Youth Work: Closing the poverty-related attainment gap during the pandemic

June 2021

"Made me feel I had someone I can trust and who will listen"

(young person)

This report explores how youth work responded to the needs of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. It considers where this can help understand how best to mitigate the longer term impacts and accelerate progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Scottish Government/Education Scotland Equity Audit set out to understand the impact of the pandemic, particularly school building closures, on educational experiences and attainment. It identified key themes and areas of focus, associated with mitigating the impact on children and young people affected by the poverty-related attainment gap. This included health and wellbeing support, digital infrastructure and connectivity and support to parents and families.

The report acknowledged the key role that youth work plays, within the education system, in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This contribution was recognised by investment from Scottish Government in a Youth Work Education Recovery Fund. These funded projects are supporting young people in some of the country's most vulnerable communities to re-engage with vital learning opportunities. This includes activities that build skills, improve health and well-being and recognise achievement.

The Equity Audit highlighted the need to continue to work across the system to understand how best to intensify and deepen support for learning and reduce inequity. The findings from this YouthLink Scotland report, focused on youth work, aim to contribute to this system-wide learning around the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Key findings

- The pandemic disconnected young people from many of the spaces they accessed youth work. This interrupted important relationships, making it more difficult to engage in support, and opportunities for social interaction and learning.

- For some young people, particularly those affected by poverty, this exacerbated the impact of the pandemic, on their mental health and wellbeing, learning and achievement.

- Youth workers adapted their approaches to recreate safe spaces, focused on equity and worked in partnership with young people and other partners.

- These priorities helped to maintain important relationships, support learning, address mental health and wellbeing and mitigate the impact of the pandemic, particularly for those affected by poverty.

- 83% of young people said youth work had been important or very important to them over the past year.

- Young people felt youth work provided opportunity for social interaction, support for health and wellbeing, skills and achievement and youth voice.

- Access to youth work will be key, within a whole system approach to mitigate the longer-term impact and accelerate progress towards closing the gap. Young people should be central to informing how we shape services.

Approach

This report draws on evidence and learning from YouthLink Scotland's Scottish Attainment Challenge programme, the National Youth Work Recovery Group and the experiences of a sample of young people and their youth workers, who took part in a survey during April 2021[1].

---

[1] 168 young people shared their experiences of participation in youth work across the pandemic. This included youth work delivered by local authority services and third sector voluntary youth organisations who are members of YLS.

How the pandemic impacted young people participating in youth work

The pandemic interrupted access to face-to-face youth work and disconnected many young people from their youth work spaces. In our survey, youth workers identified that the key impacts, particularly for young people affected by poverty, were:
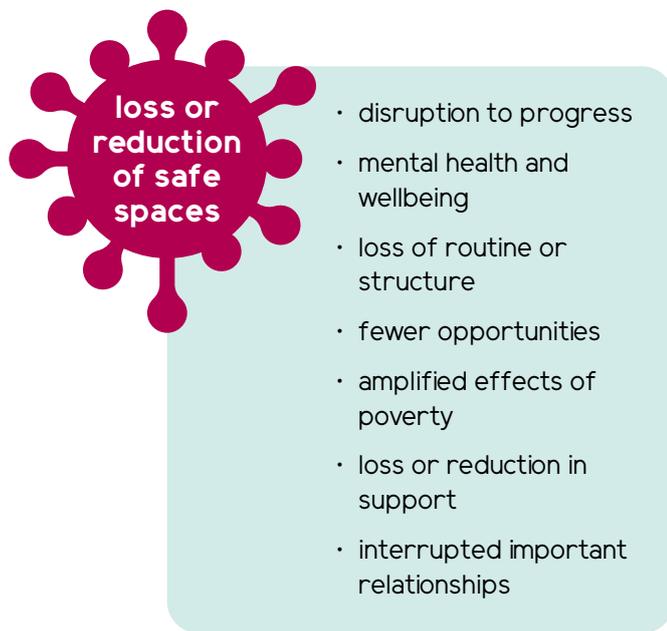
loss or reduction of safe spaces

- disruption to progress
- mental health and wellbeing
- loss of routine or structure
- fewer opportunities
- amplified effects of poverty
- loss or reduction in support
- interrupted important relationships

Figure 1: Youth worker's perspective on the impact for young people

"Potential safe spaces/ escapes with friends have been removed during lockdown. This in turn has affected mental health negatively"

(youth worker)

Youth workers noted that young people living in poverty were disproportionately affected by

interrupted access to spaces for face-to-face youth work. The loss of youth work spaces was acutely felt by young people who needed an 'escape' or respite from difficult or chaotic living/home circumstances.

