

Youth Partnership

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



Covid-19 Impact and Looking Forward **Report based on surveys carried out in spring and autumn** **2021**

Authors: Ivana Boskovic and James O'Donovan
Editor: Tanya Basarab

Pool of European Youth Researchers and
European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy

December 2021

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Communication with young people during COVID-19 pandemic.....	4
2. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on policy and funding.....	7
3. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on state operated programmes, youth work services and other supports for young people.....	9
4. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on NGO sector programmes, youth work services and other supports for young people.....	10
5. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of young people.....	12
6. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on digitalisation.....	15
7. Youth issues for prioritisation under European recovery programmes.....	17
8. Looking forward - post pandemic reality.....	18
Conclusions and main findings.....	20

Introduction

In 2021, the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership conducted two surveys (one in spring and one in autumn) that further developed and expanded on the issues that emerged from the 2020 survey on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the youth sector.

These surveys were conducted within the framework of the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership's Knowledge Hub, which brings together the findings, analyses and impacts that Covid-19 is having on the lives and futures of young people.

In the spring 2021 survey, European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYC) correspondents and the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) were asked to give an informed and considered view on how Covid-19, ongoing restrictions and prolonged lockdowns have impacted on and been responded to by the youth sector over:

- the first year of the pandemic and related measures, March 2020 to March 2021, and
- the estimated impact and response over the coming year, 2021-2022, and beyond.

The aim was to get an interim view and assessment of the overall impact of the pandemic, how it had progressed and what the medium- to long-term effects might be; how young people in different countries across Europe had been affected by the pandemic and the continuing restrictions and lockdowns; and how it has impacted on youth policy, funding for the youth sector, state and NGO-operated programmes, youth work services and other support for young people.

Correspondents and researchers were requested to give, where possible, examples of and links to innovative developments and approaches, in place or planned, for tackling the challenges posed by the pandemic. The survey was conducted between April and June 2021, under the following headings:

- Communication with young people during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on policy and funding.
- Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on state-operated programmes, youth work services and other support for young people.
- Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on NGO-sector programmes, youth work services and other support for young people.

In all, 38 completed questionnaires were received from 30 countries as follows: Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium (Flanders), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece,

Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain and Ukraine.

The second survey, which was conducted in September and October 2021, focused on four specific themes which had emerged from the previous analysis as significant policy issues during the pandemic:

- the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of young people;
- how digitalisation responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic;
- youth issues that should be prioritised under European recovery programmes;
- looking forward to post-pandemic reality.

As in the first survey, EKCYP and PEYR correspondents were asked to give an informed and considered view in responding to questions regarding how specific themes had been impacted by the pandemic and their relevance for emerging and future youth policy development.

Correspondents and researchers were requested to give, where possible, examples of emerging policy issues and innovative developments and approaches under these themes.

In all, 26 completed questionnaires were received from 21 countries as follows: Belarus, Belgium (Flanders), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Sweden.

The surveys conducted in spring and autumn 2021 also resulted in two policy briefs published in July and November 2021, available in the [Knowledge Hub's latest updates and analysis section](#).

The term “country” (European Cultural Convention) rather than “member state” is used in this report.

All information and data included in the report derive solely from the responses to the questionnaires, except where other information or data are employed for illustrative or comparative purposes.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

1. Communication with young people during the Covid-19 pandemic

In over 40% of the countries surveyed, the state sector used a variety of means – webpages, social media, posters, leaflets, brochures and television – to communicate with young people

on rules and regulations: the use of webpages (14%) and social media (11%) was particularly significant. In over half of the countries surveyed, the state sector applied a variety of means to communicate with young people on access to programmes and services, with significant use of webpages (16%) and social media (14%).

In almost 65% of countries surveyed, the NGO sector used a variety of means to communicate with young people on rules and regulations, while social media was used by almost 25%. In over 70% of countries surveyed, the NGO sector applied a variety of means to communicate with young people on access to programmes and services, with significant use of social media (24%).

Both the state and NGO sectors used common approaches in communicating with young people. However, there were some noticeable differences in terms of method and content.

While the state sector used a variety of means to communicate with young people, there was a focus on one-way communication – webpages, posters, leaflets, brochures, and television. In Germany, the state used posters, leaflets and brochures, while NGOs used more varied methods. In Greece, the state used a webpage, while NGOs used more social media. While the state in North Macedonia communicated basic information mainly through social media, the NGO sector was more active in using different means of communication. NGOs also appeared more active than the state in Spain. The National Youth Council of Ireland promoted online engagement and outreach youth work, provided social media campaigns on public health guidelines and positive mental health, and conducted surveys and check-ins with young people.

There were also some positive state sector interventions in communication with young people.

The Youth Board of Cyprus established a working group on Covid-19, consisting of youth board officers, youth organisations' representatives and young people, as well as providing a section on its website for communicating its actions and services during the pandemic.

The Italian Youth Council (IYC) promoted several campaigns to collect the opinions and expectations of young people for the future. The IYC used surveys, focus groups, online meetings and other activities to keep young people informed, active and involved during the pandemic.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, the National Youth Agency in Malta, launched two services as part of a mental health awareness campaign, one aimed at young people in NGOs and the other providing one-to-one sessions with youth workers, where the focus was on providing information and counselling. The Directorate of Children, Youth and Family Affairs in Norway ran an online information and communications platform directed at young people between the ages of 13 and 20, while a website offered quality-assured information on a wide variety of topics.

There were also some examples of state/NGO co-operation and co-ordination. The Coordination Centre of Azerbaijani Volunteers was established to prevent the spread of the pandemic, while in Belgium, consultations were initiated with children and young people by NGOs and local governments on different themes. In Poland, several studies involving young people were carried out by both the state and the NGO sectors.

There appears to have been relatively little use of more interactive digital platforms, such as Zoom and Skype, in communicating with young people.

Non-formal education and training, mental health and well-being, digital skills and social services were identified as the main areas covered by the state sector in communicating with young people, while physical health, employment, social inclusion and media literacy were also highlighted.

Non-formal education and training and mental health and well-being were identified as the main areas covered by the NGO sector in communicating with young people, while digital skills, civic engagement and, to a lesser extent, social inclusion, physical health and media literacy were also highlighted.

Human rights did not emerge as a significant issue.

The NGO sector appeared more pro-active than the state sector in seeking information and feedback from young people on the impact of the pandemic.

In almost a third of the countries surveyed, the state sector did not seek information or feedback from young people. In those where it did so, the state sector focused on collecting information and feedback from young people at either the national and/or national/local level, but less so at the local level only. The NGO sector had a more balanced approach and was more active in seeking information and feedback.

Young people identified a lack of digital skills, delays and a lack of communication from the state sector and insufficient human resources as the most significant issues.

In almost 60% of countries, information and feedback was shared between the state and the NGO sectors.

In some countries, such as Estonia, Finland, Luxembourg, Norway, Ukraine, feedback was broadly shared between the state and NGO sectors, while in Bulgaria and Greece it appeared more restricted. There was also some evidence of negative media coverage and reporting that represented young people as bearing responsibility for spreading the virus.

Reference was made to “gaps in communication with young people”, to communication between the state and NGO sectors as being “very limited and sporadic”, to the state sector

being “very inefficient in communicating with young people” and, in some instances, of adopting a “highly politicised” and “not youth-friendly” approach. In some cases, young people were “dissatisfied with communications” from representatives of the public sector and policy makers.

One of the most common criticisms voiced was that the state did not communicate directly with young people. In Finland, the civil society sector and municipalities were more active in communicating with young people. In Germany, communication with young people “mainly went in one direction, addressing them as recipients of instructive information, but there were hardly any dialogical formats used”.

Reference was also made to initiatives, campaigns, research reports, studies and surveys to enhance communications with young people, but in many cases, they appeared “sporadic” and coming more from the NGO sector or informal groups of young people.

The pandemic was also described as having a “far-reaching impact” on young people's lives, of some being subjected to “increased violence, threats, abuse or neglect” and of others feeling less safe than before its onset.

2. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on state policy and funding

The Covid-19 impacted state funding of the youth sector as well as relevant policies in the field, which ultimately reflected on both areas of work and beneficiaries. Examples and perception of impact of pandemic on state policy and funding were explored on both local and national levels.

Over one-third of responses pointed out short-term changes in state funding of the youth sector, and 75% of responses suggested these changes in funding are reflected at both local and national levels. Non-formal education and training, employment, and social services, mental health and well-being were the most affected areas.

In 50% of the countries, the impact of Covid-19 on state funding significantly affected the provision of services for young people as well as youth programme expansion and coverage.

In countries where the youth sector depends on the international funding, respondents highlighted challenges of sustainability and called for more state support for and co-ordination with the youth sector, complementing the assistance from international donor organisations.

Around 40% of respondents from various countries highlighted that there were no major changes in policy, while some 30% emphasised constant changes during pandemic. These changes in policy across the youth sector had the highest impact on families with children, followed by young people and stakeholder's capacities.

Non-formal education and training, and mental health and well-being were the two most affected fields.

There is a visible consensus that no specific policies were introduced to support navigating the impact of the pandemic on the youth sector and its beneficiaries.

