

YOUTH WORK AND COVID-19:

**2021 REVIEW OF THE YOUTH WORK
SECTOR RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC – SUMMARY REPORT**



**YOUTH
WORK
CHANGES
LIVES**

This document is 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/documents

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

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OVERVIEW



WHAT'S THE BACKGROUND TO THIS STUDY?

In September 2020 the NYCI published an independent review of the youth work sector response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In May 2021 we commissioned a further study to capture the sector's response 12 months on.

WHAT'S THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY?

We wanted to find out:

- 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?

WHAT DO THE FINDINGS TELL US?

Some of the findings outlined below are stark. We found reduced services, a decrease in the numbers of groups and clubs, and decreased volunteer levels. Moreover, there were over 80,000 less young people engaged in comparison with the pre-pandemic figures.

The youth work sector adapted and collaborated in response to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and young people appreciated their youth leaders' efforts to keep them connected - and their willingness 'to go above and beyond'.

In terms of the impact of the pandemic on youth workers and volunteers, organisations provided a range of supports, but burnout and stress were an issue, while many expressed concern about not being able to reach young people who disengaged.

New technologies and means of delivering youth work services were adopted by many, but adequate digital access and other barriers mean that new methodologies also brought limitations in how young people engaged.



80,000 LESS YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED IN COMPARISON WITH THE PRE-PANDEMIC FIGURES.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGED?

The findings from this research highlighted below indicate a number of priority areas for the youth sector including:

- Maintaining young **person-centred practice** in order to inform engagement with young people themselves, interventions, and policy as society emerges from the pandemic.



- **Funding of youth engagement/re-engagement and volunteer recruitment, training, and support** as the youth sector recovers.



- Strengthened **collaboration** between youth-focused organisations and agencies and workforce development and **support for the well-being of staff and volunteers.**





SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

HOW HAS THE YOUTH WORK SECTOR RESPONDED TO CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

REDUCED SERVICES:

- **32%** were able to maintain a service;
- **63%** continued but with a reduced service; only
- **5%** of respondents discontinued their service¹



LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT BY YOUNG PEOPLE:

- **11%** of organisations increased their engagement with young people (3,655 young people).
- **69%** experienced a decrease in the numbers of young people engaging with their services equalling a **50%** reduction (approx. 159,200 down to 79,123) over **80,000** less young people engaged in comparison with the pre-pandemic figures.
- **83%** attributed the drop to the pandemic²



DECREASE IN NUMBERS OF GROUPS/CLUBS/UNITS:

- There was a significant decrease in service provision for **24** organisations with an overall **62%** reduction (a loss of just over 1000 groups/clubs/units).
- **92%** attributed the decrease to the pandemic²



DECREASED VOLUNTEER LEVELS:

- Most organisations (61%) saw a decrease in volunteer involvement during the first year of the pandemic, with a **64%** reduction (a loss of over 7,000 volunteers)
- A significant majority of these organisations (85%) attributed this to the pandemic⁴



1. Managers and youth workers & volunteers surveys combined, n=261.
2. Managers' survey, n=54.

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

YOUTH WORK SECTOR

RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC:

- **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, their availability, 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.



“I think if we do go back to a lockdown, I think the likes 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)

“ 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 ”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS (contd)

WHAT METHODOLOGIES HAVE BEEN USED TO DELIVER SERVICES AND SUPPORTS TO YOUNG PEOPLE DURING THIS PERIOD?

