



European Charter on Youth Spaces



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Preamble

The European Charter on Youth Spaces is addressing all “actors” who interact with youth spaces, including young people, youth workers, and volunteers. Additionally, it is intended for all entities that can play a role in promoting and developing youth spaces across Europe. This includes institutions, universities, research centres, and other public, private, and non-profit organisations, as well as informal groups.

The Charter aims to foster youth spaces as inclusive and dynamic environments that are hubs for active participation, community engagement, and social innovation, supporting the development and empowerment of young people across the continent.

The Charter acknowledges the diverse range of youth spaces across Europe, recognizing that a single type of youth space does not and cannot exist. Accordingly, the Charter is not prescriptive but instead offers a comprehensive set of principles and values derived from real-life experiences, as analysed through desk and field research conducted within the framework of the Youth sPEACEs project.

Youth activism: a pillar of democracy

The European Union, a complex institutional and political structure, has always aimed to promote the social and economic development of its members and to ensure lasting peace. This ambitious goal is primarily based on treaties between sovereign states, which reflect shared visions and are the result of dialogue and negotiation.

At the heart of the Union's prosperity lies what is known as the 'democratic spirit', an ethos that pervades our way of life as a community. This spirit manifests itself through participation in public life and experimentation with new ideas and solutions, with the freedom to learn from mistakes. It is this spirit that sustains an open society, rich in diversity of ideas, tolerance and rights.

But the democratic spirit can only thrive and grow if it is felt and experienced by

new generations. If young people do not embrace this spirit, the system risks being reduced to mere compliance with rules and regulations. It is therefore essential to encourage youth activism, especially when we consider that the average age in the European Union is around forty-five and rising.

Youth activism refers to the organised efforts and initiatives by young people (on average aged 15-29, with different national ranges) to advocate for political, social, educational, environmental, and economic development. This activism encompasses a variety of activities, including community projects, digital and physical campaigns, protests, policy advocacy, mutual and peer empowerment and support, etc., aimed at raising awareness and influencing public policy, addressing issues such as climate change, social justice, human rights, and democratic participation within the EU. It leverages modern communication technologies and social media to mobilise support, create networks, and amplify the voices of young Europeans.

The role of spaces in youth activism

Spaces are not simply passive reflections of social and cultural dynamics, but active forces that shape these dynamics. When a space becomes a living space, it is no longer just a container of historical and social events, but an articulator of these events. For this reason, our Charter aims to recognise and promote spaces dedicated to youth activism, using the environment in front of the social actors involved.

Examples of youth spaces include centres, clubs, associations, councils, and other initiatives that act as hubs for group activities, peer support, and community engagement. These spaces create a sense of community and belonging, helping young people share their experiences, develop social skills, and support each other. Even spaces that are mainly for social purposes can naturally connect with activism, encouraging collaboration among young people. These spaces do not necessarily have to pursue a specific cause; they can also be important as places for meeting and mutual exchange.

In these environments, casual conversations and shared experiences often lead to discovering common concerns and interests. As young people bond and build trust, they become more open to discussing social, political, or environmental issues that

affect them. This natural development can turn social gatherings into collaborative efforts to address these issues.

For instance, a community centre where youth gather for fun activities might start hosting discussions on local environmental concerns, eventually leading to organised clean-up events or awareness campaigns. Similarly, a cultural club could become a platform for advocating cultural preservation and inclusivity.

The strong relationships and sense of community built in these social spaces provide a solid foundation for collective action, making it easier to mobilise support and sustain activism efforts. Thus, the mix of social interaction and activism enhances the effectiveness and reach of youth-driven initiatives.

The promotion of these spaces can follow different directions, from the more institutionalised to the more informal, through co-design and engagement or expert-led experiences. In all cases, youth protagonism refers to democratic practices of active participation that take shape within these specially designed spaces.

The risks and opportunities

Any social, cultural or recreational space is always at risk of segregation, of creating a division between those who are 'in' and those who are 'out'. Those inside are recognised and have a voice, those outside remain vulnerable.

