



The network
of youth groups

SMALL GRANTS

BIG GAINS

**Why Small Grants Matter for
Community-Based Youth Work**

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Small Grants, Big Gains: Why Small Grants Matter for Community-Based Youth Work

The grant gave us the boost we needed to keep going — it showed the young people that their club matters.

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

This report demonstrates that Youth Scotland's small grants programmes provide essential direct support to grassroots youth organisations, protecting local activities and services that support young people in their own communities.

Throughout Scotland, vital services for young people are under threat from rising costs and shrinking funding. At the same time worsening poverty, poor mental health and increasing social pressures among young people are creating more need for community-based youth work than ever.

Many community-based organisations are struggling to cope with rising prices, affecting the cost of venue hire, transport, utilities and staff. Volunteers are becoming overloaded and stepping back. Safeguarding and other regulatory requirements are taking more time and resource. And young people's needs are becoming more complex as they navigate a challenging combination of economic hardship and societal tensions.

Through Youth Scotland's membership network of 2,430 youth organisations, we have direct insight into the pressures facing community-based youth work in urban, rural and island communities across Scotland. As well as membership support, training, youth awards and national programmes, Youth Scotland also plays an increasingly important role as a grant giver and intermediary funder.

Evidence across Youth Scotland's recent grant programmes — Grassroots Youth Work Fund, Safe Spaces Fund, Rural Action Fund and the Summer of Sport Fund — demonstrates both increasing need and demand for accessible, flexible funding. It also demonstrates the significant impact that relatively modest investment can have when it reaches trusted local organisations already embedded within communities.

Community-Based Youth Work Under Pressure

Heating and hall hire costs went up so much this year — without the grant we'd have had to close for a few months.

(Volunteer, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Sector Challenges

In 2025, 93% of third sector organisations reported facing financial difficulties, with rising costs and inflation remaining among the most significant pressures affecting the sector. Four in five face financial-related challenges, while three in five believe rising costs are negatively affecting their ability to deliver core services.¹

These pressures are reflected clearly across Youth Scotland's membership network. Through consultation activity with Youth Scotland members and Area Associations, 79% of participating organisations identified funding as the main challenge facing their organisation, while 82% of applicants to Youth Scotland's funding programmes in the last year cited lack of funding as a reason they were unable to deliver more youth work provision.

Groups also consistently identified rising operational costs — particularly venue hire, transport, utilities and insurance — as major challenges affecting the sustainability of local provision. These pressures are often intensified in rural and island communities, where transport costs, reduced access to services and limited local provision create additional barriers for organisations and young people.

“Young people in the North Isles cannot reliably access weekday youth activities delivered in mainland Orkney due to ferry timetables, cost and weather disruption.”
(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Volunteer capacity is also becoming an increasing challenge for community-based youth work organisations, many of which rely heavily on volunteers to sustain local provision and keep activities affordable for young people. In 2025 third sector organisations were asked what the biggest challenge they faced was, the top answer was a shortage of volunteers, receiving 21% of responses.²



Young People's Changing Needs

If this place was here two years ago, I don't think I'd have got into trouble.

(Young person, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) demonstrates increasing levels of poverty, food insecurity and financial hardship across Scotland, alongside the impact this has on children and young people's wellbeing, participation and access to opportunities.³

These themes emerge consistently throughout Youth Scotland's funding programmes, where groups regularly describe increasing demand from young people for warm spaces, food provision, trusted adult relationships and affordable local activities.

“He wasn't keen to see a counsellor, just someone he trusted that would listen without judgement.”

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

In 2025-2026, applications to the Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund demonstrated increasing levels of anxiety, low mood, social isolation and low confidence amongst young people across funded communities. Applications to the Youth Scotland Safe Spaces Fund similarly highlighted growing demand for trauma-informed and early intervention support, particularly for young people affected by poverty, poor mental wellbeing and community safety concerns.

