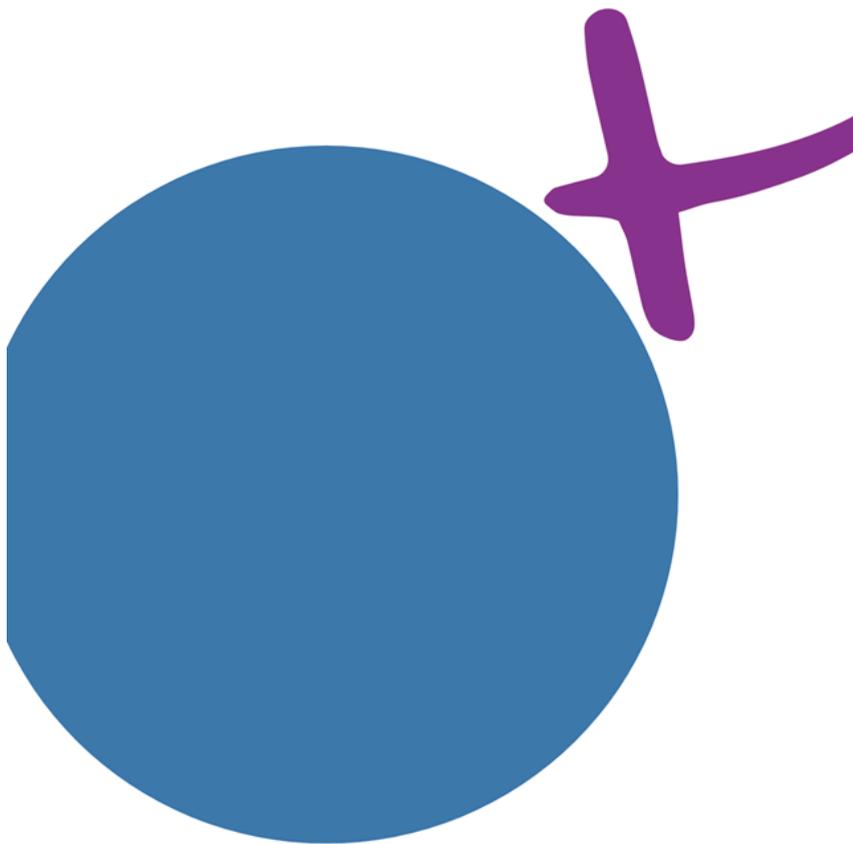


POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT



Co-funded by
the European Union

G.A. Nr: 2022-2-IE01-KA220-YOU-883F8363

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Executive Summary

The NEXUS project (2022–2025), funded under Erasmus+ Youth, set out to strengthen the connection between research, practice, and policy in the field of young carers (YCs) by empowering youth workers (YWs) as active contributors to knowledge creation and advocacy. The project brought together partners from Italy, Ireland, and Greece to test a participatory training curriculum, pilot innovative methods, and explore how youth workers can act as bridges between vulnerable young people, researchers, and decision-makers.

Main Challenges

- Across piloting activities and multi-stakeholder workshops, the project identified a series of persistent challenges that hinder effective cooperation between the three communities.
- Fragmentation between research, practice, and policy. Evidence on young carers rarely translates into concrete policy or service measures, and opportunities for dialogue among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers remain limited.
- Limited participation of youth workers in research and policy. Although well positioned to identify and support young carers, youth workers lack formal roles, funded time, and frameworks that would allow them to co-design studies or sit within decision-making structures.
- Unequal access to training in participatory research methods. The NEXUS pilots confirmed strong interest and learning gains when training is available, but existing provision is sporadic, short-term, and rarely embedded in professional development systems.
- Invisibility of young carers in national and local strategies. Many young carers remain unrecognised by schools and services, leading to inconsistent support and limited awareness of their rights within communities.

These findings confirm that while the recognition of young carers has advanced at European level—through strategies such as the European Care Strategy, EU Youth Strategy, and EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child—gaps in implementation persist. To bridge these divides, NEXUS calls for systemic action across all levels of governance.

