



YouthLink Scotland Response to the Call for Evidence on the Long-Term Financial Sustainability of Local Government (Local Government Committee)

12/08/2019

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from both the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of both the voluntary and statutory sector. Our vision is of a nation which values its young people and their contribution to society, where young people are supported to achieve their potential.

Scotland's youth work sector reaches in excess of 380,000 young people in youth work opportunities each week. Youth work has three essential and definitive features:

- Young people choose to participate
- Youth work must build from where young people are
- Youth work recognises the young person and the youth worker as partners in a learning process.

While the activities, venues, and approaches utilised to deliver youth work are varied – and include youth clubs, youth projects, specialist or targeted provision, social activism, outdoor learning, awards programmes, uniformed organisations, and democratic participation – youth work in all its forms provides fundamental support to young people across Scotland's local authorities.

At the Third annual Cabinet meeting with children and young people held on 5 March 2019, one of the issues raised by the young people present was the legacy of the year of young people 2018, particularly around budget cuts to youth work services. One of the actions agreed by the Cabinet Ministers was that: *"We will consider resourcing for participation of children and young people, including examining current funding streams, to ensure that participation is sustainable. In doing so, we will consider how national approaches to participation are reflected in the local structures which can facilitate participation"*¹. The call for evidence on the long-term financial sustainability of local government provides an opportunity to explore these points and take relevant action.

Youth Work and the Financial Challenges Facing Local Authorities

We acknowledge the pressure placed on local authorities and recognise that the resources available to deliver services have fallen in real terms. However, in a time of financial challenges for Scotland's local authorities, it is crucial to draw attention to the value of youth work and evidence that investing in our young people provides considerable long-term benefits. YouthLink Scotland has recently the

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/third-annual-cabinet-meeting-with-children-and-young-people/>

#InvestInYouthWork campaign² to show the value of youth work in Scotland. Our recent survey of youth workers highlights perceived reductions to youth work services, budgets and staffing across Scotland over the last three years and this is a serious concern. This response summarises the main arguments for prioritising investment in youth work – how it changes the lives of young people (the most crucial point of all), the value of youth workers, and the wider social and economic benefits. It concludes with the key outcomes we would like to see in relation to budgeting and resourcing of local authority youth services.

1. Recognising the Benefits of Youth Work for Young People

Youth work has a positive impact on young people’s mental health. The confidence and motivation that youth work develops is rated by 85% of employers as very important, whereas qualifications are rated this way by only 27%³. The Young Foundation⁴ produced a framework of social/emotional capabilities (sometimes referred to as “*soft skills*”) developed by youth work. These are: confidence and agency, managing feelings, creativity, resilience and determination, planning and problem solving, and communication.

The Young Foundation brought together a wide range of current research and identified that it is these changes to individual and intrinsic outcomes (the social and emotional capabilities) that lead to more concrete outcomes such as career success, reduction in risky behaviours and building positive relationships. This demonstrates the value of youth work in giving young people the “*soft skills*” they need to make informed decisions and make positive changes to their lives. It should be noted here, as Hall Aitken (2016) identify, that the Young Foundation’s seven capabilities closely align with the Scottish Government’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) framework, focusing on the development of four capacities (successful learners, responsible citizens, confident individuals, effective contributors). Participation in youth work clearly contributes towards the CfE capabilities and this underlines the value of the learning outcomes provided by youth work. This is even more pertinent when considering that youth work can reach some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised young people. This highlights the responsibility the Scottish Government and local authorities to invest in youth work services – without which, the crucial contribution youth work makes to learning for our most vulnerable young people is lost.

In addition, the National Youth Work outcomes⁵ are that young people:

- Are confident, resilient and optimistic for the future
- Manage personal, social, and formal relationships
- Create, describe and apply their learning and skills
- Participate safely and effectively in groups
- Consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control
- Express their voice and demonstrate social commitment
- Broaden their perspectives through new experiences and thinking.

² <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/news/blogs/may-2019/get-involved-in-the-investinyouthwork-campaign/>

³ Hall Aitken, *Social and economic value of youth work in Scotland: initial assessment*, January 2016, <http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/index.asp?MainID=21159>

⁴ Young Foundation A framework of outcomes for young people, July 2012.

⁵ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/policy/youth-work-outcomes/>

The incredible results that youth work can achieve will not be attainable without proper investment in staff, volunteers, and services at local level. Crucially, there is evidence that cuts to youth work are already reducing the life chances of young people and increasing inequalities.

