Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

Youth services during the Covid-19 pandemic – a patchy net in need of investment

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Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted various areas of young people's lives, including access to youth services. The lockdown-induced closure or restricted access to the public services meant that young people lost opportunities to seek support and participate in youth or non-formal activities. The youth sector itself went through a transformation, including transition to almost exclusively online activities, reduced financial resources and increased workload. This resulted in reinforced deprivation of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, who risked being completely left out of the processes and activities important for their (mental) health, non-formal education, employment, social and political participation and leisure-time activities.

Insights from the European and national levels showed limited evidence of using recovery funds for alleviating the impact of the pandemic on youth services. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that governments at national, regional and local level urgently address deficits in services to young people. Although there are no direct measures to address disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the youth sector, many research and policy studies addressed those disruptions and the situation of young people in the changing context. Among those, the most common analysis of the civil society associations' work focused on practices undertaken by the youth organisations in view of the crisis; diversifying tools to reach young people, strengthening digital youth work, along with fighting financial instability and shrinking space for civil society.

This study aims to fill in the gaps in the body of knowledge on the impact of the pandemic on young people's access to youth services. Five expert interviews were conducted with the representatives of the European organisations at national, local and European level. They revealed that the pandemic period has been characterised by several new developments for organisations, most notably by a partial change in the profile of service users and major transformations in working methodology. The increasing complexity of access affected primarily those who needed most help from youth workers and those most dependent on their personal relationship with youth workers. State-operated services received more support in their work with young people during the pandemic than services managed by civil society organisations. This reflected most strikingly in maintenance of regular funding for the state-operated services, whilst the civil society sector struggled to sustain at least a share of their pre-pandemic financial resources.

Desk research and interviews highlighted practices of the civil and public sector that can be shared to facilitate recovery in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, including platforms, instruments and guidelines that target improving both the universal service offers and targeted services for disadvantaged and marginalised young people. Sharing practices should be coupled with gathering regular disaggregated data as a basis for policy making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. These elements for youth policy and practice should be mainstreamed, together with developing adequate criteria and indicators of access to services that could enable more efficient practice and comparative insights among the Council of Europe member states.

1. Introduction: The Covid-19 pandemic and the youth sector

Provision of services to young people can take place through three main modes – public institutions, civil society organisations and privately established and funded services. This paper examines the state-provided or public services and services provided by civil society organisations. While the desk analysis focused on both modes, interviews were conducted only with the service providers from civil society organisations. Service provision varies across the countries. Still, it can be noted that public institutions were the leading providers in the areas of social services, employment and health services. Civil society organisations also provided services in the above-mentioned three areas, but stood out primarily in non-formal education, participation, human rights protection and tackling discrimination.

Boskovic and O'Donovan (2021c), in their analysis of the provision of the state-operated services in the areas of non-formal education and training, mental health and well-being, physical health, financial and media literacy, digital skills, employment, social services, civic engagement, and human rights, identified lowered access by young people compared to pre-pandemic levels. The insights suggested that the pandemic led to a medium or low possibility of service provision to young people, with only 30% of correspondents indicating that it triggered new programmes or projects in the area of youth services. The majority of the newly planned projects and programmes were held online as the youth sector had to transfer its activities from a predominantly physical to a predominantly virtual environment over a very short time. Organisations were coping with a new reality with different levels of success and there was an evident "lack of capacity, resources and training to sustain programmes and services and hold the attention of young people over the period of the lockdown" (O'Donovan and Zentner 2020).

Unequal opportunities for provision of youth services mirrored the significant disparities in youth access to those services. "There is evidence to suggest that countries with developed state sector programmes and services were less impacted and more responsive" (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021c). Still, "young people with fewer opportunities fared worst of all". However, these authors claimed that initiatives to address changed conditions for provision of youth services by the state sector were the exception rather than the norm. At the same time, Boskovic and O'Donovan emphasised that the capacities and opportunities of civil society organisations' adaptation to the pandemic should be of the highest concern as regular structural support to the youth sector varies greatly across the member states of the Council of Europe.

EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership research, including Escamilla and Lonean (2021), O'Donovan and Zentner (2020) and RAY Network (2020b) research results, suggests that the youth sector and provision of youth services by civil society organisations have undergone significant changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. More concretely, "each and every aspect of youth work [was] changed by the pandemic and lockdown (collaboration and communication, co-ordination and decision making, leadership and management, feedback,

mentoring and support, volunteering)" (Escamilla and Lonean 2021). Organisations have especially suffered from social distancing restrictions, from limited access to resources and a narrowed pool of youth workers and youth experts who could engage in joint actions. The youth organisations have also reported difficulties in developing new methods of reaching young people and delivering quality and user-tailored activities. Additionally, there was "the loss of accumulated knowledge and capacity as many trained volunteers and youth professionals had to leave the sector during the pandemic" (European Parliament 2021).

2. Methodology and aims

This study aims to explore access to youth services for young people during the Covid-19 pandemic (including youth information and counselling, youth participation and civil dialogue, non-formal learning, centre-based, online or outreach youth work and volunteering activities). The study includes a mix of research methodologies, combining desk research with in-depth interviews with experts in the youth sector and representatives of organisations providing services to young people.

