



## **Leisure - An anchor when it storms**

Nordic co-operation on children's  
and young people's opportunities  
for participation and development  
after the Covid-19 pandemic



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# Foreword

This report is the seventh and final publication to emerge from the Nordic Welfare Centre's project Nordic co-operation on children's and young people's opportunities for participation and development after the COVID-19 pandemic (2021–2025). The project commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Committee for Children and Young People (NORDBUK) aims to strengthen Nordic co-operation by promoting equal opportunities, democratic participation, and the rights of children and young people across the region.

The pandemic disrupted many aspects of young people's lives, including their access to leisure activities. Leisure is not only enjoyable – it is a vital arena for social connection, personal development, and mental well-being. Crucially, leisure also contributes to young people's resilience by offering stability, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for growth during challenging times. This report explores how leisure activities were impacted during the pandemic, and how the youth and leisure sector adapted in response to it. It underscores the importance of leisure – especially during periods of uncertainty – and provides guidance for strengthening preparedness in future crises.

This publication is part of a broader series examining the effects of the pandemic on children and young people in the Nordic region:

1. [Restricted Childhood, Interrupted Youth – on the pandemic's impact on young people's quality of life.](#)
2. [Children and Young People's Participation During the Corona Pandemic – Nordic Initiatives.](#)
3. [Child and youth participation during crisis – Recommendations for decision makers in the Nordic region.](#)
4. [Nordic youth voices – The pandemic and the right to be heard.](#)
5. [Student councils and democratic participation in the Nordic region.](#)
6. [Participation is protection – embedding children's rights in Nordic crisis governance.](#)

Together, these reports provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people in the Nordic region, and how their rights to participation can be strengthened in both everyday life and in times of crisis. This seventh report focuses specifically on leisure as a key arena for inclusion, development, belonging—and resilience.

The knowledge presented in these reports has been gathered in close collaboration with leading national experts on child and youth participation, including children's ombudspersons, researchers, practitioners in the field, and children and young people themselves. We are especially grateful to all youth organisations across the Nordic and Baltic regions who have contributed actively throughout the project period.

The entire Nordic co-operation project, of which this report forms a part, is underpinned by a child rights-based approach, which is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While this publication focuses specifically on Article 31 — the right to leisure, play and cultural life — it also considers Article 12 — the right of children and young people to be heard — as one of the Convention's four general principles. Strengthening these rights is crucial for safeguarding our democracies and fostering inclusive, resilient societies.

We envisage a Nordic region where children and young people are inspired and empowered to participate in their communities, schools, and leisure activities, and where those in positions of authority recognise the importance of a youth perspective in decisions that affect young people's lives.

Through this report, we aim to inspire policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors—across the Nordic region and within each country — to recognise and strengthen leisure as a protective, inclusive, and empowering space for young people. Our ambition is that the insights and recommendations presented here will contribute to the development of more resilient leisure structures that support young people's well-being, participation, and development — not only in times of crisis, but as a vital part of everyday life throughout the Nordic countries.

**Eva Franzén**, Director

**Merethe Løberg**, Senior Advisor

# Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to our study by participating in interviews, informal conversations and surveys. Thanks to each and every one of you, it has been a rewarding and educational journey. We hope that the findings and advice will be put to practical use, serving the intended final beneficiaries and achieving the most important aim of our study: building resilience through leisure in young people in the Nordics in the face of future crises.

**Åsa Gunvén & Monica Johansson**  
Rapsod



# Summary

This report, *Leisure – An anchor when it storms*, explores the role of organised and semi-organised leisure activities as a crucial resilience builder for young people during a crisis. The relationship between leisure, well-being, and resilience is examined with the COVID-19 pandemic as a case. Through an analysis of the impact of various policies and restrictions, as well as the response and adaptations in the leisure sector, the report investigates the effect of the crisis on the well-being and resilience of young people.

## Key findings

### **The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions had a significant negative impact on the well-being of young people in the Nordic region. The report identifies four key dimensions of well-being that were most affected by a decrease in access to leisure activities:

**Mental well-being:** Isolation, loneliness, and anxiety increased, with many young people losing access to the social spaces and informal support networks that leisure activities provide. (See, for instance: Klette-Bøhler, Bossy & Hervie, 2023)

**Social well-being:** Restrictions on gatherings and activities disrupted social relationships and reduced opportunities for peer interaction, which are vital for social and emotional development. (See for instance: Gotfredsen & Strömbäck, 2023; Bakken, Abildsnes & Aaboen- Sletten, 2024; Juuso, Lehtola & Leskinen, 2022).

**Civic well-being:** The cancellation of leisure activities, especially those involving youth participation and volunteering, led to a decline in civic engagement and a sense of alienation from society. (See, for instance: Norwegian Social Research, Youth Research Group NOVA, 2021)

**Physical well-being:** Young people experienced a decline in physical activity levels and an increase in sedentary behaviour, leading to a rise in lifestyle-related health problems. (See for instance: Olofsson & Kvist, 2022.) Screen time surged during the pandemic and has remained high ever since. (See, for instance: Chen et al., 2024; Trott et al., 2022).

The report highlights that the impact was not uniform. The most vulnerable young people, including those from low-income families, with disabilities, or pre-existing mental health issues, were disproportionately affected due to their limited access to alternative digital or paid leisure opportunities, and their greater need for inclusion and participation.

## Crisis response in the leisure sector

Despite the challenges faced, the leisure sector demonstrated considerable adaptability and a willingness to provide young people with leisure opportunities. The report outlines several key crisis responses.

**Digitalisation:** Many organisations rapidly transitioned to offering digital services and activities to maintain contact with young people and sustain a sense of community. While this shift helped maintain contact and community, it also exposed a 'digital divide', as not all young people or youth workers had the necessary access to the necessary devices, internet connectivity, or digital skills to participate fully.

**Relocation and adaptation:** To comply with social distancing requirements, many activities were moved outdoors or relocated to larger venues. While this creative approach allowed some activities to continue, it was not a viable solution for all types of leisure. The lack of available large venues and outdoor leisure spaces also limited these adaptations.

**Role adaptation:** During the pandemic, youth workers and youth and leisure organisations assumed new and expanded responsibilities, becoming key actors in a broader public health response. They played a crucial role in supporting young people with reliable information, emotional support, and a sense of continuity and normality amid uncertainty. Umbrella organisations also stepped in to offer vital assistance, coordination, and capacity-building support to their member organisations, helping the sector navigate rapidly changing conditions.

## Resilience factors

The report identifies resilience factors inherent in leisure as resources that support young people in coping with and adapting to challenging situations. These factors are positioned within the theoretical framework of Having, Doing, Loving, and Being. The framework was originally developed by Allardt (1995), then further elaborated by Helne & Hirvilammi (2015) and Laine & Kauppinen & Laine (2022). Informants contributing to this report highlight several core factors as particularly important for building resilience: togetherness and emotional support, low-threshold inclusion, access to safe leisure spaces, and supportive adults, as well as meaningful participation and personal development. Several of these resilience factors were weakened or lost in adaptations to pandemic restrictions, such as the shift to digitalisation of leisure.

In particular, the reduction in low-threshold inclusion and opportunities for togetherness contributed to a loss of well-being for young people. This has led to loneliness, a weakened sense of community, and a loss of social skills, such as the ability to navigate social environments, work in groups, and avoid and resolve conflicts. The core argument of this report is that the leisure arena is a vital part of youth understood both as a period of becoming – where identities, skills, and roles are shaped – and as a state of being, where young people experience and express agency, belonging, and meaning in the present. These dimensions of youth development are deeply rooted in everyday social encounters, which cannot easily be replaced by other forms of interaction.

Participation in leisure activities and the resilience factors they offer can serve as an anchor when it storms. In the event of future crises, it is therefore important to maintain activities within the leisure sector, particularly those that promote resilience through low-threshold inclusion, access to supportive adults, and a sense of togetherness.

## Conclusion

### Insights and pathways for strengthening leisure and resilience in times of crisis

Based on these insights, the report offers guidance on how to strengthen the resilience of the youth and leisure sector in the event of future crises. A few examples are outlined below:

**Ensure the youth perspective in a crisis:** This can be achieved by including young people in crisis response and analysing the consequences for youth groups adversely affected by the response. It can also be achieved by incorporating a holistic youth perspective through designated multisector youth working groups, and by providing

resources for youth sector intermediaries, such as national youth councils and youth work umbrella organisations to act as a link between policymakers and the leisure sector.

**Strengthen youth work as a public service:** During the pandemic, youth workers and youth centres proved essential in providing support and information. The report recommends recognising and funding them as integral components of a modern public welfare and resilience system. This would include providing youth workers with the necessary legal framework, steering, and resources to enable them to provide support throughout a crisis. A youth coordinator at a municipal level could serve as a point of contact and a resource for other leisure providers in times of crisis.

**Promote evidence-based development of youth work:** The report advises establishing and maintaining Nordic-level centres of excellence for digital youth work and youth information, as well as gathering and using knowledge and experience of resilience factors among young people for the evidence-based development of the leisure sector.

The report concludes that the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in how the Nordic region supports its young people, serving as a wake-up call. It reaffirms the vital role of leisure activities in fostering well-being and resilience, not through the mere activities themselves, but through their provision of certain resilience factors. Treating leisure as a core component of the well-being of youth and investing in a flexible, well-resourced youth sector with a particular focus on supplying resilience factors, would better equip the young people in the Nordics to navigate future challenges.



# Introduction

**Leisure is not a luxury. It is a right, a resource, and a refuge. This report explores how the resilience of youth was challenged as large parts of the leisure sector closed down during the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlights possible measures to increase the resilience factors of leisure, in particular in times of crisis.**

## Purpose and framing

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many aspects of young people's lives, including their access to leisure. While education remained a policy priority, leisure – an equally vital arena for well-being – was often sidelined. This report focuses on leisure as a strategic space for resilience, inclusion, and development, particularly for adolescents and young adults aged 13–24.

Grounded in a child rights-based approach, the report draws on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affirms every child's right to rest, play, and recreational activities. It also reflects on Article 12, which guarantees children and young people the right to express their views and be heard in matters affecting them. These principles guide the report's analysis and its recommendations for strengthening leisure structures in times of crisis and beyond.

Rather than repeating general findings about the consequences of the pandemic for young people, the report zooms in on organised and semi-organised leisure activities, drawing on Nordic examples, interviews, and practice-based insights. It identifies key resilience factors embedded in leisure – such as togetherness, low-threshold inclusion, and access to supportive adults – and examines how these were affected, adapted, or lost during the pandemic.

The report is intended for decision-makers, youth organisations, public authorities, and practitioners working to ensure that leisure remains a protective and empowering space for young people not only in emergencies, but as part of everyday life in democratic societies.



#### **Article 12 – The Right to Be Heard**

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.



#### **Article 31 – The Right to Leisure, Play, and Culture**

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

#### **Article 12 – The Right to Be Heard**

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

#### **Article 31 – The Right to Leisure, Play, and Culture**

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>



# 1. Background

This chapter sets the stage for the report by outlining its scope, structure, and analytical framework. It introduces the rationale for focusing on organised and semi-organised leisure activities as key arenas for youth resilience during crises and clarifies the target group and intended users of the report.

## 1.1 Scope and structure of the report

An initial review of the research, grey literature, and practical examples reveals how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affected young people's well-being. Particular attention is given to the links between leisure and well-being that were absent during the full and partial shutdowns. The findings indicate that this topic has received considerable attention in recent studies.

However, most sources on young people and leisure treat children and young adults as a homogeneous group. Moreover, while the general impact of the pandemic is well documented, there is a lack of research that examines organised or semi-organised leisure activities separately from informal leisure or school-based social interactions.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by focusing on teenagers and young adults and organised/semi-organised leisure activities as separated from other areas of young people's lives, such as education or family life, as well as from free time in general.

Throughout the report, 'young people' refers to individuals aged approximately 13–24. Particular attention is given to older adolescents and young adults, a group often overlooked in research and policy, despite their strong reliance on peer interaction and leisure outside the family.

This report explores supervised, organised, and semi-organised leisure activities as strategic arenas for fostering resilience and supporting young people during a crisis. These activities are examined not only as sources of recreation, but as vital platforms for social connection, emotional support, and personal development.

The primary target groups for this report are decision-makers, public authorities, civil servants, youth organisations, youth workers, and stakeholder organisations involved in youth policy and leisure provision. The ultimate beneficiaries are young people across the Nordic region – and beyond – whose access to meaningful, inclusive, and resilient leisure activities this report seeks to strengthen. The report is divided into four main chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the context and legal framework of children's right to be heard, focusing on Article 12 of the UNCRC. Chapter 2 explores the impact of pandemic-related policies and restrictions on young people's access to leisure activities and their well-being, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups. Chapter 3 presents examples of adaptations in the youth and leisure sector across the Nordic region, including digitalisation. Chapter 4 concludes by identifying key resilience factors provided through leisure and by offering recommendations to strengthen the sector's preparedness for future crises.

## 1.2 Aims

This study aims to:

- Summarise available data and research about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on young people's access to and participation in leisure and social activities.
- Explore the potential value of leisure as a resilience builder and the role of the leisure sector in promoting the well-being of youth in a crisis.
- Shed light on and share insights about strategies, methods, and good practice applied during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide advice and inspirational, concrete examples, in order to contribute to an approach towards resilience, hence ensuring youth's continued access to leisure and social activities in the face of future crises.

## 1.3 Research questions

### **Young people's diminished access to leisure time activities and its implications**

- In what ways did the access to leisure time activities diminish for young

people during the pandemic? What were the implications for young people's well-being during and after the pandemic?

- Were certain groups of young people more affected by the diminished access to leisure time activities? For instance, girls more than boys? Was some leisure given priority (by authorities and organisations)? If so, who benefited from this discrimination?
- Did the effects on arenas of leisure time activities and youth engagement linger also after the pandemic?-

### **Adaptations in the leisure and youth sector**

- What successful strategies can be identified for i) maintaining access to leisure time activities in times of crisis, and/or for ii) mitigating the negative implications on young people's health and development?

### **Insights to inform future policy and preparedness**

- What can we learn about the value of leisure time activities regarding the health and well-being of youth in general, as well as by means of providing coping mechanisms in times of crisis?
- Could negative implications be mitigated by including youth in the crisis management? If yes, to what extent and in what ways?
- In what ways can the youth sector contribute to the management of future crises regarding the well-being of youth?
- How can the insights contribute to building an approach of resilience and thus ensure youth's continued access to leisure and social activities in the face of future crises?

## **1.4 Why leisure matters: A foundation for resilience and well-being**

Leisure contributes greatly to the well-being of youth. Although perceptions of what meaningful leisure time is differ between individuals and groups, research demonstrates that physical activity, social interaction, and a sense of community, in addition to the opportunity to contemplate freely and be distracted from stress, are pivotal factors in achieving optimal general well-being and mental health. (Gotfredsen & Strömbäck, 2023)

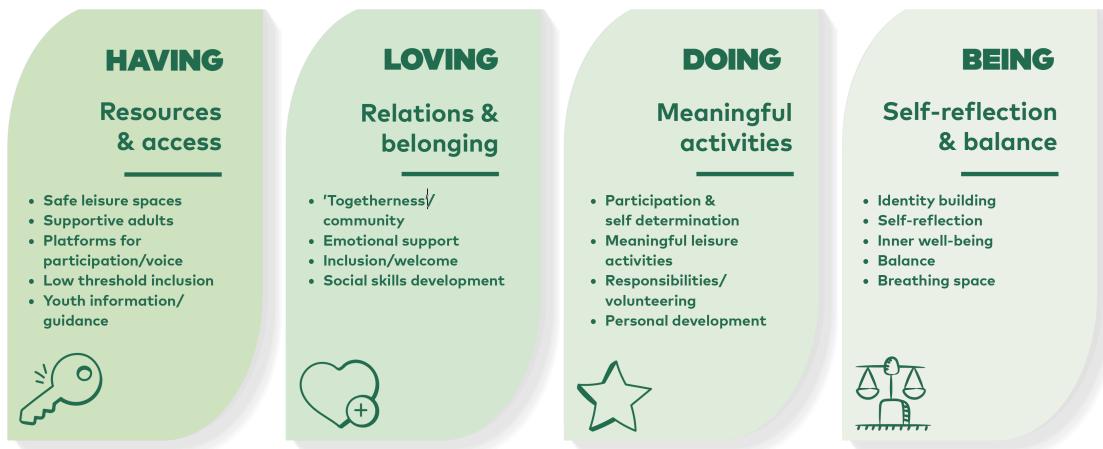
Moreover, leisure activities contribute to young people's identity formation (Hendry et al., 1993) and their personal development. (Larson, 2000; Mahoney et al., 2009).

