Education Authority Youth Service
and National Youth Council of Ireland

Workshop for Youth Work Managers

in collaboration with YouthPact

'Where are we now?'

Reflecting on the contribution of the youth work sector
in supporting young people to live, work and play
- in a pandemic.

9 February 2021

Report

"Great to lift the head and look around
and listen for a couple of hours."

Workshop participant

Peace4Youth
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Background, Context & Purpose

The youth work response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing public health restrictions, has been recognised by many in and beyond the sector as outstanding[1].

This report draws together the various aspects of the 'Where are we now?" workshop for youth service managers that took place online on 9 February 2021. This half day interactive, sharing learning workshop was designed to make space and time to reflect on the contribution of the youth work sector in supporting young people to live, work and play - in a pandemic, and the enduring public health restrictions associated with it. 90 participants from across the island of Ireland took part and we have used their direct narrative ("in quotes") throughout the report to highlight and illustrate the nature and range of the discussions, feedback and reflections they shared.

The workshop had a deliberate focus on managers, recognising the thought and practical leadership they provided, from the rapid transition to online and home-based working, to the reframing of policies to take account of the new situation and realities youth workers found themselves practicing in. It was also to acknowledge the emotional and well-being support managers offered to colleagues and teams that enabled frontline staff to persist through the highs and lows of an exceptional year.

> **"Staff support and well-being is of paramount importance - it is so important to reach out to staff/volunteers and to take that time to look after yourself and one another."**
> **Participant**

The workshop was intended as a chance to pause, take stock, admire, and celebrate the work that has taken place in youth services, North and South, to actively reach out to and engage those most in need during lockdowns one, two and three: supporting, holding connection and maintaining relationship with many thousands of young people.

A reflective practice and group work approach was built into the workshop session plan. These core youth work methodologies enabled reflection on practice and facilitated the active sharing of learning from what has been an extraordinary and unprecedented period in global history and the history of the youth sector on the island. The workshop was also an opportunity to foster North-South youth work connections, whilst creating the space to make sense of the sector's experience to date, affirm effective practice and own the lessons learned.

This was the second YouthPact collaboration with Education Authority Youth Service and National Youth Council of Ireland. The previous session was an ARK facilitated Roundtable event which brought together over 30 leaders from the youth work sector, academics, policy makers, professionals from the justice system and departmental officials (North and South). A policy briefing paper resulting from the Roundtable is available from the ARK website.

[1] In Ireland, explicit reference to youth work as an essential service was included in the Covid-related Regulations issued in January 2021.

In preparation for the workshop

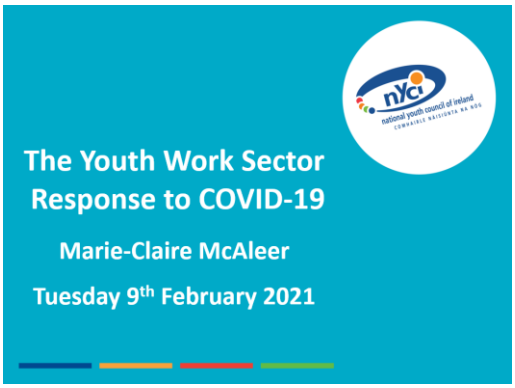
As part of the reflective approach, in advance of the workshop participants were invited to consider the four words they would choose to capture and reflect their personal and/or professional experience of the pandemic and share them anonymously on Mentimeter. 69 participants responded and their words are captured in the word cloud image below.

Challenging and hopeful were the most common words entered. The word cloud illustrates the tension, the state of being stretched, that participants experienced during the previous 11 months: a period covering the lockdown crisis response back in March 2020, through the easing of restrictions and the phased re-opening of public life in summer 2020, into the autumn of enhanced local restrictions, to February 2021 (when the workshop took place) emerging from winter and looking ahead into a period of extended curtailment.

For almost every word used to illustrate the challenging nature of this period, e.g. frustrating, overwhelming and exhausting, there was a corresponding word reflecting the hopeful approach that managers have held on to, e.g. thankful, inspired and optimistic.

The exercise illustrates the potential for cognitive dissonance, a sense of mental discomfort, that can be experienced from holding what are essentially conflicting feelings at the same time. For example, the challenge of feeling both empowered and detached, grateful and depleted, encouraged and uncertain. In the breakout room section of the workshop, participants described “Continually asking questions: am I doing the right thing?” Or “Why am I doing this and what impact is it having on those around me?” A willingness and capacity to reflect in and on action during this period undoubtedly helped mitigate this challenge.

Keynote input



Drawing substantially on the findings of the **NYCI research** undertaken in the summer of 2020, Marie-Claire McAleer, Head of Research and Policy with the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), gave the keynote input. The input also drew on global and European studies of children and young people's experience of the pandemic. **The key message was, "overall, the pandemic has had a negative impact on the lives of young people, especially at risk or marginalised young people."**

The pandemic and ensuing public health restrictions have had a negative impact in relation to young people's mental health and well-being. It has created feelings of uncertainty around access to education, for some it means the loss of a job and concerns for the future. It has also had a social and personal impact because of the lack of social contact with and isolation from friends and loss of structure and routine in their lives. It has shone a spotlight on the digital divide and the challenge of trying to adapt to new ways of learning online, for some in a confined and unsuitable and/or crowded family household. For young people from minority groups and those living in rural or remote areas there are further challenges accessing digital youth work services.

The NYCI research also captured the significant cost of the pandemic for youth workers and youth organisations, including, "exhaustion, emotional labour, stress, unhealthy work/life boundaries, isolation from colleagues, technical issues, safeguarding concerns."

However, this wasn't the whole story. The research served to highlight the extent of the youth sector's response:

- Adaptation, innovation, creativity - throughout the year, but not least during the emergency period and the rapid transition to online and home-based working,
- Responsiveness to need, availability, commitment to young people,
- One-to-one engagement online, outreach, emotional well-being contact by phone, text and social media platforms,
- Online group engagement, events and projects, local community engagement, distribution of care/activity packages and food hampers,
- Youth workers stepped into the gap and engaged in a steep learning curve.

The keynote input set out the bigger picture and wider context that youth work managers have been operating in for the past year. The presentation acted as a touchstone and reference point for the dialogue and engagement planned for the small-group, breakout rooms session that followed.

A copy of Marie-Claire's presentation, including links to research and reports referenced, can be accessed **here**.

Sharing the learning

Following the keynote input, participants were allocated into pre-assigned breakout rooms with a balance of managers from the North and South.

Each breakout room had an appointed, and briefed, facilitator, who guided participants through eight questions: five reflective focussed questions and three forward looking questions on the theme of sustaining ourselves, colleagues and engagement with young people. A notetaker recorded the conversation and engagement in each room, which was captured on a shared Padlet that which was visible to all participants.

In advance of the workshop, 10 organisations/projects had been contacted and agreed to make a short input at the start of the breakout room session (see appendix 3). The purpose was to highlight an example of their organisations' response to the Covid-19 pandemic, establish points of connection between participants, stimulate discussion, spark engagement and the sharing of insights from practice in their small group.

Throughout this section participants direct narrative has been captured in quotation marks.

Question 1. How has what you have heard today in the keynote input and the small group input resonated with you and your organisation's experience of the pandemic?

Reflecting on what they heard in the keynote input and in the opening example of practice shared in their individual small group breakout rooms, managers indicated that there was a "huge" degree of resonance around "the commonality of experiences across the sector".

The "innovation and creativity" of staff in facing into the situation brought about by the pandemic for young people, youth workers and the youth work sector, resonated strongly. This was captured by one participant as "adaptability - [the] youth sector jumped in heart first". The flexibility of the workforce was also recognised, "upskilling" especially in terms of becoming more "tech savvy" and doing so at pace. Managers recognised that it was "important to empower teammates at times to trust their intuition and to find how to connect with young people" in the online space.

Holding to the principles and processes of youth work while engaging with young people in this new online space also resonated. For example, remaining "young person orientated", holding "presence" with young people and engaging with "intention" meant that "relationship building has been possible online".

"Partnership working and learning/sharing with each other" and the "importance of partnership and knowing your community" in responding to the pandemic also resonated with managers. As did examples of "collaborative work with other agencies". In one example highlighted, an organisation worked with the PSNI in order to facilitate the operation and

delivery of its outreach work. For another organisation it was also outreach work that led it into regular contact with Gardai, sharing concerns about the lack of visible services for young people and identifying local areas where vulnerable young people were coming together.

One manager shared that their organisation had "seen a massive growth in wider support networks" and another highlighted that such networking extended to "sharing tools and activities within our teams and other organisations".

Some projects reported being able to extend their reach into target areas and groups as a result of moving their services online, however this was not the experience for all participants. Pre-pandemic hesitancy to engage in youth work in the online space, concerns around safeguarding, access to suitable devices and WiFi (especially in rural areas) were highlighted as pressures and challenges in respect of holding connection, engaging and maintaining relationship with young people in lockdown.

The view expressed (opposite) by a participant captures the discussion on the recommendation within the NYCI research around keeping relationships central and maintaining young person-centred approaches in youth work, whether online or face-to-face:

"I think it's possible for us to do contact with young people online and the impact we are having is so positive, but for many young people this isn't possible or they won't want to engage that way. I think we need to still see the strength that face-to-face and the human contact aspect of youth work has and see this as vital."

Participant

Another aspect of the keynote input and examples of practice shared in the small group breakout sessions that resonated, was that the youth work sector, North and South, had "stepped up and sustained itself against all odds".

Question 2. What have been the key enabling factors for you and your organisation's work during the pandemic?

"Our organisation's work in the background to develop guidelines and procedures for the safe, effective engagement of young people."

Participant

"The organisation acknowledged to staff, that it was not a level playing field in terms of how different staff would be able to continue to work."

Participant

"Commitment, passion and adaptability of staff and volunteers to respond and remain connected and supportive to young people."

Participant

Variations of the word and theme of 'connection' emerged often when managers describing what the enabling factors were for their organisations. For some this meant "linking with partners and other agencies to see how to move forward during the pandemic" or "utilising an already established network in new ways". Another participant described "drawing on local business to support connectivity where there is a digital barrier". There was recognition that "community connectivity has been central and underpins all the online connectivity."

"An innovative staff team who can think on their feet and change at the drop of a hat. Redeveloping programmes traditionally run face-to-face to run online" was considered "powerful stuff". "Youth workers have really stepped up and some that have had strong digital skills have been very innovative in how they have engaged young people, for example, in social media."

But it wasn't all online and phone calls, there were many examples shared of "workers connecting with young people on doorsteps" and "one-to-one walks". The Roadmap was cited as enabling the voluntary sector in Ireland to "continue an element of face-to-face work" with those most in need. Whilst in Northern Ireland "the ability to mobilise a workforce through the EA Youth Services to deliver food packages" was highlighted as a means for workers to hold connection with young people. Workers, North and South, involved in the distribution and delivery of advice and guidance materials, resource packs, care and food parcels, etc. described this as an "eye opener - changed perceptions on young people - poverty that they didn't see in youth centre".

"Regular welfare check-ins with the teams, weekly support and supervision. "Giving people the time and space" were among the approaches highlighted as an enabling factor for effective practice during the pandemic. "A management team who focused on the human aspect in this. Allowing people to focus on task rather than time. Being conscious of all the challenges that staff have, acknowledging that, lead to greater desire to do things well."

"A management team who focused on the human aspect in this. Allowing people to focus on task rather than time. Being conscious of all the challenges that staff have, acknowledging that, lead to greater desire to do things well." Participant

Another organisation shared an example of how they, "stripped everything back to the essential services. New teams formed. In those early days, even though we were struggling, some staff were really shining, being very innovative in how they engaged with young people."

The growth mindset adopted by workers, managers and organisations at the outset of lockdown was considered a key enabling factor in the success of the youth work sector's response in the pandemic.

Other enabling factors in brief:

- "Volunteer engagement: Some excellent work done by volunteers to support remote engagement of young people."
- "Risk and Reward: An appetite to get involved, and an organisation that has your back."
- "Involving the whole team in the process - trust."
- "A lot more one-to-one time with staff than usual."
- "Support with safeguarding. Clear resources and practical support."
- "Encouraging staff to engage in self-care and some team building."

Question 3. What have been the major barriers and challenges for you, the workers you manage and your organisation?

Although this question was focussed on managers themselves, the workers they supported and their organisations, participants chief concern was for young people. Managers struggled with "the challenge of leaving young people behind and being aware that some young people are being left behind", especially in marginalised groups. Questioning themselves, "Am I doing the right thing? Am I putting more pressure on young people?" "Are we invading young people's space?" " How do we sit with a mental health response going online and how do we support young people with this?"

Initially, the challenge was "trying to find ways around bureaucracy to allow young people access to the available technology", although that situation changed over the periods of lockdown and at the session there was recognition that "policies are improving". However, what quickly emerged were deeper "problems with connectivity and young people's access to IT and internet", which highlighted a digital divide and the extent of digital poverty. Plus, some organisations found that "young people struggled with digital engagement, in some ways it became apparent that some were not as digitally savvy as we thought they'd be".

Although it wasn't "just an issue of not having Wi-Fi and devices, but also the issue of private space". "So much is lost online. You just don't know as much about what else is going on in other young people's lives. On the other hand, you learn some more about young people when they log in from home. You get a sense of what their home lives are like." "Trying to fulfil the ethics and values of youth work while managing the online relationship space and concerns with this, for example, who is listening in the background, what is going on for the young person?" was a constant concern for workers. "Creating space for young people to talk without family members being around in the background" was a challenge "young people not as open or 'themselves' in the zoom space".

Many managers, workers and organisations also struggled with the move online, "IT infrastructure, skills and knowledge [was] a real barrier especially for older staff members." Others recounted that "moving to online took time providing staff with laptops, etc."

Frustration was expressed that grants and financial support for this didn't come until much later into lockdown. As is a manager's role, one participant explained that "it has been necessary to try to see where staffs' strengths and weaknesses are, for example, staff with less digital skills have gone into the centre to create packs that could be sent to young people."

Aside from the fact that the world was in the midst of a pandemic, "some staff have found it really difficult to continue to work for various reasons". For example, working at home whilst trying to balance childcare, home-schooling and/or caring responsibilities, without the "chance to take a breather by travelling and switching off". This led to a sense, for some, of feeling "totally overwhelmed", disempowered and deskilled, in particular, around online engagement and connecting with young people and colleagues through social media platforms.

Managers also described how "a lot of people felt guilt or shame and this needed to be removed e.g. staff feeling bad about struggling when they felt they were fortunate compared to others." There were also examples of some workers "who have needed a little gentle holding back or really preserving themselves - to sustain themselves." The challenge for managers in the early lockdown was that they had to provide this support to workers online to "staff who really need the in-person support."

Reflecting on the period of easing where face-to-face/in-person work with young people and teammates resumed, some managers highlighted that there was "staff anxiety" at coming to work and for some "fear was massive and a barrier in face-to-face work". It was explained that this may have been due to the efforts required to comply with Covid-secure protocols, such as track and trace, social distancing, handwashing, wiping surfaces/touchpoints.

The perennial challenge of communication was exacerbated as the pandemic took its course and the public health messaging and government/sectoral guidance in response to the easing of restrictions changed regularly. Organisations, managers and workers felt that they were continually asking or being asked, "what can we do? or what can we not do?". However, over the period of the lockdowns this too was described as "getting better".

Other challenges in brief:

- "Staff who took up new positions and didn't have the relationship with young people yet in the community and they felt quite lost."
- "A lot of the volunteers … have disengaged"
- For larger organisations, "it can be difficult to respond to the speed of our ideas or our challenges".
- The cost of "redesigning premises and PPE".

Question 4. How have you used the learning so far and adapted your work in response to the current situation?

Staff well-being and promoting self-care was one of three key focusses of this section of the small group process. Regular check-ins and having clear boundaries between work and home was considered crucial to sustaining staff during the pandemic.

> **"Staff support and wellbeing is of paramount importance - it is so important to reach out to staff / volunteers and to take that time to look after yourself and one another."**
>
> **Participant**

The ongoing development of safeguarding and operational policies and procedures in response to lockdowns and the sometimes fast changing public health legislation and guidance was the second key area of learning.

> **"Streamlined our processes, adapted our child protection and operational policies and procedures to address online work and what we are actually doing."**
>
> **Participant**

Whilst the headline feature of the pandemic has been the very practical and care-focussed nature of the youth sector's response, e.g. food boxes, care parcels and activity/ resource packs, organisations pivoted and found ways to continue to meet the developmental needs of young people in the online space.

> **"The developmental nature of the work continues to be important. Young people clear on the need to continue to develop and learn and grow, this need continues regardless of external circumstances"**
>
> **Participant**

Managers described "how the delivery of care packs supported building relationships with parents". Others outlined how they learned to blend their approach by creating "packs that young people have a tactile relationship with and we use these in conjunction with running online sessions".

National and regional organisations, in particular, took advantage of the situation as they were "no longer restricted to a geographical area" and extended their "reach further via online" services. One organisation highlighted how "remote working has supported keeping many girls involved when our volunteers are limited."

As organisations and workers adapted to youth work in the online space, many found it a "positive tool for training programmes". Other talked about how adapting their advocacy work for the online context had "been critical in supporting young people to overcome bureaucratic barriers. Managers also described how they banked their experience from the first lockdown and "have learnt to implement quicker".

Question 5. What's the one thing (learning, item, insight..) you'll bring with you from this experience to a post pandemic time?

"Values: Once the technical difficulties are addressed our values remain the same."

"Commitment to worker wellbeing - not reactive, needs to be embedded."

"Importance of continuing upskilling and keeping abreast of changing / emerging technology."

"Continuing the group work online and involving others all over the country, both the young people and the workers."