In the first stage, secondary data was analysed, primarily obtained through desk research on services of youth information and counselling, services related to youth participation and civil dialogue, services related to non-formal learning, centre-based, online or outreach youth work and services related to volunteering activities. Expertise shared via the Youth Partnership Covid-19 Hub was extensively used in the preparation of this study. During the second stage, five in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of youth services providers were conducted at the end of 2021. The respondents were contacted through the transnational networks (FEANTSA-European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, ERYICA-European Youth Information and Counselling Agency, Youth work Ireland (Member of ERYICA and European Federation of Youth Clubs (ECYC)), Eurodesk, the InterCity Youth Network and EYCA-European Youth Card Associations). The resources of the organisations were different compared to small local NGOs that work on a daily basis on the front line, but their perspective was very useful for getting a picture of the reality across countries. In some situations, respondents were more familiar with the concrete local or national cases through their members and in others with international practices. Representatives from the following organisations were interviewed for this study:

- Eurodesk is a European youth information network which was created in 1990. As a support organisation to Erasmus+, Eurodesk makes information on learning mobility easily accessible to young people and those who work with them. With a network of 38 Eurodesk centres connected to local information providers in 36 European countries, Eurodesk raises awareness about European opportunities and encourages young people to become active citizens.

- Youth Work Ireland is the largest youth work organisation in Ireland and is a member of Professional Open Youth Work in Europe (POYWE), ERYICA and the European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC). It was reached through ERYICA – the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency. Youth Work Ireland is made up of 20 Local Member Youth Services and a national office. It works all over Ireland in both the urban and rural context on a daily basis with 76 000 young people and is supported by more than 3 000 volunteers and circa 700 staff.
- The InterCity Youth Network is a European network representing municipalities actively involved in youth work. Through knowledge sharing, peer learning and policy development, they aim to improve the quality and position of youth work within Europe.
- FEANTSA is the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the homeless. It has 140 members across Europe providing a range of services to homeless people.
- EYCA is a non-governmental, not-for-profit association of 38 member organisations that issue the European Youth Card to over 6 million young people in 40 countries across Europe.

The interview questionnaire was constructed following the desk review insights on the modes and areas of youth services that were most affected during the Covid-19 pandemic. Core topics of the study included the following:

1. understanding of youth services;
2. type of youth services provided by the organisations;
3. ways of accessing the services;
4. profile of the young people accessing services;
5. barriers young people faced when accessing services;
6. new competences required for the providers of the youth services;
7. new competences young people needed to access the services;
8. changes in guidelines or standards of service delivery during the pandemic;
9. strengths/innovations and challenges that happened during the pandemic in youth service delivery.

3. Conceptual focus: defining access to service

The research operated with two key definitions: youth services and access to youth services. Youth service definitions vary significantly; stakeholders at a European level do not offer a fixed definition of the complexity of access to youth services. Respondents described "service" as both an institution (provider, organisation, structure) and action or practice. The service can meet the broader needs of young people or specific ones (addressing certain topics, having thematic focus, supporting youth with specific experiences and needs). Diversity of youth services covers a wide range of aspects of young people's lives, starting with shelters and emergency packs for homeless people, and extending all the way to online sport activities. The key criterion is that from the very beginning it should be "designed for young people" (understanding of interviewer from FEANTSA) or "specialised towards young people" (understanding of interviewer from Eurodesk).

The broad scope of the concept allowed adjusting it to different contexts with ease. For example, ERYICA uses the term "youth service" on a par with "youth (information) centre", stressing that the key feature is adopting the questions and needs of the young people as a starting point. The services should be open to all young people without exception and prior appointment and they should provide practical, pluralistic, accurate and regularly updated information on a wide range of subjects, in a variety of forms, prepared both for young people in general and for groups of young people with special needs. Moreover, youth services should operate in a way that personalises the reception of each user, respects confidentiality and anonymity, provides a maximum of choice and promotes autonomy of a young person.

Youth Work Ireland operates with the "one-stop shop" principle of Integrated Youth Services Model, which creates a base for delivering a seamless, holistic and comprehensive service to young people. The approach incorporates not just combined services, but also sharing of staff, resources, space and ways of working.

EYCA's members are very diverse (local and regional governments, public institutions, national youth councils, NGOs and social enterprises), which entails a very broad definition of "youth services". EYCA refers to services as "opportunities of different character that can be provided to youth" in a structured way (for example, at youth centres) or in other contexts (meeting young people where they are). In countries where youth work and youth services are more established, the definition gaps seem to be less evident. In other countries the process of development of even general definitions (youth work, youth policy, etc.) has not been finished yet and the frames of youth services are even less concrete. The scope and thematic orientation of services of EYCA members are very wide, starting with sharing information on existing opportunities to young people at local level, mentoring for career, and finishing with mental health coaching.

