



## Youth Work Perspectives on The Scottish Attainment Challenge

May 2025

---

# Introduction

---

Youth work contributes to the Scottish Government's Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) mission to use education to tackle child poverty. It builds health and well-being, improves readiness to learn, and increases attendance, attainment, achievement and positive post-school destinations, helping to lift young people out of poverty.

Youthlink Scotland delivers one of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) national programmes. It aims to contribute to the SAC by strengthening collaboration between youth work and schools, to improve outcomes for young people impacted by poverty.

Over the last few months, Youthlink Scotland (YLS) has gathered the views and experiences of youth work practitioners and managers to understand progress towards achieving the SAC mission from their perspective<sup>1</sup>.

Those who contributed to the views summarised in this report undertake a range of roles related to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Their responsibilities include: managing SAC youth work teams, undertaking strategic roles, supporting community planning, those with responsibility for achievement and attainment, partnerships with schools to reduce the attainment gap, working with young people affected by poverty, delivering informal learning (including those with accreditation), those in receipt of Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) to employ youth workers to work with schools, and roles supporting attendance and engagement.

## Youth Work Perspectives on the SAC

### Progress towards strategic objectives

---

We asked youth work stakeholders for their perspective on the progress made towards the intended outcomes for the Scottish Attainment Challenge<sup>2</sup>. Our findings suggest experiences are inconsistent across the sector.

[1] The views of around 70 practitioners were collected through engagement with the YLS national programme, discussions with the Youth Work & Schools Collaborative and through a small sample via a detailed online survey.

[2] <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2022/03/scottish-attainment-challenge-framework-recovery-accelerating-progress/documents/tackling-poverty-related-attainment-gap-theory-change-scottish-attainment-challenge-logic-model/tackling-poverty-related-attainment-gap-theory-change-scottish-attainment-challenge-logic-model/govscot%3Adocument/tackling-poverty-related-attainment-gap-theory-change-scottish-attainment-challenge-logic-model.pdf>

Youth work stakeholders feel most progress has been made in offering experiences to young people that support their health and wellbeing and enable them to engage in learning. They also recognise that there has been improved access to professional learning opportunities focusing on equity and reducing the poverty-related attainment gap.


Youth workers tell us that there is still some way to go in building a culture of genuine collaboration, with most saying that only limited progress has been made in:

- Strategic collaboration underpinned by a shared understanding across local authorities, practitioners and partners of the aims and mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.
- Awareness of different approaches to equity and applying and evaluating these in local contexts.

This reflects the variation noted through our national programme in how youth work experiences collaboration and young people's access to youth work as part of the SAC. It suggests further work is needed to promote an embedded culture and ethos of equity through impactful and sustainable collaboration based on interprofessional mutual trust and respect. Further progress here may help to tackle variation in experiences and outcomes for children and young people across schools and local authorities.

## Role of youth work in the SAC

---

*"The mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge is one that must be supported by 'collective agency' – the range of services, third sector organisations and community partners working together with families, with a clear focus on improving the educational experiences, health and wellbeing and outcomes of children and young people."*<sup>3</sup> 

Whilst there is a growing understanding of the role and impact of youth work in addressing the attainment challenge, particularly from national agencies, youth work organisations feel that their contribution is not well recognised, particularly at local authority and school level.

We asked youth work's views on the usefulness of national SAC guidance, to establish whether the sector feels included in the 'whole system' approach to

[3] [Scottish Attainment Challenge](#) | Scottish Parliament

closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Our learning suggests that the guidance recognises the role of youth work and reinforces the need for collaboration, but that it does not necessarily result in the inclusion of youth work as a key partner in the SAC on the ground.