"Interagency collaboration"

"Some young people really shone in the online space, those who had not felt confident to speak in in-person space, found confidence to interact online."

HOPE

"We need to still see the strength that face-to-face and human contact aspect of youth work has and see this as vital."

"New skills in applying for funding."

"Having something to aim towards and to boost the morale and keep the purpose on track."

"Starting to consider about whether the physical space - use of the office should be used the way it used to be."

"Embrace technology"

"We need to look at how we are training youth workers in colleges/universities now and how we can further develop the courses to support this element of work with young people."

"Greater reach nationally"

"Options for working from home, options for increased online youth work- blended learning models."

Sustaining ourselves, our colleagues and practice

In their small groups, managers were asked three final questions on the how to sustain themselves in the work, what their organisations can do to sustain staff/volunteers and what the youth sector can do to sustain engagement with young people. A summary of the discussion is set out below.

What's the one thing you can do to sustain yourself in your work or personally?
• Discipline to turn off the laptop/phone when needed. • Critical reflection, discussion about practice; having a critical friend. • Make time now once a week for a coffee and a chat and no talk about work. • Be aware these are not normal times - normal output is not expected. • Having clear boundaries out of work. • Setting boundaries and sticking to them. • Show gratitude, be aware of my 'ownself'. Need to mind me to mind others. • Be a bucket filler (children's book). Taking time each day to fill my life with good things and to do this for others. • Move forward - look out the window and see the brightness.
What's the one thing your organisation can do to help sustain its staff/volunteers?
• Ask staff what they need. • Managing and clarifying expectations. • Make sure that you have an up-to-date communication strategy to support staff and make sure you don't lose anyone along the way. • Taking the time for reflective practice, what is working, what isn't, what is it the young people want to do. • Weekly check-in and team meetings to make you feel like you are part of a team. They tend to be much better attended online. • Mindfulness at the start of meetings. • Well-being committee. • Compassion and understanding was good across the organisation. • Training, support, regular check-ins.
What's the one thing the youth sector can do to sustain engagement with young people?
• Having been named as an essential service [in RoI] is important. • Recognising volunteers and recognising the role of the youth worker. • Sector needs to be much more widely plugged into government. • Learn from research. • Don't forget about old practices. • Learn from this process. • Sharing good practice. • Sharing resources across youth sector organisations. • Meeting young people where they are at, youth-led and flexible. • Aware of as yet unknown mental health impacts … we need to plan and lobby now for a response to support young people. • Provide access to training equally to different parts of the youth sector. • Find opportunities to partner together…. to find ways to reach the marginalised groups. Best results through collaborations. • Youth work sector work in solidarity. • Would like to see the youth sector, North and South, moving forward, leading agencies, rolling out information and information sharing is vital.

A response to the to the discussion

Arlene Kee, Assistant Director Children and Young People's Services - Education Authority Youth Services and Mary Cunningham Director of National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), reviewed and responded to the feedback that was captured from the breakout rooms.

Arlene Kee - Assistant Director Children & Young People's Services - EA Youth Services

Commenting on Managers' feedback of what resonated with them from the keynote presentation and workshop inputs, Arlene highlighted the presence and intentionality with which managers and workers responded to the pandemic and the importance of quality of relationship held with young people.

The importance of maintaining quality relationships with staff, volunteers and communities also came through from the breakout room discussions and although it was clear that this was a very difficult time, the opportunity was taken to be creative. Arlene also drew out from the discussions that people have used this as a time for self-reflection and look at how they could measure engagement with young people differently.

Concerns around online fatigue were acknowledged, this was compounded by children and young people being online during the day at school rather than face-to-face, which added to the challenge for the youth work sector. However, what was emerging was a big difference, based on learning from experiences of lockdown one, two and three, in how to respond to this challenge.

The sector has approached the challenge of getting alongside young people in lockdown positively. By looking at different spaces and, for example, using online gaming as one of the new ways that we share in young people's experiences when we can't be with them in-person. Overall, the feeling from the breakout room discussions was that there is a sense of purpose in the youth work sector. That we have a direction of travel. That we can overcome challenges and difficulties and that presence and relationship with young people is the most important thing.

Moving on to look at Managers' feedback on the enabling factors, Arlene highlighted six key areas, the person, places, practicalities, pride, positivity and partnership.

Speaking of the person, Arlene highlighted what stood out for her was, "your personality, your tenacity, your passion and your professionalism." Speaking of the creativity displayed across the youth sector in the past year, she spoke of "a great sense that people have been able to use their own gifts and abilities to bring forward this service".

What also came through from the breakout room feedback as an enabling factor was the importance of "being in place where the young people are". As highlighted already, the challenge was significant, but organisations, managers, workers and volunteers used this period as an opportunity to upskill so as to be in those places and spaces for young people.

Organisations and managers also created places and spaces to spend more time in conversation with their staff and volunteer teams. "Maximising these opportunities for reflecting on practice and building the skills base has been very important".

Getting down to the practicalities Arlene reflected on how, "people have looked at the needs of their children and young people, their colleagues and themselves and have tried to see what they can do to problem solve and to be positive about how they can move forward. Whether that has been working with businesses to collect IT and make sure that children have access to online services where there is digital poverty. Or whether it's looking at how to upskill themselves - they have found new and practical ways of working."

The sector has been very clear that youth work works. There is an underpinning sense of pride and positivity that has helped the service to move forward in these times. "Pride in yourselves, in your colleagues and in us as a service to be able say, we know we can make a difference. We know when we have seen others step away, we have been able to take forward this space and take up the place that the young person needs and be an advocate on their behalf."

Partnerships have also been a positive development during the pandemic. For example, between the voluntary and statutory sectors, with the PSNI or Gardai, with local communities and with parents. "There has been a lot of very positive engagement with parents, where they now understand the role of youth service much more".

"All of this has led to a sense of positivity in the service. Not only in terms of government officials understanding and seeing the value of what we do, but positivity in the service in terms of how we can gain more resource and get more funding for what we do. Also, how we can build a sense of our methodology and our pedagogy to say, we can create, we can progress and we can meet the needs of children and young people in a very positive way."

