

# Youth Work and Volunteering

The Role and Impact of Youth Work  
in Supporting Young People Through  
Volunteering Opportunities



February 2024

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# Introduction



“National policy should recognise that skills are not an alternative to education, but an essential product of learning and training, and give equal value to the various settings and pathways in and through which skills development can occur.”

— [James Withers](#), *Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation*

Youth work plays a key role across the education, skills and employability landscape in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. Through youth work, young people can access a wide range of experiences and support over the course of their learning journey that helps them ‘grow and succeed in a rapidly changing world’.<sup>2</sup>

With its strong focus on equity and inclusion, youth work makes a particularly important contribution to tackling poverty, and addressing the **Scottish Attainment Challenge**. Youth workers provide vital support to young people impacted by poverty and other inequalities, improving educational outcomes, and enabling more young people to successfully transition to positive post-school destinations. Creating and supporting high-quality volunteering experiences is an important part of this wider tapestry of youth work support. Through youth work, young volunteers can build skills, access a range of valuable experiential learning (including accredited awards and qualifications) and make progress towards and into employment.

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1 [Youth Work Employability Audit 2022](#), YouthLink Scotland

2 [career-review-final-report-230306-final.pdf](#) ([skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk](https://skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk))

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In 2023-24, YouthLink Scotland supported a collaborative study with practitioners and young volunteers from a range of youth work settings across Scotland. We undertook this work through our **Scottish Attainment Challenge<sup>3</sup> National Programme**, taking a particular interest in exploring how youth work engages and supports young people who tend to be less likely to volunteer, such as young people experiencing poverty<sup>4</sup>. Through focus groups and interviews, we gathered data to describe the impact of a youth work approach to volunteering in developing the young workforce. We asked practitioners to identify commonalities in their approach, and explored how these shared hallmarks of practice support positive outcomes for young people. This short report summarises the collective findings of youth work practitioners and young people.



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3 [Youth Work and the Scottish Attainment Challenge - Good Practice Examples](#)

4 [Young People in Scotland Survey 2022 Volunteering Analysis \(volunteerscotland.net\)](#)

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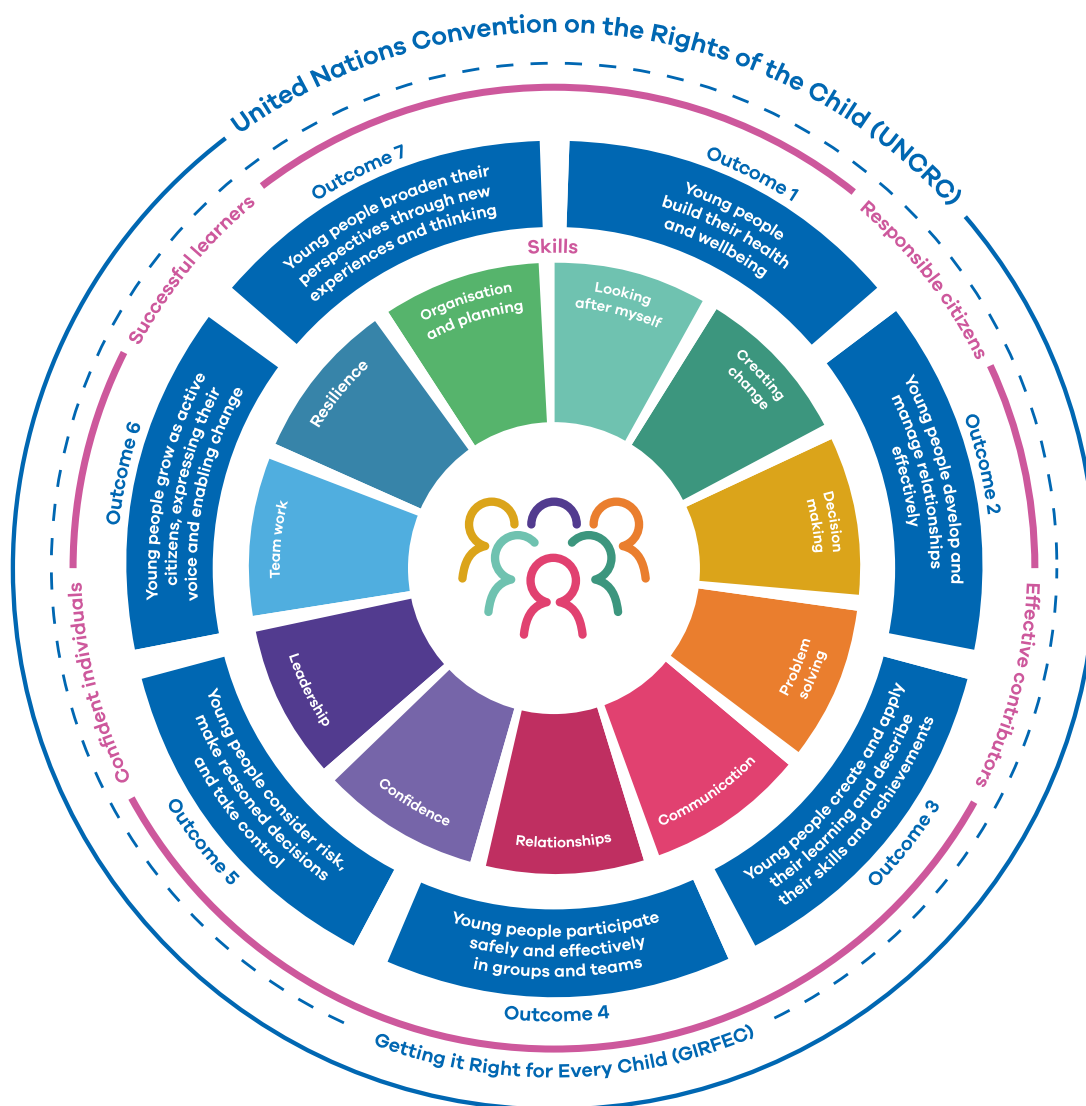


