



The Equalities Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee inquiry into the Scottish Government and COSLA's Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022-2032

Introduction

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 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 critical 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.

Executive Summary

YouthLink Scotland believes the Scottish Government should consider the critical role of statutory and voluntary youth work when reviewing the Suicide Prevention Strategy for Scotland. Youth workers are often in critical roles supporting people at increased risk of suicidal ideation and dealing with the impacts of suicide on the family and in the community.

The protective factors of youth work and its reassuring presence are fundamental to enhancing our connections and a pillar of civil society in Scotland. Therefore, promoting the essence of community-based youth work is crucial.

A positive next step is one where the Scottish Government considers the vital role of youth work services and the broader field of Community Learning and Development (CLD) when reviewing the Suicide Prevention Strategy for Scotland.

An optimistic future is one where we invest in our crucial community assets and ensure that youth work helps local authorities prevent suicide in their locale.

Our submission to the Equality and Human Rights Committee demonstrates the impact and value of youth work. It promotes a positive image of young people and youth work in this public policy space.

We ask that our sector be meaningfully included in the next steps for any renewed plan to tackle social isolation in Scotland and youth work explicitly named as a critical partner in the strategy.

Questions

To what extent do you believe the Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022 to 2032 and delivery plan will reduce inequalities which contribute to differing suicide rates between groups?

Youth workers tell us that rising poverty and unequal access to opportunities to participate in youth work activities that improve health and well-being are significant challenges. During the equalities consultation on the priority themes emerging from the National Youth Work Strategy, YMCA Scotland, 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 was not exclusively limited to people with disabilities, black and brown groups, people experiencing homelessness, those affected by violence, young people coming into contact with the law and frontline health and care staff¹².

¹ 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

² Nolan D. 'Spend time with me': Children and young people's experiences of COVID-19 and the justice system. 2020.

Our Scottish education and skills system is at a pivotal point. One that could transform the learning experience for children and young people. The current Independent Review of Community Learning and Development (CLD) is another opportunity to get it right for every child, lift young people out of poverty, and ensure every learner knows they matter. As part of this, there is a need to ensure that all parts of the system work collaboratively to provide the right level of support to help learners achieve the best possible outcomes. It is necessary to include youth work as an essential and integral sector to support this aim, reduce inequalities, and support those groups most at risk of suicide.

Scotland's communities now face the added burden of the cost-of-living crisis while our youth work organisations face increasing demand for their services with reducing budgets and staffing. This is galling when we consider that during the coronavirus pandemic, youth workers moved quickly to provide whole-family support and establish digital services. They were described as "*nimble and adaptable*", doing "*whatever they could, whenever they could*" to keep young people safe. During the most restrictive phases, young people could not attend school, college or work and could not meet and socialise with their peers. All the sports, arts, volunteering or youth work activities young people participated in were halted. Despite ongoing challenges, youth work groups continued to build strong partnerships with local communities, pairing tried and tested methods of supporting children and young people with innovative new interventions. Youth work services offered support for food poverty, finance, and mental health support, which continued as the lockdown restrictions lifted, leading to deeper relationships with young people³⁴⁵.

To what extent do you believe that the Scottish Government and COSLA's Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022 to 2032 and delivery plan will achieve its vision of reducing the number of suicide deaths in Scotland?

We are aware suicide is complex and rarely caused by one single factor. We applaud the ambition in the plan and wish it every success. It was reassuring to see the Scottish Government and COSLA [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022 to 2032](#) speak warmly to their approach to preventing suicide spanning right across society, "*All our sectors must work together – and learn together – to drive change. We must also support our communities and workforce so they can play their part*" (page, 6). However, youth work is not mentioned once in

³ <https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/YouthLink-Scotland-Youth-Works-Role-During-Covid-19-Final-Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/story/acting-on-poverty/>

⁵ [230901-FINAL-Youth-Work-and-Poverty-Brief.pdf \(youthlink.scot\)](#)

the 39-page document. Therefore, we cannot claim to be taking a meaningful cross-sectoral approach when the youth work sector, with over 50,000 paid staff and volunteers, reaches close to 500,000 young people in youth work activity every week and spanning every local authority in Scotland, is excluded from the delivery plan.

We recommend that this be rectified. Youth work could be included in several areas, including the guiding principles (page 10), linked to related strategies (page 16), and in the delivery (page 30) and implementation of the plan on the ground (including "*local leadership*") and impact and campaigns (pages 32 and 33) and the distribution of funds to the most marginalised groups.

