# Youth work's role during and in recovery from Covid-19

Report by YouthLink Scotland and Northern Star
Funded by Scottish Government

YouthLink
Scotland
The national agency for youth work

NS
NORTHERN STAR

# Contents

# Introduction

Youth work is recognised in Scotland as part of the Community Learning and Development (CLD) field of professional practice. Youth work aims to help young people learn about themselves, others and society through non-formal educational activities. Youth work is described as focussing on young people aged 11-25. However, many groups and clubs can provide services to children under 11 and there are many instances of links between services supporting young people's transitions.

The youth work sector supports young people to progress towards a set of National Youth Work Outcomes. This helps youth workers and young people to understand the difference youth work is making and how well young people are progressing towards the outcome. Effective youth work occurs in a wide range of settings in every local authority. This includes, but is not limited to, schools, youth clubs and centres, uniformed and voluntary organisations, youth counselling units, detached projects, youth cafes, youth arts and sports groups.

Although programme activities and settings may differ, the core purpose of youth work remains. Namely, supporting young people's health and well-being and providing an environment for them to thrive. Youth workers help build a young person's self-esteem and self-confidence, developing their ability to manage personal and social relationships, creating learning opportunities, and developing skills. It encourages positive group atmospheres, raises the ability to consider risk, make reasoned decisions, and take control, and encourages social action and commitment.

Scotland's youth work sector was crucial in supporting children and young people's health and wellbeing during the most restrictive phases of the coronavirus pandemic. We saw youth workers rise to the challenge of providing services remotely and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the country. This included collaboration across the public and voluntary sectors, and partners in schools and colleges to support learning. Although the sector adapted well, it was not without its challenges.

Within this context, as part of the Scottish Government Covid-19 Learning and Evaluation group evidence review, YouthLink Scotland was funded to complete an evidence review exploring youth work's role in responding to and recovering from Covid-19.

The report speaks to the role of youth work in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people, and its crucial role in improving the educational chances of young people, especially those who face multiple barriers to learning. However, these themes should not be viewed as exhaustive. Other connected issues arose from the literature review and specific Covid-19 engagement events with youth work practitioners. These are considered within the report.

This includes an in-depth look at what youth work provided during Covid-19. The report shows the adaptation of youth work services in line with the restrictions at any particular time. It highlights the number of ways in which youth work was delivered, including, but not exclusively relating to:

- **Youth work outdoors**
- **Detached youth work**
- **Digital youth work**
- **Outdoor education**
- **Summer programmes**

This evidence was gathered through a literature review (including evaluation reports and research reports on a local and national level in Scotland) and specific stakeholder engagement events. It highlighted the importance of getting it right for every child and young person as a whole system responsibility and the need for youth work practitioners as part of the solution to any ongoing challenges young people face.

We hope the findings within this report can be a complementary addition to the Covid-19 Learning and Evaluation Group and be considered in any broader recommendations required to support young people better as the country renews from the impacts of Covid-19.

# What did youth work do during Covid-19?

During Covid-19, youth work adapted its services to the restrictions at the time. Youth work was delivered in 5 main ways:

- **Digital youth work**
- **Youth work outdoors**
- **Detached youth work**
- **Outdoor education**
- **Summer programmes**



## Digital youth work

During the engagement events, youth workers told us that when the Covid-19 restrictions came into force, all face-to-face youth work was halted, and organisations had to pivot to digital youth work quickly. Many youth work organisations were unprepared for this shift. Some organisations described having limited digital skills and scant access to online tools. Up to that point, youth work organisations had, in the main, worked with young people face-to-face and found that they struggled to contact some young people as they did not have contact details.

Despite this, youth workers recognised the severity of the situation and its potential impact on young people and moved quickly to establish digital services. Youth workers were described as "nimble and adaptable", doing "whatever they could, whenever they could" to keep young people safe. This was a steep learning curve for many youth workers who had done little or no digital youth work in the past. They were aware of safeguarding issues with digital youth work, but planning and risk assessment were done on an evolving, iterative basis. They used various tools to engage young people including Snapchat, House Party, Zoom, and Discord. These tools evolved as young people and youth workers' skills and confidence developed.

Digital youth work often had a physical element to it. Youth workers would drop activity or cooking packs at young people's houses and then structure the online session around a shared activity. This allowed young people to connect with other young people and their youth worker.

## CASE STUDY: FOOD PUNKS AT TWEEDDALE YOUTH ACTION

Food Punks is a social enterprise at Tweeddale Youth Action. It started teaching young people how to cook fresh local food and became a catering business. During the pandemic they moved their model online on a Friday afternoon. Young people were sent weighed and bagged ingredients with a recipe and any equipment and kit that they needed before the online session. This initiative not only helped young people learn cooking skills, but created fun activities that connected them with other young people. The food parcels also helped to address food poverty in a dignified way by providing enough ingredients to feed the young person and their family. One young person shared:

"During lockdown the youth club has helped me stay positive with the baking and the quizzes. I have really enjoyed it all, and the youth club has been really uplifting during a hard time".



## Youth work outdoors

When restrictions allowed, youth workers moved back to face-to-face youth work in the form of planned youth groups, 1-2-1 sessions, and wellbeing walks, all taking place outdoors in the local community. This benefited young people and youth workers, developing new knowledge and appreciating their community. Organisations have continued to deliver some activities outdoors (especially the well-being walks) as they felt they were a good way of engaging young people and encouraging them to talk about how they are feeling.

## Detached youth work

Detached youth work takes place outside and engages young people where they are meeting, be that a park, street, or retail park. It differs from the youth work described above in that the youth workers go to where young people are rather than running groups that they come to. Once restrictions permitted, some organisations deployed detached youth workers to make contact with young people. This meant youth workers operating in new areas of their local community or responding to reports of young people gathering.

## Outdoor learning

Outdoor learning is different from simply moving traditional indoor youth to work outdoors. Scottish Outdoors Education Centres explain that outdoor learning gives young people a chance to take part in challenges and adventure, by connecting meaningfully with nature. It also has a vital role in supporting pupil and school recovery and narrowing the attainment gap.

In 2021, the Scottish Government created the [Outdoor Education Recovery Fund](#). This fund aimed to widen access to outdoor learning and offer support for education recovery. Between May-December 2021, 45 outdoor learning programmes were delivered across Scotland, and these programmes were supported by £500,000 in funding from Scottish Government. 8,514 young people took part in nearly 2000 sessions.

[Education Scotland](#) explained that many Primary 7 children could not participate in outdoor, overnight school camps during the restrictions. In response, some local authorities worked with partners to provide whole-day outdoor activities e.g., kayaking, hill walking, and abseiling.



## Summer programmes

Youth work played an important role in delivering summer programmes as part of the investment of £20 million in Scottish Government funding. During the summer break of 2021, [Get into Summer](#) supported children and young people to socialise, play and reconnect. An evaluation found that Get into Summer increased physical activity, helped children and young people spend more time outdoors, and improved wellbeing and food provision, particularly for low-income families. There were some barriers to participation. For example, for low-income families there was a lack of awareness of suitable activities. For families with a child with a disability or additional support needs, there was a lack of skilled staff to support children to ensure activities were fully inclusive. Local authorities also raised concerns about not engaging as many minority ethnic families as they had hoped. However, there was little discussion about the barriers preventing minority ethnic families from engaging in the evaluation.

## CASE STUDY: YOUTHBORDERS

YouthBorders took a rights-based approach to support the delivery of Get into Summer in partnership with Scottish Borders Council. Through two programmes (a rural youth work collaborative and a small grants scheme) they prioritised support for children and young people who were most likely to be experiencing continued disadvantage and, therefore, have been particularly adversely affected by Covid-19.

- 1895, children and young people benefited from participating in activities
- At least 28% of children and young people who benefited from activities were in priority families
- At least 22% of children and young people who participated in activities had undergone a significant transition during the lockdown
- At least 1 in 4 of the children and young who benefited from activities were living in poverty or low-income households
- At least 1 in 10 children and young people supported by the funding had a disability or additional support need
- 68 Care Experienced children and young people took part in opportunities through this funded activity.

"Thank you so much for providing such a fantastic holiday club! [Young person] has loved every minute of it. His confidence has grown massively, since attending. He has pushed himself to do activities out of his comfort zone!" (Parent/Carer)

## A note on awards and accreditation

During Covid-19 adaptions were made online and new resources were created to support young people to achieve awards and accreditation. However, due to the focus on engaging and supporting young people in a time of crisis, there was a reduction in the number of awards completed. Members of the Awards Network expect to see an increase in awards uptake in the post-Covid-19 era.

# What impact did youth work have during Covid-19?

This section of the report considers the impact of youth work on young people and their communities. It also examines the effects of Covid-19 on youth workers and their organisations.



## The impact of youth work on young people and their communities during Covid-19

### Connection

Youth workers told us that one of the main impacts youth work had on young people was providing opportunities for connection. Young people lost physical and social relationships with others, and youth work was a much-needed link to the outside world. Young people also missed the stimulation, structure, and routine of face-to-face education, work, or youth work. Online youth work provided some normality and continuity for young people. For some, it was the highlight of their week.

Youth work helped young people to connect with their peers and youth workers. Throughout Covid-19, youth work provided safe spaces for young people to have fun, access support, and advice, and connect with others. This was at a time when there were very few other services available.

Giving young people chances to plan and look to the future helped to build optimism. Youth work during the pandemic offered hope that things would improve and that there were still opportunities for fun and connection.

## Mental health

Youth workers shared the pandemic's impact on young people's mental health, particularly the lockdowns. This is also clear in the literature. Research by Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland, and Scottish Youth Parliament (April 2020) found that 39% of young people in their sample felt moderately or highly concerned about their mental wellbeing.

In the summer of 2020, Young Minds found issues for young people accessing support for their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Many support groups could not meet, schools could not provide support online, and regular conversations with supportive adults such as youth workers were difficult to arrange. There were indeed challenges for youth workers to support young people during the lockdowns. The University of Edinburgh (2022) completed a report for the Research Commission for the Scottish Covid-19 Enquiry. They found that restrictions on the youth work sector negatively impacted on mental health and wellbeing of young people who rely on the service, especially marginalised and vulnerable young people. Switching to providing an online provision helped provide some continuity for young people. However, there were issues around digital capacity, digital literacy, infrastructure, connectivity, and access to technological devices for practitioners, young people, and their families. The impact of LGBT Youth Scotland's digital youth work research in 2020 found that young people's engagement with digital youth work during lockdown led to reduced isolation, improved wellbeing, personal growth, and increased resilience.

## Volunteering

Another impact youth workers reported during the engagement sessions was an increase in young people volunteering. They said that young people volunteered to support other young people or the community during Covid-19, and this has continued. Youth workers speculated that this increase in volunteering might be due to young people spending more time in their local community and developing a greater appreciation for it. They thought that young people tried volunteering during Covid-19 and found that they got something from it, and liked how they felt helping others.

This increase in volunteering has affected the perception of young people. In one area, young people fundraised and created well-being for pupils and afternoon tea packs for the community. The youth worker said that this had changed how the community viewed these young people and had given them access to the community hall.

Young people have also volunteered to offer digital support for families and people to tackle digital exclusion.

Youth workers thought that young people appreciated having youth work during Covid-19 and now volunteer to ensure it is there for other young people. Losing access to youth work and other services during Covid-19 has motivated young people to get involved.

In addition to volunteering, one organisation reported that four of the six youth workers they have recently employed were young people they engaged with during Covid-19.

## Holistic support for young people

During the lockdown, the youth work sector continued to provide services for young people. Youth workers told us how they pivoted quickly to a digital service working flexibly and responding to needs. When restrictions were lifted, and some face-to-face work resumed, youth workers adapted their practice to engage young people. They started wellbeing walks, cooking challenges, and online activities to engage young people in fun activities, give them something to look forward to, and provide support for particular issues they were facing.

Youth workers better understand a wide range of issues that affect young people. Often in lockdown, the services that youth workers would refer or signpost young people to were closed or offering significantly reduced benefits, so youth workers stepped in to fill the gaps and help young people. The types of support provided by youth work have broadened due to Covid-19. This has affected how youth workers now plan programmes and services. They offered support for food poverty, finance, and mental health, which has continued as the lockdown lifted. This has led to deeper relationships with young people. An awareness of what young people have experienced and missed out on means youth workers focus on providing opportunities to make up for what was missed and more tailored services for young people.

Youth workers are now on the lookout for emerging issues. They have learned that if one young person raises an issue or problem, the likelihood is that it affects many more. They also reported that as well as deepening relationships with young people, they engaged with new people and explored new community areas where young people were gathering.

## Whole family engagement

This improved understanding of young people and their lives also leads to youth workers providing whole-family support. When meeting young people or dropping activities or food packs, they would often meet and chat with the broader family. Youth workers described delivering welfare checks and family cafes offering support with finances and food and also providing access to qualifications.

## Poverty

Covid-19 had a significant impact on those living in poverty. Scotland's worse-affected communities now face the added burden of the cost of living crisis. A recent report by Youth Scotland (September 2022) concluded that despite these ongoing challenges, youth work groups continue to build strong partnerships with local communities, pairing tried and tested methods of supporting children and young people with innovative new interventions.

The literature and youth workers in the engagement events highlighted the critical role youth work played in addressing food insecurity and learning loss during school holidays. The Lines Between (2020) evaluated a pilot programme led by YouthLink Scotland, with funding from Scottish Government. The six pilot projects in Moray, Scottish Borders, Falkirk, East Ayrshire, Dundee City, and, South Lanarkshire, worked with 152 young people in the summer of 2020. The pilot areas took a sensitive and dignified approach to address food insecurity by providing families with weekly challenge boxes, online baking and cooking sessions with food deliveries, and outdoor activities. As well as addressing hunger, these sessions and activities helped young people develop essential

preparation, planning, and handling skills. The pilot demonstrates youth work's contribution to preventing learning loss by maintaining young people's skills, motivation, and engagement with education during holiday periods. It also allowed youth workers to engage with wider family members such as parents and siblings. This brought families together.



## CASE STUDY: HIGHLIFE HIGHLAND

"During the pandemic, isolation became a way of life. Reaching out was not such an easy thing for some young people to do… In my area, I witnessed increased isolation with the addition of poverty ripping through some of my families. Using my trusted relationships with young people, I tried to break through these cracks. I offered some 1:1 'health walks' to young people. This was sold in a way that they thought they were helping me to stay motivated to keep up my steps, where this was a mask to encourage them to leave the security of their rooms and build up the confidence to face the world again. Their engagement was evidence that to dress up for the health walk offered to be helping me instead of focusing on the young person was a success. Adapting what we do in youth work is necessary. This allows freedom to meet the needs of individuals" (Youth Worker)

## Employability

In November 2020 Lockdown Lowdown, a survey of over 6000 young people was conducted by Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland, and Scottish Youth Parliament. 38% of young people in part-time employment disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "I feel good about my future employment prospects". 39% of young people in full-time jobs disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This highlights young people's concern about employability during the pandemic.

A paper by YouthLink Scotland outlines the role that youth work has played during Covid-19 to support young people into employment through signposting, developing skills, and building a trusting relationship. This helped ensure that the young person was more confident and prepared to join the workforce.

## CASE STUDY: HELM TRAINING

Helm Training offers a programme called Pathways to Dundee schools. During the pandemic, Helm offered employability and core skills SQA work for those working from home. Home visits by staff supported this aim. Helm continued to provide their brand of youth work, with an emphasis on vocational and life skills, in-person for those deemed most vulnerable. For those young people who were anxious about being in person, Helm supported them to engage with other providers such as Barnardo's, who were offering fully online engagement, which suited their needs better.

"Without youth work, young people, and the families and people who support them, would have struggled throughout the pandemic. Youth work provided support on a scale never before seen, for social skills, emotional wellbeing, mental wellbeing and simply positive entertainment" (Youth worker)

# Supporting young people who faced barriers to participation during Covid-19

## Young people with disabilities

The pandemic disproportionately impacted young people with protected characteristics. Interest Link Borders provides support to anyone aged 8+ with learning disabilities living in the Scottish Borders. Respite and activities services were closed during the national lockdowns; Interest Link Borders filled that gap through frequent contact and activities for the whole family. They used a mix of Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, text messages, telephone, and, newsletters to ensure no one was left out. One young person shared in 2020, "Interest Link is a lifeline just now. I'd be devastated without it".

During the engagement sessions, youth workers expressed concern that while most young people were isolated during the lockdown, this was amplified for young people who were shielding or who had a disability or health condition that made online engagement difficult. They were physically isolated for longer and had fewer opportunities to engage in youth work or other activities.

## Young people from black and minority ethnic communities

In 2020 Intercultural Youth Scotland outlined the need for appropriate risk assessments and race-informed, culturally-responsive youth work to support black and minority ethnic young people returning to school. Professor Rowena Arshad from the University of Edinburgh completed a Booster Consultation Report on behalf of YouthLink Scotland in 2021. This report explains that where there was funding for black and minority ethnic led events, such as summer programmes; the youth workers viewed these as highly valuable. They provided opportunities for young people to go on trips and have fun activities; many would not have had this opportunity without the funding.

An organisation working with black and minority ethnic young people reported that young people faced additional barriers to engaging with school online due to English not being spoken at home and, in some cases, parents/carers having a limited computer and digital skills. This particularly impacted online engagement with the schools that youth work organisations supported. The organisation provided a digital space for young people to come along and share their challenges, gave help and support, and ensured that young people could meet up.

## Young people from the LGBTI community

YouthLink Scotland, Northern Star, and the University of Edinburgh conducted research in 2020 to examine The Impact of LGBT Youth Scotland's Digital Youth Work on Young People during Lockdown. During this research, 22 young people shared the impact youth work had, which focused on reduced isolation, improved wellbeing, personal growth, and increased resilience. Online youth work was challenging for some young people because it made it harder to read body language and facial expressions; others were uncomfortable seeing themselves on screen. During Covid-19 LGBT Youth Scotland provided group work opportunities, individual support, participation opportunities, a safe and inclusive space, and regularly scheduled youth work. One young person, aged 19, shared:

> "Without LGBT Youth Scotland lockdown would have been horrible. I would not be communicating with anyone outside my immediate family and like two friends, so being able to communicate with the other people I normally see at group is good. And getting support from youth workers has helped a lot too, my mental health would have been in a much worse state than it is now, and I am not sure I'd be safe or alive right now. I've not used the pride and pixels server much, but I've been interacting in there, a group of us actually all met up in Dundee when the restrictions were lifted a bit. I've been engaging in 1.1 more recently and they've been good and helped a lot, I don't think anything has been taken away from doing them in person".

## Girls and young women

In 2021, Girlguiding distributed a survey where they explored hopes and fears for the future. The findings show that the pandemic had caused much change that had deeply impacted their lives. It affected their mental health and shaped their world views. The survey found that Girlguiding had provided invaluable support to girls and young women during Covid-19. 59% shared that youth groups/clubs had positively influenced them. 93% believed the government should support youth groups and clubs to help young people during Covid-19 and in the future.

## Young people who are justice and care experienced

Youth Justice Voices was created as a collaboration between Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum (Staf) and the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ). It was established to amplify the voices of young people aged 16-25 with experience in the care and justice systems. Led by the steering group Youth Just Us, the group uses creative ways to be heard in the justice system and explore and share their experiences with policymakers, managers, corporate parents, and the Scottish Government.

Youth workers adapted their practice during the pandemic to support the group online. The initial focus was on ensuring everyone was okay and providing care packages, including vouchers for takeaways so they could eat together online. They then continued their work, including working with Police Scotland to tackle stigma and discrimination. They created a national newsletter that included quizzes and word searches; this was distributed online, with physical copies for young people in Polmont. Young people also ran workshops for Scotland's Youth Justice Vision Action Plan.

## Young people living in rural communities

A report by Rural Youth Project in August 2020 highlights some of the issues experienced by young people living in rural communities, such as poor transport, poor digital connectivity, and inadequate housing. Despite these issues, before the pandemic, 72% of respondents felt optimistic about the future; in 2020, this reduced to 40%. Funding was available during Covid-19 to address social isolation and loneliness, administered by YouthLink Scotland (2022). The fund reached 842 rurally isolated young people. The fund provided additional resources to improve the inclusivity of current provisions and extra support hours to support young people in areas of high deprivation.

### CASE STUDY: SHETLAND

Yell Youth Cafe on Shetland was awarded £5000 from the Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund. The Youth Cafe closed during the lockdowns, and the funding was used to reopen as restrictions eased and provide transport for young people living on a remote, access-deprived island to attend the cafe. The Youth Cafe provides a warm, safe, friendly space, which gives young people a sense of empowerment, where they can develop new skills, and participate in an environment different from that of school or home. They can overcome the isolation and loneliness of living in a remote island community, which has been particularly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing them to connect with their community and socialise with their peers.

# The impact of Covid-19 on youth workers and youth work organisations

## Role of youth work

The role of youth work broadened during the pandemic. Organisations noted that pre-pandemic they would have referred young people to other organisations if they needed support on specific issues. During the pandemic, those other organisations were no longer available or able to help, so youth work stepped in to fill the void.

Youth workers no longer take for granted pre-pandemic ways of working. They learned to be more proactive. They identified and filled gaps in services for young people regardless of whether it was within the youth work remit. They did what was needed for young people with care and compassion. Youth work helped young people feel important and valued. Youth work organisations are more caring, flexible, and resilient due to the pandemic, focusing on ensuring young people are not left behind.

## Taking youth work outdoors

When restrictions eased, limitations on travel and mixing meant that face-to-face youth work utilised very local spaces and facilities. Young people and youth workers got to know their local areas much more, which led to a greater appreciation of the community. Youth workers adapted their practice to make the most of the outdoor spaces. Many used a variety of walk-and-talk approaches which they've carried on using even after restrictions have been lifted.

## Partnerships

During Covid-19, youth workers developed new and deepened existing partnerships.

"There has been a fundamental shift towards collaborative work across services due to the pandemic".

They worked closely with social work, education, and other agencies, and there were collaborations between third-sector organisations and local authorities.

Closer working with partners, such as education and social work has led to an increased understanding of the value of youth work. Youth work is now recognised as a critical strategic partner within local authorities. Partners recognise that youth work is not an activity but a process using a suite of resources and approaches that impacts young people's confidence skills and engagement. This has increased requests for youth work to participate in various groups within local authorities.

# Opportunities and Challenges

Covid-19 and the resulting restrictions were a seismic shift for the youth work sector. There were significant challenges for young people and youth work, but the pandemic also offered opportunities to develop new practice skills, expand professional networks and share best practice.

## Opportunities

### Skills development

Covid-19 provided opportunities for skills development for youth workers. Before the pandemic, most youth work was delivered offline, with many youth workers lacking digital literacy, tools and equipment. The need to switch quickly to digital youth work meant a swift upskilling of many youth work staff. This has resulted in a workforce that is better able to operate in an online/digital environment. Organisations now has various online information, session plans, tools, and templates to use in the future.

### Sharing practice

As well as partnerships within a geographical area, working digitally meant being able to work with and share information with other youth workers across the country. This has improved the training and development of youth work staff by sharing best practices, challenges, and lessons learned from new ways of working. New tools and platforms like Padlet, MS teams, Zoom, and Discord enabled knowledge exchange between youth workers in different parts of Scotland.

Youth workers said they are more likely to be able to attend training and networking sessions online, and this has had a significant impact on the development of youth workers. They are networking with other organisations as the travel barrier (both time and cost) has been removed.

### Funding

Many funders relaxed restrictions on funding and reporting during the pandemic allowing organisations to redeploy project funding to frontline youth engagement and wellbeing work. This relaxed funding environment was appreciated by organisations able to make decisions based on local knowledge about where funds can be best spent.

### Meeting a need

In May 2022, Education Scotland published a thematic review focused on recovery based on 42 schools across Scotland. They found that staff recognised that whole school approaches might not be sufficient to support the wellbeing of all pupils. They appointed an additional team, including youth workers, to meet this need.

## Challenges

### Access to buildings and facilities

Access to buildings and facilities for youth work was a significant challenge for the sector during Covid-19. These issues were experienced from the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020 to the end of 2021.

YouthLink Scotland distributed four surveys to the youth work sector to understand the sector's access to facilities during Covid-19. In September 2020, 39% of respondents were not offering face-to-face youth work outdoors or indoors due to restrictions. Barriers they experienced included lack of appropriate space, social distancing, lack of toilets and handwashing facilities, weather, and keeping up with Government guidance. By October 2020, 108 respondents shared that most offered outdoor youth work. Only 5% were not yet able/permitted to offer services. A third survey was completed in June 2021 by 220 respondents, at which point, only 22% had full access to facilities. Of those respondents with no access to facilities, 42% said the reason was the interpretation of guidance/restrictions, 27% said Local Authorities were not providing lets, and 36% had not been given a timeframe for reopening. As a consequence, 52% said young people had lost access to key trusted relationships with youth workers and peers, and 42% said young people's progress with learning and development had stalled. The most significant response to the survey came in November 2021, when there were 329 responses. Only 54% of total respondents had access to the facilities they needed, and 44% of organisations wanting access to schools had no access. The University of Edinburgh (2022) reflected on these findings and suggested an inequality around parity of

the value between formal education providers and the third sector support services, including youth work was a factor. Two years after the first lockdown, the youth work sector still faces barriers to accessing facilities. The University of Edinburgh (2022) concludes that the lack of access and issues around online practice will impact the recovery of the youth work sector.

## Funding

While the funding provided to the youth work sector during Covid-19 was welcome and beneficial, the focus and logistics of the budget were challenging. The timing of some of the funding, particularly summer funding, made it hard to spend money and apportion it strategically. Organisations also noted they need funding for staffing and core costs rather than equipment.

## Digital youth work

Digital engagement with young people was initially challenging for youth work during Covid-19. The speed at which lockdown was imposed meant that many youth workers were not prepared for the shift to digital youth work and found they did not have ways to contact young people - especially those who had accessed drop-in youth work or accessed youth work in an ad hoc way before Covid-19. Post-lockdown youth work is in a much stronger position digitally and has the systems it needs to work with and contact young people online.

Young people's engagement in digital youth work varied between groups. For those young people use to more intensive support every week, the shift to online youth work did not always work well, and it was difficult to engage them. One organisation talked about a group of young people involved in a pre-pandemic employability program. They received 15 hours per week of face-to-face support and developed close relationships with youth workers. They were prioritised for early face-to-face engagement as soon as restrictions allowed.

For some young people who might previously have faced barriers to accessing youth work due to geography or specific issues, digital youth work allowed them to engage on their terms. Youth workers reported a drop in young people's digital engagement over time in response to the stage of restrictions and digital fatigue.

## Re-establishing youth work

Re-establishing youth work was challenging for some youth work organisations once restrictions began to lift. Some young people felt that youth work had "left them" during the enforced absence of face-to-face work. Youth workers had to work hard to build back the trust lost in this period.

Young people had missed the structure that youth work provided, especially when all other regular activities had disappeared. This was particularly the case for young people with complex needs or who found it hard to engage online. One youth work organisation told us that their service was able to continue working with young people throughout the second lockdown. These young people were considered at significant risk and disengaged from school and other activities. Youth workers partnered with the schools and provided programmes throughout the second lockdown. As a result, the school is keen to keep the programme going, and young people are eager to get involved.

## Lessons for the future

### Role of the youth work sector

Youth work has a significant role in helping young people adjust to and thrive in a post-Covid-19 world.

Public Health Scotland (2022) explains that "the impact of Covid-19 has meant the removal of available supports that enable young people to prevent unintended pregnancy and other sexual health issues, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This includes education in schools, loss of youth work services, and most sexual health service provision and is likely to have the most significant impact on those more vulnerable or who generally fail to engage". Public Health Scotland states that they prioritise action to support the recovery of youth work in a way that "promotes the health and wellbeing of children and young people and addresses increasing attainment inequality".

During Covid-19, the youth work sector worked in partnership with other agencies and services in a much deeper and more collaborative way. It often went beyond what would traditionally have been seen as youth work. It supported young people in a range of new methods, such as tackling food poverty, more intensive mental health and wellbeing, and total family support. As a result, the perception and reputation of youth work have shifted within local authorities and partner organisations, and it is seen as an essential and impactful service.

The youth work sector is involved in discussions and service development in ways previously closed to them however, they cannot engage in some of this work due to limited budgets and staffing.

In this Covid-19 recovery period, youth workers reported an expectation from partners and young people that youth work services would return to normal but thought this was unrealistic. Youth workers reported concerns about young people's mental health and levels of risk-taking behaviour. More young people need youth work, and they are presenting with increasingly complex problems and issues. The demand for youth work is significantly outstripping the sector's ability to respond.

This is coupled with the challenges of recruiting skilled and experienced youth workers. Youth workers are often first responders for young people. They need to have the skills to support young people with the issues they are facing. The youth work workforce is depleted and fatigued and at risk of burnout due to working through Covid-19 and understaffing. Some workers left or retired during the pandemic, and recruiting youth workers at the skill level is challenging.

It is challenging to secure funding for core costs like staffing, development, and building costs. Planning and development time for youth workers is essential to ensure the quality of youth work and the wellbeing of youth workers. Funding is often on a project-by-project basis, making it hard to plan and provide continuity of youth workers for young people. Recruitment of skilled and experienced youth workers is a significant issue for the sector.

Despite these challenges, young people have shared the importance of youth work in recovery. During Covid-19, Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland, and Scottish Youth Parliament distributed surveys and conducted focus groups with young people called Lockdown Lowdown. In July 2021, 35% of young people thought that youth work had a role in supporting young people as Scotland eased out of

lockdown. The reasons included allowing space to socialise and re-establishing a feeling of community and social connection. They also felt that youth work supported young people's mental health. Some young people shared that engaging in youth work would allow them to regain confidence and reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation. As one example, "I feel that having youth groups and being able to go will help young people's mental health and also help with social anxiety".

Young Minds (2021) examined the impact of Covid-19 on young people's mental health needs. They stated that the "Government must also ensure that local charities and youth clubs, which provide vital early mental support, survive the economic impact of the pandemic". The small-scale Covid-19 Conversations research project conducted in December 2020 and January 2021 asked people to share their experiences of the pandemic and what could be improved further. One suggestion included enhancing out-of-school activities and community youth work (Scottish Government, October 2021).

## Emergency preparedness

The challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic have left the youth work sector in a much stronger position to respond to future similar events. The workforce is better skilled and also knowledgeable about digital youth work. It can mobilise more quickly.

While it is impossible to know what restrictions any future pandemic might necessitate, it is essential to bear in mind that there are some young people for whom digital youth work is not an option. Consideration therefore should be given to allowing these young people to maintain face-to-face youth work.

# Appendix 1 - Methodology

The Scottish Government funded YouthLink Scotland to complete an evidence review exploring youth work's role in responding to and recovery from Covid-19. This evidence review will inform the work of the Scottish Government Covid-19 Learning and Evaluation Group.

## Methodology

This evidence review gathered data in two ways:

1. **A literature review**

2. **Stakeholder engagement events**

## Literature review

A mapping exercise was conducted to identify any reports on youth work's role during Covid-19. This included reviewing all reports shared through YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work Briefing (a newsletter to members) from March 2020 to September 2022. The briefing was also used to ask Members to send any other reports they were aware of. YouthLink Scotland's networks were also approached to share any reports, including The Scottish Youth Work Research Steering Group, National Youth Work Covid Recovery Group, and Social Isolation and Loneliness Action Group. After a review of all the reports, a total of 76 pieces were identified as explicitly discussing youth work's role during Covid-19 (see appendix 3).

## Stakeholder engagement events

Two online engagement events were held to better understand the views of the youth work sector and reach organisations that perhaps had not published reports during Covid-19. YouthLink Scotland commissioned Northern Star (an independent evaluation company) to deliver the sessions, analyse the responses and support the information write-up. The first took place on the 23rd of June and was attended by 11 representatives from the youth work sector. The second event was held on the 10th of August with four equalities-focused youth work organisations representatives. For representatives from the sector who wanted to contribute to the evidence review but could not attend the events, YouthLink Scotland conducted follow-up online calls and emails to ensure their views were heard. The list of contributors can be found in appendix 2.

## Ethics

To ensure this evidence review was conducted ethically and safely, YouthLink Scotland adhered to their Research Ethics Policy and completed an ethics checklist which The Scottish Government approved. The completed checklist is available on request; please contact acalder@youthlinkscotland.org.

# Appendix 2 - Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following organisations for their contributions to the report.

**Aberdeen Foyer**

**Awards Network**

**Borders Additional Needs Group (BANG)**

**Cheviot Youth**

**Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ)**

**Dundee City Council**

**Dundee Youth Network**

**Fife Council**

**Glasgow Life**

**Helm Training**

**Highlife Highland**

**Hot Chocolate Trust**

**Impact Arts**

**Inspiring Young Voices – Inspire Highland**

**LGBT Youth Scotland**

**Lothian and Association Youth Clubs (LAYC)**

**Perth and Kinross Council**

**Police Scotland**

**North Lanarkshire Council – Community Learning and Development**

**Stronger Together Enterprise**

**Tweeddale Youth Action**

**YMCA Scotland**

**YouthBorders**

**Youth Highland**

# Appendix 3 - Bibliography

**Awards Network (2021)** #Youthworkathome – Supporting Award Achievement/Responding to the Pandemic

**Catch the Light (2021)** Cashback for Communities: Youth Work Fund – Annual Report 2020/21.

**Children in Scotland (2022)** Participation Through the Pandemic: Case Study Report

**Children in Scotland (2022)** Participation Through the Pandemic: Final Report

**Cross Party Group on Children and Young People (2022)** Pandemic Impact Survey 2022

**Education Scotland (February 2022)** Successful Approaches to Learning Outdoors: A Report by HM Inspectors

**Education Scotland (May 2022)** Local Approaches to Recovery: A Thematic Review – A Report by HM Inspectors

**Education Scotland and Scottish Government (2021)** Equity Audit: Deepening the Understanding of the Impact Covid-19 and School Building Closures had on Children from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds and Setting Clear Areas of Focus for Accelerating Recovery

**Girlguiding (2021)** Back in Lockdown: Girls' and Young Women's Hopes and Fears for the Future

**Girlguiding Scotland (2020)** Girls in Scotland 2020

**Glasgow Youth Council (Summer 2020)** The Future After Lockdown: Consultation Report

**Includem (2021)** The School Experience of Young People Pre and During Covid-19

**Intercultural Youth Scotland (2020)** Covid in Colour: The Experiences of Young Black and People of Colour Scots During the Pandemic

**Interest LINK Borders (2020)** 2020 Impact Report

**LGBT Youth Scotland (2022)** Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People

**Muir, K (2022)** Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education. Scottish Government.

**North Lanarkshire Council (Summer 2021)** Community Learning and Development Evaluation Report

**Prince's Trust (2021)** The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index 2021

**Public Health Scotland (2022)** Ensuring Our Future: Addressing the Impact of Covid-19 on Children, Young People and Their Families – Discussion Paper

**Rural Youth Project (August 2020)** Qualitative Report

**Samaritans Scotland (October 2020)** Hidden Too Long: Uncovering Self-Harm in Scotland

**Scottish Government (2020)** Young Person No-One Left Behind: Initial Report

**Scottish Government (October 2021)** Covid Recovery Strategy: For a Fairer Future

**Scottish Government (October 2021)** Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps – The Contribution of Education to Scotland's Covid Recovery

