

YouthLink Scotland response to Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps - The contribution of education to Scotland's Covid Recovery

Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of our sector. We are an organisation with a sharp focus on the needs of young people. Our approach is founded upon being ethical, equitable and non-discriminatory. We are an organisation that promotes learning, innovation and progressive thinking and we are committed to the highest standards of protection and safety for young people.

Vision

Our vision is for a nation that values its young people and their contribution to society, supported through key relationships with youth workers to achieve their potential. As the collective voice of the youth work sector, we represent their interests, policy and practice needs to local and national government. We achieve this by supporting the sector to demonstrate the impact and value of their work and by promoting a positive image of young people and youth work.

Response

1. A renewed focus on excellence and equity

We campaign for equality of access to high-quality youth work for all young people, supported by a workforce that is confident, skilled, well led and effective, while playing an essential role in delivering Scotland's national outcomes. As part of this process, we have been calling for significant reform of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). This should include including stronger recognition of youth work's integral role and a more equitable qualifications and assessment system, with youth awards further acknowledged as a valuable pathway to develop and demonstrate skills and achievements.

Youth work is part of the Scottish education system, designing and delivering CfE learning experiences for young people across communities, schools and colleges. As such, the sector shares the vision for excellence and equity outlined in the National Improvement Framework¹.

Youth work will continue to make an important contribution to the key priorities of:

- Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy;

¹ [Education: improvement framework and plan - 2021 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-improvement-framework-and-plan-2021/pages/11.aspx)

- Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people;
- Improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing;
- Improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people.

The report also identifies the importance of investing our “*time, hope and attention in their social development and educational achievements*”, and to ensuring this is underpinned by a rights-based approach. Ongoing collaboration with, and investment in, youth work, is required to take the holistic approach outlined to supporting and getting it right for every child and young person so they can thrive.

We acknowledge the detrimental impact of school closures on young people’s wellbeing and educational outcomes and that this was adversely experienced by vulnerable young people. Youth work played a crucial role in the delivery of emergency hubs and supporting the engagement and continued progression of young people throughout the coronavirus pandemic. We also know that the closure of spaces for youth work had a negative impact on young people². Despite significant investment to keep schools low-risk, open and welcoming environments, many young people still do not have access to safe spaces for youth work.

We look forward to working across the education system to deliver the implementation plan to take forward a whole system Education Recovery. This includes building on the success of The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund which is facilitating strong partnership across the education system and delivering effective, innovative and evidence-driven, approaches to achieving equity.

The investment to support and safeguard outdoor learning is also welcome. The Outdoor Education Recovery Fund, administered through YouthLink Scotland, is helping to provide high-quality outdoor educational experiences to support young people’s recovery. However, ongoing investment and focus will be required to embed the role of outdoor learning within a future-proofed curriculum.

YouthLink Scotland will continue to work closely with Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the youth work sector to enhance and improve collaborative approaches to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. We advise ongoing recognition of the role of youth work, in communities and in partnership with schools, to achieving equity, will help all local authorities to accelerate progress in tackling the poverty related attainment gap.

2. Health and Wellbeing

The report acknowledges the impact of the ‘Get into Summer’ offer, which focused on support for those children and young people most affected by the pandemic, with a specific focus on improving mental health and wellbeing. Youth work organisations

² <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6363/youth-work-during-the-pandemic-final.pdf>

played a key role in helping children and young people to recover from the pandemic and ultimately to be ready and able to learn in the new school year – helping to address learning loss and tackle food insecurity. Noted by, *“the invaluable contributions of our partners in local authorities, national and local third sector organisations and – crucially – the many people who work most closely with children and young people have been critical to the Programme’s success”*.

It was welcome that funds of £11.25m were distributed to local authorities to support their response to the pandemic’s impact on children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing and Youth Work Education Recovery Funding (YWERF) of £3m was been provided to support targeted youth work services to support children’s wellbeing and to engage with children in most need of support. Flexible provision targeting those not engaged in school and/or finding it hard to leave home, supporting health and wellbeing, and offering a hybrid online/offline youth work based approach (including digital services) has been a lifeline for many. It has been highlighted as an imperative throughout the coronavirus pandemic and a necessity for meaningful recovery³. However, youth work’s role must be fully recognised within the wider education system beyond crisis responding. Parity of esteem needs to mean parity of investment - now and in the long term. Therefore, commitment to investment in youth work infrastructure is required to meet the aims laid out in the education action plan.

3. Partnership and collaboration

We are encouraged to see acknowledgement that collaboration and a co-ordinated policy response will be crucial to supporting all children and young people’s progression in learning and achievement and to ensuring every individual has the same opportunity to succeed. It will be important to focus on how we build on the innovative and strong collaborations that emerged during the pandemic. This will ensure that going forward, these partnership approaches become embedded within the system - not simply seen as a go to when in crisis response mode.

The Covid-19 crisis has significantly highlighted the effective role of youth work and the benefit of all educational practitioners working together to bring about improvements to enhance student learning. This is illustrated by YouthLink Scotland’s Learning Through Lockdown report⁴, demonstrating *“how youth workers continued to engage with young people throughout lockdown, providing crisis support for the most vulnerable families and mitigating the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people’s mental health, learning and development”*. We know from speaking with hundreds of youth workers that this type of acknowledgement is necessary. However, there is an opportunity to follow up the credit shown to youth workers during the coronavirus pandemic by explicitly committing to investing in youth work within the action plan - as an essential partner to ensure that children and young people are present, participating, supported and achieving. As it stands, the action plan falls short in this regard.