In a related policy area, the Scottish Government have acknowledged young people as a priority in their [Connected Scotland Plan](#) to tackle social isolation and loneliness strategy. Crucially, youth work is explicitly mentioned as a critical partner in delivery and recognised as a sector that builds stronger social connections.

Youth workers improve young people's mental health and well-being and give them a sense of belonging. Young people tell us that their relationship with youth workers has improved feelings of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

We would welcome further discussion on the above points raised and ask that the same approach of recognising the upstream potential of youth work be used to help young people feel safe, valued, and supported.

What actions could we take as a society to reduce suicide rates in Scotland?

The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund (YWERF) was one of the approaches taken by the 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 helping young people with their health and well-being over a sustained period. YouthLink Scotland's report⁶ 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

⁶ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/7086/ywerf-report-2022-final-designed-report.pdf>

committee to better consider the range of practitioners (including youth workers) impacting the health and wellbeing of young people.

A report, "*Youth Work: Closing the poverty-related attainment gap during the pandemic*", highlighted that the closure of spaces for youth work impacted young people's health and wellbeing. Safe spaces for youth work allow 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 negatively impacted young people's wellbeing and their progress/development⁷. We would recommend the prioritisation of places and spaces and the crucial role of youth workers in those designations as a collective action the Scottish Government could take to help society reduce suicide rates in Scotland. There is a crucial link between health, wellbeing, and attainment. Youth work plays a key role in building health and wellbeing, which supports readiness to learn and [improves attendance and attainment](#).

We have this evidence, yet our sector is routinely asked to do more for less. So, the question of funding is being answered in the context of us being aware of a sector that contributes massively to the policy area and yet is being diminished and, as stated earlier, is not stated as a critical partner in the delivery of the plan. Investment generally follows policy. As the National Agency for Youth Work, YouthLink Scotland cannot say with certainty that enough funds have been put in place for the implementation and partnership delivery of the plan when our sector has been omitted.

Scotland has now incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law, and with a Scottish Human Rights Bill on motion, 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*"⁸. An equitable and rights-based offer for all learners around education must include access to youth work. Our vision for education is that every child and young person can experience their right to an education (UNCRC Article 28) and, in turn, help them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (UNCRC Article 29). A

⁷ Ibid

⁸ [The Right to Education - UNICEF UK](#)

right to access youth work services can help realise the ambition of UNCRC, so it becomes a workable flagship policy and a beacon of hope for what can be done to support the rights of young people in other countries.

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). It is highlighted as a driver of education reform and integral to implementing UNCRC into Scots Law⁹. The Equity Audit also highlighted the positive physical health benefits of outdoor learning and learning in and around nature¹⁰. Indeed, the Outdoor Education Recovery Fund (OERF) noted that 87% of young people saw improvements in their health and well-being due to this fund. We know improvement in health and well-being is a crucial priority of NIF. When considering what we have learned about the positive impacts of youth work, we can see how this aligns with the priorities of the Scottish Government. It is evident then that growing the capacity of the youth work sector should be considered during any renewed focus on Scotland's suicide prevention plan.

We have the [numbers and the positive testimonies](#) from young people and youth workers telling us that suicidal ideation is reduced through the prevalence of youth work in our local communities. The harm caused by social isolation is also diminished. The Lockdown Lowdown Survey from COVID-19 highlighted 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 due to attending youth work groups¹².

Do you think sufficient funding is available to implement and support the Strategy and delivery plan?

From the series of the impact of universal youth work [studies](#), we know that young people routinely share how youth work helped with their sense of safety and belonging and reduced isolation and loneliness and suicidal ideation. The positive role of inclusion and belonging was mentioned repeatedly by young people and marked out as a priority area for youth workers.

As just some examples:

[The National Study](#)

⁹ [UNCRC Incorporation \(parentingacrossscotland.org\)](https://parentingacrossscotland.org)

¹⁰ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5875/outdoor-learning-st4.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5319/national-evaluation-publication.pdf>

¹² Ibid

- The critical impact was that young people felt equal and included and feelings of reduced isolation.

Dumfries and Galloway Study

- In 71% of the stories, young people talked about equality and inclusion; this included reduced isolation and loneliness and providing a sense of belonging. For young people, youth work has become a family for them.