Respondents highlighted some interesting examples of innovation and adaptation to the new reality:

- The Croatian Science Foundation launched a call for research organisations on the recovery from Covid-19, which was an adequate and timely policy decision.
- In Malta, the Ministry of Health introduced important and innovative policies and guidelines during Covid-19 to mitigate its impact, e.g., guidelines on healthy eating during quarantine, guidance on staying physically active, and mental well-being guidance for pregnant women.
- In the Czech Republic, Child and Youth Development prepared a call for non-governmental and non-profit organisations, universities and leisure centres on the implementation of summer camps aimed at reducing the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on children aged 6 to 15.
- In Cyprus, the results of the Youth Barometer survey that examined the impact of the pandemic on young people's life will further inform policy makers.

In Belgium, the profession of youth welfare worker was recognised as an essential profession by the National Safety Council as of April 2020. In Finland, the municipalities significantly developed digital youth work and detached youth work during the pandemic. This was possible because the existing resources were reallocated. On the other hand, most respondents considered that there was still much to do in policy and state funding to help navigate the impact of Covid-19 impact and set the foundation for post-coronavirus crisis policies in the youth sector.

Recommendations highlighted the need to take vulnerable youth into account when deciding on new policy changes, as well as supporting the economic empowerment of young people and their active participation in public life and democratic processes. Decision makers are encouraged to increase funding on the local level to mitigate the negative effect of the epidemiological measures that led to a ban of offline activities. Another approach is to increase the funding overall to reduce the donor or funding dependency of the youth sector.

Overall, there is a need for better co-ordination on national and local levels concerning state funding and introducing policy changes to respond to the needs of young people. More analysis will be needed in the future to understand the long-term impact of state funding and policy changes on young people's realities during the pandemic.

3. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on state-operated programmes, youth work services and other support for young people

Provision of services for young people was identified as the most important area impacted by the pandemic, followed by programme expansion, outreach capacities, national and international projects and training and research. Only a small number of countries appeared to experience no significant impact.

Young people had limited or poor access to state-operated programmes and services across a range of areas, including 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.

New programmes and initiatives planned in response to the impact of the pandemic included non-formal education and training, digital skills, mental health and well-being, employment, civic engagement and physical health. However, in almost a third of the countries surveyed, no new programmes nor services were planned in response to the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic meant that many programmes and services had to go online or be delivered virtually. While funding in general remained unaffected, reference was made to “cancellations”, “delayed” or “hindered” projects and a shift towards services that were more aligned with social work. In certain instances, funding was “uncertain”, or “dependent” on foreign donors, as mentioned by respondents from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, or on European programmes, such as Erasmus+, as was the case in Romania. In North Macedonia, funding of youth centres in several cities was delayed due to the pandemic.

In some instances, there was a shift in focus because of the pandemic. In Austria, many projects had to be cancelled and youth work focused on individual counselling, which was closer to social than to youth work. A national volunteer exchange programme in Serbia called “Youth rule”, supported by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and which is global in scope, was run only at the national level during the pandemic.

Programmes in youth care and psychological support were severely impacted and young people’s mental health and well-being were adversely affected, particularly for those who were at-risk and/or marginalised.

There were, however, state sector initiatives that sought to address such issues. The State Office for Demography and Youth in Croatia employed emergency mental health phone numbers as part of its information campaign. The Ministry of Children and Families in Norway appointed a national co-ordination group to assess the effects of the pandemic on public services offered to children and young people. The group pointed to the need for

stronger compensatory measures to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable children and young people.

In Belgium, a new project titled “Strengthening the resilience of children and young people in vulnerable situations” was initiated. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in the Czech Republic announced plans for a new funding programme for NGOs working with children and youth. In Finland, the state continued to allocate resources based on the youth policy programme 2020-2023 and additional funding was allocated to outreach youth work and school-based youth work to combat the effects of the pandemic.

There is evidence that digital youth work services, ad hoc smart youth work and other innovative practices were adopted.

In Georgia, the Youth Agency adjusted and partially digitalised its youth policy implementation process. In Malta, the National Youth Agency invested in digital infrastructure that enabled it to move all its programmes online. Digital social work services were also offered to young people in Finland through chat services and social media. In Serbia, a component on digital volunteering was introduced where programmes, including digital youth exchanges or digital youth clubs, were organised in the digital space.

In some countries, the impact of the pandemic on state-operated programmes and services was less evident. There were no youth sector employment cuts in Luxembourg nor in Malta. In Norway, state funding increased in a number of areas – especially labour market measures and mental health support, while in Serbia, funding for the Ministry of Youth and Sports also increased.

4. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on NGO programmes, youth work services and other support for young people

Views and assessment of the impact of Covid-19 on NGO programmes, youth work services and other support for young people vary among the respondents. There were both positive and negative developments and examples.

