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Youth Work: Improving School Attendance and Engagement

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Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing local, regional and national youth organisations from the voluntary and statutory sectors. As the collective voice of the youth work sector, we represent its policy and practice needs, including supporting the sector's contribution to delivering Scotland's national outcomes.

Our ambition is for a nation that values its young people and their contribution to society, supported through a right to high-quality youth work for all young people. This includes access to youth work as a fundamental entitlement in Scotland's education system. We believe this will help fully incorporate children and young people's rights to education, as described in Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).¹

Youth Work and Scottish Education

Youth work is part of the Scottish education system, contributing to the National Improvement priorities² that will deliver the vision for education in Scotland³. It is key to improving outcomes and the life chances of all young people, and specifically for marginalised and vulnerable learners as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC). This includes addressing barriers to learning and offering flexible and tailored learning and pathways for young people to develop and recognise skills and achievements. These improve attendance, engagement, attainment, health and wellbeing and school leaver destinations.

The Scottish Government is reforming the education and skills system *"to give everyone the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, values and attributes that will enable them to thrive"*.⁴

It has committed to respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the rights of every child and young person in the Scottish education system.

A consistent theme has been the need for collaboration. This includes school and youth work partnerships to support health and wellbeing – recognising the vital role of youth workers in helping to create safe learning spaces, facilitating youth voice and as trusted adults that provide pastoral care.⁵

[1] Articles 28 and 29 focus on a child's right to an education and on the quality and content of education <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/the-right-to-education/>

[2] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan-2024/>

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid

[5] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/learners-scotland-matter-national-discussion-education-final-report/documents/>

Additionally, it will be essential to embed youth work into curriculum developments, such as those focused on personal pathways and project-based learning,⁶ following The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment.⁷ Scottish Government acknowledges the need for dedicated support for youth work and school partnerships, through its SAC national programme delivered by YouthLink Scotland.⁸

School attendance and engagement – what works?

Every child and young person should be able to engage in joyful learning experiences that help them reach their potential. Recently published Scottish Government statistics show that for a proportion of young people, this is not the case⁹ and that there is a correlation between poverty and school attendance. Collective and collaborative action is needed to address this and achieve our ambition for equity in education.

In 2023, Education Scotland undertook a deep dive into attendance. The report [Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues](#) identifies changes to culture, systems and practice to improve school attendance and engagement. It highlights the importance of feeling safe and having a sense of belonging, relationships with trusted adults, tailored support, effective collaboration, youth voice and agency, social and emotional support and flexibility in learning and teaching, environment and curriculum.

Scottish education is planned and delivered across different contexts and settings for learning, including youth work. Barriers to school attendance and engagement are complex, and approaches should take a holistic view of the child/young person - considering the range of circumstances impacting their ability to attend and engage in school. Schools cannot do this alone.

The need for collaboration across education is highlighted in Scottish Government guidance to support the SAC. Head teachers are encouraged to work in partnership with youth work to develop effective plans and approaches to utilising Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) and to support and enhance their work to achieve the SAC mission. This includes evidence-based approaches to supporting attendance and engagement in learning within the school and across the learning community. It also identifies the need for a collaborative approach with youth work, in the development and achievement of local authority stretch aims, including those on attendance.

[6] <https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/YW-education-reform-positioning-paper-300124-FINAL.pdf>

[7] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/>

[8] <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/scottish-attainment-challenge/>

[9] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2023/pages/attendance-and-absence/>

This recognises the importance of readiness to learn and a broad and varied curriculum. Greater alignment between community, school improvement and local authority strategic equity planning ensures that effective decision-making takes place, benefiting children and young people’s outcomes. In Stirling Council, Community Learning and Development (CLD) youth work is embedded in strategic decision-making to improve attendance and attainment. This enables education to collectively build community resilience alongside in-school approaches and interventions. Robust joint recording and tracking of data allows the authority to evidence improvement in attendance, linked to particular youth work interventions.

