

SCOTLAND'S
YOUTH WORK
SECTOR
MANIFESTO
2026

A RIGHT A SPACE A FUTURE



HERE'S TO SCOTLAND'S YOUNG PEOPLE.



The curious, creative, determined.

The ones who see possibility where others see limits.

When trusted, valued, and supported, they don't just imagine a better future — they build it.

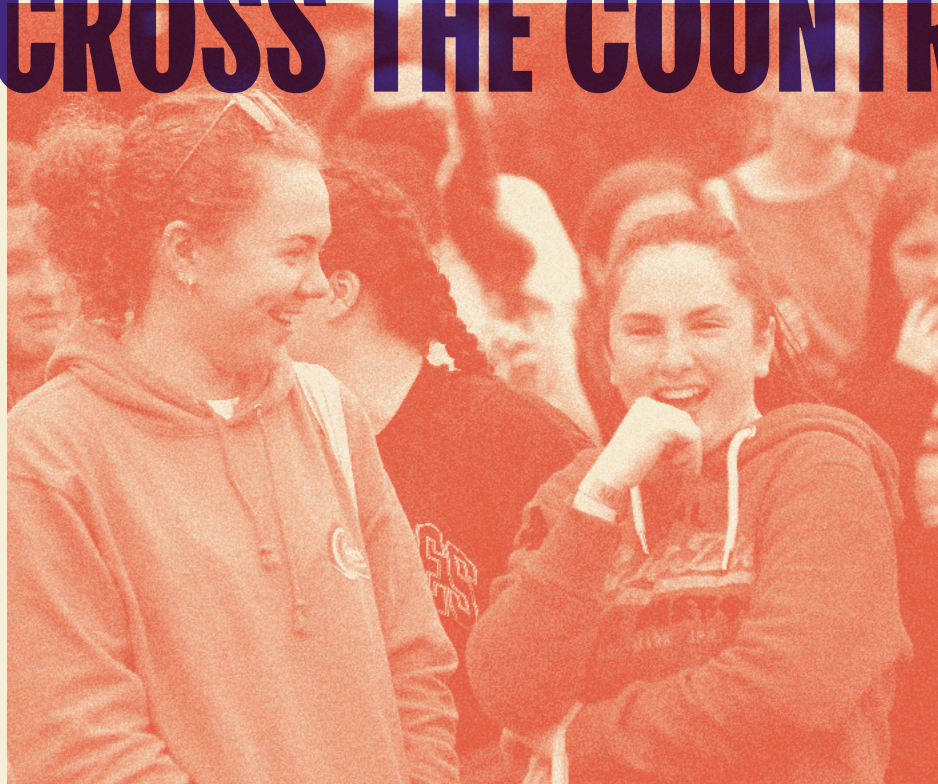
They will carry our nation forward, shape communities, drive innovation, and tackle challenges we can't yet see.

And here's to the youth workers who stand with them, the mentors, guides, champions who believe in potential before anyone else does, who turn ambition into action and give courage room to grow.

Applaud them or doubt them, question or test them — you cannot ignore them. Because together they create change that lasts.

They imagine, they lead, they inspire — and they will take Scotland into the future.

YOUTH WORK IS ONE OF SCOTLAND'S GREATEST ASSETS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES. EVERY YEAR, OVER HALF A MILLION YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGE IN SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE YOUTH WORK ACROSS THE COUNTRY.



Manifesto Vision

A Scotland where all young people, regardless of their background, realise their full potential through youth work.

This manifesto sets out three national commitments that Scotland must make to ensure all young people can thrive through access to high-quality youth work. Together they represent the foundation of a stronger, fairer youth work system: guaranteed by law, universally accessible and sustained by investment.

National Commitments

A RIGHT

A legal right to youth work for all young people.
Enshrine in law every young person's entitlement to access youth work services, regardless of their postcode, background, or income.

A SPACE

Universal access to spaces for youth work.
Guarantee free, fair, and consistent access to public spaces, such as schools, leisure centres, and community venues, for youth work providers.

A FUTURE

Sustained and increased investment in youth work.
Implement fair funding principles with ring-fenced multi-year funding for youth work at national and local level.

