



## **Consultation Response YouthLink Scotland – Independent Professional Advisor for Future School Reform: Call for Children & Young People's Organisations**

Please contact [ggracie@youthlink.scot](mailto:ggracie@youthlink.scot) for more details on this response.

[YouthLink Scotland](#) is the national agency for youth work and the collective voice of the sector. Our members have a workforce of 55,000, including 45,000 volunteers, working with 500,000 young people across Scotland.

We play a crucial role in promoting the rights and well-being of young people. Our organisation advocates for young people's rights and ensures that their voices are heard in policy-making and decision-making.

We champion and advocate for the youth work sector so that all young people can access high-quality youth work. Our membership of voluntary and statutory youth work organisations and intermediaries, including every local authority, spans all of Scotland, and changes lives for the better every day.

### **Our values**

- We believe in young people and prioritise their needs and rights.
- We are committed to the highest standards of protection and safety for young people.
- We are a learning organisation, promoting innovation and change.
- We represent our members with integrity and value collaboration with partners.
- We are committed to being inclusive, accessible, ethical, equitable and diverse.

## **Call for Children & Young Peoples Organisation's Views: Future School Reform**

Learners, parent and carer organisations are invited to submit views on the work undertaken by the Independent Professional Adviser (IPA), John Wilson, on future school reform.

This form seeks your views in three sections focused on school improvement, school funding, and school governance

When you submit this form, it will not automatically collect your details like name and email address unless you provide it yourself.

### **IMPROVEMENT**

This section seeks your views on school improvement. School improvement refers to the work that schools, local authorities and partners do to make learning, teaching and assessment better, raise attainment and achievement, and improve the overall experience and wellbeing of learners.

For each of these questions the IPA is seeking your views on the support available that help schools improve and your suggestions on what could be done differently.

#### **1. What systems or support are in place, that you are aware of, that help schools deliver high-quality education for all learners?**

*For this question you may wish to think about:*

- **support programmes or interventions;**
- **professional development and training for staff;**
- **mentoring or leadership support for school leaders;**
- **partnerships or networks between schools;**
- **guidance, monitoring or advice provided by the local authority; and**
- **additional support for schools that are facing challenges**

Working in partnership with schools, youth work makes an important contribution to high quality education for all learners through **support programmes and interventions** that:

- Tackle barriers to participation in learning
- Support health and wellbeing

- Enable engagement and attendance through targeted and whole family support
- Offer more personalisation and choice in the curriculum to support achievement and attainment for all
- Build skills for life and work
- Help young people reach and sustain positive destinations

Research has shown that youth work is particularly effective in supporting positive educational outcomes for young people experiencing poverty and those who struggle in school. Youth work's uniquely relational approach helps young people to regain the sense of safety and belonging they need to grow in confidence and re-engage in learning. Youth workers also build strong relationships with families, helping them connect with other local support where necessary, and fostering trust and more positive dynamics between parents, schools and other key services.

In one recent study involving more than 700 young people involved in targeted youth work programmes across 17 local authorities.

Evidence showed that:

- 90% of young people grew in confidence to participate in learning.
- 77% demonstrated increased resilience, particularly a willingness to keep going even when they are finding things difficult, or to try again after a setback.
- 85% built stronger, more positive relationships that, in turn, enhanced their experience of learning with others.
- 49% of young people showed an improvement in school attendance.

Young people involved in youth work also developed new skills:

- 86% of young people grew in confidence and effectiveness to contribute as part of a group or team
- 82% of young people improved their communication skills.
- 74% developed stronger problem-solving skills.
- 65% became more confident to weigh up and take responsibility for decisions.

- 43% developed their leadership skills.
- Almost half of the young people in this cohort gained accredited awards or qualifications.

Youth workers also support disadvantaged young people who may face complex barriers to transitioning into positive post-school destinations, offering targeted **programmes and interventions** across school and community settings. They offer personalised learning experiences where young people can build skills and confidence at their own pace, and they collaborate with other career service providers and with employers to offer wider opportunities when young people are ready for these. Youth workers also provide practical and emotional support to young people and their families, where needed, enabling them to sustain and progress in new learning experiences and in their employment. This includes additional help at critical transition points, and broader support with independent living, such as with housing and finances.

YouthLink Scotland's Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) National Programme, focused on building capacity for effective partnership working offers **professional development and training to support effective partnership working between youth work and schools**. In the 2025 SAC consultation, youth workers underlined the need for continued support with:

- Promoting understanding of youth work's role across the learner journey and the need for youth work to be embedded in the system.
- Supporting strategic collaboration at national and local authority level.
- Securing sustainable and secure funding for youth work and school partnerships.
- Sharing and celebrating effective collaborative practice between youth work and school.

- Facilitating engagement with national policy and drivers for improvement.

## 2. What actions or additional support could be put in place to help schools improve?

Despite significant evidence that affirms the impact of youth work and school partnerships on educational outcomes for young people, the availability and quality of collaboration across Scotland varies widely. The 2026 youth work manifesto, developed in consultation with local authority and third sector youth work teams across Scotland calls for the following actions to improve young people's educational experiences in and around school:

- Formalise partnerships between schools and youth work organisations to support wellbeing, engagement, attendance, educational outcomes and positive destinations.
- Invest to ensure all young people can access their right to youth work across the learner journey - in school, college and community.
- Support a whole-school approach to inclusion, with youth workers contributing to reducing exclusions and raising aspirations.
- Guarantee access to residential and outdoor learning as part of education, helping young people build independence, teamwork, and life skills.

These asks were informed by the views of young people participating in youth work who contributed to the National Discussion on Education Reform (2023). Only 22% of young people who took part said that they were fully satisfied with their education, and their top priorities for change included:

- Feeling safe, respected, supported, and included by those who support their learning
- Access to youth work where and when they need it.
- Opportunities to take part in youth work as part of their curriculum or timetable.

Young people are clear about value of youth work as an integral part of their education:

*“Youth work is more focused on the individual rather than meeting class targets.”*

*“We focus on things that matter to us and learn more about the real world.”*

*“So many different opportunities, it isn’t just the one way of learning, there is different ways to learn in a youth work setting and you can freely make mistakes and be supported while doing so.”*

*“We have a say in how things are done, and it feels like it’s more tailored to us It gives you a more informal way of learning, it gives you options. It doesn’t feel like learning as it’s so enjoyable. There is so much variety for topics you are interested in.”*

*“I didn’t know what I wanted to be when I’m in school, but I’ve learned more about what I want to do next by coming here.”*

*“I can relax and learn what I want at a pace I can understand.”*

*“Please have youth work as part of school. It would make learning more fun and interesting for us. Youth workers have a different way of explaining things to us.” Please don’t take this away because I’m not going to learn if I don’t feel comfortable. I’m now more confident because this is helping me.”*

3. Are there any additional comments you would like to share that have not been covered above?

The Scottish Government should formalise the role of youth work as a core partner in education, collaborating in school improvement planning, funding decision-making and governance. This would help to address the current variability in partnership working across Scotland and support more consistent access to relational, preventative support for children and young people.

As Scotland’s national youth work agency, YouthLink Scotland is already contributing to education reform by:

- Representing the youth work sector on the Careers Collaborative, supporting the implementation of the Career Review
- Participating in the co-design of Education Scotland’s programme of curriculum reform

- Supporting effective partnership between youth work and schools, including through the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programme and professional learning resources developed in partnership with Education Scotland.
- Enabling seldom heard young people and their families to share their experiences of education, and their hopes for a reformed system.

Building on this existing infrastructure, YouthLink Scotland is well placed to act as a key partner supporting education reform, working with Scottish Government, local authorities and national agencies to support implementation at pace and scale. This would include:

- Supporting the translation of national policy and reform priorities into practical and sustainable partnership models between youth work and school at local level.
- Supporting schools and local authorities to develop and strengthen partnership working in ways that are proportionate, meaningful and responsive to local need.
- Building shared understanding across sectors of respective roles, responsibilities and contributions to school improvement.
- Supporting rights-based and young person-led approaches to service development and reform, involving a cross-section of young people who currently face barriers to engagement.

Further investment in the youth work sector would enable more effective use of existing capacity, support 'collective agency' in addressing existing challenges and build on evidence of what works in improving educational experiences and outcomes for young people. The youth work sector can also help to ensure that reform is shaped by the voices of children, young people and families affected by poverty and other associated barriers to engagement in learning

4. Are you content for your organisation's views on improvement to be referenced in the report?

Yes

## **FUNDING**

This section seeks your views on school funding.

In Scotland, local authorities provide funding for the delivery of school education. The funding that makes up the local authority budget comes from a combination of Scottish Government grant funding, council tax and non-domestic rates receipts and income they receive from services they provide. Local authorities then decide how to divide this funding between schools in their area.

Some additional funding is allocated directly to schools from Scottish Government via the local authority for them to spend based on need, for example to support schools with a higher proportion of pupils living in areas of high deprivation and for the provision of free school meals.

For each of these questions the IPA is interested in your views and experiences of:

- how funding reaches schools;
- whether funding is fair and meets the needs of learners;
- how funding supports learning, well-being and inclusion;
- whether schools have enough flexibility in how money is used; and
- whether additional funding is needed for particular groups of pupils

### **5. Do school leaders receive the funding they need to deliver high-quality education for all learners?**

Evidence shows that, whilst some important progress has been made as a result of the Attainment Scotland Fund, too many young people in Scotland are still not able to access the support they need as learners:

- In a recent consultation, 20% of young people disagreed or strongly disagreed that their education meets their needs as a learner and only 33% of young people in secondary school agreed or strongly agreed that they are having the best possible education experience.
- The poverty related gap in attendance has continued to widen.
- The poverty related gap in school leaver attainment has continued to widen.

- School leavers in S4 and S5 are more likely to be young people from the most deprived backgrounds.
- Across Scotland, statistics show that there are growing challenges around rising levels of distressed behaviour in schools. The reasons for this are complex, but an increase in the number of pupils identified with Additional Support Needs (ASN), and the widespread impact of adverse childhood experiences highlight the need for more effective approaches to supporting young people that are relational, flexible and young person centred.

Whilst schools are not currently able to meet the needs of all learners, providing more funding direct to schools will not necessarily effectively address the complexity of issues that children, young people and their families face. There is a need to think differently about funding education across a range of settings, including youth work.

## **6. How well do you think the current system for funding schools in Scotland works?**

The statistics in (5) above demonstrate that we need a more joined up approach to thinking about funding across the education system, including youth work. The 2024 Independent Review of Community Learning (CLD) and development highlights:

*“an urgent need to reconsider the current weight of funding to ensure CLD learning receives the resource it requires to deliver the positive outcomes we know it can... recognising how important wider Youth Work activity is in drawing young people into an environment where more tailored learning can be agreed ... a good first step would be to encourage greater use of Scottish Attainment Challenge/Pupil Equity Fund (SAC/PEF) funding to provide dedicated and professional Youth Work support in our secondary schools.”*

It's clear that there is a need to focus, not just on the funding that schools receive but on funding models across local authorities and learning communities that offer more support, personalisation and choice in the curriculum. Youth workers, working in partnership

with schools can offer safe, trusted spaces where young people can talk, reflect, and develop at their own pace. Through one-to-one support, group work, and informal learning, youth workers help young people to understand and manage emotions, build relationships with their peers and with a range of supportive adults, so that they can re-engage with learning in ways that feel achievable and meaningful. This relational, trauma-informed approach helps young people to feel seen and valued which is a crucial factor in supporting positive behaviour and wellbeing.

A 2024 study of the role of youth work in building readiness to learn demonstrated that:

- 83% of young people were better able to regulate emotions following support in a youth work setting.
- More than 40% also showed improvement in their ability to regulate emotions in the classroom.

When youth work is integrated into multi-agency teams (alongside teaching staff, guidance, social work, third sector, police and family support), it strengthens a holistic approach to supporting young people. Many schools and families recognise that youth workers can provide effective early intervention by providing whole family support, identifying emerging issues and helping to prevent escalation before crisis points are reached.

*As a school, we have a lot of services we can access, some not as quickly as we would like, but with [the youth work team] it's always a rapid response and 99.9% of the time they are reaching young people that other services don't do – and that's through the power of their relationship building.” Principal Teacher*

*“Since he has started [receiving support from the youth work team] he has become more confident and enjoys spending time with family and friends more. Before, he was quite isolated in his room. He was quite shy due to his anxiety and was nervous about his literacy skills and talking to people – now, after this, he has something he is excited about – he talks a lot and is really passionate about it.” Parent*

*“Youth work supports health and wellbeing across the board – it helps young people to feel comfortable and happy in the school - if you're not happy, you can't learn. Once we have happy young people, they can go on to excel.” Head Teacher*

**7. To what extent is education funding allocated and used equitably to support those children and young people who require additional help such as those living in poverty?**

The Attainment Scotland Fund has provided valuable additional funds to address the needs of young people facing poverty and other barriers to learning. The ASF Evaluation demonstrates that some important progress has been made. And the youth work sector is supported through one of the SAC National Programmes, focused on gathering evidence of the impact of youth work in improving educational outcomes for young people affected by poverty - and supporting capacity-building to enable effective partnership working. However, decisions about Pupil Equity Funding are made by schools and decisions about Strategic Equity Funding are made at local authority level and recent consultations highlight the need for more collaborative strategic leadership and more joined-up decision making about funding distribution.

National Guidance for the Attainment Scotland Fund is clear that joined-up approaches are required to deliver the ambitions of the Scottish Attainment Challenge:

*“The mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge is one that must be supported by ‘collective agency’ – the range of services, third sector organisations and community partners working together with families, with a clear focus on improving the educational experiences, health and wellbeing and outcomes of children and young people.”*

Funding allocations / funding decision-making should reflect this need.

**8. What changes, if any, would you recommend to make school funding more effective?**

As outlined in (6) and (7) above, the distribution of funding in education should reflect the need for ‘collective agency’ and respond to compelling evidence that demonstrates the positive impact of youth

work on educational outcomes for young people who face a range of barriers to engagement in school. This means a significant and sustainable increase in both local authority and third sector funding for youth work. Examples of uplifts in youth work funding to support education recovery demonstrated how effective this could be, but have not yet resulted in long term sustainable funding for the youth work sector:

The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund (2021-2222) distributed an additional £3 million to 64 youth work organisations (third sector and local authority) across Scotland to address the needs of young people affected by poverty who had been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic: young people who were disengaging from learning / not attending school/ presenting with health anxieties. Around half of the projects were supporting young people affected by food poverty and a third were working with young carers. Across this group of 18,000 young people:

- 82% of participating young people developed their skills
- 79% of participating young people experienced improved health and wellbeing
- 78% of participating young people overcame barriers to learning
- 61% of young people were more engaged in learning
- 37% of young people achieved recognition of wider achievement attainment e.g. youth awards

Importantly, the fund required youth workers to collaborate with schools and other local partners where relevant when developing their programme proposals. The fact that youth work organisations were able to 'bring funding' rather than 'ask for funding' changed the conversation with some schools in a positive way, evening out a perceived power imbalance, and creating more of a level playing field for co-design and more acknowledgement of youth workers' understanding of the needs of young people. Insights from those involved, reflecting on the impact of the programme, highlighted that the partnership approach:

- Supported effective referral processes ensure the most vulnerable young people were reached.

- More comprehensive “partnership intelligence” meant there was a fuller picture of young people’s lives and the challenges they and their families were facing, enabling partners to respond to needs more effectively, and in a more holistic way.
- Sharing resources and expertise led to enrichment of experiences for young people and it was easier to signpost young people to other support.
- Links into families were stronger.
- Links with employability practitioners were stronger.

Schools accessing support through the fund were clear about the value of the partnership with youth work.

*“[The school-based youth worker] has excelled in developing relationships with pupils and staff...Her ability to build bridges and relate to young people is resulting in positive outcomes across the board.”*

*“This is magnificent. What a model for others if we get the chance to do this again.”*

*“Youth workers have skills – and huge insight from the relationships they build with young people in communities – to help us engage young people in learning.”*

The main challenges associated with one-off funding programmes to support partnership are that

- a) it takes time to establish a shared understanding of desired outcomes and shared roles
- b) partnerships supporting young people facing barriers to participation in education should be able to offer young people sustainable, relational support for the long term

Future funding models need to reflect the need for long term investment in at-risk young people.