The impact of youth work in D&G on a Young person (aged 20)

"To answer simply, I am alive. When I first got involved with youth work in Dumfries and Galloway, I was suffering from quite extreme anxiety that, earlier in the year, had caused a nervous breakdown. I couldn't sit my exams and was afraid to leave the house for several weeks. I was self-harming regularly, sometimes not even aware I was doing it, and was fighting off suicidal thoughts daily. I never spoke about the extent to which I felt a risk to myself, and I kept my feelings tightly bottled up inside. That all changed when I started to access Youth Work Services through The Toon, run by the Youth Enquiry Service. Over the two-week production camp, I began to feel less alone, realising that what I was experiencing was not uncommon and that there were people out there who could help. The warmth I felt walking out of the YES on that first day is what gave me hope to keep on fighting. Over the following months, I began receiving 1-2-1 support, which became a lifeline to me. I openly spoke about how I felt for the first time, disclosing information that I had never told anyone and began to see that I could continue to live. In my darkest moments, the staff were there, pulling me back from the brink. Three years later, I am still alive and want to be here – a significant change from where I was. I owe my life to youth work, and I endeavour to give back so that other people in my situation can receive the same support I was fortunate enough to".

Youth Worker's Commentary from D&G

"They first started accessing youth work services three years ago when they came in as a volunteer to help with the Toon and through that started accessing mainly YES drop-in provision and receiving support through challenging times. Since starting to access, they have gone on to achieve amazing things such as being an ambassador for the Year of Young People, speaking up for young people's voices in parliament, becoming a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament and going on international travels volunteering to help the world. They are a remarkable young person who have come so much from where they first started accessing three years ago. They now hold

down permanent hours within the youth work service, which is a credit to their work over the past three years".

The impact of youth work in D&G from another young person (aged 17)

"At the age of 14, I started to access Youth Work Services; after a few years, I stopped accessing it for reasons that I can't remember. I was making a lot of bad decisions, and my mental health was terrible, and I was in a dark and horrible place; there seemed to be no way out for me. I came across Youth Workers at an event in the town centre. When I was approached by a worker and asked how things were, it was obvious that I wasn't coping with life. After a good chat with her, I was given details of the drop-ins I could attend for some extra support. I wasn't sure about going, but I knew something had to change. And I couldn't do it by myself; after a few months of going to the drop-ins regularly, I began to pull myself together and started to push myself into projects and volunteering opportunities. I started to gain confidence in myself and realised that I could do anything I put my mind to. I came out of my comfort zone by performing in front of groups of people, and even just talking to new people doesn't give me as much anxiety as it may have done three years ago, without the ongoing help and support of Youth Workers, I definitely wouldn't be here today."

Youth Worker's Commentary from D&G

"They have accessed varied projects and services within Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway for almost ten years. They are engaging in-group work activities, being a peer educator & taking part in young leader programmes. This has given them the doorway to gain positive structure within their life and build on their confidence, self-esteem and self-worth, while also helping build positive relationships with their peers and youth work staff. They have daily struggles within their personal life around their mental health, which at times have experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings. Even though they have their circumstances to deal with, they are always willing to help others and are a great role model to other young people. They have recently secured a 3-month full-time volunteer role at our local youth centre, which they are doing great at, and the role has the potential to be extended after their review. They are thriving within this role, and youth work staff can see they are achieving personal goals. I think I can speak on behalf of the majority of the Youth Work team about how proud we are of them, and it is a pleasure to watch them flourish into a confident young adult".

[The Edinburgh Study](#)

- Youth work helped the young people feel safe, valued and supported. This helped improve young people's mental health and wellbeing and gave them a sense of belonging. One young person (aged 15) shared how youth work helped them with anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

Impact of youth work in Edinburgh from a young person's story (age 15)

"I think it's changed my behaviour in school, and it's helped me realise that not all things are about lashing out and then, basically, like getting angry over the slightest things, and it's helped me with, like, suicidal thoughts ...Well it's like a space for me that I can just take time to control my temper, and it's like... people helped me to realise that it's only me that can control my temper, and I've learned that and my temper's got a lot better....Like [the workers have] not been strict, but they've like... like if I've wanted to lash out, they've been like 'take ten minutes if you need to', and it's helped....Erm, well, like stuff's happened at school between some other people, like me and some other people, that's made me feel so low that I've thought about committing suicide. And then this club's helped me bring it back by realising that I've got friends here that can help me, instead of the people at school that aren't... that say they're my friends but aren't really and they'll turn on me like that...Yeah, I've got quite a good relationship with everyone here....I've learned how to make pancakes. [...] I've learnt first aid, which sort of helped me with another career path...Basically, in school, I've got all my subjects, and I'll be taking new ones. But the person from the first aid has come in and taught me like some new skills, and it's helped me go towards like paramedic stuff."

