



## **YouthLink Scotland**

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of our sector. We are an organisation with a sharp focus on the needs of young people. Our approach is founded upon being ethical, equitable and non-discriminatory. We are an organisation that promotes learning, innovation and progressive thinking and we are committed to the highest standards of protection and safety for young people.

### **Vision**

Our vision is for a nation that values its young people and their contribution to society, supported through key relationships with youth workers to achieve their potential. As the collective voice of the youth work sector, we represent their interests, policy and practice needs to local and national government. We achieve this by supporting the sector to demonstrate the impact and value of their work and by promoting a positive image of young people and youth work.

### **Overview**

One of the key themes in the upcoming National Youth Work Strategy (NYWS) (2022-2027) is the role of youth work in supporting the health and wellbeing of young people. There is an opportunity to address the wellbeing of young people through actions within the implementation elements of the NYWS strategy over the next five years and linked to any new mental health and wellbeing strategy for Scotland. This should align across significant public policy areas of focus including, but not limited to, the Scottish Government strategy on tackling social isolation, the Scottish Government Suicide Prevention Strategy and measures being taken to tackle poverty and inequality<sup>1</sup>.

This YouthLink Scotland response to the Scottish Government Consultation on a Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Scotland<sup>2</sup> focuses on three areas of interest as outlined in the consultation.

1. Conditions required for young people to thrive.
2. Tackling stigma.

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<sup>1</sup> [A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland/strategy/pages/11.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> <https://consult.gov.scot/mental-health-unit/mental-health-and-wellbeing-strategy/>

### 3. Providing support.

The response begins with some opportunities arising through the reform of education in Scotland. It moves onto an overview of the current challenges to improving the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. It then explores wider key issues around health and wellbeing for children and young people in Scotland, especially in the context of COVID-19. It makes the case for the role of the youth work sector in broader connected policy areas and culminates by highlighting the opportunities for improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next five years.

## **Opportunities**

### **Education Reform**

On 14 June 2022, Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville invited children, young people, families and teachers to join a National Discussion on Education. She called for “*fresh, innovative ideas to help to deliver change and drive improvement*” and for this to be “*the most inclusive ever discussion on education in Scotland*”, bringing “*the widest possible range of voices and views into the room*”<sup>3</sup>. We believe to achieve our vision for excellence and equity, all learners should be given a broader offer, based on their needs. This should include non-formal learning, such as youth work and youth awards. This will require a more collaborative approach to curriculum design that delivers a balance of learner experiences. In response to the Scottish Government’s Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps, YouthLink Scotland made key recommendations to ensure youth work is recognised and is funded as an integral and on-going part of education recovery for Scotland’s young people<sup>4</sup>. This was mirrored by our response to the education reform consultation on behalf of Professor Ken Muir, University of the West of Scotland and independent advisor to Scottish Government. The response calls for significant reform of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)<sup>5</sup>. Youth work complements and enhances delivery of the formal curriculum, and the provision of support for pupils, contributing to raising attainment and improving outcomes for young people – particularly, those impacted by poverty.

Scottish Youth Work Leaders believe that education reform is an opportunity to transform our education system. Professor Ken Muir’s report Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education<sup>6</sup> recommended a number of structural and cultural changes to take forward the OECD recommendations<sup>7</sup> and deliver excellence and equity in education. ‘Putting learners at the centre’ is key to achieving the ambitions laid out in Ken Muir’s report and delivering the OECD recommendations. YouthLink Scotland support a rights-based approach with

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/national-discussion-on-education/>

<sup>4</sup> [YouthLink Scotland calls for prominent role for youth work in Scotland's Education Recovery Action Plan](#)

<sup>5</sup> [YouthLink Scotland | Education reform consultation on behalf of Professor Ken Muir, University of the West of Scotland and Independent Advisor to the Scottish Government](#)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence-bf624417-en.htm>

wellbeing at its core as the best way to achieve excellence and equity through Scottish education and to get it right for every child and young person<sup>8</sup>.

As Scotland incorporates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law and with a Scottish Human Rights Bill on the horizon, education reform and other relevant strategies like this one provides us with an opportunity to create a system of education that supports *“the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”*<sup>9</sup>. An equitable and rights-based offer for all learners around education must therefore include access to youth work. Our vision for education is that every child and young person can experience their right to an education. In turn, helping them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (UNCRC Article 29). This is why we called for education reform to drive a transformed education system that seeks to address the aims bound up in Article 29 of the UNCRC.

