



Education Reform: Let's Talk Scottish Education

YouthLink Scotland response to the National Discussion

Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of our sector. We are an organisation with a sharp focus on the needs of young people. Our approach is founded upon being inclusive, accessible, ethical, equitable and diverse. We are an organisation that promotes learning, innovation and progressive thinking and we are committed to the highest standards of protection and safety for young people.

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 to the local and national government. We achieve this by supporting the sector to demonstrate the impact and value of their work and by promoting a positive image of young people and youth work.

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 Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Response

Professor Ken Muir's report [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#) recommended a number of structural and cultural changes, to take forward the OECD recommendations¹ and deliver excellence and equity in education. One of these was to have a national discussion to create a 'compelling and consensual vision' for Scottish education. His report called for the discussion to consider the vision for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and how the education system

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence-bf624417-en.htm>

seeks to address the purposes described in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The process would require a cultural and mindset shift, including according narrative privilege to all those with an interest.

On 14 June 2022, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville called for “*fresh, innovative ideas to help to deliver change and drive improvement*” and for this to be “*the most inclusive ever discussion on education in Scotland*”, bringing “*the widest possible range of voices and views into the room*”² .

In October 2022, Scottish Youth Work Leaders called for the voice of youth work to be heard and valued equitably within the national discussion. We support the position statement. In particular, agreeing that education reform is an opportunity to transform our education system. ‘Putting Learners at the Centre’ is key to achieving the ambitions laid out in Ken Muir’s report and delivering the OECD recommendations. We support the view that a rights-based approach is the only way to achieve excellence and equity through Scottish education and to get it right for every child and young person. YouthLink Scotland has worked with youth workers across Scotland to gather the views of 738 young people who participate in youth work which reinforces the need to take this position. A summary report of findings has been submitted separately and can be found [here](#).

This is crucially important as Scotland moves to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law. Education reform provides us with an opportunity to create a system of education that supports “*the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential*”³. We believe an equitable and rights-based offer for all learners around education must include access to youth work opportunities.

This YouthLink Scotland response to the Scottish Government National Discussion on Education focuses on:

- Our vision for Scottish education
- What needs to change to deliver the vision.

The response has been further informed by our members, including through direct engagements with youth work practitioners across Scotland, a private session hosted by Kaukab Stewart, MSP, Deputy Convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee of the Scottish Parliament and an opportunity facilitated by Scottish Government at the recent (08/11/22) National Youth Work Conference, attended by the Minister for Higher Education, and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, Jamie Hepburn, MSP.

² <https://www.gov.scot/news/national-discussion-on-education/>

³ [The Right to Education - UNICEF UK](#)

Our Vision

We welcome a renewed and shared vision for education if it drives the culture and systemic change needed to deliver a rights-based approach to Scottish education.

Our vision for education is that every child and young person can experience their right to an education which helps them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (UNCRC Article 29). A rights-based approach, with the learner at the centre, is how we will create and deliver the kind of education that learners need for the future. We believe a rights-based approach must include a strengthened role for youth work within a more collaborative and enhanced system.

A refreshed vision for education must also reflect what young people are telling us they need from Scottish education and acknowledge the people and places they value as part of this. Young people participating in youth work told us that they learn across various settings - including youth work. They also said they need Scottish education to help them prepare for their future life and work. In particular, they spoke about the need for education to provide them with a holistic experience that helps them to:

- Feel safe, respected and included
- Develop and apply 'life relevant' skills
- Access the support they need
- Gain qualifications and other recognition of achievement
- Learn through a broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations.

What needs to change to deliver the vision

It is clear that not all young people get what they need from Scottish education. Findings from the consultation undertaken by Professor Ken Muir identified that *“only one in three secondary school learners who responded to the survey agreed that they are having the best possible education experience while just over half (56%) were of the view that their education helps them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential.”*⁴ YouthLink Scotland’s recent consultation with young people participating in youth work identified that 22% of young people feel they are getting what they need across all the places where they learn. However, another 50% think they are partly getting what they need, with just under a third of young people saying they are not served well by the current system.

