



## **Response by YouthLink Scotland to Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee Inquiry: Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty**

**March 2018**

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing regional and national youth organisations from both the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of our sector. Youth work is part of the wider grouping of informal and non-formal learning which is known as Community Learning and Development. Our sector has a workforce in excess of 75,000 – including over 70,000 adult volunteers. We reach in excess of 380,000 young people in youth work opportunities each week. Youth work has three essential and definitive features:

- Young people choose to participate
- Youth work must build from where young people are
- Youth work recognises the young person and the youth worker as partners in a learning process

This response is informed by YouthLink Scotland members, and we support the submissions made by individual members of YouthLink Scotland. We would be happy to speak with the committee further regarding this matter and to represent the views of the youth work sector.

### **Question 1: How has your work supported the educational attainment of children and young people? What has worked well and what barriers have there been to success?**

Youth work is taking place in many of Scotland's primary and secondary schools: supporting vulnerable young people, providing an alternative curriculum, enhancing learning through youth awards, providing opportunities for achievement, intervening at times of transition, and in developing the young workforce. YouthLink Scotland believes that youth work can support the closing of the educational attainment gap in [5 ways](#)<sup>1</sup>:

- Increases social and emotional wellbeing
- Supports targeted approaches to literacy and numeracy
- Gain qualifications and skills for employability
- Differentiated support
- Engaging beyond the school

The diversity within the youth work sector makes us well placed to respond to local need and priorities – we have within our membership a range of organisations providing specialisms in, for example: outdoor learning, equalities, accredited learning, youth achievement, youth participation, mental health, mentoring, advocacy, and employability. Irrespective of which organisation or which approach is being taken the commonality of 'what works' is based on effective and trusting relationships between the youth work organisation and the school leadership team. We would direct you to the evidence submissions of our individual members to understand what works at a programme delivery level.

To profile just a few examples for the committee – we have included case studies of youth workers working to close the attainment gap. These three examples were all finalists in the recent YouthLink Scotland, National Youth Work Awards. The first two examples show the importance of personalised and tailored support for young people who

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<sup>1</sup> YouthLink Scotland (2017) 5 Ways Youth Work is Closing the Attainment Gap, YouthLink Scotland: Edinburgh

are experiencing difficulties learning; through poor attendance and undiagnosed supported needs. The role of the youth worker in these examples is to deliver sustained and committed relationships with young people, which are led by the young person and which meet their needs. In these circumstances, the young people went on to attain qualifications and to achieve in learning and volunteering. In the third example, characterised by the essential and definitive features of youth work has delivered achievement outcomes for young people, in particular The Duke of Edinburgh's Award. We would draw the committee's attention to the evidence submitted by The Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scotland and the Youth Awards Network of the value of achievement awards. We would also ask the committee to note [our response<sup>2</sup>](#) to the Scottish Government's consultation on measuring the attainment gap.

#### **Prince's Trust Scotland – Achieve In-Centre**

Youth worker, Katie has supported Jay, a pupil at a Glasgow secondary school. Just over a year ago Jay's attendance at school was below 80% and she spent most of her time drinking. *"I hated looking at myself in the mirror. I hated myself full stop. My dad committed suicide when I was younger, and it affected my mental health. I would get angry and totally flip out and then cry, but I didn't know why. It affected every part of my life. I felt like I didn't fit, so I stopped trying."*

Jay was persuaded by her school to attend **Achieve In-centre**, a personal development programme that helps young people reach their potential through practical, activity-based learning. *"I went to Achieve for six weeks and was completely out of my comfort zone, but it was fun. It helped me manage my feelings and talk about my past, and that felt really good."* Within two weeks, Jay was given the opportunity to go back to school and, for the first time, she enjoyed it. *"I changed my whole lifestyle. I moved away from bad friendships, I went back to school and I've been accepted on an access course that will help me become a care worker, which is what I want to be. Katie made me believe in myself. I'd never been able to do that before."*

#### **East Ayrshire Council - Vibrant Communities Youth Work Team**

Youth worker, Heather, became the key community worker to Auchinleck Academy, she was asked to support a care experienced young person who is also a school refuser and who was in S3 to return to school. This pupil had stopped attending school after the first week of first year and refused to return to the school building and engage in education. The young person suffered with extremely high levels of anxiety and social and emotional and social difficulties.