The inter-related nature of the impacts (shown in figure one) can help understand the significance of safe spaces for youth work. Youth workers noted that the closure of physical youth work settings, and restricted face-to-face contact, interrupted important relationships for young people among their peers and youth workers. Building trusting relationships with young people is a core element of a youth worker's ability to engage and support young people. Interrupted contact was identified by some youth workers as having had a negative effect on the relationship, making it harder to re-engage young people. Youth workers also noticed a correlation between lack of engagement in youth work and mental health concerns. In some cases, worsening mental health created additional barriers to re-engagement.

"Those with anxiety issues have also found re-integrating incredibly difficult"

(youth worker)

Nearly half of youth workers had been concerned about the impact of social isolation on the mental health and wellbeing of young people they supported, particularly those affected by poverty. This is reflected in findings through Lockdown Lowdown, where young people recognised that the inability to socialise or interact with peers was a factor that negatively impacted mental health.

When young people in our survey were asked what they had missed most when they couldn't go to their youth club/group in person, the most commonly cited aspect was social interaction.

> *"The biggest part I missed about youth clubs/groups was just the social interaction you get while being with your friends and being around youth workers"*
>
> *(young person)*

This need for social interaction may partly help to understand the feedback from some youth workers about groups of young people gathering in public spaces. They noted this across both lockdown periods and during restricted face-to-face delivery.

The pandemic also had a negative impact on the progress that some young people had been making through youth work. This included the development of skills, including confidence, and other aspects of social and emotional development. Interrupted progress was again seen particularly in young people affected by poverty.

Young people's views point to a connection between interrupted access to the activities face-to-face youth work provides and progress, with one young person from Scouts Scotland recognising that *"I forgot how to use a flint and steel"* – a skill that was clearly important to them. Young people recognised that youth work activities were something they missed when they couldn't engage in person. In general, young people highlighted that the activities they most enjoyed could not be recreated online.

It was clear from the survey that young people's experiences of the pandemic were diverse. This is reflected, and considered in more detail, within Youth Scotland and Place2Be's report Young people's mental health: Impact of Covid-19. In our survey, youth workers acknowledged that they had been encouraged by the resilience shown by some young people who had experience of adversity. Other young people adapted well to different approaches to learning. This included some young people who had engaged better through a more flexible approach to learning during school building closures. Other youth workers felt that concerns around mental health, pressure of school work and exams were more apparent during the second lockdown period.

> *"Young people had used up their reserves in the first wave and running on empty by second in terms of coping skills and resilience levels"*
>
> *(youth worker)*

Some youth organisations have seen a significant drop in youth membership during the pandemic[2]. This is partly an indication of where the pandemic impacted on young people's ability to continue engagement and was particularly seen in areas of multiple deprivation. The loss of youth work relationships and opportunities is likely to have impacted on young people now and over the longer term, should they not re-engage. Additionally, loss of membership has implications for the future of these vital organisations.

[2] Scouts aim to help young people recover from the pandemic - TFN

How the youth work sector responded

Throughout the pandemic, the youth work sector strived to work creatively, collectively and collaboratively to respond to young people's expressed and emerging needs[3]. This was illustrated in Learning through Lockdown, which summarised the breadth of youth work delivery during the summer period in 2020. Youth Scotland's report RISING TO THE CHALLENGE Community-based youth work and Coronavirus demonstrates the essential role and impact of community-based youth work, in providing immediate support to young people and in helping to prevent further negative outcomes arising in their lives. Universal services also provided much needed access to 'normality' for young people. Numerous stories from youth work were also included in Education Scotland's *"What Scotland Learned"* publication[4].

Where possible, youth workers have continued to:

· Prioritise crisis support for the most vulnerable families.

· Adapt approaches to maintain contact and continue delivery of services.

· Work in partnership to engage young people and mitigate the impact on mental health, learning and development.

· Promote young people's voice, rights, volunteering opportunities and social action.

· Support the education recovery of young people, particularly those affected by the poverty-related attainment gap.

