



Policy Paper

Developed by ALK





Policy Paper

Introduction

Youth workers play a vital role in supporting young people across Europe, yet their own well-being often remains overlooked in policy and practice. The Rise & Shine project set out to address this gap by equipping youth workers with practical tools to manage stress, build resilience, and strengthen their mental health. As part of this process, youth workers from six countries (Ireland, Spain, the Czech Republic, Romania, Cyprus, and Greece) actively contributed their experiences, insights, and reflections.

Through piloting activities, peer discussions, and post-assessment feedback, these professionals shared the realities of working in emotionally demanding environments, the systemic gaps that affect their mental health, and the types of support that genuinely make a difference. Their perspectives form the backbone of this policy paper.

The following sections summarise what youth workers themselves identified as structural challenges, what supports they found most meaningful, and what actions they believe European and national policymakers should prioritise. Their voices reflect a common message across all six countries: investing in youth workers' well-being is essential for sustaining high-quality youth work and for strengthening the wider ecosystem that supports young people across Europe.

About the project

Rise&Shine is an Erasmus+ Youth cooperation project aimed at strengthening the mental health, well-being and resilience of front-line youth workers operating in emotionally demanding professional environments. The project is implemented by a partnership of organisations: ALIANCE LEKTORU a KONZULTANTU (Czech Republic) who is coordinating the project, WeLearn Limited (Ireland), ARPIS Asociacion Regional Para la Inclusion Social (Spain), SEAL CYPRUS: Cyprus



Organization for Sustainable Education and Active Learning (Cyprus), INSTITOYTO KOINONIKIS KAINOTOMIAS KAI SYNOXIS (Greece), and Asociatia TEAM 4 Excellence (Romania), within the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme, Action Type KA220-YOU – Cooperation Partnerships in Youth. The project number is 2023-2-CZ01-KA220-YOU-000175004.

The project addresses the growing recognition, at European level, that youth workers experience high levels of stress, emotional labour and burnout, while structured and systemic support for their own well-being remains limited. Rise&Shine responds to this gap by developing, piloting and promoting practical, accessible and low-threshold tools that support youth workers in integrating well-being and resilience practices into their professional routines.

The project is structured around these Work Packages:

WP2: Youth Worker Well-being Planner and Reflective Practice Journal focuses on the development of structured reflective tools supporting daily self-care, emotional awareness and professional reflection.

WP3: Rise&Shine Well-being and Resilience Toolkit builds on these foundations through national piloting activities with youth workers and young people in all partner countries, generating experiential evidence, feedback and practice-based insights.

WP4: Rise&Shine Policy Learning, Peer Support, Promotion and Sustainability capitalises on the learning generated in earlier Work Packages by facilitating peer exchange, synthesising project evidence, promoting results and translating practice-based findings into policy-relevant messages and recommendations.

This Policy Paper was developed under WP4: Rise&Shine Policy Learning, Peer Support, Promotion and Sustainability, and draws directly on evidence emerging from the development activities of WP2: Youth Worker Well-being Planner and Reflective Practice Journal and the piloting activities implemented within WP3: Rise&Shine Well-being and Resilience Toolkit. Its purpose is to consolidate project findings and present evidence-based recommendations to policymakers, youth work stakeholders and organisations at European, national and local levels, with the aim of strengthening structural recognition and support for youth worker well-being across Europe.

Most Impactful Competency Developed Through Piloting

One of the strongest cross-country findings from the Rise&Shine piloting activities was the emergence of a shared, highly effective competency among youth workers: the adoption of simple, structured daily well-being routines built around self-reflection and short grounding practices.

Although national contexts varied, youth workers across partner countries described remarkably similar experiences. The introduction of reflective journaling, micro-learning activities, and brief mindfulness or breathing exercises helped them integrate self-care into their working lives in a way that felt realistic, achievable, and sustainable.

Replacing the “Perfect moment” with practical, daily practices

Youth workers consistently acknowledged that they previously tended to postpone self-care, waiting for an ideal moment of calm that rarely occurred in practice. The project’s Well-being Planner and reflective tools reframed self-care as something that could be built gradually, through small, incremental actions repeated over time. This shift was described as liberating and empowering, allowing participants to prioritise their mental health even during busy or emotionally demanding periods.