Together these commitments enable a preventative approach that supports young people and communities now, reducing long term costs.

YOUTH SPACES REDUCE ISOLATION, IMPROVE WELLBEING, AND PREVENT PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY TAKE ROOT WHICH EASES THE PRESSURE ON SCHOOLS, HEALTH SERVICES, AND THE JUSTICE SYSTEM.



A legal right to youth work for all young people

Youth work offers young people the spaces and opportunities to build relationships, explore their identity, develop skills and increase their confidence. It is shaped by the needs of young people and can take many forms.

Youth work also has an important role to play in supporting young people to understand and use their rights. With an ageing population, it's more important than ever to invest in our young people, they are not only the workforce of the future, but also the carers, changemakers and leaders our country will rely on. When young people access youth work and contribute to our communities, it's good for all of us. That's why youth work should be embedded in national policy.

This will be achieved by:

- Enshrining a legal right to youth work, ensuring every young person has access regardless of where they live, who they are, or how much money their family has.
- Embedding this right for all young people, with statutory guidance and entitlements backed by funding.
- Updating and strengthening existing CLD Regulations with a clear entitlement to youth work.
- Committing to the publication of a new National Youth Work Strategy, which sets out a clear plan for sustaining and growing the youth work sector.
- Ensuring inclusion across geography, identity, and need.

Universal access to spaces for youth work

When young people have safe, welcoming spaces in their communities, everyone benefits. These spaces are where young people build confidence, form trusted relationships and gain the skills they need to thrive, now and into adulthood. They are also where potential is nurtured, where future workers, carers, leaders and citizens find their voice. Youth spaces reduce isolation, improve wellbeing, and prevent problems before they take root which eases the pressure on schools, health services, and the justice system.

Communities are stronger, safer, and more resilient when young people are supported to take part, contribute, and belong. That's why youth work spaces must be a core part of national policy.

This will be achieved by:

- Creating a National Youth Spaces Partnership to ensure fair local agreements for third sector use of public infrastructure.
- Free access to public buildings (e.g. school estates, leisure facilities, community venues) for third sector and youth work providers.
- Creating secure, visible, and accessible youth work spaces in all communities.
- Establishing a national programme of capital investment in dedicated youth spaces, especially in areas of multiple deprivation.

Sustained and increased investment in youth work

Youth workers play a vital role in supporting young people through pivotal years of their lives. In Scotland over half a million young people regularly engage in youth work, they are supported to do so by over eight thousand youth work staff and forty-four thousand volunteers.

However, we need more people to get involved, in recent years we've seen a significant decrease in the number of employed youth workers, and voluntary organisations struggle to recruit enough adult volunteers to meet the demand from young people. It doesn't have to be this way.

**TOGETHER WE CAN
MAKE SURE EVERY
YOUNG PERSON HAS
THE SUPPORT AND
OPPORTUNITIES
TO THRIVE.**

This will be achieved by:

- Introducing ring-fenced, multi-year funding for youth work services at national and local levels.
- Securing Barnett consequential from youth investment in England and utilise funding from the Dormant Assets Scheme to strengthen youth work provision.

- Allocating a dedicated percentage of budgets to youth work from key portfolios areas such as Education, Health, and Justice to enable a preventative, cost-effective approach that supports young people and communities.
- Reintroducing the youth work workforce development fund and implementing a national framework for excellence in the delivery of youth work which includes paid and volunteer youth workers
- Ensuring pay, recognition, and progression parity with other educational and care professionals
- Introducing a comprehensive Youth Work Recruitment and Volunteering Campaign to inspire more people to join the youth work workforce, doubling the number of employed youth workers, increasing volunteer involvement and improving workforce diversity.
- Introducing a national entitlement to 35 hours' paid volunteering leave, enabling more adults to support young people, while strengthening our volunteering culture.



A young man and woman are shown in profile, looking out over a city skyline at sunset. The man is in the foreground, wearing a dark jacket, and the woman is behind him, wearing a striped beanie and a denim jacket. They are both smiling and looking towards the right. The background shows a city skyline with various buildings, including a prominent one with a spire. The sky is a warm orange-red color, and the overall image has a monochromatic red-orange tint.

