

JOINT PRESS STATEMENT

YOUTHLINK SCOTLAND AND THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMISSIONER ISSUE JOINT CALL FOR URGENT ACTION OVER LACK OF ACCESS TO YOUTH WORK SERVICES

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Today Scotland's National Agency for Youth Work, YouthLink Scotland have released the latest survey of the youth work sector, detailing the ongoing lack of access to facilities the sector faces to deliver essential services and support.

As we move further into winter, YouthLink Scotland's CEO Tim Frew and Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland warn that a lack of access to youth work services threatens to leave young people in Scotland without vital support.

The latest survey of the sector shows that, as we move into our second winter under Covid-19 restrictions, still only 54% of youth work have access to the facilities they need.

If we are to ensure that young people have access to the support they need, it is essential that safe spaces for youth work are made available – as a matter of urgency. We know that youth work is key to reaching and engaging young people, to providing mental health support, signposting other services, tackling isolation and helping young people re-engage in learning. It is therefore imperative that these services are made available in the community.

With increasingly cold weather, opportunities to conduct youth work activities outdoors will no longer be option. This situation is urgent and critical, solutions to the current barriers need to be brought forward now.

It's clear from survey respondents that lack of access is impacting on young people's mental health and support:

"We often have to meet with young people in public places such as cafes where confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. As a result, workers are not able to provide the same level of focused support as pre-covid. Young people don't want to talk about their private lives in public."

"The lack of routine for many has provided a lot of isolation for young people. Young people want to engage but we are usually an afterthought or priced out by an external organisation out with the community. The importance and need for the local community organisations have been huge from schools, police, young people and families. However, we are trying to do our work with both hands tied behind our backs!!!"

"We previously supported breakfast clubs and lunchtime activities in schools. No access to school permitted to continue this support. Our young people are struggling in school and tell us they need safe spaces to seek support. We are unable to offer this at the moment."

The survey does show an improved picture with 54% of total respondents having access to the facilities they need, compared to just 22% in June 2021.

However, while things have improved in the past year, 46% of youth work providers are not able to access the facilities they need and the survey suggests that significant issues remain:

- 44% of organisations wanting access to schools have no access
- 41% of organisations wanting access to local authority lets have no access
- 47% of organisations wanting access to leisure centres have no access
- 30% of organisations wanting access to faith-based centres have no access
- 20% of organisations wanting access to other community venues have no access
- 28% of those wanting access to outdoor centres have no access

The wider issue of the ongoing lack of permanent facilities has been highlighted through the survey, with 78% of respondents who have their own premises now having full access.

Tim Frew, CEO YouthLink Scotland said:

“We have serious concerns around the lack of vital youth work support and the impacts this will continue to have. We know young people are continuing to deal with the detrimental consequences of the pandemic. The impact on learning loss and mental health will only be further exacerbated while the current challenges surrounding access persist.

“If children and young people are our priority then an urgent solution needs to be found. We simply cannot have a situation where many young people are struggling to access essential youth work services. If this same situation was happening in schools, there would quite rightly be a national outcry.”

Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People’s Commissioner:

“Youth work plays a significant part in ensuring children and young people can access their rights to good mental and physical health as well as their educational, social and recreational rights. It’s particularly important to children and young people who experience disadvantage, including those living in poverty, young carers, disabled children and young people, LGBT and minority ethnic communities.

“Youth workers play a hugely important roles as trusted adults, providing safe spaces and support for children and young people outside of their family relationships. The pandemic has highlighted and further entrenched existing inequalities and providing vital youth work services with access to community spaces to work directly with children and young people over the winter months and beyond must be a priority. The Scottish Government and COSLA must take a proactive approach to increase access so that children and young people’s rights are protected and promoted.”

Graeme Luke, CEO of Scouts Scotland says his organisation nationally is experiencing significant challenges with access to facilities:

“It is essential that local authorities and the Scottish Government remove existing barriers and provide access to indoor facilities so that organisations like Scouts Scotland and other youth work providers can deliver our proven programmes of activity. Youth work sits alongside schools to engage young people in developing life skills, support personal development and positively improve mental health and social isolation.