“It was amazing to see the young people opening up throughout the sessions — they had been so quiet at the start. Relationships are really important between staff and young people as trust has and is being built. It's a real good buzz at the club and the work is rewarding.”

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Safe Spaces Fund recipient)

Food provision emerged as a particularly strong theme across all three funds, with groups increasingly describing the provision of meals, snacks and warm spaces as now becoming a routine part of youth work delivery rather than an additional service.

“We provide a warm meal free of charge to reduce hunger, ensuring there is food to take home to families to alleviate pressure at home.”

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Rural Action Fund recipient)



Small Grants, Big Gains

Families are choosing to stay on the island... It's more important than ever that we provide activities so every young person can join in.

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

In 2025-2026, Youth Scotland was awarded funding from a range of partners to create small grants schemes for organisations — the Grassroots Youth Work Fund, the Safe Spaces Fund and the Rural Action Fund. Our schemes are designed to be straightforward and to offer a rapid decision, providing grants up to £2,000 (£750 for the Rural Action Fund). In 2026-27, we added the Summer of Sport Fund to this portfolio.

Growing need

Demand across Youth Scotland's recent grant programmes has consistently exceeded available funding, demonstrating both the scale of unmet need within communities and the importance of accessible, flexible funding for grassroots youth work.

In 2026, the Grassroots Youth Work Fund received 86 applications requesting almost double the available budget of £95,000. Demand for the Rural Action Fund has also remained consistently high over multiple years with around half of applying organisations able to receive support in the most recent round

Collectively, these programmes demonstrate sustained and increasing demand for accessible funding that enables local organisations to maintain youth work provision, respond to emerging needs and keep activities affordable and accessible for young people.



Funding in Action

It was amazing to see the young people opening up throughout the sessions — they had been so quiet at the start. Relationships are really important between staff and young people as trust has and is being built. It's a real good buzz at the club and the work is rewarding.

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Safe Spaces Fund recipient)

Across all small grants programmes, groups described increasing levels of anxiety, poor mental wellbeing, social isolation, poverty and food insecurity amongst the young people they support, alongside growing concern around disengagement from school and community life, lack of safe places to go in evenings and weekends, and the ongoing impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Applications also highlighted barriers linked to transport, affordability and access to local opportunities, particularly within rural and island communities.

In response, groups frequently applied for funding to deliver practical, relationship-based youth work within their communities. This included running youth cafés, youth groups and drop-ins; providing safe evening and weekend activities; delivering mentoring, one-to-one support and trauma-informed wellbeing activity; creating female focussed spaces; and providing food, warm spaces and affordable opportunities for young people to socialise, build confidence and access support. Groups also requested contributions to towards overheads like transport and insurance.

Our assessors considered each application carefully, looking at a range of factors, such as how young people had been involved in developing project ideas and what impact each project would have, to decide which applications to support.

Overall, the submissions were of a very high quality and unsuccessful applicants received follow-up information on alternative sources of funding and additional information resources.

Funding was granted for costs including:

- Youth cafés and groups
- Mentoring
- Wellbeing activities
- Food
- Warm spaces
- Socialising
- Outdoor learning
- Residential experiences
- Drama & creative activities
- Transport

“We’ve had really positive feedback from young people to say how much they enjoy having time with their mentor each week. The trust which is built keeps the engagement high and allows young people to be honest about what is happening in their lives.”

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Impact

Funded groups reported clear benefits for the young people they work with. Groups consistently described improvements in:

- Access to safer spaces and trusted adult relationships
- Confidence and self-esteem
- Peer relationships
- Emotional wellbeing
- Take up of youth participation and leadership opportunities
- Sense of belonging and community

“The group gives the opportunity for the girls to have a safe space to come together to make friends, learn new skills and take part in activities that will help improve their mental wellbeing.”