# The Impact of a Youth Work Approach to Volunteering

## Developing New Skills

Youth work practitioners agree that a focus developing young people's skills lies at the core of every volunteering experience they offer.

Using the National Youth Work Outcomes & Skills Framework as a common reference point, all of the young people who contributed to the recent study were positive and articulate about the skills they have developed as volunteers in youth work settings:





## Confidence

*"To begin with I'd be shy – not want to run activities. But the youth workers helped me to grow confident to say 'yes' to things, even though they are out of my comfort zone. Now when I feel scared or worried sometimes I can think – let's just try it. I'll face most challenges head on."*

*"I had to talk more, I had to open up. I had to get confident to lead a group of young people through a session. In school I would have been the last person to do that. But here, you're not doing it for a mark in a test, you're doing it to help other young people to learn, so it feels different."*

*"Building strong relationships with staff helped me to gain confidence and opened my eyes to opportunities."*

## Resilience

*"I've learned that most things just take practice and [the youth worker] and other young leaders just encourage me to go for it."*

*"I definitely developed more resilience – how to keep on going when we contacted people with our ideas and they said no. It helped me learn how to bounce back when things went less well – how just to take the feedback and move on."*

*"I wasn't very good at doing things for myself before – I was quite reliant on other people. Now I feel like others rely on me."*

## Relationships

*"Working with the youth work team, I started to see adults as people who are there to help you. And then when I started volunteering I wanted to be helpful in my relationships with young people too."*

*"I'm better at building relationships. I was bullied a lot in school and coming here was a different kind of environment. It was easy to make friendships."*

*"I met and worked with people that are now a really big deal in my life. It was a real bonding experience."*

*"I feel like I have more people in my life that I can depend on."*



## Communication

*"At the beginning, when I saw senior members of the team interacting with the young people I thought 'I could never do that'. Now I can."*

*"In school, my biggest fear was public speaking – now I can stand up in front of 30 [young people] without being nervous."*

*"I can discuss stuff with people without getting into arguments. At school I wasn't a kid that would shout out answers but I can talk to people better now."*

## Problem Solving

*"I've got better at thinking of solutions myself"*

*"I've got good at thinking on my feet."*

## Decision-making

*"My experience of decision making as a volunteer is helping me as I make decisions in other parts of my life."*

*"We have loads of responsibility: I've helped with funding bids, learned about budgeting, got confident to deal with situations when a young person might be being disruptive in the group."*

*"We make a lot of decisions about the experiences we'll offer young people together. But I'm accountable for financial decisions and for the care of young people, including when we are away on residential trips. But you get to that bit by bit, with support from more experienced guiders until you are confident you can take those decisions yourself."*



## Organising and planning

*"I think I'm much better at organising my workload and managing deadlines than I would have been if I hadn't had my volunteering experience."*

