

# Scottish Youth Parliament response to the Scottish Government's call for feedback on the draft aims and principles for the establishment of Scotland's Covid-19 Inquiry

September 2021

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's call for feedback on the draft aims and principles for the establishment of Scotland's Covid-19 inquiry.

If you have any questions or require any further information about this response, please contact Rosy Burgess, Events and Campaigns Officer, at [rosy.b@syp.org.uk](mailto:rosy.b@syp.org.uk).

## The focus of the inquiry:

While the pandemic has had an impact on everyone's lives, the impact on children and young people has been unique. In relation to the four harms identified for particular attention by the inquiry, SYP recommends the inquiry investigates the following issues:

### *Direct health impacts of COVID-19, including cases and deaths in care homes*

- **Long-Covid** - while we recognise children and young people as a group are less likely to experience the extreme direct health impacts of Covid-19, we feel more work is needed to understand the effects of long-Covid on children and young people.

### *Other health impacts*

- **The impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing** - the pandemic has had a huge impact on young people's mental health. We have heard through all of our consultation activities that many young people are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and unsure where to go for help.<sup>123</sup> Concerns about education, exams, and future prospects has further exacerbated Scotland's existing mental health epidemic. Failure to support young people's mental health will be a failure to meet their right to the best possible health, and therefore it is essential that this is investigated as part of the inquiry.
- **The impact on children and young people's access to medical treatment** - We are concerned that some young people's treatment has been side-lined due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which may have long-term implications for their health and wellbeing.

"The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that everyone should have equal access to health and social care throughout the COVID-19 crisis and should not be discriminated against due to a pre-existing health condition or disability."

- (99% agree - Committee Motion, July 2020)

<sup>1</sup> Lockdown Lowdown Phase 1 (April 2020) – available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Lockdown Lowdown Phase 2 (November 2020) – available [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Lockdown Lowdown Phase 3 (July 2021) – available [here](#).

- **The impact on 16 and 17 year olds whose parents were not allowed to attend medical appointments with them** - Without the practical and emotional support from a parent or carer, young people have been left feeling isolated and frightened. We are concerned that some young people have been put in a position where they were required to advocate for themselves in a stressful and upsetting environment, and that decisions have been made about their medical care that they were prepared for or able to understand. The long-term impacts on young people’s health and wellbeing, and whether these impacts could have been avoided if a parent or carer had been allowed to attend appointments and/or visit them in hospital, should be examined.

“The Scottish Youth Parliament calls for an urgent review to be undertaken regarding current guidance on provisions for 16-18 year olds to be accompanied by a parent or guardian during A&E visits and receive visitations during longer hospital stays during the COVID-19 pandemic.”  
 - (86% agree - Members’ Motion, April 2021)

### ***Societal impacts, including education***

- **The impact on children and young people’s rights** - The pandemic and the rapid changes made during this period inevitably led to challenges for young people’s ability to access their rights. Our April 2020 *Lockdown Lowdown* survey found that over half of the respondents (58%) had some concern about their rights.<sup>4</sup> Whilst there had to be a balance in relation to the right to health and other rights, we believe it is essential that an inquiry considers this issue and determines where unnecessary breaches were made. In the rest of our response you will see some areas where we think this may have occurred, such as in decisions surrounding education.
- **The impact on education** - The disruption to young people’s education throughout lockdown, and the cancellation of exams, has put a huge pressure on young people. For some young people, lack of access to digital resources or the lack of a suitable learning environment away from school will have a further detrimental impact on their education and their future prospects. Furthermore, SYP and others have raised concerns throughout the pandemic about the lack of meaningful participation of children and young people within the decision-making process. For example:

SYP, Young Scot, and YouthLink Scotland submitted a briefing to the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee outlining young people’s views on the SQA 2020 exam results provisions for Covid-19 (May 2020, available [here](#)).

Young people’s perspectives on the reopening of schools (May 2020, available [here](#))

SYP’s response to the SQA Appeals 2021 consultation - March 2021 (available [here](#))

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<sup>4</sup> Lockdown Lowdown Phase 1 (April 2020) – available [here](#).

Blog posts about SYP's involvement in education decision-making ([here](#)), and the failures of the SQA Appeals process to uphold young people's rights ([here](#) and [here](#)).

- **The impact on youth work** - Youth work gives young people opportunities, support, greater confidence and self-esteem, friendship, skills, a voice, access to non-formal education, and independence.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the pandemic, the youth work sector has adapted to continue engaging and supporting children and young people. However, the sector continues to face the threat of budget cuts, which will have a hugely detrimental impact on many aspects of young people's lives.

“Local youth work should be invested in by national and local government and protected by law from budget cuts.”

- (87% agree - [From Scotland's Young People](#), manifesto statement)

“The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, high quality youth work should be provided for free and made accessible in every local area.”