Therefore, a significant transformation of the culture and systems across Scottish education is needed to ensure that every young person can access their right to an education as defined under the UNCRC. YouthLink Scotland believes these changes must recognise youth work as integral to education.

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/>

Culture change

Youth work in Scotland is part of the education system⁵. It is a valuable element of the learner journey for all children and young people, helping them to develop a broad range of skills, capacities and achievements to support them to succeed. It complements and enhances delivery of the formal curriculum, and the provision of support for pupils, contributing to raising attainment and improving outcomes for young people, especially, but not exclusively, those impacted by poverty. The role and impact of youth work within education are further outlined in [Youth work: a guide for schools](#).

Young people, consulted by youth workers on behalf of YouthLink Scotland, told us that youth work is part of education. It helps them to feel safe, respected and included, access the support they need, learn and develop skills through individualised experiences and pathways and gain accreditation and other forms of achievement. They value their learning, skills development and achievements through youth work and want this valued equally alongside formal learning and qualifications.

Education reform, including the national discussion, must strengthen the relationship between formal and non-formal approaches to learning. Youth work is an educational practice, delivered by a skilled workforce of youth work practitioners, who offer a unique experience for young people who choose to participate and shape what is important for them to learn. The collaboration required across the system must be based on parity. We must value youth work to value and respect what is valued by and unique to every learner. We would argue that this is an important aspiration for a rights-seeking education system.

A renewed vision for Scottish education must reinforce a shared understanding of Scottish education, recognising that young people learn through different approaches, across settings, supported by various educators. As such, YouthLink Scotland asks Scottish Government to ensure the national discussion drives the culture change needed to equally value the role of youth work in Scottish education.

New national agencies for education

Youth work does not always feel included in the support provided by national education agencies, for other parts of the system. This includes career pathways, opportunities for continued professional development and workforce well-being support. The workforce also includes tens of thousands of volunteers who are also committed to continuous learning and development and deserve recognition and support. The sector is also not sufficiently represented in curriculum development and review.

We would encourage the Scottish Government to consider how the creation of new national agencies can more fully reflect and support the role of youth work within

⁵ <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/>

education. Such structural changes have a key role in building the culture we need to deliver on every young person's right to education.

Access to youth work

A rights-based offer of education must include access to youth work where and when young people need it. 87% of young people who took part in our discussions told us that they thought all young people should be able to access youth work during the school day. Many young people also participate in youth work outside of school. This includes taking part during evenings, weekends and school holiday periods, in community-based youth work, outdoor learning, learning for sustainability and outdoor residential experiences. It is well documented that outdoor learning experiences can contribute positively to the learning journey of Scotland's children and young people. Outdoor learning supports young people to develop a connection and concern for the natural environment, become more confident and self-reliant and learn how to deal with new challenges and manage risk.

These community-based experiences equally contribute to the holistic education that young people need to prepare them for their future life and work - which is why they must be valued through protected investment as part of education.

Young people's access to youth work is inequitable compared to formal learning. The statutory duty of local authorities to provide community learning and development needs to be strengthened and more explicit regarding the right to youth work in the community and school. Alongside this, a rights-based approach to investment should follow.

Understanding, valuing and ensuring access to youth work as part of a learner's education will fulfil our duty to provide a right to education in school and community.

Collaboration

The refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge acknowledges the need to work collectively across the system to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It states that "*alongside schools, youth work improves the readiness to learn, health and wellbeing and educational outcomes of children and young people*"⁶. Collaboration across the learning community is essential to deliver equity and excellence. A more collaborative approach to curriculum design can deliver a balance of learner experiences and ensure that education provides the support learners need.

