

# Compendium on youth information and counselling

## A first-aid kit for initiators of structures at national level

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Images courtesy of LiJOT



The right to information is so self-explanatory and such an integral part of our everyday life that one could wonder why we need specific information services for youngsters. In the same way, for me, an urgent need for youth information and counselling is just too obvious to be ignored. I observed my classmates and friends who were having a lot of trouble making decisions about what to do with their lives after school, or to finish it at all. It was especially hard for them because of their background: living in a small town, distant from all economic, academic or cultural centres in a post-Soviet country which has just joined the EU. Therefore they felt the change only because a lot of EU flags were around but they were not experiencing the opportunities the EU had to offer. Some of them were facing financial obstacles or social problems in families which meant they were not able to make their own lives better than their parents managed to. Now some of them have managed to find their place in society and to create their own businesses and families here, others are doing this successfully outside of Lithuania – mainly in the UK. Sadly, a couple of them have not managed to finish their education because of early pregnancy or a lack of motivation – they still cannot see where they are heading.



Images provided by LiJOT - Lithuanian Youth Council

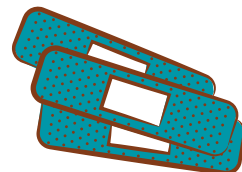
There are some success and failure stories, however most of the time those who are doing what society expects them to do and who belong to the so-called middle class are not doing “just fine” or even OK. They are gaining education, however only one third of them are sure about their choice of studies, most of them are still unemployed or poorly paid and very dependent on circumstances that will find them on the spot. Most of them still do not know how different things function; how to solve financial, social, health problems (let’s not forget, that Lithuania is still a “leader” in suicide rates); what opportunities in general are open for them. During a couple years of work as a Eurodesk relay I noticed that something more holistic in terms of general youth information and counselling was needed for our youngsters. They do not need to be in the worst possible, vulnerable situation – for every youngster the transition period to adulthood is a crucial time of their life, where parents cannot help in every case, because “in their time” most of the things we have today worked in another way. So they need some professional and youth-friendly support.

### Setting up structured information services in Lithuania

When I started working as the Eurodesk Lithuania national co-ordinator, I noticed that youngsters were searching for information in very different ways. They needed some “down-to-earth” communication in language they understood – so we established the “I know it all” programme for renewed online services – a revamped portal and social media. Together with the national agency

for the Youth in Action programme we established a young journalists’ network, which still works as a peer-to-peer network and provides content for our portal by youngsters themselves. However this was not enough, because quite a lot of young people still do not know about us or do not have access to Internet or ICT skills. Therefore we made a pilot of youth information centres as Eurodesk representations in regions of Lithuania. The main task for them was to implement work that could be done outside Vilnius, reach out to young people where they are and let them know about us and answer their questions directly on the spot. It works, it is needed, but there is a need for a bigger second step: establishing generalist youth information services with trained youth information workers.

Thinking about the structure of youth information and counselling at national and local levels started in 2011 after a Nordbuk seminar, where there was a small working group on youth information by Finnish colleagues and representatives from ERYICA. While sharing experiences and seeing what generalist youth information actually is, I got the feeling that this is exactly what we were still lacking and had been looking for. Just after this we organised an international seminar on the structure of youth information with our regional partners from neighbouring countries and ERYICA. The Lithuanian Youth Council (LiJOT) has attained the goal of establishing national and local structures for youth information and counselling (YIC) in the national programme of development of youth policy, which now is the main starting point for further work on this topic.



### A “first-aid kit” for initiators

While we are moving along with the creation process, there are still plenty of European countries which still do not take this existing pillar of youth policy and a great tool for working with young people into consideration. Especially countries with the same historical past as Lithuania do not see the need to have a clear system of how to provide youngsters with more than specialised information services (most of the time for employment only). However young people are moving on without this help and struggle with different decisions which are important for them, and should be for the state. As I started thinking and collecting information on the establishment of youth information and counselling structures in my country, I noticed a lack of them. It is great to have the opportunity for your own innovation and creativity, however there are some experiences in other countries that are better to avoid.

Of course, many good practices could be adjusted right away to your national context, you just need to know them. A general overview of the history and determinants of youth information in Europe is also where everyone interested should be starting his or her research. Another very important aspect for initiators of YIC structures is having a list of arguments and some empirical data on the impact of YIC, when it comes to lobbying and the policy-making process, where it is very easy to get lost. That’s why ERYICA came up with the idea of having a publication – a kind of compendium – on national YIC structures, which would be helpful for initiators of youth information and counselling structures at the national level and for youth policy experts and politicians who are making decisions on this issue. A “first-aid kit” is a practical tool, which I also needed when I started working on explaining what generalist YIC is, and what it is not. The compendium also aims to gather the most important facts and figures and to put some structure to the essence of generalist YIC – to make it more clear and concrete for everyone. Let me show you what are we preparing and how helpful it could be if you are thinking of starting a YIC structure in your country.



