

# The Power of Place-Based Partnerships in **Learning for Sustainability**

**Realising Scotland's Education Reform  
and Attainment Challenge ambitions**



# 1. Context

In November 2024, Learning for Sustainability Scotland and YouthLink Scotland convened an in-person event with more than 40 change-makers from across Scotland.

Chaired by Joan Mackay, Head of Curriculum Innovation at Education Scotland, this 'round-table' was designed to identify actions needed to recognise and scale-up effective collaborative practice between youth work, Community Learning and Development (CLD), schools and settings, colleges, universities, NGOs and other local and national agencies involved in Learning for Sustainability.

Participants explored how we can work together to create more equitable access to pathways that offer all young people the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to contribute to society, and shape a sustainable future and in doing so, realise the ambitions of both Scotland's Attainment Challenge and current education reforms.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# 2. Call for Action

Cross-sectoral representatives at the event collectively affirmed an urgent need to scale up effective collaborative practice to realise the entitlement of Learning for Sustainability for all young people. In the context of the current Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 2023-2030<sup>1</sup>, alongside the current education reforms in Scotland, and specifically the Curriculum Improvement process, participants called for the following actions:

## 2.1 Enhanced Communications and Networking

Design and support a wider, more cohesive, range of cross-sectoral networking opportunities - both in person and online - where partners and potential partners can connect, share learning and resources, offer inspiring stories of impact and co-create partnership activities.

### Suggested approaches include:

- Support for and facilitation of cross-sectoral networking events and learning exchanges nationally and locally
- Funding for a series of webinars delivered by alliances of partners
- Investment in an open-access online partnership platform for sharing resources, stories and ideas; and asking questions.

<sup>1</sup> Target 2030: A movement for people, planet and prosperity 2023



## 2.2 Capacity-building and Professional Learning

Invest in the design and delivery of professional learning that brings sectors together to support meaning and understanding of the power of collaborative partnerships in Learning for Sustainability.

**Suggested activity includes:**

- LfS Leadership programmes for strategic decision-makers, funders and policy-makers
- Professional learning for student teachers, teachers and CLD practitioners, particularly youth workers
- Partnership approaches to accredited learning in LfS.

## 2.3 Research

Fund research to develop a stronger evidence base that demonstrates the impact of Learning for Sustainability achieved through partnership working; and builds a deeper understanding of what works and why in place-based LfS partnerships.

**Suggested ideas include:**

- Rapid reviews and longitudinal investigations
- Mapping existing and ongoing relevant research being undertaken
- Action research with practitioners
- Action research with young people, particularly those that are more seldom heard.

## 2.4 Changes in Funding Strategy and Practice

**Funders can nurture partnership working by:**

- Designing more funds that insist on cross-sector partnership approaches
- Recognising the time and resources needed to build solid foundations for partnership
- Providing multi-year funding to enable partnerships to learn, develop and influence wider system change.

## 2.5 Education Reform and Curriculum Improvement

Highlight and support the critical role of local partnerships in enabling, enhancing and engaging with approaches to LfS across the totality of experience for learners, offering young people a consistent approach to place-based learning.

**This will require, for example:**

- More flexibility in the design of the school day - particularly in secondary schools - to allow for creative community-based collaboration
- Approaches that bring theory and practice together – and a greater recognition of the expertise that CLD, particularly youth work, can offer
- An investment in targeted approaches to LfS that connect all young people, including those at risk of disengaging from education, with new places and people who can help engage and support them as learners; particularly at key transition points in their learning journey
- Changes in the way that we recognise and celebrate the personal achievement of learners.





### 3. Background

Since the publication of the 2021 OECD Review of Scottish Education Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: INTO THE FUTURE (OECD, 2021)<sup>2</sup>, a range of independent reviews have been undertaken<sup>34567</sup> to inform the ongoing process of Education Reform in Scotland.

The ambition is for a reformed education system that fully “nurtures the unique talents of all learners ensuring their achievement, progress, and well-being”.<sup>8</sup> This has been recognised as requiring a ‘whole-system coherent strategic approach’ with effective collaboration and partnership working.<sup>9</sup>

A ‘golden thread’ that connects the review reports is the need for education to be ‘responsive to the changing needs of individual learners and of society; creating a positive and sustainable future for learners, their communities and the wider world’.<sup>6</sup> In Scotland, this approach to life and learning, termed ‘Learning for Sustainability’, is an entitlement of all young people, as part of a whole learning community approach.<sup>10</sup> The current Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 2023-2030<sup>11</sup> invites ‘the commitment of all Scotland’s people’; including government, agencies, NGOs, schools and settings, educators, learners and the communities around them to be part of the ‘inspiring movement for change so every 3-18 place of education becomes a Sustainable Learning Setting by 2030’. It is ‘not just for a few, it is for everyone’ through a focus on the four interrelated ‘Cs’ of Curriculum, Culture, Community and Campus.<sup>12</sup>