Strengthening emotional awareness and early stress recognition

Across countries, participants reported that daily reflection helped them recognise emotional patterns and early signs of stress before they escalated. This increased self-awareness translated into better emotional regulation, more balanced reactions during challenging interactions with young people, and improved ability to maintain professional boundaries.

Creating a meaningful pause in a fast-paced profession

The structured routines introduced through WP2 and WP3 created what youth workers described as a “small but transformative pause” in their day. Whether through journaling, grounding techniques such as 5-4-3-2-1, or short breathing practices, these activities provided immediate relief from cumulative stress. The simplicity of the tools, requiring little time and no special equipment, made them especially valuable in environments where workloads are high and staffing is limited.

Supporting confidence, resilience and professional identity

In several countries, particularly Cyprus and Romania, activities focused on positive self-affirmation and self-compassion had a profound effect. Youth workers reflected on how negative self-talk and pressure to “always cope” undermined their sense of competence. The project’s focus on confidence-building and emotional validation supported stronger professional identity and increased resilience. Similar effects were reported in the Czech Republic and Spain, where journaling and micro-activities helped participants articulate boundaries and gain new clarity about their needs at work.

Structural and organisational barriers

Despite the clear value youth workers found in the Rise&Shine well-being strategies, the piloting activities across all partner countries revealed a common reality: most youth workers operate within systems that make the consistent application of self-care practices extremely difficult. The barriers were not personal or motivational, but overwhelmingly structural, rooted in the way youth work is organised, funded, and supported at national and local levels.



Chronic time pressure and overlapping responsibilities

In all countries, youth workers described a daily rhythm dominated by high workloads, administrative demands, unpredictable casework, and staffing shortages. Many are required to fulfil multiple roles within their organisations, often beyond their formal job descriptions. As a result, practices such as reflection, journaling or grounding techniques, although helpful, were frequently pushed aside simply because workers lacked uninterrupted time during the day.

This pervasive lack of time was identified as the single most universal barrier across countries.

Under-resourced and under-staffed youth work environments

Findings from Ireland and Romania highlighted deep structural issues: youth centres are often under-resourced, with insufficient staffing to meet community needs. This leads to continuous multitasking, blurred boundaries, and increased emotional labour. These systemic pressures significantly reduce opportunities for youth workers to build sustainable well-being habits.

Comparable challenges are evident in the Czech Republic and Spain, where youth work structures remain unevenly supported at the municipal level, creating variable and often insufficient conditions for staff well-being.

Limited organisational culture supporting well-being

Across multiple partner countries, youth workers noted that well-being is still perceived as an individual responsibility rather than an organisational priority. Few organisations provide structured supervision, regular check-ins, or dedicated time for reflection — despite the emotionally demanding nature of the profession. Without managerial commitment or embedded well-being policies, integrating new practices into daily routines remained difficult.

Absence of national strategies on youth worker well-being

Ireland and Romania explicitly pointed to the lack of national strategies for youth worker well-being. Similar gaps exist in Greece, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, and Spain, where youth workers fall between policy domains (education, social care, volunteerism) without sector-specific protection related to psychosocial risks.

The absence of national frameworks means that well-being practices introduced through Rise&Shine depend heavily on individual motivation rather than systemic support.

Key policy and structural gaps

Across the partner countries, the project revealed a clear pattern: although youth workers show strong motivation and professional commitment, their well-being is consistently undermined by systemic gaps that limit the long-term sustainability of youth work. These gaps appear in slightly different forms across countries, but they share a common result — frontline staff shoulder heavy emotional and organisational burdens without adequate structural support.

Missing national strategies and underdeveloped policy frameworks

In Ireland, youth workers emphasised the absence of a national strategy specifically addressing well-being in frontline youth and social work. As expectations rise and the sector moves toward greater professionalisation, well-being protections have not kept pace. Workers reported long hours, emotional strain, and high burnout risk, all amplified by chronic underfunding.

Romania described a similar structural gap, though with a different background: youth work is not yet recognised within a formal national professional framework. As a result, well-being protection depends on the initiative of individual organisations rather than national policy.

The situation in the Czech Republic also reflects this fragmentation. Youth work operates across a mix of NGOs, municipalities, and informal initiatives, but comprehensive policy guidance on staff well-being is limited. This creates variability in how support is offered, with no national standard ensuring consistent care.

