



**YOUTH
WORK
CHANGES
LIVES**

COVID-19 AND YOUTH WORK

A REVIEW OF THE YOUTH
WORK SECTOR RESPONSE TO
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



SUMMARY REPORT

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COMPLETE REPORT AVAILABLE ONLINE

This paper provides a summary of the NYCI report *A Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* researched, written and edited by Deborah Erwin and Lorraine Thompson. The complete research report is available at youth.ie

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF IRELAND

The National Youth Council of Ireland 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://youth.ie)

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INTRODUCTION

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

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



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

CONTEXT

Ireland confirmed its first case of coronavirus on 29th February 2020. On 12th March the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced all schools, colleges and childcare facilities were to close initially until the 29th March. A mandatory order for people to stay at home was announced on 28th March. Youth provision, in line with schools, closed abruptly with little initial guidance on how they could continue support for young people. Since the global spread of COVID-19 there has been substantial research conducted to identify the immediate and possible long-term impact on young people. The research shows that young people have and will be adversely affected in the areas of mental health, education, economically and socially (OECD, 2020). The OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience publication (2020) recognises the **vital role the youth sector has played and will continue to play in helping young people recover from these detrimental effects and to mitigate the impact of the pandemic**. The report recommends governments should partner with youth sector organisations during the recovery phase. **In the Irish context, it is imperative adequate resources are invested to enable the youth sector to do this and to respond to the needs of all young people.**

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE

While the focus of this study was on the youth sector's response to COVID-19, a number of negative impacts for young people were highlighted by the research participants and can be summarised as follows:

Mental Health

There is a high level of concern over the negative impact on young people's mental health.

Education

Young people are worried about the uncertainty around results and the impact this will have on their future, they are missing the emotional support schools provide and there is concern around the conditions for reopening schools.

Economic impact

Young people already experiencing poverty became even more isolated.

Personal and social impact

A lack of social contact and the lack of structure and routine did not help young people function and ultimately had a negative impact both physically and emotionally.

"There were vulnerable or hard to reach young people – some with not enough access to food, a young person engaging in sex work, some with no Wi-Fi, no privacy, or in abusive or unaccepting household and therefore hard to engage" (Youth Organisation CEO)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS contd.

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

MAINTAINING A SERVICE



22%

The majority of services were able to maintain a full service or a reduced service

64%

(n=256)

14%

of respondents could not continue to provide a service during the pandemic lockdown.



33%

The most frequent reason given was that the organisation did not have an adequate digital infrastructure

ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE



59%

(n=151)

of projects had a reduction in the number of young people they were able to work with

The 151 respondents who had a reduction in the number of young people they engaged with indicated figures fell



from
59,822



to
18,391
approx.

70%



36 PROJECTS

discontinued engagement with young people which represented

approx **6896 YOUNG PEOPLE**



8 PROJECTS SAW AN INCREASE IN ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL ACTIVITIES.

YOUTH SECTOR RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

According to representatives of youth organisations interviewed for this study, several services immediately went [online via Zoom](#) and other platforms. There were some projects that continued their outreach services e.g. detached work, socially distant house visits or delivery of activity packs as a form of outreach and connection. A number of the projects had a particular emphasis on supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of the young people they engaged with.

Almost two thirds of NYCI members generated social media or website content in relation to health and wellbeing.

Some services made use of surveys to assess needs and adapt accordingly. Some projects engaged directly with parents as a way of making contact with young people.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS contd.

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

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES OF THE YOUTH SECTOR'S OVERALL RESPONSE

overall the young people shared



VERY POSITIVE EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH WORK

during this time

They felt that youth organisations were responsive to their needs and **provided vital interaction.**



FACTORS THAT ENABLED ORGANISATIONS TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY



included resourcing by organisations with a national headquarters for volunteer-led groups; links, networking and partnerships fostered with other organisations; an effective ICT infrastructure; already established relationships in local communities; support and guidance from external agencies; understanding from funders; **flexibility and good communication within organisations.**

KEY CHALLENGES/IMPLICATIONS FACED BY ORGANISATIONS IN RESPONDING

THE WORLD CHANGED OVERNIGHT;