Provision of services for young people and national and international project implementation were affected by the pandemic, according to two-thirds of respondents. Covid-19 also had an impact on salaries and human resources in the NGO sector, including programme expansion and coverage.

On the other hand, young people had moderate or low access to programmes in non-formal education, training and civic engagement. Some answers suggest that volunteering programmes, including digital activism, were highly accessible. Views vary on young

people's access to mental health and well-being, physical health that is not limited to the outdoors and social services.

Respondents highlighted that services such as non-formal education and training, mental health and well-being and civic engagement, should be considered in future planning. These are followed by the suggestion of programmes, services and support to be provided to young people in the areas of physical health that is not limited to the outdoors, employment and social services. These were some of the areas most impacted by changes in state funding and policy of the youth sector.

Correspondents also provided examples of positive developments of the impact of Covid-19 on NGO sector programmes, youth work services and other supports for young people.

The NGO sector in Georgia implemented Covid-19 mitigation measures and projects funded by the National Youth Agency. These included a large-scale volunteer project called Youth Volunteering in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, undertaken by the NGO Helping Hand with the support of UNICEF Georgia and the National Youth Agency.

The NGO sector in Belarus communicated with young people through information campaigns. Organisations in the Czech Republic freed up their volunteering capacity and expanded their activities to help those in need. Financial, legal or psychotherapeutic consultations and advice were provided. Additionally, many organisations were involved in the production of protective equipment and educational materials and a significant part of the non-profit sector largely replaced its standard project activities with the provision of humanitarian aid.

The Union of Youth Work in North Macedonia finalised a training course for youth workers, based on the accreditation for youth work provision by the Centre for Adult Education within the Ministry of Education and Science. In Estonia, mental health got a lot of attention. Additionally, various initiatives for youth workers, e.g. webinars for youth on how to cope with the Covid-19 fatigue, were organised by the Estonian Association of Youth Workers.

In Italy, the Digital Civic Service project aimed to train 1 000 young volunteers to understand and promote digitalisation. The project stemmed from the co-operation of the Department for Youth Policies with the Department for Digital Transformation. In Malta, the Loneliness Response Line was an example of a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) YMCA response to the problem of increased isolation and loneliness. In addition, the Donate Your Words campaign reached out to people who were ready to record a short video to support the cause to combat loneliness in young people.

Negative developments suggested by respondents mostly point to the continuation of the shrinking of the youth sector, with many youth organisations being on the brink of closing and their outreach severely affected. For example, in Poland, the first study of May 2020, involving 700 foundations and associations, found that 60% of them suspended all or most of

their activities. The most severely affected were the organisations operating in rural areas (80% of them) as well as sports and cultural organisations. In Romania, the interests and concerns of young people were seen as a relatively low priority.

In the Irish context, young people themselves highlighted their concerns around the economic impact of the Covid-19 on the rise in youth unemployment, which reached 45%. In Cyprus, over the past year, most NGOs working with young people reported that their sustainability was in danger, mainly because their funding was based on EU-funded projects and most of these projects had to be cancelled or postponed. In Serbia, many programmes needed to be carried out online or in a hybrid form. This meant that some young people had easier access to programmes, while young people who did not have access to the internet were excluded.

Most respondents highlight that the negative impact on the youth sector programmes, services and support will strongly affect the lives of young people at risk of poverty and exclusion or of being marginalised, with a particular negative impact on their mental health and well-being. The lack of sustainability, funding and flexibility of all stakeholders involved is seen as the greatest challenge in tackling the impact of Covid-19 on services, programmes and support for young people in the coming period.

5. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and well-being of young people

All countries indicated the strong impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of young people, and slightly less so on youth workers/volunteers. This may be indicative of the greater adverse impact of the pandemic on young people than on other age groups, excepting the elderly.

The effectiveness of the state sector in meeting the mental health needs of young people and youth workers/volunteers was generally uneven, with a stronger presence at the national level and weaker at the regional and local levels. In some countries, the overall effectiveness of the state sector appeared weak at all levels – national, regional and local.

There was also some variation in the response of the NGO sector in meeting the mental health needs of young people and youth workers/volunteers. At national, regional and local levels, the response was generally strong, if only adequate in some instances. It was rarely rated as weak.

Many countries conducted initial surveys or research on the impact of the pandemic on young people and all attested to the severity of its impact.

In Belgium, research conducted by the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre and the Flemish Office of Children's Rights showed that children and young people had been greatly affected by the pandemic. The Estonian Youth Mental Health Movement carried

out a survey on how young people's mental health had been impacted by the pandemic.