These priorities were also reflected in the approaches identified by youth workers in our survey, as having enabled engagement and support across the pandemic (figure 2). This suggests that re-creating safe spaces for young people, a focus on equity and working in partnership, worked well.

Figure 2: Approaches enabling engagement and support

[3] https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5975/supporting-young-people-through-lockdown.pdf
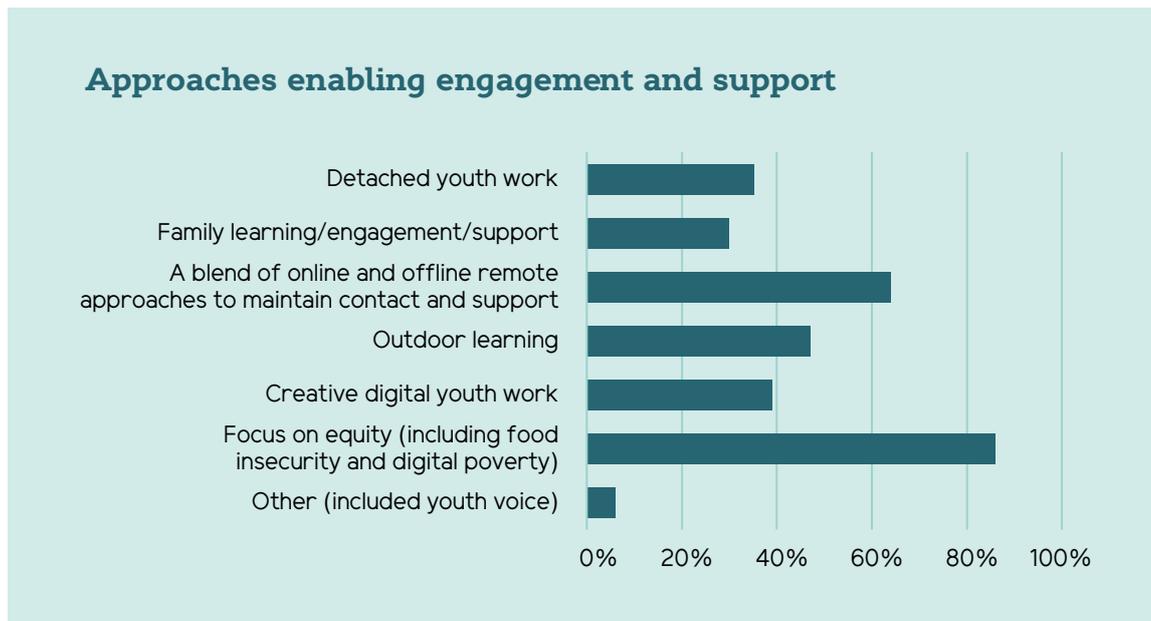
[4] what-scotland-learned_100stories.pdf (education.gov.scot)

Recreating safe spaces

Youth workers recreated safe spaces for youth work, ensuring flexibility in delivery. During periods of lockdown, many youth work organisations were able to successfully engage young people using both online and remote approaches[5]. These approaches played a key role in maintaining contact. They worked well where there were existing relationships with young people and families, strong community connections and partnerships, and where youth workers had the resources, infrastructure and skills to adapt and respond.

There are positive examples where digital youth work increased reach, particularly across rural and large geographical areas. However, several barriers to digital engagement were also highlighted, including an ongoing need to address the digital divide. This included access to devices, internet connection and whether young people had safe, appropriate spaces within the home, along with parental support to engage in online opportunities.

> *"Young people need the right support at home to engage"*
>
> *(youth worker)*

Other responses in our survey raised the challenges of engaging young people online – including the ability to maintain relationships, and create meaningful interactions: *"young people are losing interest no matter how engaging we make it" (youth worker).* Some youth workers felt they were better prepared to respond during the second lockdown, including having a stronger digital offer and collaboration with schools which enabled continuity of provision. However, many felt it had been more difficult to engage young people digitally, with a strong sense that some young people were less motivated.

Offline remote approaches (such as 'walk and talk' sessions, delivery of activity/learning packs, phone calls and doorstep crisis support) were also key approaches identified in Learning through Lockdown and were mentioned in this survey as being crucial to maintaining relationships and social interaction for some young people.