Another useful guideline for defining access and quality key services comes from the UK Local Government Association, which applies six key principles for effective youth services, including:

1. youth led-services, meaning that young people's voices are central to the provision offered to them;
2. inclusivity, equality and diversity, which should guarantee that no young person feels marginalised or isolated due to their disability, sexuality, nationality, socio-economic status, special educational needs, mental health issues, religion or any other characteristic;
3. respect, which values and recognises equally all individuals, providing them with opportunities to take part in the activities without fear of judgment or negative stereotyping;
4. quality, safety and well-being, which entails that good-quality services are provided by staff with appropriate competences and safeguarding training that leads to safe and quality services with appropriate levels and types of interventions;
5. empowerment, resulting in young people progressing and engaging in the desired activities that will lead to their better social inclusion and life prospects;
6. positivity, as a basis for development of skills and attributes of young people, without a desire to "fix a problem" (the UK Local Government Association: six key principles for effective youth services).

All concepts have as a common base the initial desire to satisfy the needs of young people while applying youth-friendly approaches. "Access to services" can be understood from different viewpoints, depending on the type of providers and users of some particular services. However, there are several common traits of the accessible services, which surpass physical access and enable all people to reach and enter a certain facility. Access to services, among others, means making services easier to use for all people, regardless of their personal characteristics and their background. In other words, equal access should, first of all, be based upon assuring inclusion and non-discrimination. Quality access to services is underlined by usage of appropriate services based on the users' needs. A definition by Penchansky and Thomas (1981), although primarily coined in a context of accessing health care, can also be adapted to the context of youth services: access reflects the fit between characteristics and expectations of the providers and the clients, which are grouped into five A's: affordability, availability, accessibility, accommodation and acceptability.

Access to youth services can also be seen as access to and full enjoyment of social rights. From this angle**,** access to social rights depends on definition of rights, procedures, information, implementation, resources and availability of resources for the realisation of that right, and on the potential rights' claimants (Daly 2002). When analysing the activities of organisations providing services to young people, the respondents tended to understand "access" as the ability to freely use the services offered, despite the limitations of the

pandemic. The notion of "access to youth services" in the experts' responses overlapped with the notions of affordability, inclusion and proactive approach of youth workers to address the emerging and rapidly changing needs and requests of young people using the means available during lockdown (mainly online spaces). Regarding the online spaces, the Mapping of National Youth Service Portals by Bergan from the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (2018) revealed that the one-stop-shop approach to online youth services can be found in Austria, Belgium (one page per each language speaking community), Denmark, Estonia, Finland (one page for each language speaking community), France, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia and Spain, while Germany and the UK have regional websites and Armenia has three websites dedicated to different topics.

4. Users of the youth services during the Covid-19 pandemic

Brazienė and Petkovic (2021) reflected on strong evidence about the crucial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's access to services in the field of education, employment, health and mental health and social services. Mastrotheodoros (2020) recognised that Covid-19 contributes to already existing inequalities, magnifying disadvantages young people were exposed to, notably in the case of good-quality education, income, access to health care and access to other supporting services. Research shows that young people in rural areas, especially young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), were exposed to higher social and digital exclusion, inability to reach services and accomplish a successful transition from education to the labour market. European Youth Forum (2021) reported that almost half of young NEET people in Europe (49.0%) were not aware of the support services offered by the government to help them find a job, and around one fifth (22.7%) reported receiving income support such as unemployment payments or cash transfers (European Youth Forum 2021). Disrupted provisions of public services left 32% of student needs unmet.

The majority of the respondents did not name any fundamental changes in the profile of their target group (related to gender, age, etc.) though some trends can be interesting to consider. Eurodesk, whose activities focus on international mobility, emphasised that young people who were already in the spotlight and had contacts before the pandemic (alumni or volunteers whose international travels were cancelled due to Covid-19) continued communicating in online spaces more easily, while for the absolute newcomers and fresh service users it was harder to get on board. Prior contact was a definite support force in simplifying access to the service.

FEANTSA stated that the need for support services and safe spaces was higher than usual for all young people experiencing homelessness because many specialised professional services, such as shelters, were closed as they could not fulfil Covid-19-related conditions. According

to FEANTSA data, the number of LGBTIQ young people in need of access to support services grew during the pandemic. These groups have experienced stronger pressure from their social surroundings, as their support networks or resources were no longer able to exercise their roles (e.g. couchsurfing as a hidden form of homelessness was no longer possible), stressed the interviewer.

All those interviewed confirmed that the most marginalised young people had less access to services provided online. Access was restrained not only by a lack of personal devices, but also by the inability to ensure the intimacy and privacy in communication with a youth worker in an online setting, as young people were often deprived of personal space at home. In the case of mental health, one expert interviewed for this study underlined the importance of access not to any services, working close to the theme, but to professional psychological help. In this sense, "professional psychological help" can be defined as a service offered by a certified psychologist or a psychiatrist, which differs from mental health service provided by youth workers who were trained in fields other than psychology or psychiatry.