It is clear from our survey of youth workers in Scotland that there are considerable difficulties in collecting accurate budget figures for youth work provision, as these can often sit within different areas within a local authority and are included in the overall budget figures for CLD. It is essential going forward that we have a clear picture of budget spend for youth work, so we can identify gaps in provision and establish whether there is adequate financing of youth work services. In our survey of the sector, we repeatedly heard from youth workers of the devastating effect of cuts to youth services which are placing young people in an increasingly precarious position. Youth workers in our survey spoke of the growing inequality and poverty impacting young people and the increasing prevalence of poor mental health. Those hit the hardest are from deprived backgrounds and often have fewer educational and employment prospects. The reduction in youth work services means there is a loss of a crucial support system as they attempt to find their way in already difficult circumstances. At a time when disadvantaged young people need youth services more than ever, young people are finding they have nowhere to go, leaving them increasingly vulnerable.

Cuts to youth work budgets mean that young people are missing out on services, but also in the decision making processes in their community. The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) campaign, *Youth Work and Me*⁶, surveyed young people about their experiences of youth work in Scotland and found youth work is important to them because it provides opportunities, support, greater confidence and self-esteem, friendship, skills, a voice, access to non-formal education, and independence. If youth work did not exist, young people think there would be more isolation, crime and anti-social behaviour, boredom, mental health problems, poverty, and deaths. They also think there would be fewer opportunities and less support, confidence, youth-led change, friendships and independence.

The research by UNISON⁷ highlights how severe the cuts to youth services in Britain have been and the devastating effect this has had on young people. In England, many parts of the country now have no recognisable youth services at all. Research by the YMCA in England found between 2012 and 2016, 600 youth centres closed, 3,500 youth workers lost their jobs and 140,000 places for young people were lost⁸. Given the current situation in Scotland with the slicing of youth work budgets, there is a real danger that, for some youth work provision, it could be non-recoverable if urgent action to save and prioritise youth work is not taken. UNISON⁹ asked respondents from the youth work sector how they felt cuts in youth services and other relevant services were having an impact on young people:

- 80% said they thought young people feel less empowered
- 71% said it was now harder for young people to stay in formal education
- 65% said young people were finding it harder to get jobs

⁶ https://www.syp.org.uk/youth_work_and_me

⁷ UNISON, *A Future At Risk: Cuts in Youth Services*, August 2016 - <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2016/08/23996.pdf>

⁸ YMCA, *Youth and Consequences*, April 2018 - <https://www.ymca.org.uk/research/youth-and-consequences>

⁹ Ibid.

- 77% reported increased mental health issues among young people, and 70% a rise in increased alcohol and substance abuse
- 83% reported increased crime and anti-social behaviour.

This report also found the overwhelming majority (91%) said the cuts were having a particular impact on young people from poorer backgrounds, with more than half identifying black people, young LGBT people and young women as experiencing particular difficulties. Respondents spoke of increasing levels of social isolation and lack of support for young people, leading them to become withdrawn from society. Some respondents reported the increased risk of young people being caught up in gangs or becoming more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The broader picture is of young people who are “frustrated, unsupported and alienated”¹⁰.

2. The Wider Social and Economic Value of Youth Work

We believe youth work is intrinsically valuable and young people have a right to it. However, the value of youth work lies not only in the difference it makes directly to the lives of the young people who engage with services, but extends further to the many benefits it provides to wider society by tackling inequalities and promoting positive outcomes for individuals. The “*common weal*” benefits from having young people who are engaged in positive activities – they make valuable contributions to their communities.

YouthLink Scotland commissioned research by Hall Aitken¹¹ established the huge economic and social value of youth work. The social return on investment of youth work in Scotland is at least 3:1 – this means that for every £1 invested in youth work, at least £7 of value was created and the total value of youth work in Scotland is at least £656 million¹². This value includes both savings to public spend and economic gains (and this is a conservative estimate to avoid over-claiming – the actual impact could be much greater). Hall Aitken also outlined some of the longer-term outcomes of youth work resulting in reduced costs to the education system, increased personal earnings from better qualifications, reduced wage scar from youth unemployment, positive health behaviours such as reduced incidence of depression, reduced incidence of obesity, reduced incidence of STIs, greater productivity due to reduced absences, reduced costs of criminal justice interventions, savings on welfare payments and reduced risk of children going into the care system.

UNISON¹³ surveyed youth workers about budgetary cuts and many mentioned the impact of youth work cuts on the general public – an increasing breakdown between young people and the wider population, resulting in poorer mental health, increased social isolation, increased substance abuse, anti-social behaviour and crime. The UNISON report also draws attention to the link between the cuts to youth services and increased pressures on statutory services (social care, mental health services, social work, the NHS, police, criminal justice system and the education system) – all a consequence of the loss of support and opportunities youth work services once provided.

