Introduction

YouthLink Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee. We make this written response following the opportunity we had to contribute to the inquiry scoping in January 2015 and to committee on 5 March 2015. In our evidence we highlight our concerns for young people who face or at risk of facing social isolation and the opportunities that youth work provides which goes some way to address this issue.

Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland (2014) states: “Working together we can create a virtuous cycle of improvement to break the cycle of inequality and improve life chances of young people. We are committed to break this cycle and ensure that all young people have opportunities which will improve their life chances.”

Background to YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. It is a membership organisation and is in the unique position of representing the interests and aspirations of both the voluntary and statutory sector. YouthLink Scotland champions the role and value of youth work, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in the development of the sector for the benefit of our young people.

Our vision is of a youth work sector for Scotland that offers sustainable, dynamic and accessible youth work opportunities that support young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, and responsible citizens.

The Value and Purpose of Youth Work

Youth work is an educational practice contributing to young people’s learning and development. Youth work engages young people as learners in their community and when appropriate within their school. The purpose of youth work is to:

- Build self-esteem and self-confidence
- Develop the ability to manage personal and social relationships
- Create learning and develop new skills
- Encourage positive group atmospheres
- Build the capacity of young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control

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• Develop a world view which widens horizons and invites social commitment.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Young People across Scotland will at different times and for different reasons experience social isolation. It is our view that social isolation and loneliness does not discriminate as to who it affects. The experience of social isolation is not a homogeneous experience – and as such as the solutions and support to tackle social isolation must be mixed, varied, but most importantly personalised to the needs of the individual. Youth Work makes a significant contribution to the delivery of this person-centered approach to learning, skills and relationships.

Definition: Cause or Symptom?

The issue of social isolation is complex, we believe that social isolation is both loneliness and the disconnection from services, support and opportunities. The cause of which will be varied and may include; poverty, rurality, disability, ethnicity, sexuality, or employment status, etc. We would highlight that in the lives of young people – social isolation can be both the symptom of their issues and problems, but also the cause. It is essential that this interdependence is recognised when addressing social isolation.

Social Media and Social Isolation

We would draw specific attention to the committee of the relationship that social isolation has with social media and digital technologies. We are strong proponents of digital access and the availability of online services for young people – YouthLink Scotland as part of a wider partnership recently published Digitally Agile National Principles\(^2\) – a national framework of guiding principles for the use of digital technology and social media in Community Learning and Development. Within this there is a clear commitment to developing youth work practice that “will be supported and enhanced through the effective use of digital technology and social media”; and that “our use of digital technology and social media will be accessible and inclusive, driven by the needs of all learners and communities.”

Initiatives such as the LGBT Youth Scotland online youth worker service which an provide 1-2-1 anonymous support with live chat between a youth worker and young person – this service has reached over 600 young people who were unable to access physical services due to geography or because they felt it unsafe to do so. Similarly, the RNIB’s award winning youth forum, Haggeye, has utilised social media with the aid of new technologies in magnification and text to speech software – which has enabled the Haggeye members to communicate with each other and have formed a Media which plans and edits their Haggazine publication. This approach has been shared between the generations – and the young people are now supporting older people living with sight loss to use technologies to ensure they are able to remain connected to their communities too. Further examples of such activities are contained within our publication of The Link Digital Youth Work Issue\(^3\).

However, we are also aware that digital and social media can add to the feelings of isolation, when bullying takes place online or as, our member, Fast Forward have identified in their practice – that online spaces and experiences foster a climate of anxiety and low

\(^2\) [www.digitallyagilecld.org](http://www.digitallyagilecld.org)

\(^3\) [http://issuu.com/youthlinkscotland/docs/youthlink_digital_onscreen?e=0/9985429](http://issuu.com/youthlinkscotland/docs/youthlink_digital_onscreen?e=0/9985429)
self-esteem because young people are able to compare themselves to each other and aspire to an unrealistic fantasy lifestyle projected through social media.

**Impacts of social isolation, for instance loneliness, ill-health**

The publication of the Prince’s Trust Youth Index 2015 is a sample of 2265 young people aged 16-25, this includes findings that show that 13% of young people feel too anxious to leave the house and when we look at population of young people who are not in education, employment or training this figure increases to 35%. Of this same population 46% said they avoid meeting new people and 39% find it hard to make eye contact with people. We must therefore acknowledge that social isolation and difficulties in social relationships are negatively impacted by employment status.

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**Activity Agreement Case-Study: Danny’s Story**

“Danny lives in a rural area with limited access to public transport. For Danny, social isolation was both a cause and a symptom of the challenges he faced. His home environment was chaotic as a result of parental alcohol abuse as well as him providing care to his father who suffered a brain injury. Danny suffered low self-esteem, had few social skills and was uncomfortable around people. He left school with no qualifications and in need of support following the death of his mother. Danny's journey involved a tailored package of learning and one-to-one support - which included an Activity Agreement, the Venture Trust, literacy and counselling services and experience with local employers. Through this multi-agency approach, co-ordinated by East Lothian Council Youth Employability Team, Danny improved his self-esteem and his confidence in forming and sustaining relationships with others and developed coping strategies. Danny's journey has now taken him to further education.”

Scotland’s anti-bullying service, respectme, have found in their annual survey, Bullying in Scotland 2014, which surveyed 7839 young people aged 8 to 19 years old, found that 30% of the young people surveyed had experienced bullying in the last school year; with 23% of those who had experienced bullying feeling isolated as a result.