A survey by the Finnish Association for Mental Health (Mieli) found that the pandemic had negatively impacted on the mental health of over half of young people aged 18 to 34, that one in ten had seriously considered committing suicide and that low-income groups had been disproportionately affected. In Poland, regional education authorities carried out an analysis of young people's needs with respect to mental health.

In Romania, a study conducted by UNICEF found that the well-being of one in seven children and young people had been adversely affected. A study conducted by the Youth Council of Serbia in 2020, titled *Youth Life in Serbia: the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic*, found that a third of young people reported deterioration in their mental health during the pandemic. In Cyprus, 57% of young people surveyed indicated that they had been badly affected by the pandemic. In Ukraine, almost one in four young people felt less safe as a result of the pandemic.

Anxiety, stress, monotony and feelings of insecurity and uncertainty were reported. Some surveys indicated over a third or a half of young people's mental health having been badly affected. The pandemic significantly worsened existing mental health problems and led to a sharp increase in mental illnesses, especially among children and young people. The pandemic was described as having "a catalytic role for mental health problems", resulting in "an increase in anxiety, fears, phobias and negative experiences" and leading to "sleep disorders, anxiety symptoms, and persistent symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress", more young people in psychiatric care and increased consideration of suicide. The greater vulnerability of young people from low-income and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, young migrants, young women and young people experiencing homelessness was also evident.

While the effectiveness of the state sector in meeting the mental health needs of young people and youth workers/volunteers was generally uneven, there were instances where the sector was more active, with great variations between countries and levels of governance.

At the national level, there were examples of online counselling, live discussions on social media, surveys on mental health, digital health campaigns, 24/7 online and telephone counselling for vulnerable young people and student-organised campaigns providing practical advice for young people on how to cope with work and studying during the pandemic.

At the local and municipal levels, there were examples of counselling for young people at risk of mental health problems and online support and advice, as well as medico-psychological consultations for young people at risk, conferences on the mental health needs of young people and youth workers during and after the pandemic and projects on supporting young people experiencing homelessness.

In Cyprus, the Youth Board undertook various actions targeting the mental health needs of young people, including individual and group counselling and free online psychological support. The State Office for Demography and Youth in Croatia opened a counselling telephone line together with the Croatian Psychological Chamber to support young people struggling with mental health issues. Additional finances were allocated by the government in Estonia to NGOs that offer counselling services for young people aged 15 to 26.

Some municipalities in France offered online medico-psychological consultations for young people, while the Ministry of Solidarity and Health launched a digital awareness campaign aimed at the general public, but with particular focus on 18- to 24-year-olds. In Finland, the state allocated resources to promote the well-being of the young through school-based youth work and other projects.

A digital information portal, I am Everything (*Ich bin alles*), was launched in Germany to address issues of depression and mental health in children and young people. The children's rights organisation Save the Children and the Karuna social co-operative started a joint emergency-aid project for homeless young people between the ages of 14 and 27 in Berlin. The National Youth Agency in Malta launched the mental health campaign Youth Worker Online, offering support and information on well-being to young people, while in Poland, the Ombudsman for children opened a special telephone line to support young people.

Responses of the NGO sector in meeting the mental health needs of young people and youth workers/volunteers at national, regional and local level varied, reflecting the uneven level of mental healthcare and disparities between more urban and rural communities.

NGOs provided information and counselling for young people with disabilities; initiatives for young people and youth workers with mental health needs; counselling services for young people and related initiatives with support from the state sector; self-analysis diaries for young people; podcasts; discussion groups for youth workers; crisis psychological helplines and remote counselling for rural and isolated young people; and psychological-social educational platforms to help those with mental health issues. There were also examples of co-operation between teachers, youth workers and health professionals to address the mental health needs of young people.

Several initiatives were undertaken by the NGO sector in Cyprus to address the mental health needs of young people and youth workers. In Croatia, youth centres in Karlovac and Varazdin offered counselling services for young people at risk of mental health issues.

The Estonian Association of Youth Workers started the podcast Youth Work Talks, where youth workers shared practices; and NGOs undertook several initiatives, many in co-operation with the state sector, including a self-analysis diary for young people. School teachers and youth workers in Estonia also co-operated to re-establish contacts with young

people who had difficulties keeping up with their learning.

In Ukraine, the state-operated programme Youth Worker, which aims to improve the competencies of youth workers, also went partially online.

The Richmond Foundation in Malta provided a 24/7 support line for all young people experiencing problems. The National Alliance of Students in Romania ran a campaign providing practical advice for young people on how to cope with working and studying during the pandemic.

UN bodies, such as UNESCO, UNICEF and WHO, the National Red Cross and private bodies and foundations were also pro-active and worked in co-operation with the state and NGO sectors, especially in Eastern Europe, in conducting surveys and other initiatives to identify and address the mental health needs of young people.

