Scotland's Poverty Related Youth Volunteering Gap

November 2025

Introduction

Recent research has highlighted that young people in Scotland who live in areas that are in quintiles 1 and 2 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), face more barriers to accessing and sustaining high-quality volunteering opportunities. While many want to take part, the obstacles they face mean they are less likely to volunteer than their peers in less deprived areas. Volunteering allows young people to gain and develop skills that positively benefit them in learning, life and work, and some young people are missing out on these benefits.

"Many people in my area have money problems and are too busy working to have time to volunteer. I have had to skip quite a few meetings and volunteer work due to paid work."

Participation in Volunteering

Youth VIP's research report **Young People's Perspectives on Volunteering (2025)** found that young people surveyed from SIMD 1 + 2 are twice as likely to have never volunteered when compared to young people in general — 22% compared to 11%. The research report also found that of those young people who have never volunteered before, 24% of those from SIMD 1 + 2 would like to volunteer compared to 18% generally. Young people living in areas SIMD 1 + 2 face more barriers to participate in volunteering opportunities, but there is a clear willingness to get involved if these barriers are tackled.

Challenges we need to address in order to create more equitable and inclusive volunteering opportunities

Making time for unpaid work

The YouthVIP research asked young people about their negative views and downsides of volunteering. Young people from SIMD 1 + 2 frequently stated that volunteering being unpaid was a significant issue for them. Young people from these disadvantaged backgrounds often need to use their free time to work in paid employment to support themselves or their families:

"A lot of young people don't see the point in volunteering because they're not being paid."

"For me, it's a struggle to find volunteering opportunities, I really want to. I don't have a proper personal/work email either or a device I can check it. Even now I'm using the school iPad to fill this form."

"Some people don't want to give up their own time to do something for someone else if they don't get much in return."

This viewpoint was more common amongst young people living in SIMD 1 + 2 communities than others from more affluent areas.

The need for flexibility

Youth VIP's recommendations act as a guide for organisations looking to recruit and retain young people as volunteers and think about more inclusive approaches to volunteering. These are especially relevant for young people facing socio-economic barriers

One recommendation focuses on flexibility: 'Make your volunteering opportunities flexible and time appropriate to the other commitments of young people'.

Young people from SIMD 1 + 2 often need to be in paid employment during their free time. As outlined above, volunteering opportunities must be flexible to allow young people to continue with this paid employment and commit the amount of time to volunteering that works and is manageable for them. Volunteering opportunities should also allow young people to step back from their responsibilities at times when their priorities shift and they must give more time to other areas such as education, work pressures or caring responsibilities.

YouthLink Scotland's **Youth Work and Volunteering** paper demonstrates how a youth work approach to volunteering recognises and responds to this need for flexibility. Youth workers understand young people's circumstances and help them participate without fear of being judged as unreliable.

In particular, this consultation with young people highlights the key role youth work plays in supporting young people with caring responsibilities to access and maintain volunteering opportunities. Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24 [1] found young carers were more likely to live in the most deprived SIMD deciles. 29% of young carers identified in the Census lived in the lowest SIMD areas, compared to 11% who lived in the highest 2 areas.

One young carer shared:

> **"The [youth work] team understand my strengths... Because I'm a carer, I can't work full time at the moment, but my volunteering experience is helping me to grow my skills for work in the future."**

The relationship between youth workers and those young people they help to access volunteering can be a crucial step to reduce the barriers facing these young people by allowing the opportunities to be adapted to better suit their other responsibilities and subsequent availability.

[1] Information on Unpaid Carers - Carers Census, Scotland, 2023-24 - gov.scot

Addressing Differentials in Social Capital

Recent consultations by YouthLink Scotland, exploring access to careers guidance and work experience[2] have shown that young people recognise that access to volunteering opportunities is not equitable. This inequity prevents them from being able to build the networks and be introduced to the new opportunities that volunteering can provide.

> *"If your parents work in the field you are interested in, that makes it much easier."*

> *"Work experiences feel like an impossible circle – you need experience to get experience."*

Youth work also helps bridge this gap. Young people value the volunteering experience they receive when youth workers support them to get involved:

> *"I feel like [the youth workers] keep me in mind for opportunities. They acknowledge your strengths and offer volunteering opportunities that play to these."*

A youth work approach to volunteering can be vital for young people to find out about, feel encouraged to access, and be supported to engage in a flexible manner that suits their needs, and this can be pivotal for those young people facing socio-economic barriers to get involved and benefit from volunteering opportunities.

Communicating the value and benefits of volunteering

A YouthVIP's research survey asked young people: "Would you be more likely to start volunteering if you knew it would increase your chance of getting a job, or into college or university?"

Across all responses, 83% said yes, but when looking only at those from SIMD 1 + 2, that figure rose to 91%.

[2] https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/Final-young-peoples-perspectives-.pdf

Survey respondents were also asked: “How could volunteering be easier for young people to get involved in?”

48% of all respondents chose “making it easier to use volunteer experience to move on into work or college” as a way this could be done, but that figure rises to 62% for SIMD 1 + 2 respondents specifically.

This illustrates that many young people experiencing socio-economic barriers want volunteering opportunities where the skills gained translate into positive destinations, such as employment or further education.

Recommendations from the YouthVIP research report also focused on the importance of clarity about the volunteering opportunity; being clear to young people about what's involved and what they will get out of it. Recognition emerged as being very important to young people when they are looking to engage with volunteering opportunities, and feeling they are being rewarded for their efforts in a way that is meaningful and impactful to them.

Key themes that emerged as important to young people in terms of this recognition as detailed above include:

- **Skills for work and personal growth**
- **CV development**
- **Progression to college, university or paid employment**

Young people need support to recognise and articulate the skills they develop through their volunteering experience. **The National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework** can be an important tool used to assist with this.

This young volunteer has shared their journey of developing confidence and teamwork skills that are key to success in education and employment.

"Looking back, I can see how my confidence has grown through volunteering . At school I didn't want to work with anyone else because it was difficult for me to talk to people I didn't know. When I first went to college, we were asked to do a piece of group work. I was dreading it – I felt ill thinking about it. But this year, on my science course, I feel fine about working in groups. I'm bringing the confidence I've got from volunteering with different people and personalities, and I'm happy to voice my opinion in groups"

These benefits, and the transferability of skills gained, should be included in promoting volunteering opportunities so those young people, particularly those facing socio-economic barriers, see volunteering as a worthwhile use of their time and effort. Ensuring that young people are supported to recognise their development is key to this transferability.

Conclusion

Many young people experiencing socio-economic barriers want to volunteer, but these opportunities need to be flexible and understanding of the challenges they face. The need to spend a lot of their free time in paid employment, caring responsibilities, less knowledge of how to gain access to volunteering opportunities all contribute to a lack of fair and equitable access compared to their peers. **Key Recommendations** from YouthVIP's research report around flexibility of opportunities, clarity of expectations and outcomes and the importance of recognition and reward for young people, as well as a youth work approach to volunteering, can play an important role in widening access to volunteering for all young people in Scotland.

#YouthVIP

#YouthVIP is a multi-organisation initiative, made up of Volunteering Matters, YouthLink Scotland, and Young Scot, existing to promote inclusive and participatory youth volunteering across Scotland. Formed from 13 recommendations made by young people from the Youth Volunteering Innovation Project (Youth VIP) to the Scottish Government in 2020, we now work with organisations, Local Government and young people to make this vision a reality.

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