Heather began to build a rapport with the young person, meeting him in the community centre one afternoon a week. Building his trust and being a real support for him, someone who he can talk to and rely on to be there. Heather began to notice his struggles with social situations, and how he would withdraw eye contact and from conversation. Heather's professional judgment enabled her to discuss with the school and the young person the possibility of having him assessed for Autism, this led to an assessment of being on the autistic spectrum. This condition had been missed for many years and only now would he be able to have the support he needed.

Over the next year, Heather has supported him to become more confident and improve his self-esteem. Heather continued to support him at the community centre and worked with him to complete coursework for National Qualifications. Although never returning to school, the young person with the help of Heather has changed his future path way. Now with qualifications and an understanding of how to overcome his difficulties he has moved on to a work placement with the Dogs Trust.

#### **Renfrewshire Council Outdoor Learning Team**

The outdoor learning team have really pushed the boundaries with young people who often struggle to cope within a school environment. The team provide an alternative learning environment through the provision of a "classroom without walls" young people achieve meaningful and positive outcomes as a result. The young people develop real self-esteem and self belief through learning fairly complex sets of skills and knowledge around bush-craft and survival skills.

The outdoor classroom is being experienced by six secondary schools in the authority and there is a growing demand for this approach because it is seen to be so effective at helping young people to achieve in alternative settings. This has included young people taking on new challenges such as starting a Bronze Duke of Edinburgh's

<sup>2</sup> YouthLink Scotland (2017), Consultation on Measuring the Attainment Gap and Milestones Towards Closing It: Response by YouthLink Scotland. YouthLink Scotland: Edinburgh

Award or by improving attendance and engagement within the wider school community. The team focus their efforts on ensuring that young people are given lots of opportunity to participate at a level which is appropriate to their learning needs. Team members' belief in encouraging young people to develop from their individual starting point; and are dedicated to working without prejudice and with great patience. They are motivated by providing a really interesting and nurturing environment where young people can achieve in an alternative learning setting.

**Question 2: Are there any services that you / your organisation has not been able to provide that you believe would work?**

YouthLink Scotland believes that youth work can make a meaningful impact on 'summer learning loss' and 'holiday hunger'. A recent report<sup>3</sup> by RAND education in America "Make Summer Count" demonstrated that lower income groups suffer disproportionately by missing the summer learning opportunities their peers have. In short, the attainment gap widens over the summer. The report found that holiday learning provision worked best when involving community organisations in their delivery. It is our view that youth work organisations are well placed to deliver this – and to expand existing residential and day programmes that exist, ensuring that those young people experiencing poverty can be included at no cost and without stigma.

We have welcomed the increased recognition of youth work, informal learning, and community learning and development within recent policy drivers for education; however we still believe there is more to be done and we would draw attention to the [National Youth Work Outcomes](#) which have been developed by our sector. These outcomes bring clarity and consistency to the youth work offer and provides a useful framework for communicating youth work's impact with partners in schools. We would seek support from Scottish Government and Education Scotland to explore how this framework is acknowledged in contemporary education policy.