In ending her reflection on the breakout room discussion Arlene commented, "As we move forward the enabling factors are very much about addressing the barriers to our children, to their families and to the wider community and there have been very clear examples outlined in the feedback you have shared today about how we can do that."

Mary Cunningham Director of National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)
Commenting on Managers' feedback on the areas of barriers and challenges, Mary highlighted that, "One of the things that I have been struck by today is the amazing experience there is in this gathering of youth work managers, North and South. What has shone is the underpinning values of youth work, they have been highlighted more, perhaps, than what they have been previously."

Mary drew on a quote from the book "The Boy, The Mole, The Fox" to reinforce her experience of the positive approach that managers' took during the workshop and that the youth sector has taken during the lockdowns. “Is your glass half empty or half full?” asked the mole. “I think I’m grateful to have a glass.” said the boy.

Reflecting on the challenges managers shared in the breakout rooms, Mary highlighted the sense that some participants felt of "being overwhelmed" at times and described how "it is absolutely understandable with everything we have had to deal with this past year and the speed with which everything happened".

"What has come through from your feedback is your real concern for young people and particularly young people that are most marginalised and therefore most at risk of being left behind. I think that needs to be a particular focus for all of us in terms of taking this work forward."

What came through in the feedback was that managers are supporting staff who both have challenges in terms of the technology and in their personal/home life. Managers sought ways "to acknowledge and support workers that are home schooling, are dealing with caring responsibilities and other issues around job security - either for themselves or others in their household - and what the future holds? What also came through in the feedback in terms of staff management was that that "managers are working to the strengths of their staff. They are deploying youth work methodologies and taking strengths and asset-based approaches and that is really good to hear."

Despite workers individual circumstances, "there has been huge learning" from addressing the barriers and challenges faced. Another area that stood out in the feedback was the continued focus on "the developmental nature of the work. That even in these really, really challenging circumstances has continued".

"There is recognition that some young people have really shone in the online space. Some of those who find it difficult in the physical space have actually done better in the online space. And when we come to a post pandemic situation it is likely that youth work will continue to offer a blended or hybrid model to continue to engage those young people."

Looking at the that one piece of learning, item or insight managers were hoping to bring forward with them from this time, there was a focus on "embracing technology" and looking "at how we can best embed that in our work". Some organisations "have significantly extended their geographical reach" through technology and that is positive, especially for the inclusion of rural young people.

Learning gained from making greater use of youth work outdoors during the different stages of public health restrictions was also highlighted as something that managers will bring with them to a post-pandemic time.

"A growing sense of responsibility for youth worker well-being" was one of the key pieces of learning and insight that managers highlighted that they wanted to bring with them from this time. "There is a focus on it now, but youth work can be difficult work all the time, therefore it needs to be embedded in everything we do.

In closing her reflection on the feedback Mary commented, "Covid-19 has foregrounded youth works commitment to young people and that is something we absolutely must hold onto. When we are talking about youth work, we are talking about our commitment to young people and their best interests. We have always believed, but I think now it is better recognised that youth work is very critical for many young people and it has been given opportunities to demonstrate that during the pandemic and to shine a light on it, in a way that hasn't happened before."

An external view on the workshop

Professor Maurice Devlin, Head of the Department of Applied Social Studies at Maynooth University, attended the workshop where he joined a number of the small group breakout rooms. Maurice noted a high degree of resonance, connection and overlap between the NYCI research presented in the keynote input and the conversation in the breakout rooms.

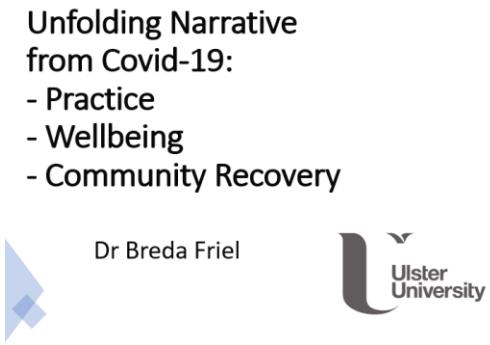
"For example:

- The value of digital and online innovation and creativity (and the impressive arc of learning involved for youth workers and young people), but its inability to fully reach all young people (for multiple reasons - technological, social, cultural, economic) or replace certain key aspects of youth work;
- The remarkable levels of adaptability, agility and resilience shown by youth workers but the unavoidable reality that the pandemic had taken its toll in terms of wellbeing, work-life balance, physical and mental reserves of energy;
- The vital importance of clear and effective communication at all levels;
- The demonstrated potential of, and further need for, systematic opportunities for critical reflection, peer-support and sharing of resources within, across and beyond individual organisations.

This latter point was held to be all the more important because the 'fall-out' from the pandemic (for young people, for youth work, for society) cannot yet be properly estimated and will take some time to begin to establish, but in any case will require careful, imaginative planning and adequate resourcing.

Participants also stressed the importance of upholding and maintaining the distinctive values and principles of youth work as we move out of the pandemic, including those relating to personal development and wellbeing; equality, diversity and interculturalism; and social justice, including climate justice and sustainability. These were reflected in the views of participants about areas for future collaboration detailed in the Next Steps section later in this report."

Well-being and self-care



Dr. Breda Friel, Course Director for Postgraduate and Master's programme and CPD Short Courses in Community Youth Work at Ulster University Magee, was invited to speak at the workshop on the theme of wellness and self-care. In her short presentation, Breda drew on training she has developed on using Psychological First Aid and shared insights from her current research focusing on the unfolding narrative and practice themes emerging from Covid-19.

In opening her presentation Breda highlighted that everything she was going to talk about was about "the practitioner", but that it also relates to young people's experience of the pandemic. She started with a reminder that the pandemic didn't just catch us as practitioners by surprise, but it caught all the mechanisms of the state and the institutions that we vest our safety in by surprise also. When the virus first landed on the island in February 2020 almost everyone thought it was going to be short-term and acute. However, it soon emerged that it was going to be a longer term and chronic stressor and the impacts are quite different.

