

Increasing children and young people's access to hobbies in Scotland

A briefing for MSPs



August 2026





Support the introduction of a Scottish Hobby Model to provide children and young people with activities that boost their wellbeing and relationships, and reduce online harm

Why hobbies matter

Children and young people growing up in Scotland face many challenges. Research tells us that more and more children are experiencing bullying, problematic social media use, poor sleep and feeling pressured by school work.¹

Children are growing up in a world where digital technology plays an ever-greater role in daily life, making access to hobbies, youth activities and community spaces more important than ever in supporting healthy, balanced childhoods and children's physical and emotional development. We urgently need solutions that are going to improve children's wellbeing and bring the fun back into childhood.



Growing up in Scotland, hip hop dancing was one of my favourite hobbies. I loved going to classes each week, learning new routines, and performing at comps with my best mates. It gave me confidence, kept me active, and was a fun way to express myself outside of school"

Young person, Young Scot Survey

Hobbies are proven to improve mental health, social connection, educational outcomes and skills development. They support school attendance, boost social skills and reduce risky behaviours such as drinking, vaping and taking drugs. They can help to tackle bullying and provide opportunities for fun, joy and success.^{2,3}

The Irish Online Health Taskforce, established to examine the impact of online activity on children and young people's health and wellbeing, emphasised that strengthening opportunities beyond the screen is a key part of addressing online harms. The final report of the Irish Taskforce on online health states:



The need to invest in and strengthen offline spaces and places for young people is not separate from – but is integral to – addressing the challenges of the digital world"

¹ **ScotPHO profiles** – Public Health Scotland.

² **Youth provision and life outcomes: systematic literature review (executive summary)** – Department for Culture, Media & Sport.

³ **Beyond the Classroom: The role of enrichment in tackling the school absence crisis** – Centre for Young Lives, 2025.

⁴ **Online Health Taskforce: Final Report** – Department of Health (Republic of Ireland), 2025.

What is getting in the way of hobbies?

There is a clear inequality in access to hobbies and activities across Scotland. While participation in hobbies and organised activities can support children's wellbeing, confidence, friendships and sense of belonging, the evidence suggests that many children and young people face significant barriers to taking part.

Participation is lower among children living in the most deprived areas, as well as disabled, care-experienced and LGBTQI+ young people, suggesting that those who can benefit most from positive activities often face the greatest barriers to taking part.

- **Only 45% of young people living in the areas of highest deprivation participated in a hobby**, according to Children in Scotland's 2023 Ipsos research with 1,533 Scottish young people.
- 67.5% of S3 and S4s take part in at least one weekly activity, but participation fell to **55.3% among disabled young people, 55.6% among care-experienced young people, and 59.6% among LGBTQI+ young people**, according to Planet Youth's 2025 survey of 7,662 pupils.
- **Children from highly mobile families face specific challenges** accessing hobbies. For example, long waiting lists can mean that children are on the move again before they ever get the chance to participate.⁵
- **Cost is the biggest barrier** according to Parenting Across Scotland's research with parents. Families highlighted session fees, equipment, travel and other hidden costs, as well as the challenge of fitting activities into busy family routines.⁶
- **Only 22% of young people have access to completely free hobbies**, according to a recent Young Scot survey.⁷

Where Scotland is now

Scotland can take the decision to introduce a national policy that guarantees access to hobbies. Important building blocks are already in place;

- Public investment already supports activity through sport, culture, play and seasonal programmes, but it is spread across different funding streams and policy areas rather than sitting within a single coherent framework.
- The incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law, alongside Scottish Government priorities on child poverty and wellbeing, provides a clear rationale for improving access to hobbies.

We now need national co-ordination to make sure hobbies are accessible to those children that could benefit most. Action to further increase family incomes in line with Scottish Government's commitments on child poverty is also essential to helping families overcome barriers to access. Without these steps we will not overcome the inequality of access to hobbies that currently exists.

⁵ **Living in our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families** – Ministry of Defence, 2020.

⁶ **Parents and carers perspectives on children and young people's access to hobbies** – Parenting Across Scotland, 2026.

⁷ **Cost is the biggest barrier to young people taking part in hobbies** – Young Scot, 2026.

What other countries show

International examples show that national action is possible. Finland has used schools to widen access to hobbies, while Iceland has introduced a leisure card to help families pay for local activities.⁸

These models point to some common ingredients: clear entitlements, coordinated delivery, local flexibility and sustained investment.

Evaluations from international models point to benefits for participation, wellbeing and prevention:

- **In Iceland**, rates of 15- and 16-year-olds that had been drunk within the last 30 days dropped from 42% to less than 10% from 1998 - 2012.
- Before implementation, 23% of 15- and 16-year-olds smoked daily and 17% had tried cannabis. By 2012, both measures have reduced to under 10%, and they have remained around that level ever since.⁹



- **In Finland**, 2024/25, 143,000 primary and secondary aged young people participated in the national hobby programme. 22,800 of those said they would not have been able to access hobbies if not for the policy (2024/25).
- 94% of overall participants experienced joy and success when taking part.
- Activity groups had positive impacts on the wellbeing of participants, including reduced bullying and discrimination.¹⁰

Images: **Young people's artwork in Iceland and Finland.**
Photos © Amy Woodhouse

⁸ **Increasing Children and Young People's Access to Hobbies and Leisure Activities** – Amy Woodhouse, 2023 Churchill Fellow, 2023.

⁹ **Prevention is Possible** – Planet Youth.

¹⁰ **Free-of-charge leisure activity groups prevent segregation among children and young people and provide experiences of group membership** – Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland), 2025.

Our ask

We ask MSPs to call for and introduce a national hobby model, to give children and young people regular access to accessible, affordable, fun activities.



Please contact us to:

- Discuss the benefits a hobby model could bring
- Talk about interesting work happening in your constituency
- Explore further actions you can take to support the introduction of a national hobby model.



The campaign so far

This briefing has been written by Parenting Across Scotland in collaboration with the following organisations: Awards Network, Child Poverty Action Group, Children First, Children in Scotland, Family Fund, Fife Gingerbread, Forces Children Scotland, Inspiring Scotland, Lyra, One Parent Families Scotland, Planet Youth, Public Health Scotland, The Yard, The Young Women's Movement, Young Scot, and Youth Scotland.

Our work is supported by the Ideas for Change Fund, a partnership between Inspiring Scotland and Changing Ideas. Throughout 2026, we are working together to build momentum for a national approach to increasing children and young people's access to hobbies.

If you would like to find out more or join us in this campaign, please contact:

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