Youth Worker's Commentary

"He attends the Monday Group for the Young people in S1-S6. When [he] first started coming to the club, he was a little disrespectful to the staff and some other young people. He also had anger issues, which he has addressed. At one point, the youth workers told him off multiple times a night. As weeks went on, I think he began to understand we were not having it, and we think that's when he started to realise his behaviour was unacceptable and that we would not tolerate it. We have been supporting him since he arrived at the club and continue to help him weekly with these issues. They are scarce now, but they are still with him. [He] is a courageous young man; he has dealt with so many emotional issues that have affected him, and we helped and supported him in all the ways we could through issue-based conversations, one to one and getting other agencies to come in and do group work. We worked closely with him to ensure he was getting all the support we felt he needed".

[The Impact of Youth Work supporting Low-Level Mental Health in Schools in D&G](#)

- Young people shared how the mental health support provided by their youth workers helped improve their relationships and reduce their feelings of isolation. Young people were supported in understanding their thoughts and feelings, and the sessions also helped them understand the steps they can take to improve relationships.

More broadly, in [Making a difference? Researching the effectiveness of youth work over time](#) one interview participant talked about the positive effect of her youth worker and the significant change it made for her whole being:

"Like, not to be dramatic or that or like, but genuinely think that if she hadn't been the way she had been with me, I would genuinely not have been here. She was just so amazing, and I treated her like shite. And again, it was because you were young, hurting, and had emotions. Yeah, she was just a person that was nice to me and I was, like, argh. I was like, why the fuck are you nice to me?. Later, I remember at a residential she shared a story about her own life, and then I remember like I went to the dorm and I just cried because I felt so horrible that I'd been like nasty there. And I remember I wrote her this long letter I was like, I'm so sorry like blah blah blah. I remember it's just this moment. I was like oh just like changed everything for me".

It is this sort of connection with a youth worker that matters. We saw this in the vital parts of the scaffolding for [Imagine A Man](#), a leading project that focuses on positive masculinity. We know from the research that that mattering can hold significant influence, particularly over the lives of boys and young men at risk from the social harm of inequality and poverty. We know trauma and shame, feeling that you do not matter, can be potent emotional drivers in the dynamics of violence.

The research¹³ showed that relationships with a trusted adult and community support are especially important for boys and young men in SIMD groups 1 and 2. Boys and young men, from diverse backgrounds could 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 vital to them in a supportive

¹³ [NKBL ImagineAMan Report FINAL-1.pdf \(noknivesbetterlives.com\)](#)

environment. This is where youth work practitioners play a vital role, particularly with young men on what constitutes a positive masculinity, creating those safe spaces to talk openly to young people¹⁴. As just one successful example of this approach, the No Knives Better Lives (NKBL) insights into well-being and trauma-informed practice support young people at risk of offending through a relational approach. This improves the mental health and well-being of young people. It mitigates the possibility of poor mental health or even mental ill-health. In extreme cases, it even lessens the possibility of suicidal ideation and can reduce the amount of young people taking their own lives¹⁵.

YouthLink Scotland members run numerous projects and [networks](#) specifically focused on improving young people's mental wellbeing. As an example of good practice, Girlguiding Scotland's Think Resilient programme, 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 partnered 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 an early intervention programme was identified as necessary to increase the protective factors of vulnerable young people. The programme targets 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 strongly focuses on equality, diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality (i.e., considering each demographic and how these intersect to create unique experiences). Designed initially as a diversion away from the criminal justice system, Y's Girls is a practical public health approach to improve participants' mental health and progress them into positive activities while strengthening relationships with parents, schools and their communities. It takes a youth work approach by providing proactive and preventative intervention with mentors recruited and trained by local YMCA groups. The service continued during the coronavirus pandemic when girls and young women needed the most support, showing the resilience of the youth work sector to step in when it matters most¹⁶.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ [Support from trusted adults can reduce risk of dying in suicidal teens, finds study \(news-medical.net\)](#)

¹⁶ [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.*

YouthLink Scotland's food insecurity and learning loss pilot [evaluation report](#) showed that youth work reduced isolation by bringing whole families together. This was done in a universal and non-stigmatising way. Food became secondary to youth work activity. Young people told us the support was a lifeline for them.

