (74%) and advocacy for the youth sector (63%). The most frequently stated support need for youth worker and volunteer respondents (n=157) in the short-term is to have realistic targets set for youth work (32%) closely followed by focusing on the well-being of staff and volunteers (31%). Well-being is also a key issue for the long-term with the highest percentage of youth workers and volunteers indicating this should be a priority (31%), followed by advocacy for young people (27%).
- **Moving forward the following issues need to be prioritised:**
  - Youth work should continue to be seen as an essential service especially in relation to in-person delivery particularly for vulnerable young people.
  - There needs to be recognition for the sector with better understanding of what youth work is and what it can achieve.
  - Resourcing to address issues arising from the fallout of the pandemic such as the increased level of safeguarding and child protection referrals and the increase in risk-taking behaviour.
  - Additional funding is required which can be adapted to meet the emerging needs of young people.
  - The need to prepare for in-person provision, blended approaches to delivery, and re-engagement with young people with continued guidance on restrictions. It was suggested there should be specific guidelines aimed at volunteer-led organisations.
  - Investment in the supports to bring back volunteers, attract new ones and provide appropriate training and ongoing support and advice for volunteers
  - Continued training, check-ins, and networking to encourage sharing of good practice and practice development.
  - Continue to work collaboratively across statutory and voluntary sectors.
  - Staff and volunteer well-being with appropriate support structures.
  - There should be spaces in communities where young people can get access to join Zoom calls for college especially if this not an option for them at home.

## 1.5 Good Practice Examples

- **TikTok As You Like It**  
As part of an online Shakespeare Festival, Droichead Youth Theatre brought Shakespeare’s ‘As You Like It’ to life using TikTok.
- **Sconce**  
Sconce was a 2020 arts initiative led by YWI Cork’s ‘Cork Creates’ project which encouraged youth groups from across the city to create posters using only two colours – Cork’s colours of red & white. The resulting artworks were displayed on billboards across the city and a walking trail was mapped as a way of viewing all the artwork.
- **Pen Pals**

A group of Brownies from Irish Girl Guides paired up with a unit in New York exchanging hard copy letters with each other. The girls improved their writing and communication skills and expanded their interpersonal networks and connections, and the groups intend to keep writing to each other.

- **Monday Night Madness**

Monday Night Madness was a weekly online wacky games night delivered by Carbery YMCA in Co. Cork, where two youth workers facilitated a series of wacky games via Zoom to a group of around 10-12 participants with a prize up for grabs in each game. A youth worker was in his car delivering the prizes to young people's doors in real time.

- **Ballyfermot Youth Service & Le Fanu Skate Park**

The Skate Park's construction was completed in June 2020. Since its opening, Ballyfermot Youth Service staff have been facilitating outreach, youth work, and biking sessions with young people as well as supporting the development of a BMX club at the facility. It has been an ideal outdoor environment for young people to meet, socialise and develop new skills especially when restrictions on travel and indoor group sizes have been in place.

- **'Get Out Into That Day'**

This is an activity pack for youth workers developed by Youth Work Ireland as part of Youth Work Ireland Week (26<sup>th</sup> April to 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021) which coincided with the easing of public health restrictions in Ireland. The pack outlines key benefits of encouraging young people to 'breakout and connect' including health and mental well-being, relationship people, appreciation and respect for the environment, adventure, and skills development, creating new stories, bonding and re-establishing connections, and connecting local to global issues.

## 1.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

This 2021 review of the youth work sector's response to the Covid-19 pandemic provides valuable insight into how voluntary youth organisations reconfigured their work with young people in an unprecedented set of circumstances and faced the challenges presented by the pandemic with integrity, creativity, and resourcefulness. There is breadth and depth to the learning about what methodologies worked well, how organisations attended to worker and volunteer well-being and capacity, and the supports that are necessary for the future. Broadly the sector was speedy in its switch to digital youth work while constantly reaching out to young people. Organisations demonstrated adaptability and tuned into the needs of young people by focusing on fostering connection in a range of innovative activities. Young people who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups were overwhelmingly positive about the actions of their youth workers and services, many experiencing a sense of community even while physically apart. However, the drop in engagement levels of young people (69%) is illustrative of the challenges facing the sector as it seeks to rebuild and re-engage young people, particularly those who are vulnerable or who experience marginalisation.

### Digital Youth Work

Given the shift to and emphasis on digital youth work has been place now for over a year it is possible to make more informed judgements about the merits and limitations of working in this way. There is vast potential to be derived from this youth work approach however much of this is yet untapped because of capacity issues in terms of skills and digital literacy,

organisational infrastructure as well as wider structural issues such as the digital divide, and inadequate rural connectivity. Ultimately, digital youth work will not substitute face-to-face youth work, but the findings of this report suggest it can sit alongside traditional forms of provision to expand reach – often geographically and sometimes in relation to accessibility. A key factor in determining whether digital youth work can be truly successful related to the skills and commitment of youth workers and their ability to create safe online spaces where young people can thrive and flourish.

The findings from this research provide a strong case for four priority areas for the youth sector going forward:

- **Advocacy for young people**

The concern for young people, particularly those experiencing marginalisation in various ways and/or in vulnerable situations was foremost in the minds of many of the research participants. The way that the pandemic exposed many structural problems including wealth disparities, racial injustice, the worsening environmental crisis, poor public transport infrastructure and so on, represents key challenges for wider society. These are keenly felt in the lived experiences of young people, particularly those who feel they are on their own and no-one cares. A youth sector that remains steadfastly committed to young person-centred practice will help to support these young people and is necessary to inform engagement with young people themselves, interventions, and policy, as society emerges from the pandemic.

- **Advocacy for the sector**

- **Funding** – Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, funding structures and norms were challenging for the sector for some time. Some felt that relationships with funders have been strengthened in the last year and now is the time to keep the dialogue flowing and work towards systems of funding that encourage strategic thinking, offer sustainability, and serve the needs of young people. Additionally, there are key areas where specific injections of funding will be particularly helpful as the youth sector recovers – youth engagement/re-engagement and volunteer recruitment, training and support.
- **Status & Value of Youth Work** – many research participants felt that youth work had become recognised and understood more widely. The feedback also indicates a need to understand the essential nature of youth work not only when it is about crisis intervention, but also when it is about supporting young people’s mental health, facilitating outreach efforts particularly with young people who may be ‘at risk’, and offering universal services or ‘open access’ youth work.
- **Visibility of Youth Work** – young people are often at the sharp end of negative press, and this was no less the case during the pandemic when they were sometimes characterised negatively as one homogenous group about their perceived attitudes to Covid-19. This reinforces the need to ensure the visibility of youth work, to communicate what youth work is, who it serves and who benefits. Projects that promote youth work will promote young people and will encourage more young people to get involved.

- **Strategic Collaboration**

- Practice stories such as the ‘Sconce’ community arts project (Section 6), the statutory and voluntary sectors working together in a Youth Response Committee in Cork and supporting young people’s participation in the ‘We Are Cork Youth

Challenge’, or the partnership between youth sector representatives and DCEDIY in the Oversight Group show the benefits of strategic collaborations. Different organisations and agencies can pool their different strengths, skillsets, networks to benefit young people.

- Key questions to consider going forward include:
  - How can the youth sector come together to address the need for a major volunteer recruitment drive?
  - How can youth sector stakeholders come together to strengthen practice in outdoor youth work, outdoor adventure learning and outdoor education and encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas, practices, skills among different sectors such as education, outdoor education, and youth work, statutory and voluntary?
  - How can the youth sector contribute to policy development to address digital safety ensuring that online platforms are safe spaces for young people?
- **Workforce Development and Support**

The research very clearly highlights the need for continued support for the well-being of staff and volunteers. The research also indicated that many youth workers found NYC’s ‘check-in’ sessions very helpful for sharing ideas and experiences, fostering both learning and connection. Supervision is a key layer of support. A key question for these times is about what will encourage longevity in the sector? Without adequate focus and action on staff well-being, burnout will remain a feature. Moreover, organisations lose out on institutional memory and knowledge banks, and ultimately young people lose out because the people working with them end up sacrificing themselves.

Although the coronavirus is still a factor influencing our daily lives and there are many challenges ahead, this study shows that the youth sector can be proud of its track record in its handling of the pandemic to date. It also demonstrates how youth organisations have – in the words of one young person – *“continuously stepped up to the mark and created new and innovative ways to engage with young people”*. Youth workers have made invaluable contributions to the lives of young people and their families across Ireland and proved the essential nature of youth services going into the future.

## 2. Introduction

The first case of Covid-19 in Ireland was confirmed in February 2020, and since then there have been various levels of restrictions imposed to prevent pressure on the health service and suppress infection rates. Measures included closure of non-essential services and retail, closure of leisure and sports services, travel limits, remote delivery of education and youth services. While young people have been at less risk in terms of the effect of the virus on their physical health, it has been well documented that young people's social and mental well-being has been negatively impacted by the pandemic.

In August 2020 the NYCI published an independent review of the youth work sector response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research captured the methodologies which were used to deliver services, how the sector responded to challenges and identified the limitations to delivering youth work during the first four months of the pandemic. The research found youth workers and projects adapted with creativity, innovation and flexibility and embarked on a steep learning curve to continue delivering youth work activities and support to young people and their families. It evidenced a stark drop in the engagement levels of young people within the youth sector emphasising the value of in-person<sup>2</sup>, developmental youth work. The research concluded the youth sector needed to get into a stronger position to meet the emerging needs of young people in the face of challenges arising from the pandemic and that 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.

In May 2021 NYCI commissioned a further study to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector and capture the sector's response 12 months on. The study is centred on four research questions:

1. How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during this period?
3. How are youth organisations supporting the well-being and capacity of youth work staff and volunteers?
4. What supports are required to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the youth work sector in the short to long-term?

This report provides an outline of the research methodology, presents the main findings, and identifies good practice examples from a variety of youth-focused organisations. It concludes with recommendations for the youth sector to guide its ongoing response as it engages young people in learning processes and seeks to be a consistent and steady source of support for young people in the face of the challenges presented by the pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'in-person' is used frequently throughout the report and refers to being physically present with others as opposed to using online virtual or telephone communication methods.

### 3. Methodology

The review engaged with a wide range of CEOs, youth services managers, youth workers and volunteers from across Ireland. By applying qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the four research questions, the main components of the research process are outlined below.

All qualitative data has been anonymised, and generic titles are used to ensure research participants' confidentiality.<sup>3</sup>

#### Desk research

- A literature review of reports and articles examining the impact of the pandemic on youth work.
- Review of NYCI online 'check-in' sessions with youth workers – NYCI facilitated 5 staff check-in sessions in February and March 2021. Notes from these sessions were made available to the researchers. The discussions focused on the following:
  - Dealing with the current reality as a youth worker
  - What is the youth worker identity?
  - Young people's experiences
  - Restorative practices
  - NYCI's role in responding to needs of youth workers.

#### Surveys

Three online surveys were designed and uploaded to the SurveyMonkey platform for the following cohorts:

- Young people
- Youth worker and volunteers
- Youth service managers

Survey links were distributed via the NYCI mailing list and promoted via social media.

#### Young People's Survey

The young people's survey focused on their engagement with youth services, how their needs were met, what methods were used during the pandemic and what else could have been done to support them.

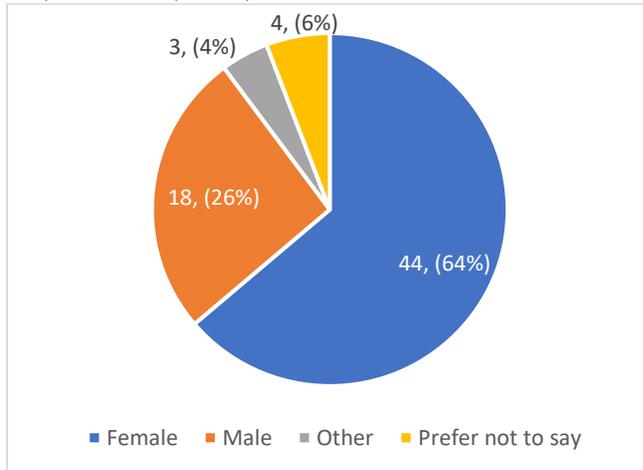
- There were 70 valid responses to the young people survey.
- 44 are female, 18 are male, 3 indicated 'other' and 4 preferred not to say.<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 1).
- Most respondents are aged 18-24 (27 young people), 18 are 16-17-year-olds, 18 are 14-15 years old, 4 are aged 12 – 13 and 3 aged 10 – 11. (Fig. 2).
- Respondents are involved in a range of youth organisations with only 7% who indicated they aren't involved with any provider.

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes have been denoted in one of the following ways: CEO, Youth Service Manager, Youth Worker, Volunteer or Young Person. Consequently, some of these titles are different to the interviewee or respondent's job title.

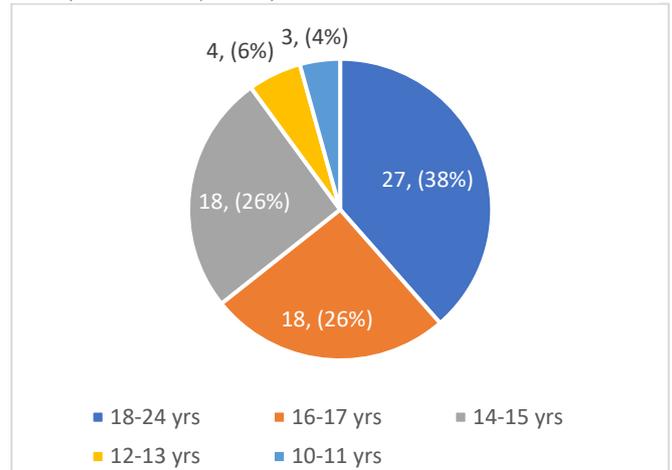
<sup>4</sup> Figures do not add to 70 because one respondent skipped this question.

Figure 1: Gender of young people's survey respondents (n=69)



\*1 skipped

Figure 2: Age of young people's survey respondents (n=70)



### Youth Workers' and Volunteers' Survey

There were 240 responses to the youth worker and volunteer survey. Of these 129 are paid members of staff and 111 are volunteers.<sup>5</sup> Seventeen respondents work in organisations which deliver youth services nationwide and 60 work in Dublin (either inner city, greater Dublin or Co. Dublin). All other counties were represented with at least one organisation delivering services in the area.

### Youth Service Managers' Survey

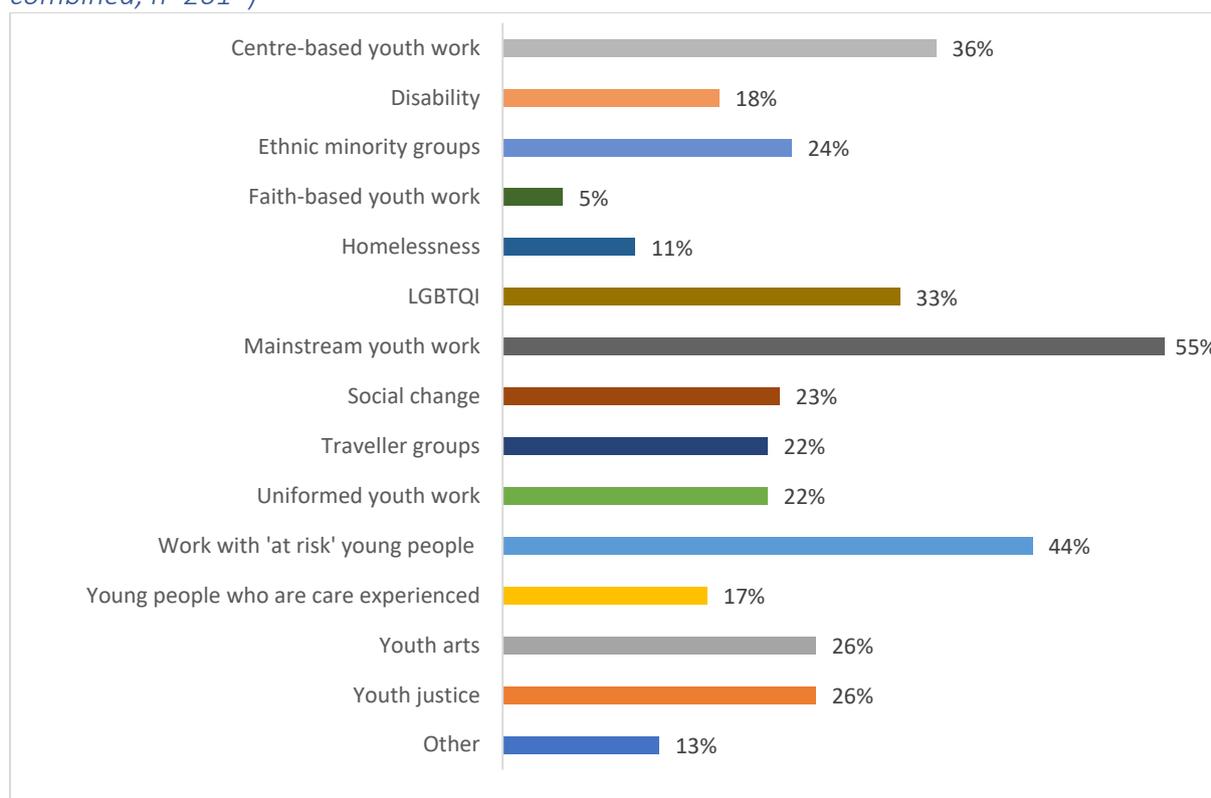
There were 54 responses to the youth service manager survey.<sup>6</sup> Of the organisations represented by respondents nine deliver services nationally, six deliver youth services across the whole island of Ireland (north and south), 12 deliver in Dublin, one organisation covers the Southeast and another works in the Midlands (Offaly, Westmeath, and Roscommon) and all others are active in individual towns or counties.

Figure 3 shows the combined thematic areas of youth work from both the youth workers' and volunteers survey and the youth service managers' survey (respondents were able to tick all options that applied).

<sup>5</sup> There was an approximate 30% drop off rate in responses by the end of the survey.

<sup>6</sup> There was an approximate 20% drop off rate in responses by the end of the survey.

Figure 3: Respondents' areas of work (Managers' and youth workers' and volunteers' surveys combined, n=261\*)



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

\*33 skipped

### Semi-Structured Interviews with Stakeholders

There was a total of 12 interviews conducted, ten with adults and two with young people. Interviews focused on how the participants' organisation responded to the pandemic, methodologies used and examples of good practice, limitations to delivery, the impact of working and volunteering during the pandemic, how they have been supported and what were the main support needs in the short- to long-term to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Interviewees were purposively selected to capture the diversity of the youth services they represent in different parts of the country including those working with young people from marginalised or minority groups, lower socio-economic backgrounds and living in both rural and urban settings. Although the research was primarily focused on the response of voluntary youth organisations, the work of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) was outside this scope, however NYCI was aware of the coordinating efforts of Cork ETB during the pandemic and their Adult Education Officer was invited to participate in an interview to include this perspective in the study. Interviews took place during June and July 2021 via online platforms including Zoom and WhatsApp. Interviewees comprised three CEOs, six youth service managers or coordinators<sup>7</sup>, and one youth worker. The project/organisation background of each interviewee is outlined in Appendix 1.

<sup>7</sup> The ETB Adult Education Officer has been classified as a youth service manager in any quotations to facilitate anonymity.

## Focus Groups

### Youth Worker and Volunteer Focus Groups

Focus groups were selected from survey respondents who indicated their interest and availability to be interviewed. Two youth worker focus groups and one volunteer focus group comprising 10 participants were conducted via Zoom in June 2021 (Table 1). The discussions focused on the following themes:

- maintaining a service
- methodologies used
- challenges and limitation
- impact on youth workers and volunteers
- short and long-term support needs (see Appendix 2)

*Table 1: Adult focus groups*

Focus group	Organisations represented
<b>Youth workers</b> FG1 – 2 x Participants FG2 – 5 x participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crosscare</li> <li>• Donegal Youth Service</li> <li>• Involve Meath</li> <li>• Irish Second-level Students' Union</li> <li>• Retold Narratives</li> <li>• Talk About Youth Project</li> <li>• YMCA Dublin</li> </ul>
<b>Volunteers</b> 3 x Participants*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coderdojo</li> <li>• Irish Girl Guides</li> <li>• Scouting Ireland</li> </ul> <p>*Participants also volunteer with other organisations including Kayaking Ireland, Variety Ireland and Youth Work Ireland</p>

### Young People's Focus Groups

Focus groups with young people were arranged in conjunction with youth workers who had responded to the survey (Table 2). Four groups were facilitated via Zoom, and one took place in-person. A total of 20 young people were involved in the focus groups. These focus group discussions sought to identify the impact of the pandemic; the support and engagement they had from their youth provider; how youth organisations can support them and their concerns for the future (see Appendix 2).

*Table 2: Young People's Focus Groups*

Project/Organisation	No. of young people	Ages of young people
Ballyfermot Youth Service	3	1 x18 years; 1x19 years; 1x20 years
Breathing Space, Wexford	2	2x21 years
SpunOut	6	2x17 years; 1x19 years; 1x20 years; 1x21 years; 1x23 years
Strive, Include Youth Donegal	3	1 x16 years; 1x17 years; 1x18 years
Youth Work Ireland, Cork	6	2x12 years; 1x15 years; 1x16 years; 2x17 years

## 4. Literature Review

The research highlighted in the literature review for NYCI's 2020 review of youth work sector's response to the pandemic inferred a more reactionary approach to the crisis as the world was still getting to grips with the scale of the challenges ahead. Much of the available literature focused primarily on actual and anticipated effects on young people. By contrast, this year's scan of literature uncovers deeper reflection on what the pandemic signifies for youth work as a practice and for youth-focused organisations as part of a wider sector.

The European Youth Forum's report, *Beyond Lockdown: 'The Pandemic Scar' on Young People* (2021), brings together an analysis of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on three key areas for young people – their work and income, education and learning, and mental health and well-being. It reviews national policy responses from across Europe and argues for a proactive approach to policymaking to address the long-term consequences of the pandemic. Its findings highlighted how pandemic-related challenges were exacerbated for young people experiencing marginalisation including that such young people were found to be more than twice as likely to have stopped working than other young people, nearly three-quarters of students in marginalised situations believe they were learning less because of the pandemic (significantly less – 40% and slightly less – 33.6%), and almost two-thirds of those surveyed may be affected by mental health and well-being issues with marginalised young people worse affected. This data illustrates the three-way relationship between youth unemployment, poor educational outcomes, and poor mental health and that such negative impacts of the pandemic “*may feed into one another over time, lasting beyond the pandemic*” (European Youth Forum, 2021: 24). The research also found that there has been minimal policy work at the national level to limit long-term impacts for young people in the three areas. The report makes a case for a ‘youth-inclusive recovery’ through four areas of policymaking: (1) Developing recovery plans that are mindful of the additional challenges facing those in marginalised groups and that involve young people and the youth sector in policy development; (2) Implementing job creation schemes to support young people into employment; (3) Building capacity in the area of remote and digital education; (4) Ensuring increased access to mental health supports and services.

In 2021 the RAY Network conducted research with youth workers and young people about the impact of the pandemic on youth work in the previous 15-18 months (RAY Network, 2021). Its findings were stark in terms of the difference youth work has been making to young people and the challenges of delivery under pandemic conditions for organisations and youth workers. Regarding the former:

- 74% of young people say youth work helped them and gave them something meaningful to do.
- 71% of young people say youth work made them laugh and made their pandemic days better.
- 68% of young people say youth work helped them to understand and interpret the news (RAY Network, 2021: 10:57).

Meanwhile the latter findings underscore just how difficult it has been for youth organisations and that youth work has been “*shaken to the core*” (RAY Network, 2021):

- 95% of youth workers say the pandemic affected their work either majorly (74%) or moderately (20%).

- 84% of organisations say the pandemic affected their work either majorly (46%) or moderately (38%).
- 6% of youth workers say they could still reach all the young people they would normally work with (RAY Network, 2021: 11:50).

The RAY Network’s research indicates that the youth work sector in Europe needs massive recovery support especially because so much of the sector is voluntary (RAY Network, 2021). It highlights that while the EU has a Recovery and Resilience Facility<sup>8</sup> of which the sixth pillar is about policies for the next generation, only three out of seven components of this sixth pillar address the needs of young people. Although national recovery plans are meant to support youth work structurally, the RAY Network’s scan of the 10 national recovery plans published by mid-June 2021 showed that these plans were failing to do so suggesting that youth work is getting neglected.

On a national level, a Red C poll of 1,025 adults in the Republic of Ireland commissioned by the National Youth Council of Ireland in April 2021 reveals the toll of the pandemic on young adults in Ireland. In comparison with other adults, respondents to the poll aged 18-24 declared substantially above average levels of anxiety, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future:

- 59% had experienced increased anxiety
- 61% reported increased loneliness
- 59% felt greater uncertainty about their future
- 25% agreed the pandemic had caused a strain on their financial well-being (McAleer, 2021).