“Our amazing volunteers have excelled in creatively delivering services throughout the pandemic but can’t go through another winter in outdoor spaces with lack of access to basic

facilities and our vital services are at real risk of permanent disruption when they are needed more than ever. Our organisation has worked tirelessly throughout the past 19 months to keep our members safe and our most recent membership survey has shown that we are well on track to returning to pre-pandemic numbers and this lack of access really threatens this achievement as our volunteers are frustrated and feel undervalued by this lack of progress."

Both the Children's Commissioner and YouthLink Scotland are clear that it is not acceptable to leave many vulnerable young people without access to vital support at a time when youth work is needed more than ever, as we face an increasing youth mental health crisis as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

Almost two years on from the start of the pandemic, and some youth workers are still having to deliver services outdoors, in parks, school grounds and on the streets.

The following are the most commonly mentioned barriers to access to facilities (ordered by frequency of mention):

1. Local authority not yet providing lets
2. Building not open due to guidance / restrictions
3. Building not open due to prohibitive cleaning / maintenance costs
4. Building not open due to volunteer committee hesitancy about cleaning
5. Limited access due to restricted numbers in buildings
6. Limited access due to competition in relation to use of venues
7. Limited access due to lack of staff
8. Building being used as vaccination centre

Some other comments from survey respondents

"We cover a massive area with many isolated villages within that. Due to not being able to look at community settings centrally, it means that multiple families living in poverty will have to look at 2/3 buses to access our face-to-face activities."

"We are starting to see a rise in ASB in some communities. Reduced access to opportunities for young people could be seen as contributing to this. Whilst Detached Youth Work has offered some opportunities for young people we are keen to have young people back in buildings especially in the face of inclement weather."

"We are struggling to keep motivated with the lack of guidance on when we can get access to the school. The head teacher has been fantastic and allow us to use the school grounds, but no access to running water or toilet facilities. Our leaders are drained. We cannot spend another winter delivering scouting purely outdoors."

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"The lack of routine for many has provided a lot of isolation for young people. Young people want to engage but we are usually an afterthought or priced out by an external organisation"

out with the community. The importance and need for the local community organisations have been huge from schools, police, young people and families. However, we are trying to do our work with both hands tied behind our backs!!!

"Working within local authority guidelines we have been locked out all our buildings and have been doing street work to support young people. Though the street work is going well, it doesn't offer opportunity to work on any accreditation or give clear structure to our delivery. Partner agencies have opened their doors and been very reactive throughout the pandemic, and deserve praise for their amazing contribution. This however makes local authority look useless in comparison, as we have no buildings, our hands are tied with red tape through our own management. Working closely with voluntary organisations is the only way I have been able to support young people."

"The young people with additional support needs who were unable to access our online service during the pandemic - have been waiting 20 months to re-join our sessions. They are now almost two years older! We are not sure if they can wait for our services to reopen."

"Young people have NO access to any building-based youth work. Therefore, we are not able to maintain regular contact with the majority of our young people. We are also not able to keep in contact with parents and families - we are a well-established service provider and are a first port of call."

"Massive impact on the older teen's mental health which impacts physical health, future options, aspirations and general feeling of not belonging or not being supported. We have funds from grants but our council will not release building to us despite our agreement to pay for everything and having had private rental before. The local council do not see this as a priority. So disrespectful to our young people and volunteers who take time out from their own lives."

"As a CLD Worker, I feel like I cannot offer the services to young people that they need most due to budgeting and staffing constraints which are led by the priorities of another service who are only willing to open a building if it will make a profit for their service."

"Since lockdown and restricted access to our meeting place we have lost half our volunteer leaders and around half our members. As a charity who have sole responsibility for the management and upkeep of our premises, we may soon find it uneconomic to continue with a group that has provided vital youth development services for 81 years since its formation."

"In all honesty, as part of the recovery process we have been really lucky in accessing safe spaces for young people by working in partnership and collaboration with colleagues in culture and leisure and the community based voluntary sector so that access and safe spaces was created."

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