Key Recommendations at a Glance

- **For Local and National Policy-Makers**
 - Recognise young carers explicitly in youth, education, health, and social policies, with clear identification and referral mechanisms.
 - Fund participatory research and compensate young carers and youth workers for their involvement.
 - Establish intersectoral frameworks and advisory councils bringing together young carers, youth workers, researchers, and policymakers.
 - Embed educational flexibility and awareness of young carers within school systems and teacher training.

- **For European Institutions**
 - Name young carers and youth workers explicitly across EU Youth, Care, Health, and Social strategies and link recognition to funding.
 - Develop EU-wide ethical guidelines for participatory research with vulnerable youth, co-created with YCs and YWs.
 - Support transnational peer-learning, capacity-building, and digital feedback platforms connecting practice and policy.

- **For Youth Work Practice and Organisations**
 - Train youth workers in participatory and qualitative research, intergenerational approaches, and policy literacy, using flexible, modular formats.
 - Use research-to-practice tools such as empathy mapping and storytelling to engage young carers and promote reflective practice.
 - Facilitate young carers' participation in local advisory groups and school partnerships to operationalise flexibility and inclusion.

- **For Research Institutions**
 - Co-produce research with youth workers and young carers as partners from design to dissemination, allocating time and resources accordingly.
 - Apply ethical, participatory methodologies with wellbeing safeguards and feedback loops.
 - Disseminate research through accessible formats—briefs, infographics, open educational resources—to reach practitioners and policymakers.

Looking Ahead

For lasting impact, the NEXUS approach must be institutionalised. Establishing standing evidence-to-policy forums, scaling the NEXUS curriculum into online and accredited formats,

embedding digital feedback mechanisms, and mainstreaming the recognition of young carers in all national and local systems are essential next steps.

By creating a sustainable triangle between research, policy, and practice, NEXUS paves the way for a Europe in which young carers are visible, supported, and empowered—and where youth work serves as a key conduit for evidence-based, participatory policy innovation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the report

This report summarises and synthesises evidence generated through the NEXUS project, whose overarching aim is to strengthen the research–practice–policy triangle in the field of young carers (YCs) by empowering youth workers (YWs) as active agents of knowledge creation and advocacy.

Drawing on insights from multi-country training pilots (Italy, Ireland, Greece) and a series of co-creative stakeholder workshops, the report formulates a set of policy recommendations designed to:

- enhance the visibility and recognition of young carers at local, national, and European levels;
- build the capacity of youth workers to apply participatory and evidence-based approaches in their daily practice; and
- foster sustainable collaboration among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

The recommendations presented here aim to bridge persistent gaps between research, policy, and frontline practice, ensuring that the voices and lived experiences of young carers inform service design and policy development. In doing so, the report contributes to the NEXUS project's broader mission—to promote inclusive youth work, cross-sectoral cooperation, and evidence-informed policymaking across Europe.

1.2. Methodology

The findings and recommendations presented in this report are based on evidence collected through the implementation and evaluation of the NEXUS training curriculum, combined with insights from multi-stakeholder workshops and participatory consultations carried out in partner countries. The methodology reflects the project's participatory ethos and its aim to connect research, policy, and youth work practice through co-creation and mutual learning.

The data sources include:

- **Training Pilots:**

Conducted in Italy (ANS & INRCA), Ireland (REDIAL), and Greece (EDRA), the pilots tested the NEXUS curriculum with youth workers and allied professionals. Each pilot adapted the blended learning format (online and face-to-face) to local contexts and included pre- and post-training questionnaires, reflective exercises, and practice-based projects designed to apply participatory research tools in real settings.

- **Co-Creative Workshops and Stakeholder Consultations:**

National workshops engaged youth workers, young carers, researchers, educators, and policymakers through interactive and creative methods such as empathy mapping, storytelling, creative collage, and imagination exercises. These activities helped uncover barriers, opportunities, and solutions for fostering cooperation between the three communities.

- **Evaluation and Reflection Tools:**

Quantitative and qualitative feedback was gathered through surveys, focus groups, and session evaluations, assessing changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and confidence to engage in participatory research and policy processes. The evaluations also explored the feasibility, relevance, and transferability of the NEXUS model to diverse European contexts.

