Health and Sport Committee - Call for Views: Preventative Agenda

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from both the voluntary and statutory sectors. Our vision is of a nation which values its young people and their contribution to society, where young people are supported to achieve their potential.

This response focuses on the preventative nature of youth work.

“>Youth work is the epitome of preventative spending, investing in young people to ensure that they can reach their full potential offers long and short term savings across a range of budgets from police and justice to health, welfare and education.”

– UNISON, Growing Pains³

Which areas of preventative spending/ the preventative agenda would it be most useful for the Health and Sport Committee to investigate?

Investment into youth work is preventative spend and can result in public savings in numerous areas (see table 1) as well as providing an intrinsic value to society, for example through increasing soft skills of young people and improving the wellbeing of youth work volunteers. Research into the social value of youth work in Scotland was estimated at a return of £7 for every £1 of public cash in 2016.²

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth work outcomes</th>
<th>Costs and Values</th>
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<tr>
<td>Better literacy, numeracy &amp; language</td>
<td>Reduced costs to education system</td>
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<td>Attaining qualifications</td>
<td>Personal earnings from better qualifications</td>
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<td>Engaged in education</td>
<td>Reduced costs to education system</td>
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<td>In employment or training</td>
<td>Personal earnings from being in employment</td>
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<td>Positive health behaviours</td>
<td>Reduced wage scar from youth unemployment</td>
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<td>Reduced incidence of depression</td>
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<td>Reduced incidence of obesity</td>
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<td>Reduced incidence of STIs</td>
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<td>Less offending</td>
<td>Greater productivity due to reduced absences</td>
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<td>Less dependent on welfare</td>
<td>Reduced costs of criminal justice interventions</td>
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<td>Positive parenting</td>
<td>Savings on welfare payments</td>
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<td>Reduced risk of children going into care</td>
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Table 1³

¹ UNISON Scotland, Growing pains: A survey of youth workers, 2016
² Hall Aitken, Social and economic value of youth work in Scotland: initial assessment, 2016
³ Ibid.
A report from Unite summarised the role that youth work plays in regards to health and wellbeing:

“A well-resourced youth work environment offers a safe developmental space where young people can explore personal concerns about health development and health risk, from use of drugs to contraception. They can also learn new skills which promote a more healthy lifestyle – anything form cooking a risotto to taking more exercise.”

The Youth Work Outcomes, developed in partnership with the youth work sector, express that through youth work, young people consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control; participate safely and effectively in groups; manage personal, social and formal relationships; and are confident, resilient and optimistic for the future. YouthLink Scotland believes that universal youth work, that which is open and available to all young people, presents the greatest opportunity in terms of preventative spending.

Youth work supports the reduction of health inequalities even in the most challenging settings. Through engaging in youth work in HMYOI Polmont, 88% of young people improved their mental health and wellbeing.

There is positive recognition from the Scottish Government of the impact of preventative spending in the early years. There is still an opportunity for preventative action for young people (defined here as those ages approximately 11-18).

How can health boards and integrative authorities overcome the (financial and political) pressures that lead to reactive spending/ a focus on fulfilling only statutory duties and targets, to initiate and maintain preventative spend?

We believe that colleagues working within health are generally supportive and acknowledge youth work’s impact on young people and communities. Public services need to be supported to take bold, evidence-based decisions with regards to re-prioritising funding. This support could be financial, political, and through partnership working with the third sector.

Youth work is in fact underpinned in legislation through The Requirements for Community Learning and Development (Scotland) Regulations 2013. Although youth work is now a statutory provision, it is the experience of our members that budgets have still been cut and provision reduced. The result of budget cuts to youth work will likely result in additional spend in the long term to deal with crisis interventions.

Linking preventative budgetary decisions to wider national ambitions could be helpful for combatting political pressure and for ensuring strategic direction of services.

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4 Unite the Union and Lifelong Learning UK, The benefits of youth work, 2010
5 YouthLink Scotland, Youth Work Outcomes
How could spend that is deemed to be preventative be identified and tracked more effectively? What is required in terms of data, evidence and evaluation to test interventions for producing ‘best value for money’?

There is qualitative research on preventative aspects of youth work on health and wellbeing from other countries; however this is only beginning to emerge in Scotland.

Recent research demonstrates Guiding and Scouts participation is associated with better mental health and narrower health inequalities at age 50. YouthLink Scotland is supporting the development of new qualitative and quantitative research on the impact of youth work through the Scottish Youth Work Research Steering Group. The group involves stakeholders from academia, public health and youth work. A number of research areas are being explored, including using data from the Growing Up in Scotland research. The group recently began a research project into the impact of universal youth work in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh and the University of St. Mark and St. John, Plymouth.

Further funding is required to support national research in this area and to support smaller organisations to effectively evaluate their services. The youth work sector would also welcome improved partnership working to share existing data, particularly with the formal education sector.

It should be noted that preventative nature of youth work is not restricted to health and wellbeing only and as such should not be the sole responsibility of this Committee to explore.

How can the shift of spending from reactive/acute services to primary/preventative services be speeded up and/or incentivised?

Prioritisation of preventative services could be incentivised by permitting savings made as a result of preventative investment to be reinvested back into the health board.

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