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Small grants are of particular importance for organisations operating with limited financial resilience. Analysis from the Rural Action Fund demonstrated that 52% of funded groups had annual incomes below £10,000, 70% operated on annual incomes below £25,000 and 96% had annual turnover below £50,000. Similar themes emerged across the Safe Spaces Fund and Grassroots Youth Work Fund applications, where many groups described operating with small staff teams, limited unrestricted income and heavy reliance on volunteers.

Across all programmes, the evidence demonstrates that relatively modest grants can have significant impact when delivered through trusted local organisations embedded within their communities.

“This isn't just a one-off project for us — it's how we keep our doors open.”

(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)



More Than a Grant: Supporting Safe, Sustainable Community-Based Youth Work

We've learned so much about running sessions safely and confidently — we couldn't have done that without the support.

(Volunteer, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Through its membership network of more than 628 organisations delivering 2,430 youth groups and supporting over 116,000 young people, Youth Scotland has trusted relationships with hundreds of grassroots youth organisations across Scotland already in place, including many groups that may otherwise struggle to access national funding opportunities. 64% of our member groups operate in SIMD 1-5 postcodes and work with communities experiencing multiple deprivation.

This reach matters. It enables Youth Scotland to identify emerging need quickly, target funding effectively and connect funders directly with community groups that are often under-resourced but deeply embedded within local areas.

Youth Scotland's support extends well beyond the grant itself. This is particularly important for organisations managing increasing complexity around safeguarding, wellbeing and organisational sustainability.

Across all our Small Grants schemes community-based youth groups benefit from support with:

- Applying
- Safeguarding and PVG checks
- Sustainability and governance
- Fundraising advice including Meet the Funder opportunities
- Training for youth workers and volunteers
- National youth voice and participation opportunities including Amplify, our expanded youth participation programme launched in 2025
- Youth Scotland Awards and accredited learning
- Networking and connection to other organisations and peers
- Support with monitoring and evaluation

“Youth Scotland's advice helped us plan ahead and think differently about what we can do next.”
(Youth Worker, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

Youth Scotland administers grants using a dedicated grant-making platform that enables an accessible and proportionate application process. We ensure the assessment process is transparent and that our communication with applicants is streamlined and effective. We ask successful applicants to report back in a format that is similarly proportionate and as straightforward as possible. We are also able to use the applications and reports we receive to generate valuable data, insight and learning about the pressures facing community-based youth work, and the difference small grants can make.

Importantly, support is not limited only to successful applicants. Through its membership structure, Youth Scotland maintains relationships with both funded and unfunded groups, ensuring organisations can still access training, safeguarding support, networking and future funding opportunities. This creates a wider support system around community-based youth work rather than a purely transactional grant relationship.

Conclusion – Small Grants, Big Gains

I feel in here I'm understood, and it makes things that I'm worried about not as big.

(Young person, Youth Scotland Grassroots Youth Work Fund recipient)

The evidence from our programmes demonstrates that small grants — delivered through trusted relationships and strong support infrastructure — can create significant and lasting impact for young people and communities across Scotland.

Across all Youth Scotland grant programmes, grants have enabled local organisations to maintain safe and affordable provision for young people, respond to increasing levels of need within their communities and sustain activity that may otherwise have been reduced or lost. This has included supporting youth groups, food provision, wellbeing activity, rural transport, mentoring, trusted adult relationships and accessible local opportunities for young people.

Youth Scotland's membership reach, and model of funding combined with capacity-building support, enhances the impact of this investment.

Through trusted relationships with grassroots groups across Scotland, Youth Scotland combines grant distribution with safeguarding, training, development support and wider infrastructure that helps organisations build confidence, quality and sustainability.





Endnotes

1. Third Sector Tracker, SCVO (2025); Understanding the Cost of Living Crisis in Scotland, Scottish Government (2025); Culture and Leisure Services Pressures, Audit Scotland (2025)
2. Third Sector Tracker, SCVO (2025)
3. Poverty in Scotland 2025, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025)

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To learn more about partnering with Youth Scotland to deliver small grants, contact Youth Scotland at —

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