Organisations faced a host of technical issues;



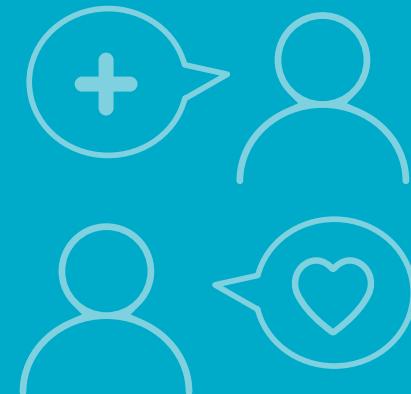
Youth projects were unable to contact some young people;



Difficulties in managing staffing levels.

“ I can't remember a time when things were so positive with the Department [of Children and Youth Affairs] – **a sense of recognition and acknowledgement of the worth and importance of youth work, and the critical role it plays as a safety net for young people, especially vulnerable young people. Especially with schools closed, teachers don't have the same skills to be able to engage with vulnerable young people.** Even within the leadership of the Department [of Children and Youth Affairs] we felt an appreciation and acknowledgement of that – really supportive, good about checking in with us.”

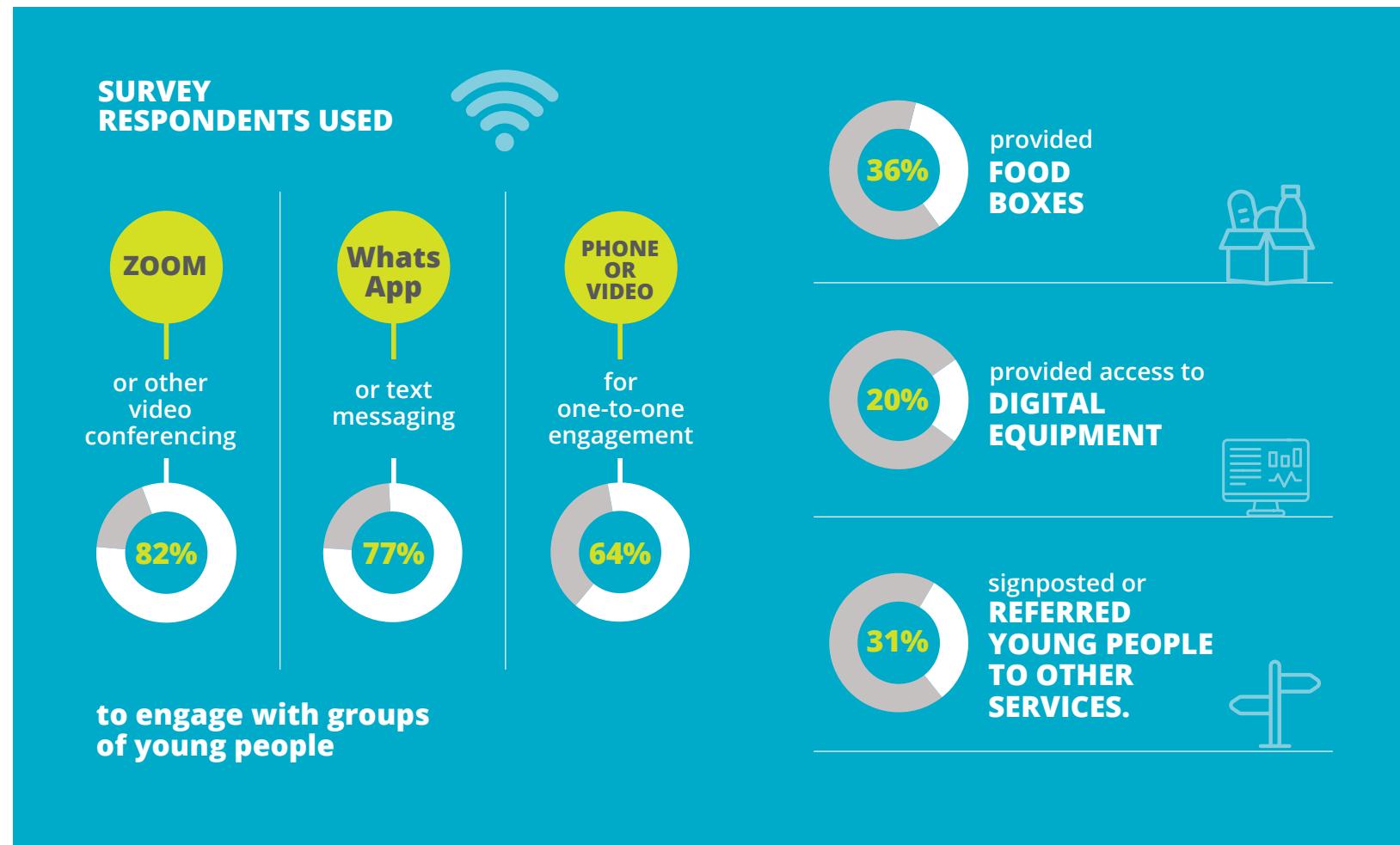
(Youth Organisation CEO)