Breda described an emerging narrative in which people, to a greater or lesser extent, have lost faith in the *fact* that life has a certain consistency and meaning. Our sense of ordinariness has gone. The assumptions/beliefs that we had previously made/held, based on our experience of the world, have been tested, shaken, even upended. We all have an optimum level of functioning and finite levels of motivation. These have been depleted by our constant vigilance, responding to stress/stressors and by the multiple losses we have experienced. For example, attachments, perceived future, structure, relationship(s), social contact, routine, order, meaning, safety, death, health, knowledge, understanding, certainty.

Breda remarked on the words that participants used to describe how they experienced the pandemic, which on the one hand include strengths-based, protective and resilience factors and, on the other hand, they are about the external distractions and triggers from Covid-19 that create a reaction in all of us. It is impossible not to have been impacted by the pandemic as we are all constantly experiencing it. In sharing our own and listening to the narratives of colleagues we must recognise that everyone's experience is unique, there is no one size fits all response to the real and/or perceived threat of Covid-19. Critically, everyone's experience needs validating.

Breda's research also highlights how the youth work sector has approached the pandemic and the enduring public health restriction with a "Growth Mindset", that's the idea that even in the present circumstances there is an opportunity for growth.

As heard in the keynote presentation and workshop breakout rooms, these growth opportunities have included:

- A focus on reflection and the opportunity for workers to develop reflexivity ("what's going on with me right now");
- Adapting practice to reach out to, hold connection and maintain relationship with young people in the online space;
- Developing policies to support staff and young people to engage safely and confidently in online youth work;
- Establishing new cross-sectoral partnerships and collaborations;
- Expanding organisational reach into geographic and communities of interest;
- Engaging for the first time in online advocacy and campaigning work;
- Learning, e.g., using technology, enhancing knowledge of digital and social media, testing out blended learning approaches, developing skills in the use of online meeting and engagement tools and platforms.

"The important factor when undertaking a Growth Mindset in these times is to have baby goals, goals that are real/realistic, specific and manageable."
Dr. Breda Friel

Breda's research into the unfolding narrative has also looked at workers' needs. In summary these include the need for practical support, standing down some procedures and clarifying others (e.g. office specific practices/working at home), access to ongoing support, consistent communication, acknowledgement, recognition, validation (of their circumstances, efforts and narrative), professional and personal care-planning. All of these areas arose in the breakout room discussions, both in terms of being identified as ongoing needs and in the examples of practice shared between managers.

In relation to professional and personal care-planning Breda outlined that these require a process/framework/protocol that can be tailored to the individual; in so much as it has the capacity to respond to a worker's psychological safety and physical safety needs. It starts with an understanding that we have all been subjectively impacted by this real and ongoing chronic crisis and stressor situation. These principles are important as organisations, in preparation for the return to in-person practice, seek to develop a range of clear and specific strength-based, worker (self-)care and goal-setting plans, which, in turn, need to be embedded into everyday practice.

Breda highlighted that just as community youth work has been part of the response to Covid-19, it can be a part of the entire community recovery strategy from the pandemic. This is consistent with approaches taken following other natural disasters, humanitarian crises/emergencies or disaster recovery situations.

In closing Breda shared an open invite, as part of her UU community activity, for participants to join her on Monday mornings (9.00am) for a 30 minute theme-based mindfulness practice delivered via Zoom (Meeting ID. is 83291858671 and Passcode: 813301). "All welcome."

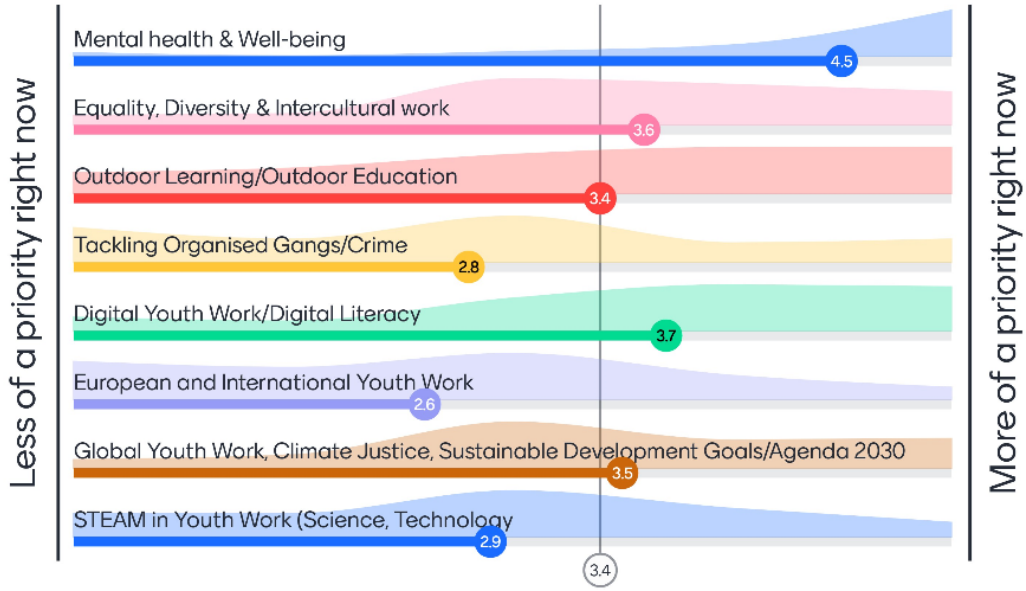
Next steps

During the workshop, participants were polled on which areas, from a list of eight, they would prioritise if there was the opportunity to meet, share practice and explore collaboration with sectoral colleagues, on a North-South basis. Seventy-seven participants took part and, perhaps unsurprisingly, 'Mental Health and Well-being' clearly topped the poll with a priority rating of 4.5 out of 5. The strength of feeling around the priority area that Mental Health and Well-being is for the sector, was further emphasised by participants following Dr. Breda Friels's input on 'Well-being & Self-Care', when they expressed a desire to explore these themes in greater detail.