> *"Socially distanced walks......was different human contact, fresh air, and somebody to listen to"*
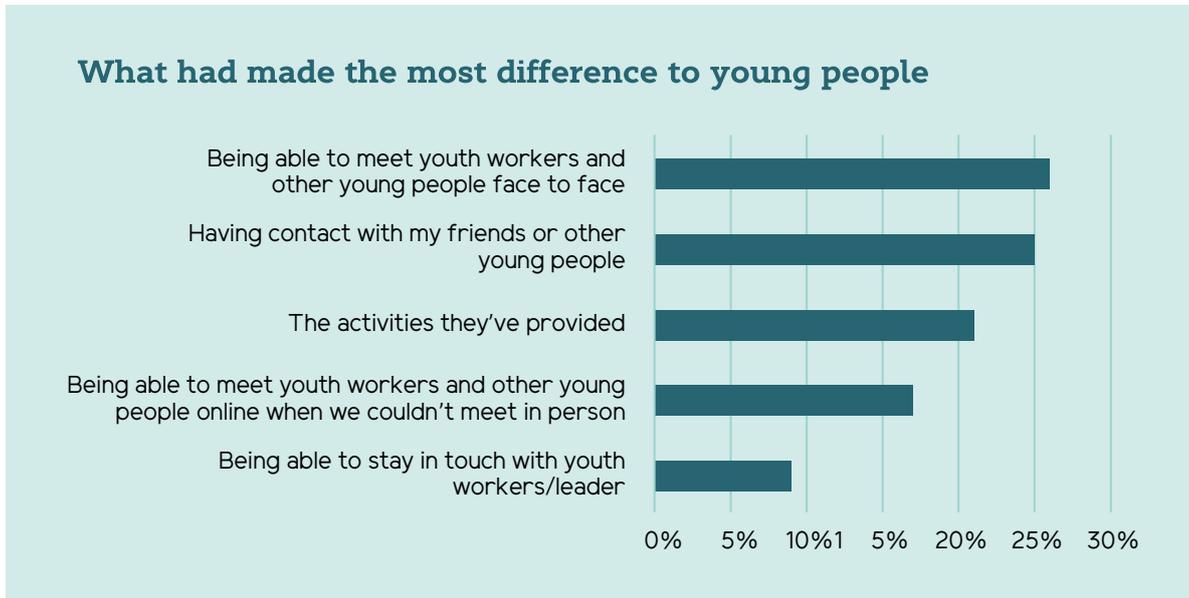>
> *(youth worker)*

A significant number of organisations also used detached youth work approaches to successfully engage young people. This enabled youth workers to respond to local need, meeting young people face-to-face in their own spaces. Outdoor learning was also recognised by nearly half of youth worker respondents as an approach that worked well, with many organisations working in partnership to enhance learning experiences. This is also reflected in examples given in Learning through Lockdown.

When young people were asked what had made the most difference during the pandemic, "being able to meet youth workers and other young people face-to-face" and "having contact with my friends or other young people" were the most common answers (figure 3). Comments provided by young people suggest that face-to-face youth work afforded opportunity to engage with their peers and participate in activities that could not be re-created online. Having opportunities to engage online when they couldn't meet in person was also recognised by young people as having been important.

[5] https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5251/learning-through-lockdown.pdf

Figure 3: What had made the most difference to young people

What had made the most difference to young people

Category	Value
Being able to meet youth workers and other young people face to face	~26%
Having contact with my friends or other young people	~25%
The activities they've provided	~21%
Being able to meet youth workers and other young people online when we couldn't meet in person	~17%
Being able to stay in touch with youth workers/leader	~9%

(Axis: 0%, 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, 30%)

Focus on equity

Where possible, youth workers provided opportunities to mitigate the impact of the pandemic for all young people. In addition, over 80% of youth workers in our survey considered that a focus on addressing inequity had been a priority for them. This included tackling food insecurity and addressing the digital divide, continued interventions to close the poverty-related attainment gap and supporting young people affected by wider inequalities.

Where possible and appropriate, youth work engages with young people within their wider family. This proved very valuable during lockdown periods, when youth workers' positive relationships with families enabled youth workers to provide crisis support and re-establish connections with young people who were disengaging from learning and/or struggling with mental health issues.

Partnership

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of collaboration. Youth workers worked in partnership to engage young people and mitigate the impact on mental health, learning and development. This included some examples of collaboration between community-based youth work and the statutory sector.

Collaboration between schools, youth work and other agencies enabled vulnerable families to be identified and tailored support to be put in place. This was seen through the education hubs. Youth work collaboration also led to some local authorities developing tailored hub support for older young people.

