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# **Youth work and employability - an audit of reach and impact**

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## Introduction

Youth work in Scotland is deeply embedded within the national policy landscape. As part of the education and skills system, youth work supports young people across their learner journey to reach their full potential.

Youth work has a strong focus on equity and inclusion, which underpins practice and the sector's contribution to the national improvement priorities. This includes working towards equity of experience and outcomes for young people impacted by poverty and those with protected characteristics and intersectionality. As part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, youth workers provide learning and support to improve educational outcomes for young people impacted by poverty, including to progress towards and into employment. The youth work sector is committed to further engaging with people and providers on the future of Scotland's employability system.

As part of this, YouthLink Scotland undertook work with its members to better understand the role and impact of youth work across the employability landscape. This report summarises information collected through 48 of YouthLink Scotland's members across Scotland<sup>1</sup>. It aims to:

- Clarify youth work's reach across the landscape, to inform a system-wide understanding of the skills and employability offer
- Inform improvement through providing insight into what works through the youth work approach and support
- Identify challenges and opportunities to strengthen collaboration across the system

## Reach

The youth work sector delivers across the youth employability landscape, including:

- Activity funded through Young Person's Guarantee (YPG)
- Activity funded through No One Left Behind (NOLB), Employability Fund or Kickstart programmes and support
- Provision of other 16+ employability programmes or support
- Targeted early intervention for 12-15 year olds
- Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

Youth work organisations may contribute across more than one part of the landscape. This reflects the role of youth work across the learner journey and its flexible approach to supporting young people through universal and targeted provision.

Our audit suggests that a significant proportion of youth work's contribution, particularly in supporting young people 16+, is not funded or recognised at system level. For example, in our survey, over 70% of organisations identified that they provide 'other' employability programmes, or support, for young people aged 16+, whereas 44% and 58% are funded through YPG or NOLB to support this age group. This suggests that there may be a gap in the system's understanding of opportunities and impact across the landscape, and how employability support is funded. There is further scope to capture and include youth work's contribution and to consider how this is communicated to young people as part of the employability support ecosystem, in particular the opportunities and pathways that help achieve the ambition for the Young Person's Guarantee.

Our review also suggests that further work would be helpful to explore reach between local authority and third sector youth work providers. Local authorities are around twice as likely to deliver NOLB (including Employability Fund and Kickstart), YPG, early intervention and DYW compared to third sector organisations. This could explain why more



third sector organisations felt they were not, or only partly, connected to their local employability partnership (LEP). Given the indicated proportion of the youth work sector who are likely to be delivering employability support for 16+, out with the tracked elements of the system, it would be helpful to better understand how third sector youth work organisations are included in local employability planning.

Youth work also contributes to delivering a curriculum that helps young people learn about and experience the world of work (DYW). This includes opportunities to learn in context, such as volunteering, youth participation and enterprise. These are often delivered in partnership with schools, colleges, employers and the wider community. Youth work is an integral element of the learner journey for many young people. Partnership with youth work can enrich the curriculum offer and open up a range of learner pathways. Youth work offers personalisation and choice in the senior phase, supporting progression pathways, and helping young people make choices about their next steps.

In many instances, youth work's role in the skills and employability system is embedded into everyday practice, including universal youth work. Youth work helps young people to develop skills for learning, life and work across the learner journey. Youth workers support young people to recognise their skills and personal achievements (including using youth awards) and to understand the transferable nature of skills and how they relate to the world of work. [Youth awards](#) are an important route through which young

people have the opportunity to work towards recognition and accreditation that they can use to demonstrate their skills and achievements to employers and open up further options for their learning journey. Youth awards:

- Help young people to develop a wide range of skills such as leadership and confidence
- Enable young people to talk about their skills with confidence and understand their value
- Support young people in their learning and to progress to further and higher education, training and employment on leaving school
- Are valued by employers as helping young people gain skills for work.
- Can be life changing experiences for young people

Interestingly, however, just under half of respondents said they were delivering DYW activity. Third sector organisations were less likely than local authority providers to identify their work as contributing to DYW. Yet skills development was the most common approach being used across all aspects of the landscape – across local authority and third sector organisations. Further work is required to build understanding of DYW as a shared responsibility across the education and skills system.

