



# Policy Briefing

## Youth Work's Role in Tackling Homelessness

August 2024

---



## Introduction

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation representing the voluntary and statutory youth work sectors. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of the sector. We are an organisation with a sharp focus on the needs of young people, promoting learning, innovation, and progressive thinking. We are committed to the highest protection and safety standards for young people.

Rock Trust is Scotland's youth homelessness charity. Working with young people aged 16-25 to ensure they have access to suitable housing with the support they need to move on with their lives. It provides youth-specific services and works with government, local authorities and sector partners to change systems, practices and cultures to end youth homelessness in Scotland.

Youth work's transformative role in tackling poverty must be better understood and resourced to realise the sector's untapped potential in this public policy space.

This policy briefing specifically highlights how youth workers focus on early intervention and prevention to mitigate the impacts of and the number of young people who become homeless. It is aimed at policymakers and legislators.

To learn more about this policy briefing, please get in touch with:

YouthLink Scotland's Policy and Research Manager, Kevin Kane, at [kkane@youthlink.scot](mailto:kkane@youthlink.scot) or

Lara Balkwill, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, The Rock Trust, at [Lara.balkwill@rocktrust.org](mailto:Lara.balkwill@rocktrust.org).



## Recommendations

### **Growing the capacity of the youth work sector:**

- Allocate resources for youth work focusing on homelessness prevention and early intervention.
- Ensure the availability of training for youth workers in homelessness-related skills and spaces to share their experiences with what works.

### **Renewed focus on integration with Housing Services:**

- Foster closer collaboration between youth work and housing departments.
- Establish joint protocols for seamless support across emergency, transitional, and long-term housing solutions.

### **Research and policy engagement:**

- Involve youth workers and young people in shaping local and national homelessness policies.
- Support their participation in research, policy consultations and advisory groups.

### **Skills development:**

- Additional training and cross-sectoral support for youth workers on identifying risks of homelessness, providing housing options advice and accessing housing support.
- Enable them to deliver workshops on budgeting, life skills, employability and vocational training.

## What is Youth Work?

Youth work is a powerful, dynamic and versatile education practice, equipping children and young people with the tools and support they need to reach their potential. It is part of the broader professional practice of Community Learning and Development (CLD). Youth work is planned, delivered and evaluated by professionally qualified youth work/CLD practitioners and other experienced practitioners, including volunteers, who hold various competency-based qualifications and skills to practice youth work.

Youth workers are based in the third sector and local authorities and deliver in settings such as youth centres, schools, colleges, outdoor education centres, or on the streets via outreach programmes and detached youth work. A diverse range of engagement tools and vehicles for learning are used to respond to the needs and priorities of children, young people, families and communities.

Youth work focuses on the 11-25-year age group. It also includes early intervention programmes and provision, focusing on children under 11 years. This can consist of support for children starting school, primary to secondary transition support, after-school clubs and uniformed groups.

## Youth Work's Role in tackling homelessness

We believe that by addressing the root causes and providing more relationship-based support through youth work, we can help more young people achieve stability and reduce the incidences of young people becoming homeless through:

### 1. Prevention and Early Intervention

Youth workers often engage with young people before they become homeless, providing support that can prevent homelessness.<sup>1</sup> They identify and address risk factors such as family conflict and mental health issues.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [Prevention - Rock Trust](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Impact of Youth Work Low-Level Mental Health Support in Schools | YouthLink Scotland](#)

and substance abuse and consider socio-economic status. Youth workers offer relationship-based support and mediation to help young people and their families resolve disputes and create stable living environments. The sector provides education and resources about tenants' rights, budgeting and life skills to enable young people to live independently.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Support and Advocacy**

For those who are already homeless or at risk of homelessness, youth workers offer crucial support and advocacy by connecting young people with emergency shelters and transitional housing and working with partners in housing to provide long-term housing solutions. Youth workers are integral to local authority systems, helping young people access social services, including healthcare, employment and financial advice. They advocate for young people with landlords, service providers and other agencies to ensure they receive the most appropriate resources and support. Community Learning and Development (CLD) practitioners have been deeply involved in re-homing those seeking asylum – fleeing persecution and war.<sup>4</sup> Youth workers will often be the people who work alongside a young person to navigate and respond to fill in the many online and hard copy forms required and instil confidence in those young people at a time when resilience and optimism are low.

*"The most significant change I've had since coming here (youth work group) would be my housing situation. I'm now successfully on the council housing list and have also been helped with getting a priority from [this organisation], and it has made a significant difference in my life" (Young person, aged 18)<sup>5</sup>*

---

<sup>3</sup> [Guide-to-YJ-Overview-2021.pdf \(cycj.org.uk\)](https://www.cycj.org.uk/Guide-to-YJ-Overview-2021.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [North Lanarkshire Council revives 200 empty flats for Ukrainians - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56888888)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/Impact-of-Universal-Youth-Work-in-Edinburgh.pdf>

### **3. Skills Building**

Youth work equips young people with the skills needed to overcome homelessness. Youth workers provide training and education, enhancing employability prospects, such as vocational training, CV writing, and job search assistance to improve their peace of mind and economic outlook. Young people can develop their skills through workshops on cooking, cleaning and managing personal finances.<sup>6</sup> Youth workers facilitate and, in some cases, provide mental health and substance abuse counselling to address underlying issues that contribute to homelessness. The youth work sector understands the need to take a children's rights and trauma-informed and trauma-responsive approach to working alongside young people.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, youth workers help young people enhance their agency through voluntary participation, setting it apart from other services.

### **4. Community Engagement and Awareness**

Youth workers raise awareness about homelessness and mobilise local campaigns to address it, such as organising community events to highlight the issue and garner support for solutions. This includes attending consultation meetings and events and building partnerships with local housing associations, businesses, charities, and government agencies and intermediaries to create a network of information exchange and support. Youth workers engage young people in advocacy efforts, empowering them to share their stories in a safe and understood way to influence policy at local and national levels. So young people are at the heart of the change they wish to see<sup>8</sup>.

### **5. Developing Policy and Research**

Youth workers contribute to policy and development aimed at addressing homelessness. The sector develops and uses existing research to better understand the causes and impacts of youth homelessness to identify effective interventions. This helps partners produce concise policy statements, briefings and consultation replies to influence policymakers and

---

<sup>6</sup> [Food-Insecurity-report\\_proofed.pdf \(youthlink.scot\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Our Approach and Aims - Violence prevention framework - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youthlink.scot/policy-influence/research/impact-of-universal-youth-work/>

elected representatives. Youth workers help young people participate in policy discussions and advocacy efforts to influence legislation and funding priorities that benefit them. Civil society can develop and implement best practices and evidence-based approaches to prevent and address youth homelessness. This builds the capacity of partners to communicate these efforts at the national level so that youth work is recognised as an integral partner and that the transformative impact of youth work is written into policy and legislation.

## **6. Creating Safe Spaces**

Youth work settings (centres or detached) provide safe, supportive environments where young people can access services as part of a trusted partnership alongside their youth worker. This is done by offering drop-ins where young people can find shelter and necessities, sometimes including food, which is provided in a non-stigmatising way.<sup>9</sup> Youth workers routinely provide a safe space for young people to connect with peers, build positive relationships, and receive practical and emotional support.

Youth work services are young person-friendly and tailored to the young person's needs. Youth workers are also in a position to hear from young people who are *'sofa surfing'*, particularly when family relationships have broken down. This is heightened within the LGBTQ community and exacerbated by instability within the care system.

Youth workers can signpost and support the young person to appropriate services and develop skills in young people, sometimes returning home with added resilience and confidence. Specialist youth work services also provide a space for those experiencing homelessness to exist as young people first and foremost. This is a crucial aspect of using a youth work approach unique to specialist youth services.

---

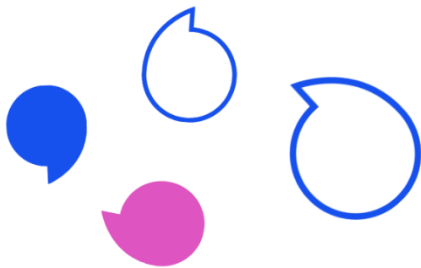
<sup>9</sup> [Food-Insecurity-report\\_proofed.pdf \(youthlink.scot\)](#)

## Summary

The youth work sector is integral to tackling homelessness through early Intervention and prevention, support, stability and empowerment, community engagement and development, and policy advocacy and influence.

Youth workers play a critical role in addressing homelessness among young people by providing support, resources, signposting and advocacy to prevent and alleviate the issue.

We ask that our sector be appropriately recognised in related areas of public policy. This should be resourced and underpinned by a valued paid and voluntary workforce in every local authority. This will help us better support young people and reduce the impacts and incidences of homelessness in Scotland.







**#YouthWorkChangesLives**



YouthLink Scotland  
Caledonian Exchange  
19A Canning St.  
Edinburgh  
EH3 8EG  
T: 0131 202 8050

E: [info@youthlink.scot](mailto:info@youthlink.scot)

W: [www.youthlink.scot](http://www.youthlink.scot)

YouthLink Scotland is a Company Limited by Guarantee.  
Registered in Scotland No: 164547. Charity Ref: SC003923