To counter this, it is crucial to build spaces that are both 'porous' and 'permeable':

- Porous spaces allow for the free flow of ideas, people, and activities between the inside and the outside. These spaces have openings that enable interaction and prevent isolation.
- Permeable spaces are those that can be influenced by external factors and, in turn, can influence their surroundings. They are not closed off but instead are engaged in a two-way exchange with their environment.

Towards a long-term vision

The Charter we propose is not just a work plan, but a vision that can be adopted by a wide range of policies. It aims to combine democratic practices with the design and animation of democratic spaces. In this context, all the spaces that will be inhabited and all the common spaces that will be opened will not be considered as mere neutral containers, but as fundamental components in the construction of the future plural spaces of the Union.

The Charter of European Youth Spaces

Article 1: Youth participation and empowerment through youth spaces

1. Youth Spaces in Europe serve as vital platforms for promoting active participation among young people through the use of different tools such as working groups, self-governing structures and community projects. These spaces must be officially recognised by institutions as promoters of youth empowerment and as hubs for social innovation, where young people can develop creative solutions to local and global problems.

Such recognition should include formal involvement of young people in decision-making processes and initiatives addressing issues pertinent to the youth community. Institutional support should also include funding, resources, and visibility to ensure the sustainability and impact of these youth spaces.

It must be clear, therefore, that youth spaces should not replace but can be complementary to public services.

2. Youth spaces promote the co-planning and co-design of interventions involving urban spaces and communities. Increasing the involvement of young people in these spaces from the earliest stages of policy conception related to territorial and community development is essential. This approach not only enhances the sense of belonging and responsibility among young people but also increases their accountability and sense of protection towards the common youth space, thereby improving the effectiveness of the interventions themselves.

3. Active participation in youth spaces contributes significantly to the emergence of youth protagonism, or also youth leadership, with motivated and competent youth who are deeply committed to building the well-being of their communities. Through continuous participation in activities and projects, young leaders consolidate important skills and knowledge that generate positive changes and impacts within the spaces and, more broadly, in the communities. These competences need to be recognised and valued by the bodies responsible for validating competences at local and European level.

4. The practical involvement of young people in the creation and definition of environments and spaces is a valuable opportunity to develop soft skills such as problem solving, entrepreneurship, teamwork, etc. This experiential learning process, especially if it is also adequately supported by education and training institutions, improves the understanding of the dynamics of cooperation and the development of projects related to territorial and community development.

Article 2: Governance of youth spaces

1. Governance models implemented in youth spaces across Europe are designed to promote inclusion and active participation, respecting the diversity of all participants. Utilising participatory mechanisms ensures that every young person's voice, irrespective of socio-economic, cultural, or ethnic background, is heard and considered in the decision-making processes. These mechanisms should include regular forums, advisory councils, and inclusive voting systems to embody the principles of democracy, inclusion, and citizenship effectively.

2. The function of youth spaces as arenas of democratic participation is of paramount importance for the active involvement of young people in society. To foster genuine youth empowerment, youth spaces should embrace bottom-up governance, enabling young people to take the lead in creating and managing their own environments. Rather than youth workers directing these efforts, they should serve as advisors, providing guidance and support. This approach ensures that youth spaces reflect the needs and aspirations of their users, promoting ownership, accountability, and sustained engagement.

3. In peripheral areas, it is often the youth workers or other practitioners who bring the voices of young people to the institutions through various activities and dynamics they implement, such as meetings, gatherings, and the collection of ideas and opinions. It is therefore crucial that local and national institutions recognise and enhance this role and promote actions aimed at broadening youth participation, in line with the European Youth Strategy.

Article 3: Cooperation between youth spaces, institutions and organisations

1. Youth spaces play a key role in bringing together different people and realities and cooperate with schools, universities and educational institutions, non-profit organisations, enterprises and local institutions in order to increase the effectiveness of the impact of their actions.