## **Key challenges to improving health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years**

### **Poverty and inequality**

A significant challenge is rising poverty and unequal access to opportunities to participate in activities that improve health and wellbeing. During the equalities consultation on the priority themes emerging in the upcoming NYWS, YMCA, Article 12, and Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS) referred explicitly to cost as a barrier to participating in activities for young people in their communities. At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, it is groups of young people from across the protected characteristics (including those experiencing multiple forms of inequality) who were disproportionately impacted by the wellbeing crisis. National Lockdown measures exacerbated these issues for disadvantaged communities. This included, but not exclusively limited to, people with disabilities, BAME groups, people experiencing homelessness, those affected by violence, young people coming into contact with the law and frontline health and care staff<sup>10</sup>.

Further, The Imagine a Man research<sup>12</sup> showed that relationships with a trusted adult and community support is especially important for boys and young men in SIMD groups 1 and 2. Through this research boys and young men, from diverse backgrounds were able to reflect on their experience and demonstrate a deep awareness of what constituted undue ‘negative’ pressure. It was revealed that what mattered most to all young people was a trusted adult to talk through matters important

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/children-young-peoples-mental-health-task-force-recommendations/pages/4/>

<sup>9</sup> [The Right to Education - UNICEF UK](#)

<sup>10</sup> Harkins C. Supporting community recovery and resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic-a rapid review of evidence [Internet]. Glasgow; 2020. Available

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

<sup>11</sup> Nolan D. ‘Spend time with me’: Children and young people’s experiences of COVID-19 and the justice system. 2020.

<sup>12</sup> [NKBL ImagineAMan Report FINAL-1.pdf \(noknivesbetterlives.com\)](#)

to them in a supportive environment. This is where youth work practitioners play a vital role, in particular with young men on what constitutes a positive masculinity, creating those safe spaces to talk openly to young people<sup>13</sup>. As just one successful example of this type of approach, the No Knives Better Lives (NKBL) insights to wellbeing and trauma informed practice supports young people at risk of offending<sup>14</sup> through taking a relational approach. This improves the mental health and wellbeing of young people. It mitigates the possibility of poor mental health, or even mental ill-health. In extreme cases it even ameliorates the possibility of suicidal ideation and can reduce the amount of young people taking their own lives<sup>15</sup>.

### **Addressing poverty leading to improved health outcomes**

In response to a call from the United Nations on the urgent action required to tackling deepening food insecurity and poverty in the UK<sup>16</sup>, YouthLink Scotland were funded by the Scottish Government to coordinate and support a pilot programme, focused on addressing food insecurity and learning loss in the school holidays. This took place during summer 2020, targeted at young people (S1-S6) identified by trusted professionals as being at risk of poverty, food insecurity or learning loss<sup>17</sup>. The six pilot projects worked with 152 young people in the summer of 2020. Three quarters of the young people who took part in the pilot lived in areas of poverty with 50% in SIMD 1, the most deprived data zones in Scotland and 27% in SIMD 2<sup>18</sup>. As observed by practitioners, those who took part in pilot projects, showed a range of positive impacts, including noticeable change in behaviour, skills and engagement in learning. Young people themselves felt the project had contributed to learning, better relationships, confidence, engagement with school, skills and eating. Importantly, their health and wellbeing were notably improved<sup>19</sup>. We believe we should be engaging and emboldening the youth work sector more to tackle poverty, as youth workers are uniquely positioned to meet whole families where they are and tailor support in accordance with their needs and to do so in a dignified way. Support and investment in youth work should therefore be seen as imperative to help deliver on local and national anti-poverty strategies and as a key driver in success for better mental health and wellbeing outcomes for all Scotland's young people. The actions we take now will be crucial. Young people deserve a commitment to the continuation and enhancement of the services that supported them during the coronavirus pandemic to maintain their wellbeing and enhance their future prospects.

### **National Youth Work Conference 2022**

Youth workers play a vital role supporting the needs of young people while ensuring they have equal access to services and that their voices are heard<sup>20</sup>. This is why our

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> [Want an Insight into Your Wellbeing?? - NKBL \(noknivesbetterlives.com\)](https://www.noknivesbetterlives.com/)

<sup>15</sup> [Support from trusted adults can reduce risk of dying in suicidal teens, finds study \(news-medical.net\)](https://www.news-medical.net/Support-from-trusted-adults-can-reduce-risk-of-dying-in-suicidal-teens,-finds-study.aspx)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-response-un-food-insecurity-poverty/>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5659/food-insecurity-report\\_proofed.pdf](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5659/food-insecurity-report_proofed.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2019/07/children-young-peoples-mental-health-task-force-recommendations/documents/children-young-peoples-mental->

upcoming National Youth Work conference (08/11/22) will explore youth work's role in poverty reduction. It will demonstrate the best practice across the sector from practitioners, academics and include keynote speakers. The conference will include the voices of individuals who have first-hand experience of poverty. They will highlight the ways that the sector works together to better support young people. YouthLink Scotland commends this year's conference to Scottish Government civil servants<sup>21</sup>. We encourage members of the Scottish Government mental health and wellbeing strategy team to join us on the day.