Broader research shows that youth work can recover and enhance our connections, which is a vital component of reducing suicide in Scotland. The youth work sector and wider CLD practitioners are crucial in supporting children and young people's health and well-being and reducing and responding to social isolation and loneliness. The [COVID-19](#) evidence review highlighted youth work's role in reducing isolation and loneliness during the most challenging periods of the coronavirus pandemic, providing whole family support and driving up inter-generational activity. Youth workers rose to the challenge of delivering remote services and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the country. The youth work approach helped broaden people's horizons and increase their connectivity. We saw youth work recovering connections and making new ones.

YouthLink Scotland is confident focusing on better understanding youth work and investing in its crucial services can help deliver the suicide prevention strategy. The evidence is there; we just need to follow it and apportion resources to these existing community assets.

YouthLink Scotland has many partnership reports and impact data. Where appropriate, we would be willing to share these with relevant teams to ensure youth work is positioned to help deliver on the strategy's aims.

What actions could we take as a society to reduce suicide rates in Scotland?

Creating 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 25¹⁷. This physiological susceptibility to negative emotions and peer pressure means that young people must 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 a partnership journey between the youth worker and the young person. We know that engaging with a trusted adult through

¹⁷ Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 23

youth work means that young people are more resilient and optimistic for the future, make reasoned decisions and improve their health and wellbeing¹⁸. Youth work meets young people's health and wellbeing needs through early intervention, preventing future ill-health. The youth work approach reduces the need for crisis interventions and improves health outcomes. Therefore, youth work should be more integral to education services - ensuring a holistic approach to young people's wellbeing. We know this helps reduce the impact of health inequalities through the solid and equitable relationships youth workers establish with young people. This means young people have increased control over their lives. Their needs are met through a youth work approach that is relational, reducing suicidal ideation and the prevalence of suicide and improving the physical and mental well-being of young people in the immediate and longer term.

- 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 across the sector, accrediting youth workers to a certain standard of knowledge. As part of the upskilling and ongoing knowledge building process, we need to re-state where local and national specialist services and referral mechanisms are currently operating. This should include recognising 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 UNCRC¹⁹.
- Research has shown incredible value in a community response to COVID-19 recovery²⁰, particularly for the most vulnerable²¹. Youth work plays a crucial role in bringing communities together. Youth workers are

¹⁸ [Youth Work Outcomes | YouthLink Scotland](#)

¹⁹ [Four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF](#)

²⁰ 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)

²¹ Ibid

uniquely positioned to enhance community-based support to improve young people's mental health and wellbeing. 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 structured arts and sports clubs and the school-age childcare sector. The social return for spending on youth work is evident²². Therefore, we would encourage the Scottish Government to consider the preventative spending potential on youth work as another opportunity to bring about the best long-term results for a young person's mental health and wellbeing.
- The priorities should include a focus on education on mental health within all levels of education and the educational attainment of children and young people with mental health problems^[2]. Children and young people with mental health problems have more frequent absences from school,^[3] which can result in lower attainment levels. CfE outlines how mental health and wellbeing should be approached in an all-school setting. This should be supplemented with continued support for teachers and other educators like youth workers to equip young people to manage their mental health and reduce stigma.
- 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 practice²³. This ambition 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,²⁴ and young carers are more likely to have a long-

²² [We must value and invest in youth work, says UNISON - UNISON Scotland \(unison-scotland.org\)](https://www.unison-scotland.org/)

^[2] <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.

^[3] Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 26

²³ *National Youth Work Strategy 2014-19*, <http://www.youthlinkscotland.org/Index.asp?MainID=19180&UserID=1479>

²⁴ Scottish Government, *Scotland's Carers*, 2015, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00473691.pdf>

term condition or disability than non-carers (22% vs. 11%),²⁵ with LGBT young carers more than three times as likely to have a mental health problem as the general population²⁶. 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 any renewed suicide prevention strategy and other related strategies and increased investment in the youth work sector at the Local Authority and Scottish Government level.
- Volunteers are a vital part of the workforce. They play a crucial role in supporting the health and well-being of young people and helping to reduce suicidal ideation and the incidence of suicides. They should be explicitly mentioned for consideration when discussing the need for mental health and suicide awareness training²⁷.
- Create conditions within the curriculum that support young people to thrive through a human-rights-based approach to education, including access to support and learning through youth work.