Fast Forward are a national voluntary organization that gives young people the skills, education and support to live healthier lives by developing projects, workshops and publications to help young people understand the facts about drugs, alcohol and tobacco. In their youth work practice they find that social isolation frequently intersects with issues of substance misuse; social isolation impacts and reinforces substance misuse and vice versa. For example young people may seek peer group membership and acceptance through substance misuse, but equally they may face stigma, shame and peer disapproval because of substance misuse.

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**Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Case-Study: Calum’s Story**

“Like most adolescents, I had various social issues to deal with but these were magnified even further with my disability. Known medically as hemiparesis, it affects my right side of my body most notably the dexterity in my right hand. It is fair to say I was bullied at high school and my self-esteem was battered in various forms. All these issues: coping with my disability, first love, years of relentless bullying, coping with Higher coursework led to the culmination of what psychologists call ‘The Perfect Storm’. I stopped sleeping for 10 days straight and fell into a depressive cycle with symptoms of psychosis. I spent time in hospital and took a year out of school, leaving me very isolated. It was through this that I
found a much needed place to channel my energy while I could not concentrate on coursework. This was the Duke of Edinburgh’s Bronze Award. For the Skills section I reignited my passion of photography and this helped me to affirm a skill I had and to appreciate the world around me giving me confidence again in my abilities. For the Volunteering section throughout all levels I have been involved in conservation work for the Green Team. Through this I saw for myself what effects my contribution had on the environment and the community around me whilst doing so with genuinely lovely people who I still keep in touch with. My physical section throughout all levels has also remained the same. I joined Craiglockhart Leisure Centre, using the gym on a regular basis. Whilst a personal programme and gym instructor have helped me focus on losing weight and keeping healthy, exercise in itself makes you feel good, releasing endorphins into the body. As I started to feel better and was on regular medication I took a brave step with regular tuition from Maths and English tutors I returned to my old high school to complete my Highers which were Maths, English, History, Chemistry and Business Management. My friends had been informed of what had happened but it was still difficult for me to fit back in again with friends who had moved on from when I had last spoke to them and had affirmed their friendships with others. Now having got the results I needed I am studying MA in Accountancy and Finance at Heriot Watt University. I will leave you with this. Whilst I do wish my life had been easier I do not regret my depression for it lead me to greater opportunities such as Duke of Edinburgh’s and volunteering and helped me become a better and stronger person as a result.”

**Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector)**

As Calum’s experience shows, youth work through the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award has provided him with a holistic experience contributing to his improved health, wellbeing and to prevent further social isolation. Youth Work happens every day in communities across Scotland. Where young people are engaged, included, nurtured, supported and empowered as individuals each with a contribution to make and their difference and challenges are understood. Youth Work as a universal service open and available to all young people can change lives. Youth Work operates at times and in places which may not be served by other services. Youth Workers commit their time at evening, weekends and during school holiday times delivering support, services, and opportunities to some of Scotland’s most vulnerable young people. Well planned and connected youth work partnerships are bringing multiple youth provisions together for joint planning and can ensure that services are available 7 days a week and year round, even in rural areas.

Youth Work is creative in its approach and innovative; ensuring that it is meeting the needs of the young people it serves – even those who are or are at risk of social isolation. One nationwide project which does exactly this is Girlguiding Scotland Lone Guiding initiative. This targeted opportunity allows girls aged 5-26 years to engage with the guiding movement without physically attending a weekly unit or meeting. This allows girls who have family caring responsibility, who have illnesses or disabilities which makes attending a local unit regularly difficult, or because they live too far away from a unit. One participant, Katie from the Isle of Lewis identifies the benefit of this approach: “it’s given me the chance to continue with my guiding, and has shown me that living on a remote island needn’t stop me from taking part in as many opportunities as I can.”

Youth Work at its core is about relationships between youth workers and young people – this opportunity for intergenerational working and learning together is exemplified in many youth organisations, one example is the Ocean Youth Trust where young people and adult
volunteers interact when participating in sailing adventures around Scotland’s coastline.

**Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy**

YouthLink Scotland would welcome further discussion on this matter and in particular to consider a definition that encapsulates the complexity of social isolation as outlined earlier in our submission. We would encourage the committee to consider how social isolation interacts with isolation from services and information.

YouthLink Scotland would encourage the committee to consider the requirement for future policies to have an impact assessment which would take consideration of their impact on social isolation. Along with our member organization, Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, we would welcome the introduction of Child Rights Impact Assessments which we believe would achieve this objective.

Identification of young people at risk of social isolation can be recognised within the wellbeing indicators of Getting it right for every child. We would urge the committee to consider the explicit inclusion of social isolation as a factor impacting upon the wellbeing of children and young people and for this to be contained within guidance and resources used by Gircfe practitioners. This sits well within the existing wellbeing indicators: nurture, included, and respected.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

We advocate to the committee the importance of extending this agenda through the direct and meaningful participation of young people. We would welcome the commission of a youth-led approach to understanding this issue from a young person’s perspective and to empower young people to recommend actions to address this matter.

We know that there is effective youth work practice which is reaching out to and engaging with young people who are socially isolated or at risk of isolation. We would welcome investment in to the youth work sector to enable the sector to achieve this more consistently across Scotland. We know that working with the most vulnerable young people who are furthest away from services and their peer groups requires additional resources and often 1 to 1 support.

Investment in peer mentoring and befriending would go some way to provide a practical intervention for young people who are socially isolated. The youth work sector is well placed to facilitate this approach and provide the safeguards required for this to be successful.

**Closing Remarks**

Youth work changes lives. From the evidence presented, we believe that sustainable investment in youth work can contribute to improved outcomes for young people and in particular to address social isolation as both a symptom and cause of issues impacting on the lives of young people in Scotland.

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