



**YouthLink
Scotland**

Lifelong Learning and Skills Reform:

A right to youth work as part of every learner's journey

Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing local, regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors. Our aim is for a nation that values its young people and their contribution to society, supported through key 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. We campaign for equality of access to high-quality youth work for all young people, supported by a workforce that is confident, skilled, well-led and effective while playing an essential role in delivering Scotland's national outcomes. As part of this process, we have been calling for education reform to drive a transformed education system that seeks to address the purposes described in Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹.

The Scottish education and skills system is at a pivotal point. One that could transform the learning experience for children and young people. An opportunity to truly get it right for every child², lift young people out of poverty and ensure every learner knows that they matter.

Lifelong learning and skills reform heralds significant change to how children and young people engage with and achieve through Scottish education. Alongside the structural changes recommended, achieving the renewed and shared ambition for Scottish education will also require a significant cultural shift. We need to transform the way we think about learning and what the education system looks and feels like. This will involve considering every learner's journey holistically, through a coherent and integrated system from early years, through school and beyond. It should enable parity across all settings and approaches to learning that contribute to helping young people develop their knowledge, skills and experiences.

Our ambition for Scotland's children and young people can only be achieved by ensuring that youth work is included as a fundamental entitlement in our learning system.

¹ Articles 28 and 29 focus on a child's right to an education and on the quality and content of education <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/the-right-to-education/>

² <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>

Youth work and education

Youth work is an education practice that facilitates the personal, social and educational development of young people³. In Scotland, it is part of the wider professional practice of Community Learning and Development (CLD)⁴.

Youth work provides safe spaces (physical or online) where young people have access to, and build relationships with, trusted adults and peers. The youth work process is primarily relational. The trust-based, voluntary relationship formed between a youth worker and a young person is the means by which the youth worker supports the young person's development. A diverse range of engagement tools and opportunities for non-formal learning are used to respond to the needs and priorities of children, young people, families and communities.

Although the primary focus of youth work is the young person and their lived experience and aspirations, youth work outcomes are relevant across, and contribute to, policy priorities in many areas including health and wellbeing; employability; education; youth justice; equality, diversity, and inclusion; child poverty; social justice and participation. As a rights-based practice, youth work has a key role in supporting the incorporation of the UNCRC and wider human rights into Scots law, working alongside young people to implement the legislation in all public services.

Youth workers are educators. The workforce includes professionally qualified youth work/CLD practitioners, and other experienced practitioners, including volunteers, who hold a range of competency-based qualifications and skills to practice youth work. Youth workers are primarily based in the third sector and local authorities. The work is delivered across a variety of settings including youth centres, schools, colleges, outdoor education centres, or on the streets via outreach programmes and detached youth work.

The purpose of Scottish education is encapsulated in the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence – to enable all children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. These capacities underpin the National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework⁵.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence is intended to be a holistic experience, encompassing learning across four contexts and different educational settings. This includes youth work. Youth workers design and deliver learning experiences for young people across communities, schools and colleges. This helps to maximise

³ <https://www.youthlink.scot/what-is-youth-work/>

⁴ <https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/about-cld/what-is-community-learning-and-development-cld/>

⁵ <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/youth-work-outcomes-skills/>

opportunities for learners to develop the four capacities and a broad range of skills that allow them to achieve and succeed.

“The curriculum is more than curriculum areas and subjects. It is the totality of experiences which are planned for children and young people through their education.”⁶

Reform and youth work

Lifelong learning and skills reform reinforce the need for youth work in an interconnected education and skills landscape.

The renewed vision for education places children and young people at its heart. It calls on the system to respond to their calls for ‘a safe, inclusive education system that values everyone and celebrates all kinds of success’. To do this, it states, we need to value collaboration “with all those working in, or connected to, the education system”⁷, strengthen youth voice and ground our work in equality, opportunity and community.

The final report from the National Discussion⁸ cements youth work as part of Scottish education – acknowledging that learning takes place across various settings utilising a variety of approaches, including in the community and through outdoor learning. Additionally, it also highlights the vital role of youth workers in supporting health and wellbeing – helping to create safe learning spaces, facilitating youth voice and as trusted adults that provide pastoral care. The need for access to youth workers was specifically identified as important.