Connection to nature

- Being connected to nature is widely known to improve physical health and 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 world²⁸. To enable 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 benefits from time spent in nature and the outdoors with non-formal learning to improve mental

²⁵ Scottish Government, *Scotland's Carers*, 2015, p. 30, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00473691.pdf>

²⁶ Carers Trust Scotland, *Young People Caring OUT There: Experiences of LGBT Young Adult Carers in Scotland*, p. 9

²⁷ [Volunteer Scotland Consultation Response - Suicide Prevention Strategy Aug 2022](#)

²⁸ [Learning for Sustainability \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](#)

health and wellbeing²⁹. YouthLink Scotland would like to reiterate its support for more learning about nature to help young people thrive³⁰.

Focus on equality

- We would expect a whole society 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, and social and family status, influence the rates and how mental health problems are presented - as well as access/barriers to services³¹. 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. Tailoring 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. As an example, we were delighted to support the sector through funding to address social isolation and loneliness. In just one round, we reached 842 rurally isolated young people. This provided additional resources to improve the inclusivity of current provisions, explore innovative and partnership approaches and provide extra support for young people in high areas of deprivation and from across the protected characteristics.

Promote intergenerational working with youth work front and centre.

- Loneliness impacts the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people³². The evidence suggests that despite us all being in the coronavirus pandemic, the proportion of adults experiencing loneliness was highest between ages 18 and 24³³, leading to the casual use of the term "*lockdown loneliness*"³⁴. The loss of peer group support had a

²⁹ [Outdoor Therapy - Venture Trust](#)

³⁰ [Ask 1: more time spent learning in and about nature – Our Bright Future](#)

³¹ Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 9

³² Impacts of lockdown on the mental health of children and young people | Mental Health Foundation

³³ 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/>

³⁴ Ibid

detrimental impact on mental health and well-being³⁵. Youth work enables community connectivity, promotes inter-generational working in communities and reduces social isolation. The evidence is that youth workers have a lasting impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing³⁶.

Challenging stigma

- Youth work leaders tell us many young people currently experience mental health-related stigma and discrimination. At a YouthLink Scotland meeting of the Youth Work Health and Wellbeing Network, members highlighted improving peer support 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 the Lockdown report underlined the impact that digital youth work had on reducing isolation and improving wellbeing during a crisis. It did so in a non-stigmatising way³⁷. This was because youth work provided a safe and inclusive digital space with group, peer, and 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 mental health by bringing people together and emphasising the value of their experiences³⁸.
- 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 poll 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 health³⁹.
- 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

³⁵ 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;

³⁶ [Youth Work Changes Lives | Mental Health Foundation](#)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ <https://www.scottishrecovery.net/peer-support/>

³⁹ [See Me | Young People feel their mental health struggles are dismissed by adults \(seemescotland.org\)](#)

with their mental health. The group focused on the topic of loss and grief as St Mungo's had recently experienced several deaths within the school. This was seen as a good way to connect and other pupils - offering support where it was required⁴⁰. 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 producing coping cards. It included See Me training for teachers (to reduce the stigma of diminished mental health), a presentation (video) with NHS partnership. It encouraged a whole school approach to loneliness and grief. The role of youth work was highlighted as key to the project's success and bringing about positive culture change across the whole school system⁴¹.

- We know 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 creating more confidence across public policy areas on how adults should hold conversations about mental health with young people to ensure that young people can 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 a mainstay of public policy and be woven into the suicide prevention strategy as a key to implementing its core aims.
- The priorities should include a focus on education on mental health within all levels of education and the educational attainment of children and young people with mental health problems⁴². Children and young people with mental health problems have more frequent absences from school,⁴³ which can result in lower attainment levels. CfE outlines how

⁴⁰ [Heids Together | Fare Scotland & St Mungo's Academy \(youthlinkscotland.org\)](#)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² <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.

⁴³ Mental Health Foundation, *Poverty and mental health: A review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*, 2016, p. 26

mental health and wellbeing should be approached in an all-school setting. This should be supplemented with continued support for teachers and other educators like youth workers to equip young people to manage their 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 consider the specific needs of young people, such as 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 achieve⁴⁴.
- 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 our changing society. 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.

Providing support at the right time

- Youth workers build critical relationships with young people to support improved health and wellbeing. Youth workers are confident in their understanding of an individual's physical and mental development, which enables them to do this effectively. For example, 347 significant change stories were collected from young people through four studies that examined 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

⁴⁴ Scottish Youth Health Improvement Strategic Lead Group, *Youth Health Improvement Consensus Statement*, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2bXtbSw>

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, 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 well-being⁴⁵.

- Our faith-based youth work organisations highlight their interaction 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 well-being 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 school partnerships (reviewed as part of collaborative enquiry with the West Partnership Regional Improvement Collaborative) provided helpful 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. For example, 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 disengaged from formal education. The service offers 1:1 support from a youth worker who builds trust and then connects young people to other support. The data shows this is a cost-effective way of working compared to finding suitable alternative provision. The 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.

⁴⁵ Ibid

Recommendations

- We advise prioritising 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 and person-centred and include regular service evaluation with users as standard.
- Reducing youth work budgets increases 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 towards youth work infrastructure to create the conditions required for young people to thrive and be better supported in the heart of Scotland's local authorities and the third sector.
- YouthLink Scotland's youth work networks span the length and breadth of Scotland, encapsulating over 50,000 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 youth work volunteers is precarious. The future of many clubs (including those which focus on arts and sports) relies heavily on the youth work volunteer network and a thriving paid workforce. As such, a commitment to supporting volunteer pathways and retention should be considered a priority. This should be part of nationwide investment in youth work infrastructure that maintains local authority CLD budgets.
- Young people involved with the Hot Chocolate Trust, a youth work organisation in Dundee, identified fundamental principles the suicide prevention plan could follow, including the need for there needs to be more creative opportunities to help young people express themselves and 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 it would be valuable to focus on promoting mental well-being for the whole population. Many would not identify with the terminology or the formal services that are required for intervention at points of poor mental health.

- Youth Work is more than a 9 am to 5 pm service. Youth workers often meet with young people when they need it or when other services are closed for the day, meaning they need better linkages to crisis services when required.
- Training for the youth work workforce needs a more joined-up referral pathway, working for a young person, including them in the critical 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 issues⁴⁶. It can alleviate depression, anxiety and stress and reduce loneliness and social isolation⁴⁷. As part of the strategy, we would like to see the promotion of volunteering in youth work and youth social action and the positive impact this has on the mental well-being of those involved.
- Utilising [youth workers in schools to support mental health](#) and wellbeing: There are good partnership and referral examples involving youth workers from across our networks, including Dumfries and Galloway, on the effectiveness of youth workers in these roles. The Youth Information Workers supported young people to understand their thoughts and feelings. Sessions also helped young people to understand the steps they can take to improve relationships.

Zee, 14 years old, exemplified:

"The most significant change that occurred for me after support from my youth worker was probably a boost in my confidence, both mentally and physically and my mental health... The support led to a change in my confidence and mental health because before getting the support I got, I never felt like getting out of bed in the mornings and felt like just staying there all day, mainly every day. My confidence was at a very low point, and I couldn't even talk in front of a room with about more than six people in it without having a panic attack as I felt everyone was judging me as a result of my social

⁴⁶ [Insert title \(volunteerscotland.net\)](#)

⁴⁷ Ibid

anxiety. I hated how I looked in every mirror I looked in and every photo, but after getting the support that I got from my youth worker, I began to feel better about how I looked, and I felt more comfortable talking in front of groups of people. As a result of my confidence, I applied for junior house captain and did my interview for it roughly about three hours before doing this, and I've just found out I've got this role. Although I still have days where I don't feel confident, they are nowhere near as much as they used to be nine or ten months ago."

- Exploring existing partnerships and funding opportunities. We know there is an increasing recognition of the need for collaboration across services to support children, young people and families. As one good example, a Shetland school used [Pupil Equity Funding \(PEF\)](#) to reduce social isolation on the island of Yell and ensure every young person could get to the youth club.

Summary

Youth workers can ease the anxieties of young people, support young people in thriving, and reduce the stigma associated with talking about mental health and well-being.

The youth work sector identifies and targets support for those most in need and builds trusting relationships with young people and families that help to surface a range of complex issues which might otherwise go unnoticed until a young person reaches a 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 any renewed suicide prevention plan for Scotland.

ENDS

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EDITOR'S NOTES