Initial Report

Policy Convention on a Right to Youth Work in Scotland
Introduction

On September 16, 2021, almost 200 delegates signed up for YouthLink Scotland’s Policy Convention on a Right to Youth Work for all Scotland’s young people.

Attendees arrived mainly from across the youth work industry, the children’s sector, and formal education. Delegates included policy professionals from different areas of public life and Scottish Government civil servants.

Peppered throughout the webinar, the audience witnessed youth work in action via videos around the theme of a right to youth work practice from young people and youth work leaders. These were very well received. As well as energising people, they helped to connect policy discussion with essential youth work delivery. This included inputs from YMCA Tayside, Perth and Kinross Council and Gannochy Trust, KYTHE youth group in Kinross, St Francis Primary & Jack Kane Centre, Venture Trust and Citadel Youth Centre in Edinburgh.

It was a pleasure to welcome speakers from Scotland, England, Malta and Australia. Speakers hailed from different parts of public policy life. They shared a commitment to youth work, which helped enormously to create a varied and international feel for the day.

A series of open and closed polls were held, including some basic questions on how delegates would describe youth work in Scotland.

How would you describe youth work in Scotland?
A more detailed report of the polling will follow soon. In the meantime, please find the themes emerging from the speaker inputs within.
Key Themes Emerging From Speakers

YouthLink Scotland’s Chief Executive, Tim Frew, welcomed delegates. Mr Frew stated that “young people tell us over and over again that they want more youth work” and that “all roads lead to the question of a right to youth work”. He repeated the case that the way to do this is “through long term funding”, a point made strongly in the online group chat throughout the day.
Event Chair, Catch the Light, Ian McDonald highlighted the “one truth” that we all want to make rights real for young people, as part of an excellent youth work and UNCRC framing session. The “two pillars” – access for all young people, backed up by quality youth work. The “three building blocks” – young people choose to participate, young people and youth workers work in partnership, builds from where young people are. He concluded, “youth work is human rights work” and a right to the practice can “lead to a better future for our young people”.

Patrick Harvie Co-leader of the Scottish Greens connected quickly with the audience as he relayed his story from being a youth worker in Glasgow and the power of the group at establishing their own youth group for lesbian and gay people. Patrick was the first youth worker attached to this organisation. He mentioned the challenge of always finding the “next funding”. He stated, “informal education and youth work is at its best creating empowering environments for young people to grow”. In particular, he believes creating spaces for young people in their communities can help them share their fears and concerns around climate anxiety. The consensus among Scottish Government colleagues about addressing mental health support was acknowledged. However, the Scottish Greens believe there is a “need to build on this consensus through community work” and a right to youth work can help achieve this
aim. They are committed to delivering their manifesto promise of a right to youth work opportunities for Scotland’s young people.

**Director of Together (SACR), Juliet Harris**, a prominent and instrumental figure in the incorporation of UNCRC into Scots Law, talked easily to the “power of youth work to bring life changing experiences to young people and the realisation of their rights”. The organisation which represents close to 500 members, recognises that budget is needed to take forward children and young people’s rights and that “youth work can help young people realise their rights and enable them to create change in their own lives”. Crucially, “we need to continue to involve young people around the youth work they need”. She closed by saying the upcoming National Youth Work Strategy (2021-2026) is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to showcase the importance of youth work.
Chief Executive of Agenzija Żgħazagh (Malta), Miriam Teuma had a dream. That dream was a “right to youth work”. In 2015 she realised that dream, as Malta successfully wrote a right to the practice into law via the Youth Work Profession Act. While there was excitement among delegates about the possibility of doing the same in Scotland, some challenges were highlighted, such as the key role of the 1000s of volunteer youth workers in Scotland and the need for them to be included in any such measure. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and Youth Strategy COE (2030) prioritises youth work. Miriam believes if we focus on the vision that unites us and with “commitment, passion, and intuition” then “mountains can be moved”.

Chair of the Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Worker Associations, Emeritus Professor Robyn Broadbent and Jasmine Ryan focused on the professionalisation of youth work, developing youth work education in the universities, putting resources in developing professional youth work, advancing partnerships across Europe, and continuing to develop an evidence base in support of youth work. She was clear on the necessity of the commonwealth code of ethical practice and that youth work must
be based on a human rights framework. One of the fundamental requirements she and Jasmine see as priority, is for “youth work to be seen a distinct profession” and that significant investment in youth work infrastructure will follow naturally.