There was also a note of caution raised by particpants around the focus on mental ill-health, and a call for the youth work sector to "tread carefully" as "we can't be everything to young people". The point being that, although therapeutic group work can and does take place, youth work is an educative process. The need to be clear on the boundaries of our role and "draw on other agencies" with the relevant expertise when young people are experiencing a mental health crisis, was highlighted. Linked to this point Breda urged caution around the narrative that the pandemic is causing a mental health crisis. She suggested that, while there will be some who need a clinical response, for most young people it is not a mental health issue. For the majority it is about a loss of connection and disruption in relationships and for those young people good youth work supports, social engagement and social connection will be enough.

The next four areas polled within a fraction of each other. 'Digital Youth Work/Digital Literacy' was rated at a priority of 3.7 out of 5, closely followed by 'Equality, Diversity and Intercultural work' (3.6), 'Global Youth Work, Climate Justice, Sustainable Development Goals/Agenda 2030 (3.5) and Outdoor Learning/Outdoor Education (3.4).

Opportunities to come together and share practice in these areas and explore potential collaborations on a North-South basis, will be reviewed and promoted in the coming months.



Closing Reflections - Takeaways

In closing the workshop, participants were asked to share, in the chat or padlet, their 'takeaway' from the event. It could have been a word, a feeling or something:

- that struck you and caused you to pause, reflect?
- that surprised you?
- that was new to you?
- that intrigued you and that you'll explore more about after this?

> **"We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience."**
> **John Dewey**

In closing, participants were keen to express their "thanks", for example, "to the YouthPact team and facilitators for creating this space for us". And to each other, "Thanks to all for a very thought-provoking morning". "So much great practice and thinking being shared today." "Thank you for reminding us of the importance of the work being done and of the wonderful people doing it!"

Some managers posted just a word or two to express what they were taking away and/or how they were feeling, including:

Encouraged	Mind ourselves	Very insightful
Reinvigorated	Affirmation	Feel refreshed
Connection	Reflective and inspiring	Reenergised
Inspiring and beneficial	Insightful / Reflective	Stay positive

Others took a few more words to articulate what their takeaway from the event was:

- Thank you guys, very beneficial today.
- Meaningful enjoyable conversation.
- Great to share with each other.
- I'm doing okay and best I can. Others are the same.
- Fascinating session from Dr Friel.
- The hybrid approach to the future delivery of youth work.
- Pride - so many people sharing pride in their colleagues and volunteers for adapting so effectively.

Many left the event buoyed up, having drawn a sense of comfort from their engagement in the workshop and the insights they heard and shared on their collective experience as managers in the pandemic:

- Good to connect with others and see that we are all in the same boat.
- Good to know we are all in this together.
- Great to hear from others managing the same issues.
- Great to hear a wide range of experiences and thoughts.
- Good to hear that we are all going through the same challenges.
- Great to lift the head and look around and listen for a couple of hours.

- The sharing of insights and feelings has been really helpful.
- A really interesting and inspiring morning. Validating individual stories...
- Brilliant to hear from others across the youth sector and the challenges they face. Makes our challenges seem less lonely and making me feel positive that we can overcome them.
- Can equate with comment that we need to remind ourselves we are there to provide education whilst recognising that we do need to provide much more emotional support at this time.
- We are not alone - managers across the island are going through the same struggles.
- Great to hear from other workers across the country who are going through the same thing, an enjoyable morning. Love to have a conference where we can all meet face to face.

For a number of managers, the value of the all-island nature of the workshop and a desire for further North-South practice sharing sessions was what they highlighted in their closing reflections:

- Thank you for such an amazing zoom meeting. It was also a great get together and to see everyone all throughout Ireland.
- So good to connect with the wider youth work field across North and South of Ireland.
- Thanks everyone. Great for all-island sharing.
- We need to work closer as an island, not just in the border regions.
- There has been a great feeling of support at a national level in the South throughout, so it's even more welcome now to have a whole island feeling of support, and how the same elements impact us all.
- Need for greater North-South collaboration, shared resourcing and initiatives.
- There is a need for this engagement (all island approach) to continue.
- Great to have this collaborative approach between both the North/South but also the voluntary/statutory sector. Would love to see this engagement/platform for these conversations to continue.
- Thank you all for your efforts in putting this together, very insightful. Really appreciated all the range of inputs and especially listening from peers being in similar situations. Good to hear that there are plans to move different themes forward.

And a takeaway for YouthPact

"Time in the breakout rooms a little rushed. Our sharing could have been more productive with a little more time. Format of the short input followed by discussion worked well."

Appendix - 1

Workshop running order

Time	Description
10:00	**Housekeeping** Joe Hawkins – YouthPact Development Officer
10:05	**Welcome & Introductions** Eliz McArdle - YouthPact Project Manager Background / Context & Purpose / Programme & Process
10:15	**Keynote Input** Marie-Claire McAleer, Head of Research & Policy - NYCI A Review of the Youth Work Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic
10:30	**Breakout Rooms / Small Group Discussion** Introductions - Opening Circle - Input - Facilitated discussion - Closing Circle
11:25	**Comfort break**
11:35	**Feedback & Plenary** Mary Cunningham / Arlene Kee Review of Padlet breakout room feedback Analysis, clarification, response
11:50	**Mentimeter Poll** Arlene Kee - Assistant Director, EA Youth Service Potential future areas for North-South practice sharing and exploring collaboration
12:05	**Well-being and Self-care** Dr. Breda Friel Course Director & Lecturer in CYW UU / Counsellor / Clinical Supervisor
12:25	**Acknowledgement & Thanks** Mary Cunningham - CEO, NYCI
12:30	**Close**

Appendix - 2

Workshop contributors

Eliz McArdle

Aside from being YouthPact Project Manager since 2018, Eliz is a Lecturer in Community Youth Work at Ulster University and has been in that role since 2014. Previously she worked for 10 years as Team Leader for the Equality Work with Young Women Team in YouthAction NI (previously the Gender Equality Unit). Along with Simon Ward, Eliz developed the LIFEMAPS positive mental health model. She is actively involved in the management of Critical Voice an online platform for creating youth work dialogue. Eliz is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy (2016).