5. Mechanisms of providing services during the pandemic: vulnerabilities and resilience

5.1. Desk research results

The pandemic has not only amplified the vulnerabilities of young people but has significantly increased their need for support services (Escamilla and Lonean 2021; RAY Network 2020b). Escamilla and Lonean (2021) emphasised that "research on the pandemic impact on youth work, youth organisations and the digitalisation of services for young people revealed increasing inequalities and the risk of marginalisation for young people with limited access to technology" (p. 8). These authors (2021) summarised the insights from several studies on youth work (RAY Network 2020a; European Youth Forum 2020; NYA 2020a; CWVYS 2020) into two effects of the pandemic on youth work and youth organisations: 1) youth workers and organisations lost contact with some of the most vulnerable young people due to limited access to the internet, lack of devices or quiet places to use them and connect with other young people; and 2) some youth organisations managed to reach young people that were otherwise difficult to reach. Those were especially young people more inclined to using digital technologies for networking and socialising. Such cases were quite often reported by UK-based organisations.

Regardless of the differences in national strategies and social and economic aspects of the pandemic, civil society organisations and young people across Europe had similar negative

experiences during this time. The European Parliament study from 2021 revealed that the national strategies for supporting youth organisations and youth work did not improve during the second half of 2020. State actors did not acknowledge youth work and youth organisations as essential providers for young people and the most vulnerable young people were particularly affected by the pandemic. Due to a lack of consultations with young people, policy responses were not aligned with young people's needs (European Youth Forum 2021).

The analysed sources revealed that state-operated youth services and youth organisations providing services to young people had very uneven financial resources at their disposal. More concretely, there is limited evidence of government efforts to increase funding for the youth sector, or other support strategies at national and local levels. Considering these insights, we could say that the public sector took for granted the efforts of civil society organisations during the pandemic. The strength and resilience demonstrated by civil society organisations during the pandemic depleted their resources and have not enhanced formal and financial prerequisites of their functioning.

The second Covid-19 policy brief by Boskovic and O'Donovan (2021b) revealed that the pandemic has exacerbated persistent problems with mental health services for young people. According to this study, 65% of respondents consider provision of services for young people to be affected by the pandemic, most visibly in the areas of mental health and well-being. The insights indicate that the public sector is heavily marked by insufficient and unavailable services supporting youth mental health, which was additionally amplified by the effects of the pandemic. In line with this finding, the policy brief stresses mental health and well-being "as the most important issue for young people that needs to be addressed by European recovery programmes" (p. 14). Moreover, the correspondents emphasised the importance of investment into infrastructure, including the range of social and community services and mental health services available to young people regardless of their background. Investment into infrastructure should also extend to access to the IT infrastructure for young people, especially to young people of lower socio-economic status and young people from a rural background, who were deprived of regular access to private online channels for communication.

Early in the pandemic, governments and stakeholders in youth policy and youth work were not aware of the extent and duration of the pandemic and it seemed as if it would be over by summer 2020. Even back then, policy makers, researchers and other professionals opened a debate on the steps to be taken in the aftermath of the pandemic. Since then, the sector is mindful of the issues to be prioritised under recovery programmes, although there is no unanimous plan on how to reach the prioritised goals. Boskovic and O'Donovan (2021a) recognised mental health and well-being as the first priority area, followed by social and educational activities focusing on civic engagement, social services and non-formal education and training.

Despite the distressing consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the youth sector, the organisations working with young people proved to possess competences and a vision on how to engage young people in new forms of youth work (especially in digital youth work) and how to boost digital competences of the youth workers and young people. Activities performed via digital youth work were able to engage otherwise isolated and difficult-to-reach young people, resolving sensitive issues and building peer support communities in a process of co-creation (Pantea and Makharadze 2021). They accomplished their goals not only through responding to the most urgent needs, but also by cautious prioritising and balancing scarce resources and restrictions to their activities. At the first outbreak of the pandemic, during the first lockdown period, when public organisations and a majority of actors assumed they would be able to resume their activities in a couple of months, youth organisations primarily offered young people advice on health and coping with the changes to their everyday lives. In such a context, some aspects of human rights and social inclusion were deprioritised, including gender and environmental justice, or cultural diversity (Pantea and Makharadze 2021). As the pandemic continued, civil society organisations continued to focus on needs and resumed some activities that had not been prioritised in the first waves.

Regardless of the relatively high visibility of youth organisations' actions and public acknowledgement for their work, there was insufficient financial support from the public sector. As regards the funding, 43.2% of respondents suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted not only youth sector funding, but also the provision of services for young people and "38% of respondents highlight the impact it has on youth programmes' expansion and coverage" (p. 11). Three major areas of state funding across the youth sectors have suffered from decreased funding: non-formal education and training (40.5%), employment (27.0%) and social services (27.0%). At the same time, "provision of services for young people was identified by correspondents as the most important issue impacted by the pandemic, including programme expansion, outreach capacities, national and international projects, training and research" (p. 17).