For example, it enables active participation, self-organisation and active citizenship, as set out in [the European Charter on Local Youth Work](#).

To strengthen the well-being and resilience of young people in crisis, it is necessary to identify more precisely the factors that build resilience in leisure activities. With this knowledge comes a possibility to strengthen exactly those factors in the leisure sector, but also to ensure their continuation when designing crisis responses and developing adaptations for leisure.

The COVID pandemic provides a valuable opportunity to examine the relationship between leisure, well-being, and resilience. By examining the impact of various policies and restrictions, as well as adaptations within the sector, we can determine how their well-being and resilience were affected by the crisis. This report will examine the relationship between leisure and resilience using a theoretical model of four basic needs: 'having', 'loving', 'being', and 'doing'.

The model in Figure 1.1 below was originally developed by Allardt (1995), further elaborated by Helne & Hirvilammi (2015) and Kauppinen & Laine (2022). The authors of this report (Gunvén & Johansson) developed it additionally by identifying the critical resilience factors of leisure within its framework (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.1).



**Figure 1.1:** The four dimensions of well-being

## Building resilience in the face of crises

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of our societies and emphasised the need to enhance resilience for the future. Several vital societal functions were caught unprepared, requiring the public and social spheres to adjust and adapt to new conditions and testing the very core of our resilience.

This report highlights actions and strategies that would give young people increased access to leisure activities, strengthening their resilience and enabling

them to recover and evolve in the face of future crises. Resilience is defined as the ability to withstand and adapt to change. (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2013)

In an ever-changing world where societal change, natural disasters, or geopolitical conflicts and wars could trigger the next crisis in the Nordic countries, it is impossible to predict what the next emergency might look like.

Due to the limited time and resources available, we did not have the opportunity to conduct in-depth research into potential crisis scenarios. However, a few interviews were conducted with key stakeholders who have extensive experience of working with young people in emergency situations, including war and invasion (Ukraine), natural disasters (volcanic eruptions), and permanent evacuation (Grindavík, Iceland), as well as the expansion of criminal networks (Sollentuna, Sweden). The informants were particularly helpful in substantiating our findings regarding the link between access to leisure activities and resilience. They also shared their extensive knowledge of the role of leisure activities and spaces, as well as the challenges and opportunities within the leisure sector in a crisis.

## The Nordic dimension

The report builds on the Nordic dimension, its fundamental values and aspirations, and the idea that Nordic societies are organised in a similar way. Thanks to the important role played by social welfare systems, a crisis situation in the Nordic countries is often less damaging for citizens. In the leisure sector, government funding plays a key role in supporting activities for young people (Krieger & Nordhagen, 2022). One example of this is the government's financial support for municipal youth work at a local level. Many leisure activities, such as sports and other hobbies, are offered by voluntary or private organisations operating within civil society. Many of these organisations also depend partly on government funding to support their activities.

Authorities at the national, regional, and local levels, as well as in different sectors across the Nordics, responded differently to the pandemic. The restrictions imposed, the policies implemented, the challenges faced, and the organisation of responses varied – even within the same country.

The similarities in the basic structures of the Nordic region mean that these variations in crisis response and their outcomes can be compared across the region, allowing conclusions to be drawn for future crisis situations.

Our intention in this report is to promote learning by highlighting the commonalities and differences, rather than conducting an in-depth comparative investigation.

To this end, we conducted interviews with young people, youth workers, youth organisations, representatives of youth umbrella organisations, and other experts across the Nordic region. Informants representing Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands,

Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Åland greatly contributed to our cause with their narratives, examples of good practice, and suggestions on possible ways forward.

## 1.5 Methodological approach and tools

Rather than a piece of research, our report is an overview of knowledge and insights. It draws on existing research and grey literature enriched and substantiated by the experience, knowledge, and learning narrated by practitioners, researchers, and youth organisations.

The study used semi-structured interviews. Interview guides were developed to operationalise the main questions and assumptions. A basic template of an interview guide can be found in Appendix I.

Key actors in civil society and community-driven youth work, researchers as well as various experts and authorities/administrations are the key informants and interviewees for this report.

The interviewees were selected to represent all the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Åland, and included various sectors and groups of young people, particularly disadvantaged groups, as well as rural, urban, and semi-rural areas. To ensure a youth perspective, we interviewed representatives of youth-led umbrella-level organisations, and several individual young people were included in the final triangulation (feedback) phase also referred to below. A total of 36 interviews were conducted with the following groups: experts (6); representatives of ministries/public administrations (4); national youth councils (3); hobby and youth organisations (8); youth work umbrella organisations (6); municipal youth workers (5); and four individual young people.

The findings, conclusions, and advice were refined through various feedback activities. More than 40 stakeholders, including policymakers, experts, youth workers, youth organisations, and young people, provided feedback through two designated workshops at a conference arranged by the Nordic Welfare Centre.

Conference participants and interviewees were asked to assess assumptions and findings, and several key informants provided feedback on the final set of insights and advice (see Chapter 4) via an interactive survey. 34 persons (including eight youth) contributed.

A second survey was designed, with the aim to get feedback on findings about the resilience factors. A total of 18 persons (including eight youth) responded. The surveys are attached to this report in Appendix II.

Some of the survey respondents are cited in the report and referred to as 'respondents'. Finally, four young people were interviewed to triangulate the key findings based on their personal experiences during and after the pandemic.

The interviewees are listed in Appendix III.

## 1.6 Definitions

### Leisure

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines leisure time as time for play and recreation, including music, art, crafts, social engagement, organisation, sports, gaming, outdoor recreation and hobbies, and sets out children's and young people's right to it. (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Art. 31, para. 1)

The authors' definition of leisure is informed by the concepts of youth work and youth self-organisation. Within these approaches, intentional activities, whether structured or semi-structured, are placed at the centre of the leisure concept.

### Youth organisations

Youth organisations typically focus on promoting and ensuring young people's democratic and social rights, encouraging their social and political participation, and providing opportunities for personal and social development through leisure activities, volunteering, and non-formal learning. (Brown & Larson, 2009)

### Hobbies

Structured sports, cultural activities, or other leisure activities. Unlike youth organisations, we also include other providers of youth hobbies, such as informal hobby groups or hobbies organised for young people by other providers, such as foundations or companies.

### Civil society

Refers collectively to voluntary, civic, and social organisations, associations, and institutions. It is seen as distinct from both the state and the commercial institutions of the market.

### Relaxed, non-structured leisure

Relaxed leisure characterised by an absence of supervision or structure in hobby groups, youth self-organisation, or community-driven youth work is beyond the scope of this report. This report will only touch upon it to complement the focus on structured and semi-structured leisure.

### Youth work

This encompasses a broad range of social, cultural, educational, sports-related, and political activities carried out with, by, and for young people through non-formal and informal learning. Youth work has three essential features: (i) young people choose to participate; (ii) the work takes place where young people are; and (iii) it recognises that young people and youth workers are partners in the learning process.

Youth work plays an important role in the personal and social development of young people, encouraging their participation in society and supporting them through life's transitions. It is intended for all young people, including those who are less engaged with society and/or have fewer opportunities. Through youth work, young people can learn about and experience universal values such as human rights, gender equality, democracy, peace, pluralism, diversity, inclusion, solidarity, tolerance, and justice. (Council of the European Union, 2020)

### **Community-driven youth work**

Refers to youth clubs and centres run or funded by the municipality. These facilities provide supervised, structured, or semi-structured activities free of charge and open to all young people. In addition to on-site programming, they often include detached youth work, which involves outreach to young people in their own environments – such as public spaces or online platforms – to ensure accessibility and inclusion, particularly for those who may not actively seek out traditional youth services.

### **Youth workers**

The term refers to individuals engaged in work or activities with and for young people, either on a voluntary or professional basis. This includes those working in youth organisations, youth services, youth centres, youth/social work training institutions, and other settings that support non-formal education. Their roles may vary, but they share a common commitment to fostering young people's development, participation, and well-being in everyday contexts.

### **Well-being and health**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health in its Constitution as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely as the absence of disease or infirmity. This holistic definition underscores that health is not limited to the absence of illness but encompasses a broader sense of overall well-being physically, mentally, and socially. It reflects the importance of supportive environments, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for participation as essential components of a healthy life, particularly for young people.

### **Youth**

We have chosen not to set a strict age limit for the study, as classifications vary across countries and research contexts. Instead, we refer to an approximate age range of 13 to 24 years, focusing on youth in secondary and upper secondary education as well as students and young adults.

Our particular interest in adolescents and young adults stems from the importance that this age group attributes to social interaction and leisure time spent outside of the family. While children are mainly oriented towards their parents and the immediate family, teenagers and young adults are more focused on peer relationships. (Brown & Larson, 2009)

Throughout the study, the attention given to older youth and young adults was consistently highlighted by youth workers and other informants. Several interviewees noted that young adults transitioning from high school to adult life are often overlooked in research and policy and are referred to as a forgotten group.

## **Resilience**

Resilience refers to the capacity of a system, community, or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform, and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management and preparedness. [The term can refer to a system, an organisation, or individuals.](#)

## **Resilience factors**

The aim of this report is to identify the key components of leisure that contribute to the well-being and resilience of young people. These factors – referred to as resilience factors – are analysed and discussed in depth in Chapter 4 and are referred to throughout the report. They include, for example: safe and inclusive leisure spaces, access to supportive adults, opportunities for meaningful participation, personal development, sense of togetherness, and emotional support. Throughout our study, these factors demonstrate the importance of leisure and give valuable guidance to leisure providers and policymakers on designing, developing, and implementing leisure activities in times of crisis and beyond.

## **Formal and non-formal learning**

This study focuses on [non-formal learning in the leisure sector](#), as opposed to formal learning in schools and universities.

[Formal learning](#) takes place in organised and structured environments led by an educator or instructor, and follows a predefined syllabus or curriculum. It has clear learning objectives and often leads to recognised qualifications, certificates, or degrees after assessments such as exams and assignments. Examples include schools, universities, vocational training, and corporate training programmes.

Non-formal learning is intentionally organised and takes place outside of traditional educational settings, usually in the leisure sector. It is structured, often with defined goals and learning outcomes, but does not lead to the formal accreditation, qualifications, or degrees associated with traditional education. Examples of non-formal learning include personal development and skills development through leisure activities.



## 2. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the wellbeing of young people

### 2.1 Policies and restrictions: their impact on the youth and leisure sector

The policies and restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic varied significantly across and within countries. Some countries or areas relied more on recommendations than restrictions. Areas with relatively small populations were able to restrict travel more easily and contain the virus, whereas larger, densely populated areas experienced higher infection rates and implemented stricter regulations.

#### **Schools and formal education prioritised**

Throughout the epidemic, the governments of the Nordic countries prioritised keeping education and formal learning open for children and young people. As a matter of fact, several interviewees in our study regret the fact that the focus was 'entirely on keeping schools open'.

It was widely accepted that the risk of transmitting SARS-CoV-2 through on-site education increased with age. Thus, high schools (for 16–20-year-olds) were mostly closed and teaching was delivered remotely through digital platforms, while educational institutions for children and young people under 16 were largely operational. University-level education was entirely digitalised.

Among the Nordic and European countries, Sweden distinguished itself by

implementing the least stringent policy measures. However, students in Sweden were also engaged in distance learning for extended periods, and public spaces and activities were restricted through recommendations that were largely adhered to. Denmark, Finland, and Norway experienced more lockdowns and longer periods of distance learning, even for younger students. Although innovative digital pedagogies were developed, the quality of teaching varied considerably. (Nøkleby et al., 2022)

## Shrinking space in the leisure and youth sector

The leisure and youth sector was significantly affected by the crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the most immediate and widespread challenges facing the youth and leisure sector was the closure of indoor sports facilities, gyms, and swimming pools. This was a widespread measure in the Nordic countries, particularly during the initial phases of the pandemic. In most places, also youth centres were completely shut down. Several informants questioned the lack of tailored restrictions and closures, which would have enabled a larger part of the leisure sector to remain open for as long as possible.

One out of several similar statements made by interviewees:

*'The restrictions were enforced in a "one-size-fits-all" manner without taking into account the potential for specific adaptations. This made it difficult for the leisure and youth sector to adapt and even more challenging to innovate.'*

The impact on various venues and activities differed greatly. The prohibition of contact sports meant that most traditional team sports could not be practised, and group training sessions could not be held. Competitions and summer camps were not permitted, either. Outdoor meetings were also occasionally prohibited.

## Ever-changing restrictions and uncertainty

The ever-changing restrictions and recommendations, coupled with the urgency of the situation, led to confusion and uncertainty among leisure providers regarding the implementation of government regulations and advice. Local authorities generally interpreted the government provisions conservatively to avoid taking risks. As one informant from a youth work umbrella organisation explained:

*'A general fear of making mistakes and causing harm to young people and their families led many municipalities to choose closure over risk, even when we offered guidelines on how to run youth centres in accordance with the restrictions.'*

Leisure and youth organisations also describe how the uncertainty had led them to cancel activities that may not have needed to be cancelled. One of the interviewees said:

*'We found ourselves in a situation where we should have pushed the boundaries of the regulations to the maximum extent possible to benefit young people, but instead we capitulated.'*

The constant changes in regulation also posed a challenge. Having to prepare for an activity or project that was later cancelled discouraged innovation. Several informants, particularly those representing youth organisations, said that motivation started to fade as the pandemic continued for a prolonged period. [The Danish Youth Council \(DUF\) post-pandemic membership survey](#) revealed that the main reason for losing motivation (as stated by 77% of respondents) were long periods of postponed activities, which often resulted in inertia.

### **Mounting pressure facing the leisure sector-**

Organisations in the leisure sector faced multiple challenges, particularly due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Smaller associations with few or no employees, in particular, found it difficult to cope with additional demands, including adapting activities, supporting volunteers, completing grant applications, conducting risk assessments, and looking for alternative venues.

Many volunteers lost motivation and some chose to pause their engagement. One interviewee said:

*'With volunteers unable to meet in person, it was difficult to maintain their motivation or a sense of community, not to mention offering innovative alternatives to physical activities.'*

Hobby organisations lost income from sources such as rent, market stalls, and ticket sales. At the same time, costs increased due to adaptations and skills development needs.

The public sector made efforts to keep these organisations afloat. Support strategies such as sustained grants throughout the pandemic despite reduced activity levels, and reduced or exempted rents for venues, were of great importance. However, interviewees noted that little (if any) additional financial support was provided to enable the youth and leisure sector to (re-) organise activities. An interviewee of an organisation working with disabled young people said:

*'There were no resources available to take a proactive approach or implement funding-requiring adaptations.'*

Funding schemes were not always designed to ensure the provision of youth leisure activities. For example, although the Swedish Sports Confederation received a substantial emergency support package, [the majority of the funds were allocated to elite and adult sports](#) to compensate for a decrease in income as opposed to supporting the provision of youth leisure on a local level.

Interviewees from other Nordic countries provided further examples of large organisations receiving funding, while smaller hobby and youth organisations were excluded from existing support structures (see, for instance, the National Sports Council of Finland, 2022).

Several informants stated that, in addition to financial assets, there was also a shortage of other resources such as suitable premises. For example, it was difficult to gain access to large indoor premises managed by municipalities, such as sports halls and schools. Youth centres, libraries, and cultural institutions were closed, and there was a lack of covered outdoor premises.

## **Lack of adequate contingency planning for the leisure sector**

The pandemic exposed significant gaps in the Nordic youth and leisure sector's contingency planning. Many interviewees said they were caught off guard, highlighting the lack of procedures for managing the outcomes of a crisis. Municipalities and youth organisations were largely unprepared and lacked the plans and skills necessary to continue activities or support resilience among young people. Indeed, many interviewees also indicated that the absence of sector-specific policies and/or policy briefings was one of the factors contributing to the negative implications for the leisure sector and, consequently, for young people. A lack of supportive strategies was also evident, with a few exceptions. As a Norwegian expert informant stated:

*'No policies or strategies supporting the provision of leisure activities for young people were implemented. Not one.'*

Over time, awareness of the negative consequences of social isolation on the well-being of young people increased in society and among policymakers. Participation in leisure activities was generally encouraged by the authorities in the Nordic region, and measures were taken to facilitate access to these activities. For example, rather than banning gatherings altogether, limitations were placed on the number of young people who could meet indoors or outdoors, and these limitations sometimes varied by age group. But the measures did not always result in expected outcomes.