BeLonG To Youth Services’ report, *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: 1 Year Later: Key Findings* (2021) underscores the extent to which marginalised and vulnerable groups of young people such as LGBTI+ young people face greater impacts arising from the pandemic. Like the European Youth Forum report, the report recognises that “*whatever lies ahead, the impact of Covid-19 will be with us for years to come*” (BeLonG To Youth Services, 2021: 2). It calls for adequate resourcing and capacity building for the sector and collective action to enable services to meet the needs of marginalised and vulnerable young people.

This BeLonG To Youth Services report is an update on its research published in 2020 and garnered 2279 survey responses from LGBTI+ young people from all 32 counties in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The results indicated that the pandemic served to compound existing challenges for LGBTI+ young people including exacerbating mental health challenges. The findings are stark and show how rates of depression, self-harm, and suicide ideation increased from 2020, for example 97% of LGBTI+ young people are struggling with anxiety, stress, or depression (up from 93% in 2020), and 83% of young people are feeling acute loneliness in the pandemic (up from 60% in 2020).

In addition to mental health challenges, the report highlights a further four key areas where LGBTI+ young people have experienced significant difficulties: home environment (56% are

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<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en#national-recovery-and-resilience-plans](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en#national-recovery-and-resilience-plans)

not fully accepted at home), housing (119 LGBTI+ young people had experienced homelessness in the last year), physical (73% say their physical health has been negatively impacted by the pandemic) and sexual health (young people faced several barriers to accessing sexual health services). It makes nine recommendations aimed at allies, funders and policymakers to work collectively with BeLonG To Youth Services to respond to the needs of LGBTI+ young people through awareness-raising, adequate service provision and re-opening of services, provision of information and resources to parents/guardians, and strengthening of relevant legislation (BeLonG To Youth Services, 2021).

In April 2021 Peace4Youth launched its study of youth work practice in the context of public health restrictions during the pandemic entitled, *At the Threshold: Youth Work through the Covid-19 Pandemic* (McArdle and McConville, 2021). Peace4Youth is a cross-border initiative funded through Peace IV and conducted research from May-August 2020 engaging with 43 youth workers employed by the project. The research applied a qualitative approach gathering data primarily through observations at organisational meetings along with a smaller number of interviews. It highlighted the centrality of youth work values and principles for practitioners as well as the importance of peer learning and reflective practice as youth workers sought to engage with young people in new digital spaces:

*“The quality programme that continued to be offered was underpinned by the primacy of the relationship and the commitment of youth workers to continually reflect in and on practice as they navigated the stresses and strains of living and working during a global pandemic” (McArdle and McConville, 2021: 45).*

The report also demonstrated the contribution of youth work across multiple areas including mental health, education, recreation, and social policy, and it identified the need for blended skills and practices in virtual and face-to-face worlds. Acknowledging the additional pressure for some staff and managers in relation to targets and outcomes, it called for greater flexibility in accountability systems:

*“Ultimately, the experience of youth work which continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates how adaptive responsive youth work practices require adaptive and responsive measurement and outcome frameworks to operate within and ultimately a culture that promotes and supports reflective, responsive and innovative practice” (ibid.: 34).*

From an organisational perspective the report underlined the need for health-promoting organisational cultures to support workers effectively:

*“Sustaining youth work programme delivery, while simultaneously minimising burnout is a conundrum, not just for youth workers and managers, but for youth work organisations, trainers and funders. The squeeze that youth workers have experienced here is unsustainable. Unless priority is given for reflection and new thinking on youth work policies, structures and funding, the lessons learnt during this pandemic are at risk of being boxed up and put away. The philosophies of care, community and learning that drive youth work practice, must be embedded in organisational culture and workforce development” (ibid.: 45).*

Addressing both everyday realities and existential challenges and how these relate to work with young people, Mark K Smith's article, *Dealing with the 'new normal'* (2020), highlights that whatever the 'new normal' of life will be after Covid-19 is not just about the normalisation of public health measures but is also about facing into the existential risk of major issues including climate and ecological change, exacerbating inequalities, and economic shifts, all of which were contributing factors in making the threat of a pandemic possible. Smith observes the juxtaposition of strengthened local civil action in health and welfare with increased remote activity and 'smart' working in all areas of life including education in ways that are significantly profitable for the key players in the tech sphere.

Recognising the extent of challenges in relation to financial inequality, employment, mental health, and the climate crisis facing children and young people pre-Covid-19 – and which are exacerbated as we try to emerge from the pandemic – Smith underlines the need to support children and young people to *"explore these fundamental issues, to contain their worries, and develop their capacity to create change"* (Smith, 2020: para 2). He lays out how sanctuary, community and hope are key areas of intervention for educators in these times.

Creating sanctuary for young people is about safe spaces where they can be themselves, find refuge from external pressures, connect with themselves and others. Smith makes a distinction between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' arguing that both are necessary to enable young people's agency and critical thinking. In naming community as a second area of focus, Smith underlines the importance of young people experiencing a sense of belonging that encourages the growth of networks fostering friendship, social capital, and associational life which enable participation in social change. Finally, hope is expressed as much more than wishful or optimistic thinking but a forward-looking, action-oriented, and cooperative stance that imagines 'change for the better' with others.

Grounded in a process-oriented and 'learning by doing' pedagogical approach to work with children and young people that invites them to *"reflect, commit and act"* (ibid.: "Our approach" section, para 1). Smith advocates for:

*"Educators, pedagogues and workers who are disposed and able to journey in hope, join in community with others, and create with children and young people space for relationship, reflection and experience"* (ibid.: "Conclusion" section, para 11).

This raises questions at organisational and sectoral levels in terms of thinking through what youth-focused organisations need to do to facilitate and equip practitioners to pay attention to the kind of character and integrity Smith names as *"central to the processes of working with others"* in informal education and social pedagogy (ibid.: "Further reading" section, para 7).

From a broader philosophical and pedagogical reflection to an exploration of the Covid-19 response in one Irish youth organisation, *From care packages to zoom cookery classes: Youth work during the Covid-19 'lockdown'* (Shaw, Brady and Dolan, 2021), focuses on the response of Foróige, Ireland's largest youth development organisation, to the pandemic in the wake of school and youth centre closures and is based on qualitative interviews with senior managers and senior youth officers in the organisation. Its findings address five key

areas: management response, consultation with young people and staff on the ground, stakeholder communications and engagement, reaching out to vulnerable young people and families, and adapting youth work services for online delivery. At the strategic management level, it points to the necessity of innovation and adaptation in the face of the crisis presented by the pandemic. In addition, it underlines the need for organisations to implement effective and consistent communications strategies both internally (staff, volunteers, young people) and externally (stakeholders including funders, government departments).

The report authors heard how *“the net of who was vulnerable grew”* (Shaw, Brady, and Dolan, 2021: 14) with an increased need for family support which created a significant adaptation towards meeting immediate and practical needs of young people and their families whether through care packages<sup>9</sup> or sourcing funds for devices to enable young people’s connectivity, online learning and digital engagement with youth activities. The report highlights valuable learning around how digital youth work methods can work well with specific groups or initiatives that are structured and task-focused or that have a national remit bringing together young people from across the country, or manualised programmes which can be translated to an e-learning system. It also notes how groups with strong pre-existing relationships and a clear sense of purpose or identity can be successful in an online environment, and certain young people who are quieter or experience social anxiety in face-to-face group settings can do well as part of online groups.

*“Participants believed that the presence of Foróige served a highly valuable function during a time when other services could not meet the needs of vulnerable young people. The development was also seen as potentially beneficial in the longer term, with some respondents expressing the view that the bonds forged with young people and families would lead to opportunities for future engagement. However, respondents also cautioned that this shift in orientation should not overtake the organisation’s core mission focused on direct work with youth”* (Shaw, Brady, Dolan, 2021: 20).

The report findings make clear that the digital divide is a significant structural issue that inhibits online engagement, particularly for socially disadvantaged young people. A second key challenge is that informal, relationship-based youth work doesn’t transfer well to digital platforms – referring to volunteer-led youth clubs one interviewee said that *“the core reasons they’re attending is taken away”* (ibid.: 17). Even in non-formal education programmes personal contact is considered a vital element and this is a point that can be applied to how blended learning approaches are designed going forward.

Regarding staff well-being and based on a suggestion from its staff body, Foróige held a ‘Big Day In’ allowing for a focus on staff self-care. The research indicates this gave *“due regard to the stress staff were experiencing in adapting to the new circumstances”* (ibid.: 11) and served to generate a sense of *“collective solidarity”* (ibid.: 24). It also provides an example of encouraging a philosophy of care within organisational culture which was highlighted in the

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<sup>9</sup> A ‘care package’ in this context refers to a parcel containing a variety of personal self-care or well-being products.

Peace4Youth report. The paper suggests that Foróige was well placed to respond effectively to the challenges created by the pandemic given its IT infrastructure, the capacity within its training, learning and development department to resource and equip staff and volunteers, and its approach to decentralising decision-making which empowered staff to operate flexibly and exercise creativity.

The literature review revealed two fascinating initiatives that centre the experiences of youth workers in the pandemic. The first of these was hosted by the Critical Voice online platform<sup>10</sup>, a youth work practitioner forum facilitated by Ulster University's Community Youth Work team that seeks to promote and develop youth work research, writing and thinking. Between February-April 2021 the platform produced a series called *Youth Work Under Lockdown* where seven youth workers from different youth organisations in Northern Ireland shared in written interviews how they adapted their work with young people, what sustained them, key challenges, and significant lessons.

All seven youth workers found themselves adapting to online delivery to try and maintain connections with young people, some offered mentoring or one-to-one support, and some were involved in delivering training programmes or other project with young people. Some also met individual young people for walks, made doorstep visits or delivered food parcels or well-being packs. There were those who found themselves in new territory providing family support work and those who helped to staff phone services responding to calls from young people. One of the interviewees, an outdoor education instructor, was redeployed to support work with local youth clubs supporting skills-based activities for the formal education curriculum but also bringing outdoor learning with a focus on well-being to young people in their local area. There was vital learning both personal and professional – well-being was a common theme underlining the importance of self-care, whether through managing social media consumption, getting outside in nature, or simply slowing down. There was a sense that lockdowns encouraged thinking outside the box and the importance of developing good links in local communities. Some found it difficult to persuade young people to engage online and one youth worker reflected on how online spaces require a much more proactive approach to initiate and maintain conversation, while another noted that digital engagement can work well for some young people because they can choose to engage at their own pace.

The second initiative generating insight into youth worker worlds during the pandemic is a *Citizen Enquiry into Youth Work in the Time of COVID-19* (Batsleer et al, 2020-21). This formed part of a contribution to a Mass Observation<sup>11</sup> archive of the pandemic at University of Sussex and was set up by a group of youth workers and academics who gathered and reviewed 159 diary entries from youth workers from across the UK in the April-December 2020 period generating four bi-monthly reports shared on the Youth and Policy website<sup>12</sup>.

These reports provide an indication of the range of methodologies applied during the pandemic – everything from detached street work and online support groups to employability skills development and practical supports like getting funding for waterproof

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<sup>10</sup> <https://sites.google.com/view/youth-work-dialogue-ni/reflections-on-practice>

<sup>11</sup> A way of using diaries to understand life for ordinary people in a time of national crisis.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/>

gear for outdoor activities. There are questions about the loss of informal work as one-to-one appointment systems are used to facilitate remote working and whether online spaces “become over-structured, adult dominated and empty. Or if they enable greater access and involvement for young people who are less likely to less able to engage in the usual spaces” (Batsleer et al, 2020b<sup>13</sup>). Despite many limitations, diarists describe ad hoc moments of creative connection with young people, of learning how to build relationships through text messaging, and it is possible to glimpse the care for others that drives youth workers to keep trying to reach out and to defend young people when they are blamed wholesale for Covid-19 misdemeanours.

The diary entries provide insights into how the youth workers observed the impact of the pandemic on young people as well as for themselves as they reflect on their own self-care and navigate coping and survival strategies during periods of limbo. Events in the wider world such as #blacklivesmatter and rising transphobia bring the needs of young people in tougher social realities into sharper focus. Youth workers are described as “*privileged witnesses of social reality*” (Batsleer et al, 2020c<sup>14</sup>) by way of simply being present with young people, but this gets juxtaposed with those who struggle with the all-consuming nature of performance-based workplace cultures. As the final report concludes, the Citizen Enquiry yields “*rich evidence of the low-key and yet vital, complex and life-saving practice of a critical and yet massively undervalued group of workers*” (Batsleer et al, 2021<sup>15</sup>).

#### NYCI Youth Worker Check-In Meetings

Between the end of February 2021 and mid-March 2021, NYCI facilitated 5 online check-in meetings open to youth workers across the sector to gather reflections from the past year and notes from these sessions were given to the researchers. Those in attendance represented a wide range of youth work organisations in Ireland. The discussions enabled the youth workers to share stories of young people and to explore their learning, well-being and hopes for the future. Recurring themes in the meetings included varied experiences of engagement with young people, practice developments and how youth work adapted, the importance of attending to staff well-being as well as addressing young people’s mental health, and recognition for youth work more broadly in society. In addition, there was discussion around the management of boundaries in relation to remote working and safeguarding, concerns about funding, and reflections on professional development and upskilling.

There were a range of comments about how youth work as a practice and the role of youth workers changed because of the pandemic and public health restrictions with one youth worker stating,

*“We have totally had to rewrite the youth work role, the job is totally different. In the past, we did group work and had a plan, case management plan, and went home. Now, it is about how to creatively engage creatively with young people. Older lads are hard to engage and have Zoom burnout. How useful is a youth work service to them now? It is*

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/youth-work-in-a-time-of-covid2/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/under-many-pressures/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/the-importance-of-our-wild-stories/>

*like we are writing a whole new thesis on this – little experiments and trying to mind ourselves as well. What are we even doing?” (Youth Worker).*

Another youth worker stated, *“we’ve all become digital youth workers, and no matter what moving forward, there will be elements of digital youth work that will remain, this needs to be harnessed”*. Others were noting that there was an additional level of strain to try and support young people and their families particularly those who were struggling and expressing the view that youth workers were *“picking up a lot”*. Several youth workers talked about the impact of the concern for young people on their own stress levels with one sharing, *“we are carrying a huge volume of stories that fall under the radar”* and another commenting that *“you are not carrying the heaviness of you own life but also the heaviness of the young people which is kind of challenging”*.

Looking to the future there were some concerns around funding with some calling for additional monies to sustain the sector. One youth worker noted that while their organisations face funding challenges the needs of young people are on the increase particularly in terms of mental health and that volunteers are also struggling. Another youth worker commented on the knock-on impacts of the pandemic for families and how this might inhibit young people’s access to youth services: *“Even while we recover, and youth groups start meeting again, many families are struggling having lost jobs and these families won’t have money to pay membership.”*

While there were mixed feelings about the extent to which the value of youth work has become more understood more widely, some of the youth workers were pleased that youth work was named as an essential service, and across the board there was a sense that such validation should continue, that the *“spotlight should continue to shine on youth work”*, and that both young people and youth workers should be celebrated:

*“Young people are the guiding light. They’ve endured so much and are still willing to respond to us in some shape when we respond to them. The story at the end of Covid is praising young people for all they went through” (Youth Worker).*

## 5. Findings

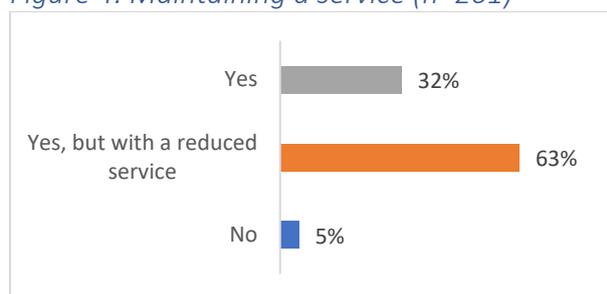
### 5.1 How has the youth work sector responded to challenges presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic?

To examine the youth work sector's response to the pandemic it is necessary to firstly assess the impact in terms of organisations and projects being able to maintain their services, numbers of groups and engagement levels of young people. The surveys with youth service managers, youth workers and volunteers, and young people provide a valuable snapshot of the sector including staffing and volunteer levels that compare with the year before the start of the pandemic. Consequently, there is commentary on how youth organisations responded with the onset of the pandemic in the initial phase and their efforts to maintain engagement with young people. This section highlights the qualities that characterise the sector's response and documents the young people's perspectives. It also identifies some of the main challenges affecting the sector.

#### Maintaining a service

The combined data from the surveys with youth service managers and with youth workers and volunteers shows that 32% were able to maintain a service and another 63% continued but with a reduced service (Fig. 4). Only 5% of respondents discontinued their service.

Figure 4: Maintaining a service (n=261)



Q: Have you been able to maintain a service since the pandemic started?

#### Change in numbers of groups/clubs/units facilitated during the pandemic

Youth service managers were asked to indicate the number of groups/clubs/units they facilitated during the years March 2019 to February 2020 and March 2020 to February 2021 (see Table 3). The results indicate that 30% of respondents maintained the same levels of groups/clubs/units in 2020 and 2021, while 9% saw an increase from 103 groups/clubs/units growing to 128 during the first year of the pandemic. There was a significant decrease in service provision for 24 organisations with a 62% reduction (1,006) from 1,632 in 2019/20 to 626 in 2020/21. Organisations that experienced a decrease overwhelmingly (92%) attributed this to the pandemic. Sixty-three per cent indicated the pandemic contributed 'a great deal' to the decrease in service provision and 29% said it contributed 'a lot'.

One manager explained that their membership increased during the pandemic due to a fully funded position that had begun before the pandemic, which was focused on increasing membership. They believed however this number would have been higher without Covid-19.

Table 3: Number of groups/clubs/units facilitated in 2019/20 and 2020/21

Levels of groups/clubs/units	% of organisations (n=54)*	Total number of groups/clubs/units Mar 19 – Feb 20	Total number of groups/clubs/units Mar 20 – Feb 21	Difference
Stayed the same	30%	203**	203**	-
Increased	9%	103	128	+25
Decreased	44%	1632	626	-1,006
Figures unavailable	7%	-	-	-
N/a	9%	-	-	-
Unanswered	2%	-	-	-

\*Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding

\*\* 3 organisations indicated figures as a percentage therefore their actual numbers were unavailable

Regarding falling numbers, one of the interviewees, a CEO of a national youth organisation made a distinction between work with young people who fall into ‘targeted’ categories (funded by the UBU scheme), and work with young people in local youth clubs seeing a significant drop in the latter:

*“Broadly speaking the numbers did go down some little bit with the targeted [youth services] but not a whole lot because the workers are dealing with a relatively small number of people and were able to keep in touch either through face-to-face or Zoom... but in the non-targeted – the youth clubs were hugely affected. We would have up to 300 clubs affiliating to our members every year normally, that’s down to about 50 this year. So, it’s a huge amount. There would be up to about maybe 20,000 young people involved in our youth clubs...” (CEO).*

#### Staffing levels during the pandemic

Respondents to the youth service managers’ survey were asked to indicate the number of staff employed for the years March 2019 to February 2020 and March 2020 to February 2021 (Table 4). Most organisations maintained the same number of staff over both years (60%). Twenty per cent of respondents (11 organisations) indicated their organisations had decreased staffing levels during the first year of the pandemic – this equated to a small loss of 35 staff. Of these responses, three managers indicated the pandemic contributed a great deal, two indicated it contributed a moderate amount and three indicated it contributed a little to the change in employee figures.

Thirteen per cent of respondents (7 organisations) increased their staffing levels which equated to a total of 48 full-time staff and one part-time staff member. Two of these organisations indicated the pandemic had contributed a lot to the need for more staff.

Table 4: Staffing levels in 2019/20 – 2020/21

Staff Levels	% of organisations (n=54)*	Total number of staff Mar 19 – Feb 20	Total number of staff Mar 20 – Feb 21	Difference
Stayed the same	60%	307 full-time 8 part-time 2 interns Total = 317	307 full-time 8 part-time 2 interns Total = 317	-
Increased	13%	1,019 full-time	1,067 full-time 1 part-time Total = 1,068	+49
Decreased	20%	218 full-time	183 full-time	-35
Unsure	2%	-	-	-
N/A	4%	-	-	-

\*Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding

#### Volunteer levels during the pandemic

Youth service managers were asked to indicate the number of volunteers involved in their organisation for the years March 2019 to February 2020 and March 2020 to February 2021 (Table 5). Only 6% of organisations kept the same level of volunteers for both years while 15% increased the number of volunteers denoting a total increase of 108 volunteers. Most organisations (61%) saw a decrease in volunteer involvement during the first year of the pandemic with a significant reduction from 11,102 volunteers in 2019/20 to 3,951 in 2020/21, representing a 64% drop in volunteer involvement. A significant majority (85%) of those organisations which experienced a decrease attributed this to the pandemic – 70% indicated the pandemic contributed ‘a great deal’ and 15% said it contributed ‘a lot’.

Table 5: Volunteer levels in 2019/20 to 2020/21

Volunteer Levels	% of organisations (n=54)*	Total number of volunteers Mar 19 – Feb 20	Total number of volunteers Mar 20 – Feb 21	Difference
Stayed the same	6%	405	405	-
Increased	15%	832	940	+108
Decreased	61%	11,102	3,951	-7,151
Unsure	4%	-	-	-
N/a	11%	-	-	-
Unanswered	4%	-	-	-

\*Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding

Of the 111 volunteers who responded to the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey, just under 20% (22) were unable to continue volunteering during the pandemic. The reasons volunteers cited for not continuing ranged from club closures due to restrictions, looking after older people during the pandemic, having risk factors for Covid-19 themselves, having “enough to deal with” as a frontline worker, or because their workload increased in their paid employment. Other reasons included some parents’ reluctance to facilitate their

children's participation online, lack of Wi-Fi, or groups where the children were too young to go on Zoom.

The data yielded from the interviews and focus groups provides further qualitative information on why there might have been such a substantial drop in volunteer numbers over the course of the pandemic. One interviewee highlighted many of their volunteers work in healthcare or live with vulnerable people or are vulnerable themselves for health reasons and so a range of personal and family circumstances may have been a key factor in their decision not to continue volunteering during the pandemic. This was confirmed by another CEO who noted a certain amount of fear among the older cohort of volunteers about getting involved in youth work:

*“Some volunteers naturally age out anyway – when their kids age out of the clubs they age out – that’s part of the pattern. But then the more long-term volunteers... many people, like myself included, would have grown up in a club and been associated all our lives. So, the older cohort of volunteers they’d have underlying health issues and are afraid now I think to get involved, and don’t feel they can return in the same way” (CEO).*

There were also many volunteers working online in their day-job and not keen on talking to a screen in the evenings again because of ‘Zoom fatigue’ or volunteers who, as one CEO put it, felt they had *“nothing extra to give to the young people”* because of *“Covid exhaustion”*. A volunteer described missing the face-to-face interaction not realising *“how much we constructed everything in that space and all our connections were based around that”*.

Furthermore, some volunteers may have been completely put off by the leap from face-to-face engagement with young people to digital engagement which, as one youth service manager observed, requires a different skillset *“they’ve never had or needed before”*, and there was a youth worker who pointed out that online engagement might feel less meaningful for some volunteers:

*“Telling a volunteer that you need them to sit in on a Zoom call, doesn’t really cut it. Volunteering is a funny thing, the volunteer has to get some kind of social reward out of it, some reason to keep them coming back... you have to have something for them to do” (Youth Worker).*

#### Levels of engagement by young people

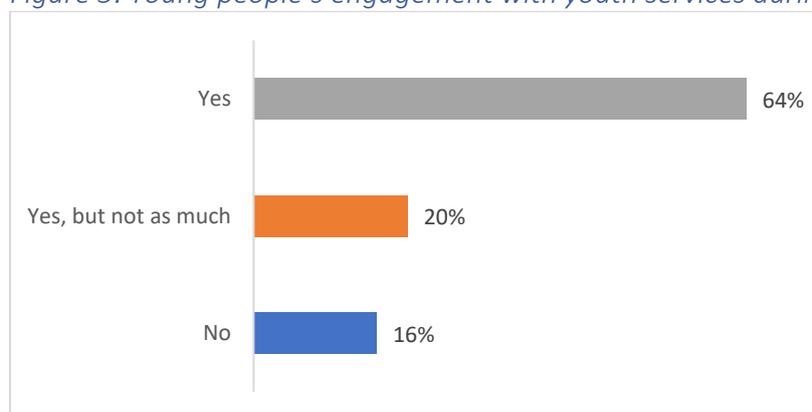
Respondents to the youth service managers’ survey were asked to indicate the number of young people they had engaged with in the year March 2019 to February 2020 and March 2020 to February 2021 (Table 6). Only 7% of organisations maintained the same number of young people in comparison with the year before the pandemic and just 11% increased their engagement with young people which equated to 3,655 young people – four of these organisations indicated the pandemic had contributed a great deal to the increase. A substantial majority (69%) of organisations experienced a decrease in their engagement with young people, this equated to a significant 50% reduction from 159,280 young people to 79,123 young people in the first year of the pandemic. Four in every five organisations (83%) which experienced a decrease attributed this to the pandemic – 65% indicated the pandemic contributed ‘a great deal’ and 18% said it contributed ‘a lot’.