*"I have to plan meetings and keep people regularly in touch with what's going to happen. I was quite a disorganised person – now I plan things days and weeks before."*

*"When we are away, or when I am leading – I've learned to plan, take charge, delegate."*

*"At College now we're learning about managing studying. I feel confident with that because I've had so much experience of organising and managing projects through my volunteering experience."*

## Team work

*"When you volunteer, you're always working in a team – and supporting young people to work together, so you learn a lot about what makes teams effective and you also learn how to listen to different points of view and how to divvy up work or reallocate it if you take on too much."*

*"I'm really used to working with different people and personalities, but I'm also much more practised at supporting other people and using what I know about them to help them contribute too."*

## Leadership

*"As a result of my volunteering experience, I think I'm more willing to take responsibility and handle tricky situations than some other people I work with."*

*"I'm more of a leader in whatever I am doing now – I'll much more happily step into a decision-making role. I enjoy coming up with ideas and taking the initiative to put them into action, and I'm used to working to deadlines and making sure that everyone is clear on their part to play."*

*"I've become more responsible – taken on harder roles – set an example for the younger ones with my behaviour."*







# Building Confidence to Apply Skills in Other Settings

Over time, young volunteers report feeling confident to transfer the skills they are learning as volunteers into other contexts. They recognise this supports their readiness to learn and their confidence to contribute in more formal educational settings, in new work experience opportunities and in employment.

## In school

*"I was out of school for a while, but I still came along to the centre to volunteer. It was good to have that focus. It took my mind off other things. I was able to make new friends and it showed me work could be enjoyable and I was able to work for awards like the Saltire Award. I like that I can go back and look at my awards – it makes me proud and reminds me I can achieve something that I didn't think I could. I'm back in school now and knowing I'm able to apply that focus in school. Knowing that I can focus, when I work at it, has given me the motivation to work hard to catch up with stuff."*

## In college/university

*"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 had to do a piece of teamwork. I was dreading it – I felt ill thinking about it. But when I had to do the same this year, having had my volunteering experience, I was much more relaxed."*

*"I'm going to university this year and I definitely feel more confident about my ability to work with other people. I'm better with organising and planning. I feel like I have more people in my life that I can depend on."*

*"I've taken some of the confidence into college – [as a volunteer] here you have to use your voice a lot – so in class now it's easier to put my opinion across."*

## In work/other volunteer roles

*"My experience of volunteering at GYIP helped in the job interview and in the induction – I felt ok about meeting new people. In the job I think I'm more willing to take responsibility and handle tricky situations than some other people I work with."*



*"I definitely use skills I learned in guiding in my job too: I'm learning to delegate more; take a step back; understand my limits."*

*"My volunteering experience also gave me the confidence to join the Army Cadet Force, and the skills I've learned as a volunteer at the Y also helped with that."*

*"Because I'm a carer, I can't work full time at the moment, but a combination of my volunteering experience and the printing business is helping me to grow my skills for work in the future."*

## **Supporting Progression and Positive Outcomes**

Youth work practitioners are clear that youth volunteering can be an important route towards and into positive destinations and recognise that their relationships with the young volunteers they work with, enables them to offer relevant and timely support and encouragement.

Young volunteers involved in the study also reflect positively on the role that youth workers have played in enabling them to progress and access new learning opportunities over time:

*"When I was 16, I got the opportunity to apply for a youth work apprenticeship with Gorbals Youth Café. The team at GYIP helped me with my CV and after an interview I was offered the job."*

*"Recently I got a new job, working night shifts at a residential children's home. GYIP gave me a reference and supported me through the application process."*

*"[The youth worker] at the Tannahill Centre gives good advice and she looks out for us. I missed my first interview for college and she went with me to the second interview and convinced the lecturer that they should offer me a place!"*

*"My degree is in accounting. I dropped out of Uni for a time – I wasn't happy there – I didn't feel like I was part of a community, but my Guide leader encouraged me to apply to complete it through the Open University and I'm really glad I've done that now."*



# Hallmarks of a Youth Work Approach to Volunteering

Youth work practitioners and young volunteers told us that a youth work approach to volunteering is effective because it:

1. Is founded on strong, positive relationships.
2. Is underpinned by a significant investment in the training and development of young volunteers.
3. Enables progression at the pace of the young person.
4. Is a genuine partnership between the youth worker/s and the young person.
5. Promotes a sense of connection and belonging – to a team and to the community.