**IN SCOTLAND OVER HALF A *MILLION* YOUNG
PEOPLE REGULARLY ENGAGE IN YOUTH WORK.**

FIVE REASONS TO COMMIT TO A RIGHT, A SPACE, A FUTURE.



Beneath the national commitments sit five national strategic priorities that provide the practical, thematic focus for how these commitments should be delivered in policy and practice. These priorities highlight the unique value of youth work in addressing Scotland's most pressing challenges, from mental health and education to youth justice and poverty.

01: Tackling child poverty

We know that growing up in poverty is at the heart of so many challenges facing Scotland. Experience of child poverty can affect attainment and future earnings, it is a key predictor of youth homelessness, and is a driver of health inequalities, youth violence and anti-social behaviour. Tackling child poverty is both the right and the smart thing to do.

Youth work is crucial to tackling child poverty. We benefit from growing evidence that a dignified, youth work approach to addressing poverty works. It builds health and wellbeing, improves attendance and engagement with learning, and increases attainment, achievement and positive post-school destinations, reduces risk taking behaviour and youth violence, helping to lift young people out of poverty. That's why youth work must be at the heart of any serious effort to tackle child poverty.

To maximise the impact of youth work in tackling child poverty we must:

- ➔ Fund targeted programmes that remove the barriers created by child poverty – including transport, education, employment, food, digital access, and stigma.
- ➔ Recognise youth work as a key player in the poverty reduction ecosystem, offering safe spaces, trusted adults, and opportunities to thrive.
- ➔ Prioritise funding for projects reaching young people experiencing poverty.

02: Delivering Rights, Participation and Inclusion

When young people know their rights, are listened to, and treated with respect, they grow up believing they belong, and that their voice counts. Youth work makes this real by creating spaces where young people can speak up, be themselves, and shape the world around them. It builds confidence, challenges inequality, and helps young people take part in decisions that affect their lives. Youth work also supports youth volunteering leading to improved outcomes in education, employment and health and wellbeing.

Crucially, it lays the foundations for lifelong participation, so that young people go on to contribute meaningfully to their communities and society as adults. When that happens, we all benefit: our democracy is stronger, our communities are fairer, and our nation is better for it.

To maximise the impact of youth work's role in delivering rights, participation and inclusion we must:

- Embed the UNCRC across national and local youth work strategies, ensuring rights-based practice.
- Fund and expand opportunities for meaningful participation and youth-led decision making.
- Recognise youth work as a gateway for young people to claim and realise their rights.
- Ensure targeted investment and tailored support for those young people who are furthest from opportunities, most excluded, or experiencing inequality, so that participation and inclusion are a reality for every young person — not just those already engaged.

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03: Education

We know that not all young people thrive in formal classroom settings, but every young person deserves the chance to learn, grow, and succeed. Youth work offers a different way to engage with learning: rooted in relationships, built on trust, and shaped around the needs and interests of young people. It can improve attendance, rebuild confidence, and help young people re-engage with formal education at school, college or in training.

Whether in classrooms, communities, or outdoor learning settings, youth workers support young people to develop the skills, resilience, and ambition they need to move forward. When we value all forms of learning, we open up opportunities and improve outcomes for young people. That's why youth work has to have a much stronger role within Scotland's education system.

To maximise the impact of youth work's role in education we must:

- Formalise partnerships between schools and youth work organisations to support wellbeing, engagement, attendance, educational outcomes and positive destinations.
- Investment to ensure all young people can access their right to youth work across the learner journey - in school, college and community.
- Support a whole-school approach to inclusion, with youth workers contributing to reducing exclusions and raising aspirations.
- Guarantee access to residential and outdoor learning as part of education, helping young people build independence, teamwork, and life skills.

WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED FOR THEIR PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THEY WILL THRIVE, IN SCHOOL, IN RELATIONSHIPS, AND IN LIFE.



04: Health and Wellbeing

When young people get the support they need for their physical, mental and emotional development, they will thrive, in school, in relationships, and in life. Youth work does this every day, offering trusted relationships, safe spaces, and opportunities that help young people grow in confidence, build resilience, and make positive choices.