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

We know partnership working had positive impacts on the ability of the system to support health and wellbeing (e.g. education/community hubs, school and youth work partnerships) when responding to the coronavirus pandemic<sup>22</sup>. The Scottish Government Equity Audit having identified the negative impact of school building closures on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and young people<sup>23</sup>.

The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund (YWETF) was one of the approaches taken by Scottish Government to provide health and wellbeing support, as part of education recovery. The evidence showed that 80% of young people accessing support through the fund improved their health and wellbeing. We believe this approach should be seen as a mainstay, rather than an addition to help young people with their health and wellbeing over a sustained period of time. YouthLink Scotland's report<sup>24</sup> on the impact of the fund, showed that youth work engages with young people who need support with their health and wellbeing, exploring the links between poverty, health/wellbeing and attainment. There is an opportunity for the mental health and wellbeing strategy to better recognise the range of practitioners (including youth workers) impacting on the health and wellbeing of young people.

A recent report, "*Youth Work: Closing the poverty related attainment gap during the pandemic*"<sup>25</sup>, highlighted that the closure of spaces for youth work impacted on young people's health and wellbeing. Safe spaces for youth work provides opportunity for the development of important relationships (with peers and youth workers), social interaction and engagement with activities and support for health and wellbeing. When these spaces were reduced or removed, it impacted negatively on young people's wellbeing and their progress/development<sup>26</sup>.

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[health-task-force-recommendations/children-young-peoples-mental-health-task-force-recommendations/govscot%3Adocument/children-young-peoples-mental-health-task-force-recommendations.pdf](https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-task-force-recommendations/children-young-peoples-mental-health-task-force-recommendations/govscot%3Adocument/children-young-peoples-mental-health-task-force-recommendations.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [YouthLink Scotland | National Youth Work Conference – Save the Date – 8 November 2022](https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/7086/ywerf-report-2022-final-designed-report.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equity-audit-deepening-understanding-impact-covid-19-school-building-closures-children-socio-economically-disadvantaged-backgrounds-setting-clear-areas-focus-accelerating-recovery/pages/6/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/7086/ywerf-report-2022-final-designed-report.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6363/youth-work-during-the-pandemic-final.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

Access to youth work in the community/school is recognised as part of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), National Improvement Framework (NIF) and Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and is highlighted as a driver to education reform and integral to the implementation of UNCRC into Scots Law<sup>27</sup>. The Equity Audit also highlighted the positive physical health benefits of outdoor learning and learning in and around nature<sup>28</sup>. There is a crucial link between health and wellbeing and attainment, with 86% of young people improving their health and wellbeing as a result of participation in youth work<sup>29</sup>. The Outdoor Education Recovery Fund (OERF) noted that 87% of young people saw improvements in their health and wellbeing as a result of this fund. We know improvement in health and wellbeing is a key priority of NIF. When considering what we have learned on the positive impacts of youth work, we can see how this aligns with the priorities of Scottish Government. It is evident then that growing the capacity of the youth work sector should be considered during the formative stages of the new mental health and wellbeing strategy. Youth workers remain key practitioners helping to deliver on national improvement priorities<sup>30</sup>.

Moreover, demographic breakdown of LockdownLowdown<sup>31</sup> responses indicated that young people in areas of higher deprivation are at a higher risk of their education being impacted negatively by the fact they are less likely to attend or have access to youth groups. This has a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing<sup>32</sup>. Inequitable access to education remains a concern for young people and it is an area of significant disquiet to youth work leaders<sup>33</sup>. The report<sup>34</sup> highlighted that only 25% of young people in the most deprived areas attended, or had access to youth work activities, compared to 40% in more affluent areas. The survey also found that young people in the most deprived areas were the least likely to attend in person. It is notable that young people regardless of where they are from said that they felt good about their mental and physical health as a result of attending youth work groups<sup>35</sup>.

## **Employability**

Another significant and related impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been on the employment prospects of young people. There is ongoing uncertainty, which is having a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of young people<sup>36</sup>. Recent reports from The Prince's Trust demonstrated that jobless young people face symptoms of mental illness as a direct result of being out of work with nearly half of jobless young

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<sup>27</sup> [UNCRC Incorporation \(parentingacrossscotland.org\)](https://parentingacrossscotland.org/)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5875/outdoor-learning-st4.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5319/national-evaluation-publication.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/2021-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/pages/3/>

<sup>31</sup> [LockdownLowdown - Breakdown of Key Findings - Young Scot Corporate](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Latest demographic breakdown indicates learning loss risk for young people in deprived areas \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](#)

<sup>33</sup> [sector-warning-release-may-2020.pdf \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](#)

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6438/july2021-lockdownlowdown-v3-survey-report.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/double-trouble/>

people experiencing mental ill health as a direct result of being unemployed<sup>3738</sup>. Therefore, it is critical that mental wellbeing is seen as more than just an issue of health. Mental wellbeing should be considered by all those in contact with young people. This is backed up by the findings in the LockdownLowdown reports, illustrating the link between poor mental health and young people's concerns about the future prospects<sup>39</sup>. What we have learned is that young people need consistent support around health and wellbeing to progress into and sustain employment. It has been acknowledged that approaches to employability support are more effective when its approached holistically. Youth workers can help with this approach.