¹⁰ Ibid:7

¹¹ Hall Aitken, *Social and economic value of youth work in Scotland: initial assessment*, January 2016, <http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/index.asp?MainID=21159>

¹² Ibid: 6

¹³ UNISON, *A Future At Risk: Cuts in Youth Services*, August 2016 - <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2016/08/23996.pdf>

In 2011, the Christie Commission report¹⁴ called for moves towards preventative spending, estimating that as much as 40 per cent of all spending on public services is accounted for by interventions that could have been avoided by prioritising a preventative approach¹⁵. Yet budget cuts to local authorities mean that Scotland is moving in the opposite direction and preventative work is not being prioritised. Instead, high levels of public resources are poured into alleviating social problems and tackling “*failure demand*” – demand which could have been avoided by earlier preventative measures. This reactive spending targets the consequences and not causes of inequalities, whereas preventative spending can improve outcomes for people and communities and reduce demands on public services. Point 6.10 of the Christie Commission states: “*if we do not manage to effect a shift to preventative action, increasing “failure demand” will swamp our public services capacity to achieve outcomes. In all aspects of our system of public services, therefore, from setting national policy to reforming the governance and organisation of public services, through to the design and delivery of integrated services, all parties must prioritise and build in action which has the effect of reducing demand for services in the longer run*”.

Youth work is the ultimate preventative measure; making cuts to youth work is a short term approach which fails to recognise the negative impact this will have across wider society in the long term. The devastating impact of youth service cuts increases the burden on other public services, which have to spend far more money resolving problems which could have been avoided through the preventative measures which youth work offers. Investment in youth work offers both short term and long term financial savings to a range of budgets – police, justice, welfare, health and education¹⁶. UNISON cites an Audit Commission report from 2009, exploring the benefits of sports and leisure activities in preventing anti-social behaviour among young people estimated that a young person in the criminal justice system costs the taxpayer over £200,000 by the time they are 16. But one who is given support to stay out of trouble costs less than £50,000¹⁷. Yet, youth workers are reporting that preventative work is not prioritised.

The call to evidence for this consultation states that the committee is particularly interested in steps they (and the Scottish Government) can take to help local authorities become “*future proofed*” against foreseeable financial risks. We would urge the local government committee to focus on preventative spending and in doing so recognise the huge value of what youth work offers in terms of early intervention and prevention and invest in it accordingly as a method of “*future proofing*”. Making cuts to youth work services in an attempt to save money is a false economy. Investment in youth work provided through local councils should be prioritised and protected.

3. Recognising the Value of Youth Workers

Hall Aitken evidenced that youth work has changed the lives of more than 1 in 10 of the Scottish population. Fundamental to this is the skill, passion and commitment of youth workers, which means just one positive relationship with a youth worker can change a young person’s life. One respondent

¹⁴ Christie Commission/Scottish Government, Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, 29 June 2011 - <https://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/352649/0118638.pdf/>

¹⁵ Ibid:7

¹⁶ UNISON, *Growing Pains – A survey of youth workers*, May 2016 - <http://www.unison-scotland.org/2016/05/11/growing-pains-a-survey-of-youth-workers/>

¹⁷ *Tired of Hanging Around*, Audit Commission, 2009 cited in UNISON, *A Future At Risk: Cuts in Youth Services*, August 2016, p7.

quoted in Hall Aitken's research describes her experience of attending a youth group: *"It was amazing to know that there were people in my life that truly believed in me"*, while another stated: *"my life would not be the same without the youth workers who supported me. I might even say I'm not even sure I'd be alive today if it wasn't for the youth workers and the youth group I attended"*¹⁸. Youth workers develop meaningful relationships with young people in order to provide them with the support they need to increase their life chances. However, the devastating cuts to youth work services, and the resulting severe staff changes and shortages, means there are now fewer opportunities for youth workers to build trust and rapport and maintain continuity with young people. The youth workers in Scotland surveyed by YouthLink, and those surveyed by UNISON Scotland¹⁹ described the devastating cuts to the sector as indicative of a lack of value placed on their skills and of the processes of youth work which enable these relationships with young people to be established.

UNISON Scotland found that severe cuts to team budgets had resulted in job cuts, reduced working hours and vacancy freezing. This survey found over 70% of respondents had seen an increase in their workloads in the last few years. There is greater reliance on volunteers to keep services going and some paid youth workers also report volunteering their own time and money in an effort to keep activities and projects going. Over 50% in UNISON Scotland's survey indicated they work extra unpaid hours frequently while another 32% do so now and again. This is reinforced by YouthLink's survey of the sector, which found some youth workers are volunteering their time in order to keep services operating and often putting their hands into their own pockets to ensure activities go ahead - concerns were also raised of the increasing reliance on volunteers as a measure to keep services running. Further, the role of volunteers is critical to the success of youth work and volunteers deserve to be invested in too, with appropriate training and support available from qualified youth workers.