There are numerous examples of effective collaboration between youth work and schools across Scotland⁷. These partnerships are able to evidence the positive impact on outcomes for learners. Working together, youth work and schools are improving

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-equity-fund-national-operational-guidance-2022/>

⁷ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/programmes/youth-work-and-the-attainment-challenge/sharing-good-practice/>

attendance and engagement, building health and well-being, raising attainment and supporting positive leaver destinations. However, there is no equitable access to this kind of experience for all learners. Additionally, these partnerships work best where there is mutual trust and respect, with a shared understanding of how youth work and schools complement each other to deliver shared outcomes. As stated earlier, education reform must strengthen the integral role of youth work in education to achieve genuine collaboration.

Young people agree that there needs to be improved communication and collaboration between formal and non-formal educators (such as teachers and youth workers). They identified the benefits this would have for their education, such as collectively being able to provide better support, including mental health and delivering the broad range of experiences and approaches to learning they need. Young people also felt that greater collaboration would provide the opportunity for practitioners to learn from each other. For example, youth workers could help teachers better understand the wider needs of young people in their class. Better collaboration would also improve attainment and achievement, such as youth workers supporting subjects like PSE and ensuring the learning and achievements of young people in the community were recognised. One young person said *“If they worked together, they can create a learning environment that is good for young people.”*

A broader curriculum offer

To deliver our vision for Scottish education the curriculum needs to deliver a more equitable balance across all four capacities⁸ and greater opportunity to develop skills alongside knowledge and understanding. Inclusion of youth work as a valuable and integral element of every learner journey for all children and young people will ensure education can provide a broader range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet individual needs and aspirations. This will also value the learning that young people participate in through community-based youth work opportunities.

Education reform must acknowledge that many young people are already developing a broad range of skills and the CfE capacities out-with the formal classroom, through youth work, including youth awards⁹. Young people’s responses to our consultation show that youth work is helping them to develop across the four capacities of CfE and that they can articulate the skills and competencies described under each capacity.

Youth work also supports young people to develop, recognise and articulate their skills. In our consultation, 83% of young people said their skills, qualities, experiences and achievements gained through youth work were very important or important to their future. They described their skills development through youth work as being ‘life relevant’ - now and for their future. Importantly, young people also expressed that youth work supports them to develop skills through practical, experiential opportunities and understand their relevance and application to their future. This is seen as an

⁸ <https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/3/>

⁹ <https://www.awardsnetwork.org/>

essential element of what they need from education. The Youth Work Skills Framework¹⁰ supports young people to recognise and articulate the essential skills developed through youth work.

Strengthened collaboration with youth work can also help plan and deliver learner experiences across the four contexts for curriculum¹¹. For example, *personal learning and achievement* helps young people to develop knowledge, attitudes and skills for learning, life and work. Greater emphasis should be placed on this within curriculum design, working in collaboration with youth work including youth awards, who play a key role in planning and delivering opportunities for personal learning and achievement in formal and community learning settings.

Strengthened partnership with youth work would also deliver a wider range of pathways and opportunities for learners making subject choices and entering the Senior Phase.

Recognition of achievement

Education reform is considering the future of assessment and qualifications in Scotland. This includes exploring how we better recognise learners' achievements outside of the classroom. While this is welcomed, any work in this regard must start from a position of equity. Young people value their achievements outwith formal learning. A rights-based approach, with youth work integral to education, should reflect parity of value in terms of what we capture, measure and why. An assessment and qualifications system should support progression in young people's learning across settings, value the achievements of all learners and demonstrate parity of esteem across different qualifications and awards. Above all it should reflect what is important to learners and help them articulate their skills and achievements.

Young people participating in youth work told us that qualifications were important to help them progress to college, university and employment. Some young people said that it felt like working towards qualifications was the focus of formal education. Alongside formal qualifications, young people value their skills and achievements, including those from non-formal approaches such as youth work (82% of respondents to our consultation with young people said they were more important or just as important as their achievements in formal settings). As such, they felt they should be recorded and valued alongside formal qualifications and other measures of progress through education (88%).