## Equality

We would expect the strategy to acknowledge that mental health problems and support are experienced differently by different demographics of people. Research by the Mental Health Foundation has consistently shown that social characteristics, such as gender, disability, age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, social and family status, influences the rates and the way in which mental health problems are presented - as well as access/barriers to services<sup>40</sup>. Young people in residential care, those in prison and young asylum seekers have different needs and, as a result of their circumstances, will have access to a different set of services. Furthermore, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people face inequalities and discrimination in every aspect of life. Research published by the Traveller Movement in 2017 highlighted that 91% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people had experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity; 70% had experienced discrimination in education; 49% in employment; and 30% in accessing healthcare. A further 55% had been refused services because of their ethnicity and 77% had experienced hate speech or a hate crime.<sup>41</sup> Consistent exposure to racism and discrimination has a huge impact on mental health, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have some of the poorest mental health outcomes of all ethnic groups. There is an obligation under the Equality Act 2010<sup>42</sup> to undertake positive action with regards to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities; given the scale of overlapping disadvantages and barriers to access that such communities often endure. Therefore, it is essential the published strategy takes specific account of the needs of people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds, alongside clear strategies for implementation and evaluation. It is also imperative that outreach to and engagement with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people are priorities for mental health services and support teams. This outreach can take place from community hubs such as GP surgeries, hospitals, or schools, within the neighbourhood, or via pre-existing community or religious or youth work

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<sup>37</sup> The Prince's Trust Macquarie, *Youth Index 2014*, <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/help-for-young-people/news-views/youth-index-2014>

<sup>38</sup> *The Power of Potential Report 2022*.pdf (<https://www.youthemployment.org.uk>)

<sup>39</sup> Youth Link Scotland. Lockdown Lowdown: survey reveals 96% of young people fear for future due to COVID-19 [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2020 Jun 15]. Available from: <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/news/april-2020/survey-reveals-96-of-young-people-fear-for-future-due-to-covid-19/>

<sup>40</sup> Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 9

<sup>41</sup> The Traveller Movement, *'The last acceptable form of racism?'* (2017).

<sup>42</sup> [Equality Act 2010: guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010)

organisations<sup>43</sup>. This sort of tailored support can transform the lives of those struggling with mental health and this is particularly important for marginalised communities who experience a high level of isolation and discrimination.

## **Connecting with nature for improved wellbeing and the role of youth work**

Being connected to nature is widely known to improve physical health, wellbeing and stimulate learning in young people. Spending time outdoors alongside youth work practitioners helps young people to be more active and focused. By engaging in outdoor activities/learning with others, young people have improved their communication skills and confidence through shared tasks, while making a positive difference to their environment and the natural world<sup>44</sup>. In terms of enabling wellbeing, the outdoors can offer space to process difficult experiences. It acts as a source of respite, creating comfort, reflection, and fun. Youth work services support people by combining the full range of benefits from time spent in nature and the outdoors with non-formal learning to improve mental health and wellbeing<sup>45</sup>. YouthLink Scotland would like to reiterate its support for more learning in and about nature to support young people to thrive<sup>46</sup>.

Each Scottish Government consultation theme is now tackled in turn and includes examples from the youth work sector to illustrate the points made:

### **1. Helping create conditions for young people to thrive**

Research has shown that the adolescent brain is more prone to developing mental health problems with 75% of mental health conditions onset before the age of 25<sup>47</sup>. This physiological susceptibility to negative emotions and peer pressure means that it is crucial that young people have spaces that encourage discussion and support risk taking. Youth work offers an avenue for this as it starts from where young people are as part of partnership journey between the youth worker and the young person. We know that engaging with a trusted adult through youth work that young people are more resilient, optimistic for the future, make reasoned decisions and improve their health and wellbeing<sup>48</sup>.

