



## **YouthLink Scotland response to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Inquiry into the Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Scotland**

### **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.

### **What are the key issues around health and wellbeing for children and young people in Scotland?**

Our partners on the Youth Work Health and Wellbeing Network, See Me, highlight there is a key challenge around tackling mental health stigma and discrimination. This was identified through See Me Youth Champions, when exploring the concerns and issues of young people with mental health problems. In 2021, the group commissioned Censuswide to conduct a poll of 1000 young people aged 16-24. The survey found that 66% of young people were dismissed by adults when they tried to speak about their mental health<sup>1</sup>. The youth work sector is integral to the education system and can help build confidence and facilitate conversations on mental health and wellbeing. More confidence building is required across public policy areas on how adults should hold conversations about mental health with young people to ensure that young people are able to share how they are feeling. The youth work approach can help ensure

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<sup>1</sup> [See Me | Young People feel their mental health struggles are dismissed by adults \(seemescotland.org\)](https://seemescotland.org/)

young people are in a better position to co-produce and design the opportunities and solutions to tackling mental health stigma and discrimination in the future.

In terms of the key role of education more broadly, the latest demographic breakdown of Lockdown Lowdown responses indicates that young people in areas of higher deprivation are at a higher risk of their education being impacted negatively, compounded by the fact they are less likely to attend or have access to youth groups. This is impacting negatively on their health and wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. Inequitable access to education remains a concern for young people and is of significant disquiet to youth work leaders<sup>3</sup>. The initial phase three report<sup>4</sup>, highlighted that only 25% of young people in the most deprived areas attended, or had access to youth work activities, compared to 40% in more affluent areas. The survey also found that young people in the most deprived areas were the least likely to attend in person. However, young people regardless of where they are from noted how they felt good about their mental and physical health as a result of attending youth work groups<sup>5</sup>. In response to Scottish Government's Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps, YouthLink Scotland has made key recommendations to ensure youth work is recognised and is funded as an integral and on-going part of education recovery for Scotland's young people<sup>6</sup>. This is mirrored by our response to the recent education reform consultation on behalf of Professor Ken Muir, University of the West of Scotland and independent advisor to Scottish Government. The response calls for significant reform of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)<sup>7</sup>.

## **What are the current challenges with improving health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?**

### **Poverty and inequality**

A significant challenge is rising poverty and unequal access to opportunities to participate in activities that improve health and wellbeing. As one example, during the equalities consultation on the priority themes emerging in the upcoming National Youth Work Strategy (NYWS) (2021-26), YMCA, referred explicitly to cost as a barrier to participating in sport activities for young people in their communities. In the midst of a global pandemic, it is groups of young people from across the protected characteristics, including those experiencing multiple forms of inequality who are disproportionately impacted by the wellbeing crisis. National Lockdown measures have exacerbated these issues for disadvantages communities, including, but not exclusively relating to, people with disabilities, BAME groups, people experiencing

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<sup>2</sup> [Latest demographic breakdown indicates learning loss risk for young people in deprived areas \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org)

<sup>3</sup> [sector-warning-release-may-2020.pdf \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6438/july2021-lockdownlowdown-v3-survey-report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> [YouthLink Scotland calls for prominent role for youth work in Scotland's Education Recovery Action Plan](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org)

<sup>7</sup> [YouthLink Scotland | Education reform consultation on behalf of Professor Ken Muir, University of the West of Scotland and Independent Advisor to the Scottish Government](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org)

homelessness, those affected by violence, those in the youth justice system and frontline health and care staff<sup>89</sup>.

## **Employability**

Another significant impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been on the employment prospects of young people. In particular, the future of youth employment. There is ongoing uncertainty, which is having a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of young people<sup>10</sup>. This is backed up by the findings in the Lockdown Lowdown reports, illustrating the link between poor mental health and young people's concerns about the future prospects<sup>11</sup>.

## **What offers the best opportunity for improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?**

### **Key relationships**

Youth workers build key relationships with young people to support improvements in their health and wellbeing. Youth workers (paid and unpaid) are confident in their understanding of an individual's physical and mental development to enable them to do this effectively. As examples, 347 significant change stories were collected from young people through four studies<sup>12</sup>, examining the impact of universal youth work. This research illustrated that youth clubs are places that reduce isolation, create a sense of belonging and provide new experiences and opportunities for informal learning. Young people also recognised and articulated the importance of having a trusted adult and a safe space created by youth workers with whom they often form long-term relationships. In many cases, this relationship continues well into young adulthood. These key relationships helped young people to feel valued and supported, leading to improvements in their mental health and wellbeing<sup>13</sup>.