Youth work – and Community Learning and Development (CLD) approaches more broadly – is an integral part of the education system in Scotland, and there is an ever-growing body of evidence that highlights the positive impact of collaboration between youth work and schools in offering young people a wider range of high-quality pathways to achievement and attainment – particularly those young people who face barriers to learning in the classroom.<sup>13</sup> Youth work is particularly well-suited to engaging young people in Learning for Sustainability; offering opportunities to explore new contexts for learning and enabling them to be active participants in influencing positive change in their communities.<sup>14</sup>

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2 [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future \(OECD, 2021\)](#)

3 [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education \(Muir, 2022\)](#)

4 [All Learners in Scotland Matter - The National Discussion on Education Reform Final Report \(Campbell and Harris, 2023\)](#)

5 [Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation \(Withers, 2023\)](#)

6 [‘It’s our Future’: independent review of qualifications and assessment’ \(Hayward, 2023\)](#)

7 [Learning: For All. For Life. A report from the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development \(Still, 2024\)](#)

8 [All Learners in Scotland Matter - The National Discussion on Education Reform Final Report \(Campbell and Harris, 2023\)](#)

9 [Education - achieving excellence and equity: National Improvement Framework \(Scottish Government, 2025\)](#)

10 [Vision 2030+ Concluding Report of the Learning for Sustainability Implementation Group \(2016\)](#)

11 [Target 2030: A movement for people, planet and prosperity \(Scottish Government, 2023\)](#)

12 [Ibid.](#)

13 [youthlink.scot/impact/education](https://youthlink.scot/impact/education)

14 [youthlink.scot/education-skills/learning-for-sustainability](https://youthlink.scot/education-skills/learning-for-sustainability)





## **4. Key messages about the principles and enablers of effective partnership working to support positive outcomes for young people**

### **4.1 Partnerships should be built to support the needs of all learners in their local context**

- Young people must be at the heart of partnership working; with their role clearly agreed and defined from the outset, and their voices heard at every stage
- Effective partnerships to support learning rely on authentic engagement with people to identify and understand their needs
- These insights should then inform the recruitment of the skills and expertise required from partners.

### **4.2 Careful investment of time is needed to build a shared understanding of goals, roles and responsibilities and the values, approach and expertise that all partners bring**

- Roles, responsibilities and scope of the partnership needs to be explored and agreed early in the process.
- It is important to take time to build trusting, equitable professional relationships: understanding each other's needs and building genuine connections, and create an ethos of mutual respect with the right 'power balance' between all concerned
- Adopting a learner-centred approach, as outlined in 2.1 above, requires partners to 'flex'; in order to respond effectively to changing learner needs
- Ongoing, clear, timely, targeted and effective communication between partners is key; with all partners given equal space to be heard.

### **4.3 A place-based approach is key, building from what works in our own learning communities and drawing learning from elsewhere**

- It's important to avoid 'reinvention of the wheel'
- We need to acknowledge and build on what we know works – and learn from what doesn't work too.

### **4.4 Active planning to sustain and scale up the work of the partnership depends on:**

- Building strong relationships that go beyond reliance on a few key individuals
- Identifying and actively striving to be part of wider networks
- Enabling a culture of reflective practice; to continually evaluate, adapt and improve
- Ensuring ongoing open and honest communication – and actively feeding this into the review process
- Advocating for wider systemic commitment and change, bolstered with legislation as required.







## 5. The challenges of partnership working

### 5.1 The funding environment

- Often promotes competition rather than collaboration
- Creates a power imbalance between CLD, schools and settings; which can lead to youth workers being seen as 'service providers' rather than 'partners'
- Funding is often short-term; making it hard to really invest in relationship building
- Funders often seem more interested in funding the 'new' rather than sustaining and developing 'what works'.

### 5.2 Confidence and capacity to build partnerships locally and nationally

- A place-based approach is required, but it can be challenging to identify the right partners to meet young people's needs in your locality. CLD teams - youth workers in particular - can play a useful role in connecting school and community-based partners
- Partnerships are still too dependent on a few key individual leaders. We need a more systemic approach to building and sustaining partnerships.

### 5.3 The requirement for partnerships to demonstrate positive impact at speed

- Building effective partnership requires time to build a shared understanding of values, agendas, shared purpose and roles – results are not instant
- Schools and funders want to see immediate positive impact
- Sometimes we need to learn by trial and error.





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