Sustained communication between schools and youth work organisations was vital during school closures. In many cases this enabled youth work support to continue and facilitated ongoing engagement in youth work learning, particularly for those who were accessing youth work as part of their timetable. In other cases, challenges were identified around communication and absence of a shared online platform to support engagement in learning.

Within our survey, 66% of those who reported some partnership working with schools felt this had been positive. Youth workers shared impactful examples of working together to identify and support vulnerable pupils. Some had been included in school 'bubbles' and felt that this reflected an understanding and value of their role. One youth worker stated that they were *"now noticed as an integral part of school learning"*. Another spoke about the impact of a joined up approach within the wider community *"teachers volunteered at our hot lunch and food distribution hub which ensured they were still in contact with pupils"*.

Working in partnership also increased opportunities for young people: *"Excellent relationships within schools have developed during the pandemic. I feel that schools now really see the value in having youth work embedded within their school. This has allowed us to deliver programmes that empower young people to have their voice heard and influence change. Whilst being in school it has also allowed us to engage with young people in wellbeing groups"*.

Working in partnership with young people was also seen as vital. Youth workers supported youth voice to shape delivery and identify young people's needs. *"We developed a survey for local young people, to use youth voice to shape future practice and gather experiences, issues and voices of young people"*. Another example spoke of working with their Youth Council to inform practice.

What was the impact of youth work?

> ## *"Made me feel I had someone I can trust and who will listen"*
> *(young person)*

83% of young people in our survey said youth work had been important or very important to them over the past year.

Young people stated that, during the pandemic, youth work had helped them:

· With their health and wellbeing.

· To develop skills.

· Achieve a qualification, such as a youth award.

· Prepare for their future e.g. progress to work or college.

· To have a voice.

Young people were also able to articulate the skills they had developed through youth work. This included communication, confidence, teamwork, organisation, looking after myself, leadership and various practical skills such as cooking and outdoor-related skills. Several examples were given where young people had received an award or badge to recognise achievement.

> ## *"I received five different badges which I am very proud of"*
> *(young person)*

Youth workers in our survey drew on evidence from their own organisation's evaluations during the pandemic, to demonstrate that youth work continued to deliver the Youth Work Outcomes with young people (figure 4), including:

- Helped to build or maintain social connections.

- Provided safe spaces for emotional support including early intervention with mental health issues.

- Supported learning – developing skills and engagement with school.

Our survey findings reflect the evidence gathered through YouthLink Scotland's *National Case Study Evaluation 2020* [6]. This provided an overview of the diverse ways in which youth work is contributing to closing the poverty-related attainment gap – helping to improve young people's attendance, engagement, skills, achievement, health and wellbeing and school leaver destinations.

> *"I have a college place and I was worried before"*
> *(young person)*

An independent evaluation of the Scottish Government/ YouthLink Scotland food insecurity programme [7], delivered in summer 2020, highlighted the role of youth work in tackling young people's learning loss, as well as supporting family learning and addressing food insecurity during school holiday periods. The youth workers were able to engage young people and their wider family using a holistic approach. This led to positive outcomes in terms of food insecurity and wider health and wellbeing, engagement with learning and skills development.