Table 6: Number of young people engaged in 2019/20 and 2020/21

Young people engagement	% of organisations (n=54)	Total number of young people Mar 19 – Feb 20	Total number of young people Mar 20 – Feb 21	Difference
Stayed the same	7%	3,425	3,425	-
Increased	11%	1,911	5,566	+3,655
Decreased	69%	159,280	79,123	-80,157
Figures unavailable	13%	-	-	-

In the young people’s survey 64% reported they were able to continue engaging with their youth service while 20% continued to engage but not as much as pre-Covid-19, and 16% discontinued altogether (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Young people’s engagement with youth services during the pandemic (n=70)



Q: Do you still engage with your youth organisation?

Among the interviewees there were some comments about reduction in numbers attending services in the initial phase of the pandemic. A youth worker observed a reduction of at least 75% in young people accessing their service. A CEO observed that their organisation was working at half its normal capacity but was pleased to still be able to operate across all its usual age-groups. By contrast, the CEO of a service operating in Dublin’s inner city saw an increase in the number of engagements with young people through their street work programme which became a priority from the outset of the pandemic:

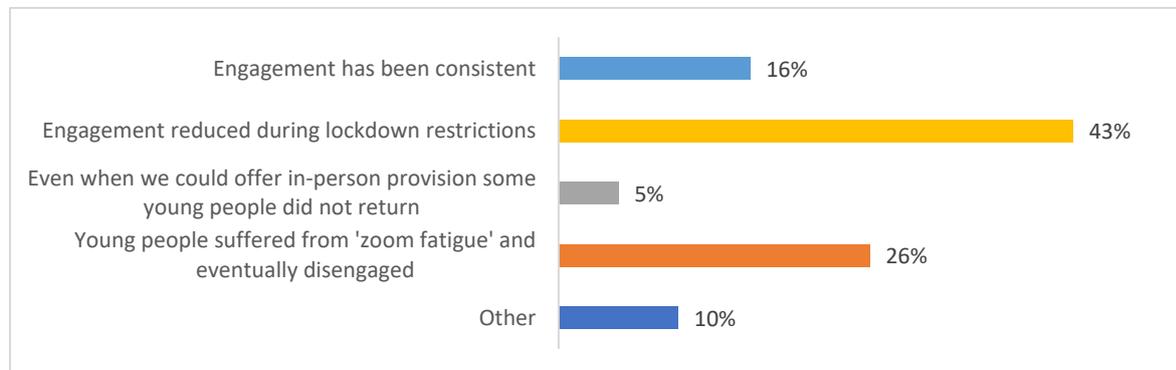
*“Our street work did expand in terms of the numbers of people we engage – there was a sharp rise. The previous year, our kind of average of contacts or engagements in a week was 51. That increased in Covid to 80+ and actually that hasn’t gone down again. So, our numbers in street work are very high. Our contact hours are also expanding with joint work with other organisations” (CEO).*

#### Change in young people’s engagement

In the surveys of youth service managers and youth workers and volunteers, respondents were asked about their observations of changes in young people’s engagement and could tick more than one option. As Figure 6 shows below, 16% found engagement was consistent, while just under half (43%) saw attendance go down during lockdown

restrictions and more specifically, 26% found that young people suffered from ‘Zoom fatigue’ and eventually disengaged. A small proportion of 5% found that even when they could offer in-person provision some young people did not return.

Figure 6: Change in young people’s engagement (n=203)



Q: How has engagement with young people changed during the last year since the pandemic started?

Those who ticked the ‘other’ option provided a range of comments about the “rollercoaster” through different engagement experiences over the past year as public health restrictions ebbed and flowed. A manager cited the frequent changes in guidelines stating, *“at this point we have not had consistency in the youth sector for over 15 months and this has affected our relationships with the young people.”* By contrast a youth worker reported seeing an increase in engagement because of a surge in referrals. A couple of respondents referred to the digital divide or lack of hardware as a barrier to engagement and others understood the social, familial, and personal challenges facing many including a volunteer who expressed pride in young people’s resilience in the face of the challenges presented by the pandemic.

The feedback from interviewees and focus group participants was broadly aligned with survey respondents in terms of the experience of ‘Zoom fatigue’ for many young people, especially older young people leading to a reduction in engagement. Many also noted that doing digitally based youth work on top of online school, particularly in the ‘lockdown’ from January 2021, was simply too much of an ask for a lot of young people. Referring to some voluntary-led units in their uniformed organisation, a Youth Service Manager shared how some leaders and parents didn’t want to compound the situation for young people by creating more online activities, and for larger groups there were frustrations when not everyone could be online at the same time so that young people were *“dropping in and out”* and *“they end up getting annoyed because they can’t fully participate”*. However, there was a youth service manager who felt that by way of bringing everything to a halt, online work became somewhat easier in the January 2021 lockdown *“because the ones who didn’t want to go online had already left, and when the whole world is shut it’s easier to be on Zoom”*.

A youth service manager’s comments reflected the unrelenting nature of the pandemic:

*“When we went back to level 5 again, that’s when it really, I think – really started to deenergise us and not just the youth workers but the kids themselves, because at that stage they were already online for school and the thought of having to come back online for youth work was just... We*

*understood that – we were not even that pushy with them on that because that wouldn't have been good for their mental health then either, being on a computer 8 hours a day, that's really when things started to just prove tough. It was tough to motivate staff, motivate the young people to try and stay involved because it was a case of 'gosh, is this ever going to end?'*  
(Youth Service Manager).

Several interview and focus group participants expressed concern for vulnerable or marginalised young people with a youth worker in a focus group reflecting *"we lost the ones that maybe needed it the most"*. There were young people whose home situations simply weren't conducive to digital engagement, lacking peace and quiet or stability. Furthermore, a youth service manager highlighted how the lack of face-to-face contact and physical visits led to significant concerns for family support and home life in terms of neglect, food, hygiene issues and so on. The comments of one of the interviewees were helpful in explaining how online engagement was essentially out of reach for many vulnerable young people:

*"...they love the physical 1-1 contact, that's what they craved and when you took that away from them – you know they're kids who do get into trouble, they do make bad decisions – and I think trying to convince them to come online was just a decision they weren't able to make, they weren't really getting supported to make that decision either, so they were getting lost. It was like when you don't go to school for a few days, you forget about all the tangibles that go with that, the aftermath that that's going to cause, it just becomes normal, and I think it just became normal for them to disengage from us and try and not re-engage"* (Youth Service Manager).

#### Young people's perspectives on engagement

In terms of the young people's survey respondents who didn't engage with youth services, there are a variety of reasons among the open-ended responses including the closure of services, not being able to meet others 'in real life', taking up new hobbies instead, a lack of interest among other members or leaders or simply not wanting to. When asked about the impact of not attending, these respondents referred to a loss of fitness, missing meeting new people or meeting friends outside of school or missing out on new opportunities. Four young people say they experienced little to no impact while one person says that they *"miss the activity and sense of belonging."*

As for the respondents who engaged with youth services to a lesser extent, again, there is a range of explanations such as connectivity issues, busyness, meetings getting cancelled or curtailed or meetings happening less regularly. One young person felt that with social distancing, there is *"less time to engage"*, another referred to social anxiety, another said that their parents were getting sent information instead, and another commented that the *"online experience isn't as interesting"*. Regarding the impact of a reduced level of engagement, the responses include young people who named social isolation and less socialising, missing seeing their friends as well as a loss of motivation or loss of skills development opportunities.

While the youth survey was the key means of attempting to get a sense of young people's rationale behind disengaging either partially or wholly from youth services, the youth focus groups also offered useful insights including one young person who admitted to 'disappearing' from digital engagement for a few weeks because of the intensity of online school saying, "I just couldn't stick to it anymore, I just couldn't do it." He also described how he would flip between engagement and disengagement:

*"It was just I got bored of doing nothing, when I got bored of doing something with all the online, I got bored of doing nothing again, you kind of realise how good it was when you're not doing it, on the first week it was ok... on the second week, 'I'm getting bored now again like'. There was a lot of boredom the whole way through. I was in 5<sup>th</sup> [year] online for a while, it was just torture. You were going through so much stuff. Teachers were just talking at you not to you" (Young Person).*

### Youth Work Sector Response to the Pandemic

In analysing the data gathered from the interviews and focus groups it is possible to create a snapshot of the youth sector's initial response when the pandemic struck and what it has been like to maintain engagement since. Section 5.2 will explore specific methodologies and interventions in greater detail.

#### Initial response

Broadly there was a speedy shift to online work with some services quicker than others to make the move, and many organisations reaching out to young people through whichever means available to them whether phone calls or social media-based group chats even as staff figured out technical adjustments for working from home. One of the CEOs in the interviews talked about how their staff were making a lot of personal sacrifices and that it was a very surreal period for both youth workers and young people. Some local units of national volunteer-led organisations may have been slower to go online but each group had their own set of circumstances to navigate.

#### Maintaining Engagement

As time passed it became clearer that the pandemic would present a longer-term challenge. The initial 'novelty' wore off and organisations grappled with applying government public guidelines to their settings, reviewing internal issues such as policies and procedures, ensuring Covid-19 compliance as well as continuing to reach out to young people and finding ways to maintain connections and support young people, particularly those in crisis.

The recognition of youth work as an essential service in March 2020 by the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now known as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth – DCEIDY) had been welcomed by many, however there were some challenges as public health guidelines changed over the course of the year, particularly in periods when Level 5 restrictions were imposed or re-imposed. Sector-specific guidance was issued by DCEIDY in September 2020 and updated thereafter<sup>16</sup> and this was

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/58393-guidance-for-youth-organisations-on-resuming-full-services-after-covid-19/>

aided by regular stakeholder engagement through an Oversight Group made up of representatives from the youth sector and Department officials (see Appendix 3 for more details). The expectation was that youth organisations develop their own protocols to align with the Departmental guidance.

The box below provides a case study from one interviewee's organisation that illustrates the complexity many youth organisations had to navigate through uncertain territory, while also trying to keep the needs of young people and families central.

### Case Study 1

A CEO related how their youth service had engaged with relevant agencies – HSE, CDYSB – and fostered a partnership with a local drugs project in the first 'lockdown' to engage with young people through street work. They carried out house visits where they felt it was necessary for young people in crisis:

*"We were able to provide a 5-day working week out on the street and you know we had Covid procedures all in place... We did have to look at what were essential situations that we might need to be called on and there were some people we did have to call with to their houses in crisis situations" (CEO).*

As restrictions lifted into the summer of 2020, they focused more on internal summer programming with some sporadic joint street work. The government's guidance for youth work organisations enabled the work to continue through the autumn and into winter albeit with smaller numbers and some changes to protocols and health and safety measures:

*"So, we managed to keep going right through that and the road map really did allow us to do a lot. That road map really allowed us to work right through from the autumn into the winter. We did have to make several changes; you're constantly having to keep an eye on what we need to be doing now as well as health and safety measures" (CEO).*

The New Year presented new challenges as the interviewee explained how their service's crisis intervention was inhibited so they had to make a case for this work and seek clarification for its operations in recognition of the needs of the young people in the catchment area:

*"...in the New Year, and the most frustrating point that we had been, and we felt there were big mistakes on how the road map was written because it really didn't allow any leeway for crisis intervention work... we realised we needed to reform and push for what we need and to make sure we were doing the right thing. So, we did... we got the clarification we could do crisis work then we were happy with that because in the [name of area] inner city the young people are all in crisis" (CEO).*

The difficulty of steering a path forward was evident in the comments of other interviewees such as a youth service manager who found the gradual re-opening of spring 2021 more unsettling because of uncertainty about how long it would last. Ultimately, while Covid-compliance and safety were paramount, it was the limitations within the restrictions that

represented a key challenge for the sector and many youth workers simply wanted to be able to do much more with young people. In the youth focus groups there were young people who felt strongly that the essential nature of youth services should be sustained and upheld such as one young person who stated that youth services are ancillary to other services like mental health services:

*“I think if we do go back to a lockdown, I think the likes of [name of youth service] should get to keep on working. I mean what they’re doing is actually phenomenal, even like it’s really unheard-of – people going beyond what they need to do, and looking after your mental health, like they’ll stay up all night and help you if you... as long as you need it... I think the government should recognise that. What’s helping young people’s mental health is the youth service, they are doing so much for young people, and they should really invest more in them and see that they are an essential service” (Young Person).*

### Characteristics of the sector’s response

The thematic analysis of the data from the interviews and focus groups reveals several key qualities and features that characterise the youth work sector’s overall response as distinctive in serving and supporting young people during the pandemic:

- Adaptability
- Young person-centred approaches
- Strategic and collaborative outlook
- Enhancing the visibility of youth work
- Internal capacity-building

### Adaptability

A stand-out feature from the last year is the extent to which youth organisations demonstrated flexibility, creativity, thinking ‘out of the box’, going beyond comfort zones and problem-solving in the face of various logistical challenges to communicate with young people ‘on their level’. Several of those interviewed talked about doing things they wouldn’t have thought of doing previously in normal circumstances, so there was a willingness to experiment and try out different ideas to find what worked for the young people. A youth service manager even commented on how the complexities presented by pandemic – at least initially – generated a motivating and energising sense of challenge as a practitioner, and he reflected a ‘can do’ attitude with a focus on making digital youth work fun. A CEO of a national youth organisation noted the speed of the evolution of youth work in response to the completely new set of circumstances:

*“I was hugely impressed at the speed at which they evolved, the way in which they thought about their services and the way in which they delivered their services. Literally within a week they had redesigned the whole process. Now there were technical difficulties, there were people getting set up for remote working, all of that. But people found ways around all of that very, very quickly. They used their volunteer base, they used all of their resources at their disposal... Because they’re so embedded in communities, they’re aware of the most vulnerable and the kids this was going to hit in a really more profound way, and they made sure the lines of*

*communication were open. To me that was hugely impressive to see and all of our youth services without exception did that” (CEO).*

#### Young person-centred approaches

There was a sense across the interviews and focus groups that youth workers’ efforts were tuned into keeping the needs of young people at the centre of their practice. This applied particularly to young people at risk who may have needed crisis supports. There were constituencies where youth organisations took a proactive approach deeming every young person ‘at risk’ either because of the pandemic and the loss of all conventional support systems in school and so on, or because of local contextual challenges in terms of marginalisation or disadvantage.

An organisation working with LGBTI+ young people found themselves doing much more 1-1 work, crisis intervention, signposting, and referrals, and with contacts from young people, plus parents, teachers, and health professionals at an all-time high. Staff at a youth information café also found themselves doing much more 1-1 work, offering intensive supports particularly with older young people such as supporting them to move into independent living, to access mental health services, to navigate the benefit system, or providing family support and informal mediation for young people and their families who were struggling with the intensity of being at home 24/7 in lockdown. Among the interviewees there were those who recognised young people’s need for connection and how even casual interactions were gone and they tried to create programmes that would help young people to stay connected.

Despite the significant challenge of trying to reach out to young people and keep them engaged in online sessions, relationship-building remains central as a practice. In one of the focus groups, a youth worker shared how the additional sanitisation protocols in place in their centre since re-opening in the summer of 2021 have enhanced relationship-building. This story exudes such a strong sense of welcome, inclusion and respect for the dignity of each young person who walks through the door:

*“One of the things we’ve had to do in our centre in [name of town], say, they’ll come in through our door, they’ll sanitise their hands, I’ll only let one in at a time and then they go through and out into the back garden. There’s one person going in at a time and usually about 3 staff that they meet someone at the door which would be me, then they walk through and see another person and they’re all individually saying hello rather than like say pre-Covid they’d all leg it in, they wouldn’t even – if you were a new worker, you wouldn’t know their name they’d just run right by you. Whereas now they love this, they’re real proud, particularly the younger ones, they’re real proud of walking in, ‘hi, how are you? I like your top, I like your nails’ or this, that, whatever – and going through and having that greater conversation particularly with the younger ones that you mightn’t necessarily, they mightn’t necessarily think that there’s much in it, but they’re really loving the fact that – ‘oh she’s welcoming me and here’s me on the way in’ – you’re meeting 2 or 3 staff on the way in and saying hello to them all and having a little chat and then when they’re waiting out the back talking to a staff member and waiting for the rest of them to come in.*

*So, there's a bit more time because of the sanitisation and stuff like that there's more chats and more relationship-building and that as well which has been really, really nice" (Youth Worker).*

#### Strategic and collaborative outlook

There was a shift towards adaptation not just in service delivery but also at the strategic level of organisational operations and infrastructure. One CEO referred to starting a standing weekly meeting for senior managers in their organisation, where they discussed any emerging issues, reviewed any updates with the guidance for the sector and checked in on how staff were doing. Another CEO of an organisation with a national reach described how their organisation's way of working completely changed through instituting regular senior management meetings to manage their response and encourage information-sharing and problem-solving across different regions. Consequently, they established specific working groups to update policies and procedures in key areas relevant to the new paradigm of digital youth work including safeguarding, remote working, Covid-compliance and so on.

The box below provides a case study of Cork ETB's coordination activities with local youth providers yielded from the interview with a member of its team. This offers valuable insight into the benefits of interagency working between statutory and voluntary partners and as such provides a useful example of the statutory and voluntary sectors working together in one geographic area.

#### Case study 2

In terms of interagency collaboration, the local authority set up a Youth Response Committee made up of statutory partners and organisations from the voluntary and community sector across Cork City. Chaired by the CEO of Cork ETB, the group met weekly with youth as a standing item on the agenda thus providing a means of accountability for actions regarding children and young people and rendering a measure of status to youth work as part of the wider pandemic response.

While coordination has always been part of the remit of Education and Training Boards, Cork ETB stepped proactively into a coordination role in support of local youth organisation recognising the need to work together across the youth sector, particularly when it became clear in the spring of 2020 that restrictions would be in place far longer than initially anticipated. An example of this was the establishment of online Youth Worker Area Networks which met every six weeks creating regular contact among youth workers as well as encouraging collaboration as summer approached.

Other examples of Cork ETB's coordination efforts include a range of joint youth initiatives such as the Urban Outdoor Adventure programme, Pumpkin Challenge, and a Netflix & Pizza Party event as an alternative to local bonfire night activity in which there were strategic linkages with both the Garda and Cork Fire Service. In doing so, Cork ETB demonstrated its capacity to leverage key partnerships, for example, linking with Cork Sports Partnership and Cork Music Generation to deliver a summer programme, 'We Are Cork Youth Challenge'. This initiative encouraged young

people across Cork to participate in a programme of 50 different challenges related to sport, music, and community engagement. Using the Flipgrid app young people submitted video responses to the challenges. Over 400 young people registered for the challenge in the summer of 2020 and special awards were given to young people who completed 20 challenges. Award-winners were later invited to a ceremony at the Lord Mayor's chambers in September 2020. At the time of the field research the initiative was scheduled to be repeated in the summer of 2021.

One of the advantages of these kinds of joint programmes and events is that they were Covid-compliant and accessible for youth workers to sign up their youth groups without having to worry about logistics. As a youth service manager reflected, they were also a morale-boosting source of encouragement about youth engagement for youth workers giving them a sense of “*ok, there’s no-one turning up for the Zoom meetings, but at least we’re part of something else too*”.

### Enhancing the visibility of youth work

Podcasting with young people served as a great way of making young people and youth initiatives more visible. An example of this is Carbery YMCA’s podcasting activity which evolved from an online radio programme taking music requests from young people to a show that included a participant slot where young people would talk about a particular band or song track, share tips about surviving the pandemic or give shout-outs to friends and family. Then the project became known as ‘Cork’s Brave Youth’<sup>17</sup> a podcast which interviews young people with a ‘story worth telling’. Each episode also profiles the music being made by local young people and includes a noticeboard segment where youth organisations can promote programmes, events, and activities. Since it launched in April 2021 it has been used in some schools as a discussion starter in SPHE classes (Social, Personal and Health Education).

The previously named initiatives in Cork also served to enhance the visibility of youth projects, young people, and youth work as a whole. For example, in the case of the Pumpkin Challenge<sup>18</sup>, 40 projects participated, and Cork ETB was able to finance a prize for the winners:

*“It was about creating more visibility for youth work in the city as opposed to just Mahon Youth Club doing a pumpkin... we had 40 projects doing pumpkins... so ETB could offer that kind of scalability and increase the visibility of youth work because there was a lot of good stuff happening, but it wasn’t – well, from what I knew from previous years it wasn’t really visible and it didn’t really matter whereas because we were in this kind of Covid era it was critical that youth work was visible. So yeah, we did the Pumpkin Challenge which was great and again we offered pizza vouchers to the winning project, which was – just those little things that the ETB could step in and provide... it’s raising the profile of activities available for young people but raising the profile of youth workers because we’ve all been putting them in our social media, ‘oh look at the great stuff happening up in [X] project, this is what’s happening in [X] project...”*  
(Youth Service Manager).

<sup>17</sup> [https://open.spotify.com/show/2yM94fFYu7Ew5j2F6Gd9mb?si=XC\\_hnCtlTe2dXwGFbYnSWg&dl\\_branch=1](https://open.spotify.com/show/2yM94fFYu7Ew5j2F6Gd9mb?si=XC_hnCtlTe2dXwGFbYnSWg&dl_branch=1)

<sup>18</sup> [https://fb.watch/6uF6yD3X\\_1/](https://fb.watch/6uF6yD3X_1/)

### Internal capacity-building

Some organisations took the opportunity to attend to internal capacity-building, whether reviewing policies and procedures, recruiting for new board members, updating websites, developing digital communications and social media output, or recruiting staff to scale up service delivery. Growing a presence on social media paid off for some of the organisations featured in the interviews, for example a youth service manager described how their pages got significantly more ‘hits’ from young people through developing their use of social media platforms. The leader of a national uniformed organisation observed that some local units became more active in sharing their activities and good practice on social media, and one of the CEOs explained that prior to the pandemic their organisation had used social media platforms mainly to talk to other stakeholders, but now young people are a major audience:

*“Huge engagement now on Snapchat and last week we started on TikTok and within a few days we’d had over 400 engagements from LGBT young people from TikTok... There’s a few objectives: first of all, it’s getting information out there that might ease some of the calls to us about information that people need to get... ‘go to our website to find out about this’, ‘sign up to this, that or the other’... And then just letting young people know that we’re here and what we can and cannot provide” (CEO).*

### Young people’s perspectives of the youth work response

Probably the best judges of what makes for good youth work in the middle of a pandemic are young people themselves, and the young people we met across the focus groups spoke very highly of their youth leaders and organisations.

*“I’d say they handled [the pandemic] really, really well. At some stage if they were annoyed, we didn’t know they were, it was like we were in-person, they did amazing like they couldn’t have done better, they were really enthusiastic and they did everything they could to make it fun and to make it familiar I guess and not gloomy, so you’re not thinking about why you’re online, but you’re just having fun” (Young Person).*

The young people’s comments reflect significant appreciation of youth workers’ and volunteers’ efforts in facilitating groups, encouraging a sense of connection with other young people, and making regular check-in calls in addition to their availability and compassion for others. One young person appreciated how the transition to online engagement was handled and observed that the youth workers were successful in maintaining a sense of community in online meetings. A couple of young people pointed out how their youth workers could have opted for an easier life during lockdowns with one speaking of his youth workers that, *“they both could have easily done nothing either – sit back and enjoy a few weeks off – it shows how much they actually care”*. Noting how youth workers *“rose to the occasion”* and were prepared to go above and beyond for young people in distress, another young person felt it *“helped a lot of people not go too far with their mental health”*.

### Organisational challenges in making a response to the pandemic

The research data reflects four main challenges for youth organisations in making a response to the pandemic and these will be discussed in turn:

- Organisational infrastructure and practices
- Managing risk
- Adjustment to different formats of service delivery
- Financial implications

#### Organisational infrastructure and practices

It is worth noting that some organisations may have been better placed than others to make the shift into digital youth work because of infrastructure already in place, certain skills among personnel, organisational practices, or habits of engagement with young people. For example, a volunteer in the volunteers focus group described how their group, a programming club for young people, was able to move online easily because all its volunteers had been used to working online prior to the pandemic. A youth worker pointed out that their organisation had been using social media platforms for group chat messaging with young people for some time prior to the pandemic and this set them up well for trying to reach out to their members once restrictions were in place.