For instance, limitations on group size put pressure on youth workers and other leisure providers that did not have leaders or venues for more groups. One of our informants, a youth worker in a remote Greenlandic village, reported:

*'The youth club is the only leisure hub in the area. It was heart-breaking to see young people queuing, only to admit twenty of them per evening and deny so many others the opportunity to socialise with their peers and us youth workers.'*

According to several informants who are well familiar with the policy-making process, the consequences of the restrictions were not properly analysed.

For example, while young people under the age of 16 were permitted to meet in

person, adults and older youths were not allowed to be present. This prevented youth volunteers, coaches, and supportive adults from implementing the activities. There was also a lack of analysis of the consequences for groups of young people who had fewer opportunities. For instance, pre-registration was introduced, which made it more difficult for young people to access leisure activities and spaces, and excluded certain groups from participating.

Several informants and respondents, particularly young people and representatives of youth umbrella organisations, indicated that young people and their perspective were inadequately represented in decision-making processes. Young people were also rarely included in policy development processes or the adaptation of measures and activities. Chapters 3 and 4 of our report discuss the consequences of this exclusion and suggest improvements ahead of the next crisis.

## **Gaps between expectations and reality**

A lack of preparation hindered effective crisis communication, resulting in an expectation gap. One of our interviewees gave the example of parents publicly 'shaming' a cultural organisation for only allowing one parent or family member to attend performances due to health and safety concerns during the pandemic. Similarly, music teachers were expected to 'continue as usual', even though they were not allowed to use indoor venues. An interviewee stated:-

*'Most pupils don't have a drum kit at home, so you can't really do that exercise online. It's also impossible to play the flute outside in sub-zero temperatures.'*

The local authorities expected the municipal youth service to continue offering activities for young people and to adapt its methods as necessary. However, this was not the case. With group size limits and an increase in digital and detached youth work, which has a more individualised focus on support and counselling, more human resources were needed to reach and support young people. Rather than maintaining or increasing staffing levels, the authorities would reallocate important resources from the youth and leisure sector. Informants reported that it was challenging when some youth workers were made redundant while others were redeployed as substitute teachers or to help prevent the spread of the virus in schools.

## **2.2 Policies and restrictions: Their implications for young people**

Young people's access to leisure during the pandemic varied depending on economic resources, social networks, geography, and the availability of activities under restrictions. For over two years, these restrictions significantly limited opportunities for social interaction outside the home.

The drastically reduced access to leisure had a particularly negative impact on adolescents and young adults (aged approximately 16–20). This age is when young people distance themselves from their families and friends become increasingly important sources of support. The age group experienced social isolation through home schooling and stricter restrictions on leisure activities than their younger peers. Students living far from home (e.g., those attending high school in a different town or city) and those who were new to an area or school were particularly affected by isolation, as they lacked a social context. (Nyyssölä & Manner, 2023; Christiansen, Qualter & Friis, 2021)

The pause in leisure activities meant that many in this age group missed out on progressing from hobby participation to volunteering for an organisation. This resulted in fewer volunteers in hobby and youth organisations, as well as a loss of resilience factors for the young people in question.

The distress and lack of clarity surrounding the pandemic and its infection control regulations led some parents to stop their children or young relatives from travelling, visiting public spaces, or socialising with friends. This situation was exacerbated by uncertainty surrounding the implications of restrictions and adaptations to leisure activities, as well as security measures within the leisure sector. This resulted in further limitations on socialisation and increased isolation, particularly among certain youth groups, such as those who were at risk themselves or who had family members who were.

The threshold for participation was raised in several respects. For example, constantly changing and unpredictable restrictions resulted in irregular activities and scarce or conflicting information about whether activities were going to take place. Limitations on numbers meant that pre-registration was required, sometimes with parental consent. Digitalisation resulted in a loss of physical social interaction with friends, youth leaders, and wider society as a motivating factor for participation. The opportunity to participate in or organise spontaneous sports activities, take part in activities with a low barrier to entry for unorganised youth, attend low-cost summer camps or visit 'open' youth centres remained unavailable for a long time.

## **2.3 Uneven impact on the well-being among different groups of youth**

The effects of the pandemic on leisure were significantly unequal for different groups of young people. Groups who faced greater barriers to participation prior to the pandemic were disproportionately impacted, with low-threshold participation opportunities disappearing. Prior to the pandemic, leisure activities had a particularly positive impact on the well-being of certain groups exposed to social isolation. Consequently, they suffered greater losses when access was denied

during the pandemic.

Groups adversely affected include young people from financially disadvantaged families, those living in overcrowded households, those living in households affected by mental illness, cognitive disabilities, abuse, violence or crime, and young migrants whose native language is not Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian or Swedish. Other particularly affected groups, as mentioned in the literature and by interviewees, include girls and young women (see for instance: Kozák, Bakken & von Soest Tilmann, 2023) , LGBTQIA+ youth (see, for instance: Malmquist et al., 2023 and Sampogna et al., 2021) , and young people with disabilities (see for instance: Kämppi, Asunta & Tammelin, 2022). The consequences for young people in these groups will be presented below.

[A Norwegian study](#) using data collected from a survey answered by 500,000 secondary school pupils shows a clear correlation between young people's leisure habits, their overall well-being, and their social background.

## **Young people with fewer socioeconomic opportunities**

The partial or complete closure of low-threshold, low-cost and/or free leisure activities at youth clubs, ever-changing conditions, pre-registration, and digitalisation had a particularly negative impact on young people from less socio-economically privileged backgrounds.

For children and young people in this group, the closure of leisure activities resulted in involuntary isolation and an increase in psychological stress. (Norwegian Social Research, Youth Research Group NOVA, Nova 2021). According to informants, this group has a particularly low participation rate in hobby organisations and was therefore particularly affected by the closure of youth clubs and other low-threshold activities or spaces.

Larger cities and/or metropolitan areas, especially those less socio-economically privileged populations had higher infection rates and therefore stricter rules. This resulted in even poorer access to youth centres and easily accessible activities than in other areas.

As several low-cost or free leisure activities closed and family breadwinners were negatively affected by layoffs and suspensions, some did not have the economic resources to pay for their children's and other young family members' participation in sports and hobbies.

Several hobby organisations started charging, or increased the fee, for leisure activities (such as bike tracks and adventure parks) that were previously offered for free or at a reduced price. (Save the Children Sweden, 2021)

When municipal sports and swimming facilities shut down, young people from more affluent backgrounds could turn to private, profit-driven sports companies to continue enjoying leisure activities (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2021). This was an

opportunity denied to those without the necessary economic means. One interviewee from Greenland said:

*'We rarely talk about it, but there is a significant disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged families in our society. In fact, I would even say that some people are poor. During the pandemic, it became clear that children and young people who usually benefited from free access to the municipal swimming pool suffered from isolation when it closed.'*

Free opportunities for un- or semi-structured leisure, such as youth centres, cafés, and shopping centre benches, were also removed. This resulted in an adverse effect, whereby resource-strong youth could meet in cafés, while those with little or no money had nothing to do. (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022)

During times of crisis and insecurity, it is particularly important that young people have access to parental and family support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this support was less readily available to families with fewer socioeconomic opportunities, as it was a time of anxiety, stress, job losses, and economic challenges. Additionally, as physical leisure activities were replaced by digital alternatives, some young people lacked the necessary resources to practise their hobby online, such as digital equipment, guidance, programmes, space, or the required knowledge. This had an unequal impact on their well-being.

The closure of safe leisure facilities, such as youth clubs, left young people living in risky environments vulnerable. Some of these young people returned to negative environments and/or reconnected with old friends or abusive adults. (Save the Children Sweden, 2022)

## Overcrowded households

Overcrowding posed challenges for young people and their families during the pandemic as adults, children, and young family members spent more time at home.-

According to statistics from 2021, Sweden had the highest rate – 16% of the population – living in overcrowded conditions among the Nordic countries.

Sweden is followed by Denmark and Iceland (10%), Finland (8%), and Norway, 6% of the population. Overcrowding (and housing shortage) has also been indicated as a challenge by interviewees from Greenland and confirmed by statistics.

Areas with a higher proportion of overcrowded households were subject to stricter restrictions, as denser living conditions posed a greater risk of contagion. This resulted in fewer opportunities to leave home and limited privacy even further. Without a room of one's own, participating in digital leisure activities such as dance classes also became more challenging.

## High-risk home environments

Severe restrictions, including lockdowns and working from home, exacerbated existing tensions within vulnerable households.

Several studies and reports; Øverlien (2020); Trolldal et al. (2025); Nesset et al. (2021); Bonsaken et al. (2021) confirm that problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, as well as family violence, worsened during the pandemic in the Nordics. In Denmark, for example, there were reports of increased pressure on women's crisis centres after schools and workplaces closed. In Norway, women from minority groups were identified as being particularly at risk of gender-based violence.

As described by one informant:

*'Many young people who experience violence or substance abuse at home spend most of their free time at the youth centre. When it closed, they were left with no place to withdraw and no one to talk to about sensitive issues.'*

## Immigrant and migrant families

Migrant families in Denmark and Sweden experience higher levels of overcrowding than traditional Danish and Swedish families. It can be assumed that this trend is similar in Finland and Norway. (Eriksen, J.O., 2020) Multigenerational living, which is also more common among migrant families, caused stress to young people who were worried about spreading the infection to older family members.

Generally, youth living in families where one or more members were considered at high risk to contract the infection, had to deal with worries, and carefully consider any participation in activities outside of their homes.

Another challenge was disseminating accurate and timely information during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear that the authorities' communication strategies were never tailored with any real effectiveness to reach the particular groups concerned. This contributed to confusion, the spread of misinformation, and a decline in health- and information literacy among migrants.

A lack of accessible language posed challenges, particularly for people with disabilities (see below) and people for whom one of the Nordic languages was not their native language. This included information on leisure activity restrictions and safety measures, as well as details of available activities and their conditions. (The Lancet Migration & Migration Health and Development Research Initiative, 2021; Lindberg et al., 2024; Nordiska ministerrådet, 2022b)

## Girls and young women

The pandemic had a greater impact on the well-being of girls and young women than on that of boys and young men (Kozák et al., 2023). For example, a Finnish survey showed that 25% of the girls and 10% of the boys 'felt lonely' during the

pandemic. (Nyyssölä & Manner, 2023). In a Swedish study from 2022 on mental health among young people aged 16–29, the proportion of young women suffering from 'severe mental distress' was 22%. Among young men, the percentage was 11%. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022)

Similarly, in an Icelandic piece of research, compared to boys, girls reported a greater negative impact across all broad indicators of well-being and behavioural change, and girls also scored higher on depressive symptoms than expected during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Halldorsdottir et al., 2021)

There are indications that girls had less access to leisure activities in real life during the pandemic, which deprived them to a greater extent of the protective factors of leisure. In a survey, UNICEF Sweden found that girls' activities, such as dance and music, were cancelled or moved online, while boys' sports activities, which allowed for physical distancing, continued outdoors. (UNICEF Sverige, 2020)

Women, who often act as carers, are more likely to reduce their working hours or leave the workforce altogether in order to look after children and relatives. In Finland, the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between parents became apparent in spring 2020, when the responsibility for looking after young children shifted to the home. This often disproportionately affected young women and girls, potentially leaving them with less time for study or leisure activities. (Queisser, 2021)

Interviewed youth workers indicated how girls from strict families in migrant communities were hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 crisis. As well as having to cope with isolation, they were expected to take on a lot of responsibility at home.

Our findings also suggest that the digitalisation of leisure disadvantaged girls. The digitalisation of free time primarily means social media (characterised by competition and 'non-live' interaction) for girls and gaming (characterised by 'live' group interaction in chat rooms) for boys. Women and girls generally use social media more than men and boys across the Nordic realm.

A higher percentage of boys (81%) also stated that the people they play games with online are the same as those they meet in 'real life', compared to 43% of girls. (Leonhardt & Overå, 2021). Chapter 3 provides more information on the use of digitalisation as a tool to address the challenges posed by the pandemic.

A possible explanation to the fact that the well-being of girls was affected more by decreased access to leisure activities and spaces could be that their well-being depends more on socialising with friends in person. An indication of this is that the distancing measures resulted in 29% of girls, compared to 19% of boys, feeling highly isolated. To understand the dimension of the feeling of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be noted that a further 29% of girls and 29% of boys reportedly felt isolated to some degree. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022)

## LGBTQIA+ youth

There is extensive evidence to suggest that LGBTQIA+ young people in the Nordic region were more likely to experience isolation and discrimination during the pandemic than other young people. The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and created new challenges for this group. (RFSL, 2020)

Many young people from the LGBTQIA+ community were forced to isolate themselves in potentially unwelcoming and/or non-inclusive environments, which exacerbated their psychological distress. These individuals experienced symptoms of clinical depression, anxiety, worry, and heightened stress sensitivity.

School closures and social restrictions prevented many young LGBTQIA+ people from accessing the mental health services and support they needed. This was particularly true for those affected by family displacement, who relied on 'chosen families' or LGBTQIA+ communities for support.

LGBTQIA+ people in the Nordic region experienced significant online harassment, hatred, and violence, which led to severe psychological distress. Trans people in particular faced challenges such as longer waiting times for gender-affirming care during the pandemic. (Malmquist et al., 2023; Sampogna et al., 2021)

The LGBTQIA+ community often serves as an important support network in light of such challenges, but also as a safe space for exploring identity and sexuality. During lockdown, access to this community through the leisure sector was severely limited, which removed access to important resilience factors. (Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health – PMNCH, 2021; Green, Price-Feeney & Dorison, 2020)

One informant explained that meeting other LGBTQIA+ youth in your local area is vital so that they can see that: there are others like me, right here where I live. The interviewee added:

*'Moving to online, national platforms is not an optimal solution since it removes the local identification role of the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as the personal support available to young people.'*

## Young people with disabilities

According to the 2022 Finland Report Card, 15–20% of children and young people have disabilities that make their everyday life more challenging. (Kämppi et al., 2022).

The impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities has been described as 'a triple jeopardy'. They experienced not only negative social consequences of the infection control measures, but also reduced access to essential health services, as well as an increased risk of severe outcomes from the COVID-19 infection itself. Moreover, studies show that young people with disabilities, as a group that is already experiencing isolation, felt a deeper sense of loneliness and longed for social contacts such as school and meetings with grandparents. They described life as

boring and lonely. (Fäldt et al., 2022).

The pandemic exacerbated existing mental health issues, with the socio-psychological cost being particularly high for groups that were already less likely to participate. Children and adults with disabilities also experienced heightened anxiety and fear relating to the virus. (Klette-Bøhler et al., 2023) This affected their ability to enjoy leisure activities. As one interviewee mentioned:

*'Young people with mental health issues were the first to be affected by the pandemic. Of this we're sure, since we collected data during the pandemic.'*

Disability organisations are often diagnosis specific. They provide their members with knowledge about their condition, the opportunity to meet others facing similar challenges and life situations, and the chance to make friends and feel empowered. According to one informant, not providing this support, particularly during the early teenage years, can have serious consequences for these young people's development, well-being, and life situation.

During the pandemic, many young people with disabilities were unable to access important information and services online due to inaccessible digital design and/or language barriers. This hindered their ability to participate in leisure activities. In Sweden, for instance, a lack of information in sign language and easy-to-read Swedish posed a significant risk to individuals with communication difficulties. (Lyngbäck et al., n.d.)

Some informants suggested that digitalisation had increased accessibility for certain young disabled people, evidenced by their increased participation. However, while this is an argument for the provision of digital leisure opportunities, it is unlikely that this positive effect outweighed the many negative implications referred to in this report.

## 2.4 Effects that linger

Five years after the outbreak of the pandemic, the situation regarding the participation of young people in organised and semi-organised leisure activities in the Nordic countries shows a mixed, but largely positive, picture of recovery and adaptation, alongside ongoing recognition of the pandemic's impact.

