The Covid-19 Crisis

Impact on Youth Work and Young People

A survey of Scotland's Youth Work Sector Leaders

May 2020
Our backdrop to the pandemic

Youth work is one of the most powerful community assets we have to help us create a better society in Scotland. It builds confidence and boosts educational attainment. It aids personal development and helps young people manage personal, social and formal relationships. It promotes volunteering, lowers youth offending rates and significantly reduces the likelihood of poor mental health.

In these extremely uncertain and challenging times, all of us in the youth work sector are working together to find new ways of supporting many young people who now find themselves isolated, with no face-to-face youth work provision.

Our survey report of Scotland’s Youth Work Sector Leaders shows youth work organisations rising to the challenge of Covid-19. It is clear the sector has serious concerns about life after lockdown. Many talk of a looming youth mental health crisis, as well as budgets and services being cut, cuts that would have an immense societal and human cost, as young people will need to access these services more than ever.

We recently partnered with the Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot to survey young people on the impact Covid-19 was having on their lives. The findings echo much of what we hear from youth workers across Scotland. Many young people are anxious about what life is like now, what life will be like post lockdown, and the impact of social isolation on their mental health and wellbeing. It’s not just the actions we take now as a society that will be crucial, young people deserve a commitment to the continuity of the services that support them post Covid-19. Read the full #LockdownLowdown report.
The detrimental effects of this pandemic on young people come at a time when budgets for youth work services have already been shrinking overall every year. Unison’s recent report ‘Youth Services at Breaking Point’ showed spending in Scotland had been cut by over £11m in the last three years alone. This report shows the continued trend of youth work cuts across Scotland’s local authorities. In Unison’s 2016 ‘Scotland’s Damage’ report, 83% of youth workers who responded to that survey said they had experienced cuts to budgets since 2010.

YouthLink Scotland’s own member survey from June 2019 also showed a funding crisis in the sector. 70% of youth workers who responded said their budgets had decreased in the last three years, with 50% saying they had experienced severe cuts to funding.

Over the last few weeks we have seen some innovative and creative solutions as the sector has begun to reposition its support to young people through digital youth work services. However, new investment is required to provide the adequate infrastructure, training and capacity to do this safely and effectively.

We are asking politicians and society to stand with us during this unprecedented period in our nation’s history, to support the youth work sector, many of whom are on the frontline, delivering food and caring for some of the most vulnerable in our society.
Executive Summary

The Covid-19 Crisis - A survey of Scotland’s Youth Work Sector Leaders

At the end of March, YouthLink Scotland surveyed our nation’s Youth Work Sector Leaders on the impact of Covid-19 and their immediate response to the pandemic. The respondents to the survey represent youth work organisations and services across the country, both voluntary and statutory, including all 32 local authorities. Scotland’s Youth Work Sector works with around 350,000 young people with a paid and volunteer workforce of 80,000.

The stats

- 70% believe there will be cuts to youth work services and budgets post Covid-19
- 92% have moved their youth work services online
- 60% of local authority youth work services are struggling with digital barriers in connecting with young people

- £20.5 million cuts to national voluntary youth work organisations
- Youth work leaders believe there will be detrimental impact on young people’s mental health because of lockdown
The issues

Immediate funding
Both national and local government have a huge role to play to ensure the continued viability of youth work services across Scotland. This includes ensuring the continuity of grants throughout Covid-19 and providing additional financial support where required as services are adapted to meet the need of Scotland’s young people. All youth work organisations, national and local must be able to access emergency funding.

Digital barriers
Almost two thirds of youth workers working for councils are facing digital barriers in trying to connect in with young people. The problem is created by a range of factors, from corporate policy decisions, where councils are preventing staff from using relevant platforms where youth workers can connect with young people, through to poor IT infrastructure and the issue of data poverty, with young people not having access to smart phones, laptops and/or connectivity. The decision to prevent council staff from using Zoom and other online platforms, for example, has been particularly damaging to efforts to engage with young people online. Voluntary organisations have had more freedom to make changes, but require capital resources, training and extra staffing capacity to invest in this. Furloughing staff due to projected income loss has further limited capacity.