# 1. Founded on Strong, Positive Relationships

## Practitioners said:

**The quality of young people's volunteering experiences starts and ends with the quality of our relationships**

*"It's the trusted, long-term relationships that youth workers build with young people that allow us to identify volunteering opportunities with the right level of stretch and challenge. As youth workers, we demonstrate trust in young volunteers' potential, whilst also offering consistent support, helping them to build their confidence and skills and reflect on their learning, achievements and next steps. These strong relationships also enable us to engage and support young people who are less likely to volunteer in other settings."*

**As youth workers, we facilitate access to volunteering opportunities that reflect young people's interests and aspirations.**

*"We start from where young people are and build from young people's interests and developing skills, ensuring experiences are meaningful and relevant for young people."*

## Young people said:

- Because youth workers know us well, they are good at identifying roles that are likely to be of interest to us.
- Established relationships with our youth workers give us confidence to step into volunteering roles.
- Established, trusting relationships are crucial to us building confidence in volunteering roles.
- Youth workers make us feel valued and cared for in our volunteering roles.
- Youth workers are role models we can learn from.

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

*"My youth worker is my champion - she knows me; she believes in me and she encourages me to take new things on."*





## 2. Underpinned by Significant Investment in the Training and Development of Young Volunteers

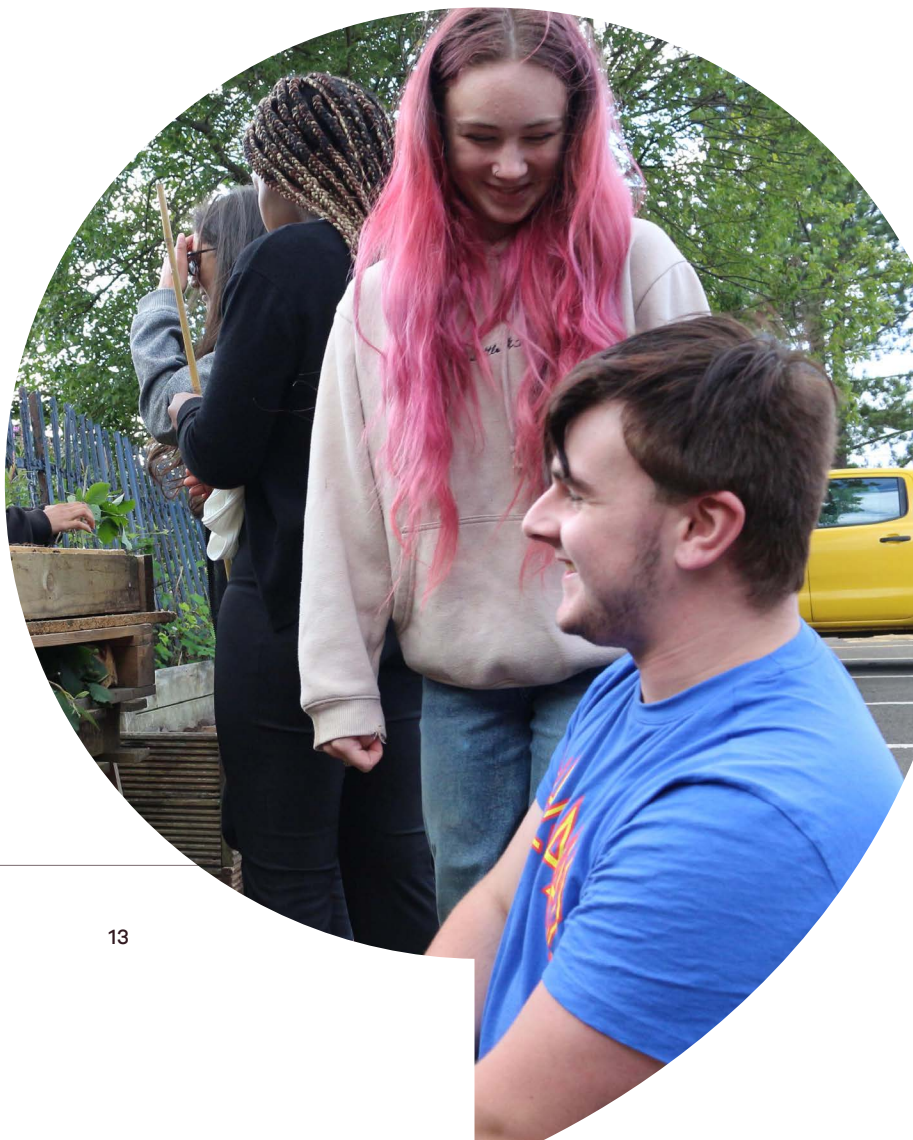
### Practitioners said:

**Volunteering opportunities are designed to support young people's learning and development.**

*"Young people themselves are the focus of a youth work approach to volunteering (what they 'get' not just what they 'give')."*

**We demonstrate our commitment to young volunteers through the provision of high-quality training and development.**

*"Youth work providers invest in youth volunteers, providing mentoring support, high quality training and opportunities for young people to learn alongside peers, adult volunteers and paid staff. Youth workers are facilitators of the volunteering journey – working with young people to identify goals and opportunities and shape learning experiences."*



## Young people said:

- We wouldn't be where we are without the formal training, awards and qualifications we've had access to through volunteering.
- We also really value the way our youth workers provide individual coaching for us volunteers.
- With youth workers, we can make mistakes and learn from them – there's never any judgement.

**Examples of training / accreditation frameworks that young volunteers in the study have had access to:**

- First Aid / First Response training.
- Safe Space / Safeguarding / Child Protection training.
- Introduction to Youth Work training.
- Adverse Childhood Experience training.
- Leadership Awards specific to individual youth work organisations.
- College-based leadership courses.
- Youth awards such as Hi5 Award, Dynamic Youth Award, Youth Achievement Award, Saltire Award.

*"At college, a number of organisations came to talk to us about volunteering. They all talked about how we could be useful to them. At the Y it feels like the youth workers want you to get as much out of the experience as you give."*

*"[The youth worker] allows me to talk things out and come to my own decision. It's like she knows I have the answer in me and she pulls it out of me."*







### 3. Enabling Progression – at the Pace of the Young Person

#### Practitioners said:

**Volunteering is a journey – not a one-off experience.**

*“Volunteering is understood to be part of a young person’s wider learning journey within youth work, providing them with opportunities for progression, and experiences that prepare them for life and work. There is a clear structure to volunteering opportunities, but we work with young people at their own pace.”*

**As youth workers, we think and act big on behalf of young volunteers.**

*“Youth workers are advocates of young volunteers – thinking big in terms of the opportunities young people have access to both within and beyond our organisations AND the difference that young people can make in those roles.”*

**We recognise that for young people, youth volunteering can be an important route towards and into employment.**

*“Where relevant, we ensure that volunteering experiences offer accreditation and supported pathways towards and into employment - and that young people understand the relevance of their volunteering experiences to their future pathways.”*



## Young people said:

- Youth workers support us to develop and take on new responsibilities at our own pace.
- Over time, we get to shape our volunteering experiences and take on real responsibility.
- Youth work teams also support us to broaden our volunteering and work experience in other settings.

*"You feel they are expecting and wanting to see you grow."*

*"It was OK to fail or to bottle out and come back and try again. In school, as a comparison, if you tried something and it didn't work first time it felt more stressful because you felt like you were being judged somehow."*

*"Alongside my weekly volunteering commitment, the [youth work team] connected me to the Prince's Trust Team programme – a 12-week personal development programme which included an opportunity to take a digital printing course. I've used what I learned on that, combined with skills learned through volunteering, to build a small business."*

*"Because the leaders know me well, they can gauge the level of stretch that I can manage."*





## 4. A Genuine Partnership

### Practitioners said:

**We are partners in the learning process.**

*"We work hard to ensure that young volunteers have the confidence and power to shape their own volunteering experience and to influence change in the organisations where they volunteer. We recognise that youth volunteering is a valuable opportunity for shared learning."*