By contrast one of the interviewees shared an observation of some issues around internal communications for youth organisations, particularly in some of the larger organisations, where the voices and ideas of youth workers were getting lost. Giving the example of information about a digital ICT grant, they noticed how some managers might have been making decisions about how to spend the money, for example on laptops, while youth workers on the ground might have had a different vision for how such funding could be used based on their knowledge of what would work in their project, for example seeing the potential of VR goggles<sup>19</sup>.

A volunteer in a uniformed organisation who participated in one of the focus groups also felt that information was slow to reach local units at the outset of the pandemic and had the impression that the national office was struggling to respond to the crisis which left some leaders feeling somewhat unsupported initially, although this improved as time went on.

Every youth organisation or project has its own set of circumstances to take into consideration and the loss of venue access was a significant issue for some groups that do not have their own premises. This created difficulties for some with the return to in-person engagement and meant that some groups were reliant on outdoor activity. The reverse situation arose for one of the interviewees representing an organisation with a good digital infrastructure but based in a city-centre building with no access to an appropriate outdoor environment for group work.

#### Managing risk

As already noted, DCEDIY set out guidance specifically for the youth sector with updates as restrictions changed, and youth organisations were expected to apply the guidelines in their own setting. One of the youth workers in a focus group mentioned some apprehension about getting this right and dealing with *“grey areas of what’s right and wrong and... the fear of the unknown”*. An interviewee shared their observation that some member groups in

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<sup>19</sup> VR goggles are a virtual reality headset which cover the eyes and provides an immersive 3D experience, widely used with video games, applications and simulators.

their organisation struggled with interpreting the guidance more than others and may have been uncomfortable with risk management:

*“I suppose it’s down to personalities. Some youth services were happy to get the guidelines and do their risk assessment and then work out how to do it. Others wanted – they kept ringing me and saying, ‘it’s not clear, do I open or do I not open, do I do let my CE workers in or...?’ I kept saying, ‘these are guidelines, they’re not laws, you need to carry out a risk assessment with your Board, and decide who are the critical people you need in, who aren’t etc.’ There was a lot of that going on... it’s about people’s own comfort levels with risk” (CEO).*

#### Adjustment to different formats of service delivery

Some of the stories related in the interviews and focus groups highlighted the extent to which youth organisations made significant adjustments in their service delivery such as a youth café and drop-in centre that had to come to terms with not being able to facilitate open access or any kind of ad hoc work with young people and shift to more 1-1 work. In fact, for one group – a variety club involving young people in singing, dancing and drama – the shift was too much, and it completely shut down. Another youth arts programme was able to carry on with different kinds of activities related to theatre including a TikTok version of a Shakespeare play (see Section 6), but it was clear from their manager’s comments that while they had adapted well online delivery and ‘made do’, they were missing being able to work towards live performance with young people:

*“We have adapted, we have made do, we’ve created entirely new genres and we’ve really pushed the forum but it’s not what we do. What we do is, we’re in a room, we’re live, we do games, we create stuff and we perform live for an audience, that’s actually the core of what we do, we’re not film makers, don’t get me wrong we are doing a lot of film projects, we’re doing one at the moment and it’s what’s going to keep us going” (Youth Service Manager).*

An interviewee whose youth service supports LGBTI+ young people explained how their enquiries had increased substantially in the aftermath of the pandemic with significantly greater numbers of adults from across the country getting in touch for advice. To meet the demand the organisation is *“now providing a service that we never set out to do which is supporting professionals and parents all over the country.”* Consequently, more of their work focuses on signposting and referrals and while they are encouraged that more people are reaching out and that there are more sources of support available compared with 5 years ago, it has had an impact on service delivery – *“we’re almost like a helpline at the beginning”*. Furthermore, with more young people calling at a time of crisis, their services were also shifting from a traditional understanding of youth work provision towards more crisis intervention including responding to the risk of suicide.

#### Financial implications

There was a broad appreciation of the flexibility conveyed by funders understanding the unique circumstances of the pandemic and the challenges it presented for youth engagement and meeting agreed targets or outcomes. Some felt there was mixed messaging between government and statutory funders about the extent of flexibility with

meeting targets leading to a certain amount of pressure for youth workers, while others had very positive experiences of funders who exercised trust in grantees and were open to listening and hearing how organisations were having to pivot. On a local scale a couple of focus group participants felt that their organisations incurred higher costs to maintain engagement with young people, for example in putting together activity packs.

The key financial issue raised in the interviews and focus groups concerned membership fees with several of those involved in uniformed organisations referring to a drop in income at the national and local levels. A couple of people talked about how it was difficult to charge a full membership when units on the ground could not offer a full programme. Moreover, many of the usual fundraising activities by local units have not been able to take place. There was recognition that the families of many members might be facing financial problems because of the pandemic but also some concern about decreasing numbers of members more widely:

*“Normally we would make some money with our events and the groups at local level would do bag packs and things and they haven’t been able to do that sort of thing, but I haven’t heard anyone saying we can’t go back to guiding because we can’t afford it. May be that’s coming down the line and we’ll have to deal with that as and when” (Youth Service Manager).*

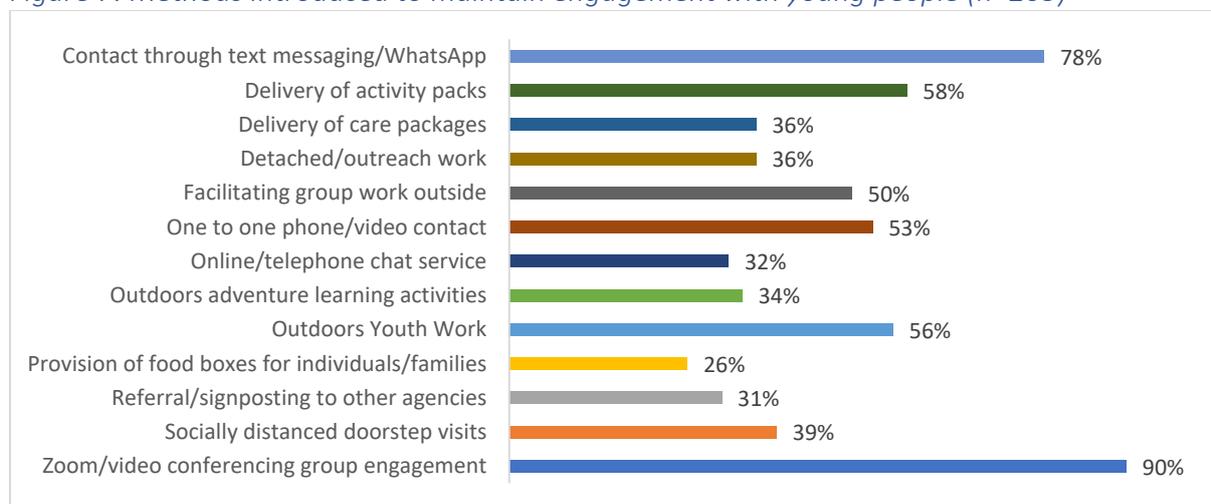
## 5.2 What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during this period?

This section reviews the data to find out the main methods organisations employed to engage with young people during the pandemic and selects some of the innovative examples of practice that were shared. Young people's experiences are also included and their views about what worked or not. There is discussion of the limitations of digital youth work and an emphasis on the importance of the youth work relationship as expressed by several interviewees and focus group participants. Finally, there is an exploration of some of the main ethical issues named by survey respondents that emerged during the pandemic.

### Methods introduced to maintain engagement with young people

In the respective surveys, youth service managers and youth workers and volunteers were asked to select methods they introduced to maintain a service for engagement with young people during restrictions and could tick as many of the options as they wished (Fig. 7). The combined results indicate that the most frequent method by far was Zoom/video conferencing group engagement at 90%. Contact through text messaging or WhatsApp was the second most popular method at 78%. Over half of respondents delivered activity packs to young people (58%), outdoors youth work (56%), made 1-1 phone or video contact (53%) and facilitated group work outside (50%). The least cited option was the provision of food boxes to individual young people or their families but still represented a method for just over a quarter of respondents (26%).

Figure 7: Methods introduced to maintain engagement with young people (n=203)



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

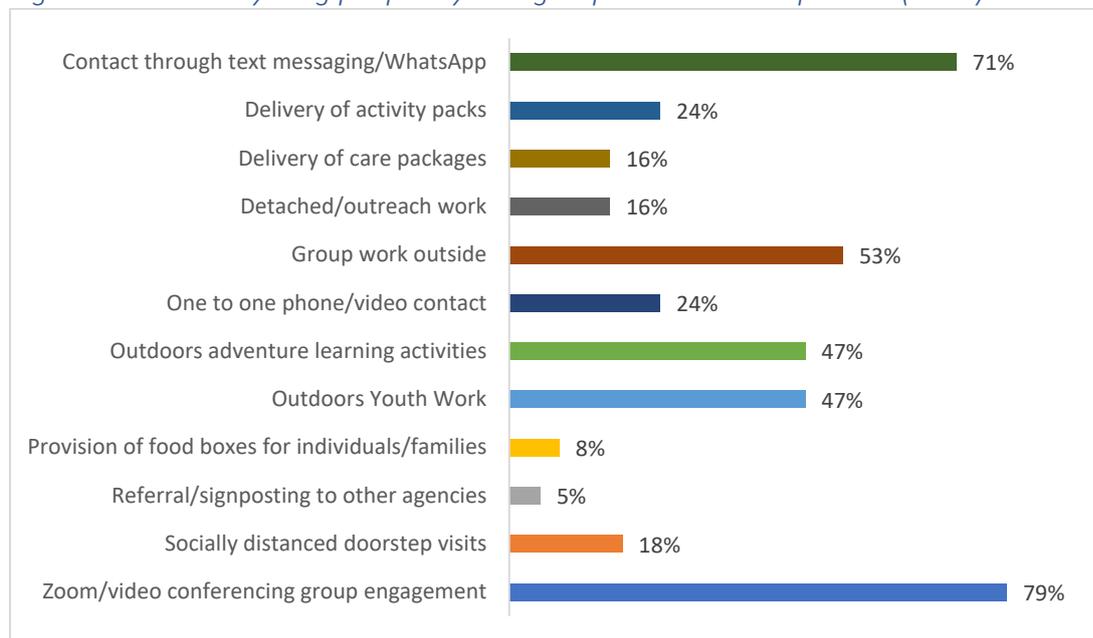
Among the comments of youth service managers, youth workers and volunteers who ticked the 'other' option, there were a variety of methods cited including national online events, social media campaigns, online gaming, delivery of equipment for digital creativity, pre-recorded online workshops delivered along with activity packs. Some of the organisations represented in the interviews and focus groups were also active in making online chat/'listening ear'/information services available to young people. One of the focus group participants described how the numbers of young people contacting their organisation's listening ear service, which had operated pre-Covid, skyrocketed in the pandemic. Another

youth worker explained that their youth service assigned a different staff member at allocated times each day to be available via social media to young people looking for extra support or needing to talk.

#### Activities young people’s youth groups continued to provide

In the young people’s survey, respondents were asked what activities their youth organisation continued to provide for them during the pandemic and could select as many of the options as they wished (Fig. 8). Most young people engaged in Zoom/video conferencing groups (79%) or had contact with their youth leaders through text messaging or WhatsApp (71%). Just over half (53%) engaged in group work outside, while just below half (47%) participated in outdoors adventure learning and similarly 47% were involved in outdoors youth work.

Figure 8: Activities young people’s youth groups continued to provide (n=38)



Q: What activities has your youth group continued to provide?

The youth respondents were also asked about other ways in which their youth organisations supported or engaged with them and among the open-ended responses there were young people who mentioned doing socially distanced TikTok challenges, online games, hiking, receiving counselling/career advice/life coaching/mental health support, regular check-ins or 1-1s, and a couple said they’d been given access to equipment including one who used this *“to do more work and advocacy online and digitally such as making a podcast”*. Only one person made a somewhat negative comment, *“was good at the start with regular calls and duties but it has since stopped”* but otherwise it was evident that the young people valued the support in the face of uncertainties and opportunities for interaction. As one young person advised, *“when your [sic] sad just talk to your youth worker to cheer you up”*.

#### Innovative approaches

Both the youth service managers’ survey and the survey for youth workers and volunteers asked for open-ended responses describing any innovative approaches introduced since the

start of the pandemic. Like the findings in the 2020 research, youth organisations facilitated a wide range of **online activities** such as competitions, challenges, quizzes, cookery sessions, arts and crafts, photography, games nights, virtual camps, watch parties, music activities, and gardening in addition to promoting 'stay safe' information, homework support sessions, connecting with other clubs or groups for specific initiatives or shared Zoom sessions, podcasting, and scavenger hunts.

The 2021 surveys reveal more of an emphasis on **outdoor activities** such as 'walk & talks', virtual walks, outdoor learning challenges or outdoor Bootcamp groups; some organisations invested in gazebos and other equipment e.g. pizza ovens, hammocks for safe outdoor get-togethers and events such as a Socially Distanced Pride Picnic. Respondents mention a wide range of **online training and tutorials** – from boxercise, theatrical make-up, and survival skills, to leadership, remote filmmaking and converting existing programmes to e-learning systems.

**Online well-being** is another feature e.g. 'Mindful Moments' weekly check-in, relax and pamper workshops, or 'Self-care Fridays' covering topics such as resilience, meditation, mindfulness and holistic approaches to health and well-being. There were **community initiatives** including youth groups painting public benches in their area, a Christmas Card Project with young people sending Christmas cards to nursing homes, intergenerational projects encouraging young people to send care packages to local older people, helping vulnerable people with gardening tasks, and one group made an enormous beach art piece which was photographed by drone, made into a card and then sent to older isolated people as a way of reaching out.

A selection of some of the other initiatives include:

- 'World of Opportunities' – highlighting opportunities for young people & volunteers (online & e-newsletter)
- Time Capsule project
- 'Fit festival' promoting a holistic approach to social, emotional, physical and spiritual health
- Online work experience in health promotion via social media
- Online Dungeons & Dragons role-play
- Peer education 'Our Fair Planet' project
- Podcasting & making radio programmes
- Online 'Shakespeare Sonnets Challenge'
- 'This Is Your Life' night with ex-Red Cross cadets sharing their careers and life experiences including one who is a flying doctor in the UK and another who is an emergency first responder in the USA
- Collectively making a sign language video of *Ireland's Call* to say thank you to frontline workers.

There were also those who opted out of online activities altogether because "*it wasn't where the young people were at*" and instead focused on what they could do offline to support young people until restrictions eased and they were able to meet in-person outdoors, for example a volunteer described supporting young people with college assignments and facilitating a work placement.

One of the interviewees who works with a youth arts project shared a great example of innovative practice where they set up an online ‘Tuesday Club’ aimed mainly at 13-14-year-olds where the young people were encouraged to lead their own theatre-related project:

*“They set themselves a goal, so that could be they might have wanted to do a monologue, they wanted to direct a scene. One girl said she wanted to do a dialogue which was going to be challenging because you couldn’t meet up with someone from Youth Theatre so we said jokingly you could talk to yourself. So that’s what she did, she ended up doing the opening scene of Romeo and Juliet herself using different costumes and we just spliced the video – so she’s talking to herself, it’s really, really cool. But that would never have happened, those young people, never would have gotten that much of my time to be entirely honest, because the big fancy shows take up so much time and focus, but I can’t wait for them to be in seniors because they’re going to be such a strong group. They just had time to think about ‘what do I want to do, how does this look, how do I want to talk as an actor?’” (Youth Service Manager).*

#### Meeting the needs of young people

The youth survey asked respondents to consider how their youth organisation met their needs and were given 9 options of which they could choose all that applied (Fig. 9). The most popular selection was ‘provided opportunities for social interaction’ (81% or 29 out of 36 respondents) followed closely by ‘helped me feel less isolated’ (75% or 27 out of 36 respondents) and in third place was ‘provided skills development or training opportunities’ selected by two thirds of the respondents (67% or 24 out of 36).

Figure 9: How has your youth organisation met your needs? (n=36)



Q: How has your youth organisation met your needs?

In the youth focus groups, the participants were cognisant of the impact of the pandemic generally on young people’s mental health with the lack of opportunities to socialise, to be out and about and get physically active, the lack of face-to-face contact, and the detachment from education with online schooling. They also talked about the difference their youth services made in terms of enabling interaction with peers online providing a sense of connection and vitally helping many young people feel less isolated.

Some young people talked about what they were able to learn through youth programmes during the last year and the story about the Ballyfermot Festival shared below is a lovely example of skills development as well as young person-centred practice addressing Covid-related concerns:

*“They still ran the Ballyfermot Festival, which basically taught anyone that was involved photography skills, photoshop skills, there was a professional photographer that was brought in and showed anyone involved, all the young people, how to use the computer and stuff like that correctly, how to correct and photoshop and edit the photos and all that, and then there was team building in reduced numbers obviously but worked together to get the photos out there. And it was really good because a lot of young people were afraid to wear a mask because of what they looked like, so there was a photograph of people taken with their masks on and off just to show it wouldn’t make any difference to their appearance really and to show young people there was nothing to be afraid of” (Young Person).*

The interviews also provided the chance to hear of new pilot programmes being made available to meet the needs of specific groups of young people. For example, BeLoNG To Youth Services secured funding to set up a therapeutic peer support group facilitated by a psychotherapist for young trans people. This sought to address transphobia both online and offline as well as internalised transphobia and to serve as a bridge between formal therapeutic services and BeLoNG To Youth Services’ other LGBTI+ youth groups.

Young people’s views on what was or wasn’t good about the approach taken by youth organisations

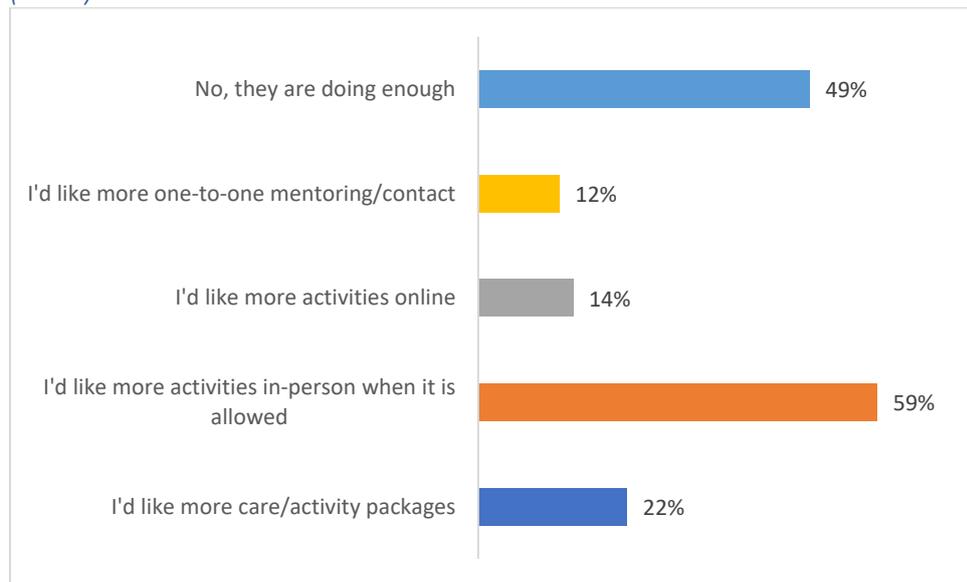
The youth respondents were asked what was good about the approach their youth organisation/worker adopted and were given the opportunity to answer in their own words. The comments show how young people felt supported and experienced different kinds of help from youth workers whether it was advice, opportunities, or things to do. They described experiencing a sense of genuine care from youth workers and appreciated the regular contact. One young person described maintaining a sense of belonging within their group and another noted that *“the restrictions never stopped them from staying in contact with us. They never seemed to take the excuse of ‘groups are impossible’ like some could have”*. There were comments indicating that young people valued the choice to engage at their own pace or being given choices about activities – some enjoyed getting to do youth group sessions outdoors – and there was a young person who reported being given more responsibility to organise their own meetings.

There were less comments about what did not work, in fact, several respondents said there was ‘nothing’ that hadn’t been good about the approach, and many referred to the circumstances of not being able to meet or being too busy for online meetups rather than anything to do with the youth organisation’s or youth worker’s actions. There was a very small number of negative comments about the repetitive nature of the online meetings, a lack of learning or training, a lack of communication during the initial lockdown period or a lack of planning of things to do for online sessions.

What could youth organisations do more of or differently to support young people?

Youth respondents were given five options about what youth organisations could do more of or differently to support them and could select more than one answer (Fig. 10). Most indicated they would like more activities in-person when it is allowed (59% or 24 out of 41) and just under half (49% or 20 out of 41) felt youth organisations/workers were doing enough to support them. The numbers of those wanting more care/activity packs, more online activities, or 1-1 mentoring or contact were relatively low (9, 6 and 5 out of 41 respectively).

Figure 10: What could youth organisations do more of or differently to support young people? (n=41)

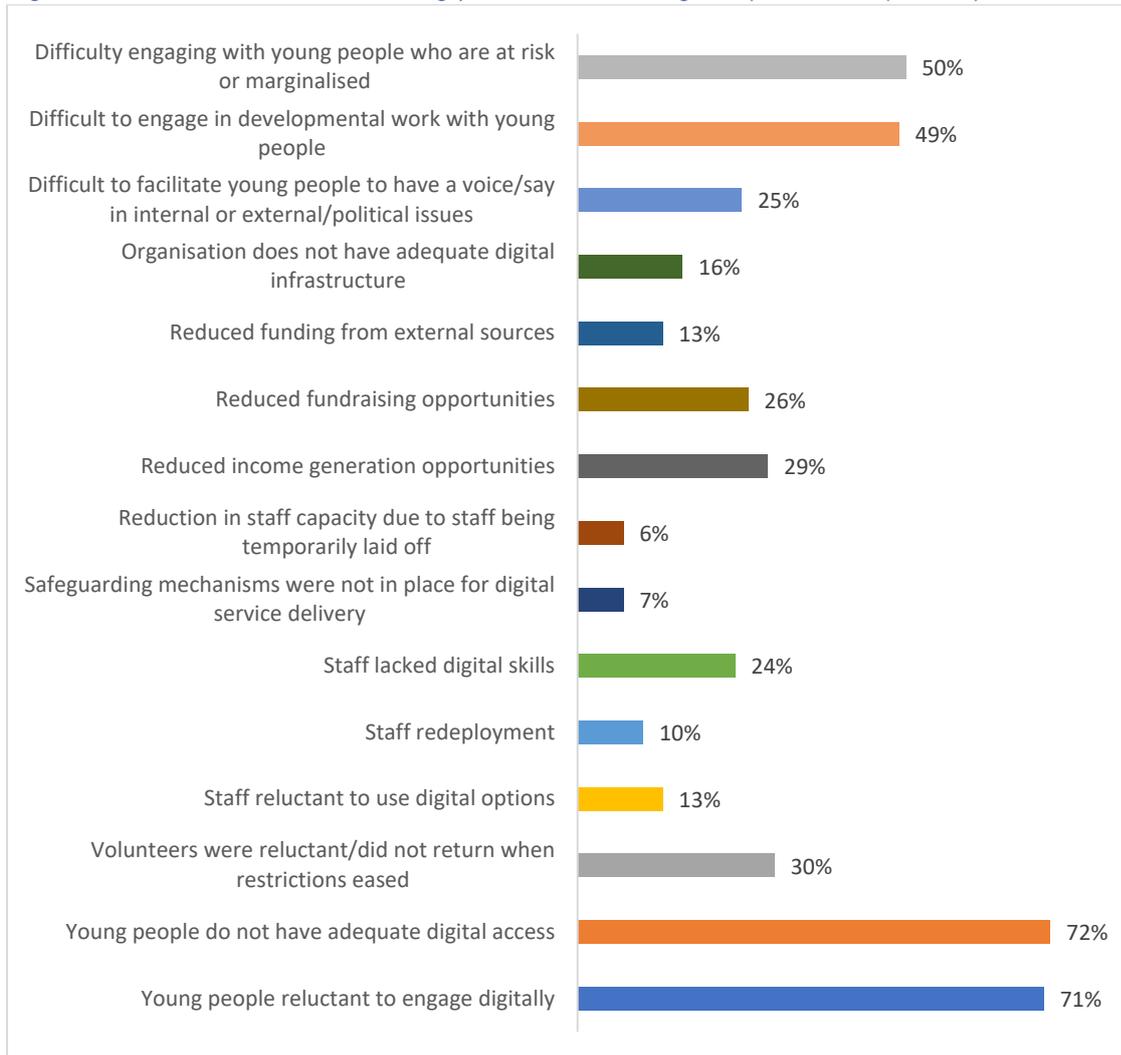


Q: Is there anything they could be doing more of/differently to support you?