METHODOLOGIES:

- **90%** of respondents used Zoom/video conferencing to engage with young people;
- **78%** contacted young people through text messaging/WhatsApp
- **58%** delivered activity packs to young people⁵
- 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
- Young people described experiencing a sense of genuine care from youth workers and appreciated the regular contact



LIMITATIONS TO DELIVERING YOUTH

WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC:

- **72%** of respondents indicated young people not having adequate digital access
- **71%** indicated young people who are reluctant to engage digitally
- **50%** of respondents cited difficulty engaging with young people who are 'at risk' or marginalised⁶



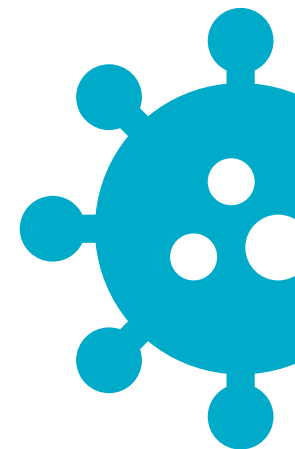
5. Managers and youth workers & volunteers surveys combined, n=203.

6. Managers' and youth workers'/volunteers' surveys, n=212.

“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. **Youth work 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)



“ Youth work was deemed essential but the opportunities which youth workers are used to working in were taken away ”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS (contd)

HOW ARE YOUTH ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING THE WELL-BEING AND CAPACITY OF YOUTH WORK STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS?

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON YOUTH WORKERS & VOLUNTEERS:

- **74%**⁷ of youth workers/volunteers surveyed and **77%**⁸ of managers surveyed were concerned about not being able to reach young people who disengaged
- 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 & VOLUNTEERS WELL-BEING DURING THE PANDEMIC:

Supports 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:

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 & VOLUNTEER CAPACITY DURING THE PANDEMIC:

Staff were supported through training on working digitally, improved digital infrastructure and extra resources, guidance on safety procedures and providing PPE and preparing for returning to in-person provision.

7. Youth workers/volunteers surveyed (n=171).

8. Managers surveyed (n=43).



"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)



“ It's passion and dedication, you know, but that only goes so far – super, talented, amazing people they'll just go into something else ”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS (contd)

WHAT SUPPORTS ARE REQUIRED TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF THE ONGOING PANDEMIC ON THE YOUTH WORK SECTOR IN THE SHORT TO LONG-TERM?

- 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 including 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.
- **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.



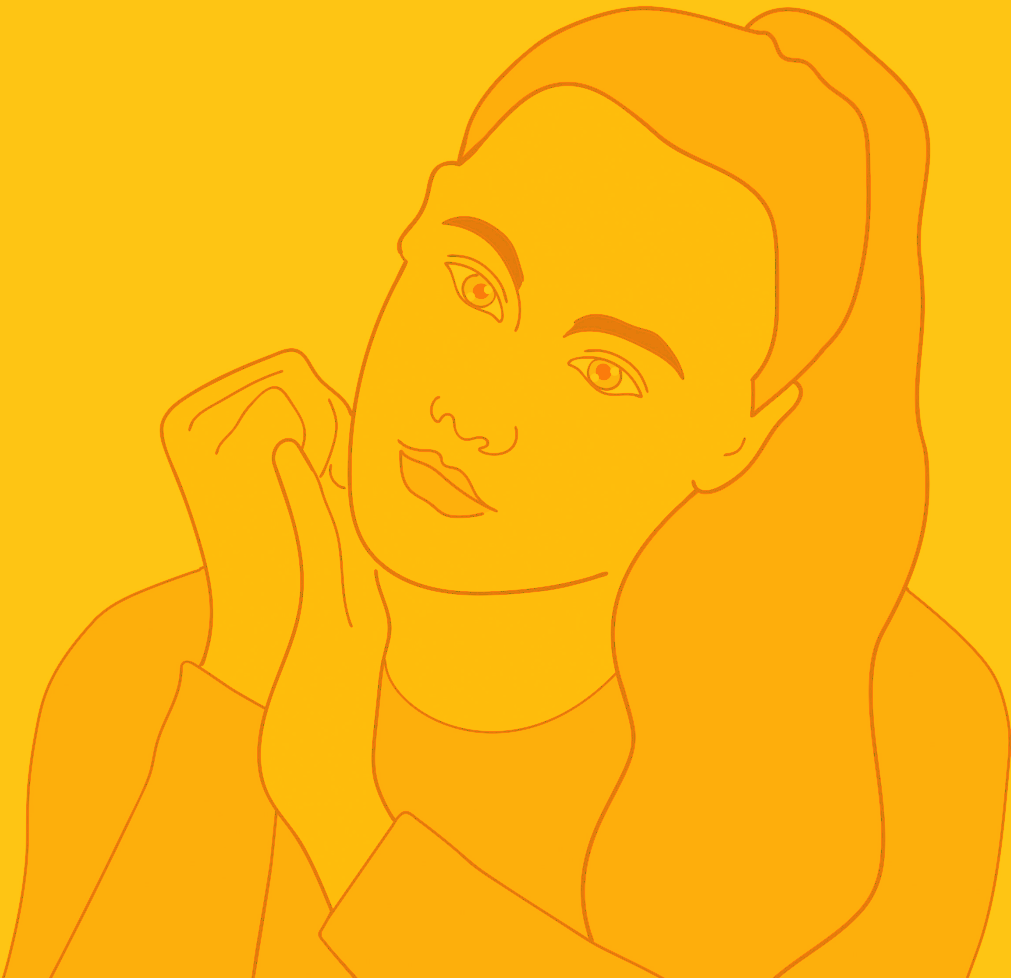
“We need to especially push for more funding just to reach out to more young people, because the way I found the youth services, it was just by chance like I saw a poster and that was really it.