The pandemic pushed youth sector activities more in line with social work, which also reflected in youth organisation finances. Projects and activities were "cancelled", "delayed" or "hindered", especially in the case of psychological support services. At the same time, new non-formal education and training initiatives (with a strong digital agenda) focused on employment and entrepreneurship and assistance to young people with disabilities. The cross-country survey provides evidence that youth organisations planned for activities in the areas of non-formal education and training (57%), mental health and well-being (49%), civic engagement (46%), physical health not limited to outdoor activities (30%) and employment and social services (30%) for late 2021 and 2022 (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021a).

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed numerous inconsistencies and inadequacies of the national, regional and local systems of youth support across the member states of the Council of Europe. Lack of youth work recognition is one of the aspects that makes those

systems vulnerable to occasional turmoil; this is worsened by the continuing impact of the pandemic. This recent crisis has shown that persisting challenges in recognition of youth work requires urgent attention, as pointed out by the UK National Youth Agency (NYA 2020b): youth services must be classified as essential services working alongside health and education professionals.

5.2. Results of the interviews

The pandemic period has not been straightforward in most European countries: the periods of strict lockdowns were interspersed with relatively open periods when some youth services could partially operate as before. The situation was diverse among countries and even across municipalities and organisations, depending on many factors including the availability of physical space that could be allocated for activities.

During strict lockdowns, services were delayed, cancelled, or partially transformed to an online setting. Rapid and forced digitalisation helped to improve accessibility for some groups of young people (mainly those who were hard to reach before). It raised additional issues: all interviewed experts stressed that most youth services were undergoing rapid developments and adaptations to pursue better accessibility and inclusion, as the boundary between access to youth services and inclusion was blurred.

Youth service providers had to revolutionise digitally. New digital services were introduced and traditional ones transformed to digital format. Examples of changes include online meeting appointments, and online events like quiz games, photo contests, webinars, videos, podcasts, live talks and social media campaigns, etc. (Eurodesk 2021). Some services had more potential for being accessed by young people due to lower contacting threshold: they required minimum efforts for the service user. For example, "Youth Information Chat" (a service operated in Ireland by Youth Information Centres including YMCA Ireland, Crosscare, and by Ireland's Youth Information website SpunOut.ie) was used not only for short consultancy talks but also for making appointments for longer "one to one" online consultations. It also became an important tool to address the mental health issues for young people, sometimes replacing the lifeline or mental health hotlines (Eurodesk 2021).

Another example comes from EYCA, whose primary service shifted to more digital practices, although some countries still prefer using the card in plastic format (in the UK it is used as a form of ID) to help those young people who usually do not have access to the internet or a smartphone to use the service. Member of EYCA Associació Carnet Jove Andorra launched an initiative whereby young people advised their peers what to do during the quarantine. These recommendations were in the form of daily posts on social media, particularly on Instagram. One of the successful initiatives among young Andorrans has been a series of testimonies. This content is based on short videos, made by young people themselves, in which they share their experiences during these unprecedented times. In addition to the testimonials, Carnet Jove Andorra has also implemented Instagram Live Sessions.

Accessibility increased for some groups or modes of youth work and decreased for others. Youth work developed a wider digital outreach, accessing new groups of young people who did not want or could not go to a youth centre or service either because they lived in rural areas or experienced difficulties being in a group of peers in offline settings. But digitalisation questioned whether all online activities without exception can be called youth work. The approaches developed by Verke, the centre of excellence in digital youth work in Finland and adopted, for example, by Intercity Youth, show that the pandemic intensified the professional reflection around the frames of digital youth work, its principles, approaches and limitations.

The principles of "youth work spaces" were re-invented during the pandemic by many organisations providing youth services. The youth work space is seen as a geographic, physical, material, temporal, virtual and human space in which young people can interact with their peers and with youth workers in a positive and secure environment that enables and supports their personal and social development (Youth work essentials). However, during the lockdowns many of these aspects were "frozen" and one of the unspoken objectives of the youth workers was to recreate the principles and values of youth work space in a digital environment. For example, safe spaces were suggested such as small communities in WhatsApp groups, where members were communicating on a daily basis and supporting each other by sharing positive moments, lessons learned, information about different opportunities, etc. (example shared by the Eurodesk representative).

Some innovations on improving access were not linked to digitalisation. For example, EYCA provided special editions of the youth card for free to various groups of young people, such as hard-to-reach youth, young people who are not in any system of state social support, and those who apply to register for unemployment benefits. It helped young people to save up money when accessing some services. It also contributed to their economic power and strengthened their access to other services. Another example was putting in place co-branded cards with universities, enabling students to reach additional facilities on campus.

A significant share of EYCA members represent youth hostels, who were heavily impacted during the pandemic. They had to find new ways to use the spaces and promote youth cards services beyond mobility. Members of EYCA had to replace their business model based on discounts related to travels, by benefits related to "staying at home", for example, giving vouchers to Netflix, online books, educational courses, and online entertainment options. Moreover, young people were the first to lose their precarious jobs. EYCA members were providing card service users with pro bono legal services, giving them advice on how to request their unemployment benefits. At the same time, for some other groups of young people who were more dependent on personal contacts with youth workers, the access to youth services deteriorated. Marginalised young people experienced a deficit of devices, sharing computers with other family members and lacking personal space to have a private talk with a youth worker. Young people from disadvantaged families or young people from "closed" LGBTIQ+ communities were especially affected.