Mental health
Serious concerns were raised about the medium to long-term impact of the lockdown. Many talked of a potential youth mental health crisis, the scale of which we have never seen, and the crucial need to find solutions to mitigate this.

Cuts to services
Our members agree that post Covid-19, young people must have continuity of youth work services. There will be greater demand for these services, with many young people adversely affected by months of isolation. Their collective concern is that any future cuts to youth work budgets, at a time when the sector will be a lifeline for young people, will have a seriously detrimental effect, on young people, their education and mental wellbeing. A lack of investment in youth work as a sector that prevents and mitigates against such negative outcomes will also result in additional costs to local authorities down the line.
Adapting to Covid-19 – The youth work response

How many have moved their youth work services online?

• 92% are endeavouring to offer online services of some kind (including email, phone, social media, creating online youth groups and one-to-one support)

Summary of points

• Minimal face-to-face provision: staff that are not furloughed are now working remotely from home

• Continuing to work with young people through digital platforms and trying to maintain support/relationships under very difficult circumstances

• Youth workers have been delivering food banks, coordinating and supporting community hubs; promoting volunteering; staffing residential care settings; repositioning services to provide digital learning and guidance; connecting with vulnerable children and young people and providing one-to-one support

• Uniformed organisations like Girlguiding Scotland and Scouts Scotland developing ‘at home’ resources. Local authorities such as Dumfries and Galloway have provided isolation activity packs for young people
“After having to stop all our face-to-face activities in March, it was inspiring to see how our volunteer BB leaders responded as we explored how to continue to provide support and learning opportunities to young people. At the moment we have to work differently to how the Boys’ Brigade has worked in our 136 years in Scotland. But whether online through our new BBatHome programme or - hopefully again soon - our face-to-face activities, we will continue to provide young people with opportunities to learn, grow and discover.”

John Sharpe, Director, The Boys’ Brigade Scotland

“We have worked with young people and staff to develop Isolation Packs, to make sure that all young people could get access to resources and not just those with access to digital. It was no easy task adapting a 100% frontline service to an online service overnight however, the feedback has been positive but it’s a temporary solution while going through this current situation.

It’s important we ensure the poverty gap doesn’t widen further for our most disadvantaged young people and that means ensuring that digital youth work post Covid-19 is not seen as a replacement for our frontline youth work services. Youth work will be key in supporting young people to re-socialise at the other side of this and ensuring that they are supported in the loss that they have experienced during this pandemic.”

Mark Molloy, Youth Work Services Manager, Dumfries and Galloway Council
“As a charity we’ve been quick to move all of our services online. We’re focusing on supporting LGBT young people’s mental health and ensuring they stay connected and able to cope with isolation. We’re bringing forward launch of a digital community platform using Discord and Moodle. That’s being tested by our youth groups right now and will connect LGBT young people across Scotland. It’s not without challenges and young people’s access to the internet is certainly one for concern.”

Jane Griffin, Head of Partnerships, LGBT Youth Scotland

“The biggest adaptation has been to focus more on online delivery, seeking young people’s feedback on the best way forward and what content they are looking for. We need to adapt further in terms of engaging those who do not have access to online support or who do not wish to access support that way. Youth workers are being asked to assist with other critical service delivery areas, utilising their broad set of skills, knowledge and experience across the workforce.”

Heather McPherson, Inverclyde Council Youth Work Services
IT challenges isolating young people

- In total 43% mention digital barriers
- Across the voluntary sector, 22% reported experiencing digital barriers
- In local authorities, 59% have serious barriers in connecting with young people online

Summary of points

- Digital infrastructure and capacity in a vast majority of local authorities means it is difficult to successfully migrate youth work online to ensure the right support is there for young people
- A number of councils are preventing access to social media and other digital platforms or putting tight restrictions on what platforms youth workers can access, which is undermining vital connections with young people
- Staff in some places have no access to devices to work from home or reach out to young people
- Data poverty for young people with no access to IT, mobiles and Wi-Fi a serious issue of concern for many youth workers
“Reaching out for mental health help and support can be difficult for young people under usual circumstances, not being able to identify quality and accessible sources of support can lead to worsening outcomes. Young people are being advised to stay at home and stay safe, however for some home is not a safe environment. For others, a lack of a reliable internet connection and access to connected devices can mean young people are at risk of becoming isolated and less likely to seek and secure support. The youth work sector is also experiencing limitations due to the resource and funding implications of connectivity.”