The National Discussion said that collaborative partnerships were vital to deliver the vision for learners. The Scottish Attainment Challenge already recognises that youth work improves health and wellbeing, readiness to learn and educational outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty⁹. As part of its approach to tackling child poverty through education, the Scottish Government is building capacity for strengthened collaboration between schools and youth work through a Scottish Attainment Challenge national programme delivered by YouthLink Scotland¹⁰.

⁶ <https://www.education.gov.scot/Documents/btc4.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/learners-scotland-matter-national-discussion-summary-report/pages/3/#:~:text=Vision%20Statement%20for%20the%20Future%20of%20Scottish%20Education&text=All%20learners%20are%20supported%20in,inequities%20that%20exist%20or%20arise.>

⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/learners-scotland-matter-national-discussion-education-final-report/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-equity-funding-national-operational-guidance-2023/>

¹⁰ <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/scottish-attainment-challenge/>

The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment¹¹ determined that a broader range of opportunities should be part of the curriculum offer. This includes opportunities for personal pathways and project-based learning as an entitlement for all, across all educational settings. These individually tailored approaches are where youth workers are already skilled and delivering. It will be essential to embed youth work into such curriculum developments, ensuring young people can access opportunities in school and youth work settings.

The ambitions to strengthen the post-school learning landscape also acknowledge the need for greater collaboration and coherence to improve how we support transitions and deliver the learning and experiential opportunities that enable young people to develop their knowledge, skills and experiences.

Youth work delivers the key principles for post-school education, research and skills¹². It provides opportunities and experiences for young people to develop and demonstrate skills and achievements and explore and follow tailored pathways towards and into employment. Youth workers also play an essential role in supporting transitions into other parts of the ecosystem. Reform and the associated work around Post-school Purpose and Principles¹³ provides opportunity to strengthen understanding of and support for youth work in the post-school system, and the potential for this to improve collaboration and support for learners.

A more coherent and interconnected post-school learning landscape will also help tackle the wider priorities around tackling poverty, building a wellbeing economy and delivering on the recommendations of the Careers Review¹⁴.

In the context of careers, the Careers Services Collaborative is working to communicate a clear national narrative and operating model to facilitate and support local partnership and person-centred delivery. Youth work is embedded within the careers ecosystem and will continue to play a crucial role in further strengthening the quality and clarity of our careers offer in Scotland¹⁵.

Skills are a golden thread across education reform. It provides us with a common language across the system, to create a coherent and connected experience for learners. Youth work provides meaningful and relevant opportunities to develop and articulate skills and achievements. The sector's National Youth Work Outcomes and

¹¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/>

¹² <https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/YLS-response-interim-purpose-and-principles.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/post-school-education-research-and-skills-interim-purpose-and-principles/pages/interim-purpose-and-principles/#:~:text=Research%2C%20teaching%2C%20innovation%20and%20knowledge,live%20and%20work%20in%20Scotland>

¹⁴ <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/career-review>

¹⁵ <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/xvync3xg/career-review-final-report-230306-final.pdf>

Skills Framework¹⁶ has been highlighted as an important part of a future system for understanding and recording a young person's progression.

All these opportunities and areas for change identified by reform necessitate bringing youth work from the margins to the centre of the education system. Recognising and resourcing youth work will ensure that young people have equitable access to the learning opportunities required to reach beyond their potential.

YouthLink Scotland has responded¹⁷ to all aspects of lifelong learning and skills reform from a rights-based position, seeking the reforms to ensure that every child and young person can secure their right to an education (UNCRC Article 28) which helps them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (UNCRC Article 29). An equitable and rights-based learning system must include access to youth work.

Young people call for change

As part of the national discussion over 700 young people worked with their youth workers to respond collectively from youth work¹⁸. Young people said they need Scottish education to help them prepare for future life and work. In particular, they spoke about the importance of a holistic experience across settings that includes:

- Feeling safe, respected and included
- Developing and applying 'life relevant' skills
- Access to the support they need
- Qualifications and other opportunities to achieve
- A broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations.

Young people spoke clearly about the transformative impact of youth work and how it helps them engage in learning, develop new skills and achieve. Many said that without youth work they would not have remained in education. They spoke about the key principles of youth work that support engagement and positive outcomes.

The relationship with a youth worker was highlighted as vital to their ability to feel safe, trusted, supported, respected and heard. Building confidence and resilience and accessing the support they need can help young people feel ready to learn. The provision of an informal, safe, nurturing environment in which to learn also made them more likely to engage. Young people could see the connection between engaging through youth work and their ability to achieve and attain. They also spoke

¹⁶ <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/youth-work-outcomes-skills/>

¹⁷ <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/education-reform/>

¹⁸ https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/views-of-young-people-participating-in-youth-work_web.pdf

about the broad range of experiences, choices and pathways offered by youth work that meet their individual needs and aspirations.