It supports those facing poverty, exclusion or trauma, while equipping all young people with the skills and strengths to navigate life's challenges. The result? Healthier young people, stronger communities, and less pressure on public services. That's why youth work must be recognised and properly funded as a vital part of Scotland's support for young people.

To maximise the impact of youth work on young people's health and wellbeing we must:

- Invest in youth work as part of Scotland's mental health and wellbeing strategy.
- Fund youth work programmes focused on early intervention and emotional literacy.
- Create joint funding mechanisms between NHS boards and youth work organisations.
- Recognise the role of youth work in tackling health inequalities rooted in poverty and exclusion.

05: Youth Justice

When young people are supported before problems spiral, everyone benefits. Youth work plays a vital role in preventing harm, offering support, structure and someone to turn to long before the justice system gets involved. It helps young people deal with trauma, build trust, and make positive choices, even in the toughest circumstances.

By tackling the root causes of offending, like poverty, exclusion, social media harms and poor mental health, youth work reduces crime, strengthens communities, and eases pressure on services. If we want safer streets and better futures for our young people, youth work must be central to how we approach youth justice.

To maximise the impact of youth work's role in youth justice we must:

- Embed youth work in local youth justice strategies as a key method of early intervention and diversion.
- Fund youth-led programmes addressing violence reduction, restorative justice, and community safety.
- Recognise youth workers as trusted adults preventing escalation into criminal justice systems.

What young people are telling us

This manifesto has been shaped by what young people across Scotland are consistently telling us, about their lives, their challenges, and their hopes. They speak of the urgent need for better mental health support, safer spaces, trusted adults, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to thrive. Their voices are at the heart of every ask we make.

In a 2023 national consultation on education reform, young people’s top priorities for change included:

- Feeling safe, respected, supported, and included by those who support their learning.
- Access to youth work where and when they need it.
- Opportunities to take part in youth work as part of their curriculum or timetable.



Headline findings



Said youth work skills and achievements were important to their future.



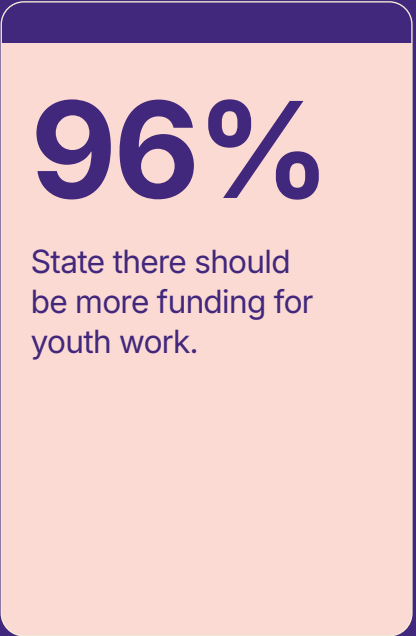
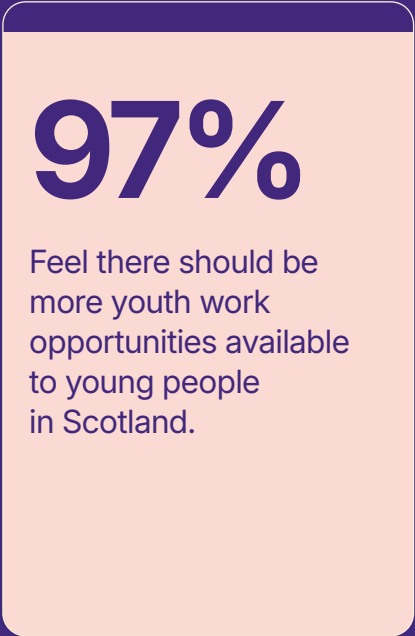
Believe youth work should be a right for all young people.



Want more funding and access to skilled, competent youth workers.



THESE INSIGHTS WERE ECHOED IN THE NATIONAL YOUTH WORK STRATEGY CONSULTATION WITH OVER ONE THOUSAND YOUNG PEOPLE.



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