Young people turning to digital to keep connected with friends. Youth Workers facilitating a supportive online space and creative means of dealing with life in isolation.

Digital traffic has increased 78% on Youth Work Ireland Meath’s website and four-fold across social media platforms. Instagram is the most popular means of communicating with our Young People and all our regular groups are now occurring across the Zoom or Hangout platforms.

**Adapting**

In four short weeks our world has utterly changed. Our freedom of movement, weekend walks, meeting a friend for coffee and cinema nights with the gang are wistful memories. We are social creatures and never has this been more apparent than now. What Youth Workers across the country have seen is the ability and endless resourcefulness of young people to adapt to their new reality.

Sure, the stories of some young people gathering to play football and hanging out in parks are known, but what about the stories of those young people (and there are many, many more of them) that are taking their social responsibility seriously and staying indoors and finding safer methods of maintaining friendships and connections.

Youth Workers with Youth Work Ireland Meath and Involve Meath have stepped up their response to engaging and providing a safe, social space for the young people they work with every week. Daily challenges, games and quizzes keep the mind active and brain whirring as they compete for daily prizes (which we will get to them when ‘normality’ returns) and video chats at times when groups would regularly meet keep a routine going in an otherwise routineless day.

Of course safeguarding is paramount and all policies around child protection, GDPR and digital youth work are being adhered to rigorously. We have had to change our approach to how we work but we are nothing if not adaptable.
Creativity

Imagination is a powerful tool. We underestimate its importance in the early years of childhood development and give it even less credence as we grow older. Now the power of imagination and creativity is becoming a survival tool for everyone.

Youth Workers have been awestruck by the creative methods young people have shown in dealing with their isolation from friends and communities during this pandemic. Art, photography, music and poetry are just some of the means they have used to express their feelings and emotions in a positive output of creativity. Much has been said about mental health and it is still the number one concern when we talk about the overall wellbeing of young people.

Creativity is a form of problem solving, self-expression and exploration of our core reason for being here. To be creative is a vulnerable exercise as you are showing the world something you have created that is uniquely yours. It is both beautiful and fragile as it is something that makes sense only to you and its power can be diminished when you share it to a world that might not understand.

Youth Workers across the country have taken their responsibility to be both creative and fearless in sharing their experiences and to give young people the confidence to express their own. The result has been immense. Photographs of emerging nature and signs of summer with cherry blossoms blooming and birds building nests, art expressing themes of self-doubt and understanding to ideas for being socially responsible, and music that extracts the frustration and anger from the current restrictions.

Young People have taken the initiative to take time from their roles as students, siblings, caregivers and workers and are using creative methods to look after themselves.

Social

What the last few weeks have taught us is that connection to others is vital for our wellbeing, mental and physical health. Being able to keep digitally connected with our young people has reduced the miles between us and helped us shine a light in the dark or remoteness. Youth Workers have adapted to this new reality with innovative approaches to work and young people have responded with creativity and energy. There is a binary line between boomers and millennials, and where we may take pot shots at each generation’s traits and values, it is the sharing of these values that will enable us to get through this stressful and difficult time.

Until we meet in our familiar spaces again, and there is no substitution for the power of face to face Youth Work, we will continue building our coping and resilience skills and support each other over the next few weeks and months. When we look back on 2020, it will be with a greater understanding of how important communities are and how each of us, young and old, through our significance and values, can add strength to those communities, to be better and to belong.