In Albania, Save the Children, World Vision and other humanitarian organisations provided support and services for hard-to-reach young people, particularly in rural areas. The Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs shared the stories of young people around the world that highlighted their role in responding to the pandemic. The Red Cross Society of Georgia established a coronavirus response group, and a project called Youth Volunteering in Response to COVID-19 was implemented with the support of UNICEF.

People in Need Moldova supported NGOs in developing advocacy strategies linked to building young people's resilience during the pandemic. In North Macedonia, international organisations adapted their funding for NGOs, to enable them to respond more effectively to the needs of young people. The Ministry of Youth and Sports in Serbia, in co-operation with UNICEF and WHO, participated in online sessions dedicated to the topic of youth mental health, called "How to protect your mental health during the coronavirus".

6. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on digitalisation during the pandemic

The cross-country survey explored the impact of Covid-19 on digitalisation and relevant processes on young people and on practitioners. The survey looked at digital capacity (access, tools, equipment) on the one hand, and at digital knowledge and training on the other.

Young people seemed to be well prepared to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Practitioners were well prepared to meet challenges related to digital knowledge and training at the national level. At regional and local levels, the impact of Covid-19 was seen as rather neutral, which means that the pandemic had no significant impact.

Examples point to a weak or very weak capacity of practitioners and young people, as youth workers and volunteers faced difficulties and spent time finding the proper digital tools and purchasing licenses and equipment. These challenges were more present at the local level. Young people had to move rapidly to a distant/online mode of education and a lack of equipment was identified as one of the major issues.

Some responses point to the problems associated with the overall process of digitalisation in some countries, including limited access to the internet, limited access to equipment, variation across geographic locations and limited financial resources. Additionally, young people from minority backgrounds, such as Roma and Travellers,¹ and those with low socio-economic status also had significant difficulties in terms of access, tools and equipment. Overall, vulnerable groups (those marginalised, with disabilities, and Roma and Travellers) are highly affected by the lack of sustained engagement in digital skills development and training programmes.

Digital fatigue, lack of social interaction, and sustainability of engagement were among challenges posed by the prolonged pandemic.

Some positive examples showing the strong digital capacity of young people and practitioners include:

- in some countries, youth workers, volunteers and students showed great initiative and creativity and provided assistance to government institutions and non-governmental organisations in developing digitalisation;
- in some countries, the overall digital capacity was relatively high, and the overall preparedness of youth workers and young people was also high – for example, youth centres were able to use digital platforms as digital meeting points with young people a few weeks into the pandemic;
- internet providers and donors offered funding to schools that lacked the connectivity and proper budgets for digitalisation;
- national youth organisations were able to quickly provide access to online activities for young people;
- social media was used to enhance digital knowledge and to provide training opportunities on several occasions throughout the pandemic;
- volunteer activities with an online, creative aspect engaged more young people and practitioners in experiencing the digital world.

Respondents identified online safety as a major concern in developing digital knowledge and training. Local organisations were more flexible in adapting and finding solutions to deploy digital learning and training programmes, despite the challenges of digital access, tools and equipment.

1. The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

Some answers point to the need to raise awareness of the benefits of using digital tools through knowledge development and training, as these are not always positively seen. Youth centres became more creative and flexible in enhancing the knowledge-sharing and digital skills development among youngsters. Although youth practitioners and young people were enthusiastic in using digital tools, it was highlighted that they still needed to be sustainably engaged in training and knowledge development, which was not yet usual practice.

Young people are a priority and should be enabled to equally benefit from and contribute to digitalisation processes at all levels. In that regard, some positive examples are worth noting, such as in Cyprus, where equipment and licenses for digital tools were funded for the projects approved through the national funding schemes “Recover20” and “Youth Initiatives”. In Georgia in 2020, the Youth Agency grant programme supported several projects aimed at raising digital competencies among young people. In Estonia, on the national level, an open call on youth initiative projects focused on projects raising youth digital competencies. In addition, the national youth information platform Teeviit offered training to young people on digital competencies in different formats.

In Romania, at the end of 2020, the Ministry of Youth and Sport allocated additional budget to equip 33 Youth Counselling Centres with a computer and printer. The Ministry of Youth and Sport also ran two sets of training courses for youth workers on how to work with young people not in education, employment or training. The activities took place online and partly covered digital learning. In Belarus, the database of over 1,000 volunteers working on the topic of Covid-19 was set up in Minsk. In Malta, the National Youth Agency, in collaboration with Agenzija Sapport, provided online sessions for young people with disabilities to create more awareness on the use of secure internet access.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated some challenges, while planting a seed of innovation and flexibility on different levels across the youth sector. These effects and challenges continue to affect the lives of young people in the ever-changing reality of the Covid-19 pandemic.