*"Somewhat useful - it is helpful to have such guidance there but it is often overlooked, particularly the Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) guidance and working with local youth work partners."*

*"Schools are not the only places in communities where learning happens, both the PEF guidance and the SAC SEF appear to recognise that young people should have access to opportunities that are relevant to them so therefore Youth Work should absolutely be a part of those frameworks."*

*"PEF funding has not been made available to third sector or voluntary organisations in my region."*



Similarly, there is mixed awareness of and engagement with Attainment Advisors. Where youth work is embedded in the SAC locally, youth work practitioners appear to have greater engagement with their Attainment Advisor. The general sense is that Attainment Advisors' primary role is to support schools.

*"Don't know who local Attainment Advisor is or if we have one."*

*"Yes as I support 2 members of SAC staff, we meet regularly to gain guidance and funding support."*

*"We have previously worked very closely with our attainment advisor, however this has dipped as the focus latterly has been much more schools based and as our capacity as an organisation has become more and more stretched."*

*"Initially the attainment advisor tried to work with all partners and to encourage positive partnership and collaboration. We have not been involved in discussions with the regional attainment advisor since covid."*



## Strategic planning

Scottish Government guidance<sup>4</sup> identifies the need for a collaborative approach with youth work in developing and achieving local authority stretch aims and in

[4] [The Scottish Attainment Challenge: Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#)

school improvement planning. It recognises youth work's role in building readiness to learn and offering a broad and varied curriculum to tackle the attainment gap. Our evidence suggests ongoing support is needed to ensure consistency across local authorities. Most practitioners we spoke to said they were unsure or were not included in local authority strategic planning, including developing SAC stretch aims. Slightly more practitioners felt that youth work was included within individual school improvement plans.

## Barriers to progress

---

Based on their experience, practitioners identified various barriers impacting progress toward closing the poverty-related attainment gap. These included funding, the capacity of teachers and youth workers, a lack of communication/ shared understanding, and the structure of formal education.

*"Lack of regard/understanding for role of youth work in poverty-related attainment gap."*

*"Systems created for spending PEF create barriers - i.e. procurement framework."*

*"Disconnect between local agenda/schools and wider strategic decision-making."*

*"There are broader issues including ongoing and worsening poverty which drag families and communities deeper into crisis. Attainment does not feel like it is the priority and feels unattainable when other day to day pressures affect people immediately (hunger, cold, health inequality etc)."*

*"Funding, as always, is massive. High quality delivery can only be sustained through investment."*

*"Youth work is brought in to react to situations...and not at the early intervention stage within education."*

*"Space within schools is an issue."*

*"Schools can also be a barrier as they don't all recognise how youth work can be positive in the SAC."*

*"The structure of the current education system no longer works for many pupils."*





*"Meaningfully including youth work as part of the school day around things like pit and flexible timetables."*

*"Too much reliance on how things have always been done. Reliance on teachers as the only 'professionals' able to engage young people in learning."*

*"Pressure on schools making it impossible for them to try new ways of working."*

*"There's gap in consistency for schools across local authority areas. This includes a lack of communication between LA and TSL's - if there's not a sustained relationship with the school involved then communication can be lost."*

*"I think that there is not enough funding within youth work to help support the progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap."*



## **Successes in the implementation of the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF)**

---

Practitioners identified where Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) and Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) investment in youth work has improved access to youth work for young people and improved outcomes. Others raised concerns about their experience of decision-making processes related to the ASF that did not include young people or the voluntary sector locally:

*"SEF spend example in Edinburgh of the Collaborative Enquiry process being supported - working with local youth work partners to gather young people's voices on the barriers to learning and school engagement."*

*"I believe we have supported young people to achieve accreditation that would not normally have been achieved. We have the flexibility to work with young people out with schools buildings if that is a barrier to their attainment."*

*"Hopefully it has seen many opportunities available for more young people."*

*"PEF has been a massive success, especially for us. We are fortunate enough that the school have used their PEF to invest in the work that we do with their pupils."*

*"Schools being able to see that youth work now plays a vital role in young people's learning journey."*