<sup>1</sup>These were a mix of local authority, national third sector youth organisations, community-based youth work organisations, youth arts organisations and other charities/social enterprise organisations delivering youth work.

## Support

Youth work is flexible and responsive in how it supports young people, with a particular focus on those furthest from the labour market, to overcome barriers, develop skills and progress towards and into employment. This includes one-to-one support, youth awards and quality, meaningful volunteering and work experience opportunities that meet their goals and aspirations.

### Skills development

In our survey, skills development was the most common type of support provided when preparing and supporting young people towards and into employment. This is not surprising given the focus on skills development within youth work. Youth workers use the [National Youth Work Outcomes](#) and the associated [Youth Work Skills Framework](#), alongside [youth awards](#), to support young people to develop, recognise and acknowledge their skills, achievements and development across the four capacities.

Alongside the development of these core skills, our audit suggests that youth work organisations also support young people to develop industry specific skills, experience and knowledge. In this way, youth work appears to be responding meaningfully to young people's expressed needs in relation to their future pathways.

### Future growth sectors

Youth work is actively planning and delivering in line with future skills needs and strategic economic policy priorities,

including digital fluency and green/sustainable jobs. Our work suggests that around a fifth of organisations are focusing on supporting young people towards and into green jobs. Organisations like the Princes Trust are actively preparing young people for the transition to net zero, responding to future growth sectors and providing opportunities for young people to create their own career pathways, such as through enterprise. Similarly, Dumfries and Galloway Council Youth Work creates pathways to help young people prepare for the changing nature of work. Young people develop core digital skills through universal youth work and can progress towards employment through digital youth work programmes, accreditation, volunteering, work experience, Modern Apprenticeship and Kickstart opportunities.

### Careers Services

Our findings suggest that over half of youth work organisations (who are delivering within the key strands identified) provide career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) as part of their approach to supporting employability.

Youth work is a vital part of Scotland's career services. Youth workers play a key role in delivering opportunities for skills development, career support and career related learning across the learner journey, in school and community settings. This is based on the needs of the young person, and can include providing information, advice, guidance, education and brokerage. Evidence shows that a non-formal, youth work approach can be particularly effective in engaging and supporting those furthest from the labour

market. Understanding and supporting the role of youth work will be vital to the implementation of the [Career Review](#) - and its ambition to create and deliver a rights-based system, where every young person can access a careers service that is designed to meet their individual needs.

### Pathways into work

Youth work creates pathways into work for young people. This includes quality, meaningful volunteering and work experience opportunities and directly supporting young people into employment.

YMCA Tayside provides opportunities for young people to shape services through volunteering on the youth committee for each youth club and drop in across Perth and Kinross. Young people in S1 upwards hold all the key positions of authority in each youth committee. This ensures the youth clubs are run by young people, for young people, whilst providing them with opportunities to develop an array of transferable skills such as leadership, problem solving and working with others. This experience contributes to many young people progressing on to positive destinations on leaving school, including creating a pathway into employment in youth work. Currently, 47% of the staff team with YMCA Tayside have progressed through youth work into employment within the organisation.

Further work is required to better understand the scope and impact of volunteering through youth work and how this supports the wider Volunteering Action Plan and the Young Person's Guarantee.

## Approach

In addition to the types of support provided, a range of factors relating to the youth work approach enables youth workers to make a positive impact on youth employability and complement other types of employability support.

Youth work is a rights-based, person-centred practice. Trusting relationships are developed between the young person and youth worker, with the young person as an equal partner in the process. Youth workers highlighted the importance of being able to build relationships over time, supporting the individual – holistically – through flexible, accessible and responsive approaches, at different points in their journey. In this way, youth workers are able to play a crucial role in prevention/early intervention, support young people to address barriers, or engage with other colleagues within the landscape.

The informal youth work approach also helps young people engage. Many 'employability' skills and experiences are developed through activities, experiential learning and fun activities designed specifically for the young people participating. These are tailored to the age and stage of the young people. Additionally, one practitioner identified that *"youth work allows young people to access support without the potential stigma of specialised support."*

The importance of safe youth work spaces, where young people build strong relationships with a trusted adult and access support was identified in the [Youth Work During the Pandemic](#) report. This can often be key to engaging those furthest from the labour market. In considering how we deliver employability support, we must listen to our young people – where they feel comfortable and who they choose to ask for support.