7. Youth issues that should be prioritised under European recovery programmes

Mental health and well-being were identified as the most important issue for young people to be addressed by European recovery programmes. Other significant priorities included employment, digital skills, civic engagement, social services and non-formal education and training.

These other priority areas can be characterised as two-dimensional and mutually supportive, aimed at addressing the economic and social consequences of the pandemic that impacted young people in particular.

One of these dimensions relates to work, with a focus on employment prospects and opportunities and up-skilling, particularly of digital skills. The need to focus on young people excluded from the labour market and for tailored integration pathways to employment were also highlighted by a number of countries.

The second dimension is social and educational, with a focus on civic engagement, social services and non-formal education and training. Some countries also stressed the importance of strengthening social infrastructure, the range of social and community services – including mental health services available to young people – and the need to minimise the gap, exacerbated by the pandemic, between less well-off young people and those more privileged.

8. Looking forward to post-pandemic reality

Correspondents provided rich examples of good collaboration in their countries that has the likely potential to strengthen social capital and create an enabling environment for youth to thrive in the coming period, while still facing the adversity of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The correspondents highlighted employment, mental health support and opportunities for civic engagement as the top three needs of young people. Several responses also include access to financial support and media literacy. A few correspondents pointed to the need to invest in the youth work sector as a primary supporter of young people, highlighting the importance of both financial and capacity-building support to create quality programmes that can respond to the needs of young people, complementary to formal education.

Correspondents highlighted the need for financial support to enable sustainability and broader coverage of programmes and opportunities to build and enhance digital capacities as the priorities for the youth sector/youth organisations/NGOs working with young people in the pandemic. While they created stronger ties between local, national and regional programmes and supported capacity building, they struggled with sustainable human resources in a shrinking youth sector space. There is also a growing opportunity for enriching links with schools and creating a model of school-based youth work.

Most correspondents agreed that the top three most significant policy changes to be considered in light of the pandemic include:

1. revision of policies in education, including the aspect of digital skills development and online access;
2. revision of mental health policies, taking account not only the psychological effects of the pandemic but the consequent mental health effects caused by lack of access to employment, civic participation and social inclusion;
3. revision of policies on financial support and capacity building for the youth sector, with a focus on inclusive and participatory practice.

Correspondents highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral approaches and strengthening the evidence base to understand the links between the needs of the youth sector and of young people at local, national and regional levels. To mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people, correspondents provided an insight into actions, programmes and measures planned for the coming months. Some of these, looking at their mid-term impact, include employability and employment schemes for vocational training and/or employment of young people, especially young people not in education, employment or training, programmes for the enhancement of entrepreneurial skills, and innovation grants.

In the area of digital skills development, these include educational programmes on new technologies, technical support, providing devices or financial support to obtain these.

Correspondents highlighted the need for programmes that support mental health and well-being, with a primary focus on reducing the impact of the pandemic's effects, e.g. counselling.

There is a need to tackle challenges in formal education, including support to prevent drop-out and fatigue that emerged during the pandemic, enhancement of digital access to remote learning, and interlinked programmes that combine face-to-face and online engagement. A few correspondents also called for the revision of existing strategies for empowerment of young people and for the enhancement of their participation, for example with more emphasis on outreach activities. They emphasised the need to enhance implementation of national youth strategies and to enable synergies between the local, national and regional levels for better support to young people during the pandemic and beyond.

Correspondents shared examples of co-ordination structures. The cross-sectoral youth working group in Cyprus, set up in the framework of the National Youth Strategy and consisting of representatives from the Youth Board of Cyprus, Ministries, semi-governmental organisations, and the commissioners, with an aim to ensure a cross-sectoral approach. In Georgia, the Youth Agency grants for youth-led organisations focused on regional youth organisations and initiative groups with two thematic directions: to finance projects submitted by young people and to create sustainable youth social (real) and/or virtual spaces with long-term results. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth NGOs gathered around the idea of uniting all youth spaces, youth clubs and youth centres under one “umbrella” organisation. The three youth councils representing young people from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a co-operation agreement and are now synchronising most of their actions. The European Youth Card Association in Montenegro provided support for well-being, mobility, non-formal education, and information to youth in collaboration with the business sector. In Moldova, online and offline sessions supporting young people in the pandemic, including an online tool called How Are You Feeling Today? for enhancing mental health, were developed. These tools need to be expanded at both the regional and local level by professional training of specialists.

Finally, several correspondents highlighted the intersectional nature of the challenges to keep in mind when developing responses to the impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector, given that many countries conducted initial surveys or research on the impact of the pandemic on young people and all attest to the severity of its impact, particularly on young people from low-income and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, young migrants, young women and young people experiencing homelessness.