Youth awards are an important route through which young people have the opportunity to work towards recognition and accreditation that they can use to demonstrate their skills and achievements to employers and open up further options for their learning journey. Youth awards are widely used by the youth work sector to provide opportunity for and recognise personal achievement. Youth awards are achieved in a variety of

¹⁰ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/policy-research/outcomes-and-skills/>

¹¹ <https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/4/>

settings. Many schools work in partnership with youth work and youth award providers to deliver recognition for non-formal learning that complements and supplements that from formal education. This helps to raise attainment and achievement¹². Several youth awards are on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), but a systems change is needed to value all youth awards.

Support for learners

We believe that education should help learners to feel safe, respected, supported and included. Relationships with trusted adults such as youth workers, can be vital to supporting health and well-being leading to improved engagement with learning and educational outcomes. There is a range of evidence about the impact of youth work on health and well-being. This includes the Youth Work Education Recovery Fund (YWERF)¹³. This was one of the approaches taken by Scottish Government to provide health and well-being support as part of education recovery. The evidence showed that 80% of young people accessing support through the fund improved their health and well-being. We believe this approach should be seen as a mainstay, rather than an addition to help young people with their health and well-being over a sustained period of time. There is an opportunity for education reform to better recognise the range of practitioners (including youth workers) impacting on the health and well-being of young people. A recent report, “Youth Work: Closing the poverty-related attainment gap during the pandemic”¹⁴ highlighted that the closure of spaces for youth work impacted on young people’s health and well-being. Safe spaces for youth work provide opportunity for the development of important relationships (with peers and youth workers), social interaction and engagement with activities and support for health and wellbeing. When these spaces were reduced or removed, it impacted negatively on young people’s well-being and their progress/development.

Access to youth work in the community/school is recognised as part of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), National Improvement Framework (NIF) and Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and is highlighted as a driver to education reform and integral to the implementation of UNCRC into Scots Law¹⁵.

Relationships with youth workers and the non-formal youth work approach are key elements that help young people to feel safe, respected, heard, included and supported through youth work.

The review is an opportunity to strengthen recognition of youth work’s role in supporting engagement of young people in the reform process and helping the wider

¹² [Learning Resource 8: Personal Learning and Achievement \(education.gov.scot\)](https://www.education.gov.scot/learning-resource/8-personal-learning-and-achievement)

¹³ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/programmes/youth-work-and-the-attainment-challenge/sharing-good-practice/youth-work-education-recovery-fund/>

¹⁴ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6363/youth-work-during-the-pandemic-final.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/info-for-practitioners/articles/uncrc-incorporation/#:~:text=Incorporation%20of%20the%20United%20Nations%20Convention%20on%20the,incorporates%20the%20UNCRC%20into%20the%20law%20in%20Scotland.>

system understand the needs and views of young people into the future. This includes engaging with seldom heard groups, where relationships and long-term support are key. Ensuring young people are genuinely involved in their learning, encouraging them to become critical thinkers must be further embedded as part of the curriculum experience for all learners. Additionally, youth work can lead in this area of work, sharing practice and encouraging improvement as an integral part of the educational workforce in schools and beyond. However, this requires significant and consistent investment.

Many young people told us that youth work supports them to re-engage with formal learning such as school. This includes building their confidence, resilience and networks to feel more comfortable in the school environment. And providing a safe, nurturing environment. Readiness to learn is an important element of supporting learners to raise attainment. The role of youth work in ensuring all learners can access the support they need should be strengthened.

Summary

The national discussion, as part of education reform is an opportunity to transform Scottish education for our children and young people. To put learners at the centre, we must work collectively to listen to what young people need, across all the places where they learn, and deliver their right to education.

We know youth work improves the well-being, readiness to learn and educational outcomes of children and young people. This is why an equitable and rights-based offer for all learners around education must include access to youth work.

ENDS

For more information about this response, please contact YouthLink Scotland's Policy and Research Manager, Kevin Kane, kkane@youthlinkscotland.org, or Marielle Bruce, Youth Work and Schools Manager, mbruce@youthlinkscotland.org