Background of the Scottish Youth Parliament

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people. We listen to young people, recognise the issues that are most important to them, and ensure that their voices are heard. Our vision is of a stronger, more inclusive Scotland that empowers young people by truly involving them in the decision-making process.

Democracy – All of our plans and activities are youth-led, and we are accountable to young people aged 14-25. Our democratic structure and the scale of direct participation across Scotland give us strength and set us apart from other organisations.

Inclusion – We are committed to being truly inclusive. The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that all young people have a right to a voice. It doesn’t matter who we are or where we come from. We celebrate our diversity.

Political independence – We are independent from political parties. Only by working with all legitimate political parties can we make progress on the policies that are important to young people.

Passion – We believe that drive and energy are crucial to successful campaigning. We are passionate about the key issues and believe that young people are part of the solution, not the problem.

Introduction

The Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equal Opportunities Committee’s call for written evidence on age and social isolation. In addition, we are heartened by the Committee’s decision to focus on both older people and younger people.

As the democratically elected voice of Scotland’s young people, designed and led by young people to benefit young people, we are committed to combating social isolation, particularly amongst children and young people.

We believe the solution to combating social isolation lies within engagement with young people, and the promotion of youth-led initiatives and projects designed to tackle the issue within communities. Youth work is crucial to this approach.
The National Youth Work Strategy, “Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland,” which recognises youth work as a key component of the Scottish Government’s agenda for young people, states:

“We want Scotland to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. We want a Scotland where the rights of children and young people are not just recognised, but rooted deep in our society and in our public and voluntary services. And we want a nation that treasures the whole wellbeing of children and young people.”

We believe that combating social isolation is an important component in improving the wellbeing of children and young people, and ensuring Scotland is the best place in the world for children and young people.

The Scottish Youth Parliament also advocates the rights of children and young people. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that:

“State Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities…and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”

We are supportive of initiatives and organisations that offer children and young people leisure and recreational time. “Change the Picture,” the Scottish Youth Parliament’s Youth Manifesto, states that funding for youth projects and groups should be a priority, and we believe these spaces and opportunities allow young people to be young people, and build and foster positive relationships with their peers. This is critical for tackling social isolation.

Therefore, the Scottish Youth Parliament welcomes the call for evidence on age and social isolation, and hopes that this further contributes to a Scotland in which young people are successful leaders, confident individuals, effective contributors, and responsible citizens.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

We echo the statements of our colleagues at YouthLink Scotland, and believe that social isolation and loneliness does not discriminate. Social isolation can affect young people at different times and in different ways, and as such, creative and dynamic solutions to tackle the problem must be adopted.

Social isolation can be caused by disengagement from youth services and groups, peer and adult support, and social opportunities. Factors such as poverty, caring responsibilities, rurality, disability, ethnicity, and sexuality can all contribute to this.

3 The Scottish Youth Parliament. “Change the Picture” (2010).
The Scottish Youth Parliament makes a concerted effort to engage young people from all areas of Scotland. Those from rural areas indicate that challenges associated with travel (bus frequency, ferry prices, transport costs), lack of high speed internet access, and few social opportunities contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness. The lack of high speed internet access in particular can limit young people’s access to online education, social media networks, and applications such as Skype, furthering feelings of social disconnection.

**Impacts of social isolation**

The impacts of social isolation can be particularly harmful to young people. The Mental Health Foundation’s “The Lonely Society” reveals that nearly 60% of those aged 18-34 feel lonely often or sometimes, compared with 35% of those aged over 55. The report further notes that young people may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness due to their brain development. Young people can also become isolated or withdrawn while seeking to establish their own identities.⁵

The Prince’s Trust Youth Index 2015, a sample of 2265 16-25 year-olds representative of the UK population aged the same, revealed that 54% of all young people feel anxious meeting new people, with that figure increasing to 62% and 63% respectively for those not in education, employment or training, and those unemployed for six months or more. Additionally, 28% of young people reported avoiding meeting new people, and 13% feeling too anxious to leave the house.⁶

Seventy-one percent of young people believed that having someone to talk to helped them to overcome their latest setback, again expressing the need for quality social relationships.⁷ These figures demonstrate that the effects of social anxiety can be devastating, particularly for young people who are not in education, employment, or training, or who are currently unemployed, impacting their confidence, access to opportunities, and overall wellbeing.

**Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland**

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that creating spaces and opportunities for young people to be engaged and empowered has a valuable impact by decreasing their social isolation and increasing their confidence and resilience. We believe youth-led projects are especially effective in supporting young people and meeting their particular needs.

“The Impact of the Scottish Youth Parliament on its Former Members,” is a report that illustrates the important effects involvement with the organisation has had on its members. The development of confidence, social skills, empathy, communication, public speaking,

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⁵ The Mental Health Foundation, “The Lonely Society” (2010).
leadership, organisation, and team work were cited as important outcomes for young people.\(^8\)

The report also revealed that 91% of former MSYPs believe that the Scottish Youth Parliament had a positive impact on their skills development, and 90% believe it had a positive impact on their personal development. Additionally, a high majority of former MSYPs continued onto further or higher education (83%), employment (91%), and volunteering (75%).\(^9\)

We believe that when young people play a role in leading and shaping Scotland’s future, positive outcomes are delivered not only for those MSYPs spearheading our campaigns and projects, but also for the young people who become involved in our initiatives.

Our national campaign for 2014, Care.Fair.Share., highlighted the struggles that many young carers in Scotland face. Young carers are a vulnerable group of young people, whose caring responsibilities can contribute to feelings of social isolation. Opportunities to meet friends or partake in school activities, bullying from peers, and money to afford outings with friends affect many young carers.

Our report, “A Costly Youth: The Impact of Caring on Young People in Scotland,” revealed that 43% of young carers in Scotland are worried about having enough money to socialise with friends and 56% believe that their caring responsibilities limit their time to be with friends.\(^10\) The young carers frequently praised the work of young carers groups and services, as these organisations offer them space to be young people and talk to friends who are facing similar challenges. We believe that groups such as these, which let young people be young people and offer specialised support, are very important in combating social isolation.

The Scottish Youth Parliament also coordinates the We-CTV project, funded by the Scottish Government’s No Knives Better Lives initiative. This project creates a framework which allows groups of young people to consider the ways interpersonal violence affects young people, and produce creative pieces to explore the issues. Young people considered the impacts issues such as bullying, relationship abuse, and knife crime, all of which can contribute to social isolation.

We believe it is important to allow young people to speak out about the issues that affect them, and work alongside their peers to generate positive change. Projects such as this give young people an opportunity to use their voice and work together for change. They also create a safe space for young people to debate issues that affect them, and may contribute to social isolation. It is important to involve young people in initiatives to tackle social isolation and to empower them to tackle the problem in their communities.

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\(^8\) The University of Strathclyde. “The Impact of the Scottish Youth Parliament on its Former Members” (2011).
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) The Scottish Youth Parliament, “A Costly Youth: The Impact of Caring on Young People in Scotland.”
Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

The Scottish Youth Parliament would welcome further debate on this matter, and consideration as to how social isolation in young people is related to isolation from youth services and information.

Alongside YouthLink Scotland and Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, we would welcome the introduction of Child Rights Impact Assessments on future policies, which would consider the impact on social isolation on young people.

The Scottish Youth Parliament also supports the call of our colleagues at YouthLink Scotland to consider the inclusion of social isolation as a factor that impacts the wellbeing of children and young people under the Getting It Right for Every Child framework. We would also welcome consideration of both the reach of youth services, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities, and the age at which young people are no longer able to access such services.

Furthermore, the Scottish Youth Parliament believes that that youth services should be a priority in funding allocation. We are aware of pressures on local authority budgets, but believe youth services must continue to remain a priority. Continued funding to these services is crucial to tackling social isolation, contributing to the wellbeing of young people, and allowing organisations to reach out to the most vulnerable young people in Scotland who have the least access to services.

Effective awareness-raising within communities

The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that it is crucial to listen to the views of children and young people on this matter, and that a youth-led approach to awareness-raising within communities should be adopted. Efforts should be made to further understand young people’s view of social isolation and their opinions of how to best tackle this issue. We also believe youth-led projects and initiatives provide an effective means of reaching out to young people who are socially isolated.

Louise Cameron MSYP
Chair
Scottish Youth Parliament
13 March 2015