- (95% agree - *Members' Motion, April 2021*)

- **The impact on perceptions of young people** - Discussions with young people suggests many feel they have been unfairly blamed for spreading the virus. Some young people feel that when restrictions have eased and they have been allowed or encouraged to do things, such as returning to school and university, the media has then portrayed them negatively. Furthermore, some feel that when a small number of young people have broken the rules, the messaging has been critical of all young people, which is unfair.
- **The impact on young people's futures** - We have heard through all of our consultation activities that many young people are worried about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their futures.<sup>6</sup> While we recognise the long-term impacts may not yet be apparent, we feel it is important that this is not forgotten throughout the duration of the inquiry.

“I am constantly stressed and worried about my future should I lose my job. I don't feel the government fully appreciate the impact the pandemic is having on the economy and people's future. My mental health has never been so poor.”

- young person, [Lockdown Lowdown Phase Two](#) (November 2020)

“Coronavirus has strongly affected my future with my higher exams being cancelled last year made a huge impact on the universities that I can even apply to. This has made me anxious and upset to think that my Highers, the pathway to university has gone and I had very little control over it.”

- young person, [Lockdown Lowdown Phase Two](#) (November 2020)

SYP's response to the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on young people's career prospects is available [here](#), and [this blog post](#) calls for decision makers to address the long-term impact of Covid-19 on young people.

<sup>5</sup> Youth Work and Me (2019) – available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Lockdown Lowdown Phase 1 (April 2020) – available [here](#).

- **The impact on young people’s experiences of racism** - For young Black People and People of Colour, the pandemic has further exacerbated existing inequalities in society. For example, [this blog post](#) outlines the impact of the pandemic on the employment of young People of Colour.

We recommend the inquiry engages with Intercultural Youth Scotland, and reviews their ‘Covid in Colour’ report (available [here](#)) to ensure the voices of young Black People and People of Colour are feeding in directly.

### ***Economic impacts***

- **The impact on young people’s jobs and employment prospects** - Young people tend to work in sectors such as retail, hospitality, and tourism, and therefore are one of the groups that has been most negatively impacted by the shutdown of these sectors. Many of these jobs use zero hour contracts, so young people haven’t always been eligible for furlough schemes, and there haven’t been enough part-time or seasonal jobs, which some young people rely on to access further education or to pay for basic living costs. This may have led some young people to seek employment in more hazardous environments, or to take on work that affects their ability to attend classes or focus on their education.

“There’s two different situations, either [Black people and people of colour] haven’t been able to go to work because it’s, they don’t want to put themselves at risk, they don’t want to put their kids at risk, they don’t want to put their family at risk, so they haven’t been able to go to work which is hurting their finances. Or they are having to work where they are putting themselves into danger which isn’t also a good enough, which isn’t like a good option either.”

- *young Black person, [Lockdown Lowdown Phase Two](#) (November 2020)*

“I lost my job in March, I was working for Farmfoods for four years and lost my job. That had a knock-on effect for rent and that sort of stuff. It’s been quite a difficult last six months for myself personally my mental health has gone quite downhill because I’ve not had the chance to socialise with people. I’ve not had the chance to form an extended household, that sort of stuff.”

- *A young person with experience of the criminal justice system, [Lockdown Lowdown Phase Two](#) (November 2020)*

- **The impact on poverty** - our research has shown that during the first lockdown almost one in three young people were moderately or extremely concerned about their financial situation, and nearly two thirds did not know how to access information about financial support that may be available to them during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, we have heard from young people who were unable to participate in education because they did not have access to the internet or a device to access school online; this was a particular challenge for young people in rural areas<sup>8</sup> and those living in or at risk of poverty.

<sup>7</sup> Lockdown Lowdown Phase 1 (April 2020) – available [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Blog post - Putting Rights at the Heart of the COVID-19 Recovery – available [here](#).

[This blog post](#) outlines the impact of the pandemic on period poverty.

“I didn’t have digital access until the end of April, so I went a month and a half without any digital access... The government were telling us ‘you have to get online’ but they weren’t providing support. With universal credit, I get about £230/£240 a month... how can you expect somebody on £200 a month to go buy a laptop?”

- *care experienced young person, [Lockdown Lowdown Phase Two](#) (November 2020)*

### **Taking a person-centred, human rights based approach**

Following the Scottish Government’s commitment to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into law, this inquiry has an opportunity to lead the way in respecting children and young people’s rights to have their voices heard (UNCRC Article 12).

### ***Focus on children and young people as a unique group***

Engagement with children and young people through this inquiry should be separate from engagement with other ‘equalities groups’. To ensure a person-centred, human rights based approach is taken, SYP calls on the inquiry to:

- Make specific effort to explore failures to uphold children and young people’s rights throughout the pandemic. Some examples given in the Independent Children’s Rights Impact Assessment, commissioned by CYPCS and published in July 2020, [here](#).
- Ensure engagement with children and young people through the inquiry is meaningful, accessible, and appropriate to the age and stage of the children and young people involved. [This blog post](#) outlines the importance of engaging young people meaningfully in decision-making.
- Ensure children and young people from seldom-heard groups are included. [This blog post](#) explains why this should be a priority.