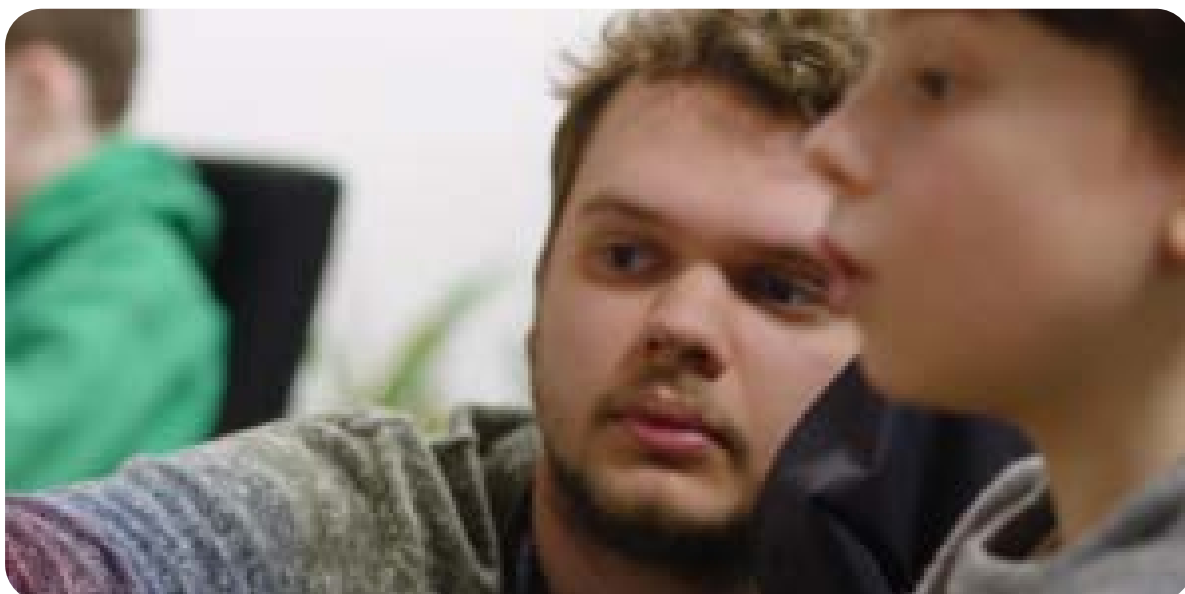
### Young people said:

- We notice that youth workers really respect us, and our contribution as volunteers, and that they are happy to work alongside us.
- Our roles are clear, and we feel integrated within the staff team.
- A youth work approach to volunteering gives us choices.

*"There was never a sense that there was a divide between us – we were learning together and there was no judgement."*

*"We have lots of choice – we're able to do what we're interested in."*

*"Our youth worker was there as a sounding board but we took the lead and made the decisions, exploring different options and working to a deadline."*





## 5. Building a Sense of Connection and Belonging

A number of young people also noticed how their volunteering experience helped build a stronger sense of connection to their local community, and to the youth work organisations that supported them. In some cases, this has resulted in them choosing to pursue a career in youth work.

### Young people said:

- As young volunteers, connected to youth organisations, we feel part of a community.
- We like that we have a chance to 'give back' to organisations that have supported us.

*"It's such a community vibe that we have – it's more than a job. We have such a bond together."*

*"GYIP is like a family to me."*

*"I got bullied a lot in school. Now I'm in college. I feel safer in college because I have [my volunteering and the people I volunteer with] here."*

*"I believe 'it takes a village to raise a child'. I've had my village and now I hope I'm a small part of the village for the girls who are coming through Rainbows and Guides now."*

*"Moving into a paid role here felt like a natural next step from volunteering but it also feels very different: as a volunteer my contribution was my choice, now my contribution is my responsibility and my role is to guide the young people who are coming through behind me."*



Youth work services play an important role in supporting the aims of **Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan**<sup>5</sup>: widening access to volunteering participation and providing diverse, inclusive, high-quality experiences that can be tailored to young people's needs, wherever they are in their learning journey.

Continuing to develop youth work practitioners' expertise in engaging and supporting young people into and through volunteering experiences is one of the key ways in which youth work services can provide effective 'experiential career learning', as outlined in **Skills Development Scotland's Career Review (2023)**<sup>6</sup>.

The impacts reported by young people involved in this study reinforce the value of volunteering opportunities offered through youth work in developing Scotland's young workforce. It's clear these experiences enable young people to develop skills, build a greater sense of self-efficacy and that they offer a choice of motivating pathways towards and into employment.

Importantly, this study highlights that the youth work sector has a particular role to play in engaging young people facing poverty or other disadvantage, so that they can access and sustain valuable learning opportunities on offer through volunteering.



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5 Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))

6 [career-review-final-report-230306-final.pdf](https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/career-review-final-report-230306-final.pdf) ([skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk](https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk))

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- Scouts Scotland
- SHE Scotland
- Tannahill Centre, Paisley
- The Machan Trust, Larkhall
- Muirhouse Youth Development Group, Edinburgh
- YMCA Tayside, Perth
- Youth Scotland







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