



'How Can We Work Better Together to Support Young People's Readiness to Learn?'

May 2026



Working Together to Support Readiness to Learn

Following the publication of reports focused on readiness to learn by the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programmes¹, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Young Scot, CELCIS and YouthLink Scotland hosted a national event that brought together 87 practitioners, including Local Authority Equity Leads, Attainment Advisors, Virtual Head Teachers, teachers, youth workers, and Scottish Government officials. The aim of the event was to explore young people's perspectives on building readiness to learn - and to consider how we can work collaboratively across the system to better support their needs.

Starting with Young People's Views

Insights from national consultations with young people facilitated by Young Scot and CPAG were the starting point for discussions at the practitioner event, ensuring that reflections and recommendations were grounded in young people's lived experience.

"When I'm hungry or worrying about things at home, I can't focus in class."

"Youth workers make school feel less scary. They actually listen."

"It's hard when people assume you're not trying. Sometimes you just need help."

"Flexible learning, like outdoor stuff or being creative, helps me when I'm stressed."

"Being treated with respect matters more than anything else."



At the Event, Practitioners Explored:

1. What young people are saying about the enablers of their readiness to learn.
2. The role of youth work in supporting readiness to learn.
3. System-wide collaboration to more effectively respond to young people's needs.

Practitioners at the event reviewed their practice, how well current approaches reflect what young people say they need; what more can be done; barriers to progress; collaborative solutions; who else needs to be involved and priorities for action.

¹ [CELCIS Virtual Head Teachers Network Information](#)
[Young Scot – What I Need to Learn Report](#)
[CPAG Big Question Report](#)
[YouthLink Scotland Readiness to Learn Report](#)

Practitioners' Reflections on What Young People Told Us

| Theme | What young people told us | Practitioners Response |
|---|---|---|
| Importance of youth work/ outdoor education | <p>"Outdoor learning helps when I feel anxious – it doesn't feel like pressure."</p> <p>"Sometimes talking to someone not a teacher makes a huge difference."</p> | Youth work and outdoor learning were seen as valuable alternatives to traditional provision. |
| Need to support young people's mental health & wellbeing | <p>"It's hard to talk when people don't believe you."</p> <p>"Being online all the time messed with my head. I don't feel like myself anymore."</p> | Mental health pressures, especially post-COVID, are rising. |
| Invest in long term, integrated support systems | <p>"It sucks when someone finally gets you – then they leave."</p> <p>"We need the same people around – that's when I feel safe."</p> | Short-term funding disrupts relationships and continuity. There is a call for long-term investment in youth work, home link workers, virtual head teachers and more consistent trauma-informed practice in schools. |
| Embed meaningful youth participation and engagement throughout our processes | <p>"Ask us before you decide stuff, not after."</p> <p>"If you're designing for us, include us."</p> | Embed young people's voices in all stages of design, delivery, and evaluation. Co-production should become the standard approach. Youth voice and participation can be hard to capture meaningfully. |
| Value Readiness to Learn – not just academic results | <p>"If I'm not okay, I can't do well in school – no matter how much pressure there is."</p> <p>"Feeling safe, warm, and listened to makes a bigger difference than getting a test score."</p> <p>"They only care if you pass – not if you're struggling."</p> | Learning cannot happen without addressing unmet basic needs. Shift the narrative: value readiness, not just results. Use broader measures of impact beyond attainment. |

What Is Working Well?

- Holistic, child/young person-centred support tailored to individual needs - for example: virtual head teachers and youth worker support.
- Positive partnership working across schools, youth work, welfare and family wellbeing teams, with trusted relationships improving engagement.
- Good local practice examples such as home link workers linking schools and families, youth workers embedded in schools, and community events connecting families to services would benefit from scaling up successful models.
- Use of data to target resources effectively is working well in some areas, though coordination requires strengthening.



