

Youth Work's Role in Suicide Prevention Policy Brief

April 2024



About YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation representing the voluntary and statutory youth work sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of the sector. We are an organisation with a sharp focus on the needs of young people, promoting learning, innovation and progressive thinking and are committed to the highest standards of protection and safety for young people.

This briefing highlights recent research and evidence of the transformative impact youth workers have on reducing the worst impacts of poverty and their role in improving the lives of children and young people. It focuses on the need to harness the power of the youth work sector to help the Scottish Government deliver on the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan (2022-2027).

To find out more about this paper, please contact YouthLink Scotland's Policy & Research Manager Kevin Kane on kkane@youthlink.scot.

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.

Youth Work and its Role in Suicide Prevention

YouthLink Scotland's recent submission to the Scottish Parliament, Equality and Human Rights Committee inquiry into the Scottish Government and COSLA's Suicide Prevention Strategy demonstrates youth work's significant impact and value. It promotes a positive image of young people and youth work in this public policy space.

YouthLink Scotland believes the Scottish Government and key partners should consider the critical role of statutory and voluntary youth work services when reviewing the Suicide Prevention Strategy for Scotland.

Because:

- 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.

Recommendations

- We advise prioritising a partnership/multi-agency approach that recognises the many services (including youth work) contributing to prevention and intervention work. The approach should be holistic and person-centred and include regular service evaluation with users as a 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 prioritised. This should be part of nationwide investment in youth work infrastructure that maintains local authority Community Learning and Development (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; rather, they should partner 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 issues . It can alleviate depression, anxiety and stress and reduce loneliness and social isolation . 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.
- 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

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.

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.

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

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 would welcome recognition of the upstream potential of youth work in this critical public policy area.

For more on this policy briefing, please get in touch with YouthLink Scotland's Policy and Research Manager, kkane@youthlink.scot



YouthLink Scotland, Caledonian Exchange, 19A Canning St. Edinburgh, EH3 8EG
T: 0131 202 8050 E: info@youthlink.scot W: www.youthlink.scot
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