**Scottish Government (2021)** School Age Childcare in Scotland: Progress Report 2021

**Scottish Government (2022)** Evaluation of Get into Summer 2021: Research Findings No. 17/2022

**Scottish Government (2022)** Get into Summer 2021 Evaluation: Parents Omnibus Survey

**Scottish Government (2022)** Get into Summer 2021: qualitative evaluation

**Scottish Outdoor Education Centres (2021)** A Vision for Young People 2021-2031: Thriving Through Residential Outdoor Education

**Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot (December 2020)** Lockdown Lowdown: The Voice of Seldom Heard Groups During Covid-19 Pandemic Report

**Scottish Youth Parliament (2021)** From Scotland's Young People: The Scottish Youth Parliament's Manifesto 2021-2026

**Skills Development Scotland and Young Person's Guarantee (2022)** Careers by Design: Report of the Career Review Programme Board

**TD1 Youth Hub (2021)** Making a Difference. Looking Back: An Impact Report about the Difference TD1 Youth Hub has made 2 to 5 Years Later in Young People's Lives

**The Lines Between (2020)** Food Insecurity and Learning Loss Pilot: Evaluation Report

**The Lines Between and Youth Borders (2021)** A Force for Good: Amplifying the Third Sector Youth Work Workforce's Contribution to Economic Growth and Social Change in the Scottish Borders

**The Prince's Trust (2020)** The Aspiration Gap: A Report from The Prince's Trust

**The Prince's Trust and You Gov (2020)** Young People in Lockdown

**The University of Edinburgh (September 2021)** YouthLink Scotland: Booster Consultation Report by Professor Emerita Rowena Arshad CBE, FEIS

**The University of Edinburgh (2022)** The Delivery of Education and Certification: Research Commission for the Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry

**Tweedale Youth Action (2021)** Tweedale Youth Action Report to the Trustees For the Year Ended 31 March 2021

**Volunteer Scotland (February 2022)** The Road to Recovery: Lessons Learned from Scotland's Volunteering Response to Covid-19

**Young Minds (March 2020)** Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs

**Young Minds (Summer 2020)** Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs

**Young Minds (February 2021)** Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs

**Young Scot, Children in Scotland and Scottish Government (2021)** The Education Recovery Panel

**Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and Scottish Youth Parliament (April 2020)** Lockdown Lowdown: What Young People in Scotland are thinking about Covid-19

**Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and Scottish Youth Parliament (May 2020)** Lockdown Lowdown: Key Findings and Data Analysis

**Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and Scottish Youth Parliament (November 2020)** Lockdown Lowdown: A Survey of Young People in Scotland about their 'New Normal' Lives as Lockdown Restrictions Change.

**Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and Scottish Youth Parliament (July 2021)** Lockdown Lowdown 3: What Young People in Scotland think as Lockdown Begins to Ease

**Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and Scottish Youth Parliament (November 2021)** Lockdown Lowdown 3: Demographic Exploration of Results

**Youth Borders (2021)** Holiday Programme 2021: Scottish Borders Strategic Youth Work Partnership

**Youth Borders (2021)** Scottish Borders Get into Summer

**Youth Borders (2022)** Winter Fund 2022 Impact Report

**Youth Scotland (2020)** Reopening of Indoor Youth Work Toolkit: Practical Planning for your Youth Group/Organisation to Use with the National Guidance in Phase 3

**Youth Scotland (May 2020)** Rising to the Challenge: Community-Based Youth Work and Coronavirus. Findings from the Youth Scotland Action Fund

**Youth Scotland (2022)** Acting on Poverty: How Youth Scotland's vital work supports the most affected communities

**YouthLink Scotland, University of Edinburgh and Northern Star (2020)** The Impact of LGBT Youth Scotland's Digital Youth Work on Young People

**YouthLink Scotland (May 2020)** The Covid-19 Crisis: Impact on Youth Work and Young People. A Survey of Scotland's Youth Work Sector Leaders

**YouthLink Scotland (June 2020)** Covid-19 Education Recovery: Youth Work

**YouthLink Scotland (2020)** Learning through Lockdown: The Impact of Youth Work During Summer 2020

**YouthLink Scotland (2020)** National Case Study Evaluation 2020

**YouthLink Scotland (2020)** Outdoor Learning and Education Recovery

**YouthLink Scotland (May 2020)** The Covid-19 Crisis: Impact on Youth Work and Young People. A Survey of Scotland's Youth Work Sector Leaders

**YouthLink Scotland (2020)** Youth Work and Employability

**YouthLink Scotland (June 2020)** Youth Work: Supporting Young People Through and Out of Lockdown. A Statement on Behalf of the Youth Work Sector in Scotland

**YouthLink Scotland (June 2021)** Access to Facilities Survey

**YouthLink Scotland (November 2021)** Headlines from Access to Facilities Survey

YouthLink Scotland (2021) Summer of Play Fund

YouthLink Scotland (2021) YouthLink Scotland Response to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Inquiry into the Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Scotland

YouthLink Scotland (2021) YouthLink Scotland response to Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps - The contribution of education to Scotland's Covid Recovery

YouthLink Scotland (2021) Youth Work and Curriculum for Excellence

YouthLink Scotland (2021) Youth Work: Closing the Poverty-Related Attainment Gap During the Pandemic

YouthLink Scotland (2022) Outdoor Education Recovery Fund Report

YouthLink Scotland (2022) Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund: Round Two. Final Report

YouthLink Scotland (2022) Youth Work Education Recovery Fund