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS contd.

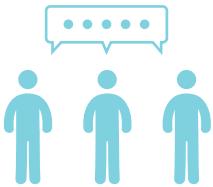
What methodologies have been used to deliver services and supports to young people during the pandemic?

"We'd have been really stuck, we'd have been stuck looking at a wall. To be fair, they have done everything they could do because they were always texting you and looking to chat, and if we couldn't they would always rearrange it."
(Young Person)



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS contd.

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



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

Projects adopted a wide range of methodologies to continue engagement:

Online group engagement included interactive activities; online events and virtual activities; new groups; arts-based activities; Youth Information; local community engagement; innovative use of digitally-based youth work. There was also engagement via telephone and text. Engagement via social media kept young people updated with links to health advice, sharing ideas and updates on events. Some engagement continued in person while observing social distancing. Some organisations delivered care/activity packages. Other interventions indirectly supported young people through training for youth workers and teachers and research within the field. Responses reflect the extent to which interaction with youth organisations served as a lifeline for some young people.

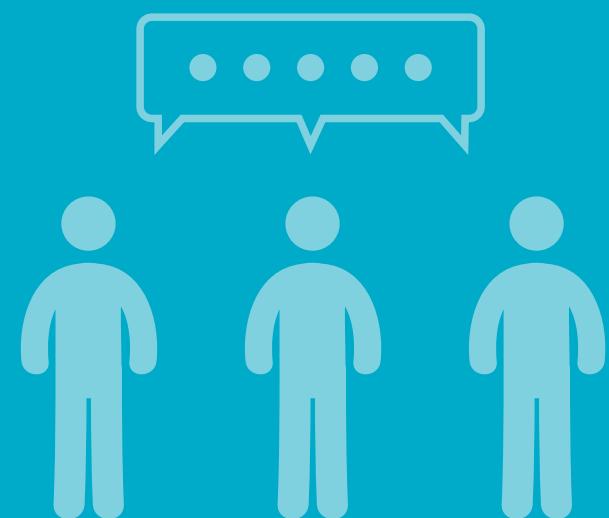
Learning and unexpected outcomes of online engagement

included an extension of geographical reach; relationship-building with parents and families; recognition of the potential e-learning can have; greater digital competency; some young people benefit from online engagement; there is value of a blended approach to digital and face-to-face work with young people going forward; there have been more opportunities for staff collaboration and the importance of innovation and experimentation.



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

(PROJECT WORKER)



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

contd.

What are the limitations of working in this way?

SURVEY RESULTS



The two most common limitations:

68% of respondents found that young people were reluctant to engage digitally



67% of respondents found that it was difficult to engage with 'at risk' or marginalised young people



Almost **one in four** projects experienced difficulties with the switch to digital youth work because **young people did not have adequate digital access**

24% found staff lacked digital skills



17% There were also concerns about **safeguarding mechanisms not being in place for digital service delivery**

PROGRAMME DELIVERY LIMITATIONS



The research indicated a **compounding effect when online engagement is significantly hampered** for young people already experiencing marginalisation in various ways.



As one survey respondent put it:

"those most at risk were most disconnected during the pandemic."