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)

“ We need to especially push for more funding just to reach out to more young people ”

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

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

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.



GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES (contd)

MONDAY NIGHT MADNESS

Monday Night Madness was a **weekly online wacky games night** delivered by Carbery YMCA in Co. Cork, where youth workers facilitated a series of wacky games via Zoom 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

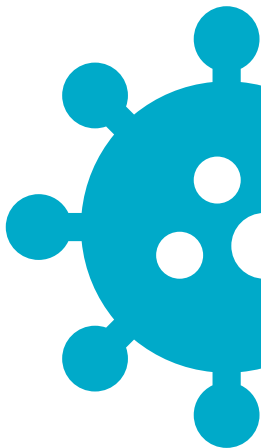
Since its opening in June 2020, Ballyfermot Youth Service staff have been facilitating outreach, youth work, and biking sessions with young people as well as supporting the development of a BMX club at the facility. It has been **an ideal outdoor environment for young people to meet**, socialise and develop new skills.



'GET OUT INTO THAT DAY'

An **activity pack for youth workers** developed by Youth Work Ireland as part of Youth Work Ireland Week (26th April to 2nd 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.



RECOMMENDATIONS

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



1. ADVOCACY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

A youth sector that remains steadfastly committed to young person-centred practice will help to support all young people, particularly the most marginalised and is necessary to inform engagement with young people themselves, interventions, and policy as society emerges from the pandemic.

2. ADVOCACY FOR THE SECTOR

- **Funding** – 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** – there is a need to understand the essential nature of youth work.
- **Visibility of Youth Work** – there is a need to ensure the visibility of youth work, to communicate what youth work is, who it serves and who benefits.

3. STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

Different organisations and agencies can pool their different strengths, skillsets, networks to benefit young people:

- How can the youth sector come together to address the need for a major volunteer recruitment drive, strengthen practice in outdoor youth work, outdoor adventure learning and outdoor education and contribute to policy development to address digital safety ensuring that online platforms are safe spaces for young people?

4. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

The research very clearly highlights the need for continued support for the well-being of staff and volunteers.

METHODOLOGY



DESK RESEARCH

3 SURVEYS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

3 surveys, aimed at different cohorts:

- 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

12 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

FOCUS GROUPS

- 2 youth workers' focus groups
- 1 volunteers' focus group
- 5 youth focus groups

For detailed methodology see complete report available at youth.ie/documents.



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