What We Could Do More Of/ Differently

- Earlier intervention and prevention, particularly supporting children between P1–P6 and whole-family approaches.
- Alternative provision including outdoor learning, community-based programmes, and flexible curriculum pathways.
- Broader measures of impact, recognising the value of experiences (e.g. youth work groups) beyond academic outcomes.
- Stronger information sharing models (e.g. “tell us once” approaches) to avoid duplication.
- Reduce bureaucracy and empower practitioners with greater autonomy and trust.
- Need to move away from stigmatising language (e.g., 'deprivation', 'bad behaviour') toward strengths-based terms like 'readiness to learn'.
- Need support for alternative, experiential, and flexible learning environments.
- Consistent access to youth work in and around schools and to the support of virtual head teachers.
- Embed young people’s voices in all stages of design, delivery, and evaluation. Co-production should become the standard approach.

Barriers to Meeting Needs

- Short-term, inconsistent funding undermines sustainability, causes high staff turnover, and limits long-term impact.
- Siloed working and duplication across funding streams and services.
- Challenges with data sharing between agencies.
- Reaching disengaged young people who are not currently in school remains difficult (e.g. breakfast clubs often miss those most in need).
- Youth voice and participation can be hard to capture meaningfully if young people are not in school. It is not possible to engage non-attending young people in school-based consultations.
- Mental health pressures post-COVID.

Who Else to Include / Influence

- Housing services: to help identify family needs early.
- Mental health providers: addressing post-COVID challenges and prevention.
- Community Learning & Development and Youth Work: trusted voluntary sector partners.
- Young people and families: ensuring their voices are central, with language that avoids stigma.
- Local and national government funders: to align and streamline funding.

Key Priorities for Action

Secure long-term, sustainable funding to support continuity, relationships, and transformational change.

- Short-term funding undermines programme continuity and relationship building.
- Loss of staff due to temporary contracts disrupts relational, trauma-informed practice.
- Calls for long-term investment in key support roles (e.g. youth workers, home link officers).

Embed early intervention, basic needs and whole-family support, including wellbeing workers, youth work and community-based services.

- Earlier intervention and whole-family approaches were seen as key, especially for younger children (P1–P6).
- Learning cannot happen without addressing unmet basic needs like food, clothing, and mental health.
- Youth work is key for relational, community-rooted support.
- Rethinking metrics to value wellbeing and lived experience, not just attainment.

Streamline systems and strengthen collaboration, reducing siloed working, duplication, and bureaucracy.

- Need for integrated work across education, youth work, health, and housing.
- Duplication of effort and lack of shared data are common barriers.
- Suggestions for 'tell-us-once' models and shared planning structures.

Growing concern around young people's mental health, including post-COVID trauma requiring flexible, trauma-informed responses to young people's needs (training funding, infrastructure).

Young People's Feedback on Identified Priorities

Since the National Programmes event in the Autumn, the SAC National Programmes teams have taken time to share practitioners' views and recommended actions with young people, and have asked them whether these are likely to help bring about the change that young people have said they want to see.

Eighty eight young people provided feedback using an online, anonymous survey. There was overwhelming agreement that the priorities identified by practitioners would make a positive difference to support for young people. First and foremost, young people highlighted the importance of feeling listened to, supported and understood, particularly in relation to mental health, trusted relationships, safe spaces and access to opportunities. Young people also stressed the need for services and support to be consistent, accessible and shaped with their voices at the centre.

I think the points surrounding poverty, neurodiversity and good environments are the most important.



I agree about early intervention. This could also help get young people access to mental health supports earlier"



Ranking of Priorities by Young People

The young people ranked the priorities identified by practitioners from their perspective and it was clear that they particularly valued:

- early intervention
- sustained support from school and partners
- the involvement of families in building readiness to learn.

The feedback demonstrated a strong alignment between the perspectives of practitioners and young people, reinforcing the importance of continuing to work collaboratively across services and communities.

These insights will inform the work of the Scottish Attainment National Programmes and partnership work across the system going forward, recognising the importance of continuing to engage young people in shaping the changes they have said they want to see.

Removing barriers can make learning interesting and useful.



I think parents have to be part of the plan because they are in charge of what happens at home.





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