Youth work meets young people's health and wellbeing needs through early intervention and prevents future ill-health. The youth work approach reduces the need for crisis interventions and improves health outcomes. Therefore, youth work should be built in to education services - ensuring a holistic approach to young people's wellbeing. We know this helps reduce the impact of health inequalities through the strong and equitable relationships youth workers establish with young people. This means young people have increased control over their lives. Their needs are met

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<sup>43</sup> Traveler Movement UK provided information on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people to help inform this part of the YouthLink Scotland response.

<sup>44</sup> [Learning for Sustainability \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](https://youthlinkscotland.org)

<sup>45</sup> [Outdoor Therapy - Venture Trust](#)

<sup>46</sup> [Ask 1: more time spent learning in and about nature – Our Bright Future](#)

<sup>47</sup> Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 23

<sup>48</sup> [Youth Work Outcomes | YouthLink Scotland](#)



through a youth work approach that is relational, reducing the negative impact of risk-taking behaviours and improving physical and mental wellbeing of young people in the immediate and longer term.

Loneliness has been a negative consequence of lockdown, impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people<sup>49</sup>. The evidence suggests that despite us all being in the coronavirus pandemic, the proportion of adults experiencing loneliness is highest between ages 18-24<sup>50</sup>, leading to the casual use of the term “*lockdown loneliness*”<sup>51</sup>. The loss of peer group support had a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing<sup>52</sup>. Youth work enables community connectivity, promotes inter-generational working in communities and reduces social isolation, which is a key policy area of action for Scottish Government. The evidence is that youth workers have a lasting impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people<sup>53</sup>.

YouthLink Scotland members run numerous projects, specifically focused on improving the mental wellbeing of young people. An example of one such project is GirlGuiding Scotland’s Think Resilient programme<sup>54</sup> designed to offer girls a safe space to share their worries and explore various techniques to help them to overcome challenges and build-up resilience. Think Resilient is peer-led and run in partnership with youth mental health charity, Young Minds.

Another successful youth work example of providing conditions for young people to thrive is the Y’s Girls programme. This was designed by YMCA Scotland and utilised across the UK where there is an identified need for an early intervention programme to increase the protective factors of vulnerable young people. The programme is targeted at girls and young women aged 9-14 years and seeks to establish 250 mentoring relationships across 10 YMCAs in all four nations of the UK. It takes a youth-work approach and places a strong focus on equality, diversity and inclusion as well as intersectionality (i.e. considering each demographic and how these intersect to create unique experiences). Originally designed as a diversion away from the criminal justice system, Y’s Girls is proving to be an effective public health approach to improve the mental health of participants and progress them into positive activities while improving relationships with parents, schools and their communities. It takes a youth work approach by providing proactive and preventative intervention with mentors being recruited and trained by local YMCA groups. The service continued during the coronavirus pandemic, at a time when girls and young women needed the support most<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Impacts of lockdown on the mental health of children and young people | Mental Health Foundation

<sup>50</sup> Orben A, Tomova L, Blakemore S-J. The effects of social deprivation on adolescent social development and mental health. Preprint [Internet]. 2020;4642(20):1–7. Available from: <https://psyarxiv.com/7afmd/>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Loades M, Chatburn E, Higson-Sweeney N, Reynolds S, Shafran R, Brigden A, et al. Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2020;

<sup>53</sup> [Youth Work Changes Lives | Mental Health Foundation](#)

<sup>54</sup> [Think Resilient | Girlguiding](#)

<sup>55</sup> [YMCA Y’s Girls Mentoring Programme | Centre for Youth Impact](#) *The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations that work together to progress thinking and practice around impact measurement in youth work and services for young people.*

## Conditions for success of mental health and wellbeing strategy to create conditions for young people to thrive

- Learn from successful youth work projects and invest in the youth work workforce. This should include CPD for youth workers noted explicitly as an element of preventative mental health work. In particular, our members highlighted the importance of upskilling youth workers to develop a trauma-informed practice.
- A national training offer that is free, accessible and accredited for all across the sector, accrediting youth workers to a certain standard of knowledge. As part of the upskilling and on-going knowledge building process, we need to re-state where local and national specialist services and referral mechanisms are currently in operation. This should include recognition of youth work as a valuable early intervention support industry. Investment in the youth work sector will also assist in bringing the voices of young people to the heart of policy decision making, which is in keeping with the principles of the UNCRC<sup>56</sup>.
- Research has shown there is incredible value in a community response to COVID-19 recovery<sup>57</sup>, particularly for the most vulnerable<sup>58</sup>. Youth work plays a crucial role in bringing communities together. As such, youth workers are uniquely positioned to enhance community-based support to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Any strategy response should include a focus on working alongside communities to identify and tailor responses, considering issues at a local level.
- The role of youth work is notable in after school settings/clubs, working in partnership with other sectors, such as play, social work and structured arts and sports clubs and the school age childcare sector. The social return for spending in youth work is clear<sup>59</sup>. Therefore, we would encourage Scottish Government to consider the preventative spend potential on youth work as another opportunity to bring about the best long-term results for a young person's mental health and wellbeing.
- Non-medical prevention and early intervention for children and young people beyond specialist health services should be identified more clearly within the strategy. The central ambition of the previous *National Youth Work Strategy 2014-2019* was that all young people, in every part of Scotland, should have access to high quality and effective youth work practice<sup>60</sup>. Taking this ambition