The methods of outreach, detached youth work and outdoor education proved important, particularly for most vulnerable people, since they valued building human relations. It was important to develop alternatives to online work and many service providers realised this soon after the start of the pandemic. For instance, youth workers were operating in the evenings in the local pubs (Ireland), building connections with young people when it was possible. “Social walking” (joint walking and talking while keeping physical distance and other measures of protection) was used as a space for building relations, while in-person communication encouraged young people to speak more freely with a youth worker (a case presented by Eurodesk).

In non-formal education and youth work, synergy of group work is considered the strongest resource for learning. Many organisations introduced online learning options on a wide range of topics during the quarantine period, while access to traditionally understood non-formal education was reduced. International mobility was affected by restrictions on travel and being together in the same physical space. During the first periods of lockdown, providers of non-formal educational activities cancelled or postponed the educational services, while during a later stage different modes of services were introduced in online spaces. All the respondents reported that during less restrictive periods some organisations resumed local outdoor non-formal educational activities.

Lack of access to youth services has been the subject of concern since the beginning of the pandemic. Some services became very difficult to access compared to the time before Covid-19, either because their demand was not so obvious, or their deficit was not highlighted. For example, the respondent from FEANTSA pointed out that many shelters could not be accessed, as shared space was not considered safe. Where such spaces were still operating, young homeless people hesitated to attend as they had a fear of getting Covid-19.

Services related to well-being and mental health have been in higher demand since March 2020. As the respondent from EYCA stressed, access to mental health professionals has not been adequate compared to the growing need of young people. Though some services in this field were provided by the members of EYCA (for example, connecting young people to mental health professionals, organising workshops or other online events with inspirational speakers, encouraging young people to express themselves through art), there has been a demand for affordable professional psychological help.

6. New opportunities and support mechanisms in access to youth services

6.1. Desk research results

Transparent communication and reporting on the pandemic and its effects proved to be one of the pillars in gaining support for government initiatives during the past two years. The state actors who applied direct communication to the young people have been trying to use messages tailored to specific social subgroups, recognising their needs and addressing them in a clear manner. Still, some practices of unskilful and inefficient communication were noted, which triggered an atmosphere of mistrust and a lack of co-operation from the youth associations. According to the Youth Partnership research, 50% of respondents agree that states applied a variety of means to communicate with young people during the pandemic, while results indicate that civil society organisations employed communication with the youth more often (70%) (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021a).

O'Donovan and Zentner (2020) analysed the government communication strategies across the member states of the Council of Europe. They identified several channels and strategies of communicating with young people, mainly from the relevant ministries that took the initiative in communicating directly with young people, like in Bulgaria, Estonia, Luxembourg, Malta and Norway. In Croatia, information was passed to the youth representatives at special events and meetings. Direct communication with young people included press conferences for young people, communicating at the government "open days" and using social media and specially designed interactive webpages (e.g. in Germany). In Austria and the UK, youth information agencies and youth organisations tailored information campaigns to young people, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina youth organisations led the communication with young people on the pandemic. Direct communication with young people at the level of municipalities was an effective strategy employed during the Covid-19 pandemic in Finland, Norway and Sweden, countries that are well known for their youth work being well rooted in the local settings.

In some countries, the pandemic has not significantly increased the provision of digital youth services. In Croatia, there are no regular public-sector online support structures for youth, and youth organisations remain the only ones that provide this type of support. Some other countries that do have structures and mechanisms of support for young people in place decided to put "non-essential" areas of support on hold. This happened to the leisure-time activities that were pushed back in favour of providing formal education, as was the case in the Czech Republic. Several countries registered a willingness to provide online support services to young people, admitting that the staff at public institutions lacked digital skills (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Moldova and Ukraine).

A number of countries managed to put youth services online and digitise their resources and platforms. Some of the examples include offering youth services via private chats and telephones in Austria, online chat services (Ireland), organising hackathons and mobile youth work (Estonia), developing platforms for exchange of practices in the field of child and youth policy (Germany). The Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria provided laptops and other digital support free of charge for vulnerable young people, especially for those in remote areas and socially disadvantaged or minority groups (O'Donovan and Zentner 2020).

This desk review and existing youth partnership research do not provide an exhaustive list of support mechanisms offered to young people by public institutions and civil society organisations. It is certain that many good practice examples remain undetected due to scarce feedback or a lack of regular reporting on the activities targeting young people. The interviews conducted in the scope of this study revealed that new opportunities emerged during the pandemic, which could be replicated in other settings and by diverse actors in the youth field.

6.2. Results of the interviews

The outcomes of the expert interviews clearly demonstrate that access to youth services during the pandemic depended on many factors. For example, it has been much easier for young people who had been using youth information services before the pandemic to continue using them online. Access to information services related to youth mobility was easier for young people who were familiar with the mobility programmes before the pandemic and it was much easier for young people who felt comfortable being online. In the case of vulnerable or disadvantaged young people, respondents mention that these groups used to be approached by youth workers in face-to-face settings, which was not possible during the lockdown. Proactive actions of youth workers was a crucial precondition for using the service by young people in these groups.