**9. Are there any additional comments you would like to share that have not been covered above?**

There is a need for future education funding models to recognise the impact that early intervention support offered by youth workers in partnership with primary schools can have on improvements in health and wellbeing, learner engagement, and attendance:

Youth Work Outdoor Learning Recovery Fund is another post-Covid example that demonstrates the power of youth work for younger age groups - 72% of the 8,500 young people who accessed youth work through this fund were of primary school age:

- 95% of participating young people developed their skills.
- 87% of participating young people experienced improved health and wellbeing.
- 83% of participating young people were more engaged in learning.
- 83% of participating young people had a stronger sense of connection with, and appreciation of, nature and place.

Children from low-income families are almost twice as likely to experience a negative transition between primary and secondary school. Youth workers can offer continuity of support from primary into secondary school to young people at risk of experiencing a negative transition, supporting young people's health and wellbeing and readiness to learn. Youth work teams can also offer targeted support to young people during the school holidays, helping to tackle summer learning loss, food insecurity and supporting families to access other support services where needed. Some primary schools are also allocating limited Pupil Equity funding to partnerships with schools, but currently these are in the minority, due to much more limited PEF funding being available to support this for young age groups.

"Our [school-based youth worker] focuses on nurture, family support and promoting positive relationships. I think children and families often develop different relationships with [our youth worker], partly because she's not a teacher. The youth work approach and particular skills-set that comes with this role complements and enhances the range of support we offer as a school." Primary School Head Teacher

"Engaging families is crucial to establishing and maintaining good attendance with our children. The [youth workers] engage with families that, due to various factors, may be reluctant to engage with school staff. This inevitably impacts positively on the school relationships with families." Primary School Head Teacher

"Youth workers bring high-quality, personalised approaches to nurture and learning loss – and they also offer flexibility: they are

there in the evenings and during the holidays when there is still a need for the support.” Council Engagement Officer

Another area where youth work has the potential make a significant difference to experiences of education in school is amongst young people with additional support needs. In 2024, 40.5% of all Scottish pupils were identified as having an additional support need/s. This number has more than doubled in the last decade. As a rights-based practice, youth work has a strong focus on equity and inclusion and can work with schools to support young people with a range of additional support needs. Again, education funding should reflect the role that youth work can play in tailoring support to meet young people where they are.

For example, care experienced young people continue to face barriers to participation and attainment in education. A recent youth work approach to supporting care experienced young people in Edinburgh at risk of disengaging from education demonstrated promising evidence of impact:

- 84% of participating young people became more confident.
- 88% of young people made progress in building positive relationships with one another and with adults connected to the programme.
- 92% of participating young people made progress in their communication skills.
- 64% of young people showed improvement in school engagement and attendance.

Too often, funding for programmes like these is short term, and does not offer young people the continuity of support needed to help them to sustain progress.

10.Are you content for your organisation’s views on funding to be referenced in the report?

Yes

## **GOVERNANCE**

This section of the form seeks your views with regards to school governance. School governance looks at how schools are managed and led.

In Scotland, responsibility for school governance is shared across several levels. The Scottish Government sets national policy and priorities. 32 Local authorities have responsibility for running schools in their area, including staffing, support, funding, and improvement planning. Headteachers lead the day-to-day management of their individual schools. Schools also work with partners such as Education Scotland, Parent Councils, learners, and the wider community to support decision-making and school improvement.

For each of these questions, the IPA is interested in your views and experiences of: whether roles and responsibilities across the system are clear;

- how accountable and transparent decision-making processes are;
- whether schools have appropriate autonomy to respond to local needs;
- how learners, parents/carers and communities are able to participate in governance and influence school decisions;
- and whether any changes to governance could strengthen school improvement.

**11. How clear are you in understanding the role and responsibilities of schools, local authorities and national agencies such as Education Scotland in the overall governance of schools?**

As the National Agency, YouthLink Scotland understands the roles and responsibilities of schools, local authorities and Education Scotland in the overall governance of schools. Through the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programme and associated networks such as our Youth Work and Schools Collaborative and professional learning resources such as Lost in Translation (produced in partnership with Education Scotland) we have been able to support more shared understanding of school governance at national and local level, however this is still work in progress and more could be done to help partners across the system understand these roles and responsibilities more clearly – and to build a shared

understanding reciprocally of the role of local authority and third sector youth work.