*"Youth work is increasingly being recognised as having an important role to play in reducing the poverty-related attainment gap. Some schools are very appreciative of what youth work is doing. SEF funding means that youth workers are supporting more young people than ever before, and feedback from young people and other stakeholders demonstrates the impact on young people's health and wellbeing. Some young people far from learning are being supported by youth workers to return to the classroom confident and ready to learn."*

*"I think some of the successes are mostly PEF programmes where schools brought in youth workers to be based within their school environment. I have seen first-hand the impact that they make on young people's lives because they were based in a school - really helped push young people to achieve."*



## Challenges in relation to the ASF

---

Challenges were identified around:

- **Recruitment** - mostly related to the short-term nature of ASF funding.
- **Unrealistic expectations** - of young people and the youth work organisation, particularly with short-term pieces of work.
- **Lack of consistency** - there is not a culture of collaboration with youth work, or investment in youth work across local authorities and schools.
- **Capacity** - for smaller organisations to navigate PEF systems and the need for more youth workers in every school, including primary.
- **Lack of transparency** - about who/what PEF is being spent on and the impact of these interventions.
- **Investment** - in core funding for third-sector organisations.
- **School-focused system** - SAC/ASF feels driven and controlled by schools/formal education and support focused here.

## Policy recommendations and the role of YLS national programme

---

The key barriers the youth work sector faces in delivering as part of the SAC primarily relate to the geographical variation in inter-professional understanding. This means that the role and impact of youth work are not always valued, which inevitably has a knock-on impact on the funding available to youth work teams. This likely impacts continued variation in access to the support and learning young people need and outcomes across schools and local authorities.

This lack of shared interprofessional understanding also leads to the de-prioritisation of youth work in school settings. In delivering our national programme, we have experienced competing priorities between youth work and school, mainly when relying on engagement with a cross section of teachers, not just one or two teacher advocates of the youth work approach. This has sometimes delayed progress in delivering interventions or securing ongoing commitment. It also remains difficult to provide support and challenge in an environment where a partnership with youth work is seen as optional, and collaboration is not accountable.

Throughout our engagement with practitioners, they have raised concerns about the short-term nature of funding and its impact on their ability to meet planning, recruitment, and delivery needs. Similarly, a lack of investment in youth work in general and specifically for SAC-related work can negatively impact the capacity to partner with schools and deliver more broadly within the community.

It is positive that several youth work managers report increasing demand from schools for their services. This includes some cases where a need has been jointly identified with youth work for gender-based youth work to support young people at risk of disengaging from school and risk-taking behaviours. There are challenges to meeting this need with finite resources. This hinders partnership working and presents a barrier to young people reaching their potential. In other cases, youth work practitioners report that schools increasingly recognise the need for longer-term engagement with young people and earlier intervention. The challenge for schools and youth work here is balancing the need to plan for earlier, longer-term support with growing demand and pressure on schools to respond quickly to urgent needs.

Our national programme is helping to support the structural and culture changes identified as vital to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This includes ensuring<sup>5</sup>:

- All parts of the system know the range of approaches to support equity and can apply them in their local context and identify impact evidence.
- All local authorities, practitioners, and partners share an understanding and work on the Scottish Attainment Challenge aims/mission.
- Strategic collaboration across the education system resulting in innovative, impactful and sustainable approaches to closing the poverty related attainment gap.

[5] [SAC Theory of Change](#)



Youth work practitioners identified an ongoing need for the following support through our programme:

- **Influencing the system** - demonstrating how youth work can support the reform that is needed in Scottish Education.
- **Elevating youth voice** - particularly the voices of young people whose needs are not currently being met in formal education.
- **Promoting understanding** of youth work's role across the learner journey and the need for youth work to be embedded in the system.
- Continue to build an **evidence base** for youth work.
- Supporting **strategic collaboration**.
- Securing **sustainable and secure funding**.
- **Sharing and celebrating effective practice**.
- Facilitating **engagement** with national policy and drivers for improvement.