Social marginalisation remained one of the barriers. Experience from the pandemic in some countries brought more light to this issue. There is a significant deterioration of access to services for some groups of young people, for example, homeless or LGBTIQ+ youth, who should become more visible and be prioritised by public policies. The pandemic experience revealed the deficit of requested services, accelerated the existing gaps in youth services and contributed to reshaping quality standards and requirements in youth work. Interviewed organisations and networks initiated research and data collection on the effects of the pandemic on youth services. Reflections about accessibility are an integral part of these surveys. The data could potentially be used for developing new strategies that would include measures guaranteeing better access. In this respect, the experience of the pandemic created a basis for developing new guidelines and protocols in youth work, which also has the potential to contribute to improving access to youth-oriented services in a long-term perspective. This is true especially for most youth workers used to face-to-face settings and not familiar with digital youth work tools. Youth Work Ireland developed special protocols reflecting the newly accepted policy approaches to social media and digital youth work in general. It aims to assist youth workers to better navigate the online settings.

Competence frameworks for youth workers had to be adjusted due to the pandemic and new ways of working. Critical and confident use of digital platforms, and competences to adapt offline youth activities to an online setting, are becoming essential features of the professional profile of a youth worker. Professional exchange and mutual learning took place in many networks, umbrella associations of youth organisations and services (e.g. Eurodesk, EYCA). They set up a number of online hubs, presenting practices on access to services. For example, two youth information and mobility networks, the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) and Eurodesk, drafted the competence framework for youth information workers (Frith; Reina; Simon; Sabuni 2021).

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The pandemic period has questioned youth services to the core, exposing weaknesses and structural challenges and highlighting the need to assess and invest in a more structured thinking around youth service delivery across Europe. While youth services were characterised by challenges in outreach, presence and inclusion, suffering loss of funding and brain drain (in particular, services delivered by non-state actors), they also showed strong networking, innovation and adaptability to new modes of working, leading to a series of reflections on competences and standards. Unequal access to youth services by young people was evident prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Diversity of youth work practices, support systems and policy foundations for youth work reveal a gradient system with: 1) well-established systems that provide each young person with possibilities for social inclusion; and 2) systems that do not suffice for essential support. The impact of the pandemic and the lockdown highlighted the differences between the systems, and the need for an urgent response from the national, regional and local governments. Consistent with the diversity of the conclusions that can be derived from the analysis, the following section offers policy implications and recommendations.

Adapt services to youth vulnerabilities

The pandemic has amplified existing inadequacies, which resulted in severe social and economic impact for the most vulnerable social groups. The lines of exclusion, discrimination, disadvantages and scarce resources have deepened, forcing youth organisations and young people to find new techniques of coping with fulfilling their needs. General marginalisation and existing gaps in access to social rights remain key barriers to youth services. Young people of vulnerable background are dependent on social welfare and may live in families where they lack personal devices, space and privacy, and in general have more difficulties with accessing their rights. They relied on face-to-face youth work and personal contacts while this option is often no longer in place due to the pandemic. Another challenge for accessibility is the long distance to reach youth services in rural or remote areas. Lack of affordable public transport hinders access to youth services (McAller 2019), and in the context of pandemic restrictions, the absence of close youth services providers further worsened the situation. Young people experiencing homelessness belong to a particularly vulnerable sub-group of the youth population as they were left without housing options due to closure of shelters. Such adversity entails numerous detrimental consequences, one of which relates to inability to access a range of services, including youth-specific ones, and obtain means for fulfilling their everyday needs.

Costly mental health services for young people were a challenge even before the pandemic. Instruments and tools provided during the pandemic, such as workshops with psychologists, online yoga, expression through art, meditation sessions, etc. do not cover the demand for access to professional services on mental health. Therefore, **youth service providers should**

identify the existing gaps and advocate for better accessibility not only to youth services but also to specialised mental health, housing and other support services for young people, in the wider frame of access to social rights and services.

Develop and strengthen user-tailored and youth-friendly communication

Communication with young people during the pandemic did not contain youth-friendly messages answering the needs of young people (Potočnik 2021). This reality **calls for (re)aligning communication strategies to be respectful of the demands of young people and their specific social circumstances and individual characteristics**. Any other approach poses a threat to autonomy, personal development and full participation of young people in society, and risks to further disengage them from society.

Invest in strengthening all youth services operated by the state and services by the civil society organisations

There were significant differences between state-operated youth services and youth services operated by civil society organisations during the pandemic. The state-operated services mainly kept their regular sources of financing, supported by an already established infrastructure. Funding available to youth NGOs decreased and became less regular, which additionally weakened their capacity to cope with everyday challenges. While **civil society organisations were more proactive and innovative in assisting young people during the pandemic, state support to young people was uneven and hesitant, especially on digital response to their needs** (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021b).