### Compendium: to produce arguments for policy makers

The compendium has been divided into four parts: concept and development, state of the art and impact as a policy measure, ERYICA and its services, establishing youth information and counselling structures at national level. The first part of this publication outlines the definition of YIC through a brief presentation of youth information history – major developments, determinants in which the concept has emerged. For this purpose not only existing documents were analysed, but also pioneers of the concept of YIC in different European countries were interviewed, they are contributing to the publication with their own articles and insights. Since the compendium should be universal in all European countries, a short overview of international institutions, organisations and documents has been prepared. The Council of Europe and the European Union input into YIC and other European networks such as Eurodesk or the European Youth Card Association (EYCA) will be introduced to readers. Probably the best way to understand how YIC works, and what the different models of structuring it on national levels are, is to present functioning models in different national realities. Looking at descriptions of Austrian, Finnish, French, Portuguese, Croatian as well as Scottish, Welsh and Flemish YIC structures by the same criteria allows the reader to compare differences. It will include short comments not only from pioneers who are most often youth workers, academics or representatives of NGOs, but also from politicians who have supported this new way of working with young people from the beginning. Therefore it will help today’s initiators to see arguments which have helped in the past to promote the establishment of YIC services.

### Impact of youth information – Is it possible to measure?

The compendium is not only a compilation of documents on YIC which have already been created by different actors, this tool also aims to make YIC more concrete and to provide initiators with information on the impact that YIC has for youngsters, the society and state. Every day, during all these years of work in thousands of youth information centres in different countries, youth information workers see that their work is needed and what impact they have on the lives of young people. So the key to demonstrating this lies in the method. Meanwhile there is an ongoing YIC services users’ survey, which will provide us with some very concrete quantitative data on the impact of YIC services. The second part of the compendium will include a summary of interviews with co-ordinators of national YIC structures and also academics will explain their research, which should be transferred into a qualitative analysis. We will provide readers with a list of problems that YIC services can solve. Today, youth unemployment is one of the biggest obstacles for successful youth integration into society, which is why we will go more into detail on YIC and possible synergies with “youth guarantee” and youth employment in general. To sum up, if the first part of the first-aid kit for initiators of YIC on national level is more introductory and provides an overview of YIC, the second part aims to give some quantitative and qualitative data and arguments which should help initiators and lobbyists to explain and defend the idea of YIC and show its impact.

Generalist youth information and counselling are main concerns of the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA), which has been dealing with this topic since 1986. ERYICA



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is still actively helping countries which are considering the establishment of YIC services and promoting this actively at European level. ERYICA offers a wide range of services, which can be very helpful when starting a YIC structure at national level. That is the main reason why the third chapter of the compendium will present different methodologies of training, good practice sharing platforms (such as SHERYICA), publications and projects created and offered by ERYICA. This should help interested organisations or even policy makers in the debates on how YIC should look in their countries and provide them with a package for a successful and easier start, preparation of the first professional youth information workers and international co-operation.

### Guidelines for the beginner: how to start?

Another important goal of the compendium on YIC national structures is to enable beginners to plan their own model YIC structure in their national context based on experiences of countries where it already exists. With input from different national co-ordinators the compendium will present possible ways to provide youth information at national level. It includes all the main steps of the process – starting with a situation analysis of young people needs, finding a suitable role for YIC in the national context of youth policy, awareness building and lobbying policy makers, getting YIC as a part of youth policy in national and regional law. A very important point is to decide which model of governance of the YIC system will be chosen, so readers will have the possibility to see the comparison of existing models with their strengths and weaknesses. Ensuring stable financing in a time of restructuring of public finances is a timely aspect, so some links to existing financial schemes will be provided. Hiring and training staff, quality of services and how to measure it, together with some ideas on how to set up the regional network and how international co-operation helps ensure quality will enable initiators to see very practical

aspects of the establishment process. Nowadays it is not possible to avoid the online part of YIC work, so an article on planning and implementing online services, communication and branding of online and offline services will give some basic guidance. More general overviews on methods of YIC services, breaking down and explaining different types of services, paying special attention to the youth participation and peer-to-peer method and also having a list of topics currently covered by YIC in Europe should help as a source of ideas or a good starting point for those who are planning and taking decisions. Moreover, the European Youth Information Charter's principles and how they are being implemented will help to evaluate work and is meant to set a framework, which helps when there is no other reference available. A list with contacts of YIC structures and experts across Europe will be also provided. Finally, the fourth chapter of the compendium is a practical step-by-step toolkit with further referrals for those starting something like YIC in their country.

Since the compendium by its nature is a collection of different views and the variety of different models of how YIC works in European countries, we are not aiming to show one best way of how YIC could function in your reality. It is too complex and every situation must be taken as an individual one. Therefore the "Compendium on national structures of youth information and counselling" will be a good starting point for explorers of the very fascinating world of youth information. We are doing our best to provide initiators and policy makers with some empirical quantitative and qualitative evidence on the impact of youth information work, provide practical tools and show some different experiences in other countries, with further guidance. However you need to be passionate about youth information and counselling and believe that every youngster should have the best possible knowledge on how society works in order to create his or her life and be an active, happy, healthy, critical, open-minded person and national and European citizen.

### Step-by-step: how to establish a national youth information structure

- analysis and evaluation of important actors and stakeholders
- young people's needs
- defining relevant topics
- role of YIC in the national context of youth policy
- awareness building and lobbying with policy makers
- having youth information as a part of youth policy in national law
- structure and governance
- funding and staff
- quality of services
- setting up a regional network
- planning and implementing online services
- communication and branding of services
- international co-operation