Dr Marion Allison, The CLD Standards Council Scotland drew attention to CLD at helping people identify collective goals. She focused on action research pedagogy and values that underpin CLD, which connect to UNCRC, highlighting, “it’s about transformation and promoting rights” and every young person has the right to “empowerment” – a fundamental value within CLD. The presentation crystallised around collaboration between volunteers and paid staff. She stated, “we need everybody”. Marion however noted the tension within a system that gives significant responsibility to volunteers who could arguably be getting paid for the work they do. Similar to the other presenters she spoke of the need for proper and continued investment as “youth work is the jewel in the crown of education”.

Clontarf Foundation (Australia), Project leader, Brendan Maher showed how the Clontarf Foundation improves the education, self-esteem, life skills and employment prospects of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. The project focuses on addressing inequality and giving young men opportunities they otherwise would not have. Brendan spoke passionately about the “youth work approach as a key component of the group’s delivery”, without which they would be unable to connect properly. The project is increasing in number throughout schools in Australia and uses sport as a linchpin to connect and advance the soft and vocational skills of the young men. He closed by saying “building self-esteem and confidence comes from a broad education - not maths and English”.

Children and Young People’s Centre for Justice (CYCJ), Interim Director, Fiona Dyer focused on the rights of children and young people who offend and explored participation and engagement, policy development and research and the need to provide key relationships between young people and adults at all stages of the criminal justice process. She commented that “children are not mini adults and so they need specific support”, naming specific projects such as “Youth Just Us” - working alongside young people 16-25 who are care and justice experienced. Fiona reiterated the need to take an inclusive approach, as the ultimate method for prevention.

National Youth Agency (England), Chief Executive, Leigh Middleton believes all young people throughout the UK deserve a right to youth work. He was excited by the title of the convention. Far more young people need youth work support, particularly due to COVID19. It solidifies the National Youth Agency’s resolve, that when it comes to investing in young people, the youth work approach is the right approach. They have a ten-year vision to 2030 making a “firm commitment to young people on increasing youth work provision”. However, “time is running out”. He spoke to the scatter gun picture of investment across the country and how we “must put young people in charge”. He echoed the general consensus of the day that we need more qualified youth work professionals. He went on to say there is great value in volunteers at ensuring the safe delivery of youth work. The Youth Covenant pledges that young people have a right to youth work. He believes a right to youth work would help “hold the system accountable”.
Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), Policy Officer, Eireann McAuley spoke clearly about her youth work journey, her authenticity resonating very well with the audience. Youth work gave her “the tools to use her voice and youth workers were stable people who helped her feel loved”. She went as far to say she would not be speaking to the convention without her youth workers. She repeated the STUC position that they are supportive of a right to youth work practice. However, she cautioned that there are policy decisions that could be taken on poverty and inequality, stating “It is not one or the other”. She went on, “decision makers should be showing that young people are the future – through properly resourcing and funding and right now”.

Lead Clinician for Youth Navigator in NHS Lothian, Dr Alison McLuckie believes the time is ripe for a right to youth work, particularly as incorporation of UNCRC into Scots Laws sets us on a path of “righting some wrongs” and is in keeping with the personalised approach to patient care. “One trusted adult is vital for good social outcomes for young people and healthcare is an important place to engage with young people and youth workers are an important part”. She went on to speak of the success of the Youth Navigator Programme, “providing relatable support from youth workers, where there is no time limit on support and they can be helped in their community”. Her presentation highlighted that youth workers have been embedded in medical services for a long time. However, “now is time to strengthen partnerships” if we want to get it right for even more young people.

YouthLink Scotland, Policy and Research Manager, Kevin Kane spoke to the “positive movement feel” of the day. He finished with a rallying cry to the assembled. Tasking them with a challenge “to do one thing when you leave here today, either personally, or within your organisation to further the discussion, and take action on a right to youth work”. He went on, “then we will be another step closer to achieving a right to youth work practice for all Scotland’s young people”.
Thank you to all the speakers who gave up their time and all the attendees for such informed and enthusiastic engagement throughout the day. We look to forward to working with you all again soon!

Special thanks to key organisers for the event. Policy convention planning group members, Kevin Kane, Amy Calder, Susan Symington, Eddie Nisbet, Tila McDonald, Alana Black, Vicky Wilson, Shirley Crawley, Mike Strang, event Chair, Ian McDonald, and other key YouthLink Scotland staff for their continued support in the lead up to and on the day of the policy convention.

ENDS

EDITOR’S NOTES

For more information on the policy convention, please contact YouthLink Scotland’s Policy and Research Manager, Kevin Kane, on kkane@youthlinkscotland.org