

The Relationship between Youth Work and Play Work in Scotland

Introduction

YouthLink Scotland and Play Scotland are National Membership Organisations for youth work and play work respectively. Both organisations are committed to ensuring further conversations and actions to progress Scottish Government's vision that Scotland is the best place for children and young people to grow up. There are similarities in the organisations' reason to exist and how they operate and engage the respective youth work and play work sectors.

YouthLink Scotland is the National agency for youth work, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors, championing the role and value of youth work and advocating for the aspirations of the youth work sector. Play Scotland is the National Play organisation for play and play work, working to make children's right to play a reality in Scotland. The group promotes the importance of play for all children and young people and campaigns to create increased play opportunities in the community. It can also be seen that the mission of the two agencies converges on ensuring young people have equal opportunities to participate in diverse and quality youth work and play work. Both organisations contribute to the overarching vision that Scotland is a nation that adheres to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and values its young people and supports them to achieve their potential.

Scotland's Policy Landscape

While the current National Youth Work Strategy (2014-2019) and National Play Strategy (reviewed in a COVID-19 context) have their origins, purpose and intentions, there are many high-level commonalities. In addition to the National Outcome that Scotland is the best place to grow up, it is significant that both are grounded within UNCRC. Additionally, the general purpose of each strategy is concerned with the provision of services, improving outcomes for young people, and building workforce capacity. The age range of each strategy overlaps. The Play Strategy is from birth until 18 years. The Youth Work Strategy is from 11-25. Where early intervention is required, youth work will work with those under the age of 11 – or in the case of long-established uniformed youth organisations, they have been working with children from as young as age 4. There is evidence that younger children are presenting themselves to youth workers and are looking for support and services, particularly after school and during school holidays. Therefore, age (and stage) remains a critical discussion between the sectors, particularly the resourcing gap for those aged 8-18 years. There are actions in the Play Strategy that explicitly reference the contribution of youth workers, youth clubs, and community spaces.

YouthLink Scotland and Children in Scotland are the Joint Secretariats for the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Children and Young People. The most recent meeting (30/01/23) centred on school-age childcare and featured contributions from the youth work and play sectors. Youth work and play work practitioners contribute to the diverse, skilled and knowledgeable school-age childcare workforce. However, there is a challenge for youth workers and play workers in gaining access to the school

estate and a worrying trend of partial or total closure of important community hubs, thereby denying young people from realising opportunities in youth work and their right to play. The upcoming [National Youth Work Strategy \(2023-2028\)](#) (sitting with Scottish Government awaiting publication) underwent significant co-production to ensure that the priorities reflect the interests, knowledge, experience, expertise and skills of all youth work stakeholders to contribute towards a meaningful legacy to the [year of young people 2018](#). The youth work sector has raised the lack of investment in facilities as an area of significant concern, threatening its ability to provide essential services, including holiday provision.

UNCRC

The vision of the [Youth Work Leaders' Forum](#) is that every child and young person can experience their right to an education that includes youth work to help them develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (Article 29). The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Article 31) provides a shared platform from which youth work and play work can cooperate. Ensuring that Article 31 is realised for all young people up to the age of 18 and that play is more than an activity for those in early years involves duty bearers such as youth workers and play workers are positioned to fulfil the obligation to young people.

The [statement on the nature and purpose of youth work](#) and the [play work principles](#) recognise that meeting young people where they are as a part of a partnership approach is crucial for children and young people to learn and develop new skills. There is an acknowledgement of reflective practice where risk is balanced against the developmental benefit and well-being of children and young people.

Outcomes

Perhaps the most substantial areas of commonality between the youth work and play work sectors lie in the non-formal approach, led by the needs and interests of the young person. The sectors use methods which promote peer learning, often facilitated in groups, promoting choice and leadership. There is a common challenge of identifying, quantifying and evidencing the value and the impact of the activities undertaken.

In recognition of this, YouthLink Scotland has worked collaboratively to articulate the contribution of youth work in Scotland. The [youth work outcomes and the youth work skills framework](#) have proved to be valuable tools in planning and evaluating our work and most importantly in providing a structure for reflective learning conversations with young people on their youth work journey. During 2022, YouthLink Scotland has worked with the youth work sector to integrate these established tools into a single framework, aiming to make it more straightforward for youth workers to make explicit connections between outcomes and skills and for young people to identify and review meaningful learning goals. The [Youth Work Outcomes](#) describe the key overarching impacts of youth work in young people's lives.

There are distinctions between youth work and play work, reflecting the origins, environment, and cultures within which the youth work and play work sectors have evolved. For example, comparing a youth work employability programme with free unstructured play highlights a noticeable difference. However, this might not readily be the case when considering a play ranger and a detached youth worker or a play scheme compared to a youth work street football event. This rich diversity of methods, settings, and contexts within which each sector makes it more challenging to compare, and most sector leaders would support the view that the sectors continue to work distinctively. The [Youth work is non-formal education](#) and its [pedagogy](#) differentiates from play work as the character and integrity of the practitioners are seen as central to the process of working with others.

However, there may be more scope to explore support and collaboration between the sectors to further policy areas of interest and benefit young people. There may also be interest in exploring further how online play and online youth work is framed and utilised to the benefit of children and young people – particularly following so many digital positive adaptations due to the restrictions placed on young people during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. As such, some knowledge exchange between the sectors may prove useful.

The Future

A significant issue shared by both sectors is the perception of young people in public spaces as a nuisance. At times, this is aided and abetted by a hostile media. Youth work and play work can help ameliorate these perceptions by showing young people in a positive light and can assist young people thrive in local area, involving them in planning and leadership. Shared experiences of inclusive public spaces serve to promote and strengthen civil society and guides young people to recognise themselves as citizens with rights.

Indeed, [The United Nations \(UN\)](#) encourages dialogue between older and younger generations to provide greater recognition of children as rights holders and of the importance of networks of diverse community spaces in a local area which can accommodate the recreational needs of all children and young people. Both sectors can be stronger united on this message to make unified demands of local politicians. Youth work and play work leaders have an integral role in implementing the strategies of the other and united they can help save money and advance the outcomes of broader strategies and priorities of local and national governments.

In an unstable funding environment and in a time where the cost of living is impacting the choices families are making and the options and facilities available to them diminishing, there is an increased need to collaborate to ensure no young person misses out on entitlement to youth work or play work. The youth work and play work sectors can work together to close the policy chasm, closing the provision and practice gap in the lives of young people. However, this can only be done with the renewed and explicit recognition of stakeholders and funders and investment in inclusive community infrastructure.

ENDS

This paper is influenced by the recommendations contained within the Play Work and Youth Work Symposium, 2016.

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EDITOR'S NOTES