

Strategy Reconnector Report



◆ EDINBURGH ◆
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL



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Introduction

Edinburgh launched a 5-year Youth and Children's Work Strategy in May 2023. The Strategy recognises that youth and children's work takes place in a variety of settings, including community venues, schools, youth cafés, and on the street, whilst using numerous approaches such as outdoor pursuits, drama workshops, health initiatives, peer education and single issue and single gender work to engage with children and young people. It aims to provide prolonged and stable engagement over time.

In June 2025, a Reconnector event was held to mark the midway point of the Strategy and to highlight its priorities with new key stakeholders. Building on the successful format of the original launch, the event featured keynote contributions from partner agencies and case studies showcasing practice. It also provided space to take stock of progress under each of the Strategy's priorities. A group flipchart exercise was used to capture reflections, and these form the basis of this report.

What are the Strategy's priorities?

Reducing inequality and the impact of poverty

Health and wellbeing

Closing attainment gap

Rights and participation

Develop the skills of youth and children's workforce

Communicate with a range of stakeholders

Increase partnership working between youth and children's services

Improve equality and diversity within youth and children's work services

Priority: Reducing inequality and the impact of poverty

Providing access to social, educational and recreational opportunities, information, advice and support for children and young people from disadvantaged families and communities.

The universal youth work offer is open and accessible, with no waiting lists, ensuring young people can engage when they choose. It promotes a non-stigmatising approach that supports inclusion and builds trust. Through strong relationships, youth workers are also able to provide onward referral and signposting to additional services where needed.

Opportunities

Working with Single Point of Access and Team Around Community could help to identify what services are available through universal youth work engagement.

Youth work is well placed to identify emerging needs and gaps in provision, ensuring services remain responsive and relevant to young people. Youth Work.

Youth work has the opportunity to promote free-of-charge opportunities, ensuring all children and young people can access activities without financial barriers.

Challenges

Expectations on the sector are high and youth work is consistently called upon to deliver across multiple agendas, its contribution is not always recognised on an equal footing with other services.

*Not all comments have been included, and any feedback specific to individual organisations has either been reflected within broader points or removed, to ensure this report represents the wider sector.

Priority: Health and Wellbeing

Helping children and young people to be physically healthy and emotionally resilient, particularly as they recover from the impact of the Covid pandemic on mental health.

Youth work is flexible, responsive to emerging needs, and provides accessible opportunities that support both physical and mental wellbeing. By building trusted relationships, youth work creates meaningful connections and pathways for children and young people. Universal youth work services also play an active role in the Community Mental Health Framework, helping to embed early support within local communities.

Opportunities

Ensuring children and young people have dedicated places in their communities to gather, socialise, and grow.

Youth work has the opportunity to ensure its spaces are accessible and inclusive, creating welcoming environments where all children and young people feel they belong.

Youth work plays a vital role in supporting young people to navigate the online world safely, make informed choices online, protect themselves, and use digital media responsibly.

Recognition improving outcomes for children and young people requires a whole systems approach including youth work.

Youth work has the opportunity to contribute to the building blocks of health** by supporting wellbeing, resilience, and positive lifestyle choices from an early age.

Challenges

Youth work continues to face the challenge of meeting young people's mental health needs, combined with future decisions on the Community Mental Health Framework funding creating uncertainty.

Ensuring greater recognition is given to the skills, expertise and professionalism of the youth work workforce remains a significant challenge.

**What builds good health?

Case Study: M's Story

Background information

A local youth work forum raised concerns about a group of young people, aged 13 to 17, some of whom were travelling in from outside the area. The group, of 20 to 30 young people, regularly gathered around a local shopping centre and park. Their presence raised alarm among residents due to persistent noise, vandalism, and antisocial behaviour. Young people were frequently observed vaping, drinking alcohol, and causing disruption in public spaces.

M was consistently part of this group and was known to spend time in these locations with their peers.

Initial Issues

Workers began by conducting mapping exercises using information from partner organisations to identify where and when young people were gathering. This helped establish key locations and times, as well as patterns of behaviour that were disruptive to residents and impacted the wider community. Through these observations, it became clear that many young people in the group lacked basic knowledge around alcohol, vaping, and sexual health, limiting their ability to make informed decisions about their wellbeing. Although M was part of the group, they appeared quiet and uneasy. It seemed likely that M was present mainly because their close friends were involved.