Our evidence and insights suggest that further embedding youth work within the SAC would help accelerate progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. It is recommended that:

- **Youth work practitioners must feel fully engaged in the SAC - all schools should understand how youth work supports equity.**
- **National guidance and policy for the SAC could better include the role and responsibility of youth work.**
- **Youth workers must understand where they can access support and challenge from Attainment Advisors and YLS.**
- **There should be greater consistency in strategic collaboration across local authority strategic planning and school improvement planning.**
- **Adequate and stable investment in youth work to continue to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty as part of the SAC.**
- **Better alignment between policies to reduce child poverty and the attainment gap.**
- **Learning from youth work regarding capturing and valuing outcomes such as engagement in learning, health and well-being and achievement.**

Scottish Government and Education Scotland policy documents and guidance should feel more directly relevant to youth work, emphasising their roles and responsibilities as part of the system-wide approach needed. Alongside this, support and challenge for the youth work sector in the SAC should be strengthened. This also includes support and recognition of community-based youth work and the SAC. Appropriate investment is needed to ensure young

people have access to the learning and support needed to reach their potential – in school and the wider community.

In its 2022 report<sup>6</sup>, the Scottish Parliament Education, Children and Young People Committee noted that schools cannot close the poverty-related attainment gap alone. Collaboration with partners such as youth work is vital. It asked Education Scotland and local authorities to ensure funding stability for third-sector partners. The Committee recommended that the impact of such longer-term relationships on outcomes for children, young people and their families should be evaluated.

In 2024, *Learning: For All. For Life. A report from the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development (CLD)*<sup>7</sup> recommended that “The Scottish Government should undertake an urgent and overdue reassessment of the current balance of spending across all dimensions of learning in Scotland”. Further, it suggests, “An early and helpful step would be to encourage greater use of SAC/PEF funding to provide dedicated and professional Youth Work support in our secondary schools.” Our insights suggest that there is further work to be done to support the contribution of third-sector organisations, including youth work, to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

## Summary

---

Our national programme will continue to support the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026 by ensuring youth work is embedded in national and local responses, including creating a supportive infrastructure and enhancing family well-being and capabilities.

Youth work is crucial to tackling child poverty. It provides support and opportunities to children, young people, and families across different intervention points, responding to personal and local circumstances. Youth work, together with young people and their families, works to understand and address the wider factors and structural barriers impacting life chances. Growing evidence shows that this affects the well-being, quality of life, and life chances of children and families.

As part of the Scottish Government's mission to use education to tackle child poverty, youth work builds health and well-being, improves readiness to learn,

[6] Scottish Attainment Challenge | Scottish Parliament

[7] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/learning-life-report-independent-review-community-learning-development-cld/pages/3/>

and increases attendance, attainment, achievement and positive post-school destinations, helping to lift young people out of poverty.

Through our national programme, we provide support, advice, and guidance to promote equity and improve outcomes for learners through collaboration. We have also promoted an embedded culture and ethos of impactful and sustained collaboration, based on a shared understanding between youth work and schools.

There is increasing recognition that addressing the poverty-related attainment gap needs a whole-system and whole-journey approach. Youth work is uniquely positioned as a consistent partner across the learner journey, including work with families. Identifying and implementing effective interventions for equity should take cognisance of the wider and longer-term circumstances for families and communities - working towards a 'support around the child and family' approach informed by early intervention. There is learning from youth work that we can bring to this space.

Embedding youth work further within the SAC will require a greater understanding of youth work across the learner journey and support for the child/young person within the context of their family and community.





# #YouthWorkChangesLives



YouthLink Scotland  
Caledonian Exchange  
19A Canning St.  
Edinburgh  
EH3 8EG  
T: 0131 202 8050  
E: [info@youthlink.scot](mailto:info@youthlink.scot)  
W: [www.youthlink.scot](http://www.youthlink.scot)

YouthLink Scotland is a Company Limited by Guarantee.  
Registered in Scotland No: 164547. Charity Ref: SC003923

