



11 May 2023

By Email

Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry

Lord Brailsford
Chair of the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry

Dear Lord Brailsford,

SCOTTISH COVID-19 INQUIRY: YOUTHLINK SCOTLAND

Brief overview of our work in supporting the sector re COVID-19

As the national agency, YouthLink Scotland led the youth work sector in a collective and strategic approach to COVID-19 response and recovery. We quickly established a national youth work COVID-19 recovery group which met regularly and increased the frequency of our existing networks meetings, with sector leaders on specific key themes. This provided an opportunity for us to hear directly from youth work leaders regarding challenges and to create space for shared learning and support. We also worked closely with this group to develop several key resources and collective actions to support the delivery of youth work during the pandemic. This included detached youth work guidance, a digital youth work support hub, the creation of digital mental health and wellbeing resources, a statement of commitment from the sector to young people and an access to facilities influencing campaign. Our engagement with the sector through this leadership group was also vital to developing guidance to support the delivery of youth work during the pandemic. This was published in partnership with Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland and was updated regularly, in response to the gradual easing of restrictions. The youth work guidance was fundamental to the sector's ability to continue to support the most vulnerable children, young people, and families during the pandemic.

On behalf of Scottish Government, YouthLink Scotland administered several funding programmes, to support young people. This included the CLD Digital Inclusion Fund, Youth Work Education Recovery Fund, the Outdoor Education Recovery Fund, the Outdoor Centre Support Fund, the Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund and the Get into Summer youth work fund. These investments were a lifeline for youth work organisations to engage and support those most impacted by the pandemic. In addition, we worked with the Scottish Government to deliver a national food insecurity pilot. An external evaluation of this pilot evidenced the positive impact on food insecurity, skills development and health and wellbeing for families impacted by food poverty.

YouthLink Scotland also played a key role with the sector and key agencies such as Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Children in Scotland, and the Children's Parliament in hearing from young

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people directly on the pandemic as it affected them. A key survey report 'Lockdown Lowdown' was used at three distinct stages of the Lockdown to gather the views of children and young people.

The key issues and impacts for our sector

Youth work in Scotland played a vital role in supporting children and young people's health and well-being during the most difficult phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the lockdown periods of the coronavirus pandemic, young people were unable to attend school, college or work and were unable to meet and socialise with their peers. Much attention has been given to the impact of school closures. However, the pandemic also 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. Remote and digital services, outdoor learning and detached youth work 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. There are positive examples where digital youth work increased reach, particularly across rural and large geographical areas. However, barriers to digital engagement 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.

A significant area of concern for youth work was young people and families in crisis. Youth work responded to the need for crisis support, providing immediate support to young people and families, helping to prevent further negative outcomes arising in their lives. Much of this was part of a community-response, working in partnership across youth work, schools, and other services to identify, engage and support vulnerable young people and families. This included leading or delivering in education/childcare Hubs and projects funded through the Youth Work Education Recovery Fund.

The sector faced significant challenges throughout the pandemic. One of these was access to facilities. This created barriers for youth work in providing a safe space to support young people. A lack of access to facilities led many youth work organisations to provide youth work outdoors, although this became particularly challenging during the winter months. When schools returned, many youth workers remained 'locked out' of schools, unable to support those young people most impacted by the pandemic, including poor mental health. Lack of facilities also had a wider impact on membership, volunteer numbers and financial viability of youth work organisations. The reasons preventing access to facilities were complex. YouthLink Scotland worked with Scottish Government and COSLA to ensure that local authorities understood the guidance around access for youth work as an equity issue and encouraged local authorities and other providers of facilities to remove unnecessary barriers.

Our views on learning from the pandemic

We would encourage the inquiry to consider learning from youth work. Specifically worth noting is the report into youth work's role during COVID by YouthLink Scotland and Northern Star, commissioned by the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Learning and Evaluation Oversight Group. The impact of youth work was achieved in the face of significant financial and practical challenges. Some of these remain – investment is putting the future of many youth work services at risk, and we need sustainable investment and recognition of youth work as a key resource in tackling poverty, improving the mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people, and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Access to services

During the pandemic very restricted access to appropriate facilities left many youth work organisations experiencing barriers to the facilities they needed to deliver youth work services. Many community centres normally accessed for youth work groups were repurposed as vaccine centres and many of those that could open for young people, but not mixed groups, chose not to, citing extra cleaning costs and availability of cleaning staff as one of many barriers to opening. This was despite extra funds being provided for schools and local authorities to support cleaning and ventilation. No additional funds were made available to voluntary sector organisations churches and village halls to cover the additional costs associated with reopening youth work spaces, including increased insurance premiums. Nevertheless, many chose to resource this from core funds and a number of these buildings were open before publicly funded buildings were open for youth work.

Going forward we must ensure young people have access to the support they need, it is essential that safe spaces for youth work are available. We know that youth work is key to reaching and engaging young people, to provide mental health support, signpost to other services, tackle isolation and help young people re-engage in learning. Youth work, as part of education, must be prioritised, all youth work in Scotland should have re-opened in line with schools. There are still significant issues with access to spaces for young people.

As part of the learning from the experience of the pandemic, there has to be a clear commitment from each LA, and from national government, to ensure there are spaces open for youth work projects to use and a clear acknowledgement that young people need youth work services, especially given the detrimental impact COVID-19 has had on some of our more vulnerable young people.

Whether we feel the sector was adequately considered when decisions about the response were being made by SG and any correspondence with SG in relation to the response

We were in regular dialogue with Scottish Government officials in developing guidance to support the delivery of youth work. Youth work was not considered an essential service. However, as part of Scottish education, youth work was able to return to face-to-face delivery alongside schools. Despite our role in education, many youth work services faced barriers to returning to their delivery in schools and other public buildings. As a result, many vulnerable young people were left without safe spaces to engage with youth workers. YouthLink Scotland correspondence with Scottish Government, on behalf of the sector, included issues of access to facilities and funding.

YouthLink Scotland represented the needs of the sector concerning COVID on the CLD Leadership Group and subsequently on the Advanced Learning and Science COVID recovery group. There was a strong focus on Higher and Further Education, and arguably, given the cross-cutting nature of youth work and some of the issues that were being discussed in relation to age restrictions during lockdowns, we could have also been placed within COVID-19 recovery groups such as the (COVID-19): Children and Families Collective Leadership Group and The Education Recovery Group.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

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Chief Executive

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