Young people stated that youth work supports them to develop important, life-relevant skills and to understand the relevance to their learning and life now and in the future. This is seen as an essential element of what they needed from education. A total of 83% of young people said skills and achievements through youth work are very important or important to their future, with 88% saying they should be recorded and acknowledged alongside formal qualifications.

Young people identified what needs to change across education, calling for education reform to ensure that every young person can access youth work as a fundamental element of their education.

In October 2023, YouthLink Scotland worked with youth workers to consult young people as part of our response¹⁹ to the Scottish Government's extended consultation on the National Discussion and Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment. Young people identified their top priorities for change. These are:

- Young people will feel safe, respected, supported and included by those who support their learning
- Every young person can access youth work where and when they need it
- All young people can access youth work opportunities as part of their curriculum/timetable

Similar themes that support learning through youth work were also highlighted through work undertaken by YouthLink Scotland's Scottish Attainment Challenge national programme. They are also reflected in key findings from other sectoral reports including LGBT Youth Scotland's Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People 2022 report²⁰.

¹⁹ <https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/Extended-consultation-Oct-2023-YLS-response.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/media/2712/life-in-scotland-for-lgbt-young-people-2022-e-use.pdf>

Research evidence and impact data also demonstrate that the key principles of youth work support engagement and positive outcomes - the trust-based, voluntary relationship formed between a youth worker and young people, the safe spaces youth workers create and the non-formal, person-centred learning opportunities and experiences.

"The staff understand us and try to find opportunities and skills and awards that can fit into our lifestyles. We are given so many opportunities to get experiences that we need for jobs, college and everyday life skills."

"Youth work allows us to design our own learning."

"Value youth work as much as you value schools and teachers."

"Youth work makes me feel wanted."

(Young people responding to the National Discussion)

"The people that make the decisions need to know that it's not just the teachers who help us. It's all the other people who really help when it's hard"

(Young person responding to the extended consultation)

A route map for change

Equitable access to the opportunities young people need cannot be left to local decision-making alone. Education reform must be driven by a stronger and clearer narrative that reinforces youth work as a fundamental element of the Scottish learning system.

A human-rights-based approach to Scottish education must go further than considering how we can make the vision a reality within the confines of what we currently do. The ambition to ensure that every learner feels they matter requires a fundamental shift in how we talk about and experience Scottish education. This needs strong leadership and a courageous approach from all those with an interest and stake.

Youth work is part of Scottish education. A focus on improving the quality of learning and teaching must demonstrate parity by ensuring that all educators, across every sector and setting, are valued, supported and have the capacity to deliver.

Recognising and resourcing youth work as an essential element of the learning system will secure the diverse achievements of all learners and achieve equity and

excellence in education. We simply cannot show every learner that they matter until we demonstrate that all learning matters.

It will be essential to build on the current role and impact of youth work across the learning system – with sustained investment and stronger coordination, to ensure young people can access the support they need, where and when they need it. This also includes ensuring youth work services and organisations have access to school facilities to ensure safe, suitable spaces for youth workers to support and work with young people.

Summary

Lifelong learning and skills reform has determined that a transformation is needed across the system to achieve the collective ambitions for children and young people. It has also reinforced that Scottish education needs youth work. Our ambition for an interconnected and impactful learning system, that delivers excellence and equity, can only be achieved by ensuring that youth work is included as a fundamental entitlement for every young person.

Those tasked with taking forward reform must seek to ensure structural and culture change demonstrates parity across all settings and approaches to learning that contribute to helping young people develop their knowledge, skills and experiences. Youth work must be recognised and resourced as a fundamental element of the Scottish learning system.

Youth workers are in an ideal position to engage with young people and ensure that their voice is heard in ongoing discussions and decisions around lifelong learning and skills reform. YouthLink Scotland will continue to elevate their voice. In a system that places children and young people at the heart, education must hear the voices of those who are seldom heard, including those who engage and learn through youth work.

Clear leadership and narrative need to uphold the right of every young person to have access to youth work as an integral entitlement within the learner journey. Importantly, as we strive to deliver a human-rights-based approach to education, collaboration is how we will show all young people they 'matter'.

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