Barriers and facilitators of social connections among young people in rural Scotland

Briefing Paper 2

Author: Dr Emilia Pietka-Nykaza, Dr Rosie Alexander, Leyla Kerlaff and Helen Baillot

13 November 2024

Overview

Recognising that social networks provide an important source of support for young people, this briefing paper outlines and discuss the barriers to developing strong social networks for young people in rural Scotland.

Main Findings

As we explored in our first briefing paper, the most important sources of support for young people are family, friends and other trusted adults. However not all young people are born into well-connected, well-resourced and supportive families. For young people who are less fortunate, peer groups and relationships with other professional adults such as youth workers and guidance teachers are vitally important. This paper highlights four key barriers / facilitators for developing strong relationships outside of the family environment:

- **Localised places and activities for connections**
  To facilitate connections, young people require access to localised places where they feel comfortable and can build relationships.

- **Accessibility and Transport**
  The spaces that young people form relationships within, and the services that they seek support from, need to be accessible. However, such access restricted due to limited public transport infrastructure.

- **Accessing wider service can be restricted by stigma**
  Young people are cautious about accessing public services, or are unsure of what services deliver. Accessing some public services was also perceived to come with a certain amount of stigma.

- **Perceptions of opportunities and infrastructure**
  While young people identified a great deal of support for finding work and understood the support as valuable in navigating the labour market infrastructure, such support was not available in relation to their housing needs.

Introduction

As we explored in our first briefing paper, the most important sources of support for young people are family, friends and other trusted adults. In some cases, young people are born into well-connected, well-resourced and supportive families. For young people who are less fortunate, peer groups and relationships with other professional adults such as youth workers and guidance teachers are vitally important. This paper highlights four key barriers / facilitators for developing strong relationships outside of the family environment.

2. Accessibility and Transport

The spaces that young people form relationships within, and the services that they seek support from, need to be accessible. In this project, issues of accessibility particularly arose for young people in rural communities outside of the main towns. Bus services were perceived as infrequent and sometimes unreliable; in Orkney a lack of buses running in the evening was particularly highlighted. Young people in rural communities where there is limited public transport infrastructure are reliant on family and friends to provide lifts unless they are able to drive. Without access to a car, they are unable to access dedicated services or employment. Again, in Orkney, issues of ferry transport for those from the outer isles means that activities held on the mainland are often impossible to access, and a lack of parity between bus and ferry services means that where buses are free for young people, ferries are not.

1. Localised Places and activities for social connections

As discussed in previous briefing paper, families are a key source of support for young people. However, families vary in their knowledge, resources, and the strength of relationships within them. Building relationships with peers, with other important adults, and engaging with public services is important to address inequalities between young people. To facilitate connections, young people require access to localised places where they feel comfortable and can build relationships. These relationships are however formed in places, and through activities that people engage in on a regular basis over a prolonged period of time. Having spaces that young people feel comfortable in, and where they are engaged in activities they enjoy helps to build trustful relationships with both peers and professionals. For young people in this project, key relationships had been developed in spaces dedicated to young people, including youth club settings or youth projects. However, others reported either choosing not to engage with youth clubs or not being able to engage, and instead seeking out alternative activities and local places where they could connect with peers. These included social spaces, and social activities.

For school-age young people, schools were key sites for forming relationships with friends and professionals. These included with teachers and guidance teachers, but also careers advisers, employability officers and youth workers. However, as with youth clubs, not all young people found the school environment positive and some did not develop strong relationships in this setting. Young people in this project reflected on the need for a wider range of activities and localised spaces that cater to the diversity of their interests. Recognising that different young people feel 'at home' in different environments and responding by offering a more diverse range of spaces and activities available for young people to socially connect would address both a sense of limited opportunities in rural areas, and enable young people to strengthen and extend their social networks.

4. Perceptions of opportunities and infrastructure

Services providing support and advice are only perceived as useful in opportunity-rich contexts. Young people identified a great deal of support for finding work and understood the support as valuable in navigating the labour market. However, they identified very few possibilities where finding housing was concerned. All young people who took part in this study were living with their family members and did not see it changing in near future. A perception that housing is simply not available, or too expensive for young people, meant that most had never even considered where they might look for advice or support. This is significant because being able to live independently is an aspiration of many young people, but a lack of opportunities impacts on their ability to achieve this. The exception is leaving home to go to university, as the provision of financial and other support for higher education meaning that university is perceived as a key means for being able to leave home, which is much more difficult to achieve otherwise. However, entering university is also a step that not all feel able to achieve, requiring a level of academic achievement, confidence, and significant financial resource. Here we see how the education infrastructure and funding additionally drives outmigration in contexts where independent living (within one's own community) is seen as challenging.

3. Accessing wider services

Local and national organisations and services are a significant source of support for rural young people. However, as we explored in our previous briefing paper, family members, friends and trusted professionals are the key source of multiple support for young people who are also cautious about accessing other services, or are unsure of what services deliver, and whether they are appropriate or accessible for young people. Accessing some public services was also perceived to come with a certain amount of stigma. Young people were much more likely to access services when they had been provided with additional information and encouragement by adults or peers. School guidance teachers and youth workers were particularly important sources of information and encouragement. Young people had often been referred to additional support as a result of being identified in school settings as requiring additional help. This raises questions about accessibility of services for those who do not present themselves for support or are not identified as requiring support in the school context. Greater consideration of how services can reach young people who can benefit from them would therefore be valuable.

Summary

To facilitate connections, young people require access to localised places where they feel comfortable and can build relationships. These include school contexts youth clubs, and in the case of friendships, social activities. These places also need to be accessible, bearing in mind transport infrastructure. Public services are of limited impact and rely on young people being encouraged or supported to access them. They are perceived as of limited relevance in addressing young people's needs if there are issues in the wider economic and social infrastructure of a place. The implications are:

1) consideration should be made to provision of a range of spaces and activities to support young people in rural areas,

2) services need to be more fully promoted and accessible to young people; and

3) issues of economic and social infrastructure in rural areas including transportation and housing require critical consideration in order to improve young people's lives.

For more information on this work please contact:

E: Emilia.pietka-nykaza@uws.ac.uk

sefari.scot   info@sefari.scot   @SEFARIscot

Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot