

Proposed Youth Work (Scotland) Bill

Consultation response



Introduction

Youth Scotland welcomes the focus on Scotland's world-class youth work sector afforded by both the proposed Youth Work (Scotland) Bill and last year's Independent Review of Community Learning and Development (CLD). We are enthused that there is renewed support and cross-party recognition of the essential role youth work plays in supporting Scotland's young people to be confident, resilient learners and to have better outcomes, regardless of their background.

Scotland's youth sector remains in extremely challenging financial conditions, operating with increased demand for services while facing significant reductions in funding. We trust that policymakers, national and local recognise the fundamental reduction to the pressures on the public purse youth work makes as a preventative activity aloneⁱ, regardless of the additional, evidencedⁱⁱ benefit to learning, empowermentⁱⁱⁱ and wellbeing derived from this participation.

Youth Scotland's response to the proposed Youth Work (Scotland) Bill follows a period of consultation and conversation with our wider membership network. Our position is informed by and inclusive of these crucial viewpoints.

Overview

About Youth Scotland:

We are the largest national youth work organisation in Scotland, supporting 105,00 young people, 2,200 youth groups and over 11,300 youth workers. Youth Scotland has been around since the early 20th century and has a diverse membership network – from small rural youth groups to large urban projects. The common goal that we all share is better outcomes for young people.

Our membership network is made up of local youth groups of all sizes, Area Associations and Youth Scotland staff who can provide support and training on a range of youth work topics. We are proud of the varied, universal youth work our network delivers and the innovative solutions our members create in an ever-changing youth work landscape.

Youth Scotland membership includes over 600 organisations, comprising over 2,200 youth groups, most of which are small, local and led by volunteers from within their communities. 64% of our members operate in SIMD 1-5 areas and 27% in rural areas. The diversity of delivery across our network highlights the critical need for inclusive legislation that works for all models of youth work.

We have 4 main 'pillars' of activity:

1. Membership: supporting our member youth groups so all young people, regardless of their circumstances, can benefit from high quality community-based youth work.
2. Programmes: providing youth leadership and national programmes which enable young people to have the opportunity to grow and develop their skills and to use their voice in their communities.
3. Training youth workers and volunteers: as the leading provider of training and capacity-building for the youth work sector in Scotland, we improve the skills and confidence of those who are supporting young people.
4. Youth awards: by creating more opportunities for young people to gain recognition for their achievements through our accredited Hi5 Award, Dynamic Youth Awards and Youth Achievement Awards at SCQF levels 2-7

Question responses

1. Which of the following best expresses your view of the proposed Bill?

Partially supportive.

Youth Scotland welcomes and supports the overarching ambition of the proposed Youth Work (Scotland) Bill to create a statutory foundation for equitable, accessible and high-quality youth work across Scotland. We strongly agree with the Bill's intention to enshrine the right to youth work and recognise the critical role it plays in promoting young people's rights, wellbeing and opportunities.

We are encouraged by the principles laid out in the proposal and believe the Bill could be transformative, but it must explicitly recognise and protect the diversity of youth work practice and providers across Scotland.

Our support is qualified by points raised during consultation with our membership, our own research and suggest the need for greater clarity and detail in key areas:

- Definition and recognition of role of voluntary youth work within the legislation, including recognition of its place as the majority provision of youth work in Scotland.
- Fair and direct access to funding for community-based youth work groups through processes and systems which are proportionate, inclusive and accurately reflect the capacity and means of voluntary provision.
- Recognition of the unique operating models (e.g. volunteer-led, part-time, issue-based) of grassroots youth work, to protect their unique qualities and strengths.

- Clear commitments around national infrastructure and support for workforce development.

Consultation with members of Youth Scotland revealed a strong support for the formal recognition and incorporation of youth work as a right for Scotland's young people.

Beyond this, there was a consensus that should the proposed Bill be taken forward, the detail should be as inclusive of the voluntary sector and community-based youth work as possible. We support the view of members that community-based youth workers and volunteers should be able to see themselves in the language and mechanisms of any proposed legislation.

In particular, consideration should be given to how any implementation of legislation, national or local frameworks and structures would affect the small, grassroots organisations who rely on a volunteer workforce to interface with the inherent systems and administration of local or national government.

“Top-down infrastructure can be hard to work with in community-based youth work. We operate in an agile, developing landscape with young people and how this is going to be implemented is important.” - Youth Scotland member

2. Do you think legislation is required, or are there other ways in which the Bill's aims could be achieved more effectively?

Yes.

Youth Scotland believes legislation is required to ensure a consistent, long-term national commitment to youth work provision and the removal of short-term funding or thinking.

The current landscape is fragmented, with wide local variations in access, quality and funding for youth work. Without legislative underpinning, national strategies lack the necessary weight and enforcement to guarantee parity of access and investment.

However, we note that the proposal's language strongly implies a local authority-led or administered model of youth work delivery and funding. While local authorities are vital stakeholders, we must recognise that community-based and voluntary sector youth work

organisations are the majority providers of youth work in Scotland, reaching deeply into rural areas and communities experiencing deprivation.

Our members and wider network have consistently raised a key concern—one we share—that if the Youth Work Fund is administered through a local authority mechanism, there is a risk it may not reach voluntary sector providers at a grassroots level, especially given the acute financial pressures many councils are facing. There is an understandable concern that funding, once received by local bodies, may be diverted to meet statutory pressures elsewhere and not re-emerge to support the community-based youth groups that deliver a significant proportion of youth work provision. The key concern here is understanding what the Youth Work Fund would look like, how it would be managed and administered and whether there would be sufficient ring-fencing for voluntary youth work services.

We would urge that the proposed Youth Work Fund be structured with equity and accessibility at its heart, ensuring that the hyper-local, often volunteer-led, organisations that are embedded in their communities are not structurally disadvantaged by the system. With 51,820 of the 53,507 volunteers and youth workers supporting 358,110 of the 504,721 young people accessing youth work^{iv}, voluntary organisations seek reassurance about equitable access to funding.

“If the proposed Bill focuses on schools-based vs community-based, will that favour local authority provision and if so, why?” - Youth Scotland member

In our submission to the Independent CLD Review, we highlighted that many of our member youth groups do not identify as CLD providers and often have limited or no formal relationship with local authority CLD planning structures. These groups—despite their reach and impact—can be unintentionally excluded from strategic frameworks and funding conversations. We urge that legislation does not reinforce this disconnect.

Ultimately, legislation offers an opportunity to raise the status of youth work, ensure its protection and sustainability and deliver on Scotland’s commitments to young people’s rights under the UNCRC. To succeed, the Bill must be designed with an understanding of the broad spectrum of providers across the sector and with mechanisms that guarantee inclusion and fairness for the voluntary youth work sector that forms its foundation.

“Youth work is important because it’s seen as a small thing and gets forgotten. If it’s law, will that change?” Young person from member group.

3. What financial impact do you think this proposal could have if it became law?

Some reduction in costs.

There is strong evidence^v that youth work is a preventative, cost-saving investment^{vi}. Community-based youth work contributes to positive mental health, reduces the need for crisis interventions, supports educational attainment and improves employability outcomes. An adequately funded youth work service, protected by legislation, could lead to more effective mid and long term benefits, easing the strain on acute services already in crisis, like the NHS and criminal justice services^{vii}.

A Youth Scotland membership survey identified financial viability as the most pressing concern facing member community-based youth groups. Rising costs, short-term grants and high demand are placing significant pressure on organisations, threatening sustainability.

If resourced effectively and delivered equitably, the Bill could reduce public expenditure in the long term:

- Reduced demand on health, justice and social work services. Youth work is widely recognised as preventative and cost-effective
- Greater stability for voluntary youth work organisations, reducing the administrative burden of constant fundraising.
- Improved outcomes for young people facing poverty, isolation and inequality.

To ensure cost-effectiveness:

- The proposed Youth Work Fund should be as accessible to voluntary sector organisations as possible. A common concern raised in consultation with our membership was that the Youth Work Fund could be difficult to access if administered via a local authority mechanism.
- Funding should be multi-year and outcomes-focused, not just service-count driven. Youth work operates on an outcome-driven model and should be measured through the National Youth Work Outcomes.

4. What impact could this proposal have on particular people if it became law?

We believe the Bill has the potential to deliver enhanced equalities impact across many protected characteristics, particularly for young people facing poverty, rural isolation, discrimination, or additional support needs.

Youth work is inclusive by design, person-centred and grounded in the principles of equality and rights. However, it is critical that the legislation:

- Recognises the disproportionate barriers faced by LGBTQ+ young people; young people in rural and isolated communities; disabled young people; and care-experienced young people.
- Embeds intersectionality into national guidance and planning.
- Ensures youth voice is central to policy design, evaluation and improvement processes.

Youth Scotland's Acting on Poverty^{viii} report evidences how youth work addresses poverty-related challenges by offering safe spaces, trusted adult relationships and access to learning, wellbeing and leadership opportunities for those facing multiple barriers.

Youth Scotland's Enthusiasm of the Edge report^{ix}, documenting the experiences of those working in marginalised communities, also highlighted the challenges of working with other agencies and services. Almost all participants described issues related to rigidity and lack of flexibility in statutory services that engage with the young people they support. This presents a stark contrast to the adaptability and flexibility adopted by youth work organisations to ensure that they can best meet the needs of young people. One described this as the difference between being service-led – expecting young people and their needs to fit with a rigid service – and needs-led, where the service is tailored to the young person's situation and circumstances. The challenge that youth work organisations are left to wrestle with is how to influence system change.

5. Do you think the proposal could impact on work to protect and enhance the environment, achieve a sustainable economy, and create a strong, healthy, and just society for future generations?

Yes.

Youth work already contributes to a fairer, more sustainable Scotland. Youth-led community action projects, climate education and environmental volunteering are all well-established parts of youth work practice. Moreover, youth work strengthens

resilience and civic participation, enabling young people to contribute meaningfully to society.

In addition:

- Voluntary youth work contributes to the social economy through skills development, volunteering and employment.
- Youth work's flexible delivery in community spaces reduces carbon-intensive travel and improves local sustainability.

We know from our member groups that environmental and community-led learning is deeply embedded in youth programmes across the country, particularly in rural areas where outdoor learning and volunteering are vital components of participation.

A well-resourced youth work sector underpinned by this legislation would support the aims of the National Performance Framework and Scotland's climate and social justice agendas.

6. Do you have any other additional comments or suggestions on the proposed Bill?

Yes.

The proposed Bill suggests that each local authority will be required to maintain a youth work strategy, but it does not clarify how the full breadth of youth work provision in that region—including voluntary and community-based organisations—will be included in this process. Community-based youth work providers are often independent of formal CLD partnerships and structures, and without explicit inclusion, there is a risk that their voices and contributions will be overlooked in the local planning process. We believe any strategy—national or local—should reflect the diversity of delivery models represented across the wider sector.

Further, the Bill does not set out how these local strategies will connect with, or be guided by, a national youth work strategy. Without this strategic alignment, there is a risk of disjointed implementation, regional inconsistency, and duplication of effort. A clearer understanding of the proposed structure is needed to articulate how providers beyond local government will be meaningfully engaged, and how progress will be monitored cohesively across the country.

Youth Scotland's Strategy 2024–29 Growing Sustainable Community-Based Youth Work^x outlines how our work at the heart of community-based youth work is well-placed to be an active partner in the delivery of key policy areas in Scotland. Youth work is a pragmatic

and grassroots endeavour that often has the ability to impact positively in some of the most disadvantaged communities; 67% of Youth Scotland members operate in SIMD 1-5 postcodes. Supporting the ambitions of Scotland's National Performance Framework (NPF), our strategy seeks support efforts across the community-based youth work sector to create a Scotland where our young people are cherished, supported and empowered to achieve their utmost.

Simply put, we envisage opportunities for every young person to thrive in their education, health and well-being – all within communities where their rights are recognised and upheld. Providing additional structure to that vision is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which serves as our guide to ensuring that young people's rights are embedded in every facet of Scottish life. We are supportive of the commitment to protecting young people's right to youth work, taking a step towards a Scotland where young people can expect their views and needs to be provided for as equitably as possible.

To deliver this, the sector tells us, we need to provide adequate protection, funding and rebuilding of a skilled workforce. The critical purpose of youth work is the exploration with young people, individually and in groups, helping to create opportunities in an increasingly bleak and precarious funding landscape.

Therefore, it is a national imperative to focus on the needs of young people, building physical and social skills and creativity and encouraging them to remain hopeful in challenging times. Youth work must continue to advocate the politics of the common good and demonstrate, in numbers and stories, how good youth work achieves this aim, ensuring families received the right support at the right time.

By creating the recognition, resources and stability that a legal requirement for youth work could bring, Scotland could leverage even more benefits of one of its strongest assets in a robust and resurgent youth work sector.

ⁱ Hoddinott, S. and Davies, N. (2024): [Youth work and prevention](#)

ⁱⁱ Dr Fyfe, I. et al (2018): [The Impact of Community-based Universal Youth Work in Scotland](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Youth Scotland (2024): [Acting on Youth Participation](#)

^{iv} YouthLink Scotland (2024): [YouthLink Scotland Youth Work Sector Survey Report 2024](#)

^v UK Youth, Frontier Economics (2022): [The economic value of youth work](#)

^{vi} Hoddinott, S. and Davies, N. (2024): [Youth work and prevention](#)

^{vii} Villa, C. IFS (2024): [How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime and education](#)

viii Youth Scotland (2023): [Acting on Poverty](#)

ix Youth Scotland (2023): [Enthusiasm of the Edge](#) (pages 20-29)

x Youth Scotland (2024): [Youth Scotland's Strategy 2024–29 Growing Sustainable Community-Based Youth Work](#)