This mixed-method and co-creative approach ensured that the policy recommendations are grounded in practical experience, stakeholder perspectives, and evidence of learning outcomes collected throughout the project's piloting and implementation phases.

1.3. Intended audience

This report is intended for a broad range of stakeholders involved in shaping, implementing, or studying policies and practices that affect young carers across Europe, including:

- **Policy makers** at local, regional, national, and European levels, responsible for youth, education, health, and social policies;
- **Researchers and research infrastructures** working on youth participation, informal care, and social inclusion, particularly those seeking to embed participatory and co-creative methodologies in their work;
- **Youth workers and service providers** in the education, health, and social care sectors, who play a key role in identifying, supporting, and empowering young carers through practice and advocacy.

2. Context and Rationale

2.1. Overview of young carers in Europe

Young carers (YCs) represent a considerable yet often invisible segment of the youth population across Europe. They are children and young people who provide regular, significant, or sustained care to a family member or another person with a physical or mental illness, disability, or substance dependency.

Caring responsibilities can have a profound impact on young carers' education, health, wellbeing, social participation, and future opportunities. Many experience emotional strain, social isolation, and interruptions in schooling, often without adequate recognition or support from formal systems.

In recent years, this vulnerability has increasingly been acknowledged within European policy frameworks and programme design, including the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the European Care Strategy, and the EU Youth Strategy. However, despite growing awareness, young carers remain largely unrecognised in national statistics and public policy across many Member States, highlighting the need for stronger evidence, cross-sectoral cooperation, and participatory approaches that amplify their voices.

2.2. Gaps in policy, research, and practice linkages

Findings from the NEXUS pilots and workshops consistently revealed a disconnect between policy objectives and everyday practice. While many policies acknowledge the importance of supporting young carers, their implementation often fails to reflect the complexity of young carers' lived realities.

Research on young carers has expanded in recent years, yet the translation of evidence into concrete policy measures and frontline practice remains limited. Mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are still fragmented, leading to duplication of efforts and missed opportunities for impact.

Moreover, pathways for young carers to directly influence decision-making are inconsistent and largely dependent on individual projects or local initiatives rather than embedded systems of participation. This lack of structured collaboration hinders the development of sustainable, evidence-informed, and youth-driven policies and services across Europe.

2.3. Importance of engaging youth workers in policy and research

Youth workers (YWs) occupy a pivotal position in recognising and supporting young carers, as they often operate at the intersection of education, social services, and community engagement. Through their close and trusting relationships with young people, they are uniquely placed to identify hidden young carers, create safe peer environments, and facilitate their participation in programmes and decision-making processes.

However, despite this strategic role, youth workers frequently report insufficient funding, limited time, and a lack of dedicated tools or frameworks that would enable them to meaningfully engage in research co-design or policy dialogue. Their potential to act as bridges between young carers, researchers, and policymakers remains underutilised. Strengthening their capacity and formal involvement is therefore essential to ensuring that policies and interventions for young carers are both evidence-informed and grounded in real-life experiences.

2.4. Relevant EU policy frameworks

The NEXUS piloting and workshops highlighted a widespread need to strengthen policy literacy among youth workers and practitioners, many of whom demonstrated limited familiarity with existing European strategies and policy instruments relevant to young carers. This gap reduces their ability to connect everyday practice to broader policy objectives and to advocate effectively for systemic change.

Several European policy frameworks provide a solid foundation for integrating the needs and voices of young carers within wider youth, care, and social inclusion agendas:

The European Care Strategy (2022) calls for improving access to quality, affordable, and inclusive care services across the life course and explicitly recognises the importance of supporting informal carers, including young carers.

The EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) promotes youth participation, equality, and inclusion—objectives that align directly with empowering young carers as active citizens.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021–2024) underscores the obligation to protect children from excessive responsibilities and ensure their right to education, play, and wellbeing.

The European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Child Guarantee reinforce commitments to equal opportunities, social inclusion, and access to essential services for all children and young people.