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

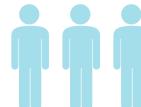
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What are the limitations of working in this way? contd.

PROGRAMME DELIVERY LIMITATIONS contd

A range of issues were highlighted by the findings:

- Barriers to young people's digital engagement
- **Difficulty engaging** with young people described as 'at risk' or experiencing marginalisation
- **Access to technology and digital poverty**
- Safeguarding concerns
- **Not being able to see and respond** when a young person needs support
- Online engagement tailed off
- **Lack of structure and lack of support from parents** and online engagement sometimes compounded pressure for families



- There is a **paradox of encouraging online engagement in lockdown** when previously discouraging device dependence pre-COVID-19
- Online engagement prevented developmental work and experiential learning
- There has been a **loss of young person's voice and agency**
- There have been limitations associated with outreach work
- Online events versus in-person engagement
- Many ultimately feel you **can't replace face-to-face youth work**



LIMITATIONS OF DIGITAL YOUTH WORK METHODOLOGIES AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

These included:



IT skills and capacity among workers and within organisations



Challenges in relation to boundaries for workers



Stress and anxiety for workers



Time and effort to make contact with young people and to adapt and compliance with changing funding arrangements

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS contd.

Adapting for the Future

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

(Programme Manager)

Concerns for the Future

Concerns for the future around uncertainty where no one can be sure of how things are going to be in the coming months with the possibility of increased outbreaks of COVID-19.

- 1 Concerns around **understanding and keeping up with regulations**, keeping staff and young people protected from the virus while continuing to offer a vital service to young people, an increase in bureaucracy and paperwork.
- 2 Some projects are **apprehensive about the available space and facilities to allow for social distancing** and the consequential costs if larger premises are needed.
- 3 There is **apprehension over funding and investment particularly in terms of resources to offer both face-to-face and online provision.**
- 4 **Rebuilding relationships could be difficult** following the lockdown period and the summer months and future involvement of volunteers are in question where they may have increased home-life pressures, fear of getting the virus or having had a break will not want to return.
- 5 **Mental health** will continue to be a great concern for young people themselves and youth workers as they try to mitigate the **long-term damage this could have on young people's well-being and development.**



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS contd.

Adapting for the Future contd.

Adapting for the Future

Projects will follow government guidelines and observe social distancing, use masks, meet outside in small group. Many are intending to utilise a blended approach of both digital and in-person activities. Some stated they would consider how to improve digital equipment to enhance digital creativity.



"It's going to take some of us longer to get off the ground, and we might have lost some of the young people forever. Good youth work is based on the relationships, it's going to take time to build that up again, just an understanding of that"
(Programme Manager)

Help and Support for Organisations

Projects have requested extra funding both to enhance digital equipment and to prepare for combating COVID-19 such as PPE equipment, hand-sanitizer and signage, advice on digital practice/programmes, access to appropriate equipment and software and how to maintain engagement with young people and digital training for staff.



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

(PROGRAMME MANAGER)



GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Reaching out to the community



- **Girls Brigade in Tallaght** – Members engaged in a COVID Hearts project where they sent handmade knitted or crocheted hearts to patients at Tallaght University Hospital.
- **Localise Youth Volunteering** supported young people during Lockdown to reach out from the safety of their homes to combat COVID-19 with compassion, creating videos, tables-quizzes, cards and much more to encourage over 2000 isolated individuals in nursing homes and care facilities, and frontline workers.

“The youth organisation could have had the best, fastest, greatest out-rolling of support the world’s ever seen yet if you don’t have the device that allows you to access it you can’t access it.”
(Young Person)

Sharing the impact of the pandemic on young people



- **The Happiness Jar** is a podcast developed by a group of YMCA Youth Advocates from YMCA Cork Region. It aims to tell the story of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of young people.
- **Irish Wheelchair Association Youth ‘Teen Talks’ podcast** produced two special edition episodes during the pandemic – ‘You know it’s 2020 when...’ and ‘Testing Times in 2020’

Changing to Virtual Activities



- **Foróige** produced an interactive map of how local groups have adapted during pandemic.
- **Gaisce #GaisceAtHome** campaign encouraged young people to stay active and engaged in their personal development and community action
- **Irish Girl Guides** held a 24 in 48 challenge with the aim of completing 24 Ladybird Badges in 48 hours.
- **Foróige ‘Feed Your Body Fuel Your Life’** was launched as a social media campaign to encourage young people to focus on mind, body and soul addressing empathy and self-care through music, art, craft and design and food.