**Question 3: If you work with schools/local authorities/others to address school attainment and wider achievement, what makes collaboration on this issue easy/difficult?**

Our members tell us that successful collaboration comes when:

- There are opportunities for joint and shared planning; and a clear understanding of the need of the learners, school or community
- Youth work programmes are evaluated and there is evidence of impact
- Youth workers are trusted partners in the life and ethos of the school; and where their professional identity is understood and valued
- There is strong and effective school leadership which values and welcomes partnership working with local authority youth services or third sector youth work organisations

One of our member organisations, Youth Scotland, conducted research with community based youth work organisations regarding their experience of engaging schools for the delivery of Pupil Equity Funds; and in their report a youth worker said:

*"We found it a very welcoming approach from our local high school because of our track record of achievement with them in the past and the fact the school know we work well with those young people who are being excluded or within the poverty deciles that the school welcome a youth work approach as they see that we have positive relationships with a lot of the young people they struggle to engage with."*

The experience of successful youth work and school partnerships for delivery of Pupil Equity Funds and Scottish Attainment Challenge is not without its difficulties and our members regularly tell us of their frustrations and barriers they face.

- **Not being known** – if youth work organisations do not have established working relationships within the community it is much more difficult for their services to be engaged to support pupils. This is particularly challenging for national youth organisations; who would have previously engaged with the local authority to

<sup>3</sup> Sloan Mccombs et al. (2011) *Making Summer Count: how summer programs can boost children's learning*

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Making-Summer-Count-How-Summer-Programs-Can-Boost-Childrens-Learning.pdf>

establish a relationship/service level agreement and set out their youth work offer; this is increasingly now required to take place at school level and most national third sector youth work organisations simply do not have the capacity to deliver this.

- We are also hearing anecdotally that some Headteachers are **wary of third sector organisations**, and believe that they are on a 'sales pitch' - to counter this we have worked with Education Scotland, Scottish Government and other national intermediaries to produce [national guidance](#), which states:  
*"The third sector has experience in delivering projects which address each of the three priorities identified for the Scottish Attainment Challenge but is particularly well placed to support improvements to health and well-being and to improve employability skills and school leaver destinations."*
- Lack of transparency of how schools publish their **School Improvement Plans**. Schools are not required to publish their School Improvement Plans in any consistent way – this makes it difficult for youth work organisations to find out what the attainment needs of the school is, and to tailor a programme of support which would meet learners' needs.
- Lack of awareness by other educationalists of **youth work's professional values** and contribution that a youth worker can have on the ethos of the school. Many head teachers do not know what a youth worker does, or the skills and approach they could bring to their school. We know there is a shortage of teachers and schools are having difficulties in recruiting – we believe that in some circumstance they could appoint a suitably qualified Youth Worker – particularly for matters related to attendance, achievement and community partnerships. We would welcome further political and senior strategic leadership which explicitly recognises and values the professional skills and competences of youth workers as non formal educators.

#### **Question 4: What else could be done to support the attainment /achievement of children and young people from families affected by poverty?**

YouthLink Scotland would welcome further opportunities and financial resources for **community based learning** (alternative provision, evening, weekends, and during school holidays) for young people to be supported to both attain and achieve. Youth work organisations are well placed to deliver this.

YouthLink Scotland would welcome financial investment and support for **evaluating and researching youth work's impact on closing the attainment gap**. We currently have a range of programme specific evaluations, and we would value the opportunity for investment to further our national research and evidence base.

Our members have told us that the young people that they work with, who are living in poverty, need **more financial support**. The cost of school uniform, school excursion, menstrual hygiene products, curricular costs, textbook costs, and travel to and from school etc. are impacting on their ability to achieve and attain. Ways in which we believe this could be addressed is through:

- Increase in the value of Education Maintenance Allowance
- Increased value and frequency of payment for the School Clothing Grant
- Free menstrual hygiene products in schools and community settings
- Reducing the costs of the school day

We would also welcome increased **access to school and community premises for learners 'out of hours'** where learners can get access to reliable internet connection and IT equipment. We cannot assume that young people living in poverty have **digital access**; and increasingly class content, advice and support is being communicated via digital education platforms and social media.

Ultimately, we believe that the **root causes of poverty** must be addressed – as education alone will not be able to close the gap.

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