³ [Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/youth-and-covid-19-response-recovery-and-resilience-2020-09/)

⁴ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5251/learning-through-lockdown.pdf>

For example, within the focus on parental and learner engagement, we know that many youth workers engaged holistically with families during the pandemic, supporting engagement and tackling food insecurity. The Scottish Government/YouthLink Scotland Food Insecurity Pilot⁵ evidences the impact of a youth work approach. We also support the ambition to ensure young people are heard and valued within the education system. Youth work plays a key role in facilitating youth voice and should be better recognised for their expertise and skills in this area.

Additionally, the report pays particular attention to investing in support for the education workforce. We agree that the health, wellbeing and continued professional development of practitioners is vital. However, we would seek clarification that these opportunities and support outlined through Education Scotland are both accessible to youth work practitioners, and additionally that bespoke opportunities for the youth work and CLD workforce are resourced.

4. Supporting Positive Destinations

The report makes no mention of youth work's role in supporting positive destinations. As we move beyond the pandemic, the youth work sector's role within the education, employability and skills system is vital to achieve improvement in the skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people, and to accelerate progress for those most at risk of being furthest from the labour market.

The youth work sector has an important role to play across the employability landscape, including tackling youth unemployment through Developing Young Workforce (DYW), designing and delivering CfE and as part of the Young Person's Guarantee (YPG). Youth workers provide support and opportunities for all young people, particularly those who are furthest away from the labour market, which help them overcome barriers, develop skills and progress into sustained employment pathways. This includes offering quality, meaningful volunteering and work experience opportunities that meet their goals and aspirations, and a commitment to preparing young people with the future skills needs and economic priorities, such as digital fluency and climate emergency/environmental opportunities. Further, ensuring youth work is recognised and resourced as a critical component in building a confident, skilled and compassionate young workforce is a key priority for the National Youth Work Strategy 2021-2026.

5. Early learning and childcare

“Outcomes for children are linked not only to the learning that takes place during school hours but also to the range of life enhancing experiences and opportunities that are available to children outside of school hours and during holiday times”. We welcomed the SG progress report on school age childcare and the significant investment and focus on further ensuring that families have access to a range of provision to suit their needs. Youth work plays a role in the school age childcare system, alongside the regulated childcare sector and organised activities. We are committed to working with SG to further explore and understand this landscape.

⁵ https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5659/food-insecurity-report_proofed.pdf

Suggested Changes to Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps The contribution of education to Scotland's Covid Recovery

- Supporting the workforce - In the “*next steps*” (p.40) there is no mention of youth work. We are in the latter and accelerated phase of the production of a new National Youth Work Strategy (2021-2026). Some of the initial themes from the co-production of the strategy include investment in the youth work sector and support for workforce development. As an educational practice and as a sector widely recognised as pivotal for thousands of young people (during the most chaotic period in Scotland's education, perhaps in a lifetime) any action plans must state clearly the imperative of youth work as integral to any next steps. The implementation of an ambitious youth work strategy can only happen with resource and on-going commitment to the industry. Further, by enabling and investing in youth work success, we can help deliver the actions contained within the education recovery piece.
- In relation to the National Youth Work Strategy (2021-26), we would suggest on page 38 this is changed from, “*Continue work, which paused during Covid-19, to develop a youth work strategy and an adult learning strategy for Scotland*” to “*continue work, to develop an ambitious youth work strategy and an adult learning strategy for Scotland, building on the positive impact of youth work practitioners on young people during Covid-19*”. While writing the strategy was paused by Scottish Government, the response of the youth work sector during this coronavirus pandemic has been absolutely crucial at cementing the themes (including investment) for the strategy, as prioritised by thousands of young people and youth workers.
- There is perhaps an opportunity within the supporting the workforce (p.39-40) section to encourage more young adults to volunteer, or consider a career in youth work. We know from recent engagement with key youth work organisations that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the number and continuity of volunteers, which has had a negative impact on youth work provision.
- Youth work plays an essential role in delivering a renewed vision for Scotland's education system. As such, this needs to be more explicitly highlighted within the action plan. The report acknowledges that youth work helped to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's mental health, learning and development. Yet, for example, there is no acknowledgement of youth work's contribution to the success of ‘Get into Summer’, or the sector's role in supporting positive destinations. The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund is also facilitating strong partnership across the education system and delivering effective, innovative and evidence-driven, approaches to achieving equity. Continued commitment to invest in and recognise youth work will be crucial in

achieving the shared vision to support children and young people to continue to progress in their learning and achievement.

- We are seeking clarification that the actions outlined to support the education workforce are also accessible to youth work professionals.

Progressing

This response has been developed through our Covid-19 Recovery Group and by bringing together the priorities noted through other supporting networks and via evidence available showing the impact of youth workers on young people's lives during Covid-19. As such, we hope Scottish Government will give due consideration to the proposed amendments.

ENDS

EDITOR'S NOTES