UNISON²⁰ discovered the cuts mean youth work staff are under enormous pressure to deliver a high quality service with increasing demand and fewer resources – morale among youth workers is very low. Youth workers reported feeling anxious, undervalued and stressed. Over 70% describe morale in their teams as low or very low, none said morale is very good, with concerns about job insecurity contributing to this feeling. This is reinforced further by YouthLink Scotland's own surveys, which have identified increasingly low morale and burnout amongst youth work staff, poor mental health with increasing levels of stress and anxiety as they try to do their best with the declining resources available. Other concerns raised by youth workers as a consequence of the impact of cuts includes the loss of experienced youth workers, lack of support and a decline in funding for universal youth work services (with more emphasis on targeted services).

There needs to be proper investment in youth work in order to ensure there are the resources and experienced staff available to support young people effectively and deliver high quality services. Such investment would demonstrate recognition of the vital job youth workers do and acknowledge the

¹⁸ Hall Aitken, *Social and economic value of youth work in Scotland: initial assessment*, January 2016, p.51 <http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/index.asp?MainID=21159>

¹⁹ UNISON, *Growing Pains – A survey of youth workers*, May 2016 - <http://www.unison-scotland.org/2016/05/11/growing-pains-a-survey-of-youth-workers/>

²⁰ UNISON, *Growing Pains – A survey of youth workers*, May 2016 - <http://www.unison-scotland.org/2016/05/11/growing-pains-a-survey-of-youth-workers/>

significance of their skills and experience. The wellbeing and morale of youth workers is something worth valuing, to ensure they can continue to build life changing relationships with young people.

4. Investing In Youth Work

The value of youth work cannot be underestimated – it is integral to the work and life chances of young people – but for youth work to be effective, it requires investment at local level and a commitment to protect and enhance youth work budgets. YouthLink Scotland would like to see:

- Access to youth work opportunities available to all young people as an essential part of their education
- Comprehensive funding of youth work services
- Acknowledgment of the importance of both universal and targeted services and investment in both
- Core funding for local authority youth work services and a discussion on what a statutory duty to provide youth work for young people would look like
- Youth work budgets in every local council to include designated monies for sessional staff, support for volunteer and youth forums, as well as support for third sector youth work organisations.
- An undertaking of Child Rights Impact Assessments at both a national and local authority level on budgetary decisions.
- Youth work budgets collected and published separate to broader Community Learning and Development budgets in order to promote transparency about the level of local service provision
- Young people playing an active part in decisions that affect their services, including budgetary decisions.

We would like consideration given to a statutory obligation on local authorities to provide universal and targeted youth work services. As our National Youth Work Strategy²¹ states: we want a Scotland where the rights of children and young people are not just recognised, but rooted deep in our society and in our public and voluntary services. A statutory duty on local authorities would be based on the concept that access to youth work services is a right. This would also contribute towards fulfilling the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Scottish Government's responsibilities in relation to GIRFEC. The recent UNCRC Concluding Observations highlighted concern that that recent fiscal policies and allocation of resources have contributed to inequality in children's enjoyment of their rights, disproportionately affecting children in disadvantaged situations²².

Effective engagement can empower young people through providing opportunities to develop leadership skills, take responsibility, make decisions and make a real and lasting contribution to society. Budgetary decisions on youth work services should be no different and young people ought to play an active part in these too - as such there should be a commitment for young people to be involved meaningfully by local councils in local budgetary decision making, in line with recommendations from the UNCRC.

²¹ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/policy/national-youth-work-strategy/>

²² UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations [CRC/C/GBR/CO/5]*, 2016, p. 3, http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=987&Lang=en

A statutory duty to provide youth services only works if there is full core funding so that the necessary resources are available to provide high quality delivery of those services. Therefore, the Scottish Government must ensure local authorities have the core funding they need to enable this to happen.

When asking questions about the long-term sustainability of local government, we request the Scottish Government also asks *“do we as a society have the necessary services and provision to meet the needs of all our young people in Scotland?”* and ensure that this question is given due cognisance when considering the long-term sustainability and delivery of council services. In doing so, allocation of resources to youth work services should be made acknowledging its true impact. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up and that is why all young people, in every part of Scotland, should have access to high quality and effective youth work practice.