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A study into the current climate change policies of the youth work
sector in Scotland

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Executive Summary

Both young people and youth workers recently raised climate change and environmental issues as priority areas during the consultation period of the new National Youth Work Strategy 2021-2025 and, as seen from the increase in youth climate activism over recent years, it is clear that climate change is of key importance to young people. However, at present, there is very little research into the role that young people play in tackling climate change and lack of a centralised strategy or approach from the youth work sector. While some in the sector are very clear with their aims of protecting the planet, others appear to mention the issues infrequently, although there may be several factors for this, such as a lack of climate literacy, funding, or time. Thus, this research sought to examine the current state of environmental policy and action to address climate change within the youth work sector, before exploring the possible opportunities that can be taken advantage of and barriers that may hinder progress in future environmental policy development.

Literature review

The literature review primarily explored research focused on increasing climate activism in young people and on the impact that youth work has had in previous scenarios. On climate activism, the literature reviewed explored how campaigns were not only highlighting environmental issues, but also bringing together notions of solidarity, anti-oppression, and climate justice in a shift towards intersectionality led by young people. It also highlighted the benefits of cross-generational protest, the increased role of technology, child-to-parent learning, and the way in which young people perceive climate change. On the impact of youth work, the literature reviewed looked at youth perceptions of youth work in increasing social capital, including giving them a sense of empowerment and helping them to develop new soft skills. It also highlighted how youth work was considered as an equally important source of support to college-based FE by many young people and that further work is needed to ensure that young people are empowered to create wider community action and youth-led change.

Methodology

Research was conducted in the form of semi-structured solo and group interviews with both young people and youth workers. A total of 11 participants were interviewed – 5 youth workers and 6 young people. The five youth workers came from a national organisation, a rural local organisation, and two local authorities – one rural and one urban. The six young people came from a national organisation and a rural local authority – three from each. The recordings of interviews with participants were transcribed and anonymised. These transcriptions were then analysed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Key findings

The research presents four key findings. While all youth workers interviewed had some level of climate literacy, most did not feel particularly confident about this. Furthermore, there was also a clear difference in the way that information about climate change was sought between

youth workers and young people. All youth workers interviewed referred to resources related to climate literacy that they were aware of, although there was a feeling that these were sometimes hard to find or not well joined up. While the youth workers primarily referred to learning from specific climate-focused youth work resources, the young people interviewed focused much more on easily accessible online media and expressed frustration that school education did not emphasise the urgency of climate change.

The third key finding is that, while there are expected funding barriers to creating change, another issue that youth workers face is time. Youth workers noted the short timeframe in which they had to work with young people, where other issues, such as mental health or difficulties at school, were prioritised over climate change. They also mentioned difficulties related to training, in that many youth workers did not have the time to undertake additional training in climate literacy on top of a growing pile of other issues that are often handed to the youth work sector.

Finally, in terms of the future of environmental policies within the youth work sector, there was an emphasis on the need for a joined-up, collaborative approach across the sector, between both local authorities and organisations. All youth workers interviewed felt that the sector did have a responsibility to support young people in tackling climate change, alongside other institutions such as the Government or education system. Similarly, the young people interviewed felt that the youth work sector could play a role in further supporting education on climate change that the school system missed, such as education on justice or activism.

There were also additional barriers that were mentioned by some of the participants which seem important to mention separately. The first is that all young people interviewed showed a high level of awareness that choices to tackle climate change are not always accessible to all, although this does also suggest that there may be a lack of education around sustainable options. Furthermore, there was talk of eco anxiety by both youth workers and young people, as well as exhaustion from the pandemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions that were put in place as a result were also identified as a barrier by some of the participants.

Recommendations

All young people interviewed emphasised the importance of tackling climate change to them, with most stating that the youth work sector also had a responsibility to act. Nonetheless, the role of the youth work sector need not necessarily be solely focused on climate change, as other issues were also raised, such as mental health support with eco anxiety or learning how to make sustainable dietary choices. However, while this research has shown that there is a role for the youth work sector to play, there are also some issues that need to be addressed too. As expected, lack of funding was raised by all youth workers as an issue across their work. While it would certainly be beneficial to have increased funding directed at improving resources, this may not be feasible and therefore increasing the climate literacy of youth workers and addressing the time barrier have been raised as the most important within this study, with solutions that emphasise creativity and cross-sectoral cooperation being highlighted as the most valuable.

To better understand the implications of these findings, future studies could seek to explore how best to improve the climate literacy of the workforce within a limited timeframe, building on the success of Keep Scotland Beautiful resources that several participants mentioned. Furthermore, it is clear that cross-sectoral work could be beneficial by bringing in outside experts or promoting action against climate change through different lenses, such as creative ones. Therefore, future studies could also seek to explore the impact of youth work alongside contributions from actors such as schools or corporations, among others. YLS has already demonstrated successful cooperation in creating climate change toolkits for youth workers with Keep Scotland Beautiful. Replication of this success with other organisations and improved signposting of the resultant resources would be good.