Laura Sharpe, Education and Young People Manager, SeeMe Scotland

“Negative impact for all young people with some councils not even having the IT infrastructure which would allow youth work organisations and services to connect online. Increased isolation for young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and youth work is their lifeline. Increased issues with youth mental health and young people not able to access IT facilities and equipment.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager – Central Scotland

“Technology! We are not equipped sufficiently in the public sector to work outwith council buildings and networks. This means we are not as responsive to emerging needs of our young people.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager – East of Scotland
“This Covid-19 catastrophe has highlighted very acutely the deficiencies in ICT. The poor quality of hardware, devices and phones for too many workers, even a lack of access to council infrastructure. There are also limitations of access to software and apps, in particular, the more young person orientated social media platforms, as well as the quality of broadband and wifi.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager – Rural Scotland

“Difficulties with young people being able to access appropriate digital resources to allow them to participate in planned activities. There are challenges around organisational IT restrictions on software, internet usage and platforms.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager – West of Scotland

“This pandemic has exacerbated an already challenging situation for many local authority youth work services, with youth workers restricted by corporate policy around IT and digital platforms. Local authorities are unable to fully commit to engaging young people online. Constrained by the platforms we can use and the lack of investment in infrastructure. Councils across Scotland need to develop the skills and confidence to think differently about where young people are, what they are looking for and how they want to engage. It was an issue before Covid-19 but it has now become a very serious one, with youth workers struggling to provide the online support to young people they require, at a time, when they need it the most.”

Ross Martin, Chair of Scotland’s Local Authority Youth Work Manager’s Network
Impact on young people

Youth work leaders believe young people’s mental health will be detrimentally affected, both during and post lockdown.

In our recent report Lockdown Lowdown, in partnership with Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament, almost two fifths (39%) of young people stated that they felt moderately or extremely concerned about their own mental wellbeing.

Summary of points:

- Increased issues for young people with social isolation, mental health, anxiety, unsafe home environments, loss of learning and social interaction.
- Reduced access to youth work provision, including outdoor activities, safe spaces and contact with trusted professional youth workers will impact on young people’s physical and mental health.
- Increased demand on services long-term in respect of large scale issues with mental health and social isolation.
- The effects of Covid-19 might mean a refocus away from services such as youth work to other areas, resulting in young people having less support.
“As a youth work services provider, we are particularly concerned about the impact of isolation on young people’s mental health. There are current campaigns to encourage young people to keep in touch with friends etc via social media/telephone etc. Not all young people have access to these tools and therefore are effectively cut off from the outside world. Young people’s mental health services are already overwhelmed by the demand placed on them. The impact of Covid-19 will only exacerbate this, leaving young people without adequate information, support and guidance. We are working hard to ensure young people have access to high quality information, advice or guidance.”

Heather McPherson, Inverclyde Council Youth Work Services

“Young people need the vital support of youth workers, especially in these uncertain and worrying times, but they also need to know that we will be there for them when we come out of lockdown. The youth work sector will be an essential partner as we seek to recover from the economic and societal fallout of Covid-19, and any prospect of further cuts to youth work funding would have a direct impact on young people. It is crucial that our sector, key to that recovery, has the proper funding in place to support all of our young people.”

Kerry Reilly, CEO YMCA Scotland
“We are concerned about the future for young people across Scotland. Having enough suitable safe spaces for them to meet trusted and supportive adults was a concern before Covid-19. That space to engage and navigate growing up in Scotland will become more crucial as lockdown restrictions are eased. These are very difficult times for our young people, a time when youth work is and will be needed more than ever. The youth work sector, both voluntary and local authority must be properly funded to build and maintain their services. With the spectre of future funding cuts, affecting the young people who require our support, we must afford parity of esteem to youth work alongside formal education.”