YouthLink Scotland works alongside other SAC colleagues to support collaborative practice between schools and youth work through its SAC national programme. It also facilitates the Youth Work and Schools Collaborative. This professional learning network provides an opportunity for educators from youth work and formal learning to share practice and strengthen collaboration. Work by the collaborative identified the key elements of effective partnership working that can improve outcomes, including school attendance and engagement:

Partnerships which improve outcomes for young people have....						
Agreed purpose and aims	A shared understanding of roles and responsibilities	Common language	The opportunity to share skills, knowledge and experience	Joint planning and evaluation	Regular and open dialogue and review	The voice and involvement of young people
and strong foundations of mutual trust and respect						

YouthLink Scotland has been providing professional learning and tailored support to practitioners to strengthen these key elements of collaboration. As one example, Education Scotland and YouthLink Scotland published a professional learning resource, [Lost in Translation](#), to support the development of a shared language between youth work and schools.

This has been updated for 2024 to strengthen collaborative approaches to improving school attendance and engagement.

Research and insights¹⁰ identify the key principles of youth work that support engagement and positive outcomes:

- The trust-based, voluntary relationship formed between a youth worker and young people.
- The safe spaces youth workers create, and
- The non-formal, person-centred learning opportunities and experiences.

These principles can help to understand how effective collaboration can create the conditions for learning.

The [SAC Logic Model](#) identifies readiness to learn as one of the outcomes designed to achieve the SAC mission 'to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap'. It encourages a sustained focus on children and young people's readiness to learn through focusing on engagement and attendance, confidence and wellbeing. A recent report¹¹ from YouthLink Scotland demonstrates that youth work improves readiness to learn. It:

- Supports young people's social and emotional wellbeing, as the foundation for successful learning.
- Offers young people a range of pathways for learning and achievement, providing personalisation, choice and agency in learning.
- Provides young people with opportunities to learn core skills that are relevant for life and work, such as confidence.
- Supports young people's reengagement in learning in the classroom, and beyond, encouraging them to seek out new learning experiences.

The evaluation offers insights into the multiple factors that can impact on a young person's readiness to learn and how the key principles of youth work support positive outcomes in relation to attendance, engagement, confidence and wellbeing. It also reinforces findings from a research study into the impact of low-level mental health support by youth workers in Dumfries and Galloway,¹² where participants experienced significant benefits, including the development of well-being skills, increased confidence, improved self-esteem, and positive changes in attitudes towards school attendance.

[10] <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/scottish-attainment-challenge/attainment-good-practice/#national-case-study-evaluation> and <https://www.youthlink.scot/policy-influence/research/impact-of-universal-youth-work/>

[11] [Boosting Attendance | YouthLink Scotland](#)

[12] <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/impact-of-youth-work-low-level-mental-health-support-in-schools/>

In the readiness to learn evaluation report, there is further evidence of the positive ways in which youth work practitioners can support young people to learn coping strategies that help them to manage their own emotions more effectively in different environments. Across the youth work projects, 83% of young people showed improvements in their ability to regulate their emotions in a youth work setting, and more than 40% were then also better able to regulate their emotions in the classroom.

Learner voice should be at the centre of understanding barriers to school attendance and engagement in learning. A recent report by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland¹³ provides vital insight into what children and young people feel they need to help them become ready to learn at school. It identifies a range of factors spanning home and school – including school environment, culture, relationships, the structure of the school day, learning and teaching, opportunities to participate and access to resources and food. It also found that young people from low-income households are at risk of being less likely to experience or be equipped with what is needed to feel ready to learn. Such findings also help to appreciate the complexity of ‘readiness to learn’ and point to the need for a multi-faceted approach to addressing school attendance and engagement.

Young people taking part in youth work have also expressed their views on what they need from Scottish education and the factors that help them to engage in learning. A report collating their views as part of the National Discussion on Education¹⁴, shows young people need Scottish education to help them prepare for future life and work. They spoke about the importance of a holistic experience across settings that includes:

- Feeling safe, respected and included.
- Developing and applying ‘life relevant’ skills.
- Access to the support they need.
- Qualifications and other opportunities to achieve.
- A broad range of experiences, choices and pathways to meet their individual needs and aspirations.

Young people said that youth work supports their engagement with learning, including re-engaging with school. They said that their relationship with a youth worker was vital to their ability to feel safe, trusted, supported, respected, and heard. This helps them to engage with learning, develop, and grow.

[13] <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/The%20Cost%20of%20the%20School%20Day%20Big%20Question%20report.pdf>

[14] https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/views-of-young-people-participating-in-youth-work_web.pdf

Youth workers also provide young people with access to the support they need. The provision of an informal, safe, nurturing environment in which to learn also made them more likely to engage.

