



YouthLink Scotland Response to Scottish Government Plan to Tackle Food Insecurity

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 support, protection and safety for Scotland's young people.

Youth Work's Contribution to Tackling Poverty and Food Insecurity

We know that food insecurity ranges from worrying about running out of food and experiencing hunger due to lack of money or other resources. We are also aware that poor educational outcomes are a key indicator of experiencing poverty in later life and that well paid work is recognised as one of the best protections against poverty.

The focus of our response is on addressing the root causes of poverty so we can collectively tackle food insecurity. We know the youth work approach to food insecurity works. However, youth work's role needs to be considered within the wider approach to tackling poverty. We must give due consideration to youth work's role in supporting young people to engage and progress through education and into employment, as a key factor in reducing the risk of experiencing poverty.

Our National Case Study Evaluation, provides evidence of youth work's contribution to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The evaluation also illustrates youth work's role in skills development and supporting positive school-leaver destinations as key elements of the learner journey.

As the collective voice of the youth work sector, we represent their interests, policy and practice needs to local and national government. 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. It is crucial then that any Scottish Government plan to tackle food insecurity, recognises the youth work sector's integral role in delivering for young people and communities.

Food Insecurity Pilot¹

During 2020, YouthLink Scotland were funded by the Scottish Government to coordinate and support a pilot programme, focused on addressing food insecurity during the school holidays. This was targeted at young people (S1- S6) identified by trusted professionals as experiencing or being at risk of food insecurity or learning loss. This policy statement is informed by the findings from the specific piece of work and enhanced by the information provided by our member youth groups.

Six Regional Improvement Collaborative local authority areas participated in the pilot programme, each developing its own delivery model. The programme was designed to test and evaluate the impact of youth work partnership approaches leading to:

- Offering partnership opportunities for schools, and youth workers from Community Learning and Development (CLD) teams and third sector organisations
- Identify and engage young people who would benefit most
- Plan an approach to delivery that adheres to Scottish Government public health restrictions and protection measures
- Deliver a dignified approach to food insecurity
- Embed measures to tackle food insecurity within an informal learning setting
- Deliver learning opportunities tailored to the needs of the group
- Take a holistic approach to supporting families affected by food insecurity and where possible and appropriate - engaging the whole family.

A number of wider impacts of the pilots were identified, in addition to addressing immediate needs around food insecurity, including skills development, strengthened relationships and broadened perspectives. It is these impacts that are vital to addressing the root causes of food insecurity, breaking the cycle of poverty, and turning response into prevention. The evaluation also identified the key features of the pilot that contributed towards the positive outcomes and underlined the effectiveness of a youth work approach to tackling food insecurity.

Our evaluation found that factors such as education, experience, confidence and family circumstances contribute to food insecurity and other issues with food. For example, low levels of literacy and numeracy affected the extent to which families can budget, plan meals and follow recipes. Some young carers lacked cooking skills, because they had limited opportunities to learn from others in their household, and families with chaotic lives, or unpredictable working patterns struggled to plan meals, relying instead on fast, costly food. These barriers can make it difficult for individuals and families to break cycles of food insecurity.

Youth work approach

A youth work approach is responsive to young peoples' personalities and circumstances. This is evident in the way each pilot project was delivered and project plans were made - providing flexibility when required. It was recognised that a different approach is needed to engage young people in approaches to addressing food

¹ [220119 - food-insecurity-report_proofed.pdf](#)

insecurity, rather than develop another one size fits all approach. As one example from the pilot. It was shown that geography adds a layer of complexity to the issue. Households in rural areas face higher costs and fewer choices due to the limited provision of supermarkets and infrequent, costly public transport options. This was a particularly acute issue in Moray, the most rural of the six pilot areas.

The pilot highlighted that it is important to meet young people where they are and help them own their journey. This is where youth work practitioners are key. Representatives of the youth work sector managed to delivered a person centred, whole family/community approach, respecting the dignity of the individual seeking support and their broader personal development at its core. The approach to food insecurity needs to be about relationships and trust and tailored to the needs of the individual and their life circumstances.

Stigma

Breakfast clubs and food banks were important services in the pilot communities. However, stakeholders described insufficient capacity to meet demand and explained that the stigma of food insecurity prevents families and young people from asking for help through fear that they will be judged, labelled or be contacted by social services. While the issue of stigma needs to be further explored, we recommend that the issue of stigma and food insecurity should be seen as symptomatic of deeper-rooted structural issues, rather than syphoned off and focused on as a separate issue. This was borne out through the pilot programme. Youth work is important at helping to overcome stigma through relationship building and the learning of skills. While the provision of food was important, it became secondary. This shift in power alleviates stigma.

Responding to the impacts of COVID19

COVID19 has significantly disrupted the educational and work pathways for many young people, particularly those affected by poverty. Lockdown restrictions have exacerbated the issues already faced by young people furthest from the labour market, including:

- Inequality of educational engagement and attainment
- Opportunity to develop and articulate the skills and experience they need to gain and retain employment
- Support with the transition through education and training into work.
- Disproportionately poor mental health and wellbeing
- Access to support and opportunities to overcome barriers to employment.

While most of the young people who took part in the pilot lived in areas of multiple deprivation, the disruption noted above, was not contained to these communities. Food insecurity can affect any household, including those with individuals earning money. In many cases, wages do not cover basic costs, or provide a sufficient buffer for financial shocks. For example, some of the families who participated in the pilot had found themselves in need of support with food for the first time, because of the financial impact of COVID19.

Youth workers did not face the barriers to engagement with families, reported by some education and social work partners, because their role is different. Through contact about food and activities, youth work practitioners were able to identify and address hidden needs, cementing existing trusting relationships and making new connections with families who were struggling. This supports an approach to services and support that looks at the whole person.

As we move beyond the coronavirus pandemic, the youth work sector's role at tackling poverty, supporting young people's mental and health being and crucial position across the education, employability and skills system will be vital. Youth work practitioners can help improve the skills and enable sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all Scotland's young people, particularly those experiencing poverty and inequality.

Focus on the root cause of poverty

We agree that accessing emotional and practical support in a dignified way merits focus and youth workers operate well at providing targeted support (including food provision). The youth work sector will continue to pivot and provide relationship based, innovative responses to the needs of young people. However, we would strongly recommend that investment in a universal relationship and skills building offer, that prioritised prevention will have a more transformative effect in this area.

Partnership approach

Some of our member organisations, such as Magic Breakfast¹ and Scran Academy² are already doing great work in this space. We believe any emboldened youth work provision, should consider how to bring together other agencies, so no young person misses out on crucial tailored support. The strengthened local and community approach to the pilot delivery emerged as another success factor we should draw upon going forward. Involvement of partners with an understanding of the target participants and experience in engaging them meant that the right people were targeted and sensitive approaches were employed. Where activities took place out of the home, the use of familiar community facilities helped to avoid another potential barrier to participation, which could have been created with a more centralised approach.

The future

We need to factor in ongoing support needs in project design to ensure project benefits are sustained and built on further over time. The food insecurity pilot evaluation demonstrates potential for this project to lead to profound positive change in the long-term. Any Scottish Government approach needs to consider what works and ensure there is investment to sustain the relationships, preventative approaches and crisis responding. We believe apportioning resources to the youth work sector will unlock this potential and support Scottish Government with their next steps to tackle food insecurity.

¹ [Magic Breakfast](#)

² [Scran Academy | Social Enterprise | Edinburgh](#)

ENDS

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