Lack of mandated professional supervision and emotional support

Greece identified the absence of systematic, regular supervision as the single most significant structural gap. Many youth workers handle complex emotional situations but have nowhere to process those experiences safely or professionally. Supervision is rarely mandated or funded at national level, making it dependent on organisational priorities.

Cyprus reported a similar issue: youth workers often operate in project-based or NGO environments with limited access to mental health support, reflective practice, or formal supervision. This leaves workers highly exposed to burnout, even when they find the work personally rewarding.

In Spain, the degree of support varies strongly between regions. While some providers offer structured supervision, many youth workers still rely on informal peer support rather than institutionalised emotional care.

Insufficient continuous professional development opportunities

Romania highlighted the lack of continuous professional development (CPD) as a major gap, especially compared with sectors like education where CPD is mandatory. Without structured training in resilience, stress management, or trauma-informed practice, youth workers often rely on trial-and-error learning.

In Ireland and Greece, CPD opportunities exist but are heavily dependent on project funding cycles, making them irregular and unsustainable. Cyprus faces similar challenges, where training often depends on short-term grants rather than long-term planning.

The Czech Republic shows an improving landscape, but CPD related to well-being is still optional rather than embedded as a standard part of professional support.

Resource constraints and workload pressures

Ireland reported significant understaffing and under-resourcing within youth centres, creating workloads that leave little space for self-care or reflection. This structural pressure makes it difficult for youth workers to consistently apply well-being strategies.

Some organisations in Spain and Cyprus face comparable challenges, especially smaller NGOs where staff juggle administrative, outreach, and pedagogical tasks simultaneously.

In Greece, the practical barrier of limited time was frequently mentioned — even when workers valued well-being tools, they struggled to apply them during demanding schedules.

The Czech context shows similar tendencies: many youth workers operate in small teams or as individual practitioners, limiting capacity to introduce structured well-being routines.

Limited recognition of mental health support as a professional standard

Across all countries, a shared systemic gap is the absence of national standards ensuring access to mental health support, counselling, or reflective practice. Whether youth work is well-established (as in Ireland) or still formalising its structures (as in Romania), mental health support is rarely treated as core professional infrastructure.

Introducing such standards would normalise self-care within the profession, reduce burnout, and strengthen the overall sustainability and quality of youth services across Europe.

Alignment with central pillars

The European Commission's new approach to mental health highlights three central pillars:

- (i) adequate and effective prevention,
- (ii) access to high-quality and affordable care, and
- (iii) reintegration after recovery.

Findings from the Rise&Shine piloting across partner countries show that while youth workers strongly align with these goals on principle, significant systemic gaps still prevent full implementation in practice.

1. Prevention: A strong match in theory, but weak in national infrastructure

Across countries, prevention emerged as the area most directly strengthened by the project, yet also the most underdeveloped at national levels.

In Ireland, Greece, and Romania, youth workers consistently reported that preventive structures such as supervision, resilience training, and organisational well-being policies are either minimal or entirely absent. Workers often manage emotionally complex situations without early-support mechanisms, which directly contradicts the EU's vision of systematic prevention.

Cyprus showed strong engagement with preventive tools introduced by Rise&Shine, mindfulness, self-reflection, journaling, but these practices are still not embedded in mainstream youth work structures.

The Czech Republic reflected a similar pattern: while individual organisations offer preventive activities, there is no unified national strategy promoting stress prevention,

burnout mitigation, or emotional support for youth workers. Prevention remains dependent on local initiative rather than national policy.

In Spain, preventive mechanisms vary significantly by region. Some autonomous communities provide structured supervision and mental-health training, while others rely almost entirely on project-based or NGO-led initiatives. As a result, many youth workers still lack consistent early-intervention support.

2. Access to high-quality and affordable mental healthcare: Limited and uneven

A second major gap relates to the EU's principle of accessible, high-quality care.

In Greece and Ireland, youth workers reported difficulties accessing mental-health services due to long waiting lists, cost barriers, or lack of specialised support for professionals dealing with emotionally demanding situations. Many noted that even when they experience work-related distress, public services are not tailored to their needs.