### **Youth work and prevention**

Youth work meets young people's health and wellbeing needs through early intervention, preventing future ill-health. In turn, reducing the need for crisis interventions and improving health outcomes. As such, youth work has a clear role to support the health and wellbeing of young people and should be built in to education services - ensuring a holistic approach to young people's wellbeing. We know this helps reduce the impact of health inequalities through the strong and equitable relationships youth workers establish with young people. This means young people

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<sup>8</sup> Harkins C. Supporting community recovery and resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic-a rapid review of evidence [Internet]. Glasgow; 2020. Available

from: [https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7854/COVID19\\_Comm\\_Recovery\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7854/COVID19_Comm_Recovery_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Nolan D. 'Spend time with me': Children and young people's experiences of COVID-19 and the justice system. 2020.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/double-trouble/>

<sup>11</sup> Youth Link Scotland. Lockdown Lowdown: survey reveals 96% of young people fear for future due to COVID-19 [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2020 Jun 15]. Available from: <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/news/april-2020/survey-reveals-96-of-young-people-fear-for-future-due-to-covid-19/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/policy-research/research/the-impact-of-universal-youth-work/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

have increased control over their lives. Their needs are met through a youth work approach that is relational, reducing the negative impact of risk-taking behaviours and improving physical and mental wellbeing in the immediate and longer term.

### **Training and support for youth work practitioners**

What would make the youth work approach even stronger in this space is a National Training offer that is free, accessible and accredited for all across the sector, accrediting youth workers to a certain standard of knowledge. As part of the upskilling and on-going knowledge building process, we need to re-state where local and national specialist services and referral mechanisms are currently in operation. This should include recognition of youth work as a valuable early intervention support industry. Investment in the youth work sector will assist in bringing the voices of young people to the heart of policy decision making, which is in keeping with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>14</sup>.

### **Tackling social isolation and loneliness and the role of the youth work sector**

Youth work enables community connectivity, promotes inter-generational working in communities and reduces social isolation. Tackling social isolation is a key policy area of action for Scottish Government. The evidence is that youth workers have a lasting impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Scotland<sup>15</sup>. Investing in youth work infrastructure should therefore be seen as having the most positive impact on improving the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Scotland over the next five years. Moreover, loneliness is a negative consequence of lockdown, impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people<sup>16</sup>. Evidence suggests that despite us all being in the coronavirus pandemic, the proportion of adults experiencing loneliness is highest between ages 18-24<sup>17</sup>, leading to the casual use of the term “*lockdown loneliness*”<sup>18</sup>. The loss of peer group support has had a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing<sup>19</sup>.

At YouthLink Scotland’s recent (03/12/21) meeting of the Youth Work Health and Wellbeing Network, improving peer support was highlighted by members as a strategic imperative to assist young people in the months and years to come. Further, the Impact of LGBT Youth Scotland’s Digital Youth Work on Young People during Lockdown report<sup>20</sup>, underlined the impact that digital youth work had in reducing isolation and improving wellbeing during a time of crisis. This was because youth work provided a safe and inclusive digital space with group, peer, individual support. Peer support can provide organisations with the opportunity to develop strengths based and empowering approaches that put people young people in positions of leadership. This

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<sup>14</sup> [Four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Youth Work Changes Lives | Mental Health Foundation](#)

<sup>16</sup> Impacts of lockdown on the mental health of children and young people | Mental Health Foundation

<sup>17</sup> Orben A, Tomova L, Blakemore S-J. The effects of social deprivation on adolescent social development and mental health. Preprint [Internet]. 2020;4642(20):1–7. Available from: <https://psyarxiv.com/7afmd/>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Loades M, Chatburn E, Higson-Sweeney N, Reynolds S, Shafran R, Brigden A, et al. Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2020;

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5686/lgbt-ys-digital-yw-research-report.pdf>

develops skills and confidence and addresses social isolation and stigma in mental health by bringing people together and emphasising the value of their experiences<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, investing in online and face-to-face peer support initiatives (utilising the support available from youth workers) and tackling loneliness and isolation must remain public policy priorities over the next five years.

One of the key themes in the upcoming National Youth Work Strategy (2021-2026) is health and wellbeing. There is an opportunity to address the wellbeing of young people through linked actions within the implementation elements of the strategy over the next five years. This should align across significant public policy areas of focus - including, but not limited to, the Scottish Government strategy on tackling social isolation and measures taken to tackle poverty and inequality<sup>22</sup>.