*"SHE Scotland maintains a holistic approach to the delivery and services which we provide. Enabling young women to access services and programmes which develop positive sense of self, confidence, skills and developing positive peer relationships as well as positively impacting on their community."*

A number of youth work organisations have a specific employability remit and have tailored their approach to this work. The youth work approach is equally as vital in these contexts. Others, such as SHMU (Station House Media Unit) have evolved their services to provide a 'wrap around' approach:

*"We are a community media organisation, based in one of the regeneration areas of Aberdeen. We provide a wide range of programmes, that range from in-school vocational qualifications, to running a radio station in HMP Grampian. We therefore have different strands of our organisation that have different focus and different client groups and service users/volunteers/participants. Our Adult Services and Youth Media tends to work with participants on early intervention and barrier removal. Our shmuTRAIN strand is our employability focused strand and its primary focus is 16+ employability programmes. We know that support is essential at an early stage to build confidence and remove barriers; people are not capable of moving into employment if their lives are unstable, so we work with them to remove barriers and bring stability. We also know that building trusting relationships can take time so having progression routes within shmu for participants to move onto with little disruption can be very beneficial."*

Outdoor education is another key approach within the youth work sector that supports youth employability. The



[Outdoor Education Recovery Fund](#) impact report found that 87% of participating young people experienced improved physical health and wellbeing, 95% developed skills and 83% of participating young people felt more engaged in learning as a result. The Fund, launched in 2021 by the Scottish Government to widen access to outdoor learning and offer vital support for Scotland’s education recovery, encouraged partnerships between schools, third sector youth organisations and outdoor learning providers to support young people’s achievement, attainment, and personal and social development.

We know that many young people benefit from ongoing support to sustain participation. This is a key feature of the youth work approach highlighted by our members as crucial within the context of employability. Youth work services such as West Lothian Council’s 16+ HYPE programme, create meaningful opportunities where young people can maintain contact and support. There is a sense that this is not sufficiently recognised within funding, and that sometimes young people will choose to seek this ongoing support from a youth worker, rather than someone at college, or a training programme.

It is youth work’s holistic, often ‘time unlimited’/longer-term contribution to youth employability – including the ‘pre-pipeline’ work, universal provision, and its role across the learner journey - that should be further explored and recognised for its importance within the learner journey and in building the foundations for progression.

*“Simply getting young people ‘into work’ should no longer be our aim. If we support young people to live happier, healthier and more fulfilled lives, they will gain and maintain employment much more easily and sustainably.”*

*“Youthwork is by far the best approach to supporting young people into employment. By developing caring relationships and walking ‘alongside’ young people on their journey through life, we empower them to overcome barriers and support them to believe in themselves and their future.”*

Youth work’s position within the community enables its unique contribution to young people’s lives. Youth workers know their community, the barriers to employability and the local labour market. Youth workers are skilled in engaging and supporting young people, in creating meaningful, informal learning opportunities across the learner journey, and across settings.

Youth workers also work in partnership, collaborating with others to create options and pathways and provide specialist support where needed.

For example, in partnership with Perth and Kinross Council and The Gannochy Trust, The Perth & Kinross Youth Partnership have developed Skills Academies that give young people a realistic 12-week experience of a particular industry. The Skills Academies are aimed at young people aged 16-19 who are not in employment, education, or training. They are designed and delivered in partnership with employers in their localities and are needs led for each area. The recent Venture Academy (funded through Perth and Kinross Council Youth Guarantee and organised and delivered by YMCA Tayside) provided opportunity for young people with an interest in outdoor learning instruction to gain qualifications and experience of a variety of outdoor activities including canoeing, hillwalking, mountain biking and abseiling. Working alongside qualified outdoor instructors, and supported by youth workers, all young people developed skills, achieved accreditation, made connections into employment and further education pathways, with all moving on to a positive destination on completion.

Our members identified the importance of continuing to work across the system, sharing practice and ensuring a coherent journey for young people.