Sweden has seen a remarkable increase in the number of young people participating in sports. Between 2019 and 2024, the number of occasions on which people participated in sports in Sweden increased by almost five million, reaching historic levels. Football, gymnastics, basketball, handball, and ice hockey experienced significant growth, with football's ability to hold outdoor activities during the pandemic contributing to its continued increase.

At the same time, the young people who were lost during the pandemic did not return, and the consequences for them were irreversible. Leisure providers speak of

lost generations of participants and volunteers.

## **Decreased volunteering**

Although most leisure organisations have reported an increase in membership since the pandemic, the number of volunteers has continued to decline. For example, an interviewee representing a national youth council noted a decrease of one hour of volunteer work per person per month within its affiliated organisations. This negative trend is a cause for concern among leisure and hobby organisations, as volunteer work is essential for delivering activities and fostering resilience among young people.

Representatives of hobby organisations described how the departure of role models and youth leaders had resulted in a loss of knowledge transfer, which in turn had affected younger participants. Some organisations have had to start from scratch to equip young leaders with the necessary skills and competencies to organise a summer camp. The shortage of youth leaders and knowledge also limited the ability to kick-start after the crisis.

## **Movement from organised to unorganised leisure activities**

The pandemic prompted some young people to switch from organised sports to more informal physical activities. (Teare & Taks, 2021) There has also been a growing interest in outdoor life and holistic health practices such as yoga, meditation, crocheting, knitting, and painting among young Swedes, reflecting a diversification of leisure activities. (Ungdomsbarometern AB, 2025) This increased interest in outdoor life has also been reported in Finland, Faroe Islands, and Norway. (Johansen et al., 2024).

## **Persisting inequalities**

This report demonstrates that the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in young people's mental health and overall well-being, leaving vulnerable groups particularly exposed. While the lasting impact of these inequalities is beyond the scope of this report, it can be concluded that children and young people with fewer opportunities are likely to be the least resilient and the most disadvantaged in any future crises. (Olofsson & Kvist, 2022)

## **A lack of social skills and togetherness**

Informants were asked to reflect on any lingering effects of the pandemic on young people's behaviour. Some interviewees reflected on the fact that it is difficult to say with certainty whether behavioural changes are related to the pandemic, as several trends were ongoing even if they were accentuated during the pandemic. However, most interviewees state that they have become more aware of specific patterns in

the aftermath of the pandemic.

Almost all the examples were related to the deficit of the loving dimension of well-being. They stressed the importance of feeling a sense of belonging and togetherness, and of having the opportunity to socialise and develop social skills, all of which were largely inaccessible during the pandemic. Below are a few examples to illustrate what has just been indicated. An interviewee representing a sports association said:

*'The number of volunteers has declined somewhat, but the most obvious negative difference as compared to before is that it has become increasingly difficult to get youth leaders and other volunteers to take on responsibility.'*

Another interviewee narrated:

*'I am a sports coach in a young team in my free time. Team members sometimes call the evening before a game, to notify that they don't feel like coming, or that they have fallen sick, and it appears to happen more frequently lately. Of course, it's difficult to say if this has anything to do with the pandemic. My guess is that it might be related to the fact that young people have become used to meeting and engaging on-line. In an on-line game people drop in and out without that leading to any consequences for the rest of the players, as it does in real life.'*

The interviewee then added:

*'I have also noticed that children and young people are more anxious than before. They don't enjoy staying overnight at sports camps or on hikes. They are also more sensitive to noise and crowds. During the last tournaments, some young participants requested a "silent room", where they could withdraw and rest.'*

Informants representing youth centres and non-governmental youth organisations (NGOs) alike have noted an increased level of conflict and harsher language, as well as an inability to solve conflicts. Social anxiety is also making it difficult to establish contact with others or find one's way in a social setting.

Conflict levels were also found to have risen by a university teacher:

*'Many young people who attended high school during the pandemic, have now become students at the university. Whenever we have group work, I reflect on the fact that there are many more conflicts than there used to be, and I can't help but think that this is because young people missed out on training crucial social skills such as collaboration, conflict management, or even compromising.'*

These examples indicate that the decrease in participation of young people during the pandemic has had a negative impact on young people's social skills, which can be expected to affect various aspects of their lives in the long term.



### 3. Crisis response in the youth and leisure sector

The pandemic tested society's ability to withstand and adapt to rapid change. As described in Chapter 2, the leisure and youth sector faced a number of challenges that required swift and flexible responses. Youth and leisure organisations adapted relatively quickly. These adaptations helped ensure that young people could continue to access leisure activities and contributed to reducing the negative impact of the pandemic on the sector and on young people's everyday lives.

As restrictions varied considerably — even within the same municipality — the responses of the sector were highly diverse. The illustration below summarises the measures taken in the Nordic countries to ensure young people could continue to access leisure activities and to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the leisure sector.



**Figure 3.1:** Changes made in the Nordic region during the pandemic to tackle challenges in the leisure sector.

This chapter begins with an insight into the workings of a Danish youth centre. It then provides an overview of the various adaptations implemented across the

Nordic region during the pandemic.

Sections 3.2–3.5 will examine each type of adaptation in greater detail.

Digitalisation has been given special attention because it was a particularly extensive and complex form of adaptation for promoting the well-being and resilience of young people.

### **Innovative adaptations at a Danish youth club**

A Danish youth worker described how a youth club had quickly adapted to the new conditions imposed by the pandemic. This involved targeting young people with special needs and using digitalisation and detached youth work to reach those who were forced to stay at home.

The club usually caters for around 250 users aged 10–18, and it is open for 28 hours a week to young people from local schools. Some of the visitors are young people with fewer opportunities, including those facing issues such as substance abuse, economic hardship, and psychological challenges such as stress and anxiety. Under normal circumstances, a variety of free activities are offered, including:

- A creative room, a music room, and an e-sport room, all guided by professional staff.
- Classics such as billiards, football, and table tennis.
- Free dinners twice a week and a light lunch every day.
- A focus on providing a safe place to be and have fun, with a strong emphasis on 'hygge' (cosiness/well-being), while providing protective factors such as emotional support, guidance, and encouragement.

The interviewee narrates:

*'Our club prioritises creating an environment where young people can "be together in their differences" through activities. We also try to attract youth who might otherwise be on the streets, without access to other leisure activities, by providing a positive alternative.'*

While most young people were staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, this club opened its doors to around 40 young people with special needs whose parents or carers were unable to provide necessary support, such as helping with home schooling. At the youth centres, these young people received support with distance learning, as well as access to youth workers and activities. A 38-page guideline from the municipality ensured their safety. The informant stated:

*'The initiative to keep the youth centre open for a group of young people with greater needs was highly successful, and the protective measures worked well – nobody fell ill.'*

The youth workers were keen to reach out to young people who were unable to attend the youth centre during the pandemic. The interviewee recounted:

*'We drove or cycled to the homes of those who were unable to leave. We gave them a T-shirt bearing the name of our youth club and a letter of encouragement. We told them that we missed them and that they would be welcome back to the youth club after the pandemic. We also invited them to meet us on digital platforms such as Fortnite, an online game and platform. Together, we dreamed and planned what we would do once society reopened.'*

Youth workers would organise outdoor activities where we could be together while also being apart such as walking, biking, canoeing, and fishing. At the same time, they would offer opportunities for dialogue and emotional support.

The municipality played a key role in helping to reach parents via the school. This was important as many parents did not allow their children to go out. It also suggests official recognition of the value of leisure activities and coordination.

With 210 out of 250 young members unable to come to the club, the operations were quickly moved online. Digital efforts included:

- Starting an online youth club that allows for virtual 'dates' and activities in games such as World of Warcraft or Fortnite. However, the interviewee mentioned these as a fill-in rather than a full replacement.
- Organising and facilitating shared experiences, such as watching and discussing Netflix films together, or taking part in baking activities and sharing the results online.
- Engaging in Instagram activities, social media interactions, and Twitch streams.
- Utilising Microsoft Teams and Discord for meetings and group chats.
- Producing podcasts for young people.
- The youth workers of the municipality started a nationwide Facebook forum for practitioners to share good practice and boost morale.

The informant concluded:

*'While our centre was very active during the pandemic, the situation varied greatly from one municipality to another. Some did nothing to adapt, others did a lot.'*

### 3.1 Digitalisation

One of the most common responses to the restrictions imposed in the Nordic countries was to convert physical leisure activities into digital formats. As one expert explained:

*'For youth organisations, digitalisation was a matter of "do or die".'*

The focus varied between countries and leisure contexts, and the adaptations were implemented with varying degrees of success. Although many leisure activities could be digitalised relatively easily, it remained challenging to ensure factors that contribute to resilience, such as 'togetherness', peer support, and low-threshold inclusion. An informant representing a sports organisation said:

*'As the threshold for participation increased with digitalisation, we immediately lost our most vulnerable participants.'*

### Digital municipal youth work

Municipal youth services in the Nordic countries created virtual youth centres, where youth workers organised activities such as quizzes, film nights, and creative workshops (e.g., digital art and music production) via video chat platforms. (Virtanen & Olsen, 2022). As one youth worker from Norway described:

*'Like most other youth clubs, we created new digital meeting spaces on social media platforms such as Discord, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook. We also offered young people a course in how to create a podcast. The podcasts featured interviews with artists and musicians. It was a great success.'*

Discord was widely used in youth work during the pandemic. This platform for instant messaging, voice, and video chat allows users to communicate privately or within virtual communities called servers. These servers are organised into different text and voice channels, enabling groups to talk, share media, and participate in activities together. Although originally designed for gamers, Discord is now widely used by diverse communities for various purposes.

Youth centres across the Nordics used Discord to offer activities such as watching movies or gaming together, taking part in leader-led activities and workshops, and using a digital or phygital (physical and digital activities combined) 'maker space', where young people could work on their projects. Here youth could also take part in conversations about a variety of topics or meet up in smaller, more intimate groups. Some channels were about pets, others about food and recipes, photography, film, or literature. One youth worker mentioned a channel dedicated to cooking where:

*'People would bake something or prepare a meal and then show the results to other participants.'*

Although young people were not heavily involved in designing the overall digitalisation strategies, they played a proactive role in shaping the activities and topics offered at digital youth centres and on Discord servers. As one digital youth worker stated:

*'We do things together that the young people have decided on. That works best.'*

Discord servers were also used to compensate for a lack of adult contact outside the home. A youth worker from Finland explained:

*'We heard from young people that many of them needed to talk to adults who weren't their parents or close relatives, so we set up an online service on the Discord server.'*

Chats could take place either during dedicated support hours or in a separate digital room during activities.

Several of the interviewed youth workers emphasised the importance of involving active young people as youth moderators to create a safe digital space within the Discord server. Thanks to the automatic monitoring and notification function, the servers could remain open 24/7 – even when no youth workers were online.

Young people also played an active role in developing innovative tools. For example, a Danish youth worker described how girls came up with different ways to meet on gaming platforms and created unique avatars for socialising. Rather than playing the game itself, they used the avatars to meet, hug each other, and dance – a way for them to feel close to each other, albeit virtually. Such innovations are important in including girls, who tend to use more competitive social media sites or single-player games for online leisure activities. Boys, on the other hand, tend to spend more time gaming live with friends and communicating in group chats. For this reason, there is a need to develop more group-based games and alternative forms of digital interaction for girls. Virtual reality is another area worth exploring in this respect.

In Norway, expertise in digital youth work was brought together in Trondheim, where 15 youth workers joined forces to set up a national Discord server that an individual local youth centre could not hope to match in terms of scale and outreach. The Trondheim team also supported local youth workers, helping them to set up their own Discord servers.

Similarly, in Finland, a national Discord server enabled large-scale digital participation by pooling resources and providing more youth workers and content, courtesy of Verke. Verke, the Centre of Excellence for Digital Youth Work, was established in 2011 and closed in 2024. Interviewees have referred to Verke's knowledge and expertise as being instrumental in the digitalisation of youth work processes during the pandemic, not only in Finland, but in other Nordic countries, too.

The digitalisation of youth work also presented many challenges. One informant describes:

*'Maybe only four out of a hundred Discord servers used by youth centres worked well. You need the skills to run it, and digital youth work skills were scarce among the youth workers.'*

In the Verke 2021 digital youth work survey, youth workers identified insufficient working hours as well as a lack of skills and objectives as the main challenges in digital youth work. The report concluded that, although digital skills had improved relating to devices and applications, the pandemic had not led to an increase in digital youth work competencies.

Considerable effort was invested in training and developing skills throughout the pandemic, particularly by the umbrella organisations of municipal youth work. For instance, Verke in Finland hosted a Discord server for 2,500 youth workers, facilitating peer-to-peer learning and offering several training sessions and lectures each week. At the same time, however, several informants described it as challenging, if not impossible, to establish the necessary infrastructure and skills once the crisis had hit and the shift to online work had occurred. Another informant reflected on the issue of working hours in digital youth work:

*'One challenge we initially faced when going digital was that many youth centres closed and the youth workers were laid off. Those who are not familiar with digital tools may think that fewer personal resources would be required for online activities than for our everyday physical work. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Access to at least one youth worker needs to be guaranteed in order for the space to be safe, and one-to-one counselling and emotional support sessions are needed. So, the youth club, its activities, and its staff needed to go digital without being downsized.'*

Although digitalisation was the main adaptation in youth work, digital initiatives were largely abandoned as soon as society started to reopen after the pandemic. As one of the informants mentioned:-

*'In the next crisis, we'll have to start from scratch with regard to digitalisation.'*

A former employee of a digital youth work hub in a Nordic country said that his hub's staff numbers were reduced from 15 to fewer than one after physical leisure activities reopened following the pandemic. Another example of a stalled digitalisation initiative was the closure of Verke in Finland.

## **Digitalisation in leisure and youth organisations**

Youth and leisure organisations also underwent extensive digitalisation.

According to a digital youth work expert interviewed for this report, Youth Against Drugs in Finland was one of the first youth organisations to engage with young

people through interactive digital youth work. For example, they ran phygital challenges in which young people had to go outside to complete tasks and then share their experiences online. This method was adopted by others throughout the pandemic.

Hobby associations across the Nordic countries launched digital training programmes and challenges aimed at young people. These included online dance classes, at-home training sessions led by youth leaders via live stream or video, and step challenges in which young people competed to take the most steps outdoors using apps. Other examples include individual orienteering with remote GPS monitoring and coaching, as well as virtual cheerleading competitions and training sessions on social media platforms. Organisations focusing on art, music, theatre, and programming for young people moved their courses and workshops online. Young people learned to play instruments, write stories, code games, and participate in virtual theatre projects from home. (Guðmundsdóttir & Larsen, 2022)

Many after-school clubs and youth associations in the Nordic countries organised digital game nights and tournaments of popular e-sports titles, as well as virtual LAN parties, via platforms such as Discord and Twitch. (Karlsson & Nielsen 2021)

In Sweden, Save the Children (Rädda Barnen) was one of the initiators of [the DigiFritids.se](#) platform, which is a safe digital space for children aged 6 to 12 to enjoy their leisure time. There was also a section called 'Support Ice Cream', where children could access information about their rights and get in touch with safe adults, for example via the BRIS (Children's Rights in Society, Sweden) chat service.

Some organisations managed to incorporate a social element into their activities. For instance, young people and leaders would engage in drawing activities together while listening to background music. This approach aimed to foster a sense of togetherness in an online setting, rather than focusing solely on performance, competition (as in gaming), or instruction (as in a drawing class). (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022)

A dance teacher described how she preferred to stream dance classes, rather than provide participants with training videos. She said:-

*'I told the participants that it doesn't matter if you're in the middle of the living room with limited space for dancing and young children running around. The important thing is that we do this together.'*

She also included a check-in round at the start of each class. This exercise grew in importance and length over time.

These examples demonstrate the advantages of live digital interaction over asynchronous interaction, in which users do not need to be online at the same time. Horizontal activities, in which the youth leader creates an environment for 'doing together' rather than 'giving instructions', were also referred to by interviewees as

successful methods for fostering togetherness online and build resilience.

## Challenges to the digitisation of leisure

The digitalisation of leisure presented a variety of challenges that differed greatly between different parts of the sector. For example, while an orchestra could perform together via live streaming, players who relied on borrowed instruments were excluded. Those who were highly motivated continued their sport or hobby online, but those who were less engaged lost interest in the transition as the threshold for participation rose. (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022)-

Several informants described how, after a day of online schooling or working, neither volunteers nor participants were motivated to take part in an online activity. Digital fatigue increased as the pandemic continued.