Chair of the National Voluntary Youth Work Organisations and CEO of Girlguiding Scotland, Denise Spence

“Looking to the aftermath of the situation, we need to be not only focusing on the current situation, but towards the trauma that young people are facing. When we come out of our burrows what will be there to greet or support the young people. Are we expecting a return to normality?”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager, East of Scotland
“Mental health issues are prevalent across our services supporting 2,100 of the most vulnerable families in Scotland, across 28 local authority areas. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated mental health difficulties caused by loneliness, isolation, unsuitable living arrangements and accommodation.

This increasing vulnerability manifests itself in various ways for children and young people with anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm and increased substance misuse. Third sector and youth work organisations require longer-term investment to support innovative ways to address existing and emerging needs.”

Barnardo’s Scotland – Children’s Services

“In these unprecedented and rapidly changing times, young people need investment in youth work to ensure their life opportunities are not at risk. Youth work is essential to enable organisations like the Scottish Youth Parliament to develop young people’s skills and self-confidence. Post-Covid-19, youth work becomes even more important to battle the worsened mental health epidemic young people are facing.

Scotland’s young people want decision-makers to allocate more funding and opportunities to access youth work. This should be taken into consideration when developing youth work budgets post-Covid-19.”

Sarah Quinn MSYP, Scottish Youth Parliament Trustee
Impact on youth work sector

Scotland’s National Voluntary Youth Work organisations are facing an income loss of at least £20.5 million this year.

In addition 70% of the whole sector believe there will also be significant cuts to youth work budgets and services post Covid-19.

Summary of points

- Funding priority post Covid-19 may not include youth work as budgets are stretched further, although youth workers will be critical as more young people will require mental health support and a trusted adult.

- Losing valuable momentum with isolated and vulnerable young people, will take a lot of resource to gain back ground.

- Many organisations could now close as their sustainability was already precarious, with services already impacted by cuts over the last few years.

- A perfect storm of a youth mental health crisis coupled with further cuts to services and centres closed.
“These figures are calculated on losses up to the end of August only, so would be significantly worse if current situation goes beyond that. Business interest loss £1.5m, with a loss of £200,000 in fundraising.”

Scouts Scotland

“All income streams are affected and charities cannot continue to spend down reserves over an open-ended period. The UK Government’s furlough scheme will protect roles, however, this incentivises us to take staff off the front-line at a time when need is escalating. While our employment, training and skills services continue to deliver, all be it in a different way, it is critical that funding models and compliance arrangements match the agile and flexible response of charities, to keep youth workers on the frontline.”

Craig Wilson, Senior Head of Operations, The Prince’s Trust

“The economic fall out from this pandemic could result in further and severe cuts to youth work funding.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager, East of Scotland
“Funding to youth work organisations has been progressively cut, year on year. We are already seeing the detrimental effect on young people’s mental health caused by the lockdown and anticipate a massive increase in demand for our services in the very near future. A lack of funding right now is making it impossible for us to build the capacity we need to address this need in the months and years to come.”

David Brackenridge, CEO, Venture Scotland

“This unprecedented period could mean some organisations and youth centres closing permanently. Funding has already been on a knife edge and it could mean the further downgrading of youth work as a priority, as councils post Covid-19 seek to make further cuts.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager, Central Scotland

“The pressures on community-based youth work have grown significantly under years of austerity. Now, facing the unprecedented changes to life that the Covid-19 pandemic has wrought on our communities and young people, we are faced with a stark choice: invest in the essential work that is local youth work or it will suffer and so will the health and wellbeing of our young people.”

Ian McLaughlan, Chief Executive of Youth Scotland
“Many community organisations will suffer financially due to this crisis, with so many assets in community member’s hands, this will mean closures to centres and projects. Groups will require additional support to ensure they can rebuild, given the many cuts in the CLD sector recently this will put further strain on staff teams.”

Local Authority Youth Work Manager, West of Scotland
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#YouthWorkChangesLives

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