Measures Implemented

Street work sessions were scheduled based on where and when young people were gathering. Over time, consistent engagement by workers led to the development of relationships with a core group of around fifteen young people, including M, though not all were initially willing to engage. As trust grew, young people shared details about their lives, allowing workers to offer tailored support and information on local services, health resources, and topics like alcohol, vaping, and drugs. Workers also provided C:Card services and raised awareness about the group's impact on the local community—something the young people had not previously considered. This prompted reflection and responsibility. One-to-one conversations away from peer pressure were facilitated to support deeper engagement. Workers noticed M was spending more time chatting and sharing details of their personal circumstances. M shared that they had difficulties at school and had made some poor choices relating to peer relationships, alcohol and sexual health. Workers felt that M would benefit from additional support so shared details of Youth Agency's individual support service which would allow M to meet with a worker weekly at a time and location that was suitable for them. M was keen to engage in this.

Changes Noted

Over time, young people became more open about the challenges in their lives. Workers provided information on sexual health, answered questions, and, when appropriate, helped young people access local services. Increased awareness of the risks associated with vaping and alcohol led some to choose not to vape. As a group, they became more conscious of how their behaviour affected the local community. Some began challenging negative behaviour among their peers, and the group gradually reduced in size. Through 1-1 support, M built a trusting relationship with a worker, which helped them reflect on their choices around school and friendships. M shared they had joined the group because they felt isolated. With support, they began making more positive decisions and focused on forming healthier relationships within a smaller, more supportive peer group.

Evidence of Change

Young people built trust with adults and started seeking support when needed. Their confidence and social skills improved, allowing them to address group issues sensitively. They also became more aware of the group's impact on the community and took responsibility for their role in it. Consequently, the group split, with many members accessing dedicated youth services.

Workers observation highlighted M appeared more confident and feedback from M showed they felt they had increased self-esteem. M felt able to communicate better with their family and more comfortable with smaller peer groups.

Priority: Closing the Attainment Gap

Supporting children and young people who have disengaged from education during Covid-19 to return to school and move on to positive destinations in training, further education and employment.

Youth work begins from where young people are at - supporting their wellbeing and encouraging small, meaningful steps forward. This relational approach helps build trust, resilience, and confidence at a pace that works for each individual.

Opportunities

Valuing opportunities for wider achievement and skills development within youth work services.

Youth work creates opportunities for young people to learn in ways that suit their needs, interests and circumstances, opening up different pathways to achievement.

Challenges

A challenge remains in securing greater recognition of youth awards by employers, ensuring the skills and achievements gained through youth work are valued in the workplace.

Priority: Rights and Participation

Asking children and young people what is important to them, including their views on youth and children's services.

It is important to recognise that all these priorities can be achieved through universal, open youth and children's work, as well as more targeted services.

Youth participation is active across the city, with strong examples, particularly through collaborative efforts like the North West Edinburgh Youth Work organisations. While there is great practice happening, there remains a challenge in pulling together and capturing this information in a cohesive way to inform wider strategic developments.

Opportunities

Youth work provides an opportunity to ensure children and young people are meaningfully involved in shaping the agenda, with their voices influencing decisions that affect them.

Through trusted relationships and collaborative practice, youth work supports joined-up approaches across services. This prevents duplication and reduces pressure on young people to retell their experiences.

Challenges

Consultation data gathered from children and young people is not always used and a feedback loop is not always in place.

Over-reliance on certain existing groups of children and young people, due to barriers in reaching and capturing the voices of all groups.

Ensuring young people know about youth participation opportunities and youth forums and how to get involved.

An overview is too big for individual organisations – needs a whole system approach and a strategic role.

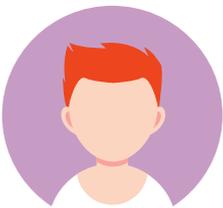
Case Study: Friday Night Lights

This project was set up in partnership with City of Edinburgh Council (CEC), Community Sports Hubs (CSH) & Portobello High School (PHS) after it was identified that there was a lack of youth work provision available locally. PHS identified 2 Pupil Support Officers (PSOs) who they fund to support the provision on Friday nights, this has been an invaluable link with young people and the school. The aim of the project was to give young people an alternative to being engaged in anti-social behaviour as well as free access to activities on a Friday night.

On average **35** young people take part on Friday nights.

92% of young people have reported that they have built good connections and made new friends.

100% of young people have said they have built good connections with school staff from attending the sessions.



I would have been doing nothing or sitting in my house – playing on computers on Fridays nights

Relationships with young people have improved and they are speaking to us in school – building up relationships and asking for support



It has helped me get out and make friends!

Priority: Develop the skills of youth and children's workforce

Provide access to a youth work led local training programme delivered by a range of partners and include essential topics (i.e. child protection, emergency first aid and trauma informed practice) alongside topical training (i.e. Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenting and substance use awareness).

An annual report will be published including data on increase of skills, knowledge and confidence, alongside case studies on the impact of training.

Youth work workforce development training programmes are responsive to new and emerging areas, ensuring that training remains relevant and supports staff to meet the evolving needs of children and young people. Annually there is a youth work-led training programme developed, incorporating over 40 sessions each year, designed to build the capacity of youth workers across the sector, some of this programme is delivered in partnership to meet needs with the public protection multi-agency training.