Conclusions and main findings

Both the survey in autumn 2020 and the survey in spring 2021 on the impact of Covid-19 were conducted when most of Europe had experienced and was slowly emerging from lockdown, but where the threat posed by the pandemic was still active. Consequently, the responses to both surveys tended to reflect and reinforce each other.

The survey conducted in autumn 2021 sought to explore the significant themes and issues that emerged in the two previous surveys, while also seeking to explore future policy directions.

The surveys covered the following:

- communications with young people;
- funding and policy issues;
- the impact on and response of state-sector programmes and services;
- the impact on and response of NGO-sector programmes and services;
- the impact on the mental health and well-being of young people;
- the digital response to the pandemic;
- future policy directions.

From the onset of the pandemic, official communications were targeted at the population in general, rather than at young people, and were often seen as one-way and directional. There were issues with the quality and clarity of official communications and mixed messaging resulting from lack of co-ordination among different stakeholders. While the NGO sector sought a more interactive and innovative approach in supporting young people, shortcomings in sharing information and feedback and opening up dialogue using digital media were lacking.

There is a need for greater co-operation and co-ordination between the state and NGO sectors in communicating with, informing and seeking feedback from young people. Such an approach could avoid mixed messaging and promote a more positive response from young people. Communicating with, informing, and seeking feedback from young people also need to be more interactive. One-way communication needs to be replaced by dialogue and information, and feedback needs to be more widely shared by the state and NGO sectors and young people.

In general, state funding for the youth sector appears to have remained relatively consistent during the pandemic and youth policy largely unaffected, though there was evidence of some pressures on both: reallocation or postponement in funding and delays and deferrals in policy initiatives. This may be due in part to the fact that the pandemic did not arrive until the spring of 2020 and that, by spring 2021, the impact of vaccination had begun to be felt. However, these pressures were most evident in expenditure rather than allocation. Consequently, those countries with a well-established and well-funded youth sector were better positioned than those countries that are largely dependent on European project-based funding that they were unable to expend because of the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic highlighted and reinforced a known dichotomy in the youth sector in Europe. In those countries where the youth sector, including youth work services and other support for young people and youth organisations, are long established, policy or legally based, publicly funded and where youth workers have job stability, the impact of the pandemic appears less severe and the response more managed. In those countries that did not have these underpinning supports, the impact of the pandemic appears more severe and less well managed.

Non-formal education and training programmes and services provided by the state sector for young people were severely impacted by Covid-19 and young people's access to such programmes and services was limited or poor.

The need for social distancing since the onset of the pandemic and the resulting social isolation of young people were important factors in curtailing their physical access to programmes and services. This had two main consequences: deterioration in mental health and well-being and over-reliance on digitalisation.

While all countries indicated the strong impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of young people, it also exacerbated the pre-existing problems. While it might be argued that the end of the pandemic will remove the source and cause of mental distress, this is only true in part.

Many countries conducted initial surveys or research on the impact of the pandemic on young people and all attest to the severity of its impact, particularly on young people from low-income and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, young migrants, young women and young people experiencing homelessness.

It also appears that the state sector was not adequately prepared at either national, regional or local levels for the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and that this was due, at least in part, to inadequate policy focus on their mental health needs.

Consequently, mental health and well-being emerged as the most important issue for young people that should feature in European recovery programmes.

Other significant priorities identified were employment, digital skills, civic engagement, social services and non-formal education and training. These priorities can be characterised as two-dimensional and mutually supportive and aimed at addressing the economic and social consequences of the pandemic that have impacted young people.

The state sector's communication with young people during the pandemic tended to be one-dimensional and directional. While funding and policy remained largely unaffected, the response to meeting the needs of young people through state-operated programmes, youth work services and other support was uneven and hesitant and there was a clear lack of capacity in terms of the digital response.

The NGO sector was more pro-active and innovative in communicating with young people. Its over-reliance on temporary or irregular funding, however, greatly hampered its capacity, in particular in relation to digital capacity, responding and adapting its programmes, youth work services and other support for young people.

Young people, in general, were socially isolated, inadequately supported and often offered uneven responses to their educational, learning and mental health needs by the state sector.

The pandemic delivered a severe shock to the youth sector across Europe and the result was paralysis and uncertainty. From a European youth policy perspective, this might point to a need for greater flexibility, adaptability and autonomy at regional and local levels in terms of both policy and funding.

There also appears to be a clear need for greater consideration and research on digitalisation in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, capacities, potential and limitations.

Finally, the impact of the pandemic has re-emphasised that young people have multidimensional lives that require multidimensional responses and that sectors such as youth may need to tailor and prioritise their policy ambitions and resources accordingly.