While several interviewees described how they could easily continue with their debates and statutory meetings online, they found that other features of face-to-face meetings were more difficult to recreate in a digital setting. One informant said:-

*'Of course, it was possible to watch a film online and then organise a facilitated dialogue. But you wouldn't get the chance to have a one-to-one conversation afterwards with friends or a youth leader or experience the spontaneous joy of meeting in person. Overall, it was much less inspiring than getting together in real life.'*

Some youth organisations focusing on non-formal learning through interactive and fun activities struggled to attract participants. A volunteer in the cultural sector provided the following example:

*'We had to create online events and training sessions that were as appealing as films or TikTok videos because young people were really tired of doing activities online. For us as organisers, collecting memes, making videos and preparing fun, interactive exercises was very time-consuming and labour-intensive.'*

Digitalisation reportedly worked better when groups already knew each other. One possible reason for this is that it is difficult to read body language and build new relationships in a digital space.

Across the sector, skills and competencies were insufficient to various degrees, resulting in an increased threshold for innovation within the youth and leisure sector. This issue was exacerbated by the existing knowledge gap between young people and youth workers. One positive example of how to address this issue can be found at Ungdommens Hus in the Norwegian municipality of Harstad. Here, young people played an active role in the digitalisation process, training staff in the use of digital media, teaching them how to set up Discord and Drawpile (an online drawing platform) and introducing them to podcasting.

There was also a lack of tools and equipment. For instance, many municipalities did not permit youth centres to use Discord servers due to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This presented a significant obstacle to the swift digitalisation of youth centres. The lack of granular control over data, concerns about data retention, and [the problematic nature of obtaining consent from minors in a school setting](#) mean that Discord is incompatible with the legal obligations of many municipalities.

However, one interviewee, an expert in the field, explained that it is possible to negotiate other terms and conditions with Discord to ensure consistency with municipal regulations.

## **Digitalisation – a threat or an opportunity?**

Screen time surged during the pandemic and has remained high ever since. While acknowledging the risks of digitalisation, young people emphasise the important role that the digital arena plays in their lives. This is a fact that researchers, policymakers, and youth workers must not overlook.

The digital arena is an important social space for young people and has had a positive impact on various groups of young people during the pandemic. Online games and social media have been effective ways to cope with stress and boredom. The number of virtual encounters, such as voice and video calls, as well as multiplayer online games, has increased significantly. These offer a perceived sense of social support, reducing feelings of loneliness, boredom, and anger. In Ukraine, informants described WhatsApp groups as supportive platforms for youth workers, facilitating communication between them and young people.

Research is being conducted into the potential harmful effects on children and young people spending more time online. [In Norway, a government-appointed 'Screen Use Committee'](#) has been set up to examine the impact of screen time on young people's leisure activities and well-being following the pandemic.

Research shows an association between high social media use and poorer mental health among adolescents. This is partly due to displacement of sleep and physical activity, as well as increased exposure to the pressure to participate, cyberbullying, and negative social comparisons. For instance, a youth worker describes how young people started to emulate influencers, which aggravated mental health issues among them. Several studies also support the displacement hypothesis, which highlights the fact that social media can take time away from activities that are known to promote well-being, such as leisure. (Kelly et al., 2019).

In Norway, an increase in gaming time was found to be linked to physical inactivity among young people. In Finland, there was an increase in gaming, particularly e-sports, alongside negative associations with daily physical activity. (Haug et al., 2022). One youth worker described how:

*‘...young people lost two years of learning how to be together and instead learned how to be alone – online. Some continued this behaviour even after the pandemic.’*

Although the digitalisation of the leisure provided vital continuity and social connection, which was reportedly appreciated by parents and young people, some challenges remained, especially for the more vulnerable:

*‘We managed to get 85–90% of youth back to the club where I work after the pandemic. Unfortunately, we did lose a specific group of vulnerable kids struggling with stress, diagnoses of neuro divergence, and eating disorders. The increased time alone during lockdown may have exacerbated their conditions, giving them too much time to think. We also noted how some more introverted youth emerged with the on-line activities and some now prefer this to physical action and real-life meetings.’*

Gaming culture can be toxic. However, there are also initiatives that focus on promoting positive gaming practices and providing guidance. [The Safer Internet Centre is one such European initiative](#). Some youth centres, such as Helset in Norway, and youth organisations, such as [SVEROK, Sweden](#) work to raise the profile of gaming and create safe, inclusive online communities. These platforms offer access to supportive adults and leaders, as well as community-building and participatory, non-formal learning.

These examples demonstrate how organised, low-pressure online activities can foster a positive environment and a sense of digital togetherness, positively impacting well-being. (Bakken, 2020)

During and in the aftermath of the pandemic, public debate raised concerns based on the perception that youth work should be face-to-face primarily. (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 2025).

However, the digital youth work survey, conducted by Verke in Finland (2021), shows that by the end of the pandemic, 51% of youth workers considered interacting in digital environments to be as real as face-to-face encounters. One digital youth worker described how youth workers are present in chat rooms and activity rooms, just as they would be in real life:

*‘We talk with the young people while we do an activity together and make sure to show that we see them.’*

One other digital youth worker added:

*‘Youth workers are present in on-line chat rooms and activity rooms, just as they would be in real life.’*

For young people with disabilities, or for those who found it difficult to participate in physical activities for other reasons prior to the pandemic, digital solutions presented a new opportunity. A large-scale survey in Norway revealed that many young disabled people felt that they finally had the necessary adaptations to

participate socially or follow lessons at school, thanks to increased digital technology use. This included online events and cultural experiences that enabled them to interact with others on an equal basis. (Nordic Welfare Centre, 2023).

One informant shared that the highly digitalised youth, who had previously experienced social exclusion in physical settings, were suddenly able to participate on equal terms.

For some, the threshold for sharing with a youth worker or other trusted adult online was also lowered, as digital forums allow for a degree of anonymity. (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

In conclusion, digital options provided adequate leisure activities and managed to reach some new groups of young people. However, they failed to fully compensate for the long-term loss of structured, semi-structured, and spontaneous physical activities, as well as the social interaction and guidance these activities provide. In particular, it was challenging to provide resilience factors such as togetherness and low-threshold inclusion. Research on Nordic teenagers indicates that robust offline social support (i.e., physical interaction) from multiple social networks (e.g., family, friends, teachers, and classmates) is most conducive to low levels of psychosomatic distress and the least problematic use of social media. (Gustafsson et al., 2025).

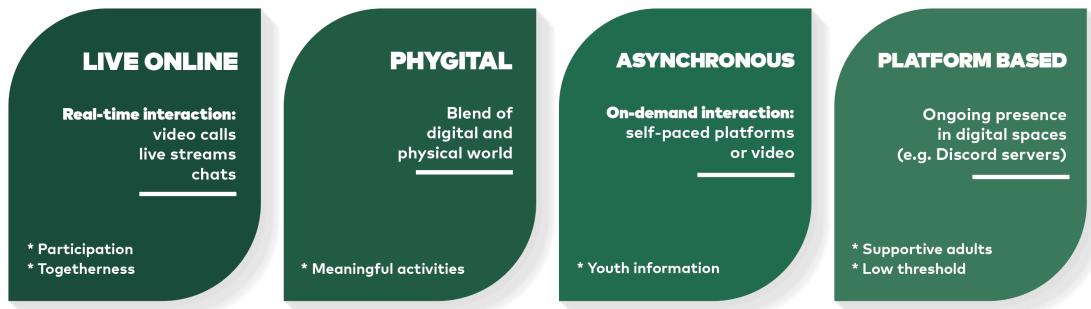
One interviewee stressed that, without digitalisation, young people's access to social interaction would have been extremely limited during the pandemic. He stated:

*'It is important for adults to be careful when criticising, as our fears may be unfounded. During a crisis such as the pandemic, if adults discourage and hinder young people from meeting digitally, they risk depriving them of one of the few opportunities they have to interact outside of school.'*

The interviewee then added:

*'We should remember that, while we must be aware of the risks connected to digital youth work, it is not necessarily bad. It is a source of empowerment and provides opportunities to learn and interact. Digital platforms are meeting spaces. They become what we make of them.'*

Figure 3.2 illustrates the four formats of digital youth work that were used during the pandemic. The format used for a given activity or method influenced how the well-being and resilience of young people was strengthened. Based on the examples identified in this chapter, the figure indicates the format particularly associated with a certain resilience factor. The figure suggests that resilience can be developed in digital environments through careful, evidence-based planning and development of digital youth work formats and methods.



**Figure 3.2:** Formats of digital work that were used primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic period, and their potential to build resilience in young people.

## 3.2 Relocation to outdoor and/or larger venues

### Moving outdoors

Across Finland, Norway, and Sweden, there was a notable increase in outdoor recreation. This included more people walking in local areas, hiking, cycling, and even staying outdoors overnight. Young people were particularly active in this shift. (Statistisk sentralbyrå, Norway 2021; Gustafsson et al., 2025).

In Sweden, sports and outdoor activities were permitted to continue under safe conditions. Many clubs and training establishments, including gyms and yoga studios, moved their activities outdoors to places like parks and forests. New temporary walking and running groups were also formed. (Norberg, Andersson, & Hedenborg, 2022)

Also, Norway saw a significant increase in the use of nature as a social meeting place, particularly among young people. (Norsk Friluftsliv, 2021)

In interviews, some representatives of leisure organisations said that they had coped well during the pandemic by making minor adaptations to their activities and moving them outdoors. One such example is provided below, by a representative of a sports association in Åland.

'We made short films showing what you could do at home, but we soon felt the need to train together and received requests from members to do so, so we moved outside. We rented a container for our equipment, placed it in a field, and relocated some of our activities there. We brought out benches, barriers, and so on, and I must say we were able to continue reasonably well. It wasn't exactly the same as being indoors, but we managed to continue training. The municipality supported us by waiving the rent for our halls and the outdoor training area with artificial turf. Outdoor training became popular, which was great, but of course it was only a temporary solution. We could only do this in spring and summer.'

Whenever possible, youth centres relocated some of their activities outdoors. While

some interviewees emphasised that outdoor youth work is possible even during the cold and rainy months, others were less convinced. Some centres organised 'phygital' activities, in which young people would go outside and do something physical before sharing the results with the group online. These activities could include sledging, building a snowman, or playing an online version of bingo where participants had to find items around their homes.

### **Challenges to outdoor adaptations**

The adaptation came with its own set of challenges. Many sports can easily be played outside, but music teachers described the difficulty of playing an instrument outdoors in winter. In Norway, outdoor gatherings were sometimes prohibited or limited to three people. Some organisations also mentioned conflicts arising from the high demand for green spaces.

Requirements relating to outdoor infrastructure varied greatly within the leisure sector. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of having a roof, lighting, and electricity, as these would enable a variety of activities to go ahead regardless of the weather. However, there are no examples of municipalities providing these amenities.

Several interviewees highlighted the missed opportunity to establish outdoor leisure hubs where young people could gather safely. The latter was a recurring request from young people during the pandemic.

Instead, young people gathered in public spaces such as shopping centres, playgrounds, and streets. This sometimes resulted in conflicts, leading to the stigmatisation of young people as 'rule breakers'. Furthermore, as ordinary citizens withdrew from the streets, outdoor spaces became unsafe for young people. In urban areas in particular, young people were increasingly exposed to adults with mental health problems or substance abuse issues, as there were no safe places to enjoy their leisure time. (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022)

One interviewee gave the example of an outdoor drama performance called Gäng (Gang), created in collaboration between the Finnish National Theatre and Digiloo, in Helsinki. Young actors guided audiences through the city centre, using audio to share their perspectives on the urban environment. The aim was to challenge negative public perceptions and explore young people's experiences of urban spaces.

### **Access to schools and larger venues**

During the pandemic, sports halls and other large venues were closed for the leisure sector. This made it difficult for youth centres and leisure organisations to find premises where the restrictions on numbers and social distancing could be adhered to. A representative of a cultural organisation said:

*'The municipality told us to carry on as before, but the venues were closed, and no*

*alternatives were offered.'*

Some interviewees cited the use of school premises for leisure activities in the afternoon or during evenings as a positive example of creating low-threshold activities. These efforts aimed to prevent infection spreading by limiting social interaction during free time to smaller groups or cohorts who were already meeting during the school day. The use of school premises for leisure activities after school is in line with the 'Finnish model'. It should be mentioned here that the model was not an adjustment made as a response to the pandemic. It prescribes, among other things, leisure activities to be primarily organised in connection with the school day, often on school premises or nearby. This makes hobbies easily accessible and convenient for pupils, eliminating the need for separate transportation or complex logistics for parents.

As an example of good practice, a Swedish respondent mentioned the very popular night-time soccer arranged by local youth volunteers in a school sports hall in Tensta, Stockholm, which is considered a high-risk area.

### **3.3 Reduced group sizes and preregistration**

Restrictions on group size meant that many hobby and youth organisations had to reduce the number of participants in their activities. While this allowed them to continue working, it presented several challenges.

Due to a lack of large premises that could accommodate several small groups of young people while guaranteeing safe distancing, hobby organisers were forced to reduce group sizes. As the number of youth leaders remained unchanged, this often meant that the time allocated for the activity had to be reduced. This led to a loss of many proactive, resilience-building factors, such as interaction with peers and youth leaders, and meant that the focus shifted solely to the activity itself.

Activities that would usually be open to all, such as those in youth centres or after-school leisure facilities, now required registration. This made participation more difficult, particularly when parental consent was required for registration. Several informants therefore requested a cohort structure, whereby the same young people could meet regularly without pre-registration. These groups could be school classes or hobby groups, for example.

### **3.4 Adaptations of roles and responsibilities**

#### **Umbrella organisations as crisis response coordinators**

Umbrella organisations, such as municipal youth work organisations, national youth councils, and sector-specific groups (for instance, those for young disabled people), played a vital role in ensuring that young people continued to have access to leisure activities. A representative of one of the youth umbrella organisations narrated:

*'We evolved into a supportive hotline for local organisations. We translated the rules and provided counselling to try to reduce insecurity and stress. Gradually, even parents and young people began contacting us directly for immediate advice.'*

The new roles assumed by the umbrella organisations included:

- **Explaining rules and safety guidelines.** Providing sector-specific 'translation' of the rules and restrictions, and of how to ensure activities are safe.
- **Keeping policies and safety advice up to date**, as rules changed.
- **Running a support hotline** to answer questions from associations, coaches, trainers, etc. about regulations.
- **Sharing feedback** from the ground, feeding back experiences and needs to policymakers.
- **Offering training and learning materials**, such as how to work with young people online.
- **Creating spaces for youth workers and volunteers** to support each other and exchange of experiences.
- **Managing funding**, including handling applications for, and distribution of, funds.

During the pandemic, umbrella organisations pooled resources, reducing the need for various stakeholders in the youth and leisure sector to duplicate work or 'reinvent the wheel'. For example, [Ungdom og Fritid](#), a national, non-profit organisation which organises over 700 youth clubs in Norway, funded a digital team to provide training and support to all municipalities, rather than each one developing these capabilities independently.

Umbrella organisations also played a crucial role in supporting isolated professionals. In Ukraine, for instance, a youth work umbrella organisation emphasised the importance of supporting youth workers in rural areas. These workers often operate alone under high levels of stress, so the organisation provides them with the backing of a sector-specific body with knowledge of their field of work. This example illustrates a broader challenge faced by small, local organisations across Europe, limited opportunities for peer learning as well as lack of resources to access support mechanisms, such as funding programmes and educational materials.

Interviewees also provided examples of how umbrella organisations supported decision-makers. One interviewee representing an umbrella organisation said:

*'We had close and constructive dialogue with the authorities, both nationally and*

*locally. We were able to report on the needs of our members, both large and small organisations. We felt that we were being heard and that efforts were being made to enable maximum participation.'*

While these role adaptations demonstrate the sector's resilience, they also highlight its underlying vulnerabilities. Youth umbrella organisations explained that their influence relied on pre-existing personal contacts rather than formal channels. Informants recount that, when invited to contribute, the format was often incompatible with the nature of the voluntary sector. Sometimes, they were given just a couple of hours to provide feedback, preventing them from consulting their member organisations.