Mitigation strategies by youth organisations were often not matched by funding and support from the state, which left youth organisations and young people in a hiatus of unmet basic needs and growing frustrations. In such a context, universal provision of quality services to young people was far from being realised. To reverse negative trends, **states should carry out a thorough review of the access to provision of quality services by young people and build stronger support systems for universal access, provision and high take-up of services in the areas of health care, education, employment and career guidance, social inclusion and political participation and creative expression of young people's identities and aspirations**.

Invest in regular research and monitoring of the situation of young people and their needs

Two years of the pandemic left a significant impact on the individual trajectories, and the long-term consequences will require thorough strategies and individually tailored approaches. Such approaches need **to identify differentiated impact of the pandemic on various social groups, based on their socio-demographic characteristics and vulnerabilities they are exposed to**. An efficient strategy of tackling social inequalities and inadequate

support systems should include **regular gathering of disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policy making, including implementation, monitoring and evaluation.** Those surveys should include young people as individuals, youth organisations and organisations and institutions working with young people. In addition, **access to services should feature highly on the political agenda** since the pandemic accelerated gaps and intensified existing accessibility barriers. Difference in defining and understanding youth services across organisations in Europe contributes to dispersed information and understanding. To support better provision and offer, **the professional community needs to further discuss definitions, develop criteria and indicators of availability, access and take-up and use this frame to advocate for better accessibility of youth services.**

Support youth work recognition and resilience of youth organisations

Uneven recognition of youth work and the youth worker profession across the member states of the Council of Europe added to the challenges youth organisations faced during the pandemic. While youth organisations were praised for their contribution in combating the effects of the crisis, especially in the early days of the pandemic, their work was often taken for granted and pushed to the margins together with volunteering. Despite this, a significant share of youth organisations demonstrated resilience and capacities to cope with various consequences of the pandemic. Still, their status and the sustainability of mechanisms that have been developed under harsh conditions come under question if not recognised and supported by government institutions. **National governments, together with educational institutions, should set up mechanisms and structures for recognition of youth work and the youth worker profession, which should be coupled with providing infrastructure and resources for quality youth services accessible by all young people.**

Subsequent lockdowns posed challenges to youth social inclusion and to provision of youth services related to funding and competences. Some countries (for example, Ireland) recognised a moment to invest in the infrastructure and competences and they have contributed to building a valuable structure that must be supported after the pandemic. This structure should serve as a foundation for **establishing a more resilient, meaningful and responsive system of youth services, which can operate both in offline and online mode**.

Support innovation and collaborative networking

The pandemic highlighted numerous vulnerabilities of individuals, civil society organisations and state institutions. Nevertheless, it has also been an opportunity to develop new platforms and new guidelines for mitigating the adverse consequences of this health, social and economic crisis. More resourceful and determined policy makers and practitioners have developed guidelines and handbooks on how to tackle various aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic. **Newly developed platforms, instruments and guidelines are a valuable resource**

that can be shared among the stakeholders in the youth field, and be updated and reinforced even after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Proactivity and innovation in the online environment could be considered a prerequisite for guaranteeing digital access to some youth services. Lack of connectivity and large disparities in access to technology, based on pre-existing inequalities, limit the access of young people to online youth services. In response to this, networking had a very strong supportive effect during the pandemic. Being part of a network has been useful for mutual learning, disseminating practices and innovations and quickly adopting new effective instruments for improving access. **Strengthening collaborative networking and partnerships should be supported via different schemes because it contributes to raising quality in youth work and improving access to youth services.**

Improve quality standards in youth work and non-formal education

During the last two years, some organisations have been collecting data on the new youth work reality, while trying to measure the influence of the pandemic on youth work and on the lives of young people. Service providers conducted surveys related to the emerging needs of young people and to the changing landscape of youth work, rethinking the ways they provided services. They initiated internal surveys, developed manuals on how to navigate online landscapes, reshaped the internal competence requirements, and revised their quality criteria better adapted to the reality. **The demand to upskill youth workers to answer emerging needs is based on several key questions: 1) which type of skills youth workers need; 2) to what extent a youth worker should be proficient in the digital environment; 3) to what extent a youth worker should be able to navigate the mental health terrain – an emerging demand; and 4) what are the right skills that facilitate access of young people to youth services.**

Transformation of practices of non-formal education deserve special attention from stakeholders, trainers and youth service providers. The access to non-formal education and training opportunities should become a part of these discussions. **New developments related to digital youth work should be taken on board by stakeholders, reflected within the professional community, and be used for updating quality criteria and standards in youth policy, youth work and non-formal education.**

Invest and strengthen all forms of youth participation

The pandemic showed how impressive the mobilisation of young people could be; they were volunteering, donating, and practising other forms of care in their communities. This mobilisation breaks the negative stereotypes about young people and confirms that young people can be very empathetic and practise different forms of participation, not necessarily only conventionally accepted ones. **The experience of different forms of youth participation**

during the Covid-19 pandemic should be recognised and appreciated. Young people should be included in youth policy making, implementation, evaluation and review.

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DYPALL

ECYC

EYCA

ERYICA – the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency

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