Marie-Claire McAleer

Marie-Claire McAleer is head of research and policy at the National Council of Ireland (NYCI). She has extensive experience of conducting research on youth issues and contributing to the development of public policy at a national and European level. Marie-Claire has publications on educational disadvantage, youth emigration, youth unemployment, the use of social and digital media in youth work, and the provision of youth work in rural Ireland. She is a graduate of University College Dublin and is currently undertaking a doctorate in Social Science at University College Cork. Marie-Claire is a member of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, and the Pool of European Youth Researchers.

Mary Cunningham

Mary Cunningham has been Director of National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) since March 2002. She is the first female Director of the Youth Council. Mary came to the organisation with a wealth of experience advocating on behalf of children in a representative body for children's organisations in Northern Ireland. She steered the organisation and supported the voluntary youth sector in Ireland through the extremely challenging period of recession and has drawn on that experience during this current period of rapid change.

Arlene Kee

Arlene Kee is Assistant Director Children and Young People's Services (Youth Services) with the Education Authority (EA) and has held the role for the past three years. With 19 years' experience in the EA and former Education & Library Boards, Arlene was Head of Youth in the former South Eastern Region and 7 years before that as Head of CAMHS & EOTAS (education other than at school). As part of the EA senior management team she contributes to the strategic leadership of the Authority; a key focus is transformation of educational services to meet the ever changing and complex needs of children and young people.

Dr Breda Friel

Breda is Course Director for Postgraduate and Master's programme and CPD Short Courses in Community Youth Work at Ulster University Magee. Her doctoral research area is suicide prevention policy in Ireland. Specialising in trauma debriefing and critical incident responses, Breda is an accredited therapist and clinical supervisor with IACP and BACP. She works with statutory and community and voluntary agencies in managing resources and support following critical events. Her current research is focusing on the unfolding narrative and practice themes emerging from Covid-19. Breda is founding member of Insight Inishowen, a suicide prevention community and voluntary organisation in Donegal, Ireland and she is Director of the Inishowen Mindfulness Centre.

Professor Maurice Devlin

Maurice Devlin is Professor and Head of the Department of Applied Social Studies at Maynooth University, where he also holds the Jean Monnet Chair in European Youth Studies. Originally from County Derry, Maurice is a graduate of the University of Hull as well as University College Dublin, Maynooth University and Trinity College Dublin. He is founding Joint Chair of the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS), the all-Ireland body for the professional endorsement of youth work training.

Appendix - 3

Breakout room inputs, facilitation & notetakers

A massive thank you to those managers who agreed to make an input on their organisations' response to the pandemic and to all those facilitated and recorded the workshop discussions.

Presenters	Organisations	Themes/Focus
Johnny Crymble	EA Youth Service, Belfast	'Zoom Fatigue' following the rapid transition to online work - adapting and responding online.
Stephen Dallas	Youth Work Alliance	Responding and supporting the needs of member organisations in the pandemic.
Siobhan Darragh	Youth Initiatives	Moving online and communicating with young people and parents through the restrictions.
Mick Ferron	Sphere 17 regionalys	Holding and re-establishing connection with vulnerable young people in the online space.
Timmy Hammersley	SpunOut.ie	Consulting with young people in lockdown - increasing quantity and quality of engagement.
Claire King	The Uniform Youth Work Hub	The impact of and response to Covid-19 of uniformed organisations in Northern Ireland.
Leighann McConville	YouthPact	Sharing learning from YouthPact research into the Peace4Youth response in the pandemic.
Michael McLoughlin	Youth Work Ireland	Observations from practice on the changing focus and the enduring values of youth work.
Nora Moriarty	Crosscare	Reflection on the changes to its work, responding locally to a global pandemic.
Miriam Ryan	Foróige	An Outreach response to the needs of young people during public health restrictions.

Facilitators	Organisations
Niall Blee	Include Youth
Lynsey Braniff	EA Youth Service
Alison Fox	NYCI
Dearbhla Holohan	Include Youth
Eliz McArdle	YouthPact - Ulster University
Leighann McConville	YouthPact - Ulster University
Daryl Moore	YouthPact - Pobal
Stephen Quiqley	EA Youth Service
Joanne Stainsby	YouthPact - Co-operation Ireland

Notetakers	Organisations
Sophie Burford	NYCI
Jean-Marie Cullen	NYCI
Sally Daly	NYCI
Allen Fleming	EA
Lisa Harrold	NYCI
Sharon Hughes	EA
Mandy Jones	EA
Catherine McGinley	Extern
Barbara Nea	NYCI

Appendix 4

List of participating organisations

Ashton Community Trust	Resurgam Trust & Youth Initiative
Belfast Met	Scout Foundation NI
BeLonG To	Scouting Ireland
Boys' Brigade (RoI)	Seagoe YC
Carlow Regional Youth Service (YWI)	South West College
Catholic Guides Northern Region	Sphere 17
Church of Ireland Youth Department	Springboard Opportunities Ltd
Clare Youth Service (YWI)	SpunOut.ie
Co-operation Ireland	St Andrews Resource Centre
Crosscare	Start360
Donegal Youth Service (YWI)	SWAN Youth Service
Eco-Unesco	The Bytes Project
Education Authority Youth Service	Ulster University
Extern	Uniform Youth Work Hub
Ferns Diocesan Youth Service	Verbal
Foróige	Voluntary Service International (VSI)
Gaisce	Volunteer Now
Girls' Brigade (RoI)	YMCA Ireland
Include Youth	Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU)
Irish Girl Guides	Young Irish Film Makers
Kildare Youth Service (YWI)	Youth Initiatives
Limerick Youth Service (YWI)	Youth Link NI
Mencap	Youth Work Alliance
NUI Maynooth	Youth Work Ireland
National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)	Youth Work Ireland Louth
Pobal	YouthAction NI

YouthPact

YouthPact, the Quality and Impact Body for the Peace4Youth Programme, works with the funded projects to promote and support a culture of continuous improvement and to provide training and resources that enhance the impact of the work for participating young people. YouthPact is a project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

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