Opportunities

Exploring multi-agency UNCRC training offers the opportunity to build a shared understanding of children's rights across sectors, strengthening collaboration and ensuring children's and young people's rights are upheld.

Development of the working groups linked to Children's Services Partnership i.e. GIRFEC, UNCRC and Trauma could all provide a role in supporting development of youth work workforce.

Expanding workforce development pathways creates opportunities for youth workers to progress and strengthen the overall skills and capacity of the sector.

Developing peer-led learning and support, underpinned by central resources and guidance, offers youth workers the chance to share expertise, strengthen practice, and build collective capacity across the sector.

Challenges

Challenges in making youth work an attractive and sustainable occupation, with fair recognition, pay, and career progression to retain and inspire the workforce.

Priority: Communicate with a range of stakeholders

Engage with a range of stakeholders including elected members, public sector and other interested organisations to raise awareness of the role and impact of youth and children's work.

Youth and children's work will be represented within Edinburgh Community Planning Partnerships and other local networks.

Local youth and children's organisations are well networked and actively communicate with a wide range of stakeholders, ensuring the voices of the sector are heard. Current practice also includes strong representation across Community Planning structures, helping to communicate the purpose and impact of youth and children's work. Through the Youth Work Working Group, the sector shares evidence of impact, influences decision-making, and seeks opportunities to strengthen multi-agency collaboration.

Opportunities

Youth work has the opportunity to establish long-term connections with children, young people, families, and communities, building trust and continuity that strengthens support over time.

Challenges

Youth work is sometimes viewed as a rapid response service, which risks overlooking its long-term, relationship-based approach.

In comparison to other service areas youth work is not always recognised as an equal.

There is an unclear picture of Community Planning structures in Edinburgh, making it difficult for the youth work sector to understand.

Priority: Increase partnership working between youth and children's services

Identify opportunities for partnership working through Edinburgh Youth and Children's Work Strategy Group, alongside local youth work providers forums.

Regular youth and children's work events will be held, providing opportunities for partnership working, raising the profile of youth and children's work and highlighting good examples of practice.

In North West Edinburgh, strong structures are in place to support effective partnership working between youth work services. This is alongside specific initiatives such as Clear, Hold, Build - the West Pilton Community Safety work, which has fostered significant community engagement and collaboration.

It was acknowledged that formalising partnerships through contracts and data sharing has been viewed as supportive and constructive.

Opportunities

Team Around Community could provide an opportunity to increase partnership working in geographical parts of the city with youth work services.

Single Point of Access could provide an opportunity for increased partnership working with youth work services.

Raising the profile of youth work and deepening understanding of its impact — including among the wider public.

Making universal, open access youth work services more visible so their value is better recognised and understood.

Challenges

Ensuring mutual respect and shared values across organisations to support effective collaboration.

It remains confusing to navigate for families with so many 'routes in' – awaiting Whole Family Wellbeing mapping to identify how families move through services and impact on outcomes.

Priority: Improve equality and diversity within youth and children's work services

Support youth and children's services and create opportunities to improve equality and diversity within services; including engagement in decision making and increasing participation in services.

Work in partnership with diverse communities to develop and share "Top Tips" for inclusive youth work practice.

Youth work services are delivering sensory-based groups tailored for young people with additional support needs. These groups provide a safe, supportive, and engaging environment where young people can explore and express themselves through sensory activities. This approach helps reduce barriers to participation, supports emotional regulation, and promotes inclusion by responding to individual needs in a youth work setting.

Opportunities

Developing the youth work workforce to better reflect and represent the communities it serves.

Supporting youth workers to build cultural awareness and confidence.

Provision of dedicated spaces for children and young people with protected characteristics alongside inclusive, universal activities that welcome all.

Challenges

Measuring current equality and diversity across the youth and children's work sector is a challenge.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The Strategy Reconnector event reaffirmed the collective commitment of partners to strengthening and sustaining youth and children's work across Edinburgh. Through the small group discussions, participants identified both opportunities and ongoing challenges within each Strategy Priority, alongside practical calls to action to guide progress (included as an appendix). These calls to action now provide a clear framework for immediate priorities as well as longer-term development.

Looking ahead, the Youth Work Working Group will take forward these actions, fostering stronger partnerships to address challenges and maximise opportunities. Engagement will continue beyond the Working Group to ensure the wider sector remains central to this process.

Raising the profile of youth and children's work will remain a core priority, with ongoing engagement, monitoring, and reporting used to track progress and evidence the impact of the sector's contribution.

A selection of case studies have been used in this report, other case studies were presented as part of the Reconnector event and the initial Strategy launch and be shared upon request to interested stakeholders.