2. Platforms for the exchange of knowledge, research and good practice are important for the development of effective youth policies, as is the sharing of organisational structures, participatory funding and support networks. It is important to disseminate these tools at local and national level in order to increase the effectiveness of actions by using the different competences of the organisations involved.

3. Schools play a key role in collaboration with youth centres to promote youth development.

Fostering dialogue, interaction, and mutual support between formal educational systems and youth spaces is essential. By extending their support beyond regular hours, these institutions can collaboratively bridge the gap between formal education, non formal and informal education, extracurricular activities, ensuring a cohesive and continuous learning experience.

This collaboration fosters a stronger sense of community and belonging among young people, enhances their educational and personal growth, and allows for more comprehensive support systems. Additionally, joint projects and shared resources between schools and youth centres can provide diverse learning opportunities, encourage civic engagement, and develop essential life skills, ultimately contributing to the holistic development of the youth.

4. A change of mentality is needed to involve the whole of civil society in a more comprehensive approach to youth policy. Cooperation between youth spaces, public authorities, non-profit organisations and enterprises is essential to optimise resources and share expertise.

5. This collaborative approach contributes to the creation of an innovative and networked environment for young people, where diversity is valued, intergenerational relations are promoted and strong support networks are created that increase opportunities for young people and promote cultural exchange between organisations, both nationally and internationally.

6. Collaborations that focus on young people and are genuinely driven by the intent to foster their growth and social development, rather than by economic dynamics related to funding pursuits, should be highly valued. There should be greater availability of funds to support networked activities, as these efforts require continuous professionalisation to maintain quality.

Article 4: Value-based approach

1. Youth Spaces shall embrace and contribute to the promotion and dissemination of the fundamental values of the European Union: respect for dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. Within the youth spaces, by promoting an environment conducive to dialogue and critical thinking, young people cultivate a daily understanding of the principles of equality and the dignity of each individual.

2. Incorporating values-based education and dialogue within youth spaces is essential for fostering understanding, tolerance, and respect for diversity. Examples of this approach may focus on organising facilitated discussions on topics like diversity, discrimination, and social justice, using techniques such as role-playing and storytelling to encourage open sharing of perspectives.

3. Recognising the importance of inclusiveness as a guiding value, youth spaces welcome people from different backgrounds and with different values, thus promoting social cohesion.

This role, when recognised and valued, helps to prevent social conflict and thus to create safer communities that embrace common European values.

4. Youth spaces provide a sense of belonging to a wider community that shares fundamental principles, promotes active and responsible citizenship and contributes to building a renewed youth culture, ready to face the challenges of a complex and ever-changing society.

5. Youth Spaces foster an environment of continuous learning and personal development. By offering opportunities for educational programmes, skill-building workshops, and experiential learning, they empower young people to pursue lifelong learning. This commitment to ongoing education helps individuals to adapt to societal changes and to thrive in various aspects of their personal and professional lives, ensuring that they remain active and informed participants in the democratic process.

6. Youth spaces primarily intended for social interaction can seamlessly integrate with activism, enhancing collaboration among young individuals. In these settings, informal conversations and shared activities often uncover mutual concerns and interests. As trust and bonds develop, young people become more willing to engage in discussions about social, political, or environmental issues affecting them. This natural progression can turn social gatherings into coordinated efforts to tackle these challenges.

Article 5: Sustainability and social responsibility

1. Youth spaces shall prioritise sustainability practices and promote environmental awareness, instil in young people a deep respect for the planet and promote environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

2. The spaces shall encourage young people to become active stewards of our planet, to participate in evidence-based initiatives and campaigns aimed at protecting the environment, and to raise community awareness of environmental issues. This approach, based on civic education, awareness-raising and citizenship, aims to involve all the social actors most directly concerned by the main issues of the ecological transition (climate change, pollution, sustainable lifestyles, etc.) and to encourage institutions and governments to take young people more into account in the design and implementation of European environmental policies.