Passing on Public Health Information



- **Macra na Feirme** regularly encouraged members to stick to safety guidelines.
- **Irish Red Cross Youth** consistently updated young people with advice on staying safe and used accessible info guides.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

contd.

Support with Mental Health and Wellbeing



- **Swords Youth Service, Crosscare**, made up Positivity Packs to distribute to young people at risk.
- **Sphere 17** consistently posted reminders of where to get help for mental health.

Help and Support for Specific Needs



- **Blossom** hosted an accessible webinar giving young people practical advice on looking after yourself and planning your day during the pandemic.
- **Crosscare Outdoor Learning Team** was redeployed when they couldn't do their usual role to provide one to one support to 'at-risk' young people.
- **Spunout.ie/YMCA Ireland/Crosscare/Youth Work Ireland Youth Information Chat service.** The chat service is staffed by Youth Information Officers from centres across Ireland.

"We are running an online cooking programme. We deliver 40 Food packs each week and do three live zoom calls a week. Each day the group learn how to make a new dish."
(Youth Worker)

Consultation and Research on Young People's Experiences



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

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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

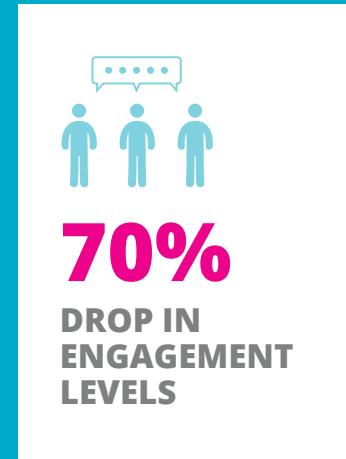
Broadly the pandemic has served to expose a whole range of inequalities and exacerbated vulnerabilities and while it is great that youth workers showed their creativity and flexibility in numerous ways, it does not make the marginalisation experienced by young people any less challenging.

The drop in engagement levels (70% reported by survey respondents) paints a stark picture and along with stakeholder feedback demonstrates just how **important face-to-face youth work is, particularly for those in marginalised and vulnerable situations.**

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

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

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



CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

contd.



Advocating for the Sector

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

Recommendations for Youth Organisations to take forward

1 KEEP RELATIONSHIPS CENTRAL

Young person-centred approaches are core to good youth work practice whether online or face-to-face

2 PAY ATTENTION TO KEY TRANSITION POINTS IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

3 LEARNING & EVALUATION

Seek feedback on practice delivery during the lockdown to learn about what works and what can be improved or enhanced

4 GET SKILLS INTO THE SECTOR

Particularly IT training and guidance on social media and different IT/social media platforms to facilitate digital engagement

5 GET TECH INTO THE SECTOR

Identify and supply the technology that will facilitate young people's participation and resource organisations and workers

6 ACCESSIBILITY

Particularly for young people with intellectual and other disabilities

7 INVEST IN PEOPLE

in terms of staff and volunteer capacity for COVID-19 compliance as well as wellbeing

8 EMBRACE THE CHALLENGE

of experimenting with different digital methods and trying new mediums

METHODOLOGY

The review approach involved:

Desk Research

A review of NYCI members' websites and social media platforms; a review of data and research from other jurisdictions on advice and responses to the pandemic; a review of NYCI online 'check-in' sessions with youth workers.

Survey with Sector Projects

The survey was distributed to youth sector organisations running from 24th June-10th July 2020. There were 256 valid responses to the survey. Respondents were representative of a wide range of thematic and geographical areas.

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Semi-structured Interviews with Stakeholders

15 interviews were carried out with representatives from youth sector projects and took place in July 2020 via Zoom or WhatsApp.

Focus Groups with Young People

5 focus groups from 4 organisations were facilitated via Zoom during July and early August. A total of 16 young people participated from the ages of 14-25.



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