Romania and Cyprus face similar challenges: youth centres rarely have partnerships with mental-health professionals, meaning workers rely on NGOs, personal networks, or private services—options that are either insufficient or unaffordable.

In the Czech Republic, access to psychological support varies widely. While urban centres provide more resources, youth workers in smaller towns often encounter limited availability and long delays, making timely support difficult.

Spain again reflects regional disparities. Some communities offer workplace mental-health services for youth workers, but many others provide no structured support at all, leaving professionals to navigate care independently.

Across all countries, youth work remains outside formal healthcare systems, making access to appropriate care inconsistent and largely dependent on individual circumstances.

3. Reintegration after recovery: A missing structural component

Reintegration—supporting professionals after burnout, leave, or mental-health challenges—is the EU principle least developed across partner countries.

In Ireland and Greece, youth workers reported returning from periods of high stress or burnout without transitional measures such as graded return-to-work, reduced caseloads, or follow-up supervision. Reintegration is left to organisations' discretion, leading to inconsistent and often inadequate support.

Romania shows a similar pattern: reintegration depends almost entirely on informal peer support rather than institutional procedures. Youth workers described returning directly to full workloads, undermining long-term recovery.

In Cyprus, the concept of reintegration is emerging but still informal. While awareness of well-being is growing, structured return-to-work policies remain rare, especially in NGOs or short-term project environments.

The Czech Republic also lacks standardised procedures for reintegration. Professionals often resume their duties without adjustments or reflection opportunities, which increases the risk of repeated burnout.

Spain presents a mixed picture: a few regions with strong social-service infrastructures offer reintegration protocols, but for many youth workers, especially those employed by smaller NGOs, formal reintegration is nonexistent.

Overall alignment with EU priorities

The Rise&Shine project strongly supports the EU's first principle: prevention, demonstrating that simple, scalable daily practices can significantly reduce youth worker stress when applied consistently.

However, systemic implementation remains weak, as access to services and reintegration mechanisms are fragmented or absent across countries.

The findings highlight a clear need for:

1. National strategies for youth worker well-being,
2. Mandated supervision and emotional support structures,
3. Stronger partnerships with mental-health services,
4. Formal reintegration protocols after burnout or leave.

By addressing these gaps, member states can more fully align youth work practice with the European Commission's holistic approach to mental health.

National policies and strategies

Across the partner countries the pattern is clear: national mental-health strategies and labour/occupational health laws exist and can be mobilised to protect employees from psychosocial risks, but there is a consistent absence of targeted, profession-specific policies for youth workers (mandatory supervision, funded CPD, workload standards, reintegration processes after burnout). This creates a structural gap: youth-worker well-being is often treated as an individual responsibility or as a patchwork of organisation-level measures, rather than as a systemically supported element of youth-service delivery.

Ireland

There is no national policy specifically for youth-worker mental health. Youth work is a sector with a large volunteer base and uneven professionalisation; paid youth workers are covered by general occupational health & safety law (Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005), which obliges employers to manage psychosocial risks, but the Act does not recognise youth work as a distinct profession with its specific psychosocial hazards (vicarious trauma, out-of-hours crisis work, precarious funding). Partners highlighted chronic under-resourcing, high workloads and the absence of a targeted national strategy as the main gaps.

Greece

Greece has recent national mental-health and labour reforms and some workplace mental-health initiatives, but none that specifically target youth workers. The sector remains largely unregulated as a distinct profession; partners reported the lack of funded, mandated professional supervision and emotional-support structures as the key structural gap that would most improve youth-worker mental health.

Romania

Romania has national strategies that reference youth and mental health (e.g. National Youth Strategy; Mental Health Strategy), but the youth-work sector lacks institutionalised supervision, mandatory CPD and dedicated psychological support for youth workers. Most well-being supports are project- or NGO-driven rather than embedded in statutory frameworks.

Cyprus

National youth and health strategies recognise youth well-being, but do not explicitly cover the mental health needs of youth workers. There is no standardised framework for supervision, reflective practice or guaranteed access to counselling for professionals in youth services; support is typically dependent on organisational capacity.

Spain

Spain has a national mental-health strategy and related regional programmes that strengthen prevention and access to care at population level, and there are active youth policies at regional/national levels that promote young people's wellbeing. However, there is no widely used, dedicated national policy that treats youth-worker mental health as a discrete, regulated area. In practice, supports for youth workers

typically depend on employer provisions, regional services or NGO initiatives rather than a national, profession-specific framework.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has national mental-health strategies and youth policy instruments that aim to improve population mental health and youth services. Still, like in many partner countries, there is no specific national policy that defines mandatory supervision, workload standards or guaranteed well-being supports for youth workers as a professional group. Provision of support tends to be organisationally driven rather than centrally mandated.

Investment

Partners across partner countries converge on two priorities: (1) low-cost, scalable measures that can be implemented quickly (free access to Rise&Shine resources, peer support groups, online networks), and (2) structural investments that require public funding (paid professional supervision, ring-fenced CPD time and budgets, staffing increases or workload standards). These approaches together combine immediate relief and longer-term sustainability.

Key policy recommendations

Make Rise&Shine resources freely and permanently available

Rationale: Immediate, cost-effective support for front-line staff; increases reach and equity.

Steps: host translated materials on national platforms and the T4E learning platform; promote through national youth networks; ensure accessible formats (PDF, PPT, mobile-friendly).

Indicator: number of downloads / course enrollments per country.

Establish funded peer-support networks (virtual + in-person)

Rationale: Piloting showed peer exchange is highly valued and low-cost; it reduces isolation and normalises self-care.

Steps: seed small national/regional hubs with modest grants; appoint trained volunteer facilitators or rotate facilitation among partners; integrate with existing youth-sector meeting calendars.

Indicator: number of active peer groups, participant satisfaction and retention.

Fund regular, paid professional supervision for youth workers

Rationale: Supervision addresses the emotional labour of youth work, prevents burnout and improves practice quality; partners identified this as the highest-impact structural change.

Steps: mandate minimum supervision hours in funded youth projects; create a roster of accredited supervisors; include supervision costs as eligible in national/EU grants.

Indicator: % of youth workers with regular supervision; changes in burnout/well-being metrics.

Ring-fence CPD time and budgets for well-being and resilience training

Rationale: Without protected time, staff won't access training. Funded CPD ensures continuity beyond project lifespan.

Steps: require CPD allocation in project and organisational budgets (e.g., minimum days/hours per year); public funding lines for resilience/trauma-informed training.

Indicator: training hours delivered per worker per year; uptake rates.

Incentivise staffing increases and workload standards

Rationale: Under-resourcing drives the main practical barrier (lack of time). Hiring or clear workload guidance reduces pressure and creates space for self-care.

Steps: pilot funding for additional posts in high-need youth centres; develop national workload guidance for youth services; include staff ratios in funding criteria.

Indicator: staff:participant ratios; reported time for well-being activities.

Integrate well-being and supervision into national youth & occupational policies

Rationale: Legal/strategic recognition reduces dependence on ad-hoc, organisation-level solutions.

Steps: amend national youth strategies or OHS guidance to explicitly name youth-worker psychosocial risks; recommend supervision and CPD in guidance documents.

Indicator: policy references adopted; number of funding calls requiring well-being measures.

Peer-to-peer support

Across all partner countries, peer support emerged as one of the most impactful and valued components of the Rise & Shine project. Youth workers consistently highlighted that simply having the opportunity to talk openly about their work (sharing stories, comparing experiences, and learning informally from colleagues) created an immediate sense of relief, connection, and validation. Many described these conversations as the first time they felt truly understood by people who face similar pressures and emotional demands.

During the piloting activities, peer spaces became safe and non-judgmental environments where participants could openly reflect on stress, burnout, and the emotional complexity of their work. Group reflection circles, closing sessions, and informal discussions helped normalise conversations about mental health, something

often missing in organisational structures. This collective reflection reduced feelings of isolation and strengthened a shared sense of purpose across teams.

In several countries, particularly Romania and Cyprus, peer discussions organically developed into micro-communities of practice, where youth workers exchanged coping mechanisms, offered emotional support, and reinforced one another's motivation toward self-care. Participants emphasised that hearing others' strategies—such as mindfulness routines, boundary-setting techniques, or personal resilience practices—helped them integrate the Rise & Shine tools into their daily routines more effectively.

Quantitative feedback echoes this impact: for example, in Cyprus, all WP3 participants reported increased confidence in talking about mental health with colleagues and noted that peer spaces encouraged them to apply well-being practices collaboratively rather than alone.

Overall, peer support proved to be both a coping mechanism and a catalyst for sustaining the well-being practices introduced by the project. It fostered solidarity, built confidence, and created a sustainable foundation of mutual support that youth workers can carry forward long after the project ends.

Contribution of the Rise&Shine project

The Rise & Shine project introduced a set of resources that youth workers across partner countries described as both practical and transformative for their well-being. One of the most valued elements was the Peer Support Network, which offered an ongoing space for mutual encouragement, shared reflection, and honest conversations about the challenges of youth work. The network allowed youth workers to exchange strategies, learn from one another's experiences, and maintain a sense of solidarity, an essential buffer in a profession marked by emotional intensity and high levels of burnout. Sustaining this network would require only minimal investment, such as periodic online or in-person meetings, light coordination by a facilitator or mentor, and integration into existing youth work structures. Even modest recognition, such as

awarding CPD hours for participation, could help maintain momentum and long-term engagement.

Another cornerstone resource was the Well-Being Planner, which reinforced the message that self-care is not a luxury but a daily practice built through small, manageable steps. This tool was particularly appreciated by youth workers, whose demanding schedules often make sustained self-care difficult. The Planner helped them develop consistent habits, improve self-awareness, and manage stress more proactively. Because it is freely available online, it presents a highly scalable and sustainable resource that can continue to support youth workers far beyond the lifespan of the project.

The Well-being and Resilience Toolkit also emerged as a key asset. It provided evidence-based techniques that youth workers could easily integrate into both their professional roles and their personal routines. Piloting sessions, especially in Cyprus and the Czech Republic, showed that youth workers gained confidence in applying the activities for themselves as well as with young people. The Toolkit's adaptability to different organisational contexts makes it suitable for national-level uptake. With modest funding to support updates, translations, and facilitator training, it could be embedded in national training schemes or Erasmus+ CPD systems, thereby offering long-lasting impact.

Together, these resources create a sustainable ecosystem of support, combining peer connection with practical tools for emotional resilience. When maintained beyond the project, they can continue strengthening the well-being of youth workers and enhancing the overall quality and sustainability of youth work across Europe.

A Call to European Policymakers: Prioritising Youth Worker Well-Being

If given only a few minutes to speak directly to a European policymaker, the central message would be clear: *youth workers cannot sustain Europe's ambitions for young people unless their own well-being is actively protected and supported.* These

professionals carry significant emotional burdens as they support young people through crises, trauma, exclusion, and uncertainty. Yet, the systems around them rarely acknowledge the emotional demands of their work, let alone provide structured support. It is therefore imperative that policymakers promote a culture where youth workers are encouraged (and enabled) to take meaningful steps to care for their own mental health. This includes integrating simple, daily self-care practices, such as those offered through the Rise & Shine micro-learning resources, which help embed well-being into everyday routines rather than treating it as an afterthought.

Strong youth workers create stronger communities. Investing in their mental health through accessible training, peer support networks, and tools for managing stress is not an optional luxury, it is a structural necessity. As one message succinctly captures: “*Youth workers care for Europe’s young people — but no one systematically cares for them.*” This must change. The EU and its Member States should recognise youth work as an emotionally intense profession and guarantee frameworks where supervision, reflection time, and continuous professional development are a right, not a privilege. Such measures are modest in cost but transformative in impact.

The Rise & Shine project has demonstrated how even small interventions can produce significant improvements. With space for peer discussion, reflective practice, and easy-to-use well-being tools, youth workers became more grounded, confident, and resilient. They reconnected with the meaning of their work and with one another, showing that a supportive infrastructure can revitalise an entire sector.

The lesson is simple: *when we invest in the people who support young people, we strengthen the whole system around them.* Future EU youth, mental health, and social inclusion policies should embed youth worker well-being into training pathways, project budgets, accreditation frameworks, and quality standards. It should no longer depend on the goodwill of organisations or temporary project funding.

Ultimately, *investing in youth workers’ well-being is investing in Europe’s social resilience.*



RISE AND SHINE

Supporting front-line youth workers and youth educators to manage their well-being, and to continue to support young people



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