#### Limitations to delivering youth work during the pandemic

In the surveys of youth service managers and youth workers and volunteers, respondents were asked to consider the limitations they had experienced in delivering youth work during the pandemic and were given a wide range of response options, all of which could be ticked if relevant (Fig. 11). Two limitations emerge as clear frontrunners in the combined survey results – young people not having adequate digital access and young people who are reluctant to engage digitally (72% and 71% of respondents respectively) while just around half of respondents cited difficulty engaging with young people who are ‘at risk’ or marginalised and difficulty in engaging in developmental work with young people (50% and 49%).

Figure 11: Limitations to delivering youth work during the pandemic (n=212)



Q: What limitations have you experienced in delivering youth work since the pandemic hit?

In relation to the issue of young people’s reluctance to engage digitally, a young person in one of the focus groups urged a considerate attitude towards peers who disengaged suggesting “it’s just maybe understanding that they might not have liked it”. However, it is worth pointing out the observations of some youth workers from the interviews and focus groups about a false perception of the level of young people’s digital literacy and how this can be a barrier to engagement:

*“There was a reluctance to use the likes of Zoom, so we resorted to using Facebook and Messenger most of the time which has limited outlets to break up and do different little bits and bobs. The young people also weren’t overly aware, even though there’s an idea, ‘sure young people all know technology, they’re all on it all the time’. Actually for us, particularly with young Travellers, there was a lot of confusion around it... So, with young people there was definitely struggles there... and that creates a barrier as well to engagement – because if you don’t know how to you can’t. There’s this thing of ‘well the young people all know’... it’s still a*

*reluctance because they don't want to see themselves as not knowing or being the eejit" (Youth Worker).*

Regarding the challenges of delivering developmental work there was a broad consensus among interviewees and focus group participants that content-based, thematic programmes work better online in comparison with some of the 'drop-in' style sessions where young people would much rather spend time with their friends in-person. While this wasn't always the case, the feedback suggests programmes that work well have a clear remit and purpose e.g. well-being programmes or creative writing groups, or are aimed at specific groups of young people, perhaps those with a shared interest in campaigning or activism on a particular topic. This means, as one CEO found, that there is less *"depth with the general population of young people"*.

Young people involved in SpunOut.ie participated in one of the youth focus groups and were very positive about its approach in allocating some meetings for 'content' work and some meetings for members to catch up with each other more informally as well as using Slack channels for communication in between meetings:

*"We know if it's a check-in call we can do whatever we want but like if it's a content meeting, it's a content meeting and you know what you're signing up for... you can decide if you want to do it, if you're free you do it, you know going into it what it's about it and 'this is business' whereas for the check-in calls that's where you can just talk, that's more to relax, that's where the success of SpunOut is, the separation between that and that's really what's had me so productive during the disruption of Covid" (Young Person).*

There were several comments about how well this arrangement worked and how members were able to get to know each other better. Some experienced a sense of inclusion and appreciated the light relief afforded by the check-in Zoom calls during lockdown, and others enjoyed getting to facilitate some of these calls which not only developed their confidence but also strengthened the sense of community.

The survey respondents who selected 'other' (38) in the question on limitations provided clarifications on the options they had ticked or commented on additional problems. Several youth workers and volunteers referred to connectivity issues particularly in rural areas and several named 'Zoom fatigue' as an inhibitor, not just for young people, but also for youth workers and volunteers themselves, and for parents who may need to supervise younger people to access online activities. There were comments from managers and youth workers about a range of personnel issues – staff overload and exhaustion, the need for digital upskilling, the challenges for staff working from home to manage work/life balance and privacy, and the reduced capacity of volunteers with other commitments, for example, as frontline workers, or their own health concerns. One youth service manager felt that the group size restrictions diluted their relationships with volunteers because it was harder to involve them in sessions.

A few respondents noted the additional time required for different aspects of online engagement in terms of the initial set-up and getting online systems in place, making

adaptations or redesign programmes, and to support young people to manage stress and anxiety. This point was backed up by comments in the focus groups and interviews including a youth service manager who felt *“it needed more focused official prep than I had ever had to do for in-person”* and a youth worker delivering a course online had the same experience plus they were having to post or deliver materials or documents to the young people at additional associated cost. One of the survey respondents felt that there was a lack of understanding among external agencies of this kind of additional effort and time. However, there was a youth worker who saw the advantages of the situation that *“created a space for young people to have a stronger voice and to be able to participate in events that issues such as transport would have denied them in the past”*.

#### *‘Real life work’ and the youth work relationship*

In the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey, a respondent observed that *“online work alone is no substitute for real life work. Difficult to respond to crises online”* and this was a recurring theme in many of the interviews and focus groups where the research participants acknowledged the struggle to replicate in-person work online and emphasised the need for an informal environment in which to build rapport with young people. One youth worker described the lack of premises to work from as a *“huge void”*, a youth service manager felt that digital youth work reduces young people’s agency in choosing to engage with youth provision unlike meeting a youth worker in a club or youth service, and with reference to centre-based delivery another reflected,

*“that’s when you get your best work done, especially around developing good positive relationships and that mentorship and coaching... it’s better around a table I think and having a chat than on Zoom” (Youth Service Manager).*

Although many organisations used phone calls and texting to keep in touch with young people, there were limits with this too in terms of a lack of meaningful conversation and connection. A youth service manager observed the frustration among his staff *“because they felt they were doing the same old thing, ‘oh how are you’, ‘oh I’m fine’”*.

There was a youth worker in one of the focus groups whose organisation – like others – secured funding to provide Wi-Fi modems to families but found that *“it was still a difficulty if the ones that might have needed the most support you weren’t reaching because they didn’t have necessarily the supports that they needed.”* As a youth service manager explained, the online realm can be a step too far for marginalised or ‘at risk’ young people:

*“Because a lot of the kids we had might have been ‘targeted’ kids – for them the idea of working online or staying connected online was foreign to them, it wasn’t something that they wanted to do mainly genuinely down to their own maybe anxiety or stress or inability to develop relationships – however hard that is to do on a one-to-one level or in a space where there’s nice music and it’s relaxed and it’s easy-going – trying to do it on a Zoom call is just nigh on impossible” (Youth Service Manager).*

Another youth worker talked in their interview about challenges in building trust with young people he hadn’t met before the pandemic, even when meeting them for a walk in the park

and he felt limited in terms of what he could achieve to support them effectively. His view of 'ad hoc' and informal work with young people is that it is *"where the important things happen"* and creates *"a safety net"* where the young people's choice to participate provides the context for relationship-building and *"if they are having any issues, that we can help deal with them rather than take us out of the equation"*.

The loss of group work was another concern in one of the focus groups where a youth worker noted its value for peer learning in terms of realising that *"other people have similar fears, hopes, worries"* and she observed that some young people lost some ground in their personal development with the loss of in-person group work. She also stated that face-to-face work with young people is much better because they can read the youth leader's body language even when in the middle of ordinary everyday activities such as making a cup of tea and it's this kind of in-person action that lets a young person know they're safe, respected and valued. With that foundation in place, they might feel confident about asking for help:

*"Young people don't say, 'I have a mental health problem' or 'I'm very anxious today, I need to talk' or 'I've suicidal thoughts' – they don't do that, most adults don't do it either. That's not how you say, 'I'm not feeling good'. How you say, 'I'm not feeling good' is maybe just by sitting talking to somebody and then 15 minutes into the conversation they might reveal it. So, it doesn't come out like... young people's way of asking for help is not like a tick box – 'go to your GP, talk to somebody, get your medication changed'... It doesn't happen like that. Those wee opportunities are lost"*  
(Youth Worker).

There were volunteers who also felt that the pandemic reduced socialisation opportunities and changed group dynamics particularly for those in younger age groups who didn't fully understand why the group couldn't meet up and then when they returned to an in-person session *"didn't know how to behave around one another because they had never met these people in their lives"*. While all the above points are valid, there was also acknowledgement that some young people can do really well in an online setting and some of the youth workers noticed young people who came 'out of their shells' and grew in confidence through the online sessions.

#### [Returning to in-person delivery](#)

The previous quotes raise the question about how youth organisations are finding the return to face-to-face youth work as restrictions gradually ease. This was an emerging issue as the field research mostly took place in July 2021. One of the focus group participants was very concerned about the low numbers of young people, particularly older young people coming back to the youth centre. She shared how her organisation was making programme adaptations – more daytrips – to encourage them to re-engage, but indicated there was a perception among some young people that they can't re-join if they hadn't been part of online activities, while another youth worker found that young people have been more interested in spending time with their friends commenting, *"that's hard to compete with when they're with their friends and they don't need us to facilitate that"*.

One of the youth focus group participants found the return to in-person sessions a bit strange initially with social distancing measures and mask-wearing, but still preferable to meeting online. Moreover, a couple of the youth workers in a focus group noticed how they had no issues getting young people to comply with various public health protocols and the young people *“just get on with it”*.

Unfortunately, it seems that a key challenge with the return to face to face youth work is managing the logistics and practicalities of working within the latest public health guidelines. One of the interviewees explained that despite the progress made with society’s emergence from lockdown, their youth arts organisation felt that in-person work would not be financially viable in the summer of 2021 because of insurance, smaller group sizes, difficulties getting venues and so on. Two of the youth workers in a focus group also talked about how the restrictions on group sizes for meeting indoors is off-putting for young people they meet through outreach. These are older young people who simply want to be with their friends and say that they’ve coped ok without youth provision for the previous year and a half, and the youth workers feel like they’re making them choose between friends or the youth centre. A survey respondent felt the drive to re-engage young people was creating the potential for *“a slip towards consumer-based provision”* in organising *“the most jazzy activity to try get young people back when actually they just might not want to be back outside or in such a restrictive way”* and this underlines the importance of young person-centred and youth-led approaches as services return to in-person methods.

#### Ethical issues

Youth workers, volunteers and youth service managers responding to the surveys were asked to indicate any ethical issues they encountered because of adaptations made to service delivery during the pandemic. The issue highlighted most frequently, related to different kinds of boundaries including privacy, confidentiality, and work/home life. For example, there was a comment about the blurring of boundaries between work and home with responding to young people ‘out-of-hours’ and another youth worker cited the *“increased demand of service – available to all at all times”*. Many respondents stated they were uncomfortable with what felt like having access to a young person’s home. Moreover, there were issues around parents being able to ‘listen in’ where the young person would normally be able to have a private conversation with their youth worker.

Another ethical issue raised in the responses is exclusion due to a lack of devices or broadband which is strongly linked to issues of poverty – many respondents were concerned about young people whose families could not afford the necessary equipment and Wi-Fi or private physical space in the home to continue engagement. As one of the youth service managers put it, *“disengaged young people [were being] pushed further to fringes due to digital divide”*. In one of the responses a youth worker pointedly asked, *“WHO is left behind?”*. There was unease about young people who already face exclusion or marginalisation not being able to get online such as those in the Traveller community, those with a disability, those in Direct Provision or LGBTI+ young people who aren’t out at home. One respondent mentioned donating laptops to a Direct Provision centre for young people to use but was concerned about how these might be managed or distributed. A youth worker pointed out that *“some Traveller parents have no email and don’t want one. It’s hard to demonstrate the benefits of digital youth work without being able to meet face to face to*

*demonstrate*". A volunteer was worried that their membership pool would decrease "leading to a less diverse, less open accessible group moving forward".

Survey respondents expressed their reservations about the limitations with service delivery to young people amidst Covid-related public health restrictions. There was a sense of frustration about less productivity or effectiveness. In fact, one youth worker likened their attempts to operate within the restrictions to *"being in a boxing ring with one hand tied behind your back"*. Such reduction in service delivery – including where statutory services cut back services such as social workers not making home visits or a lack of access to referral agencies – presented a significant ethical dilemma in addition to placing an extra burden on voluntary youth organisations. One youth service manager shared their concern about the potential of increased risks regarding young people in homes where there are safeguarding concerns during lockdown restrictions, and another stated their organisation ended up *"in a holding position doing the work of many other agencies"*. Others felt that young people were receiving a diminished service if they joined a programme during lockdown and that waiting times for services were longer. The predicament of having to 'choose' who can engage in in-person provision due to smaller group sizes was difficult for some youth workers and volunteers who did not want to deny opportunities to young people. A few also suggested that some young people in crisis situations were unable to get the help they would in normal circumstances creating a gap between *"what we provided and what the young people needed"*. Indeed, one of the responses illustrated some youth workers' exasperation with the interpretation of restrictions and the extent to which they could meaningfully respond to young people's needs:

*"Young people were really struggling and could have done with the option of coming into the service in a safe controlled way, but this option was taken away and we were forced to work remote[ly] unless [the] young person [was] deemed at 'Crisis'. Youth workers should be allowed to work from building if the area can be controlled in a safe way. Youthwork was deemed essential but the opportunities which youth workers are used to working in were taken away – I think this is something that needs to be looked at if lockdown happens again"* (Youth Worker).

Some respondents indicated that they felt they were compromising their youth work principles particularly in terms of maintaining the core focus of building relationships and fostering human interaction with young people while at the same time trying to manage appropriate boundaries and respecting young people's voluntary participation. One youth worker described being left wondering *"if I held the boundaries of access to me strong enough when the overwhelming feeling was that we needed to be there for young people all the time"*. The responses also flag the necessity of ensuring online spaces are safe environments for young people and that there is adequate understanding and application of safeguarding best practice.

### 5.3 How are youth organisations supporting the well-being and capacity of youth work staff and volunteers?

This section considers some of those challenges youth organisations experience and explores how organisations have been supporting the well-being and capacity of staff and volunteers and mitigated any negative impacts.

#### Challenges faced by youth workers and volunteers

The youth workers' and volunteers' survey asked respondents to highlight the key challenges they have faced since the pandemic started. There was no limit on how many options they could tick (Fig. 12). Almost three quarters of respondents (73%) cited maintaining engagement with young people as a challenge and almost two thirds indicated concern for young people who do not engage online (61%). Another major challenge was concern for young people's mental health (57%).

Figure 12: Challenges faced by youth workers and volunteers (n=157)<sup>20</sup>



Q: What has been the greatest challenges for you as a youth worker/volunteer during the pandemic?

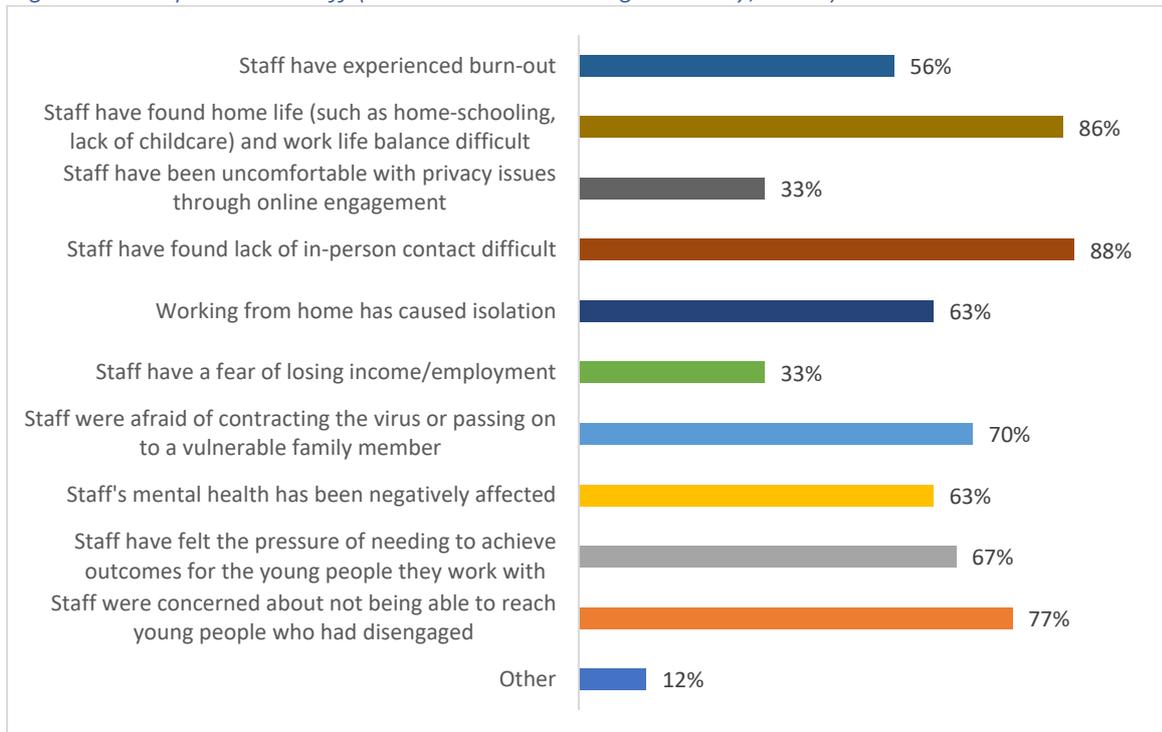
#### Impact of the pandemic on youth workers and volunteers

Figures 13 and 14 show the impact the pandemic has had on staff and volunteers from the perspective of youth service managers (Fig. 13) and youth workers and volunteers (Fig. 14). Again, respondents could select multiple responses to this question. For youth service managers the top 3 impacts were staff finding lack of in-person contact difficult (88%), staff finding home life and work life balance difficult (86%) and concern about not being able to reach young people who had disengaged (77%) while for youth workers and volunteers concern about not being able to reach young people who had disengaged came out just ahead of finding lack of in-person contact difficult (74% and 73% respectively) with feeling

<sup>20</sup> 83 respondents skipped or question was not relevant

the pressure of needing to achieve outcomes for the young people the third most selected impact at 54%.

Figure 13: Impacts on staff (Youth service manager survey, n=43)



Q: What have been the impacts on your staff while working during the pandemic?

Figure 14: Impact of the pandemic on youth workers and volunteers (youth workers' and volunteers' survey, n=171)



Q: What have been the impacts on you as a staff member or volunteer while working during the pandemic?

### The youth work role

A major concern in the youth sector has been the impact of the pandemic on young people particularly for those who disengaged from youth services, so it is not surprising that this was a top-3 issue in both the managers' and youth workers' and volunteers' surveys. Indeed, interviewees and focus group participants spoke with regret and frustration that they couldn't continue to help and support those who had disengaged and were aware of potential negative consequences such as an increase in anti-social and risk-taking behaviours.

Some managers and youth workers felt pressure to achieve outcomes for young people, stating that they questioned whether they were doing enough to engage marginalised young people. The level of concern they felt in this regard was compounded when young people didn't show up online. While many organisations were given flexibility with funding targets and only 24% of survey respondents identified such targets as a challenge (Fig. 12) a youth worker described the pressure to account for their efforts perceiving that *"there will be decisions made based on our actions in lockdown that are going to affect us coming out of it and that's something everyone's conscious of"*.

The pressure associated with moving to online delivery of youth work was evident particularly around negotiating boundaries of privacy and confidentiality. Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents to the youth workers' and volunteers' survey and a third of respondents to the youth service manager survey indicated staff and volunteers were uncomfortable about privacy issues as noted previously in section 5.2 regarding ethical challenges.

The change in the youth work role and how youth work is delivered has had a major and often negative effect on some youth workers. A focus group participant shared his experience of finding himself in a role once Covid hit where he was on a laptop all day rather than engaging in 'hands-on' interaction with young people. He found this stressful and draining and felt it didn't play to his strengths and wasn't what he *"signed up for"*.

### Lack of in-person contact

Clearly staff and volunteers found the lack of in-person contact difficult during the pandemic. Several participants in focus groups and interviews could relate to experiencing significant isolation because they missed working collaboratively or having a *"bit of banter"* or because they were geographically located beyond the 5km limit from friends or family. Youth workers and volunteers missed being able to connect with each other on a personal level and to discuss and problem-solve practice issues and it was difficult to replicate that remotely.

One volunteer explained the difficulties she and her co-volunteers experienced in terms of not being able to engage face-to-face with the young people and realising how much relationship building with young people relies on reading body language and facilitating a physical group space. At times online engagement felt forced with the lack of free-flow conversation and when young people kept their cameras off. She said, *"it felt like just talking to myself and it took a really long time to get them to say anything, like you almost feel like you're bullying them [to get a response]"*.

### Working from home

For some staff, working from home brought certain benefits. For example, one focus group participant described how she suffers from severe back pain and working from home allows her to be more comfortable while working and take breaks when necessary. Another interviewee shared that as a sole employee in her organisation, working from home was not that different from working in an office on her own and was advantageous in eliminating travel. However, both workers stressed they missed interaction with others.

According to the youth workers' and volunteers' survey thirty-six per cent of respondents indicated working from home had caused isolation (Fig. 14) while for managers there was a much higher percentage (63%) who identified this as an issue for their staff (Fig. 13). Some youth workers were already working in small teams in one or two-worker projects and working from home exacerbated the existing lack of collegiality.

Most respondents to the manager survey indicated their staff found balancing home and work life difficult (86%). The percentage of youth workers and volunteers who selected this option was much lower, however there was still just over a third of respondents who found home/work life balance difficult (36%). Some interviewees referred to staff and volunteers having to negotiate childcare and home-schooling arrangements while they were working. Furthermore, establishing a distinction between 'on-duty' and 'off-duty' was difficult when work was in the home environment. As one youth worker highlighted her bedroom doubled as her office and her place of sanctuary became her place of work. This issue was not limited to paid staff as volunteering from home also posed difficulties and at times prevented people from continuing in their volunteering role:

*“Volunteers in projects definitely dropped off, they were practically non-existent and that was partly because people had their own families and everything else to deal with... you might enable older parents who were completely independent but because of Covid they became dependent. So, I think people in their own personal lives were pivoting in ways they'd never had to” (Youth Service Manager).*

### Experience of burn-out

Fifty-six per cent of managers who responded to the survey said their staff experienced burnout, while a slightly smaller percentage of the youth worker and volunteer respondents ticked this option (46%). The interviews and focus groups revealed an optimism about the future amongst research participants, but there was also a sense of exhaustion and of being drained, which was not apparent to the same extent in 2020 review. Some participants and respondents attributed this to the overall stress caused by the longevity of the pandemic or to concerns for 'at risk' young people and those who weren't engaging. One manager described feeling like they were working at 20% burnout all the time since the start of the pandemic. Several youth workers acknowledged youth work can be a difficult job and can lead to burnout in 'normal' circumstances, but that this was potentially even more the case with the pandemic and navigating Covid-19 restrictions. One volunteer leader spoke about needing to keep an eye out for burnout amongst her team of volunteers in terms of screen time and Zoom 'overload':

*"As a troop leader I had to really look at the burnout among my leaders, a lot will be straight from work, I know that like for every 1 hour you put on Zoom there's probably about 3 or 4 hours of work that goes in before you actually even get to the Zoom" (Volunteer).*

#### Physical and mental well-being

Contracting the coronavirus or passing it on to a vulnerable family member was a concern for some workers and volunteers as indicated by 70% of respondents to the managers' survey and 45% in the youth workers' and volunteers' survey. One CEO explained that staff with underlying health issues were more cautious during the first lockdown than the second by which point they were keen to get back to face-to-face work.

The impact on youth work sector staff and volunteers' mental health has been substantial, with almost two thirds of managers (63%) who responded to the survey stating staff mental health was negatively affected while this was true for just under a third of youth worker and volunteer respondents (32%). In the interviews and focus groups youth workers spoke about increased stress linked to the job and a focus group participant shared they had sought out counselling to help with mental health issues that arose because of Covid-19. One of the CEOs named 'vicarious trauma'<sup>21</sup> as a key concern for youth workers – whether current to the circumstances presented by the pandemic such as increased crisis intervention work, or in relation to work they've been involved in over the years and the stories they carry with them of young people they have worked with. For some, the pause created by lockdowns meant that accumulated stresses caught up with them. She also acknowledged the complex needs being addressed by youth workers have not disappeared during the pandemic.

*"We're so busy all the time that we don't have time to stop and think and reflect and I think what Covid has done is there is no running from some things, so a lot of people have had to face a lot things... I think that there's personal stuff, also the 'vicarious trauma' that they've been carrying from young people they've been working with maybe for a decade... One of my youth workers said it to me one day – you're on the phone to a young person who's suicidal, you're talking to them, you're giving them all the information, you do the ASSIST suicide, you go home – that could be a Friday night – and all weekend you're worried about whether they're alive on Monday morning" (CEO).*

#### Youth workers leaving the role

As a result of burnout and increased stress from the demands of the role during the pandemic some interviewees believed there will be youth workers and volunteers who leave the sector. One youth worker shared that he himself has thought of leaving and knows of others considering it because of a combination of factors including Covid-19, frustrations connected with the work, *"what we do, what we're not doing"*.

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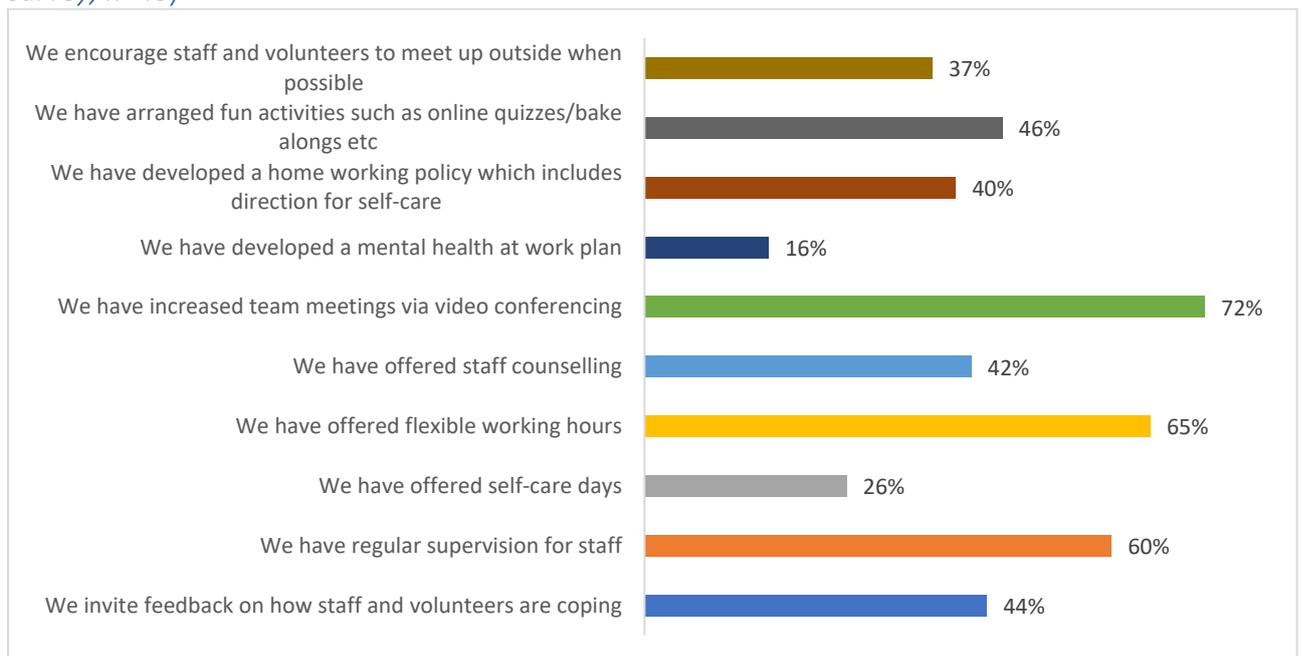
<sup>21</sup> Vicarious trauma refers to harmful changes that occur in professionals' views of themselves, others, and the world, because of exposure to the graphic and/or traumatic material of their clients. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247508409\\_Vicarious\\_traumatization\\_and\\_secondary\\_traumatic\\_stress\\_A\\_research\\_synthesis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247508409_Vicarious_traumatization_and_secondary_traumatic_stress_A_research_synthesis)

*“I think we’ll see a lot of movement, I think a lot of people will leave youth work after this, they’ll just go, ‘Jesus, there has to be easier ways of making a living’...from talking to a lot of youth workers across the country, the shitty conditions they’re expected to work in, I can’t believe – I would be like, ‘f\*\*\* off’ – some of them I wouldn’t work for the people that they work for. It’s passion and dedication, you know, but that only goes so far – super, talented, amazing people they’ll just go into something else. So I hope that doesn’t happen but that is a risk, if you didn’t look after your staff, if you didn’t mind them, things are going to change, things are going to shake-up, with remote working – people who live in rural areas now can work for a big company up in Dublin, they don’t have to go and work in the local youth club anymore...” (CEO).*

Supporting staff and volunteers’ well-being during the pandemic

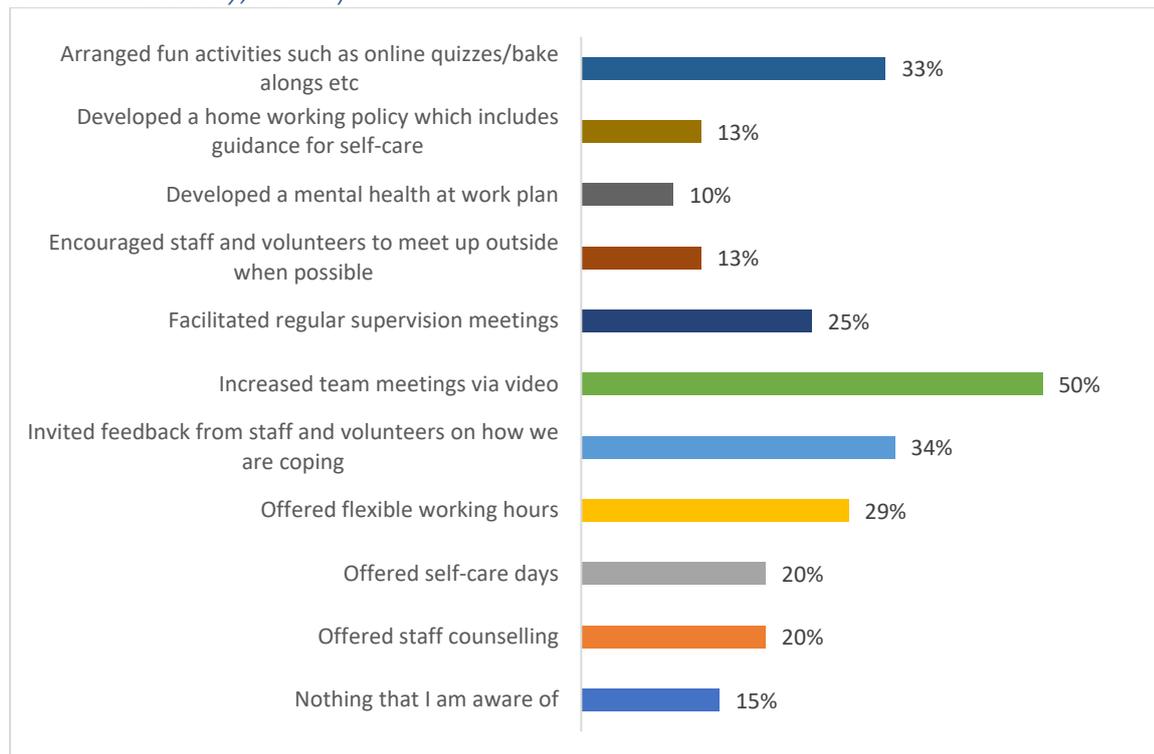
Figures 15 and 16 show findings from both the managers’ survey and the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey on what has been done to support the well-being of staff and volunteers.

Figure 15: Organisational support for staff and volunteers’ well-being (Youth service manager survey, n=43)



Q: What has your organisation done to support the well-being of staff and volunteers?

Figure 16: Organisational support of staff and volunteer's well-being (Youth workers' and volunteers' survey, n=157)



Q: What has your organisation done to support the well-being of staff and volunteers?

#### Increased staff meetings, communication, and supervision

Results from the youth service managers' survey and the youth workers' and volunteers' survey showed the most common action by organisations to support well-being has been to increase team meetings according to 50% of youth worker and volunteer respondents and 72% of manager respondents. One of the youth service managers interviewed, highlighted that his organisation increased staff meetings from monthly to weekly initially and then fortnightly to facilitate check-ins with staff, and he also intentionally made himself available to staff through weekly Zoom calls, phone contact and ensured access to resource materials. Sixty-four per cent of manager respondents and 30% of youth worker and volunteer respondents indicated their organisations increased communication between managers, staff, and volunteers. Other managers in the interviews recognised the importance of *"being at the end of the phone"* as a listening ear for staff and volunteers in addition to email communications, and youth workers in the focus groups valued having different avenues to keep in touch with colleagues including through group messaging in addition to direct calls. One interviewee highlighted their organisation increased board meetings to ensure they identified where support was needed.

Sixty per cent of respondents to the youth service managers' survey indicated their organisation facilitates regular supervision sessions, while only one quarter of respondents to the youth workers' and volunteers' survey indicated their organisation facilitated regular supervision sessions. The qualitative data suggested that supervision provided an effective source of support for those who received it especially in dealing with the pressures of delivering youth work during the pandemic. One youth worker talked about the benefit of

peer supervision and shared that her organisation is starting to provide external supervision additional to existing line management arrangements:

*“...the staff needs to be supported in order for us to support the young people” (Youth Worker).*

One of the CEOs in the interviews spoke of the need for a specialist layer of support for staff who had become increasingly involved in crisis response. Despite previously thinking they had sufficient support in place including line management, external supervision or coaching, team meetings, informal check-ins, and access to counselling via an EAP, they identified the need for an additional group therapeutic space for frontline staff which is facilitated monthly by a psychotherapist. As she said, *“we want to keep [youth workers] working with young people, we need to provide them with the proper tools and support to process what they’re hearing, what they’re witnessing.”*

### *Flexibility*

Flexibility – both in terms of when hours are worked and in taking time off – has been important to staff although the survey results indicate differences in perceptions between managers and youth workers and volunteers in terms of being offered flexible working hours – 65% and 29% respectively. Some managers shared that they had to push their staff to take holidays and there were those who tried to help staff manage their working hours to fit around home life such as home-schooling and to keep Zoom interactions to a more manageable level.

Youth workers appreciated the flexibility and understanding from their organisations especially when programmes or young person engagement did not go as planned:

*“Our managers are, I have to say, they’ve been super, very accommodating – when we’ve been coming back and saying, ‘listen I ran that group and literally had 2 people turn up’, they say, ‘well that’s 2 people, that’s fine, in the circumstances we’re in, don’t be beating yourself up because we know it’s hard to connect and everything else” (Youth Worker).*

### *Wellness initiatives and social activities*

Just over a third of manager respondents (37%) and 13% of youth worker and volunteer respondents indicated their organisation encouraged staff and volunteers to meet up outside when possible. A few interviewees shared they had recently been able to meet up outside as a full staff team which was a great morale boost including a staff team who went on a 10k walk together in their local mountains, which was the first time since the pandemic started that they had been together physically.

Almost half of managers (46%) and a third (33%) of youth worker and volunteer respondents’ organisations arranged fun activities for their staff and volunteer teams. One youth worker shared examples of visits to the beach and project teams leading games or well-being activities after each monthly staff meeting.

Many of the interviewees and focus group participants shared that their organisation had facilitated wellness initiatives. These included activities such as mindfulness and meditation workshops, yoga and so on. One of the CEOs from the interviews explained that his organisation set up a specific group to create a programme of such activities for the rest of the year, and a volunteer in a focus group shared that these kinds of initiatives were affirming making her feel that “volunteering actually matters and it really helps people”.

### *Encouraging self-care*

Forty per cent of manager respondents’ organisations and 20% of youth worker and volunteer respondents’ organisations developed a home working policy which addresses self-care. Twenty-six per cent of manager respondents’ organisations offered self-care days to their staff. Twenty per cent of youth workers and volunteers who responded indicated their organisation had offered self-care days.

Staying positive and drawing encouragement from volunteers and young people also helped to counter the negative impacts of the pandemic for some of the interviewees:

*“I am definitely energised and enthused by the volunteers and the girls themselves. As a staff member you're not directly working with the girls, but those photos and stories keep you going, and it really encourages me. One of the things I'm doing is putting together an annual review for the term and I asked all the leaders to send me in stories and highlights and photographs and I asked them this year – which I've never done before – to provide any little quotes they had, you know, messages from parents or any little thing. And what has come back has been amazing you know and that is encouraging me” (Youth Service Manager).*

### *Access to counselling*

A small number of organisations represented in both adult surveys developed a ‘mental health at work’ plan (11%, n=200). In terms of organisations offering counselling, 42% of respondents to the manager survey and 29% of paid youth work staff who responded to the survey said their organisation had done so. Research participants were aware of free counselling offered through their place of work and were largely appreciative to have this access though not everyone felt it would meet their needs so there was an example of one youth worker from a focus group who sought out counselling privately instead, while another didn’t find the prospect of getting counselling online appealing:

*“The Employee Assistance Programme...they have webinars and stuff like that. There’s been a bit of that going on, but no disrespect to them but the last thing you want to be doing is looking at a bloody computer again to get your support to be honest. I’d rather take a walk up in the forest. There’s that which is more of a kind of box-ticking exercise than anything else. The EAP in itself, it’s good in that if you do have any particular stresses or you feel you need a bit of counselling or independent advice, not just to do with work – they have support around budgeting and all sorts of things that might come up that affect you personally...” (Youth Worker).*

### *Support from external agencies*

Many youth workers and volunteers sought and received support from agencies external to their own organisation. This was particularly beneficial for those who were not receiving adequate support within their own organisation. As noted in section 5.1, Cork ETB set up Youth Worker Area Networks, which helped to address some of the considerable isolation among some youth workers in the area. Moreover, the NYCI online check-in sessions, networking events and training opportunities were cited many times in the responses as particularly useful and supportive interventions, especially for those working in small teams, or for team managers and sole workers. One worker from a small team took on the role to support other staff and volunteers during the pandemic but received very little support herself which she understood was difficult in a volunteer-led organisation. As a result, she found it very helpful to network and connect with others through the NYCI events. Another manager shared that because she lives on her own and was working from home the NYCI events gave her human connection, even though it was online, where she could share, reflect and hear how others were coping during the pandemic:

*“I’m not just saying it because it’s NYCI doing this, but they were absolutely brilliant, what NYCI provided, and it wasn’t forced, plenty of webinars or training events, and I attended a lot of those because there’s a lot of people like me where they’re either on their own or they’re the head of a staff team and you just wanted to go. And then you feel like you’re not on your own, and you were bouncing off them talking about what was working and what wasn’t working and we’re still doing that so it’s really good” (Youth Service Manager).*

### *Gaps in support from organisations*

Most respondents to the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey were very happy with the support they received from their organisation and had nothing to suggest about what else could be done to support them. There was frustration from other survey respondents regarding support from their organisation in terms of what wasn’t provided such as encouraging healthy boundaries for working from home and self-care practices. The most common issue cited was the need for more frequent and clearer communication. Many felt their organisation should increase check-ins with staff and volunteers and there were several youth workers who would have liked more regular supervision sessions from their managers and external supervision. One of the focus group participants who had found the NYCI check-ins extremely useful wished that her own organisation had facilitated something similar internally reflecting that *“maybe if [management] knew how people were feeling and how things were impacting them, personally and professionally... there could have been more supports put in place”*.

Several volunteers requested more contact and proactive support and advice from their boards. Another focus group participant explained their organisation used to facilitate tea mornings or lunch get-togethers pre-pandemic which gave the opportunity for the staff body to mix – everyone across departments, management, and workers. However, she expressed disappointment that no online catchups were arranged and felt that *“when they were needed the most, they were taken away”* which created a lack of community and made her feel less valued as an employee particularly because the organisation didn’t

acknowledge that she lived alone and had even less contact with people than those with families.

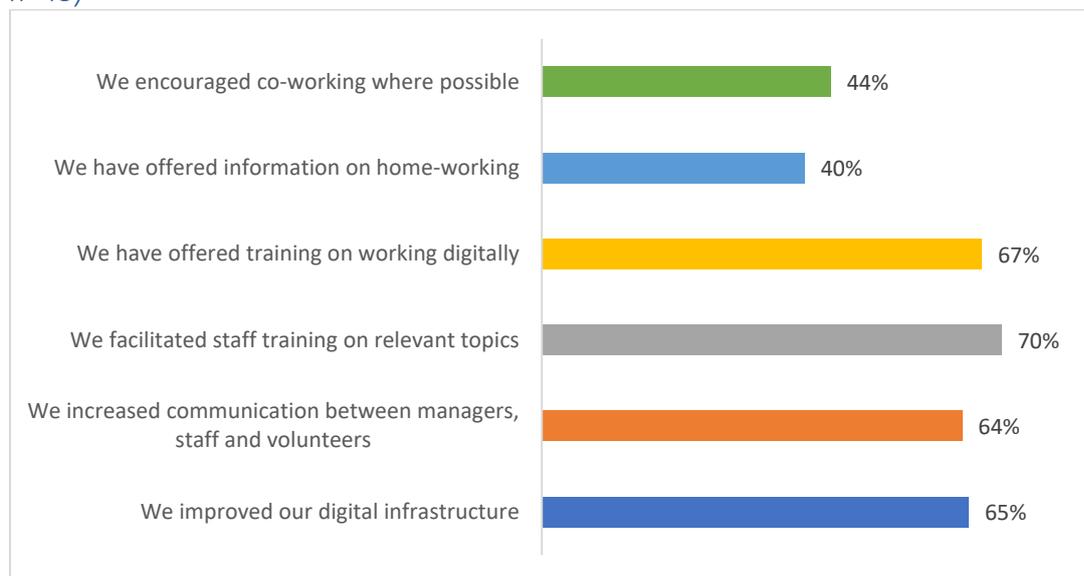
Some volunteers highlighted they had received very good support at a local level, but this was not necessarily the case on the national level. One focus group participant shared that some volunteers are reluctant to return because communication from the national organisation led them to feel guilty about not having the energy to keep volunteering.

Redeployment was a major issue for several youth workers among the survey responses and focus groups, which resulted in youth workers feeling devalued and anxious through having to move to a new area of work in a time when so much was uncertain. One respondent stated that youth work was *“like the poor cousin in service provision”*.

#### Supporting staff and volunteer capacity during the pandemic

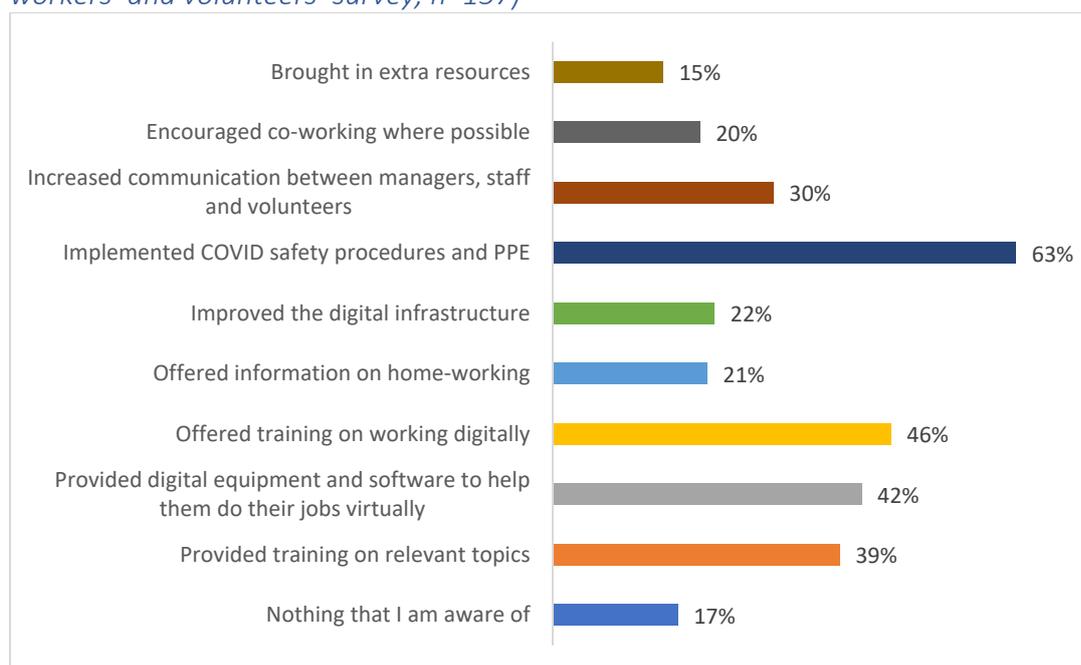
Findings from the NYCI review carried out in 2020 identified the need to build the capacity of staff and volunteers to manage and overcome the challenges presented by the pandemic. The surveys for this review sought to identify if and how the sector has done so. Figures 17 and 18 below show the results from the two sets of surveys of youth service managers and youth workers and volunteers.

Figure 17: Organisational support to build capacity of staff (Youth service managers' survey, n=43)



Q: What has your organisation done to build capacity of staff and volunteers?

Figure 18: Organisational support to build capacity of youth workers and volunteers (Youth workers' and volunteers' survey, n=157)



Q: What has your organisation done to build capacity of staff and volunteers?

#### *Training on working digitally and other relevant topics*

Sixty-seven per cent of manager respondents and 46% of youth worker and volunteer respondents indicated their organisation had offered training on working digitally. Seventy per cent of manager respondents and 39% of youth worker and volunteer respondents said their organisation had offered training on other relevant topics. In the interviews, a manager highlighted that her organisation had been able to train more volunteers than normal as they did not need to factor travel time, making training events more accessible. This was true for other participants, as well. By taking advantage of the space to focus on training rather than on all the usual engagement with young people, this organisation included training sessions on risk assessment, communication skills and preparation for returning to in-person delivery.

Some workers and volunteers engaged with training from organisations external to their own. Managers, youth workers and volunteers named organisations such as The Wheel, NYCI, Volunteer Ireland and Youth Theatre Ireland, as helpful in this regard.

Some organisations evidently recognised the need to support and build capacity of volunteers particularly around safeguarding online and using digital methods to engage with young people. One CEO mentioned that her organisation was doing some internal policy developmental work with Volunteering Ireland. Another emphasised that volunteer-led clubs need access to professional development support with compliance and need to be able to access that support especially if something goes wrong:

*“The ask of volunteers is huge now from safeguarding, vetting, quality standards – all of these things and they really need a bit of handholding, they need somebody they can ring on a Friday night when something goes*

*wrong at the club – that’s absolutely needed and that’s what they’re not getting” (CEO).*

Although it wasn’t a formal training activity, a uniformed organisation facilitated monthly Zoom calls with volunteers, initially to check-in on general well-being but also to build capacity through sharing ideas and activities that had worked well digitally. By operating via video calls these meetups served to connect leaders from across Ireland who wouldn’t normally link with each other and led to the volunteers exchanging offers of teaching different skills to each other’s units – *“you come and teach our ones to dance, and I’ll teach your group to do arts and crafts”*.

#### *Improved digital infrastructure and extra resources*

Sixty-five per cent of respondents to the manager survey indicated their organisation had improved the digital infrastructure, however the percentage of respondents to the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey was much lower with just 20% indicating their organisation had improved the digital infrastructure. However, among the youth worker and volunteer respondents there was a larger proportion of 42% who indicated their organisation provided digital equipment and software to help them do their jobs virtually. An example of this was shared in the interviews where a CEO described a range of training in digital engagement and the use of new platforms, they also upskilled staff in safeguarding for online engagement.

Cork ETB recognised the local youth sector needed a lot of support at the beginning of the pandemic to upskill in digital literacy starting with ensuring there was a foundation of core knowledge to enable the shift to online provision and help youth workers connect with young people. They developed a ‘how-to’ guide covering things like how to set up a Facebook page or a WhatsApp group and addressing GDPR and privacy considerations. They also developed a ‘Zoomergisers’ training course on how to engage young people in online sessions.

#### *Safety procedures and PPE*

Sixty-three per cent of respondents to the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey indicated their organisation implemented Covid-19 safety procedures and PPE. In one of the interviews a CEO outlined some of the measures their organisation had put in place including putting limits on how many staff could work in the office and how many could be in the same room and so on.

#### *Returning to in-person provision and youth work in the outdoors*

A few interviewees highlighted the need to prepare staff and volunteers for returning to in-person provision. One CEO stated that there has been a level of nervousness about reopening and suggested that intentional support is required to ensure staff and volunteers have the capacity to deal with the demands of working in-person but within Covid-19 restrictions.

With the restrictions around indoor provision youth workers needed to adapt to delivering youth work in the outdoors. Section 6 highlights a resource produced by Youth Work Ireland on outdoors-based youth work. The interview with the Cork ETB representative offered

insight into how a statutory agency was able to support UBU-funded projects to adapt their provision for outdoor engagement. It distributed 'Outdoor Youth Worker Packs' to youth workers including jackets, flasks and bobble hats in blue and pink UBU colours, both by way of saying thanks and to encourage youth workers to engage with young people outside:

*"It was twofold, one it was to thank them, but two it was to encourage them to be at the school gate and walk with the young people home, to send a seed that to not be afraid of youth work...it was creating that identity for youth work as well. And the feedback we got back from the youth organisations, I suppose they were high quality merchandise, but they were delighted with it" (Youth Service Manager).*

In addition, Cork ETB created an opportunity for youth workers in the area to engage in Outdoor Adventure Skills training. The programme ran for 4 weeks and offered skills development in facilitating outdoor games, campcraft, and kayaking. Those who participated were given a Kelly Kettle and completed a Level 2 proficiency award in kayaking. The training served to build confidence in supporting outdoor engagement with young people and reduce reliance on external outdoor education providers, but also provided a revitalising opportunity for youth workers to connect and network with each other. The Cork ETB representative shared how they witnessed youth groups getting together outside *"making their cups of tea and having the chat and a few sausages...they loved it"*.

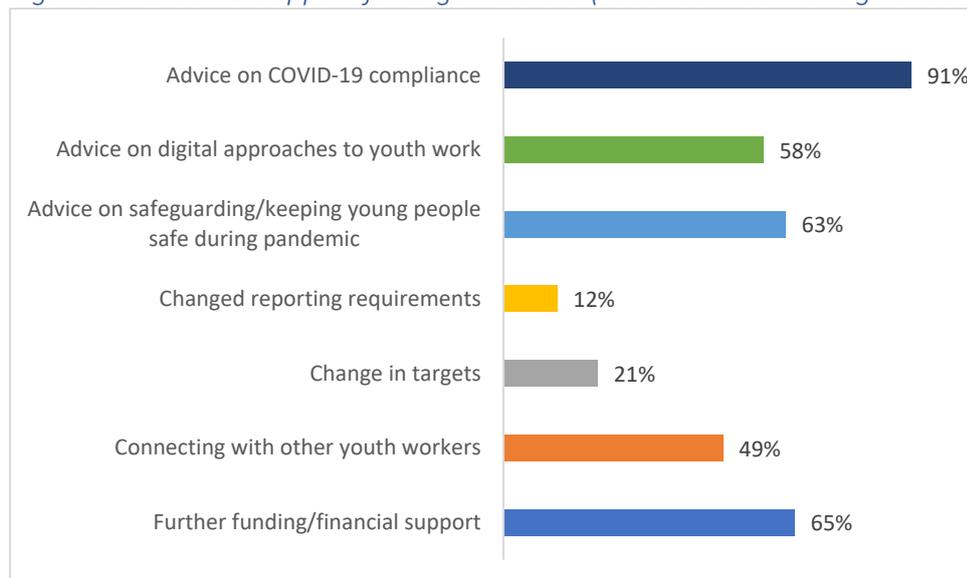
#### 5.4 What supports are required to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the youth work sector in the short to long-term?

It is clear from the previous sections that the impact of the pandemic on the youth sector has been immense. Managers, youth workers, volunteers, and of course young people themselves have been affected in many ways. This section begins by summarising the external support youth organisations have received throughout the pandemic and then looks to the future, identifying the supports needed to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic.

##### External support for organisations

Figure 19 shows the support organisations received during the pandemic according to youth service managers who responded to the survey. The most frequent type of support was advice on Covid-19 compliance (91%). Almost two thirds (65%) received further funding or financial support followed closely by 63% who were given advice on safeguarding during the pandemic.

Figure 19: External support for organisations (Youth Service Managers' survey, n=43)



Q: What kinds of support have you received from external organisations/agencies?

Managers were asked to specify which external organisations/agencies they had received help from and what form that help took. In relation to government departments/agencies, DCEDIY was mentioned by over a third of respondents for its Oversight Group and guidance for the youth sector, funding support and new grant opportunities, for example, ICT/Capital grants or support with returning young people from abroad during the first lockdown. Other organisations which were mentioned were Tusla, County Councils, Arts Council, DOJ, Foras na Gaeilge, Sports Partnerships, Pobal and NOSP (HSE). ETBs were cited by just under 40% of managers surveyed for providing funding and grant assistance, training, review sessions, telephone support, advice, information, youth worker and manager support sessions. NYCI was mentioned by 93% of manager respondents for its support with updates, training and webinars, staff online events including Wellness Workshops, Covid-19 roadmaps and compliance advice, networking and sharing experiences across the sector, for example, NYCI Specialist Organisations Networking. Sixteen per cent indicated they had received help from

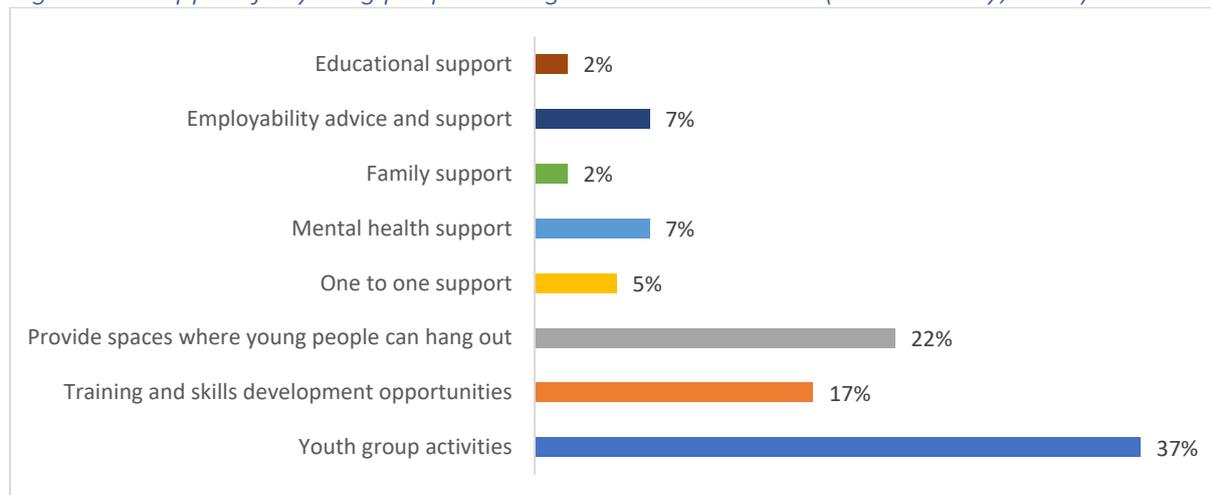
The Wheel which provided training opportunities and return-to-work-safely protocols. Other voluntary organisations mentioned were Volunteer Network, CDI Tallaght, North Tipperary Development Company, Youth Theatre Ireland, Youth Work Ireland, CYPSC, Volunteer Ireland, National Centre for Guidance in Education Ireland, the Proud Trust UK, Talk About Youth Project, church authorities, IBEC, BeLonG To and the Fórsa trade union.

Many managers expressed their appreciation for the external support they received including funding, advice, digital upskilling, networking opportunities and infrastructure. One interviewee described the support from Tusla and DCEDIY (formerly DCYA) in relation to funding as excellent and benefited from additional monies for Covid-19 compliance – masks, sanitizer etc. Moreover, their organization was given flexibility with some underspend to obtain bikes for outdoor summer activities. Survey respondents had similar experiences and praised the support they received, including a youth service manager who valued NYCI’s general guidance and 1-1 advice, plus the training events.

### Future support for young people

Youth work continues to be delivered within ever-changing parameters and limitations because of the pandemic. It is important to find out directly from young people what support they think they need. Young people responding to the youth survey were therefore asked how they felt youth organisations could support them in the next six months.

Figure 20: Support for young people during the next six months (Youth Survey, n=41)



Q: What do you think youth workers/organisations could do to support you in the next six months?

### Youth provision for young people

Results from the youth survey showed just over a third want to be provided with youth group activities (37%), another 22% would like spaces where they can hang out. Young people recognised the need to create opportunities for socialising and connection – some in one of the focus groups observed how it has been lost in the pandemic reflecting that *“socialising is not really a thing any more over the pandemic”* and expressed the need for a drop-in centre for young people in their local community with qualified staff. They recommended this should be a space where they could access mental health support and information on issues such as drugs.

### Education, training, and employment

The youth survey responses showed 17% of young people surveyed want support to access training and skills development opportunities in the short-term future while just 7% want employability advice and support and only 2% want educational support. There was acknowledgement in one of the youth focus groups about the psychological impact of the pandemic particularly for younger children who haven't been able to experience the social and fun aspects of school life, such as extra-curricular activities suggesting that the youth sector has a role in mitigating the long-lasting impact of that.

### Mental health, individual and family support

Although the responses were very low in percentage terms in relation to support with mental health, one-to-one support, and family support (7%, 5% and 2% respectively – see Fig. 20), mental health was a consistent theme in the young people's focus groups. Some participants talked about friends struggling with mental health issues and needing support while others emphasised the need to move beyond just giving advice on Covid-compliance and for support to focus on addressing mental health more directly, and provide practical help:

*“And I think with the pandemic as well, it's one of those things, everyone's so worried about Covid but the suicide rates are rising rapidly but there's nothing said about that. All you're told is 'wear your mask and get your vaccine' but there's nothing said like, 'go talk to someone' or 'go to your doctor, tell your doctor how you're feeling'. There's nothing like that and it's very sad” (Young Person).*

One young person talked about how Covid has changed the dynamics of interacting with others in the local community commenting how *“You used to be able to walk down a road – [name of town] is small like – walk down the road and talk to someone but now they'd be half-scared to even stop and talk to you.”* This implies a need to think about what will help people to reconnect in their communities. Another young person suggested there should be adequate resources for organisations to support young people with mental health issues and to promote youth workers' availability to offer support.

### Future support to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic

The youth service managers' survey and the youth workers' and volunteers' survey asked respondents to prioritise areas of support for the next six months and for the long-term. Results from the managers' survey (Fig. 21) showed the top two supports needed for the short-term are advocacy for the sector (60%) and the need for additional funding (56%). Similarly, the top two supports needed for the longer-term are additional funding (74%) and advocacy for the youth sector (63%). Resources and guidance on ICT infrastructure was the least popular choice – 19% in the short-term and 14% in the long-term.

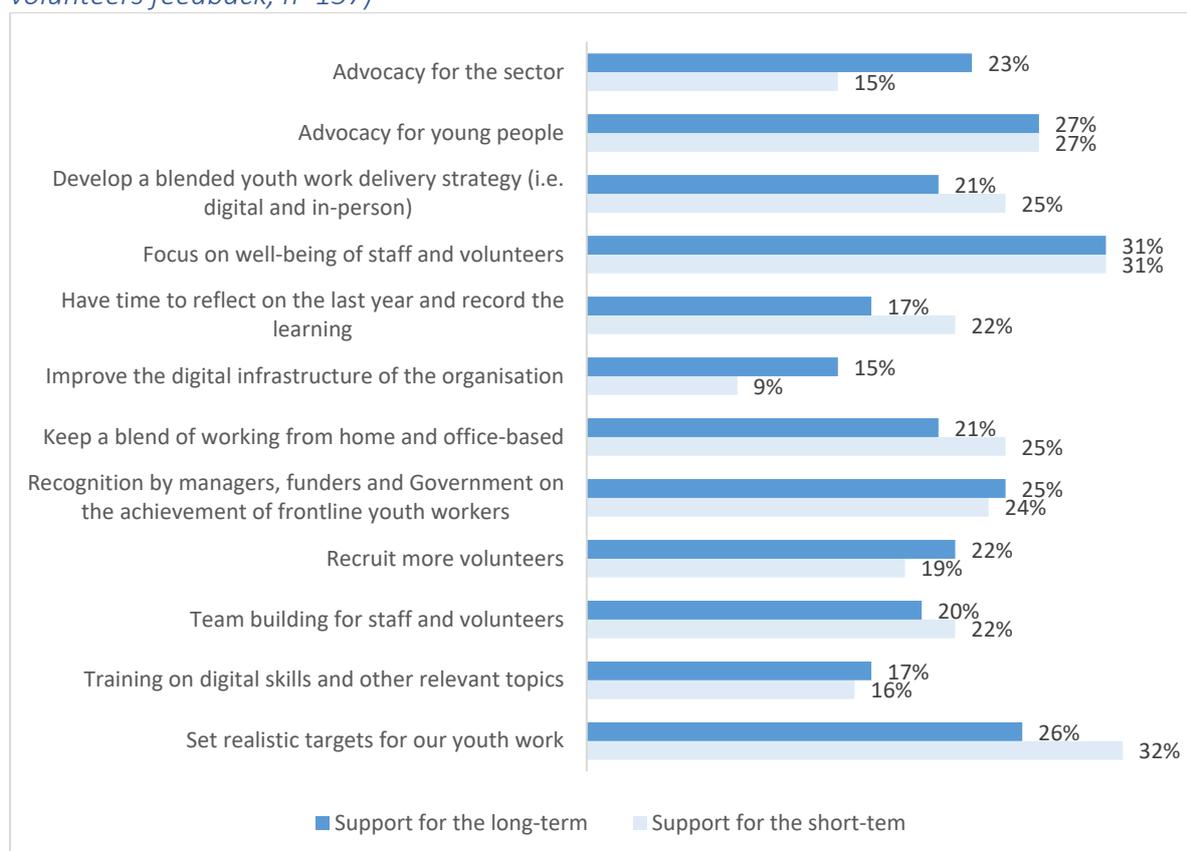
Figure 21: Support needed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic (Youth service managers' survey, n=43)



Q: What support do you need moving into the next six months to mitigate the impact of the pandemic?  
 Q: What support do you need moving into the long-term to mitigate the impact of the pandemic?

The results from the youth workers' and volunteers' survey (Fig. 22) have a much more even spread of support needs. The most frequently stated short-term support need is to have realistic targets set for youth work (32%) closely followed by focusing on the well-being of staff and volunteers (31%). Well-being is also a key issue for the long-term with the highest percentage of youth workers and volunteers indicating this should be a priority (31%) followed by advocacy for young people (27%). Like the views of manager respondents, the lowest chosen option from youth workers and volunteers was improving the digital infrastructure of the organisation, with 9% for the short-term and 15% for the long-term.

Figure 22: Support needed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic (Youth workers & volunteers feedback, n=157)



Q: What support do you need moving into the next six months to mitigate the impact of the pandemic?

Q: What support do you need moving into the long-term to mitigate the impact of the pandemic?

### Inequalities and pre-existing social and structural issues

A common theme which permeated discussions in the focus groups and interviews is how the pandemic revealed and compounded pre-existing social and structural issues and inequalities, one youth service manager reflected that it was sometimes *“hard to know what is related to Covid and what is actually the difficulties we would be experiencing anyway and has been exacerbated by Covid”*. It was young people themselves who raised this issue and referring to how the pandemic *“exposed the fallibilities of our current system.”* One young person observed that *“these issues were always there... and they’re only continuing to get worse in some cases ... there’s significant structural issues and endemic issues well before Covid”*.

### Issues identified by young people

Young people named a host of issues which need to be addressed. One of the most evident inequalities – a key theme in the 2020 report – was the digital divide which, as already noted, has continued to have a huge impact on young people and their families. Although there have been mitigations where youth organisations have obtained funding to provide devices or modems to families, youth workers and young people highlighted how some young people have had no choice but to disengage from youth provision and are *“essentially cut off... from interacting with other people”*. Moving forward one young person suggested

there should be spaces in communities, for example within a youth centre, where young people can join Zoom calls for college:

*“I think that spaces in communities need to be made where people can join a Zoom call that might not be in their home, for reasons maybe of safety or noise or broadband, so I think youth organisations could do something around that. Maybe a youth club could have a room where somebody could take a Zoom call if they weren’t able to do that within their home, so I think those sorts of supports for online college are going to be very important going forward” (Young Person).*

Young people also expressed the need for improved healthcare and especially mental healthcare. Other pre-existing issues raised included the cost of and access to education and the need to overhaul SUSI grant; employment challenges and young worker rights, with concerns over low employment rates, job security, pay, living wage, the need to abolish the under 18s wage and the need for a safety net/welfare system for young people. As one young person commented, *“there needs to be better strengthening of job opportunities for young people but also as well, paying work conditions that are adequate for young people”*. Some young people highlighted poor public transport and limited cycling infrastructure which exists in most areas beyond the large cities and especially in rural communities.

#### Youth work as an essential service

As noted in section 5.1, all young people who were interviewed as part of this study conveyed their gratitude for their youth service and felt strongly about youth work’s status as an essential service. There was a youth worker who suggested that youth services and mental health services need to be able to offer in-person support as essential services because they’re vital sources of support for young people.

Several research participants recognised that a lack of in-person interaction would be very negative for young people unable to connect online and one young person named youth outreach as a key area for investment. Another young person shared her experience of homelessness during the pandemic and stated that it was youth workers who provided her with key support. She believes youth work should be well funded to reach out and ensure more young people can access supports and ensure youth services are fully inclusive of those from minority groups:

*“We need to especially push for more funding just to reach out to more young people, because the way I found the youth services, it was just by chance like I saw a poster and that was really it. When I was young, I wasn’t really approached by any youth worker or community worker so there is a lot of young people who like me – especially ethnic minorities – that need supports like this in Irish society especially with the awareness of racism, especially in the past year, I think there needs to be a lot more training in anti-racism – compulsory, not as an option or anything” (Young Person).*

### Recognition for the sector

In relation to the emphasis placed on advocacy for the sector in the youth service managers' survey (Fig. 21), many interviewees and focus group participants also highlighted the need for greater recognition of youth workers' and volunteers' work and stamina during the pandemic and of the difference youth work makes in general. There were those who felt that the pandemic had created more appreciation of youth work in communities.

Another youth service manager thought there should be better understanding of the difference youth work makes not only on a human and social level, but also economically and in terms of cost savings, for example, by preventing young people going into care and in terms of how the voluntary sector supports the work of the statutory sector. He described how his organisation operates a programme to keep young people out of care and can run residential weekends at a fraction of the cost of the formal care system. He cited working with 688 young people this year with an annual budget of just over €600k with 15 staff which would pay for only one child in care for a year<sup>22</sup>.

There was also frustration that youth worker wages were cut due to the financial crash in 2009 and those rates have never been reinstated. A CEO referenced having 24% less funding for their youth work programme in comparison with 2009 for doing the same work but with 1.5 less staff. These situations felt even more unjust for the interviewees because of the energy youth organisations put into providing quality services and making sure young people can continue to engage during the pandemic and because staff in statutory bodies have received wage increments.

Another CEO reflected that where people don't have a personal connection with youth work, there is less understanding of its value and that the sector needs to get better at sharing stories of the difference it's making in the lives of young people so that even more young people get the benefit of youth services. She believes youth work has given young people a lifeline during the pandemic and *"we need to be better at owning that and sharing that"*.

### Fallout from the pandemic

The survey results showed 35% of managers think there should be advocacy for young people in the short-term and 51% think it is needed in the long-term (Fig. 21), while 27% of youth workers and volunteers indicated advocacy for young people is needed in both the short- and long-term (Fig. 22). Many organisations represented by interviewees and focus group participants are working with young people who were already disadvantaged before Covid-19 hit and some raised a worrying scenario regarding safeguarding and child protection referrals. These initially reduced because of less in-person contact with young people and families during the first lockdown but now the opposite is the case, and a youth service manager reported an excess of referrals beyond the normal rate. This situation has been exacerbated by the 2021 cyber-attack on HSE systems and the fact that the pandemic has intensified difficulties for families so that more children and young people are being taken into care. All of this creates added pressures on voluntary services to meet the demand and underscores the need for adequate resourcing to do so.

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<sup>22</sup> The Spending Review 2020 Tusla Residential Care Costs shows the basic private mainstream placement rate for a child in residential care with single occupancy is €13,500 per week which equates to €702,000 (Branigan & Madden, 2020: 10)

Another serious consequence from the pandemic has been the increase in risk-taking behaviour by those who would normally have been engaged in youth services. Lack of in-person contact reduced relationship building opportunities with young people inhibiting the potential of youth provision to offer an alternative to anti-social behaviour and crime. Two youth workers related what they heard from young people about the emergence of 'postcode wars' where young people who cross into another postcode area are at risk of getting into fights and knife crime. The youth workers both agreed the impact of restrictions and reduced provision has meant there are few alternatives for the young people getting involved in this type of anti-social or criminal behaviour. One youth worker told the story of a conversation with a young person, and it is powerful in highlighting a sense of abandonment and hopelessness among some young people and demonstrates the need for youth services to get up and running with as much in-person contact as possible to offer safety and sanctuary as well as opportunities for positive personal and social development:

*"... he said, '[name of youth worker] you know what?' I said 'What?' he said, 'I don't have a question to ask you, but I've got a statement to make...Does anyone really care about us?' he said, 'Not the politicians, not the Guards, not the schools, not anyone else, they all say they do, but does anybody really care what happens to us standing on the corner, having nowhere to go and nothing to do? I know if I go out with the lads, I know someone's going to have a go and start a fight with me because of my size, if someone pulls out a knife, I'm going to have to do something to protect myself.' You know it's a sad thing that a bunch of teenagers seem to always be in trouble who actually don't want to be in trouble and are just looking help. So yeah, they asked, 'does anybody care?' and I said, 'yes' and they said, 'yeah we've heard that before, but they don't really.' Of course we do and many, many people like us do, but they don't see it on the ground" (Youth Worker).*

#### Additional Funding

Fifty-six per cent of respondents to the manager survey prioritised additional funding as a support need in the short-term and 74% for the long-term (Fig. 21). Linked to this, 44% of manager respondents would like flexibility with funding targets in the short-term and 37% see this as a priority for the long-term. There were those involved in the study who felt the pandemic served to improve relationships with funders. There was understanding of the unique circumstances it presented for grantees. There were also calls for more funding because many organisations haven't been able to fundraise to the same extent or have seen a drop in income from membership fees as noted in section 5.1. Organisations appreciated the funding for PPE distributed in 2020, however with the constantly changing restrictions, some of these resources have not been used. In addition, there were those who felt greater flexibility is needed to respond properly to young people's needs rather than only relying on needs assessment for specific target groups. In this regard one CEO cited the example of the need for detached work to "so you can go out and find young people who are really at risk, who are out at night doing whatever it is they do in their local parks".

There were concerns about the challenges of re-engaging young people and how this may affect funding levels for youth provision in future. A youth service manager pointed out the

need for *“patience, some time, some trust in the work that’s been done... We certainly need some time to rebuild and we’re probably going to have a new cohort”*. This is especially true if organisations are to work towards young person-centred developmental youth work.

In the interviews, a couple of the CEOs were clear in their call for a more strategic and long-term approach to funding for youth work as a long-term project that encourages sustainability of services, meets the needs on the ground, and acknowledges that the pandemic’s impacts are likely to reverberate for some time particularly in terms of young people’s mental and psychological well-being:

*“The impact of Covid will continue for the foreseeable into the future, so, we need to stop talking about it as if we’re all going to be vaccinated including kids by the end of September and let’s jolly along. That’s not the way I think we need to be constructing our future and looking at our future... I mean the impact on young people’s mental health has and continues to happen...I just think we need to be thinking about developing a strategy... this is a long-term project, how do we help our young people to recover mentally, psychologically, how do we help them to socialise again?”* (CEO).

#### Preparation for in-person provision and re-engagement with young people

CEOs, youth service managers and youth workers interviewed were all at the stage of preparing for the next phase. They recognise their priority is to re-engage young people and connect with those who have never been involved in a youth service or are older and have ‘aged out’ of youth work or who weren’t engaging during lockdowns. One of the youth service managers felt there is a need to review referral pathways and registration processes to make it as easy as possible for young people to get plugged into youth projects. Consideration also needs to be given to how best to attract young people back to youth services. Some youth workers would like training and guidance on how to re-engage young people and one youth worker stated there should be funding allocated for this specific purpose allowing youth services to offer residentials, trips and other fun activities.

The challenge is that the sector needs to be prepared for every eventuality. Some interviewees had shared their frustration of implementing policies and procedures for re-opening after the first lockdown only to have new restrictions imposed. All those working in the sector will need continued support to cope with the changing environment they are operating in. Aware that staff can find a lot of change demotivating or become insecure a CEO expressed concern that any setbacks with the route out of the pandemic would be destabilising or make people feel like *“we’re just never going to get out of this”*. She talked about reaching out for change management support with her coach to aid with the shifting circumstances of the transition towards re-opening.

#### Guidance and road map

The manager survey results found that 40% of managers surveyed want more communication from government departments in the short-term and 35% would like it in the longer-term (Fig. 21). In response to the survey question on external supports, many of the managers indicated they appreciated the road map and guidance for the sector that was provided. It was noted that in negotiating the next phase, some managers who were

interviewed want as much notice as possible or a timeline to allow for planning or getting a Board together to make decisions about how they apply the guidelines in their setting.

Some found the guidelines need a lot of interpretation and adaptation for volunteers. A youth service manager referred to an induction video for paid staff which was used in his/her organisation which would be a useful resource to adapt for volunteer-led organisations in the future.

One youth service manager shared how he spent a considerable amount of time developing guidelines and procedures for his staff team including making hand sanitisers available, putting information posters on the walls, ensuring staff wore masks and so on. He also designed induction packs for when staff came back after the first lockdown, developed new consent forms to take account of Covid and developed protocols for frontline staff about mask-wearing, sanitising, seating arrangements in cars etc. This was all done with little external help but ironically, he found himself supporting statutory colleagues to develop their protocols – *“we were being asked as a voluntary organisation by the statutory people what we were doing, asking for advice and they adapted what they were doing to what we were doing”*.

#### Implementing a blended approach

Just over a quarter (26%) of youth service managers surveyed indicated they would like information and training on how to offer a blended service (both digital and in-person) in the short-term, with this figure dropping to 14% for the long term (Fig. 21). A quarter of youth workers and volunteers who responded to the survey would like to develop a blended youth work delivery strategy for the short term and 21% would like this longer term (Fig. 22). One of the youth workers in the focus groups could see the potential of blended delivery particularly for certain young people who *“come into their own online because it suited them, they’d the safety and security of their own room and they were techy and it worked for them”*.

In terms of youth services blending home and office-based arrangements, a quarter of youth workers and volunteers would like to maintain a blend of working from home and office-based work in the short term and 21% would like this more permanently in the long-term (Fig. 22). A few interviewees see the potential of a hybrid model, as long as it is discussed within staff teams, and doesn't create silos nor eliminates the kind of ‘chance’ conversations that encourage connection and information-sharing. Many youth workers and managers also see the benefit of engaging in a mix of online and in-person training and networking, especially as virtual training eliminates travel and travel time.

#### Volunteering

Just under a fifth of respondents to the youth workers’ and volunteers’ survey stated that they want support to recruit more volunteers (19%), and 22% thought this was an issue for the long-term (Fig. 22). Volunteering is a strand of organisational capacity that was already in need of review prior to the pandemic. Some interviewees and focus group participants talked about the need to conduct a recruitment drive when in-person provision is re-instated more fully, and one interviewee believes that volunteering needs significant reinvigoration and will require funding to support organisations to bring back volunteers,

attract new ones, provide appropriate training and ongoing support and advice. One volunteer suggested using a model like 'Culture Night' to promote volunteering opportunities nationwide.

Participants in the volunteer focus group emphasised that volunteers often do not commit to their role for thanks, but some did feel there were heavy expectations of them. One volunteer explained how often someone will volunteer for one evening and then be asked to help with another group or with an event and then end up with minimal free time. Volunteers also emphasised the importance recognition and the importance of feeling valued and appreciated to encourage them to stay motivated and engaged in the role. A couple of volunteers in the focus group felt it would be good to incentivise volunteering. One spoke of the potential to learn from organisations/businesses where volunteers are allocated time to volunteer and proposed a national model where everyone is released for 3 days a year for service volunteering:

*"I have a friend in national organisations, and they get service days to volunteer, so the company pays for them to volunteer a few days. I know plenty of coaches who thought that was a brilliant idea that if nationally you were given rewards... we have what three days nationally for sick leave, what if we had three days nationally for service? And then when there's actually a need you offer 3 days volunteering at once" (Volunteer).*

There was recognition from CEOs and youth service managers that volunteers need appropriate support and upskilling that comes from professional workers. Indeed, one of the CEOs regarded this to be essential in terms of health and safety and safeguarding. However, there was concern among volunteers about overdoing training requirements and too much of a 'professionalised' approach that becomes off-putting for potential volunteers – volunteer recruitment needs to be as straightforward a process as possible.

#### Training, check-ins, and networking

As already highlighted, a common theme from respondents, interviewees and focus group participants has been the value of engaging in training and check-ins facilitated by agencies such as the NYCI. This is something many would like to continue both in the short and long-term with a blend of online and in-person opportunities and facilitated both internally and via external organisations such as NYCI, The Wheel, Youth Theatre Ireland, or Volunteer Ireland. It was recognised that there is a need for continued upskilling especially in risk assessment and safeguarding but also for mutual encouragement – as one youth service manager said, "keep those things on...because we're all burnt out". Youth workers in one of the focus groups suggested the check-ins like the NYCI check-ins should continue – not necessarily focusing on Covid but so that they benefit from sharing and developing practice, networking, and learning from how others are responding to challenges.

#### Working collaboratively

Since youth workers were deemed as frontline workers, they got priority access to vaccinations, and the sector had its own guidance on the public health roadmap. Some CEOs and youth service managers observed an improvement in collaboration between statutory and voluntary sector agencies and government departments and a "better relationship than

ever with the State” (CEO) during the pandemic and would like that to continue in the long-term.

#### Staff and volunteer well-being

Forty-four per cent of youth service managers would like guidance on how to support staff and volunteer well-being in the short-term and 33% in the long-term (Fig. 21), and 31% of youth worker and volunteer respondents would like their organisation to focus on well-being of staff and volunteers both in the short and long-term (Fig. 22). Section 5.3 provided in-depth analysis of the impact of the pandemic on staff and volunteer’s well-being and makes clear that it will be important to be proactive in offering appropriate support structures for staff. One of the CEOs interviewed articulated how the sector needs to address this issue as a collective and with respect for what frontline workers do:

*“I think we as a sector...really have to have some serious conversations around well-being...in the sector, we’re at the coalface and young people and older people are the people who paid the highest price and therefore those of us working with those populations have been secondarily affected the most in relation to that...sustainability within the sector, how we hold on to good people, don’t just eat them up and spit them out. So, it shouldn’t take its toll on staff” (CEO).*

## 6. Good Practice Examples

### TikTok As You Like It

As part of an online Shakespeare Festival, Droichead Youth Theatre brought Shakespeare's 'As You Like It' to life using TikTok. They had been working with a group of older teens – leaving cert students, who loved the play but felt overloaded with online schooling and felt they couldn't commit to learning all the lines. As a joke one of the young people said, "*Can we not just do TikTok?*" And that's exactly what they did, they became very involved in the writing and transformed a 3-hour play into a series of TikToks.

### Sconce<sup>23</sup>

Sconce was a 2020 cross-city arts initiative led by YWI Cork's 'Cork Creates' project in partnership with a local design agency, Notes to Cork, which encouraged youth groups from across the city to create posters using only two colours – Cork's colours of red and white. Young people met in small groups either face-to-face or online in the summer of 2020 and produced over 60 artworks which were installed on various billboards across the city and a walking trail was mapped as a way of viewing all the artwork. The project received an enthusiastic response and other youth arts projects have since emerged because of the success of Sconce and the collaboration between youth workers, artists and Notes to Cork including the development of an interactive poster project for National Heritage Week that will be displayed on billboards in the city centre at Kryl's Quay.

### Pen Pals

A group of Brownies from Irish Girl Guides paired up with an American group of guides exchanging hard copy letters with each other following a request from a unit in New York to the Irish Girl Guides' communications committee. In their letters the girls exchanged information about themselves, life in New York and Ireland, their hobbies and what guiding is like in their respective countries. Some included pictures or social media contacts. It was an ideal activity for the girls as they realised other people in a different country are experiencing similar things to them for example, online schooling, not being allowed to go out and play or meet friends or go on holidays. In addition to the fun factor, the girls improved their writing and communication skills and expanded their interpersonal networks and connections. The groups intend to keep writing to New York and there is great anticipation waiting for replies.

### Monday Night Madness

Monday Night Madness was an online wacky games night delivered by Carbery YMCA in Co. Cork where two youth workers facilitated a series of wacky games via Zoom to a group of around 10-12 participants with a prize up for grabs in each game. Games ranged from things like 'Where's Wally?' and 'dress up as your favourite superhero' to 'you've got 10 minutes to cook us something and bring it back and we'll decide who the winner is'. What makes this games night a little bit different from other games nights is that a third worker was in his car delivering the prizes to young people's doors in real time. Prizes ranged from boxes of chocolates to toasters (some parents were very appreciative of this type of prize). We

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/arid-40220348.html>

include this example of practice not so much for innovation – because games nights were a very popular activity – but more so because the story conveys a wonderful sense of fun in the middle of a very strange time, the youth workers put a lot of enthusiasm into it, and it encouraged plenty of chat and connection among the young people over the course of 8-10 weeks.

### Ballyfermot Youth Service & Le Fanu Skate Park

The idea for the Skate Park came from young people involved with Ballyfermot Youth Service in 2012 who began a campaign to get a skateboarding and urban sports facility located in the area. After commitment from Dublin City Council the park's construction was finally completed in June 2020 and immediately opened to the public. An estimated 800-1000 people visited the Skate Park on the first night of opening showing the demand for such a local resource, particularly as the opening coincided with easing of restrictions following the spring lockdown. However, Ballyfermot Youth Service recognised the need to establish a presence onsite and provide purposeful youth work to prevent anti-social behaviour and misuse of the park. Since its opening, Ballyfermot Youth Service staff including its outdoor learning instructors have been facilitating outreach, youth work, and biking sessions with young people as well as supporting the development of a BMX club at the facility. It has been an ideal outdoor environment for young people to meet, socialise and develop new skills especially when restrictions on travel and indoor group sizes have been in place. The Skate Park has given a lot of young people the opportunity to be active and to meet up with their friends safely. In addition, Ballyfermot Youth Service set up a community action group made up of youth leaders and young people who help maintain the park by doing litter picks and generally keeping the park in good condition.<sup>24</sup>

### 'Get Out Into That Day'<sup>25</sup>

This is an Activity Pack for youth workers developed by Youth Work Ireland as part of Youth Work Ireland Week (26<sup>th</sup> April to 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021) which coincided with the easing of public health restrictions in Ireland. In recognition that the pandemic meant many were spending more time indoors, on digital devices and connecting via online interactions, and that being in the outdoors with others offers safe benefits for young people, youth workers developed a range of methods to take youth work into outdoor settings that enable young people to interact safely. The pack and the suggestions in it emerged from a 'Lunchtime Learning Event' which Youth Work Ireland ran with youth workers in December 2020 on the theme of 'Youth Work Outdoors.' The initiative recognises the wide spectrum of open landscapes such as beaches, parks, hills, forests, riverbank, trails and gardens available in local urban or rural communities, which may not have been utilised as a youth work setting for activities before. It moves from the usual centre-based youth work setting to seeing opportunities which come with the beginnings of a 'new normal' where everything can be reimagined, and youth workers can use the outdoors as a '*natural living youth centre*' and space for the development and support of young people.

The pack outlines key benefits of encouraging young people to 'breakout and connect' including health and mental well-being, relationship people, appreciation and respect for

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0723/1155108-young-people-take-care-of-skatepark-in-ballyfermot/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youthworkireland.ie/what-we-do/news/youth-work-ireland-week-2021>

the environment, adventure and skills development, creating new stories, bonding and re-establishing connections, and connecting local to global issues. It includes practical advice from youth workers from Youth Work Ireland Member Youth Services on how to take youth work activities outdoors as well as suggestions for a range of outdoor activities including challenges, fun activities, making use of technology outdoors, community engagement and 'adrenalin rush' activities. It also applies the '5 Ways to Wellbeing' to youth work outdoors and proposes different ways in which youth groups can connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give outside, and includes links to further resources and websites.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This 2021 review of the youth work sector's response to the Covid-19 pandemic provides a valuable insight into how voluntary youth organisations reconfigured their work with young people in an unprecedented set of circumstances and faced into the challenges presented by the pandemic with integrity, creativity, and resourcefulness. Informed by 364 survey responses, 12 interviews and eight youth and adult focus groups with 30 participants, there is both breadth and depth to the learning about what methodologies worked well, how organisations attended to worker and volunteer well-being and capacity, and the supports that are necessary for the future. Broadly the sector was speedy in its switch to digital youth work while constantly reaching out to young people and only 5% of survey respondents discontinued their services. Organisations demonstrated adaptability and tuned into the needs of young people by focusing on fostering connection in a range of ways from Zoom chats and games nights, writing groups and outdoor Bootcamps, online meditation sessions and e-learning, detached street work and podcasting. Young people who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups were overwhelmingly positive about the actions of their youth workers and services, many experiencing a sense of community even while physically apart. However, the drop in engagement levels of young people (69% as reported by survey respondents) is illustrative of the challenges facing the sector as it seeks to rebuild and re-engage young people, particularly those who are vulnerable or who experience marginalisation.

### Digital Youth Work

Given that it has been well over a year it is possible to make more informed judgements about the merits and limitations of digital youth work. Although there is vast potential, much of this is yet untapped because of capacity issues in terms of skills and digital literacy, organisational infrastructure as well as wider structural issues such as the digital divide, and inadequate rural connectivity. Ultimately, digital youth work will not substitute face-to-face youth work, but the findings of this report suggest it can sit alongside traditional forms of provision to expand reach – often geographically and sometimes in relation to accessibility.

A key factor in whether digital youth work can be truly successful is the skills, resourcefulness, and commitment of youth workers to create positive online engagement where young people enjoy social interaction and experience connection. Based on feedback from young people for this study – including from those who said they wouldn't have known what to do without their youth service's online activities – this is broadly what was happening.

However, the onus does not wholly lie with individual youth workers to make digital youth work succeed. One of the interviewees commented on the importance of the sector working collectively to ensure online spaces are safe spaces for young people. This perspective recognises that young people spend a lot of time online, and online engagement has been a vital way of maintaining connection and combatting isolation for many, but there also must be acknowledgement that digital spaces can be a place of harm in relation to hate crime, exploitation, radicalising methods and so on. Understood in this light, there is a role for the youth sector to attend not only to safeguarding best practice in online spaces, although that is essential, but to also push for adequate regulation of digital

platforms ensuring they are safe spaces where young people can thrive rather than hostile spaces especially for those from minority groups.

### Priority areas for the youth sector

The findings from this research provide a strong case for four priority areas for the youth sector going forward:

- Advocacy for young people
- Advocacy for the sector
- Strategic Collaborations
- Workforce Development & Support

### Advocacy for young people

While this research was not focused on examining the impacts of the pandemic on young people, it was a consistent theme in many of the conversations with youth workers, managers, and volunteers and in the survey responses. The concern for young people, particularly those experiencing marginalisation in various ways and/or in vulnerable situations was foremost in the minds of many of the research participants. There was recognition of what so many young people lost in terms of connection, socialisation opportunities and interaction with peers, extracurricular activities, skills development, formal and non-formal learning, health and well-being, milestones of achievement and celebrations. There were different views about the extent to which young people will suffer negative impacts in the long-term, however the way that the pandemic exposed many structural problems including wealth disparities, racial injustice, the worsening environmental crisis, poor public transport infrastructure and so on, represents key challenges for wider society and these are keenly felt in the lived experiences of young people, particularly those who feel they're on their own and no-one cares. A youth sector that remains steadfastly committed to young person-centred practice will help and is necessary to inform engagement with young people themselves, interventions, and policy as society emerges from the pandemic.

### Advocacy for the sector

#### *Funding*

There is a lot of appreciation for the way in which funding bodies have supported organisations in the adaptations they have made to service delivery including the shift to digital engagement. While many have had positive experiences, there are those with less positive experiences such as feeling pressure to achieve targets in a situation where the targets are much less meaningful and don't necessarily translate to a society going in and out of different levels of restrictions. Furthermore, funding structures and norms have been challenging for the sector for some time before Covid-19, particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, policies of austerity and a tendency towards short-term funding. Some felt that relationships with funders and with government officials were strengthened with the onset of the pandemic and now is the time to keep the dialogue flowing and work towards systems of funding that encourage strategic thinking, offer sustainability, and serve the needs of young people. Additionally, there are key areas where specific injections of funding will be particularly helpful as the youth sector recovers – youth engagement and re-engagement and volunteer recruitment, training, and support.

### *Status & Value of Youth Work*

Many research participants felt that youth work had become recognised and understood more widely whether in the informal ‘family and friends’ networks of youth workers and volunteers or in the formal state recognition of youth work as an essential service in March 2020. The feedback also indicates a need to understand the essential nature of youth work not only when it is about crisis intervention – as much as that is vital – but also when it is about supporting young people’s mental health, facilitating outreach efforts particularly with young people who may be ‘at risk’, and offering universal services or ‘open access’ youth work.

### *Visibility of Youth Work*

Young people are often at the sharp end of negative press, and this was no less the case during the pandemic when they were sometimes characterised negatively as one homogenous group about their perceived attitudes to Covid-19. This reinforces the need to ensure the visibility and value of youth work, to communicate what youth work is and the benefits to the individual and to society at large. Projects that promote youth work will promote young people and will encourage more young people to get involved. When young people get involved in youth initiatives it increases the possibility and likelihood of more people becoming volunteers, contributing to civil society, giving back to their communities, and strengthening youth work practice.

### *Strategic Collaborations*

One of the interviewees felt strongly that the best work can be found where there are strategic collaborations, and this was evident in some of the practice stories such as the ‘Sconce’ community arts project described in Section 6, the coordination efforts of Cork ETB outlined in Section 5.2 with the statutory and voluntary sectors working together in a Youth Response Committee and supporting young people’s participation in the ‘We Are Cork Youth Challenge’, or the partnership between youth sector representatives and DCEDIY in the Oversight Group which worked to develop appropriate public health guidance for the sector. Different organisations and agencies have different strengths, skillsets, networks – all of which can be pooled for common goals to benefit young people and the communities they live in. This is something that can be applied to joint initiatives as happened during the pandemic but also to specific areas of work or practice.

Key questions going forward include:

- How can the youth sector come together to address the need for a major volunteer recruitment drive?
- How can youth sector stakeholders come together to strengthen practice in outdoor youth work, outdoor adventure learning and outdoor education and encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas, practices, skills among different sectors such as education, outdoor education, and youth work, statutory and voluntary?
- How can the youth sector contribute to policy development to address digital safety ensuring that online platforms are safe spaces for young people?

### Workforce Development and Support

The research very clearly highlights the need for continued support for the well-being of staff and volunteers. Staff experiencing isolation was a key theme of the survey responses and it is vital that they not only get the support they need but that youth organisations build in a range of layers of support rather than solely relying on access to an Employee Assistance Programme to cover well-being or a few staff days out.

The research also indicated that many youth workers found NYCI's 'check-in' sessions very helpful for sharing ideas and experiences, fostering both learning and connection. These have been essential for a time of pandemic but surely, they remain essential going forward into a Covid-recovery phase? Furthermore, such gatherings enable cross-fertilisation of ideas across different agencies and organisations which can strengthen collaboration.

Supervision is a key layer of support and can be understood in multiple layers – managerial supervision and professional supervision can take place on a one-to-one basis or at a peer level and internally or through external channels e.g. offline supervision. Although youth work degree programmes often encourage practice development through supervision, this seems to die out once youth work students gain employment. A key question for these times is about what will encourage longevity in the sector? Without adequate focus and action on staff well-being, burnout will remain a feature. Moreover, organisations lose out on institutional memory and knowledge banks, and ultimately young people lose out because the people working with them end up sacrificing themselves.

Although the coronavirus is still a factor influencing our daily lives and there are many challenges ahead, this study shows that the youth sector can be proud of its track record in its handling of the pandemic to date. It also demonstrates how youth organisations have – in the words of one young person – *“continuously stepped up to the mark and created new and innovative ways to engage with young people”*. Youth workers have made invaluable contributions to the lives of young people and their families across Ireland and proved the essential nature of youth services going into the future.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Project/Organisation Background of Interviewees

Project/ Organisation	Geographical Area	Area of Work	Purpose
<b>BeLongTo</b>	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.
<b>Carbery Youth Service/YMCA Ireland</b>	Clonakilty, Skibbereen, Dunmanway, Co. Cork	Mainstream Youth Work; Traveller groups; LGBTQI+; Early school leavers; those transitioning to secondary school	Provides support, personal and social development through music and drama, 1-1 support, mentorship and coaching and podcasts.
<b>Catholic Guides Ireland</b>	East Coast of Ireland (Donegal-Cork, also work in NI)	Uniformed Youth Work	To provide challenging Guiding opportunities within a safe environment and enable girls and women to develop their full potential, instilling leadership skills for the future.
<b>Cork ETB</b>	Cork	ETB – statutory funder/co-ordination	Provides, supports and co-ordinates education, training and youth services in Cork.
<b>Droichead Youth Theatre</b>	Drogheda	Youth Arts	Introduces young people to the arts and creativity, encourages mutual respect, intellectual questioning and active citizenship.
<b>Girl's Brigade Ireland</b>	National	Uniformed; Faith-based	A volunteer-led organisation which helps girls develop new skills, knowledge and confidence in a safe and fun environment.
<b>Home Youth Liaison Service</b>	Sligo, Leitrim & West Cavan	Work with 'at risk' young people	To provide support to families and young people in partnership with Tusla social work. Offers school support, youth support, group intervention and residential respite breaks.
<b>The Loft Youth Project, Letterkenny, Donegal Youth Service/Foróige</b>	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	A support service for young people aged 12-25, to engage in activities and personal development programmes and overcome difficulties in their lives.

		Groups; Travellers; Work with 'at-risk' Young People.	
<b>Swan Regional Youth Service</b>		Work with 'at risk' young people; Street work and outreach; Youth Arts; Young people in care or who are care experienced; centre-based youth work; disability; ethnic minority groups; homelessness; LGBTQO; social change; youth justice;	To engage young people who live in the area who are socio-economically disadvantaged. To engage young people in a process of critical social education and work toward their empowerment to make positive changes in their own lives and in their communities, ultimately working towards creating a more just society.
<b>Youth Work Ireland</b>	National	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.

## Appendix 2 – Interview and focus group discussion guides

### Interview Discussion Guide

- What is your particular role? 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 respond initially to the pandemic? Over the year restrictions have changed at different times – lifted, then reimposed – how did your organisation respond? What intended outcomes have been difficult for your organisation to meet as a result of the pandemic? What infrastructure/operational issues has your organisation faced? 1) How has funding been affected? 2) Have you maintained the same level of volunteers? 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? What benefits have there been to delivering youth work during this time? What aspects of delivery or general learning would you like to continue post-lockdown/pandemic? What support have you received from government, funders, NYCI and others? What else could be done to support you?
- What has been the impact of working during the pandemic on youth work staff? What has been the impact on volunteers? How has the organisation helped build capacity of staff and volunteers to carry out their roles during the pandemic? How has the organisation supported the well-being of staff during the pandemic?
- Moving into the future what support will you need as an organisation? What support will the staff and volunteers need? 1) In the short-term 2) In the longer term. What do you think the lasting impact of the pandemic will be on your organisation? What changes might be required to adapt service delivery going forward as a result of ongoing challenges with the pandemic? What has been the main learning for your organisation delivering youth work provision since the pandemic began?

### Youth worker focus group – discussion guide

- Have you been able to maintain a service/engagement with young people? How has the young people's need for your organisation's services changed? How has it been to navigate the various changes in restrictions over the course of the past year? What intended outcomes have been difficult for your project to meet as a result of the pandemic?
- 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? What benefits have there been to delivering youth work during this time? What aspects of delivery or general learning would you like to continue post-lockdown/pandemic?
- What impact has working during the pandemic had on you personally? How have you managed this? What has worked well in mitigating any negative impact? What supports have you received from your organisation in relation to your professional development? What supports have you received from your organisation in relation to your well-being? What has been effective and what else could be done to support and equip you 1) From your own organisation 2) From external supports eg NYCI?
- Moving into the future what support will you need as a youth worker? 1) In the short-term 2) In the longer term; What changes might be required to adapt service delivery going forward as a result of ongoing challenges with the pandemic? What has been the main learning for you as you have delivered youth work provision since the pandemic began?

### Volunteer focus group – discussion guide

- What initiatives/methodologies have been 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? What benefits have there been to delivering youth work during this time?
- Have you been able to keep volunteering throughout the pandemic? How has this been maintained? What impact has volunteering during the pandemic had on you personally? What supports have you received from your organisation in relation to your well-being and professional development? What has been effective and what else could be done to support and equip you?
- Moving into the future what support will you need as a volunteer? 1) In the short-term 2) In the longer term. What do you think the lasting impact of the pandemic will be on your organisation? What changes might be required to adapt service delivery going forward as a result of ongoing challenges with the pandemic? What has been the main learning for you as you have volunteered to work with young people since the pandemic began?

### Young people focus group – discussion guide

- 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?
- 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?
- How has your youth organisation supported and engaged with you at this time? What activities have you engaged in? What has been good about the organisation's activities and approach? Has this changed over time and as restrictions have changed at different times e.g. total lockdown/summer 2020 etc? What difference has the organisation's approach made to you?
- What has not been so good about how the organisation has responded? Do you know of young people who have disengaged/not stayed involved? Do you know why they might have disengaged? Is there anything they could be doing more of /differently to support you?
- What are your views on coming out of the pandemic – do you feel positively/negatively? What kind of support do you think is important for young people going forward? How can youth organisations help? What do you think youth work delivery should look like going forward?

### Appendix 3 – Oversight Group

The Oversight Group was convened by DCEDIY in March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic to provide a forum for a flow of information and discussion on management of COVID-19 by the youth sector. The group consists of the Assistant Secretary and Principal Officer in the Youth Affairs Unit of DCEDIY and other key officials, representatives from NYCI, a range of youth work organisations and ETBI. The group has met as required since March and has been primarily concerned with ensuring concerns and needs of youth sector are inputted into Government policy with regard to COVID-19 and also reviewing public health guidance and adapting for the youth work sector.