### ***Supporting young people to participate***

Many young people feel they have been unfairly blamed for a rise in Covid-19 cases. It is essential that this is not the case during the inquiry. Therefore, we recommend the following steps for supporting young people to participate:

- Explore opportunities to gather young people’s views through a range of formats, including focus groups and informal discussion sessions, in spaces where young people feel comfortable, and at times which suit the young people without requiring them to miss work or education commitments.
- Meet with the young person / young people prior to the evidence session to give them an opportunity to ask questions, to talk through what will happen during the evidence session and who will attend, and to explain what the purpose of the evidence session is.
- Do not ask young people to retell their story more than once. For many young people, the events of 2020-21 have been distressing and have caused or exacerbated mental health and wellbeing problems. If a young person

volunteers to speak about their experiences, it is not fair to ask them to relive those experiences repeatedly.

- Ensure members of the inquiry panel are trained and supported to engage meaningfully with young people, and are able to put young people at ease during the session. It is important that young people do not feel they are on trial when giving evidence, especially as they are less likely to have experienced giving evidence than other participants may be.
- If a young person or group of young people is invited to give evidence in person, invite them to visit the venue prior to the evidence session so they feel comfortable in the space. If this is not possible in person, a video tour or photographs of the venue may help them to prepare.
- Arrange for young people's travel to be booked in advance to avoid them being out of pocket. If this is not possible, reimburse travel expenses straight away. If sessions are to take place online, offer support to ensure young people are not digitally excluded. For example, this could involve paying for a data top-up or providing a device to enable young people to access the internet.
- Ensure young people from seldom-heard groups are involved in the inquiry by working with organisations who support them. Those who have been most affected by the pandemic are also the least likely to have their voices heard unless a deliberate effort is made to meaningfully include them.

We appreciate the urgency for this inquiry to come to its conclusions, and that engaging with children and young people meaningfully can take time. However, this time and process is necessary to ensure that rights are upheld, and we encourage the inquiry to factor this into its timeframe.

### **Reporting the inquiry's progress:**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the lives of children and young people in Scotland. It is therefore critical that children and young people receive feedback on the inquiry's progress in a format that is accessible to them.

The Scottish Youth Parliament would like the inquiry to:

- Publish regular updates demonstrating the inquiry's progress and findings.
- Work with organisations who support children and young people to develop reporting mechanisms that are appropriate and accessible for all children and young people.
- Involve children and young people in the design and presentation of reporting resources.
- Ensure the language used throughout the process is free from jargon and acronyms, and where this is not possible, ensure there is a simple explanation of what this language means.
- Ensure reporting is available in a range of formats, including easy read, braille, large print, BSL, Gaelic, and other languages.
- Publish reporting in places where children and young people are, rather than assuming children and young people will look for it.
- Ensure there is a feedback loop in place to ensure all children and young people who participate in the inquiry are aware of how their input has influenced the inquiry. This element is essential to ensuring a rights based approach is achieved, and children and young people's rights are respected through this process.

## The Scottish Youth Parliament - [www.syp.org.uk](http://www.syp.org.uk)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the basis for the Scottish Youth Parliament's (SYP's) vision, mission and values. In particular, SYP embodies Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that young people have the right to express their views freely and have their opinions listened to in all matters affecting them. As a completely youth-led charity, the words and sentiment of Article 12 have profound importance for our work.

### Our Vision

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratic voice of Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its young people. Our goal is to make this vision a reality, in order to ensure young people in Scotland grow up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential.

### Our Mission

SYP is a rights-based charity, with members supported by all of Scotland's 32 local authorities and 11 National Voluntary Organisations.

SYP's mission is to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them, and campaign for changes to the nation that they live in. We support our members in their work by training them, supporting their personal development, and empowering them, using a youth work ethos.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people in every community across the country and ensure that decision-makers listen to their voices.

### Our Values

- **Democracy** - We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 14 to 25. Our democratic structure and the scale of our engagement across Scotland gives us a mandate that sets us apart from other organisations.
- **Rights** - We are a rights-based organisation. We are passionate about making young people aware of their rights, and ensuring that local and national governments uphold their rights.
- **Inclusion and Diversity** - We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure policymakers and politicians hear the voices of young people from every community and background in Scotland.
- **Political Impartiality** - We are independent from all political parties. By working with all stakeholders, groups, and individuals who share our values, we deliver the policies that are most important to young people.

### SYP's *Bounce Back* campaign

The [Bounce Back campaign](#) is the Scottish Youth Parliament's 2020-21 national campaign, calling on decision makers to take a Human Rights Based Approach to recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Our campaign focuses on five areas of young people's lives, which the pandemic has particularly affected. All of these issues are underpinned by young people's access to our rights:

