



## **Draft Infrastructure Strategy (2027–2037) Consultation**

### **Response from YouthLink Scotland, the national agency for youth work**

#### **Introduction**

YouthLink Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [Draft Infrastructure Strategy](#).

We support the Scottish Government’s ambition to establish a long-term, strategic and place-based framework for infrastructure planning and investment. We particularly welcome the recognition that Scotland’s infrastructure needs span **economic, social and natural infrastructure**, and that future investment decisions must support inclusive growth, enable the transition to net zero and strengthen resilient places.

This is an important and welcome framing.

Too often, infrastructure debates focus narrowly on transport, utilities and major capital projects. While these are vital, Scotland’s future also depends on **social infrastructure**: the local places, public assets and community spaces where people connect, learn, participate and thrive.

For young people, this includes youth clubs, community centres, schools after hours, leisure facilities, libraries, parks, creative venues, outdoor learning spaces and digital hubs.

As we have said in previous consultations, **youth work is not an add-on—it is infrastructure**. It builds belonging, tackles inequality, supports wellbeing and connects young people to opportunity.

The Youth Work Sector’s 2026 manifesto, [A Right, A Space, A Future](#), calls for:

- A legal right to youth work
- Universal access to spaces for youth work
- Sustained long-term investment in youth work provision

It also proposes the creation of a **National Youth Spaces Partnership** to secure fair and consistent access to public infrastructure for youth work providers working with young people across Scotland.

We believe the Draft Infrastructure Strategy provides an opportunity to embed these ambitions within Scotland’s long-term infrastructure planning.

## **Background to YouthLink Scotland**

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We're a membership organisation, representing the country's youth work sector, local, 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. This includes strengthening recognition of youth work's role in building Scotland's infrastructure that is fit for the future.

Youth work is a powerful, dynamic and versatile education practice that equips young people with the tools and support they need to reach their fullest potential. It's nature and purpose places wellbeing at its heart; promoting inclusion, mutual respect, equity and youth voice. This includes working alongside young people to build their health and wellbeing, empowering them to have a meaningful role in decision-making, developing transferable skills for life and work and supporting young people towards and into employment. Youth work tackles poverty in all its forms – including digital, food, health and education and plays an important role in delivering provision within the school-age childcare ecosystem, supporting more people into work.

As the national agency for youth work, YouthLink Scotland seeks to build our sector's capacity and influence policy change that promotes a more equal society for current and future generations of young people.

## **Role of the Infrastructure Strategy**

### **1. Do you agree with the scope and role of the Infrastructure Strategy?**

We broadly agree with the proposed scope and role of the Strategy. We are pleased to see an emphasis on transforming places, strengthening public services, and driving a fair transition to a net zero economy.

We welcome:

- A 10-year planning horizon linked to longer-term needs assessment
- A place-based and outcome-focused approach
- Strengthening public services
- Recognition of economic, social and natural infrastructure
- Focus on long-term public value

However, the final Strategy should go further in explicitly defining and prioritising **social infrastructure**.

For Scotland's young people, access to safe and welcoming local spaces is foundational to wellbeing, learning, participation and opportunity. These spaces should be recognised as core infrastructure assets, not discretionary amenities.

We recommend the final Strategy explicitly reference:

- Youth and community spaces
- Shared civic buildings
- Sports and recreation facilities
- Libraries and cultural venues
- Digital inclusion spaces
- Outdoor learning and environmental assets

**2. Do you think the proposed framework, linking the 30-year Needs Assessment, 10-year Infrastructure Strategy, Spending Reviews and annual Budgets will support improved strategic planning and delivery? Are there any further improvements you want to suggest?**

Yes, in principle.

Longer-term alignment between the 30-year Needs Assessment, 10-year Strategy, Spending Reviews and annual Budgets should improve strategic coherence and reduce short-term decision making.

However, this will only succeed if accompanied by:

- Clear and open reasons for why projects are chosen
- Clear responsibility for delivering what is promised
- Real involvement of communities in decisions
- Different government departments and public bodies working together
- Reliable long-term funding for preventative services and local partners

Annual budgets should reinforce, rather than undermine, long-term commitments.

### **Infrastructure Governance Principles**

**3. Do any elements of the infrastructure lifecycle need to be strengthened to promote more effective infrastructure planning and delivery?**

Yes.

We recommend stronger emphasis on the following stages of the lifecycle:

#### **Early participation and co-design**

Communities and young people should shape infrastructure priorities from the outset.

#### **Whole-life social value**

Projects should be assessed not only on capital cost, but on their contribution to wellbeing, equality, inclusion and prevention.

### **Maintenance and accessibility**

Existing assets should be maintained to high standards and remain affordable and accessible to communities.

### **Flexible use over time**

Buildings should be designed or adapted for multi-use and community use outside core hours.

### **Retrofit and repurpose first**

Wherever possible, existing assets should be modernised before disposal or replacement.

## **4. In what areas could changes to governance or planning processes across the public sector improve the impact of the investment hierarchy?**

We support the Strategy's investment hierarchy, particularly the presumption in favour of maintaining and repurposing existing assets.

To maximise impact, we recommend:

- National guidance on community use of public buildings
- Simpler shared-use agreements across the public sector
- Stronger collaboration between councils, education, health and communities
- Clearer pathways for community asset transfer where appropriate
- Stronger youth representation in local infrastructure decision making

And in terms of investment hierarchy:

1. Look after what we already have – maintain and repair existing buildings, roads and facilities.
2. Use current assets better – share spaces, open buildings for wider use, modernise or adapt them.
3. Reuse or repurpose old assets – bring empty or underused buildings back into use.
4. Only build new infrastructure when needed – where existing assets cannot meet the need, **recognising that there will be circumstances where investment in new, purpose-built youth facilities is required.**

For YouthLink Scotland, this is important because it supports ideas like:

- opening schools for youth work in evenings and weekends
- using vacant buildings as youth hubs
- sharing community facilities
- improving existing youth spaces rather than always starting from scratch

However, while repurposing should be the default approach, it is important to recognise the limitations of existing assets. Too often, community asset transfers involve buildings in poor condition with high ongoing costs. Capital investment in dedicated youth work infrastructure has been limited, and there is a strong case for targeted investment in new, purpose-built youth centres where this will better meet young people's needs.

## **Infrastructure Themes and Enablers**

### **5. Do you agree that enabling net zero and environmental sustainability, driving economic growth, and building resilient places continue to be the right outcomes to guide infrastructure investment over the next decade?**

We support these three outcomes.

However, we recommend the final Strategy explicitly recognise that progress towards each depends in part on strong **social infrastructure**.

#### **Net zero and sustainability**

Accessible local spaces reduce unnecessary travel, enable active travel and support localised service delivery.

#### **Economic growth**

Young people need access to skills, confidence, networks and opportunities. Youth work contributes directly to employability, entrepreneurship and workforce readiness.

#### **Resilient places**

Communities are stronger where young people are connected, supported and able to participate.

We also encourage explicit reference to **reducing inequality and improving wellbeing** as measures of success.

### **6. Are the three proposed enablers, public assets, place-making and private investment, sufficient to deliver the Strategy's outcomes? Are there other enablers we should consider instead/additionally?**

Public assets, place-making and private investment are important and welcome enablers.

However, under **public assets**, the Strategy should more clearly recognise the value of community access to public estate.

YouthLink Scotland proposes creation of a **National Youth Spaces Partnership** as a practical delivery mechanism within the Strategy.

Coordinated nationally and delivered locally, the Partnership would bring together:

- Scottish Government
- Local authorities
- Public bodies
- Schools, colleges and leisure trusts
- Third sector youth organisations
- Private sector partners
- Charitable funders
- Community organisations

Its purpose would be to identify how existing buildings, land and public assets can be **repurposed, shared and modernised** to expand access to youth spaces and community opportunity.

This would include:

- Reusing vacant or underused buildings
- Opening school and civic estate after hours
- Co-locating youth services with other services
- Leveraging philanthropic and private investment
- Blending national, local and charitable funding
- Targeting areas with poor provision or deprivation
- Supporting rural and island solutions

This aligns directly with the Strategy's principles of best use of existing assets, place-based delivery, public value, partnership working and inclusive growth. This model of a National Youth Spaces Partnership is a costed proposal from the sector.

**7. What mechanisms or approaches should the Infrastructure Strategy adopt to ensure that critical cross-cutting priorities, such as housing delivery, regional**

**economic development, and natural infrastructure are systematically embedded in investment planning and decision making?**

All major infrastructure decisions should assess impacts on:

- Child poverty
- Young people's access to opportunity
- Equality and inclusion
- Transport connectivity
- Rural and island equity
- Community wellbeing
- Climate resilience
- Skills and employability

We also recommend a stronger preventative spending lens within appraisal processes.

**8. Are there any findings from the Scottish Futures Trust Needs Assessment (perhaps from drivers of change, cross-cutting themes or enablers) that we should more fully integrate into this 10-year Infrastructure Strategy?**

We support stronger emphasis on:

- Demographic change and Scotland's ageing population
- The need to invest in younger generations
- Rural depopulation and retention of young people
- Mental health and social isolation
- Digital exclusion
- Flexible local service models
- Community resilience

As our manifesto notes, young people are Scotland's future workforce, carers, leaders and changemakers. Long-term resilience depends on investing in them now.

**Place Based Approach**

**9. Do you support the proposal that infrastructure investment is more directly driven by the priorities of places across Scotland?**

Yes – strongly.

We welcome a place-based model recognising that communities across Scotland have different needs and opportunities.

However, place-based investment must include the priorities of young people, who are often among the biggest users of local public space yet underrepresented in decision making.

As previous YouthLink Scotland consultation work has shown, barriers such as transport, lack of local facilities and digital exclusion can significantly limit young people's ability to participate, particularly in rural and island communities.

**10. Are the proposed principles, national spatial priorities and place partnerships, the right ones to guide a place-based approach? Are there other principles we should consider?**

We broadly agree with the proposed approach, but recommend a stronger and more explicit focus on young people, skills and future opportunity within place-based planning.

Infrastructure decisions shape whether young people can remain in, return to or thrive within their communities. Access to transport, housing, digital connectivity, youth spaces, training facilities and local employers are all interconnected.

We recommend the following additional principles:

**Youth Opportunity Principle**

Every place-based investment decision should consider whether it improves outcomes for young people, including access to learning, work, wellbeing and participation.

**Skills and Transitions Principle**

Infrastructure planning should align with local labour market opportunities, colleges, apprenticeships, enterprise support and youth employability pathways.

**Intergenerational Fairness Principle**

Investment decisions should balance present demand with the long-term interests of future generations.

**Community Anchor Principle**

Local youth organisations, community groups and third sector providers should be recognised as key delivery partners in creating thriving places.

Place partnerships should therefore include representation from youth work, education, employability and community sectors alongside statutory partners.

**11. Do you agree with the Scottish Government’s proposal to empower communities to play a more active role in infrastructure decision making? What mechanisms would best support meaningful community involvement and help to maximise local social benefits?**

Yes.

Meaningful involvement must go beyond consultation and should include young people as equal participants.

Mechanisms could include:

- Participatory budgeting
- Youth advisory panels linked to local plans
- Paid participation opportunities
- Community co-design processes
- Youth representation on place partnerships
- Transparent feedback on decisions taken

Young people are not future stakeholders—they are current citizens.

**12. Do you believe the current landscape of local and regional partnerships provides an effective framework for delivering place-based infrastructure investment? Please explain your answer, including any suggestions for improvement of existing structures.**

There are positive examples across Scotland, but the current landscape can be fragmented and difficult to navigate.

We would welcome:

- Clearer accountability
- Simpler local routes for community engagement
- Better alignment between local and regional structures
- Stronger involvement of the third sector
- Consistent youth participation expectations

The proposed National Youth Spaces Partnership could complement existing structures by focusing specifically on access to youth and community infrastructure.

## **Enabling Private Infrastructure**

### **13. Are there additional sectors or opportunities that should be considered for strategic investment to support economic growth and maximise opportunities for longer-term growth?**

Yes.

If Scotland wants long-term inclusive growth, strategic investment should also include sectors that directly develop young people's skills, readiness for work and economic participation.

These include:

#### **Youth Work Sector**

Youth work helps young people build confidence, teamwork, communication, leadership and resilience - skills valued by employers and essential for successful transitions into employment, training or entrepreneurship.

#### **Skills and Employability Infrastructure**

Spaces and facilities that connect young people to careers advice, vocational learning, apprenticeships, enterprise support and digital skills should be prioritised.

#### **Creative, Cultural and Sport Sectors**

These sectors create jobs, build transferable skills, improve wellbeing and retain young talent in communities.

#### **Community Digital Infrastructure**

Digital hubs, device access and community learning spaces are essential for modern employment and training opportunities.

#### **Social Enterprise and Green Economy Pathways**

Infrastructure that supports repair, reuse, climate action and community enterprise can create accessible local jobs for young people.

Investment in these sectors is investment in Scotland's future workforce.

### **14. To make the most of the strategic opportunities in renewables, housing, and natural capital, what will the economy need from our infrastructure to grow and thrive up to 2037?**

Scotland's economy will need:

- Affordable housing

- Reliable and affordable transport
- Universal digital connectivity
- Clean energy systems
- Resilient town centres and communities
- Skills and learning infrastructure which includes well resourced youth work services
- Community spaces that attract and retain young people and families

Infrastructure is a key determinant of whether young people can build successful futures. Where communities have accessible spaces, transport links, digital connectivity and strong local services, young people are more able to gain qualifications, access training, secure employment and remain economically active in their area. Where these are absent, young people are more likely to disengage or leave.

Young people are more likely to stay, work and contribute where places are connected, affordable and full of opportunity.

### **Closing Statement**

Scotland's future prosperity depends not only on what we build, but on who can access it, shape it and benefit from it.

For many young people, the most life-changing infrastructure is not a motorway or office block. It is a safe place to go after school, trusted adults, somewhere to belong, somewhere to learn and somewhere to thrive.

A modern Infrastructure Strategy should therefore recognise youth work, youth spaces, community assets and accessible local provision as essential national social infrastructure.

The proposed **National Youth Spaces Partnership** would offer a practical way to turn that ambition into action by coordinating national leadership with local delivery, unlocking assets, attracting investment and expanding opportunity for young people across Scotland.

We would be happy to discuss any of the proposals in this consultation response. If you wish to reach out us please contact Sarah Paterson, Policy and Public Affairs Manager [spaterson@youthlink.scot](mailto:spaterson@youthlink.scot)