### **Youth work, physical activity and sport**

YouthLink Scotland promotes activities, helping children to develop and learn core skills including critical thinking, reading, learning, reasoning and problem solving. We believe young people can achieve these skills through sport (where youth workers ensure activities are inclusive and fun), contributing to the overall confidence and wellbeing of those young people involved.

We are pleased to support Scottish Sports Association (SSA) as part of this response. Scotland's youth work networks span the length and breadth of Scotland, encapsulating thousands of volunteers and paid workers, benefiting young people's physical and mental health. This includes direct engagement between youth workers and young sports people up to and including elite level competitors. It should be noted in the context of priorities for the next five years that maintaining and recruiting of youth work volunteers has been precarious during the coronavirus pandemic. The future of many individuals and sport clubs rely heavily on the youth work volunteer network. As such, a commitment to supporting volunteer pathways and volunteer retention should be considered a priority - as part of nationwide investment in youth work infrastructure.

We know that frequent participation in sport and physical activity at a young age encourages positive cognitive development and impacts positively on educational attainment. It encourages the enhancement of brain function through increasing blood flow to the brain, as well as bringing about psychological wellbeing for participants. The role of youth work is particularly notable in after school settings/clubs, linking with other sectors, such as play, social work and structured arts and sports clubs. The social return for spending in youth work is clear. Therefore, we would encourage the committee inquiry to seriously consider the preventative spend potential on youth work as a real opportunity to bring about the best long-term results for a young person's physical and mental health.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.scottishrecovery.net/peer-support/>

<sup>22</sup> [A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

## Local community response

Research has shown there is incredible value in a community response to COVID19 recovery<sup>23</sup>, particularly for the most vulnerable<sup>24</sup>. Youth work plays crucial role in bringing communities together. Youth workers are uniquely positioned to endorse and enhance community-based support to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Any policy response should therefore, include a focus on working alongside communities to identify and tailor responses, considering issues at a local level.

## Why youth workers and organisations need leadership from political parties

YouthLink Scotland's own member survey from summer 2019 also showed a looming funding crisis in the sector with 70% of youth workers who responded stating their budgets had decreased in the last three years, with 50% saying they had experienced severe cuts to funding<sup>25</sup>. Unison's report "*Youth Services at Breaking Point*" showed £11,147,600 cut in local authority youth service spending in Scotland in 2016-19<sup>26</sup>. The report highlighted the continued trend of youth work cuts across Scotland's local authorities. Reducing youth work budgets results in increased pressure on statutory services like social care, mental health services, social work, the NHS, the police, the criminal justice system and education. We need to reverse this trend, by investing in youth work now.

## How does addressing poverty lead to improved health and social care outcomes?

In response to a welcome call from the United Nations on urgent action to tackling deepening food insecurity and poverty in the UK<sup>27</sup>, YouthLink Scotland were funded by the Scottish Government to coordinate and support a pilot programme, focused on addressing food insecurity and learning loss in the school holidays. This took place during summer 2020, targeted at young people (S1-S6) identified by trusted professionals as being at risk of poverty, food insecurity or learning loss<sup>28</sup>. The six pilot projects worked with 152 young people in the summer of 2020; exceeding the original target of supporting 20 in each area or 120 in total. Three quarters of the young people who took part in the pilot live in areas of poverty with 50% in SIMD 1, the most deprived data zones in Scotland and 27% in SIMD 2<sup>29</sup>. The findings were stark. Based on self-evaluation forms completed by the young people who took part in pilot projects, it showed a range of positive impacts are evident. For example, young people felt the project had contributed to learning, relationships, confidence, engagement with school, skills and eating. Their health and wellbeing notably improved<sup>30</sup>. We believe

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<sup>23</sup> Harkins C. Supporting community recovery and resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic-a rapid review of evidence [Internet]. Glasgow; 2020. Available from: [https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7854/COVID19\\_Comm\\_Recovery\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7854/COVID19_Comm_Recovery_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> [Youth sector in crisis point warning - TFN](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Youth-services-report-04-2019.pdf \(unison.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-response-un-food-insecurity-poverty/>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5659/food-insecurity-report\\_proofed.pdf](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5659/food-insecurity-report_proofed.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

we should be engaging and emboldening the youth work sector more to tackle poverty. Youth workers are uniquely positioned to meet whole families where they are and tailor support in accordance with their needs and do so in a dignified way. Support and investment in youth work should be seen as imperative to help deliver on local and national anti-poverty strategies and as a key driver in success for better mental health and wellbeing outcomes for all Scotland's young people. The actions we take now will be crucial. Young people deserve a commitment to the continuation and enhancement of the services that supported them before and during the coronavirus pandemic to maintain and enhance their wellbeing and future prospects.