Young people see youth work as a gateway to learning and achievement. They identify that youth work offers a broad range of experiences, choices, and pathways tailored to meet their individual needs and aspirations. This includes developing skills that they describe as relevant to their lives now and in the future. Young people appreciate that they can develop these skills through relevant, experiential opportunities.

Importantly, young people felt that every young person should be able to access youth work as a fundamental element of their education. Greater collaboration between teachers and youth workers would:

- Help them to feel safe, respected, supported and included.
- Provide greater, experiential opportunities to develop 'life-relevant' skills.
- Offer a broader range of experiences, choices and pathways that are tailored to meet their individual needs and aspirations.

The key elements of youth work that young people identified as helping them engage in learning are consistent with findings from research and evaluation - the trusting relationship with a youth worker, safe spaces, and a person-centred, tailored approach to learning. Providing young people with an 'attractive' learning offer, in an environment and approach that works for them can have a positive impact on attendance and engagement in school.

Effective approaches to improve school attendance and engagement place the learner at the centre. This is one area where youth work and school partnerships can be useful. YouthLink Scotland worked with the City of Edinburgh Council and LAYC to facilitate a [rights-based approach](#) to improving school attendance and engagement, focused on building effective 'Teams Around the Learning Community'. Youth work partners supported schools to gather views of young people known to be struggling to attend or engage in school to ensure that their lived experience informs the development of collaboration across learning communities.

The recent report from the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development (CLD)¹⁵ highlights the role of youth work and wider CLD partners in improving school attendance and engagement.

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

It describes the positive impact of the sector's ability to provide tailored learning pathways and approaches (recognising that the classroom doesn't work for every learner), skills development, and support for those who need it. The review suggests greater use of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) could be used to provide access to youth work in schools.

The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment¹⁶ determined that Scottish education should recognise the diverse achievements of every learner. This recommendation reflects the views of young people participating in youth work, who want their skills and achievements through youth work to be valued. Approaches to recognising the value of all learning can help improve school attendance and engagement.

Youth workers help young people to develop, recognise and articulate their skills development using the National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework.¹⁷ This is used alongside reflective learner conversations and other tools to support profiling and tracking.

An Education Scotland study in Forth Valley and West Lothian¹⁸ recommends that tracking young people's achievements can best be achieved through a collaborative approach between schools and CLD providers, particularly youth workers. The study identified that the National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework¹⁹ provides "a valuable tool to support shared planning and evaluation between youth work partners and schools. It also allows for accurate and meaningful skills mapping for children and young people". The report also highlighted that youth practitioners bring expertise in engaging young people to reflect on their learning and progress in a range of creative ways.

YouthLink Scotland has developed an approach to enable young people to notice, make sense of and articulate their skills and strengths, and how these are developing and evolving over time. This can also support collaborative approaches to shaping the design and delivery of future learning opportunities for young people – in school and community settings. The [model for tracking achievement](#) was developed in partnership with teachers and youth workers in Clackmannanshire, and CLD colleagues from Education Scotland, over the course of a school year (2023-24). The partnership worked together to track young people's skills development across a range of opportunities for personal achievement, including youth work programmes and youth awards, using the [National Youth Work Outcomes & Skills Framework](#).

[16] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/>

[17] <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/youth-work-outcomes-skills/>

[18] [forth-valley-and-west-lothian-achievement-project-2023.pdf](#) (education.gov.scot)

[19] <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/youth-work-outcomes-skills/>

Examples of effective practice

Youth Voice

In North Ayrshire, the Council's Connected Communities team (CLD) works closely with the Education Leadership team to empower young people to inform service improvement through various youth voice structures. This has included enabling over 100 young people to share their views on the reasons for school attendance rates locally, with a Joint Cabinet. An action plan was produced and shared with decision-makers in education.

Flexible Learning Pathways


In Shetland, Shetland Islands Council's Youth and Employability Services are embedded in planned approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap and supporting effective collaboration across education. Youth and Employability Services work closely with schools to reach a shared understanding of how youth work can contribute to school improvement plans. Anderson High School works in partnership with the youth work team to support their plans to improve engagement in learning. The school invested Pupil Equity Funding to enable youth workers to deliver targeted provision for a group of young males who were struggling to engage in a formal setting. Youth workers plan and deliver a structured programme of learning as part of the pupil's timetable, across a full academic year. This is focused on activities to promote health and wellbeing, including challenging behaviours and supporting positive choices, building relationships and developing a sense of achievement. Youth workers use CfE experiences and outcomes to align learning to the curriculum. They also use the National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework to help young people recognise and track their progress and skills development.

Marnie Harpe, Principal Teacher of the Social, Emotional Support Base said ***"The work that our colleagues in Youth and Employability have undertaken with a core group of disengaged young folk has been pivotal to the forward progress we have made in their support. For some of the young people, this time has been the only positive engagement within their week and has been crucial to improving their attendance and extending their network of trusting adult relationships."***



[Full case study](#)

Tailored Support

In East Renfrewshire, Barrhead High School utilises its Pupil Equity Fund to support targeted young people in the broad general education to improve their attendance. This enables FARE Scotland youth workers to target young people to participate in activities to improve their wellbeing and connection to the school. The school works in collaboration with local partners to develop young people's leadership and skills for learning, life and work with a focus on outdoor learning. **Fiona Johnston, Head Teacher, Barrhead High School, said "Our learners are contributing to the wider life of the school and are reporting an increased confidence and resilience to attend school."** 


Youth workers build positive relationships with pupils, enabling provision of tailored support. They work collaboratively with the pastoral care team to identify the most effective intervention for the learner. This can include one-to-one pupil support. The youth work partnership also supports the engagement of a cohort of S1 learners who were identified to have low school attendance at the end of their primary 7 year. The S1s participate in leadership activities and personal learning projects across the school. This is building their sense of connection with the school, and they have seen significant improvements in attendance rates.

Youth work in partnership with Barrhead High School was identified by HM Inspectors in the recent [East Renfrewshire CLD Progress Visit](#) was identified as very well planned, resulting in a clear picture of the progress being made by each young person. This includes reduced risk-taking behaviour, improved attendance and engagement in a wider range of curriculum areas. Data shows increased engagement of young people from deprived areas in CLD programmes and an increase in the number of youth awards achieved.



Family and Community Engagement

In Orkney, Community Learning, Development and Employability (CLDE) Youth Services team have worked in partnership with Papdale Primary School and Kirkwall Grammar School to establish two Pupil Equity Funded (PEF), in-school Pupil Equity Workers (known as youth worker) posts. Youth workers provide targeted support for children, young people and families from P1 – S3 who are at risk of disengagement or non-attendance. **Papdale Primary School Head Teacher Emma Billington says:**

“Engaging families is crucial to establishing and maintaining good attendance with our children. The Pupil Equity Team engage with families that, due to various factors, may be reluctant to engage with school staff. We have noted that trusting relationships have developed that include a parental openness not previously in place. This inevitably impacts positively on the school relationships with families.” 

In both schools, the youth worker also provides wider engagement opportunities during and after the school day to encourage engagement. Opportunities include a breakfast bar, a soft start option for young people who are unable to go directly to class themselves, and confidence-building programmes. A key element of the partnership is the ability to provide consistent support throughout the year, including during the school holidays. This is also having a positive impact on school attendance and engagement.

[Full case study.](#)



Summary and further support

Tackling the complex issues surrounding attendance requires collaborative approaches to creating systems, culture, and processes that impact positively on children and young people. Working effectively in partnership can bring additional insight and skills to understanding and addressing the barriers to engaging in formal learning. Young people should also be heard in our collaborative efforts. They are the ones who can tell us the support they need and how we can structure our learning environments and design our curriculum to enable every child and young person to access joyful learning that equips them to reach their full potential.

Across Scotland, many schools and youth work partnerships are effectively collaborating as a learning community to deliver the changes needed to improve school attendance and engagement. They have created the culture, systems, and processes that embed collaboration across the school and community. This includes working with young people to understand barriers and codesign solutions. These partnerships are having a positive impact on school attendance and engagement in learning - ultimately improving educational outcomes and life chances for children and young people.

Educators can continue to strengthen collaboration through exploring practice examples and through continued professional dialogue.

To access support to develop youth work and school partnerships that can improve attendance, visit YouthLink Scotland's [website](#) or contact Marielle Curran mcurran@youthlink.scot.





#YouthWorkChangesLives



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