3. When there is a discrepancy between the actions of youth spaces and those of other stakeholders (including local institutions) concerning sustainability and environmental awareness among young people, youth spaces must take the lead in promoting specific measures to align or actively engage all parties in these efforts. There is a notable disconnect where institutional frameworks and economic systems are not adequately integrating or supporting the initiatives and concerns of youth regarding environmental sustainability. This disparity highlights the need for greater collaboration and commitment from these sectors to effectively address environmental challenges and leverage the enthusiasm and dedication of the younger generation.

Article 6: Towards a systematic approach to youth policies and spaces

1. Youth spaces function as part of local ecosystems, not as ‘islands’. Consistently, they have the capacity to be flexible, resilient and adaptable to the needs of their participants and to external challenges. Youth spaces function according to a systemic approach, promoting a way of understanding society as a whole, made up of individuals, communities, living environments and production systems, reflecting and respecting the complexity of young people's identities and promoting active and meaningful interactions between different worlds.

2. For example, implementing project-based learning initiatives within youth spaces may trigger collaboration across disciplines (e.g., science, arts, social sciences) to tackle community issues such as sustainable development or mental health awareness. This approach would encourage young people to explore interconnected solutions, bridging gaps between different fields of knowledge and fostering systemic thinking.

3. A systemic approach to youth policies and spaces necessitates the active involvement of young people in decision-making processes. Youth spaces will prioritise the inclusion of youth voices, ensuring that young people have a say in the policies and programmes that affect their lives. By embedding youth participation at all levels, we can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of interventions, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among young people.

4. We advocate the need for a paradigm shift from sectoral to systemic thinking on the part of all civil society actors: this paradigm shift will allow us to address youth challenges with greater depth and effectiveness, understanding them within the broader framework of natural and human ecosystems, and enabling us to create spaces of contamination to generate innovative solutions to common problems.

Article 7: Safe and open spaces for young people

1. The organisation of youth spaces in the countries of the European Union shall ensure conditions for participation that are physically and emotionally safe, promoting inclusion, mental and physical well-being and a culture of peer support. Learning comes not only from success but also from failure, which is an opportunity for growth. Therefore, in these environments, young participants are encouraged to take the initiative and try out new activities, with the aim of learning from experience in a safe and welcoming atmosphere, also freely exploring opportunities and topics and finding their place in the community.

2. The activation of mentoring, especially peer mentoring, becomes an essential component for personal development, competence building and empowerment of young people, also in dealing with generational conflicts. In particular, peer mentoring involves individuals of similar age or experience levels providing guidance and support to each other. This approach fosters mutual learning, enhances skills, and builds confidence through shared experiences. Peer mentors offer relatable advice and encouragement, creating a supportive environment that promotes personal growth for both parties.

3. We support the strengthening of the role of youth spaces in initiatives to promote freedom of expression and the constructive use of leisure time. In this context, youth spaces must be recognised not only as physical places, but also and above all as real places of social and cultural aggregation. Through participatory and inclusive management, characterised by structured activities and unstructured socialisation opportunities, youth spaces promote the development of relationships between people and the skills needed by communities and territories, helping young people to become aware and active citizens in the social fabric.

4. Youth spaces should be equipped with resources and facilities that are accessible to all, including those with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds, ensuring equitable opportunities for participation. This includes providing information and communication in multiple languages and formats to accommodate various needs.

5. Collaboration with local governments, educational institutions, and community organisations is vital to enhance the effectiveness of youth spaces. By fostering partnerships, these spaces can offer a wider range of programs and services, including educational workshops, cultural events, and recreational activities, tailored to the interests and needs of young people.

6. Evaluation and feedback mechanisms should be implemented to continually assess and improve the quality and impact of youth spaces. Young people should be actively involved in this

process, ensuring their voices are heard and their suggestions are integrated into the development and enhancement of these spaces.