Relevant quotes from youth work teams:

*“Feel like our [youth work] team gets information “through the grapevine” rather than direct from the source.”*

*“Understand what each part does but not always how they interrelate and influence one another.*

*“Not sure who influences what.”*

## **12. How clear are you in understanding how decisions made by schools, local authorities and national agencies support school improvement?**

It is not always clear how decisions made by schools, local authorities and national agencies support school improvement.

As highlighted in the answers in the sections above, there is more work to do to support a more strategic and collaborative approach to decision making, particularly at school and local authority level.

Recent work on Education Reform by national agencies – for example the National Discussion on Education Reform, and Skills Development Scotland’s Career Review - has been relatively inclusive in its approach, and it is positive to see Education Scotland making efforts to involve partners, including youth work, in the current consultation on curriculum reform. Retaining the focus on partnership as national agencies move from consultation into leadership and delivery of reforms is critical – the sector implementation plans and the diverse membership of the Careers Collaborative is a good example of a clear commitment to this.

YouthLink Scotland’s SAC National Programme team consulted with the young work sector in 2025 to hear their views on progress with the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

This highlighted that despite Scottish Government guidance identifying the need for a collaborative approach with youth work in developing and achieving local authority stretch aims and in school improvement planning, most youth work managers and practitioners were not included in local authority strategic planning for formal

education, including developing SAC stretch aims. A larger number of those consulted said that youth work was included within individual school improvement plans, but experiences were still mixed.

Recent quotes from members of YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work and Schools Collaborative:

*"It can be overwhelming trying to navigate the landscape and see the linkages. What is happening as a result of the Education Reform discussions a few years ago?... How is this impacting on the current curriculum improvement cycle for example?"*

*"Not clear how these [decisions] feed down to youth work"*

*"Not sure how much youth work is invited to be part of that through good sharing of plans with partners."*

*"There is a disconnect between local agenda and wider decision strategic decision making."*

### **13. How well do learners, parents and communities influence school decisions that result in high quality education for all?**

Evidence (above) suggests that community partners are not regularly given the opportunity to influence decisions about school improvement priorities or approaches to equity in schools.

We are also concerned that young people who are not engaging in school and families where relationships with school have broken down have very few opportunities to influence school decisions.

Recent quotes from members of YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work and Schools Collaborative:

*"Schools are open to good ideas(generally) however, most people find it very difficult to access the decision makers in school."*

*"I feel that this is a tick box for schools, they generally don't like criticism even if its constructive"*

*"While schools do ask for pupil voice it is often tokenistic and young people feel like they've not been heard"*

*"Pupil voice is only authentic if it is reflected in the planning around the young person...It is often tick box and tokenism."*

*"Difficult for schools to find time to do this well."*

*“Schools are too focused on the league tables and just want the young people they don't know what to do with taken care of.”*

**14. Are there further considerations for the governance of schools and school education?**

Governance should reflect Scottish Government guidance on the need for an education system that works effectively in partnership with other services, including youth work. Collaborative processes for improvement planning, involving local authority and third sector youth work partners alongside schools and other relevant services are key. There needs to be more accountability for these, moving beyond guidance to a required part of the planning process.

And with community partners, parents and young people themselves, it is important to move beyond 'consultation' to defined, meaningful opportunities to influence decision-making.

**15. Do you have any additional comments on school governance that have not been covered above?**

Youth work can also play a vital role in rights-based and young person-led approaches to service development and improvement. All too often, efforts to gather youth voice or co-design services are not representative of all young people. Through youth work, seldom heard young people can be supported to share their experiences, providing invaluable insights from key groups of young stakeholders who potentially stand to benefit most from service reform. Additionally, as highlighted in section 1 above, youth workers are experts in building strong relationships with families, and could support efforts to consult with parents who are not currently engaging with schools.

16. Are you content for your organisation's views on governance to be referenced in the report?

Yes

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

17. Name of organisation: YouthLink Scotland

18.City: National Organisation, based in Edinburgh

19.Contact details for follow-up (should clarification be required)