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<sup>56</sup> [Four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF](#)

<sup>57</sup> Harkins C. Supporting community recovery and resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic-a rapid review of evidence [Internet]. Glasgow; 2020. Available from: [https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7854/COVID19\\_Comm\\_Recovery\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/7854/COVID19_Comm_Recovery_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> [We must value and invest in youth work, says UNISON - UNISON Scotland \(unison-scotland.org\)](#)

<sup>60</sup> *National Youth Work Strategy 2014-19*, <http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/Index.asp?MainID=19180&UserID=1479>

forward will alleviate pressure on primary care and reduce the number of crisis interventions for young people.

- There should be a renewed focus on young people who care for relatives with mental health problems. There are an estimated 29,000 young carers in Scotland<sup>61</sup> and young carers are more likely to have a long-term condition or disability than non-carers (22% vs. 11%),<sup>62</sup> with LGBT young carers more than three times as likely to have a mental health problem as the general population<sup>63</sup>. Young carers are more prone to school absences due to their caring responsibilities and as such, mental health support should not be confined to children and young people within the education system.
- Explicit recognition of youth work within the new mental health and wellbeing strategy and other related strategies and increased investment in the youth work sector at Local Authority and Scottish Government level.
- Progress in this area should include recognition of the upcoming NYWS and its importance to delivering upon the aims contained within education reform and in support of renewal from COVID-19. It should relate specifically to creating the conditions within the curriculum which support young people to thrive through a human-rights based approach to education, including access to support and learning through youth work.
- Volunteers are a key part of the workforce. They play a key role in supporting the health and wellbeing of young people and helping to reduce suicidal ideation and the incidence of suicides. As such, they should be explicitly mentioned for consideration when discussing the need for mental health and suicide awareness training<sup>64</sup>.

## 2. Challenging stigma

Youth work leaders tell us many young people currently experience mental health related stigma and discrimination. At a YouthLink Scotland meeting (03/12/21) of the Youth Work Health and Wellbeing Network, improving peer support was highlighted by members as a strategic imperative to assist young people in the months and years to come. The Impact of LGBT Youth Scotland's Digital Youth Work on Young People during Lockdown report<sup>65</sup>, underlined the impact that digital youth work had in reducing isolation and improving wellbeing during a time of crisis. It did so in a non-stigmatising way<sup>66</sup>. This was because youth work provided a safe and inclusive digital space with group, peer, individual support. Peer support can provide organisations with the opportunity to develop strengths based and empowering approaches that put people young people in positions of leadership. This addresses social isolation and stigma in

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<sup>61</sup> Scottish Government, *Scotland's Carers*, 2015, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00473691.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Scottish Government, *Scotland's Carers*, 2015, p. 30, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00473691.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Carers Trust Scotland, *Young People Caring OUT There: Experiences of LGBT Young Adult Carers in Scotland*, p. 9

<sup>64</sup> [Volunteer Scotland Consultation Response - Suicide Prevention Strategy Aug 2022](#)

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5686/lgbt-ys-digital-yw-research-report.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

mental health by bringing people together and emphasising the value of their experiences<sup>67</sup>.

Our partners on the network highlighted there is a challenge around tackling mental health stigma and discrimination. This was also identified through See Me Youth Champions, when they explored the concerns and issues of young people with mental health problems. The group commissioned Censuswide to conduct a poll of 1000 young people aged 16-24. The survey found that 66% of young people were dismissed by adults when they tried to speak about their mental health<sup>68</sup>.

Other youth work partnership examples include, Fare Scotland, who worked alongside a group of young people aged 12-16 from St Mungo's Academy in Glasgow, to develop a resource to support young people with their mental health. The group focused on the topic of loss and bereavement as St Mungo's had recently experienced a number of deaths within the school. This was seen as a good way to connect with each other and other pupils - offering support where it was required<sup>69</sup>. It illustrates youth work's commitment to taking a partnership approach. The programme went on to develop the Pure Mental Health Podcast. They contributed to the "*Heids Together*" resource, a youth work guide to creating mental health ambassadors and the production of coping cards. It included See Me training for teachers (to reduce the stigma of diminished mental health), a presentation (video) with NHS partnership and encouraged a whole school approach to loneliness and grief. The role of youth work was highlighted as key to the success of the project and bringing about positive culture change across the whole school system<sup>70</sup>.

### **Conditions for success of mental health and wellbeing strategy on challenging stigma**

- We know that the youth work sector is integral to the education system and can help build confidence and facilitate conversations on mental health and wellbeing. We believe in building more confidence across public policy areas on how adults should hold conversations about mental health with young people to ensure that young people are able to share how they are feeling. The youth work approach can help ensure young people are in a better position to co-produce and design the opportunities and solutions to tackling mental health stigma and discrimination in the future.
- Investing in online and face-to-face peer support initiatives (utilising the support available from youth workers) can help tackle stigma. Therefore, it should remain part of public policy over the next five years and woven into the mental health and wellbeing strategy as key to implementing on its core aims.
- The priorities should include a focus on education, in relation to education about mental health within all levels of education and the educational attainment of

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.scottishrecovery.net/peer-support/>

<sup>68</sup> [See Me | Young People feel their mental health struggles are dismissed by adults \(seemescotland.org\)](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Heids Together | Fare Scotland & St Mungo's Academy \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](#)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

children and young people with mental health problems<sup>71</sup>. Children and young people with mental health problems have more frequent absences from school<sup>72</sup> which can result in lower attainment levels. CfE outlines the way in which mental health and wellbeing should take an all-school approach. This should be supplemented with continued support for teachers and other educators like youth workers to equip young people to manage their own mental health and reduce stigma.

- Youth friendly health services should include youth engagement as a core part of their service delivery and service developments should be designed in co-production with young people. They should take into consideration the specific needs of young people in, communication, provision of information, service location, environment and opening times, and issues related to consent and confidentiality. They should be clear about how they will engage with young people and the outcomes they wish to achieve”<sup>73</sup>.
- We want to see mental health services that suit the needs of young people, that are easy to access and can adapt and develop within the context of the changing society we live in. This will also require more informal community-based projects run by the voluntary sector, helping to improve resilience to stress and mental illness. Our members predict that this would play a part in reducing the stigma around accessing support.

### 3. Providing support

Youth workers build key relationships with young people to support improvements in their health and wellbeing. Youth workers are confident in their understanding of an individual’s physical and mental development to enable them to do this effectively. As examples, 347 significant change stories were collected from young people through four studies<sup>74</sup>, examining the impact of universal youth work. This research illustrated that youth clubs are places that reduce isolation, create a sense of belonging and provide new experiences and opportunities for informal learning. Young people also recognised and articulated the importance of having a trusted adult and a safe space created by youth workers with whom they often form long-term relationships. In many cases, this relationship continues well into young adulthood. What stood out in the review conversations on Pathfinder and the new West Dunbartonshire programme is that the relationships that youth workers build with young people and their families helped to surface other issues that were affecting mental health (e.g. housing / caring responsibilities) that had not been picked up until these trusting relationships were built. So, we can see when the investment is there, youth workers often enable young people and families to talk more honestly about the challenges they are experiencing. This in turn helps them to connect to other local support and services that can help,

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<sup>71</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/3914/youth-work-a-guide-for-schools.pdf> This is a YouthLink Scotland guide for schools, highlighting health and wellbeing and the role of youth workers.

<sup>72</sup> Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 26

<sup>73</sup> Scottish Youth Health Improvement Strategic Lead Group, *Youth Health Improvement Consensus Statement*, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2bXtbSw>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/policy-research/research/the-impact-of-universal-youth-work/>

including more specialist support for mental health when this has gone beyond early intervention. It can be seen that these key relationships helped young people to feel valued and supported and led to significant improvements in their mental health and wellbeing<sup>75</sup>.

Our faith-based youth work organisations highlight that they interact with young people at their most vulnerable. For example, in times of bereavement. An initial session with a trusted adult has sustained and even improved a young person's mental wellbeing, while waiting lengthy periods for a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) appointment. In some cases, it reduced the need for any referral at all.

Youth work and as school partnerships (reviewed as part of collaborative enquiry with the West Partnership Regional Improvement Collaborative) provided useful examples of effective approaches to tackling mental health to improve readiness to learn and engage in education – helping young people to thrive, as well as providing crucial support at a time they need it. As examples:

- The South Lanarkshire 'Pathfinder' programme includes six schools showing wide-ranging and supporting issues in families as well as directly with young people improving their educational outcomes and youth workers as integral to those positive impacts.
- The West Dunbartonshire partnership focuses on working with young people who have totally disengaged from formal education. The service offering 1:1 support from a youth worker who builds trust and then connects young people into other support. The data shows this is a cost-effective way of working, as compared to finding suitable alternative provision.

The above projects demonstrate the importance of mental health in tackling the attainment challenge and the role that youth workers can play in supporting young people directly and connecting them to other support they might need in their communities. YouthLink Scotland has further partnership reports and impact data. We would be willing to share these with relevant Scottish Government teams to ensure youth work is positioned to help deliver on the aims of the strategy.

### **Conditions for success of mental health and wellbeing strategy at providing support**

- We advise the prioritisation of a partnership/multi-agency approach that recognises the many services (including youth work) that contribute to prevention and intervention work. The approach should be holistic, person-centred and include regular service evaluation with users as standard.
- Reducing youth work budgets results in increased pressure on statutory services like social care, mental health services, social work, the NHS, the police, the criminal justice system and education services. We need to reverse this trend, by investing in youth work. We can do this by apportioning resources

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid

towards youth work infrastructure to create the conditions required for young people to thrive and be better supported in the heart of all of Scotland's Local Authorities.

- YouthLink Scotland's youth work networks span the length and breadth of Scotland, encapsulating thousands of volunteers and paid workers, working alongside young people to support their physical and mental health. This includes direct engagement between youth workers and youth groups. We know that maintaining and recruiting of youth work volunteers has been precarious during the coronavirus pandemic. The future of many clubs (including those which focus on arts and sports) rely heavily on the youth work volunteer network. As such, a commitment to supporting volunteer pathways and volunteer retention should be considered a priority. This should be part of nationwide investment in youth work infrastructure and considered as part of the implementation of the volunteering action plan<sup>76</sup>.
- Young people involved with the Hot Chocolate Trust, a youth work organisation in Dundee, identified key principles that a mental health strategy should follow, including the need for there needs to be more creative opportunities to help young people express themselves to help them process their emotions and experiences. Mental health professionals should not try to control or dictate what should happen. They should work in partnership with young people.
- Our members told us that it would be valuable to focus on the promotion of mental wellbeing for the whole population. Many would not identify with terminology, or the formal services that are required for intervention at points of poor mental health.
- Youth Work is more than a 9am to 5pm service. Youth workers often meet with young people when they need it, or when other services are closed for the day, meaning youth workers need better linkages to crisis services when they are required.
- Training for the youth work workforce needs a more joined up referral pathway, working for a young person, including them in the key decisions affecting their lives.
- Youth workers are susceptible to vicarious trauma and therefore require a considered programme of support to protect their wellbeing.
- Participating in volunteering and becoming a youth work volunteer can bring significant health and wellbeing benefits, preventing or reversing more serious mental health issues<sup>77</sup>. It can alleviate depression, anxiety and stress, and reduce loneliness and social isolation<sup>78</sup>. As part of the strategy, we would like

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<sup>76</sup> [Volunteering action plan - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

<sup>77</sup> [Insert title \(volunteerscotland.net\)](http://volunteerscotland.net)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

to see the promotion of volunteering in youth work and youth social action and the positive impact this has on the mental wellbeing of those involved.

- The Scottish Government's £60 million commitment to fund counsellors in all secondary schools by the end of October<sup>79</sup> is welcomed. However, it should include utilising youth workers. There are good partnership and referral examples involving youth workers from across our networks and there is an on-going study in Dumfries and Galloway assessing the effectiveness of youth workers in these roles.

## **Summary**

Youth workers can ease anxieties of young people, support young people to thrive and reduce the stigma associated with talking about mental health and wellbeing. The youth work sector identifies and targets support for those where the impacts of lockdown and restriction measures has been the most challenging and builds trusting relationships with young people and families that help to surface a range of complex issue which might otherwise go unnoticed until a young person reaches crisis point.

We believe a renewed focus should be given to the positive role of youth work practitioners in the lives of children and young people and the capacity of staff teams to develop multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral responses to the coronavirus pandemic. This should be seen as integral to any new mental health and wellbeing strategy for Scotland.

YouthLink Scotland would be happy to provide any representations to Scottish Government colleagues and/or connected working groups to provide more clarity about our role in aiding in the production and implementation of the strategy.

## **ENDS**

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy consultation can be found [here](#).

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

If you wish to know about the Youth Work and Mental Health and Wellbeing Network, please contact YouthLink Scotland's Events and Networks Manager, Sarah Robertson, [srobertson@youthlinkscotland.org](mailto:srobertson@youthlinkscotland.org).

## **EDITOR'S NOTES**

This policy response takes account of information gathered via key youth work networks and surveys. It draws upon evidence on the priorities of young people and youth work practitioners and is written in alignment with previous policy responses and position statements provided by the organisation in recent years. It has been informed

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<sup>79</sup> <https://www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/2020/17-september-scotland-s-school-counselling-commitment-on-track/>



through YouthLink Scotland's Secretariat role on the Youth Work Health and Wellbeing Network and the co-production of the National Youth Work Strategy (2022-2027).