Figure 4: How youth work helped to mitigate the impact of COVID-19

How did youth work help to mitigate the impact?
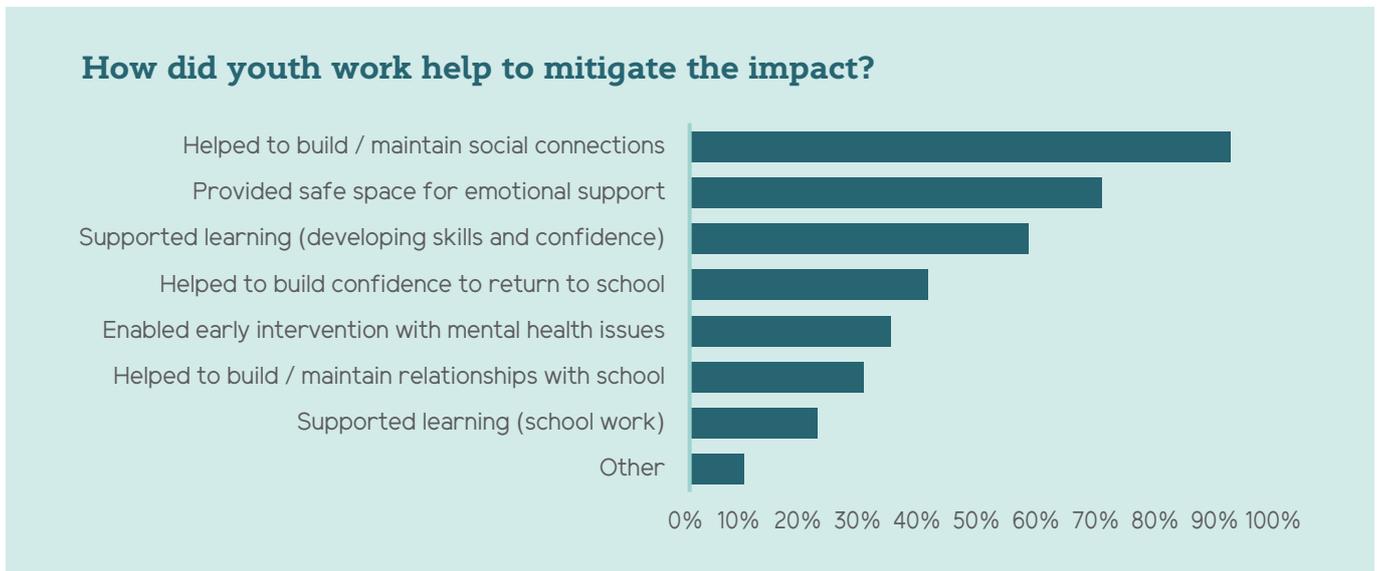
[6] national-evaluation-publication.pdf (youthlinkscotland.org)
[7] food-insecurity-report_proofed.pdf (youthlinkscotland.org)

Opportunities to learn about how best to mitigate the longer term impacts and continue to address the poverty-related attainment gap

"Returning to "business as usual" will not deliver a sustained long-term economic recovery that also improves well-being and reduces inequality." [8]

"The disruption caused by COVID-19 offers an opportunity for education systems to do things very differently." [9]

Evolving services to provide safe spaces for young people to engage in youth work helped to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Flexibility in delivery helped young people to develop and maintain important relationships, through which they engaged with support for mental health and wellbeing, developed skills and achieved. Alongside this, a focus on equity and working in partnership targeted support at those who needed it most, including young people affected by poverty. Learning from what worked during the pandemic will inform how the youth work sector reimagines delivery, whilst continuing to empower young people to shape services. It also offers insight into how we might do things differently across the system.

Partnership

> *"Young people should be central to informing how we shape services"*
>
> *(youth worker)*

We should not assume we know what young people need – and how they need it. Youth workers will continue to work with young people as partners in the learning process and can play a helpful role in facilitating youth voice across the system. This includes supporting young people to participate in decisions and ensuring their voice is heard as the education system considers how best to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Learning from the pandemic can help inform how best to further strengthen youth work and school collaboration, across school and community settings, to understand and tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. Youth workers identified the importance of relationships which underpinned clear processes for communication, planning and evaluation within partnerships. This mirrors learning through YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work and Schools Programme about the conditions and processes that facilitate effective, sustainable collaboration. At its core, effective partnership working is about building and maintaining positive and sustainable relationships. Relationships that are based on a shared understanding and respect for professional roles and approaches, can help create the right conditions and culture to improve outcomes for young people.

YouthLink Scotland's National Case Study Evaluation also illustrated that for some young people, youth work is the key to unlocking learning, overcoming barriers to engagement and providing a more tailored curriculum offer – in the community and within school. The Youth Work Skills Framework offers a common language to support shared understanding, joint planning and tracking of progress – facilitating effective collaboration across school and community contexts.

The STV report The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on third sector organisations identified that strong partnership between third sector and statutory sector was a positive feature arising during the pandemic, with many cases of third sector providing agile responses to support overstretched local authorities. It argues that *"relationships between third sector and statutory sector should continue to be strengthened, with recognition of the role third sector played during the pandemic reflected in clarity and support."*

[8] https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-back-better-a-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-covid-19-52b869f5/

[9] https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JPCC-07-2020-0055/full/pdf?title=building-back-better-education-systems-equity-and-covid-19

Spaces and places for youth work

> *"Providing safe spaces for young people to come together in an inclusive environment will be key going forward."*
>
> *(youth worker)*

The role of youth work in closing the poverty-related attainment gap across community and school contexts is related to the importance of safe spaces for young people, highlighted during the pandemic. Youth work creates safe spaces where young people can build and maintain important relationships with each other and trusted adults. These relationships are crucial to the outcomes youth work achieves with young people. A commitment to mitigating the impact of the pandemic should therefore include consideration of young people's access to youth work spaces across community and school settings. This includes universal and targeted approaches, outdoor learning and digital delivery.