The valuable assets – human resources and relatively stable funding – that major youth umbrella organisations had prior to the pandemic enabled them to take on new roles and respond readily as the crisis emerged, when combined with a resolute prioritisation as the crisis evolved.-

### **Adaptation of roles within the leisure sector**

An interviewee representing a volunteering umbrella organisation said:

*'Organisations can complement the public sector in important ways. For example, they have a different level of trust and understanding of different groups than the public sector does.'*

A variety of tasks and responsibilities were taken on by civil society organisations, which identified a broad range of needs within society. Several civil society organisations in the Nordic countries stepped up to provide crucial psychological support and safe spaces for young people, often through hotlines and online services. Save the Children Norway, for example, set up a supportive hotline staffed by young volunteers to provide emotional support to children and young people. Existing hotlines increased their operating hours and contributed to the protection of children and young people by providing reports on mental health issues affecting this age group.

The example also illustrates how opportunities of volunteering can be created through crisis response, providing young people with a sense of agency and purpose during a crisis that had impacted their lives. Another example of a conscious strategy to strengthen youth by volunteering during the pandemic is the special badge introduced by the Scouts during the pandemic. It encouraged scouts to engage with the community and take action

This provided young people with volunteering opportunities, giving them a sense of agency and purpose during a crisis that had impacted their lives. Another example is the 'badge' introduced by the Scouts to encourage their members to engage with the community and respond to the pandemic.

Throughout the study, informants who had experienced crises other than the

pandemic offered valuable insights into how municipal youth services could adapt by taking on new roles and responsibilities to promote the well-being of young people during times of crisis. For example, after the volcanic eruption that led to the evacuation of the entire town of Grindavík in Iceland, the decision was made to relocate the youth centre with the evacuees to encourage togetherness and provide a safe space during the transition period while they settled into their new surroundings.

Similarly, youth centres in Ukraine help young internally displaced persons (IDPs) to make new friends and find a sense of community. As part of the response to the war crisis, they help IDPs find places to live and work, as well as volunteering opportunities. They even help IDPs develop the hard skills needed for employment and offer university students internships, as securing placements has proven challenging for the higher education system, which is now entirely online.

A representative of a Ukrainian youth organisation explained how they had become a resource centre for the entire municipality, not just young people. She asked:

*'Who else is accessible at weekends and in the evenings? Who has the skills to be one hundred per cent adaptable and flexible? Who has the competence to coordinate a thousand volunteers?' Several informants identified the flexibility of the youth and leisure sector as the most important factor for successfully taking on new roles.'*

A municipal youth work manager explained,

*'The youth and leisure sector has a tradition of doing things flexibly. We are accustomed to adapting to the preferences of young people, who live in a state of constant change. We can take advantage of this.'*

## **Youth information**

In a crisis, access to clear, accessible, and youth-friendly information is essential for many aspects of young people's lives, including crisis-related matters and leisure activities. Several informants emphasised the need for information, emotional support, and youth services during crisis – and that these things are closely interlinked. A lack of appropriate information can create barriers to participation and feed fear and anxiety. (Barnens Rätt i Samhället, 2021)

A report from the Danish organisation for children's rights, Børns Vilkår, describes how the COVID-19 pandemic created a new social context that was difficult to navigate without adequate information. Children and young people, for instance, reported being teased by their peers for either adhering too strictly or too loosely to the restrictions.

Several informants also described how challenging it was for young people to find out which leisure activities and spaces were available, given that restrictions were constantly changing. In Sønderborg, Denmark, young people developed

recommendations for the municipality, one of which was clear and easy-to-use communication about the municipality's sports and cultural opportunities for young people.

While official information often came from national health authorities and traditional media, youth organisations, civil society groups, and youth workers became important intermediaries. They translated complex restrictions and guidelines into understandable formats and distributed them through their established networks and also spread information about helplines and mental health care. (NOVA, 2021)

The Finnish model of youth information is a prime example of how structured, empowering, and participatory youth information services can be delivered – something that has not been replicated in other Nordic countries. Thanks to its solid legal mandate, robust digital infrastructure, trained professionals, and national coordination, the model provided a robust foundation for youth information work during the pandemic. Koordinaatti, the Finnish National Centre of Expertise for Youth Information, operated between 2006 and 2024 and played a pivotal role in maintaining and developing this model. During the pandemic, Koordinaatti acted as a national hub for youth information professionals, providing them with up-to-date, verified information about the virus and offering support.

Koordinaatti also ran Nuortenelämä.fi, a national youth information platform featuring a national chat and a Questions & Answers service staffed by dozens of professionals. Information about hotlines and chat channels was shared on social media to reach young people. Influencers were also enlisted to help spread the word. Several interviewees and respondents emphasised the latter as an innovative and effective measure.

Across the Nordic region, civil society organisations and municipal youth workers played a key role in leveraging their platforms and expertise in youth language, media, and communication tools. They often had direct contact with vulnerable young people and immigrant communities who might have faced greater challenges in accessing or understanding official information due to language barriers or digital exclusion. These organisations were therefore crucial channels through which public authorities could effectively reach young people, and they also provided the authorities with valuable feedback to help them tailor their communication strategies. (Nordic Welfare Centre, 2022) One youth worker explained:

*'We would talk about the vaccination and address any concerns the young person had. Sometimes, we would even accompany them to get their shot.'*

Another youth work expert explained that the leisure sector also played an important role in providing a space for reflection:-

*'At the start of the pandemic, there was a lot of uncertainty and many scary things'*

*for young people to deal with. Our most important role is to listen to people's concerns, provide emotional support, and offer media criticism. Now, more than ever.'*

Both civil society and municipal youth workers rely heavily on state-level resources to provide young people with adequate information and counselling on a large scale. An interviewee representing a youth work umbrella organisation concluded:

*'Youth information work is a very important role. We tried but received no support or structure. We really need this support to fulfil our important role.'*

### **3.5 Detached youth work**

A proven method of maintaining a presence and accessibility for youth workers is to use detached youth work to target young people not participating in the leisure sector. This approach proved particularly useful during the pandemic. As described by one informant:

*'Some municipalities increased their work with young people as youth centres closed, but there was no general or systematic strategy for outreach work with young people.'*

Even greater efforts were made during the pandemic to reach out to young people in Helsinki, Finland, where detached youth work had been ongoing for decades. One interviewee recounted:

*'Youth street workers found young people wherever they were – in train stations, shopping malls, or at outdoor parties – and offered them support and a listening ear.'*

According to one interviewee, the number of street-based youth workers in Danish Biborg increased from zero to 14, four of whom remained after the pandemic.

While these municipalities have increased the number of youth workers, interviewees indicated that detached youth work has not been implemented on a large enough scale to benefit young people in general. This approach requires more resources given its reliance on one-to-one contact, yet few additional resources have been provided. Some youth workers also mentioned that young people were not to be found outdoors and speculated that this was due to restrictions or overprotective parents trying to keep their children at home.

Detached youth work is a valuable source of information for the effective organisation of youth-related policies and activities, particularly in a crisis. A local youth police officer said:

*'Municipal youth workers know exactly how young people feel, what concerns and interests them as a group.'*

The officer then added:

*'They have their finger on the pulse like no one else.'*

A youth work director explained that, unlike adults who try to control them, youth workers can accompany young people wherever they go and be accepted as supportive adults:

*'This knowledge about their whereabouts, together with the data we collect, is a great asset in a crisis.'*

A detached youth worker described the importance of reaching out to young people and meeting them where they are, even in the post-pandemic era:

*'Many young people have given up their hobbies, and their patience levels are low. We support their participation in the leisure sector by motivating them and encouraging them to continue. We also encourage them to contact mental health services, help them stay on the waiting list, and accompany them to appointments.'*



## 4. Conclusion and the way(s) forward

This study explores the role of the leisure sector in promoting the well-being of youth in times of crisis, as well as the potential of leisure as a resilience builder. It is concluded that the policies and restrictions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic severely reduced young people's access to leisure activities, resulting in negative consequences for their well-being and personal development. These consequences linger more than five years after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The report shows that the youth and leisure sector adapted relatively quickly. However, as restrictions varied greatly, even within the same municipality, the needs and responses of the leisure sector were diverse.

In this concluding chapter, we will argue that there is solid evidence that preserving access to leisure activities can strengthen the well-being and resilience of young people in times of crisis.

Section 4.1 summarises the main findings from previous chapters, focusing on the gap between young people's needs and the leisure activities available to them during the pandemic.

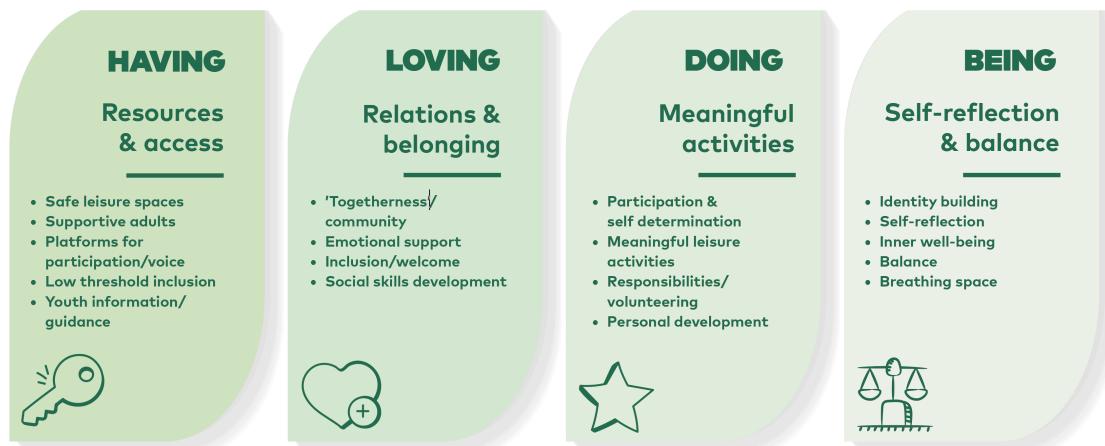
This leads into Section 4.2, where we identify a set of resilience factors as essential building blocks for youth well-being. These factors highlight the importance of leisure and give valuable guidance to leisure providers and policymakers on designing, developing, and implementing leisure activities. This guidance is particularly valuable when planning for future crises with the aim of strengthening the resilience and well-being of young people.

The final section 4.3 offers a synthesis of the report's key findings and presents a set of insights and suggested pathways for enhancing young people's access to leisure and resilience in times of crisis. Rather than issuing prescriptive recommendations, the aim is to provide inspiration and guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and youth organisations seeking to strengthen preparedness and support resilient structures within the youth and leisure sector.

The proposals and advice are grounded in the voices and experiences of young people, youth workers, researchers, decision-makers and civil society actors across the Nordic region. They reflect both the challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and the creative adaptations that emerged in response. By highlighting what worked, what was missing, and what could be improved, this section invites reflection and dialogue on how to ensure that leisure remains a protective and empowering space for young people – especially in times of uncertainty.

The insights and advice presented in Section 4.3 are based entirely on the authors' analysis of various existing good practices and sources, including research and grey literature, as well as over 36 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the Nordic region. Findings and conclusions were substantiated at two workshops involving young people, children's ombudspersons, researchers, and policymakers. These participants, as well as the interviewees for the study, were also invited to evaluate and comment in an online survey.

## 4.1 Four dimensions of young people's well-being affected by decreased access to leisure



**Figure 4.1:** The resilience factors of leisure and their contribution to well-being.

During the pandemic, the partial or full closure of the leisure sector meant that young people lost access to important factors that would normally contribute to their well-being. For some young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities, the consequences were significant and irreversible.

In the course of this study, we mapped what negatively affected the well-being of young people as leisure facilities closed fully or partly. This has enabled us to identify key resilience factors that leisure provides.

This model was originally developed by Allardt (1995), further elaborated by Helne & Hirvilammi (2015) and Kauppinen & Laine (2022). The authors of the present report (Gunvén & Johansson) developed it additionally by identifying the critical resilience factors of leisure within its framework (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.1).

These factors are presented in Figure 4.1 and discussed further below with reference to the four dimensions of well-being as Having, Doing, Loving, and Being.

## **HAVING – resources and access**

Young people's access to leisure activities depended on economic opportunity, social networks, geographical location (including rural and urban areas), and the available activities in the wake of restrictions. As access to safe leisure spaces such as youth clubs and leisure centres was limited, urban spaces, streets, courtyards, parks, and digital spaces instead became places where groups of young people could meet their peers (Kauppinen & Laine, 2022). The increased isolation experienced by many young people, particularly girls, greatly impacted their well-being.

During partial home isolation and in the 'new' leisure arenas, young people lacked access to supportive adults and youth leaders from the leisure sector who would have provided critical support and motivation during this time of crisis on multiple levels. While the highly motivated would continue their hobby even if it was digitalised, those who were less engaged would be the first to stop participating, as some of the restrictions removed the possibility of low-threshold activities. (Laine & Malm, 2023)

The closure of open and low-threshold youth centres, in particular, made it more difficult to reach those who did not participate in hobby activities, or who lost access to them during the COVID-19 crisis. Although detached and digital youth work increased in some places, the number of young people reached was still very limited.

Another largely missing resource was easily accessible, youth-friendly information about the pandemic itself and the ever-changing leisure landscape. When access to school nurses and supportive adults in the leisure sector was limited, there was an increased need for information about support mechanisms, such as helplines, for young people.-

Finally, several interviewees confirmed that young people were neither included nor invited to participate in interpreting restrictions or adjusting to the new conditions. There were few opportunities for young people to make their voices heard during this transformative period for both young people and society.

The young interviewees identified platforms for youth participation as the resource most adversely affected by the pandemic.

## **DOING – participating in meaningful activities through leisure**

During the pandemic, young people had far fewer opportunities to pursue hobbies and meaningful leisure activities. Governments and authorities prioritised schooling and formal education, and the number and variety of leisure activities and spaces available decreased. Access to non-formal learning, which typically occurs during leisure activities and fosters social interaction and personal development was severely restricted.

Over the past couple of decades, there has been an ongoing trend of fewer young people regularly participating in physical activities, and this trend was reinforced and accentuated during the pandemic among young people in general (Olofsson & Kvist, 2022). The use of social media and screen time surged and has remained high ever since. (Chen et al., 2024; Trott et al., 2022)

Research indicates that the decline in physical activity among young people has had a negative impact on their mental health and their overall general well-being<sup>7</sup> (Gotfredsen et al., 2024), including social satisfaction and self-esteem. (Juuso, Lehtola & Leskinen, 2022). The latter are features that young people benefit from in leisure activities pursued together with others. Mental well-being is also presented as a feature inherent in 'Being' below, since it involves self-reflection and peace of mind.-

Taking part in the organisation of leisure activities with others, whether through guided or unguided self-organisation, volunteering, or taking on responsibilities, contributes to young people's well-being. At a time when there was an increasing need for empowerment and agency, and a desire to take control of one's life, young people were denied the opportunity for meaningful participation and self-determination.

## **LOVING – experiencing relations and belonging through leisure**

Leisure is an important arena that offers young people opportunities to fulfil their basic social needs, such as experiencing acceptance and inclusion, developing empathy and receiving reciprocity in social relationships. A welcoming atmosphere

in which individuals feel that they are seen helps to lower the threshold for participation and build self-esteem.

Several interviewees emphasised the importance of togetherness in leisure activities as a significant contributor to young people's well-being and an important motivating factor for participation. We have described the many challenges of providing this during the pandemic and the digital adaptations of leisure activities that followed.

The leisure arena is also a place where young people can receive emotional support from their peers and youth workers. The opportunity to talk during activities was partly removed during the pandemic, which had an adverse effect on the most vulnerable young people.

For more than two years, online meetings replaced most opportunities for physical interaction, relationship building and guided development of social skills. While digital technologies partly compensated for limitations in social relations, research suggests that physical distancing disproportionately affected young people aged 10–24, who need peer interaction to develop. (Orben et al., 2020)

Section 2.4 of this report confirmed that the pandemic has had long-lasting effects on young people. These include reduced social skills and social anxiety. This may lead to difficulties when interacting with others and when preventing and managing conflicts.

## **BEING – space for self-reflection and balance through leisure**

Hobbies and leisure activities are important for providing young people with breathing space. They offer an opportunity to take a break from the home and school environments and help young people find balance when they are negatively affected by social pressure and/or school stress.

The enforced social distancing imposed severe limitations in this regard. Interviewees clearly indicated that young people, especially those living in challenging family and home environments, requested such spaces during the pandemic. Few of them were available. (Børns Vilkår, 2022).

The 'being' dimension is also related to mental well-being and peace of mind. Both are challenged by a crisis situation and are exacerbated by a lack of supportive structures.

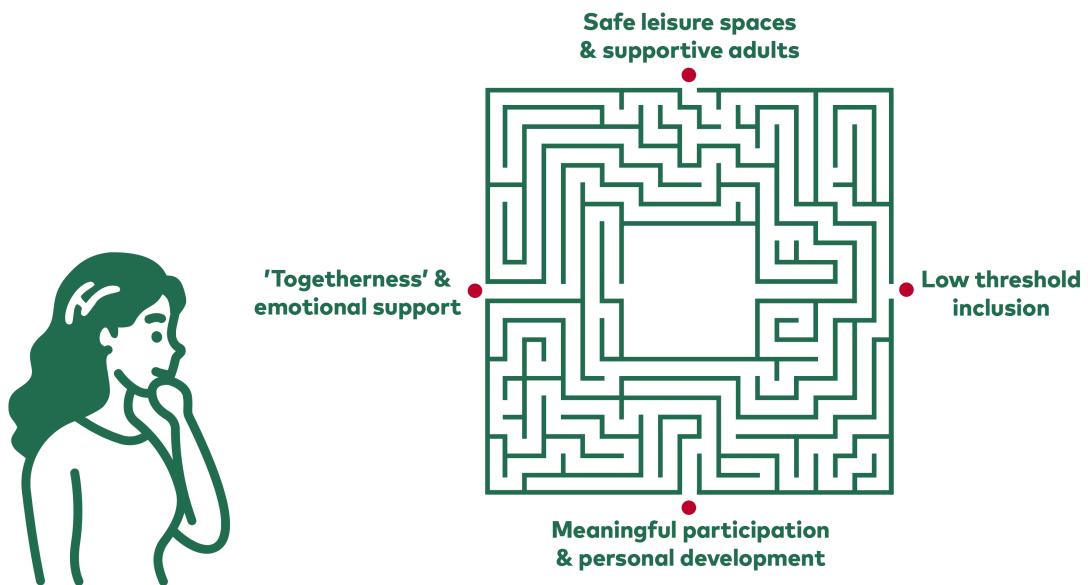
Over a longer period, an increase has been recorded in the number of children and young people suffering from mental health issues ranging from anxiety and isolation to more serious psychological conditions. This trend accelerated during the pandemic, particularly among certain groups of young people.

During their formative years, young people need to explore, experiment with, and define their identity and sexuality. To do so, they need access to youth communities and safe spaces, both of which were lacking due to distancing measures.

Self-reflection, which can be achieved through interaction with friends and emotional support and guidance from youth workers or other supportive adults, has been shown to contribute to young people's psychological well-being. This need increases in times of uncertainty and stress, such as during a crisis, when it is important to distinguish between perceived and real anxiety.

## 4. 2 Building resilience through leisure

It can be concluded that limited access to leisure resulted in an insufficient supply of the resilience factors outlined in the previous section. This, in turn, had serious consequences for all four dimensions of young people's well-being. The findings suggest that certain resilience factors are more important than others in times of crisis. These are illustrated in the figure below.



**Figure 4.2:** Main factors that contribute to resilience through leisure.

During the pandemic, the lack of low-threshold activities and safe leisure spaces, decreased access to supportive adults and emotional support, the feeling of 'togetherness' as well as opportunities for personal development and meaningful participation. This may have left irreparable gaps in young people's well-being, socialisation processes, and social skills.

In the event of future crises, the priority should be to ensure the strategic supply of

these resilience factors throughout the leisure sector rather than merely ensuring that leisure activities continue. This study suggests paying particular attention to the resilience factors presented in Figure 4.2.

## Togetherness and social interaction

One of the young interviewees provided a practical example of how a sense of togetherness and social interaction was lacking in his music classes and elsewhere during the pandemic. He pointed out that offering lessons online is valuable, but it would be even better if the orchestra could have continued to provide a sense of togetherness. The interviewee stated:

*'When you play music, you want to hear others. During the pandemic, no orchestra rehearsals were possible, and group activities were suspended. That was much less fun. You lose the human relationship and contact. The sense of community is compromised, and you feel distant from others.'*

The interviewee reflected on the idea that social interaction can be cultivated through conscious effort:

*'I would have liked more opportunities to chat with others about our shared experiences. I even lost my social skills during the pandemic. Youth workers can help by bringing everyone together and starting conversations, not only during a crisis but in general.'*

The experience of this young interviewee reflects the findings of this report, shedding light on how the conscious and strategic design of methods and activities can strengthen various resilience factors to varying degrees. One measure that reportedly fostered togetherness and emotional support during the pandemic was setting aside time at the start of an activity for check-in sessions. Looking to the future, one way to further strengthen key resilience factors in music classes, for instance, would be to combine music schools with youth clubs where youth workers are available before and after lessons. Togetherness could be promoted by providing group activities, orchestras for example. Young musicians could be encouraged to participate more meaningfully by being given the opportunity to collaborate on their own project, such as organising their own concert. A similar conscious development process could take place for other types of activities.

One of the young interviewees, who has a neurodivergent diagnosis, emphasised that what she missed most during the pandemic was the opportunity to spend time with and interact with other young people. She said:-

*'I missed my Scouts for six months. I was sad and bored. I spent most of my time in bed scrolling through my phone. I missed going out into the forest with my friends. I missed my friends a lot.'*

The interviewee describes just how challenging it can be for neurodivergent people to motivate themselves and emphasises the importance of young people having

access to social platforms and experience togetherness:-

*'Due to my condition, I find it hard to do quiet activities on my own, like painting. I can't focus on one activity for long. In the Scouts, however, we do a variety of activities, so you don't get bored. While we're doing an activity, we talk and interact with each other.'*

## **Low-threshold inclusion**

Another resilience factor emphasised throughout the report is access to 'low-threshold inclusion'. As demonstrated in the report, young people with fewer opportunities are more vulnerable to the negative effects of a crisis. It is therefore vital to minimise barriers to participation in leisure activities, as these young people have a lower threshold for participation due to factors such as a lack of parental support and financial resources. They may also experience discrimination and have health issues and a low self-esteem.

A dance teacher described how young people with mental health issues were the first to be excluded by digitalisation. This illustrates the consequences of raising the participation threshold through activity adaptations in a crisis.

Another interviewee, a young volunteer in civil society organisations, emphasised the importance of lowering these barriers even further:

*'We should remember that we are dealing with vulnerable individuals. Some of them may have been isolated from social contexts for a long time. They suffer from social anxiety and may find leisure activities extremely stressful. So, even if some activities have to be cancelled, those who organise them must learn to be more creative and patient, both during the crisis and when the activities resume. People might not show up at first, but if you are persistent, they eventually will.'*

The same interviewee suggested that an effective measure during the pandemic was to be approachable and maintain a welcoming attitude, despite the irregular participation of some young people. Another advice was to continue activities on fixed days at fixed times to keep the threshold low.

Several informants emphasised the importance of keeping youth clubs open, as these provide a low-threshold entry point to leisure activities for young people who are not currently participating. The permanent and local nature of the clubs, and the relationships formed with supportive youth workers, are difficult to replicate in a digital youth work setting.

## **Maintaining resilience factors in digitalised leisure**

Another area that requires further consideration regarding resilience factors is the digitalisation of leisure activities. In the event of future crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation will provide ample opportunities for the leisure sector to

continue many of its activities online. Therefore, it is highly relevant to explore the potential of digitalisation while maintaining resilience factors such as active participation, togetherness, and access to supportive adults. Further research in this area, practical toolkits, and competence building would all be highly valuable going forward.

## 4.3 Insights and pathways for strengthening leisure and resilience in times of crisis

In conclusion, the need to strengthen the resilience of the leisure sector must be widely acknowledged in the face of future crisis.

The insights that have emerged throughout this study have been categorised under the following five main topics: A) Being prepared; B) Policy development; C) Structures for coordination; D) Communication; and E) Adaptations. Advice for enhancing young people's access to leisure and resilience in times of crisis follows each set of insights. This section aims to inspire and guide policymakers, practitioners and youth organisations seeking to strengthen preparedness and support resilient structures within the youth and leisure sector.

### A. BEING PREPARED

#### 1. Contingency planning for leisure

□ Insights: This report concludes that governments and policymakers in the Nordic countries did not pay enough attention to the important role played by the leisure sector in promoting resilience among young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis revealed significant deficiencies in the contingency planning of the Nordic youth and leisure sector.

Both municipalities and youth/leisure organisations were largely unprepared, lacking plans to continue activities and implement necessary adaptations. One respondent stated:

*'During the pandemic, we had to invent solutions as we went along, during a crisis. Next time, we must be prepared; therefore, contingency plans need to be developed now.'*

#### Advice:

□ **Include young people's needs in contingency planning.** Contingency plans at local and national levels should include a chapter on the holistic needs of children and young people. Developed with the involvement of young people and the leisure sector, these plans should cover general structures and tools for maintaining access to meaningful participation, safe leisure spaces and adult support.–

- **Involve the leisure sector in the planning process.** The capabilities and possibilities of the various parts of the leisure sector should be used in the contingency planning, building on the complementary roles of the private, public, and civil sectors. While encouraging cross-sectoral collaboration, the independence of civil society organisations to act according to their own vision and priorities must be respected. For example, civil society organisations should not be expected to perform tasks or assume responsibilities outside their remit.-
- **Strengthen contingency planning within the leisure sector.** To enhance the leisure sector's ability to respond effectively in times of crisis, the contingency planning and organisational adaptability of municipal youth work and civil society must be strengthened. This includes joint initiatives to develop adaptation skills and infrastructure (e.g., digitalisation), as well as organisational-level contingency planning.

## 2. A legal framework for youth work

- Insights: One respondent explained:

*'We need a clear, shared understanding of what youth work is and what it should achieve. In a crisis situation, a Youth Act would help us decide what adaptations to make, as it would define a shared goal that is legally supported.'*

Finland is the only Nordic country to have a Youth Act. This legislation aims to support young people's personal development and independence, encourage active citizenship and participation, and enhance their living conditions. The Act establishes provisions for youth work and requires cross-sectoral co-operation to ensure that young people – defined as individuals under the age of 29 – receive the necessary support and opportunities.

### Advice:

- **Establish a legal framework for youth work.** Having a legal framework for youth work, which includes its aims and standards, would clarify its role in building resilience among young people. It would also emphasise the importance of youth work as a critical resource in times of crisis.

## 3. Research and lessons learned from youth work and leisure

- Insights: This study identified a lack of examples of lessons learned from youth work and leisure activities during the pandemic. There is also a lack of documentation and follow-up relating to the development of resilience within the sector, which could facilitate knowledge-based development of youth work practice and strengthen resilience among youth. Most of the examples found were narratives of local, specific, and sometimes isolated events. Had references to promising practice, research, and lessons learned been available, they could have served as input for national-level dialogues on good practice across the Nordic

countries.

### **Advice:**

□ **Expand the scope of youth research and collect practical knowledge.** The field of youth research has the potential to expand its scope to cover a much broader range of leisure-related issues, including factors that promote resilience. It is also crucial to collect, preserve, and utilise practical knowledge, experience, and lessons learned from youth work relating to leisure during times of crisis. This is particularly important for improving the delivery of the identified resilience factors based on evidence.

## **B. POLICY DEVELOPMENT**

### **1. A youth perspective in policy development at national level**

□ Insights: This report provides numerous examples of the negative consequences for young people of not having access to leisure activities and the resilience factors they provide during the pandemic. At the same time, young people were largely excluded from policy development. Although several national youth councils were consulted, there were no structures in place to ensure their meaningful inclusion.-

The report's findings also show that lockdowns and restrictions disproportionately impacted groups of young people with fewer opportunities. One respondent stated:

*'Young people's influence was generally missing from policy processes, yet the restrictions placed on children and young people with disabilities were particularly severe.'*

These adverse effects could have been mitigated or avoided had a youth perspective and consequence analysis for different youth groups been implemented.-

It is also necessary to include young people in local co-ordination structures. See section C1 for more information.

### **Advice:**

□ **Incorporate a broad youth perspective in national and local policy measures.**

Youth-led organisations and/or well-functioning youth councils should be invited to participate in designing the crisis response. For this to be meaningful, they must be involved from the outset and throughout the entire process, and their contributions must be given appropriate consideration. Such structures should be established as part of contingency planning well before a crisis hits. Other important stakeholders in the youth sector, such as municipal youth services, children's rights organisations, and schools, should also be included. It is particularly important to involve different groups of young people with fewer opportunities in the analysis of the

consequences of the crisis response, as they are adversely affected by the closure of leisure facilities. The direct voices of young people should also be included in the process, particularly within local contexts.

## 2. Adoption of flexible, yet sturdy, regulations to maximise youth's access to leisure

□ Insights: Some youth workers indicated that restrictions were sometimes applied across entire countries or regions, regardless of the local infection control situation. As one respondent stated:

*'National statistics from big cities would form the basis for excessively harsh restrictions in areas that might not have needed them at all.'*

Another interviewee made a similar point:

*'Some premises that were immediately closed at the outbreak of the pandemic could have remained open. The organisers would have implemented restrictions on group sizes and social distancing to prevent the spread of infection.'*

### Advice:

□ **Develop tailored policies.** One-size-fits-all regulations should be avoided. The development of tailored solutions that maximise young people's access to leisure activities should consider local knowledge, resources, and specific needs. Rather than prohibiting leisure activities, regulations that limit them should be developed to allow for innovation and adaptation. These regulations should also remain stable over time, enabling the leisure sector to develop adequate adaptation strategies and providing stability for young people and youth workers.

## 3. Making use of school as a leisure arena

Insights: In Chapter 3, informants mention arrangements whereby school premises were used for leisure activities in the afternoon as a measure to adapt to the pandemic. In line with the Finnish model gaining popularity in the Nordic countries, smaller groups or cohorts who were already meeting during the school day were permitted to continue doing so for these activities. This prevented the spread of infection while enabling social interaction during free time.

### Advice:

□ **Make use of school venues as safe spaces.** School venues should be made more widely available as safe spaces for leisure activities and socialising. During a pandemic, there is also potential to use school 'cohorts', i.e. groups of young people, for leisure activities and youth participation without increasing health risks.

## 4. Supporting a quick start-up and compensation phase

□ Insights: As society begins to open up again after a period of crisis, it is crucial for leisure providers to quickly start offering in-person activities again. Every week that passes makes re-engagement more challenging as social anxiety increases. As one informant stated:

*'It only takes three months to completely lose the relationship with a young person.'*

The interviewees emphasised the importance of grants during the opening-up phase and highlight the challenges the sector faces in scaling up quickly after a crisis. Chapter 3 of this report discusses how youth workers used detached youth work to meet and keep in touch with young people during the pandemic, and how this lowered the threshold for re-engaging with leisure activities and spaces.

### Advice:

□ **Provide the leisure sector with necessary resources for a quick restart.** Once society starts to open up again after a crisis, it is crucial that the leisure sector is provided with the necessary resources to re-engage young people in social activities and leisure pursuits without delay. Detached youth work has proven to be an effective means of building bridges to leisure activities and compensating for deficits in social competence and habits among young people in the aftermath of the pandemic. Funding for summer camps and grants to kick-start the leisure sector and reengage youth are also important, particularly at a local level.

## C. STRUCTURES FOR COORDINATION

### 1. Structures for meaningful youth inclusion at local level

□ Insights: Structures for youth participation can enhance the leisure and youth sector's ability to maintain operations throughout the crisis, as well as facilitating a quicker restart when society reopens. This is because the response can be tailored to the needs of different youth groups and the specific circumstances of each area. Several interviewees emphasised that stable structures must be in place prior to a crisis for youth participation to be possible when the crisis hits, and that such stable, well-functioning structures are scarce. In Norway, for example, local youth councils are legally required, though their roles, composition, and effectiveness can vary between municipalities. However, one workshop participant warned that it is all too easy to abandon useful participatory structures in times of crisis in favour of other concerns.-

Several interviewees emphasised the importance of participatory structures that include both unaffiliated young people and broader youth representation through youth organisations. One respondent also highlighted the necessity of addressing

the 'right' young people – those who are concerned about the process.