By linking the practice-based insights of youth workers and the lived experiences of young carers to these existing frameworks, the NEXUS project reinforces the need for cross-sectoral cooperation and evidence-informed policy development. Enhancing practitioners' understanding of such EU strategies is therefore essential to bridge the gap between local practice and European policy ambitions, ensuring that young carers' rights and needs are systematically recognised within national and regional policy contexts.

3. Key Findings from Stakeholder Consultations and Workshops

Insights from the NEXUS piloting activities and multi-stakeholder workshops revealed both common priorities and specific challenges across the four main target groups: young carers, youth workers, policy-makers, and researchers. The consultations confirmed the importance of participatory and cross-sectoral collaboration as the foundation for sustainable policy development and practice innovation.

Young Carers

Lived experiences:

Across workshops and participatory sessions, young carers described a significant emotional and practical burden associated with their caring roles. Many expressed the need for greater recognition and understanding from teachers, peers, and service providers, as well as access to

flexible schooling arrangements and reliable support or respite options. The discussions revealed that young carers often feel isolated and undervalued, with limited spaces where they can safely share their experiences or seek guidance.

Involvement in policy and research:

Young carers consistently voiced a desire for direct participation in decision-making processes, particularly those affecting education, leisure, and social inclusion. They advocated for the creation of structured, youth-friendly channels that allow them to express their needs and influence the development of local and national measures.

📌 Youth Workers

Current practices:

Youth workers play a central role in identifying, supporting, and mentoring young carers, often through informal or ad-hoc initiatives. They engage in group work, counselling, and community awareness-raising, but frequently lack systematic tools for participation and evidence generation. The piloting confirmed their strong motivation to adopt participatory research methods and to contribute to the translation of practice insights into policy.

Challenges:

Youth workers identified limited funding, insufficient time, and fragmented collaboration as key barriers to sustained support for young carers. The diversity of needs among young carers, combined with difficulties in building trust and maintaining continuity, often restricts the effectiveness of interventions. Participants also highlighted the need for cross-sectoral cooperation and the creation of digital communication and feedback tools to facilitate ongoing exchange between practitioners, young carers, and decision-makers.

Training needs:

All pilot countries reported a strong demand for training in participatory and qualitative research methods, intergenerational approaches, and EU/youth policy literacy. Many participants demonstrated a low initial awareness of relevant European policy frameworks, underlining the need to embed policy competence within youth work curricula.

📌 Policy-makers

Awareness and engagement gaps:

Consultations with policy-makers revealed variable levels of awareness regarding the existence and challenges of young carers. While participants valued creative and co-design approaches

introduced through the NEXUS workshops, they also emphasised the need for clearer pathways to policy implementation and measurable outcomes. Limited exposure to grassroots practice and insufficient coordination between policy domains (youth, education, health, and social affairs) continue to hinder effective responses.

📌 Researchers

Collaboration with practice:

Researchers involved in the NEXUS pilots recognised the feasibility and benefits of co-producing knowledge with youth workers and practitioners. The experience demonstrated that such collaboration improves the relevance and applicability of research findings to real-world contexts. However, persistent time constraints, funding limitations, and capacity gaps make sustained cooperation challenging. Participants also stressed the importance of disseminating research outputs in accessible, practice-oriented formats that can inform both professionals and policymakers.

4. Policy Gaps and Challenges Identified

4.1. Fragmentation between research, practice, and policy

Findings from the NEXUS pilots and stakeholder workshops point to persistent fragmentation between research, practice, and policy-making in the field of young carers. Although substantial evidence on the needs and circumstances of young carers exists, it is not systematically translated into policy or service design.

Youth workers and practitioners often lack access to research findings in usable formats, while researchers have limited opportunities to test or refine their work in real-life practice settings. Similarly, policymakers rarely engage directly with youth workers or young carers, which limits the feedback loops necessary for evidence-informed policy development.

This disconnection results in duplication of efforts, inconsistent implementation of good practices, and a missed opportunity to build a coherent, Europe-wide approach to identifying and supporting

young carers. Strengthening structured platforms for regular dialogue and collaboration among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers is therefore critical to bridging this gap and ensuring that policy measures are grounded in lived experience and empirical evidence.