Seventy per cent of young people in our survey agreed that there should be youth workers in all schools (with another 28% saying they didn't know). In stating what difference that might make to them and other young people, the most common answers identified that it would enable access to someone to listen/talk to, who wasn't a teacher, and who they could go to for support, advice and guidance. Comments suggest that young people recognise and value the different nature of their relationship with a youth worker, compared to teachers and other adults. Other comments stated that having access to youth work in school would expand opportunities, such as outdoor learning and skills development.

"We would get more time to learn actively outside like nature, and I feel healthy when I'm outside."

"A youth work space where we could go for help and support."

Digital methods will continue to be an important space for youth work delivery. In particular, where online approaches enabled youth workers to reach communities (particularly rural and remote rural) that they had not been able to before, will have implications for decisions regarding best use of resources. To continue to develop an effective digital approach, youth workers need appropriate infrastructure, resource and training.

Mental health and wellbeing

> *"Young people need to feel they have a good working relationship with staff and a foundation of trust before they really disclose how they feel"*
>
> *(youth worker)*

In paying particular attention to those most impacted by the pandemic, a collective effort is required to focus on mental health and wellbeing. Youth work helps young people to develop relationships with their peers and trusted adults, which support wellbeing. As trusted adults for many young people, youth workers will have a key role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on mental health, particularly in early intervention. Youth workers in our survey identified the importance of ensuring they have the confidence and skills around mental health.

Focus on equity

> *"It taught me the inequality of education for those experiencing poverty due to lack of resources or peaceful areas of the home to study and the importance of trying to secure gadgets for them to use for exam course work"*
>
> *(youth worker)*

The pandemic has highlighted and in some cases exacerbated the wider impacts of poverty for families known to youth work. This included food insecurity and digital connectivity. Addressing digital poverty is an ongoing challenge for the whole system. Learning from Data Poverty in Scotland and Wales / Nesta suggests that data poverty widens inequalities, affecting life chances, impacts on wellbeing and economic opportunities. It will also be crucial to continue to share learning from youth work approaches to tackling food insecurity.

Whilst it was recognised that all young people, and families, need access to support, many youth workers in our survey felt that a continued focus was needed on those most impacted by COVID-19. This includes providing targeted support and focusing on the development of particular skills gaps identified during the pandemic.

Workforce development

The National Improvement Framework[10] and Equity Audit identified a need to focus on the health and wellbeing of the education workforce and support professional learning to develop skilled and confident practitioners. As key contributors to education and wider recovery, it will be important that the wellbeing and professional development needs of youth workers are also recognised. This should be reflected in the upcoming National Youth Work Strategy (2021-26) where workforce development has been highlighted by young people and youth work practitioners as a priority area for action.

Summary

This report identifies some of the ways youth work in Scotland helped to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on young people, particularly those affected by inequality and highlights the need to invest in youth work infrastructure if we are to have any chance of building back better from pandemic. It informs how youth work and the wider system could accelerate progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap and create a more equitable system for all.

The legacy of COVID-19 poses an unprecedented challenge for the youth work sector in Scotland. Therefore, we need to continue to work across the whole education system to understand how to intensify and deepen support for learning and reduce inequality. An understanding of youth work's essential role across public policy areas and recognition of the benefits of taking a youth work approach as a key component towards achieving positive outcomes for all Scotland's young people must be a priority.

This is especially important at a time when the Scottish Government has committed to directly incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law. Articles 28 and 29 focus on a child's right to an education and on the quality and content of education. Article 28 recognises the right of children to education and the need to take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and Article 29 centres on the aims of education and directs Governments to focus on the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. It is crucial therefore that the whole education system commits to enhancing youth voice and recognises the opportunities the youth work sector provides at realising the ambition contained within UNCRC.

---

[10] https://www.gov.scot/publications/2021-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/

For further details on this publication, please contact
mbruce@youthlinkscotland.org