#### **Advice:**

□ **Establish and strengthen local youth participation structures.** Well before the next crisis hits, representative local youth participation structures managed by young people themselves need to be established. When identifying the needs of young people and developing crisis measures, it is important to consult those who are already active in the leisure sector, as well as those who are not. Examples of structures that can be adopted for crisis response include local youth councils and permanent national and local youth working groups.

## **2. A youth working group for coordination**

□ Insights: Our report emphasises the importance of young people having access to leisure activities for their well-being and resilience. This requires collaboration between all youth stakeholders from different sectors, including young people themselves. A Norwegian respondent provided the example of a municipal-level crisis response task force formed during the pandemic, comprising public bodies and civil society organisations.

#### **Advice:**

□ **Establish youth working groups for comprehensive crisis management.** The establishment of a dedicated youth working group comprising representatives from the youth and leisure sectors, relevant public services, and young people themselves would facilitate more comprehensive crisis management in relation to youth well-being. Regarding leisure, the group could promote cross-sectoral co-operation, identify the sector's needs, and ensure access to leisure activities.

## **3. Resourcing sector-specific hubs/umbrella organisations**

□ Insights: During the COVID-19 pandemic, umbrella organisations such as youth councils, sports associations, disability organisations, and youth work networks played a vital role in enabling their members to continue providing leisure activities. Their activities included updating and translating restrictions, developing skills and competencies, and offering tailored support via hotlines.

#### **Advice:**

□ **Allocate funding and resources for umbrella organisations.** Directing resources towards umbrella organisations to strengthen their supportive role would better equip the leisure sector to withstand crises. The sector's ability to adapt its activities could be enhanced further by providing these umbrella organisations with adequate innovation resources and financial support, utilising their network-based knowledge and outreach.

## 4. A youth coordinator at municipal level

□ Insights: This study reveals that the leisure sector currently lacks the necessary resources, infrastructure, and support structures at a local level to adequately adapt in times of crisis. To access the municipality, its resources and networks, leisure providers need entry points and adequate human resources. This can be challenging, particularly for small organisations with limited staff.

### Advice:

□ **Appoint a municipal youth coordinator.** Appointing a municipal youth coordinator before or during a crisis would enable youth leisure providers to access support and resources more easily, helping them to adapt and avoid closure. Such coordinators could foster cross-sectoral co-operation, identify needs within the sector and resolve them, and facilitate the provision of venues and other essential infrastructure throughout the crisis. They could also ensure that young people have access to adequate information about local leisure opportunities, for example by setting up a dedicated website.

## D. COMMUNICATION

### 1. Leisure-sector specific guidance

□ Insights: In interviews, many leisure providers across the Nordic region said that they found it challenging and frustrating to implement government regulations and recommendations effectively. This resulted in them being overly cautious and choosing closure over adaptation. For instance, many municipalities opted to shut public leisure venues, including sports halls and youth centres, when other measures could have been implemented to keep them open.

### Advice:

□ **Provide guidance and minimise uncertainty.** To maintain leisure activities and keep leisure spaces open, it is crucial to minimise uncertainty over what is permitted. Any new restrictions or regulations must be accompanied by leisure-specific guidance for municipalities and leisure providers to prevent misinterpretation or the unnecessary severe application of restrictions.

### 2. Providing adequate youth information

□ Insights: Young people need access to information tailored specifically to them to fulfil their rights and needs. Several interviewees suggested that the need for information increases during times of crisis.

One interviewee reflected on the importance of positive communication about participation during a crisis:

*'We should have run many more social media campaigns targeting young people to promote the idea of continued participation, given that public discourse was only highlighting dangers and distancing measures. We could have played a role in counterbalancing this.'*

#### **Advice:**

- **Provide youth friendly accessible crisis information.** Information related to crises and young people's well-being should be made available at national level. This should include clear and up-to-date details about leisure opportunities, emotional support services, and other relevant resources. To be effective, the information must be communicated in a way that is accessible and meaningful to young people – using language, formats, and channels that resonate with them and reflect how they typically seek and engage with information.

This communication should be part of a proactive youth information strategy, supported by a well-resourced leisure sector. Youth organisations should also be encouraged – and publicly funded – to run campaigns that promote participation in unstructured, semi-structured, and structured leisure activities, particularly during and after times of crisis.

### **3. Using public communication to prevent the risk of stigmatising youth**

□ Insights: Some of the interviewees said that young people seeking to socialise were sometimes stigmatised as 'lawbreakers' and potential carriers of the virus. This perception also affected the leisure sector, causing it to adopt an overly cautious approach. As one respondent stated:

*'In the Faroe Islands, people kept an eye on each other and were quick to judge others' actions. While public debate focused on physical health, the risks of loneliness were overlooked.'*

One of the interviewees gave an example of how public communication helped mitigate the stigmatisation of young people:

*'The Norwegian prime minister's speech emphasised the responsibility that young people carry on behalf of others. This has certainly helped reduce the tendency to publicly shame young people, even here in Denmark.'*

#### **Advice:**

- **Communicate in support of participation.** Public communication should proactively address the fears and concerns of young people, their families, and other citizens regarding participation in social activities during times of crisis. Public discourse should focus not only on physical health, but also on the risks of loneliness and social marginalisation, and other aspects of young people's well-being.

## 4. Building trust with parents and caretakers

□ Insights: This report highlights that the public information provided about the necessary precautions and restrictions during the pandemic often caused uncertainty among parents and carers. Parents needed clear, reliable information about safety measures and the activities available for their children. Building this trust is crucial to ensuring that all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can access and benefit from leisure activities. At the same time, interviewees emphasised the challenges involved in establishing and maintaining the necessary relationships and information flow with carers.

### Advice:

□ **Provide easily accessible information to build trust with caretakers.** In a crisis, both municipalities and leisure providers must build trust with parents regarding youth leisure activities. This involves establishing relationships and providing easily accessible, multilingual information about the leisure opportunities available to their children, as well as the safety measures in place for these activities. This is particularly important for young people with disabilities, those with family members in risk groups, and those from migrant backgrounds.

## E. INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ADAPTATIONS

### 1. Making safe and accessible outdoor leisure spaces available



**Figure 4.3:** Safe outdoor leisure spaces.

□ Insights: One of the expert informants of this study asked young people how they imagined their own space during the pandemic. She recounted:

*'They described a safe place with supportive adults present to ensure inclusion and non-discrimination. Some basic services should be available, such as mobile phone chargers, internet access, a microwave, and a kettle. Youth said they wanted to use the space to organise activities or simply hang out.'*

Leisure organisers also identified the need for shelters to enable them to continue their activities outdoors in the Nordic climate.

### **Advice:**

□ **Provide safe leisure spaces.** Regardless of the crisis, safe leisure spaces managed by supportive youth workers should be made available to enable young people to socialise and organise activities safely. These spaces could be outdoors. The leisure sector also needs adequate infrastructure – such as outdoor spaces

with lighting – to enable it to continue its activities safely.

## 2. Provide adequate resources to enable adaptations

□ Insights: The report notes that the adaptations required in the leisure sector during the pandemic were partly resource intensive. A lack of resources meant that these adaptations were not as innovative or high-quality as they could have been. Also, valuable initiatives such as detached youth work and high-quality digital youth work were not implemented on a large enough scale. Furthermore, informants highlighted the difficulty of finding larger premises in which groups of young people could organise themselves, play sports, and take part in other leisure activities while observing social distancing measures. Adequate venues were lacking, which hampered innovation and limited options for adaptations, particularly when group sizes were limited.

### Advice:

□ **Allocate additional resources and provide infrastructure.** Additional resources will be required to implement the necessary adaptations within the leisure and youth sector during times of crisis. These resources must be allocated based on the sector's identified needs, ensuring they are disseminated to smaller organisations and initiatives, too. It is crucial to provide adequate infrastructure, such as venues and digital resources, as a lack of this infrastructure creates bottlenecks for activities across the entire sector.

## 3. Use youth workers and youth centres as resources

□ Insights: During a crisis, when the needs of young people are unpredictable and change rapidly, youth centres can be valuable hubs for promoting the well-being of children and young people. They have the ability to increase the scope and level of activity, combined with professionalism, flexibility, knowledge of young people, and access to them. Ukrainian informants referred to local youth centres as an indispensable resource for young people and wider society in a crisis situation.

One interviewee summarised the potential role of a local youth centre as a resource centre:

*'We are a resource for young people by supporting them in what they want to do and achieve; for youth organisations that want to use our premises; for vulnerable young people and for the local society and the municipality. The pandemic highlighted that local youth centres are needed, and today we are even experiencing an increased request for our support from the municipality.'*

### Advice:

□ **Redirect, scale up, and resource municipal youth work.** In a crisis, there is potential to redirect, scale up, and resource municipal youth work, including local

youth centres and youth workers. The aim is to increase young people's access to resilience factors through leisure activities. With adequate responsibilities and resources, municipal youth services can also support other essential municipal activities during a crisis. These include public health, democracy engagement, volunteering coordination and support for hobbies and youth organisations.

#### **4. Develop knowledge hubs at Nordic level**

□ Insights: In Finland, centres of excellence have provided crucial support for digital youth work and youth information work, both before and during the pandemic (e.g., Verke and Koordinatti). However, today the centres are closed, and there has been a general retreat from digital youth work and the development of digital youth work competencies within the Nordic region. This leaves us ill-prepared for an impending crisis in which youth information and digital youth work are likely to remain vital.

##### **Advice:**

□ **Explore the possibilities for establishing youth work centres of excellence.** The potential for setting up Nordic centres of excellence to support evidence-based youth information and digital youth work should be investigated. If such hubs are set up, they must be maintained at all times – including periods of stability – to ensure a high level of preparedness in the event of a crisis.

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# Appendix I

The interviews were semi-structured, which means that all questions do not necessarily have to be posed/answered. The researcher is responsible of "moderating" the interview, and the interviewee is welcome to talk about what he or she considers most relevant. Interview guides with a few questions were developed to operationalise the main questions and assumptions, and to give interviewees an overview of the questions that were going to be posed.

## **What were the IMPLICATIONS of young people's diminished access to leisure time activities?**

- In what ways did the access to leisure time activities diminish for young people during the pandemic?
- What were the implications of young people's diminished access to leisure time activities?
- How did it affect the WELLBEING of youth DURING and AFTER the pandemic?
- Did the effects on arenas of leisure time activities and youth engagement linger also after the pandemic?

## **Were CERTAIN GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE MORE AFFECTED by the diminished access to leisure time activities?**

For instance, girls, more than boys? Was some leisure given priority and who benefitted from this discrimination?

## **What INSIGHTS can be drawn from the varying Nordic experiences to inform future policy?**

- What can we learn about the VALUE OF LEISURE TIME ACTIVITIES regarding the health and wellbeing of youth in general, as well as by means of providing COPING MECHANISMS IN TIMES OF CRISIS?
- What SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES can be identified for i) maintaining access to leisure time activities in times of crisis, and/or for ii) mitigating the negative implications on young people's health and development?
- Could negative implications be mitigated, by INCLUDING YOUTH in the crisis management? If yes; to what extent, and in what ways?
- In what ways can the YOUTH SECTOR CONTRIBUTE in the management of future crises regarding the wellbeing of youth?

How can the insights contribute to building an approach of RESILIENCE, hence ensuring youth's continued access to leisure and social activities in the face of future crises?

# Appendix II

## Survey 1: Resilience factors

1. How do you assess the following resilience factors that leisure contributes with? (for HAVING resources)

Did youth have access to this during covid? →



To what extent does leisure provide this? →



**All individual answers fell within this range**

- 1.** Access to reliable adults/youth leaders for support/motivation
- 2.** Safe leisure spaces for peer connections & emotional support
- 3.** Platforms for participation
- 4.** Low threshold inclusion
- 5.** Participation and self determination
- 6.** Meaningful leisure activities
- 7.** To take up responsibilities /volunteering
- 8.** Non-/formal learning /Personal development
- 9.** Togetherness / community
- 10.** Emotional support
- 11.** Inclusion / welcome
- 12.** Social skills
- 13.** Identity building
- 14.** Self - reflection
- 15.** Inner well-being
- 16.** Harmony and balance

2. Can you describe situations where any of these positive things disappeared during Covid?

3. Can you share any good examples of how the youth sector managed to provide these in the Covid crisis? For examples trough adaptions to activities.

4. In addition to the resilience factors listed, is there anything you would like to add or comment on?

# Appendix III

## Interviewees

1	André Ruud, Secretary-General, Youth Work Norway (Ungdom og Fritid) – Youth Club Umbrella Organisation, Norway
2	Anki Herlin, Detached youth worker, Helsinki, Finland
3	Birthe Navntoft, Head of Secretariat, Ungdomsringen – Association for youth clubs, Denmark
4	Christine Lund, Chair of Danish National Youth Council (DUF) & volunteer in various youth organizations, Denmark
5	Ditte Enemark Sølbeck, Chief consultant, MIO - Greenland's Child Rights Institution, Greenland
6	Elínborg Ingvarsdóttir, Director, Grindavík Youth Centre, Iceland
7	Ellen Åberg, President, The Swedish Association of Youth Councils, Sweden
8	Eygló Rúnarsdóttir, Assistant professor in Leisure studies and Social Pedagogy, School of Education, University of Iceland
9	Gustav Fernlöf, rural police officer, focus youth, Stenungsund, Sweden
10	Hannah Kroksson, former Secretary General, Swedish National Youth Council (LSU), today president of Forum – idéburna organisationer med social inriktning, Sweden
11	Hedvig Johansdottir, Secretary General, Barnabati - Children rights NGO, Faroe Islands
12	Ingrid Grøntvedt, Organisational Advisor, Norwegian Children and Youth Council (LNU), Norway
13	Jaana Fedotoff, director of Koordinaatti 2006 – 2024 (closed), today coordinator, City of Oulu, Education and Culture Services, Finland
14	Jenny Haglung, Secretary General, KEKS - Youth Work Network, Sweden
15	Jonas Skarin, Youth worker, Sollentuna, Sweden
16	Josefin Viklund Levirinne, Head of Unit, LSS (Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments), City of Lidingö, Sweden

17	Marie Isbøsethsen, Manager, Klub Qaqqavaarsuk (Youth Club), Kujalleq, Greenland
18	Mia Hanström, Director, SKUNK - Young voices in the archipelago, Åland
19	Mikko Vatka, Director of Youth Affairs, City of Helsinki, Finland
20	Oda Oftung, Advisor on Equality and Participation, Unge funksjonshemmede (Disabled Youth Norway), Norway
21	Olena Glazkova, NGO Kremenchuk informative-elucidative centre European Club, Ukraine
22	Olena Podobied-Frankivska, Association of Youth centers of Ukraine & National Ukrainian Youth Organisation, Ukraine
23	Pasi Tuominen, Digital Youth Work Expert, formerly at Verke (now closed), today in Humak university of applied sciences, Finland
24	René Hedegaard Nielsen, Youth Center Coordinator/Youth Worker, Denmark
25	Runar Nilsen Wiktil, Project Leader, NOVA – Digital House of Culture; Digital Youth Worker, Trondheim kommune, Norway
26	Sandra Vega, Dance Teacher and Subject Coordinator for Dance/Theatre/Visual Arts, Municipal School of Culture (Kulturskolan), Sweden
27	Sofia Laine, Research Professor, The Finnish Youth Research Society, Finland
28	Stine Haslund Jønsson, Project Manager, AURA – LGBT+ Youth Community, LGBT+ Denmark
29	Svava Gunnarsdóttir, CEO, Samfés - Youth Work Iceland, Iceland
30	Trine Lise Hoffmann, Senior Executive Officer, Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir), Norway
31	Valgerður Þórunn Bjarnadóttir, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Education and Children, Iceland
32	Ylva Watkins, Club manager and coach, Gymnastics Åland

## Individual youth

In addition to the youth organisations mentioned above—several of which were represented by young people—four individual youths were interviewed at the end of

the study to help triangulate and validate the findings.

1.	Youth, Scout, semi-rural context, Sweden
2.	Youth, Music/parcour, semi-urban context, Sweden
3.	Youth, Volunteer, non-formal education, semi-rural context, Latvia
4.	Youth, Football, Faroe Island

# About the publication

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