4.2 Limited youth worker participation in research co-design and policy-making

Despite their central role in identifying and supporting young carers, youth workers rarely have formal opportunities to contribute to research design or policy development. Their involvement is often limited to short-term consultations or project-based activities rather than being embedded within institutional or policy frameworks.

Findings from the NEXUS pilots indicate that youth workers are highly motivated to engage in co-research and policy dialogue but face significant structural barriers—including the absence of funded time, lack of recognition for research-related work, and limited access to decision-making fora.

As a result, valuable insights from frontline practice are frequently lost or underutilised, and policies risk being developed without grounding in the realities faced by young carers and the professionals who support them. Creating formal, compensated roles for youth workers in research partnerships and policy advisory structures would not only enhance the quality of evidence, but also strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of resulting policies.

4.3. Lack of accessible training on participatory research methods

The NEXUS pilots demonstrated that targeted training in participatory and qualitative research methods leads to significant knowledge gains among youth workers and practitioners. Participants reported increased confidence in applying participatory tools and a stronger understanding of how research can inform policy and practice.

However, the availability of such training remains uneven and fragmented across countries and sectors. Existing opportunities are often short-term, overly condensed, or insufficiently tailored to the realities of youth work practice. Many practitioners also lack access to ongoing mentoring or peer-learning spaces that would help them consolidate and apply newly acquired skills.

To achieve lasting change, training in participatory research needs to be integrated into continuous professional development frameworks for youth workers and linked to formal recognition or accreditation. Sustained investment in capacity-building is essential to enable practitioners to act as effective mediators between research, practice, and policy.

4.4. Invisibility of young carers in national/local strategies

Across all NEXUS workshops and consultations, participants emphasised that young carers remain largely invisible within national and local policy frameworks. In most European countries, there are no formal mechanisms for identifying, recognising, or systematically supporting young carers through education, health, or social services.

This lack of recognition results in fragmented and inconsistent responses, often dependent on the commitment of individual professionals or local initiatives rather than coordinated policy measures. Participants highlighted the urgent need for clear identification pathways, school flexibility to accommodate caring responsibilities, and community awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and promote understanding of young carers' experiences.

Without explicit inclusion of young carers in youth, education, and social policy strategies, their needs risk remaining overlooked, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Embedding the recognition of young carers within national and local frameworks is therefore a prerequisite for developing equitable, supportive, and evidence-informed systems of care and inclusion.

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1. For Local and National Policy-Makers

- **Recognise and include young carers explicitly within youth, education, health, and social policies**, ensuring that their specific needs are addressed through targeted measures. **Develop and implement formal identification and referral protocols** across schools, primary care, and community services to facilitate early support.
- **Fund and sustain participatory research initiatives** that actively involve youth workers as co-researchers and enable young carers to share their lived experiences. **Provide fair compensation for young carers' participation**—covering time, travel, and digital access—to ensure inclusion and equity. Encouraging groups of people coming from the same reality could help their individual learning process, since the trainees could easily support each other, sharing (during and after the training) their

experience and thoughts. Organising initiatives to maintain the contacts with the trainees and expanding their network.

- **Establish intersectoral cooperation frameworks** that connect the youth, education, health, and social service sectors. **Set up local or regional advisory councils** comprising young carers, youth workers, researchers, and policymakers to ensure continuous dialogue, feedback, and joint decision-making.
- **Embed flexibility within the education system** by allowing adjusted timetables, assignment deadlines, and attendance policies for identified young carers. Integrate young carer awareness and support strategies into teacher education, school leadership training, and student welfare programmes to promote understanding and early intervention.
- Wherever feasible, integrating training courses into existing (academic, professional or vocational) programs aimed at future professionals working with young people and especially YCs.

5.2. For European Institutions

- Explicitly **recognise young carers and youth workers within the EU Youth, Care, Health, and Social Strategies**, ensuring that their roles and needs are reflected in policy priorities and related funding instruments. **Allocate dedicated EU funding to initiatives** that promote the identification, recognition, and participation of young carers.
- **Develop and adopt EU-wide guidelines and ethical standards for conducting participatory research with vulnerable young people**, co-created with young carers and youth workers. These should ensure meaningful, safe, and inclusive engagement in research and policy processes.
- **Support transnational cooperation and peer-learning** by funding communities of practice, capacity-building programmes, and digital feedback platforms that facilitate regular exchange between practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Such mechanisms would enable the real-time transfer of frontline insights into European-level policy development and strengthen coherence across Member States.

5.3. For Youth Work Practice and Organisations

- Provide structured training for youth workers in **participatory and qualitative research methods, intergenerational approaches, and policy literacy**. Training should be

offered in **modular and flexible formats** that accommodate varying workloads and should integrate reflective practice to promote continuous learning and professional growth.

- **Implement research-to-practice tools**—such as empathy mapping, storytelling, and creative collage—that have proven effective in engaging diverse stakeholders and bridging communication between young carers, practitioners, and policymakers. These tools can support both evidence generation and inclusive dialogue.
- Empower young carers to **participate meaningfully in local advisory bodies, youth councils, and consultation forums**, ensuring that their voices contribute to programme and policy design. Youth organisations should also establish peer-support groups and safe spaces, and collaborate with schools to operationalise flexible measures that accommodate young carers’ educational and emotional needs.).

5.4. For Research Institutions

- **Co-produce research with youth workers and young carers** as active partners throughout all stages of the research process—from the formulation of research questions to data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Research planning should allocate dedicated time and budget for practice partners to ensure equitable participation and genuine collaboration.
- Apply **ethical** and **participatory methods** that are appropriate for working with vulnerable youth populations. Research designs should incorporate wellbeing safeguards, informed consent procedures adapted for younger participants, and feedback loops to ensure that findings are shared and validated with those involved.
- **Disseminate research findings in accessible and practical formats**, such as concise policy briefs, infographics, and short training materials tailored for practitioners and policymakers. Wherever possible, develop **open educational resources** to support the wider uptake of participatory approaches across the youth and social care sectors.
- **Meet policymakers first at local (municipal, regional) level periodically** to connect research and practice to policy by sharing recent findings on young carers and plan evidence-based support activities. Then expand this practice to the national and EU level.

6. Sustainability and Follow-up

Ensuring the **long-term sustainability** of the NEXUS approach requires that the **connection between research, practice, and policy**—the so-called triangle—**become a permanent and recognised part of the way young carers issues are addressed**. To achieve this, the project

calls for the creation of **standing evidence-to-policy forums at municipal and regional levels**. These should bring together youth workers, young carers, researchers, and service leaders on a regular basis to exchange knowledge, review progress, and propose improvements. Linking these local structures to national ministries through annual reporting would ensure that grassroots experience continues to inform policy decisions at higher levels.

A second priority is to **maintain and expand the professional development opportunities** initiated through the NEXUS pilots. The NEXUS curriculum, having proved effective across several European contexts, should now be adopted in sustainable formats such as MOOCs or blended training programmes. This would allow for continuous learning, even in resource-limited settings, while encouraging universities and accredited training providers to recognise the programme within formal continuing professional development (CPD) frameworks.

Sustainability also depends on **establishing robust mechanisms for data sharing and feedback**. Digital platforms can provide real-time communication channels through which youth workers and young carers share their experiences, challenges, and innovative practices directly with policymakers. Such tools would not only facilitate ongoing dialogue, but also increase accountability by tracking how feedback is acted upon.

Finally, true sustainability will come from **mainstreaming the recognition of young carers within all relevant national and local systems**. This means embedding identification procedures, educational flexibility, and referral pathways into official guidance, local service contracts, and quality standards. When young carers are systematically recognised in this way, their support will no longer depend on individual projects or chance encounters, but will instead be part of a coherent and enduring policy and practice framework across Europe.

Annexes

- Workshop reports
- Piloting reports
- MOOC access link: <https://training.nexusproject.eu/>