To help achieve this YouthLink Scotland commends our three key policy recommendations from our 2021 Youth Work Manifesto to the committee<sup>31</sup>:

1. Make access to youth work opportunities a right for young people in Scotland.
2. Increase investment in the youth work sector at Local Authority and Scottish Government level.
3. Formal recognition of youth work within the strategies and policies of Local Authority and Scottish Government.

### **Learning from experience during the coronavirus pandemic**

We know partnership working had positive impacts on the ability of the system to support health and wellbeing (e.g. education/community hubs, school and youth work partnerships) when responding to the coronavirus pandemic<sup>32</sup>. The Scottish Government Equity Audit identified the negative impact of school building closures on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and young people<sup>33</sup>.

The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund was one of the approaches taken by Scottish Government to provide health and wellbeing support, as part of education recovery. This was positive. However, this approach should be seen as a mainstay, rather than an addition to help young people with the health and wellbeing over a sustained period of time. YouthLink Scotland's interim report on the impact of the fund, shows that youth work engages with young people who need support with their health and wellbeing and makes the links between poverty, health/wellbeing and attainment. We believe there is an opportunity for the inquiry to better recognise the range of practitioners that impact on health and wellbeing and the crucial role of youth work practitioners.

A recent report, "*Youth work: closing the poverty related attainment gap during the pandemic*"<sup>34</sup>, highlighted that the closure of spaces for youth work similarly impacted negatively on young people's health and wellbeing. Safe spaces for youth work provide opportunity for the development of important relationships (with

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<sup>31</sup> Scotland's Youth Work Manifesto 2021 ([youthlinkscotland.org](https://youthlinkscotland.org))

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equity-audit-deepening-understanding-impact-covid-19-school-building-closures-children-socio-economically-disadvantaged-backgrounds-setting-clear-areas-focus-accelerating-recovery/pages/6/>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6363/youth-work-during-the-pandemic-final.pdf>

peers and youth workers), social interaction and engagement with activities and support for health and wellbeing. When these spaces were reduced or removed, this impacted negatively on young people's wellbeing and their progress/development<sup>35</sup>.

A right to access youth work in the community/school is recognised as part of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), National Improvement Framework (NIF) and Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC). The Equity Audit also highlighted the positive physical health benefits of outdoor learning and learning in and around nature<sup>36</sup>. There is a crucial link between health and wellbeing and attainment, with 86% of young people improving their health and wellbeing as a result of participation in youth work<sup>37</sup>. Improvement in health and wellbeing is a key priority of NIF. Youth work must be considered as a key partner in the health and wellbeing journey because youth work practitioners can help deliver on these National improvement priorities<sup>38</sup>.

## Summary

Focus should be given to the positive role of youth work practitioners in the lives of children and young people and the capacity of staff teams to develop multidisciplinary and multisectoral responses to the coronavirus pandemic. Youth workers can ease anxieties of young people, reduce the stigma associated with talking about mental health and wellbeing. The youth work sector routinely identifies and targets support for those where the impacts of lockdown and restriction measures has been the most challenging. Investment in the youth work sector means investment in better health and wellbeing outcomes for young people in Scotland.

We ask that this is recognised by the inquiry and that commitment to the youth work sector's key role within this public policy area is supported by members of The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

## ENDS

For more about this policy response, please contact YouthLink Scotland's Policy and Research Manager, Kevin Kane - [kkane@youthlinkscotland.org](mailto:kkane@youthlinkscotland.org)

If you wish to know more about the youth work health and wellbeing network, please contact YouthLink Scotland's Events and Networks Manager, Sarah Robertson - [srobertson@youthlinkscotland.org](mailto:srobertson@youthlinkscotland.org)

## EDITOR'S NOTES

This policy response has been informed through YouthLink Scotland's lead role on the Youth Work Health and Wellbeing Network, the co-production of the National Youth Work Strategy (2021-2026), information gathered via key youth work networks, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5875/outdoor-learning-st4.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5319/national-evaluation-publication.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/2021-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/pages/3/>

draws upon current evidence on the priorities of young people and youth work practitioners.

Helpful webpage with sources of literature on the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of young people from the Mental Health Foundation:

[Impacts of lockdown on the mental health of children and young people | Mental Health Foundation](#)

Health, social care, and sport committee webpage:

[Health and wellbeing of children and young people | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

YouthLink Scotland webpage information and link to Health, Social Care, and Sport Committee webpage:

[YouthLink Scotland | The national agency for youth work](#)

[Inquiry into the Health And Wellbeing of Children And Young People \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](#)