Article 8: Relations with the Community

1. Youth spaces are, by their very nature, dynamic and permeable places where young people can encounter and interact with the surrounding community. This ability to cross-pollinate promotes the exchange of ideas and cultures not only between young people themselves, but also between young people and other actors in the social context. In order to increase the effectiveness of youth spaces, it is therefore crucial to extend their impact beyond the 'physical place' by actively involving the local community.

2. Institutions, NGOs and other local bodies must be fully aware of this opportunity and be prepared to adopt an open and collaborative approach towards youth spaces. It is essential that they understand the importance of including young people's perspectives in decisions and activities that affect the community as a whole.

3. Synergistic and complementary cooperation between local actors and youth spaces promotes the development of local programmes and projects that truly address the needs and interests of young people, thus contributing to a more inclusive, dynamic and supportive community.

4. The promotion of volunteerism within youth spaces can significantly enhance community engagement. Encouraging young people to participate in volunteer projects not only benefits the community but also helps them develop important skills, gain valuable experiences, and foster a sense of social responsibility.

5. Regular community events, such as festivals, open days, and collaborative projects, should be organised to showcase the activities and achievements of youth spaces. These events can help raise awareness about the role and importance of youth spaces in the community, attract new participants, and strengthen community ties.

Article 9: The digital dimension

1. European youth spaces recognise that technological tools for communication and collaboration have become an integral part of everyday life for young people and other age groups alike. The importance of these tools in enhancing individual expression and maintaining meaningful

connections with the outside world is clear. Furthermore, the ability of these tools to strengthen the collective voice in the digital context is recognised.

2. Youth spaces increasingly promote initiatives aimed at digital literacy for young people, promoting critical digital use, enhancing the exploration and acquisition of knowledge related to the digital transition in order to foster a conscious use of digital spaces and tools. To ensure digital inclusion, youth spaces must provide equitable access to digital tools and resources, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes offering training and support to bridge the digital divide and ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to participate fully in the digital world.

3. Digital literacy initiatives must be coupled with programmes for digital safety, wellbeing and protection to ensure comprehensive and secure digital use. Stakeholders and youth workers should focus on making digital spaces as safe, sound, and usable as possible.

4. However, the long and significant experience of Youth Spaces in the European Union shows that face-to-face relationships are indispensable for the acquisition of key competences, already highlighted in several EU policy documents, including the European Youth Strategy.

5. Therefore, Youth Spaces promote a balanced hybrid approach, combining the responsible use of digital tools with a focus on real human interaction and the promotion of social and emotional skills, which are fundamental for individual and collective well-being.

Article 10: Feedback and Continuous Improvement Policy

1. In order to strengthen their role and impact on the community, youth spaces are committed to valuing feedback from young people in order to identify strengths and areas for improvement and to give young people an active voice in the re-planning of activities. The concept of continuous improvement is the foundation for managing a space, group, or community. This improvement must be an ongoing effort involving everyone, both the young people and those working with them. Improvement should be pursued both at the human level and in professional skills through appropriate support and services.

2. To further enhance the effectiveness of feedback and continuous improvement, youth spaces should implement a structured system for regularly collecting, analysing, and acting on feedback. This system should include clear channels for feedback submission, regular feedback sessions, and transparent mechanisms for communicating how feedback has been utilised.

3. Success stories and improvements resulting from youth feedback should be regularly documented and shared with the community. This not only highlights the impact of young people's contributions but also encourages ongoing engagement and demonstrates the value of a feedback-driven approach.

4. This process, facilitated by peer review activities, not only empowers young people but also ensures that youth spaces remain responsive to their needs at all times.

5. Other key players in the community (institutions, associations, etc.) can contribute to the commitment of youth spaces to use and value young people's feedback. This could include participating in joint working tables, sharing resources and expertise, and promoting synergies between youth spaces and other existing youth services and programmes in the community.

6. In addition, local institutions should commit themselves to seek and value young people's feedback in improving youth services and programmes. This could lead to policies and guidelines that actively encourage organisations and institutions to involve young people in decision-making and evaluation processes.