## Opportunities and challenges

Our members told us that their key challenges to supporting youth employability are:

- Funding/capacity 73%
- Youth work recognition or inclusion within the employability landscape 60%
- Communication between partners 37%
- Skills/knowledge of youth workers 23%

Unsurprisingly, securing sufficient resource to meet the needs of young people was the most common challenge. This included access to funding – such as the ability of small organisations to secure funding, and how third sector organisations will be engaged as partners in local employability partnerships. It was also recognised that the impact of short-term funding can present challenges for staff retention and ongoing support for young people. Some also felt that the need for pre-pipeline and holistic support wasn’t reflected enough in existing funding models.

Linked to investment was the sense that youth work’s contribution to the employability system is undervalued.



As identified earlier in this report, there is scope to better understand the whole system – the people and places that contribute to a young person’s employability journey. This includes the impact of the youth work approach and how the system engages and supports those with multiple barriers – including mental health, ASN, care experienced young people and those who are asylum seekers/refugees.

We need to recognise that for many young people their journey isn’t linear, including how we resource and understand longer-term interventions – including youth work’s role in developing the young workforce. *“There is still too heavy an emphasis on designing services from an overview of the landscape, rather than building with young people, over time, on their particular journeys.”* In this way, services are still not connected and communicating, and the ongoing support needs of young people furthest from the labour market are not being met. Youth work needs better recognised for ‘walking the longer road’ with young people.

Additionally, we should seek to learn from the Careers Review principles and deliver a truly person-centred approach to youth employability – where young people can access support from the organisation or practitioner they have a relationship with. And communicate clearly around the roles, options and pathways across the system.

The local [employability partnerships framework](#) recognises the need to work collaboratively, to ensure the right services and support are available and that they are designed and delivered around the needs of the individual. In our audit, 61% of organisations said they were involved or

partly involved in local employability partnerships. Of this, 100% of local authority respondents said they were, but only 42% of third sector organisations were. Whilst supporting the principle of local planning and partnership, the role of national youth work organisations requires further consideration to understand their contribution to developing pathways for young people and how best to facilitate their engagement in local planning.

Our study also suggests that information for and signposting of young people could be improved, to include a wider range of options including through youth work. This includes building the capacity of youth organisations, e.g. youth arts organisations, to expand opportunities for young people such as in the performing arts. There was a concern that, particularly in light of the pandemic, we are in danger of reducing young peoples’ ambitions to progress towards fair and meaningful work.

As one participant put it, we need to consider “how we invest in and engage all those who can contribute – to expand opportunities for young people”.

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## Impact

Youth work organisations measure progress and impact using a variety of approaches. This includes working with young people to track their journey and involving the parents/carers/support network in measuring progress. Over 70% of organisations track positive destinations, 62% track skills development and 50% use the National Youth Work Outcomes. Around 40% are jointly evaluating impact with other partners.

This provides a strong foundation to explore how we can work in partnership, to develop and use data and insight, to measure and inform progress; contributing to improved system-wide understanding, including identifying gaps in a young person’s journey and their development of skills and personal achievements. The [National Youth Work Outcomes](#) and associated [Youth Work Skills Framework](#) provide a common language to build a shared impact measurement framework for youth work and explore how the sector can continue to work in collaboration within LEP planning, and Scottish Government reporting. Demonstrating impact has also been identified as a key element for the National Youth Work Strategy 2022-2027.

## Next steps

Youth work is part of the education, skills and employability journey for young people. It can be a particularly important element of the journey for young people furthest from the labour market – those who’s needs are not met by more formal approaches.

Our learning suggests that there is opportunity to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for young people if we:

- Capture and include youth work more meaningfully within the Young Person’s Guarantee, including the options communicated to young people, the value of volunteering through youth work and the impact of local youth work employability support/programmes
- Pay attention to the role of third sector youth organisations, including national youth organisations, and share good practice around local employability planning and investment
- Continue to promote an understanding of DYW as a shared responsibility across the education, skills and employment system. And how this contributes to the learner’s journey
- Invest in the person-centred, holistic approach provided by youth work – providing choice and flexibility for young people and the ongoing support to sustain participation
- Work in partnership to measure and use data for improvement

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