

Who We Are

The Scottish Youth Parliament - 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.

Summary

Of the young people we spoke to in our focus group (8 MSYPs), they all agreed or strongly agreed that young people's mental health has been affected by the cost of living crisis. Services that support young people's mental health and well-being, like youth work and community-based mental health services, are underfunded. This is impacting service delivery and accessibility, especially for those in more rural areas. Overall, this means services are struggling to cope with the growing demand, resulting in children and young people not receiving the support they need. Consequently, all the young people we spoke to strongly agreed that the cost of living crisis will have a long-term impact on young people's health and well-being.

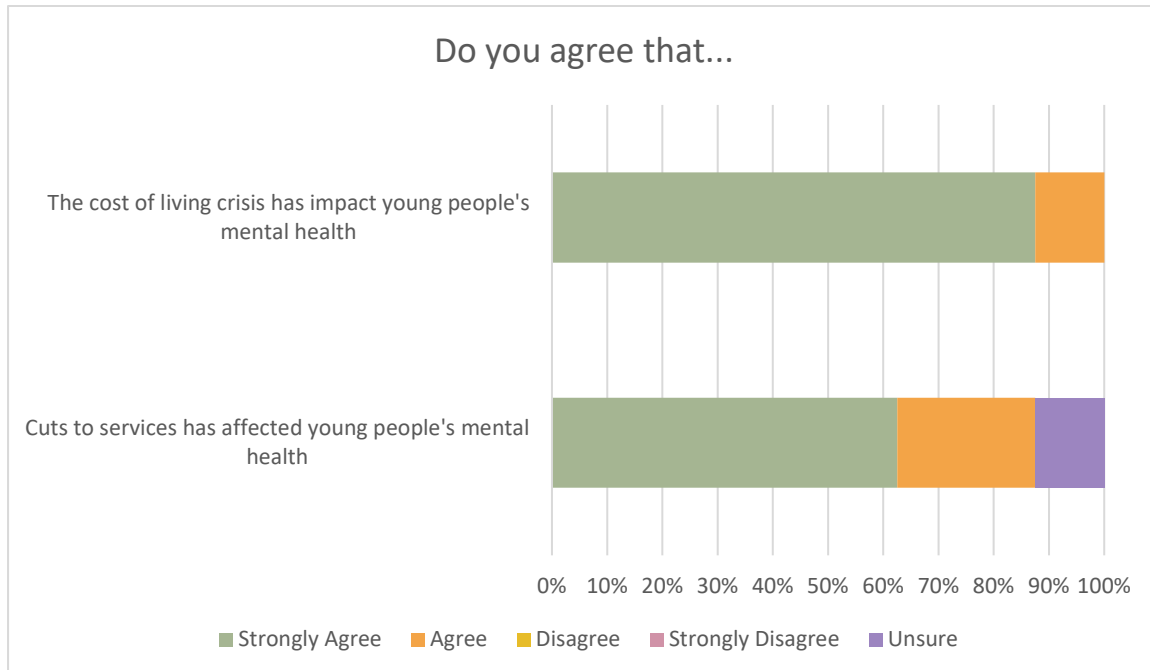
Recommendations

1. The UNCRC should be incorporated into law by the UK and Scottish Government to offer stronger protection of children and young people's rights, including their right to health and health care services (article 24).
2. Long-term funding needs to be available for services that support children and young people's mental health and well-being, such as youth work and community-based mental health. During the cost of living crisis, this is essential for addressing the growing demand for these services. However, these holistic services are also vital for prevention strategies, so long-term funding options are necessary.
3. Interventions are needed to improve accessibility in rural areas. Alongside ensuring funding reaches these areas, connectivity should be improved such as through free public transport for young people being introduced across the UK. The scheme should be UK-wide and cover all forms of public transport, including ferries.

Young people's health and wellbeing

FOCUS GROUP (8 MSYPs):

To what extent have young people's health and well-being been affected by the cost-of-living crisis?



There was unanimous agreement with the statement that young people's mental health has been affected by the cost-of-living crisis, with 7 out of 8 young people in the focus group strongly agreeing. They said:

- *"I worked on a report that looked at young people's experiences of the cost of living crisis across the UK, our research clearly showed that young people's mental health had been impacted, it was devastating hearing their experiences. They had lost hope."*
- *"I work 35 hours a week and make less than rent on any one or two bedroom flat or house in my area."*
- *"lots of young people i know worry about their spending and that of their family. this inevitably wears on their mental health."*

Meanwhile, 5 strongly agreed and 2 agreed that cuts to services had an impact, whilst 1 person skipped the question. They said:

- *"I've been on the sandyford (sexual health clinic) waiting list for 5 years. Last year I was in a car crash that injured me so severely I cannot return to the job I had before. I still haven't seen a physiotherapist and am in pain all the time, which is severely detrimental to my mental health."*
- *"My carer service had to cut their numbers of people attending groups aswell as how many support workers they had due to lack of funds to pay which meant i didnt get to see my friends as much as well as not being able to attend group which has always been a lifeline for me"*

EVIDENCE SPOTLIGHT:

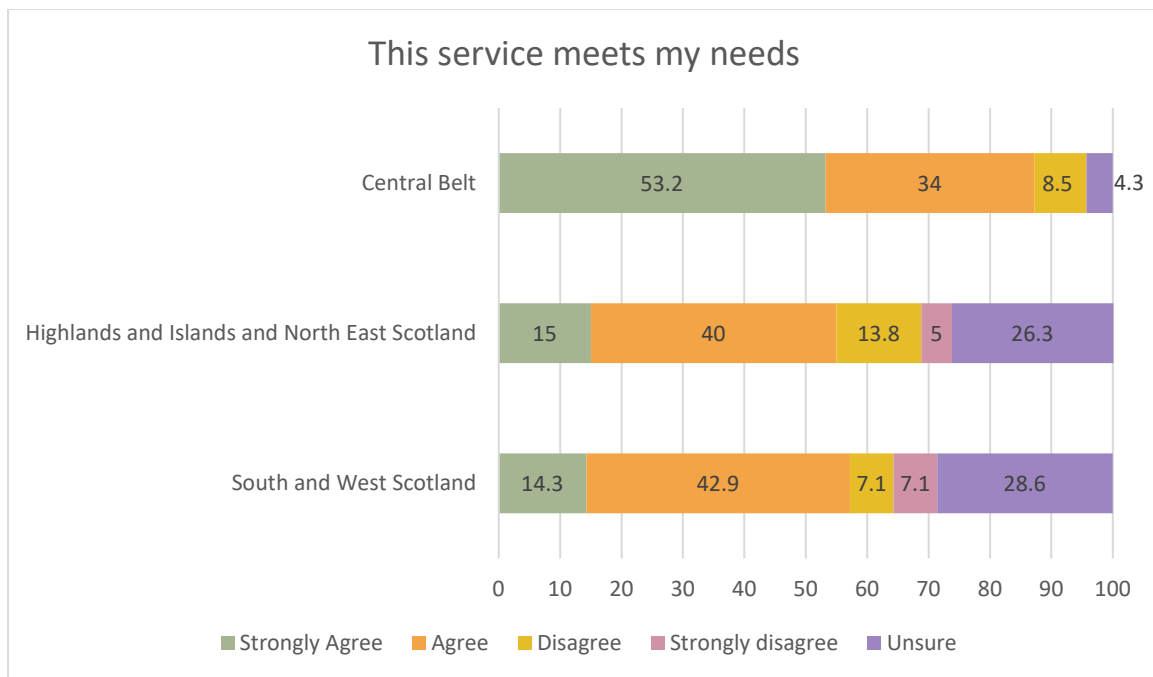
Independent evaluation of mental health and wellbeing community support and services for 5 to 24-year-olds, their parents and carers (November 2022) - [available here](#).

The independent evaluation was led by the Scottish Youth Parliament's Mental Health Investigation Team, between May and October 2022. It compared the services with the recommendations from the [Our Minds Our Future project](#). It consulted with 246 young people.

Demand for mental health and wellbeing support appears to have increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, along with the rise in the cost of living. The rise in demand for mental health services has created long waiting times and resulted in a mental health crisis. Primarily, increased funding has focused on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS).

SYP's research on community-based mental health services found that nearly three-quarters (73%) of young people who responded felt they were supported when using these services. Community-based mental health services could offer effective support and help reduce waiting times. Nevertheless, the rise in demand for mental health services has also impacted waiting times for community-based mental health services. Funding issues have also led services to reduce the number of sessions they can offer, limiting the number of young people that can be seen and the length of time they receive support. Community-based mental health services could be providing effective support to almost three-quarters of Scotland's young people, but this cannot be done without a commitment to resourcing them.

Notably, the perceived standards of services are much better in the Central Belt of Scotland than in the Highlands, Island, North East, South and West Scotland, as shown in the chart below. This highlights an inequity in service provision, often referred to as a being a 'post-code' lottery for mental health support.



At the start of 2023, SYP brought these findings to the UN’s Committee on the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. After hearing the evidence about the mental health pressures young people face, and the opportunity of community mental health services to get young people support quicker, they included in their concluding observations for the UK to:

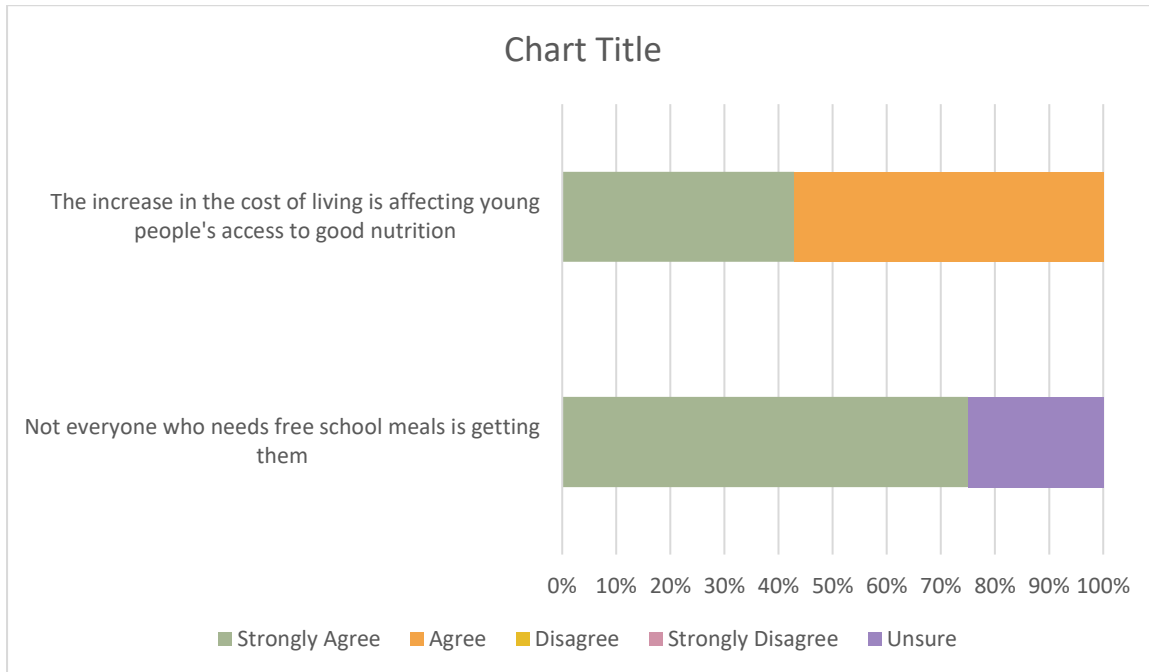
“43 (c) Develop or strengthen strategies, with sufficient resources, for ensuring the availability of community-based therapeutic mental health services and programmes for children of all ages, and for providing comprehensive mental health promotion, screening for mental health issues and early intervention services in schools.”

This means the UN Committee recognised strengthening the resources provided for community-based mental health services was important for achieving children and young people’s right to health and healthcare services (Article 24 of the UNCRC). Having the UNCRC incorporated into law (rather than just a treaty the UK agreed to) would help ensure these recommendations are acted upon.

Free School Meals (FSM) and food security

FOCUS GROUP (8 MSYPs):

How is the rise in the cost of living affecting young people's access to good nutrition?



All the young people we spoke to agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of living crisis is affecting young people's access to good nutrition, with 3 young people strongly believing so. One person explained that *“yes, not only is it cheaper to consume ultra high processed foods when buying them from shops, but this is also found in terms of the most energy efficient cooked meals (that the average person is aware of). it takes a lot of time, digital literacy, cooking proficiency and effort (even just researching how to cook low cost, low energy, nutritious cooking) to prepare a nutritious meal which meets this criteria. this is made worse for those with allergies and dietary requirements as these are often not included in discounts and coupons offered by shops. for example, my cousin is 4 with complex allergies. my aunt has to either buy expensive allergy friendly foods in large quantities to prepare a meal that her whole family can eat, or cook twice, with entirely seperate food for her son.”*

Many young people struggling to access good nutrition rely on their school meals and access to the free school meal scheme. However, 6 out of the 8 young people we asked agreed that not everyone who needs free school meals was getting them. 2 responded they were unsure. In the group, they gave a few examples of young people missing them:

- “ive known plenty of young carers who do not have access to free schools meals beause they do not meet the requirements e.g. having a bit more money but once rent and bills are paid their families can barely afford to send their kids to school with money for food”

- “The rise in prices has not been taken into account for the criteria of free school meals so many more families could use them but can't access them, and families who home educate have never been able to access them same with families with high school children”

When asked, if any, have you seen changes in eating / food patterns given the rise in food prices they identified:

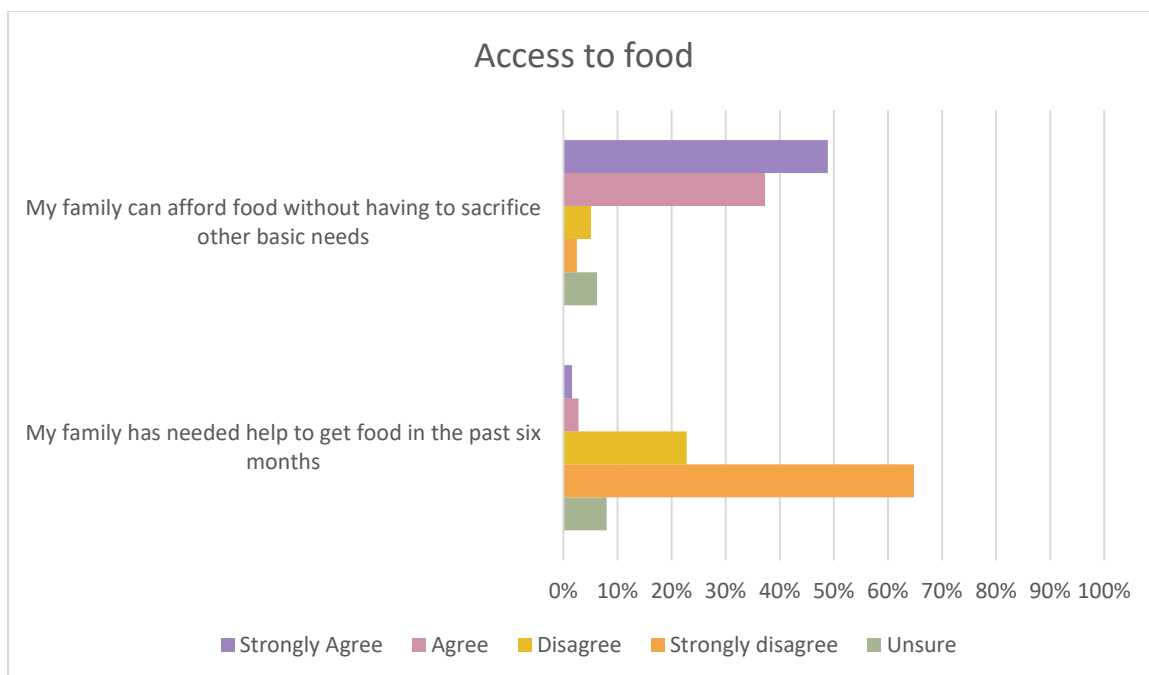
- Less people affording school meals.
- Reliance of special deals and discounts - which results in less healthy and frozen or microwave options.
- People reducing the amount they eat to save costs and having snacks instead of meals.
- Eating out or ordering food less.
- Difficulty for young people to provide for themselves - club card and nectar card memberships are over 18.
- Applying to jobs that include a free meal during shifts.

EVIDENCE SPOTLIGHT:

Young People’s Right to Food Report (March 2023) - [available here](#)

The research for this report was carried out in October and November 2022 through an online survey. In total, 846 young people aged 12-26 took part in this consultation. Responses were received from young people in twenty-six local authorities and from the eleven national voluntary organisations represented within SYP.

The Young People’s Right to Food Report wasn’t directly focused on how young people’s right to food had changed as an impact of the cost of living crisis. Instead, it addressed young people’s access to food and thoughts on solutions more generally. Only 12 percent of respondents came from Quintile 1 of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (the most deprived areas), so the report was not focused on the experiences of those most vulnerable to the cost of living crisis and at risk of not having their right to food met. This translates to the results on questions about their access to food, as shown below.



Survey respondents could also write about their experience, which provided more insight into the experiences of those with limited access. When asked if “it is easy for me to get to a shop which sells healthy and affordable food?” 4.8% were unsure, 84.1% agreed or strongly disagreed, and 11.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed. For those who answered it wasn’t easy several barriers were identified, including a lack of public transport in rural and island communities, travel expenses for low-income families, and inaccessible shops for young people who have disabilities. One young person said: “When I say I don’t have access to a place to buy food I mean my nearest food store is islands away and the bus to get there doesn’t come within a mile of my house” (Right to Food Report, 2023, SYP, page 9).

Previously, SYP’s *All Aboard* campaign called for free bus travel for all young people under the age of 22 in Scotland. This campaign was a success, and young people can use their Young Scot card to use buses for free. A review of this policy by the Scottish Government showed that it improved the independence of young people and benefited their health and well-being. However, it currently does not stretch far enough, as it does not apply to people who rely on other forms of public transport, such as ferries. More needs to be done to ensure all young people can receive the health benefits associated with free public transport.

For the question do you “feel there is a stigma in asking for help to access food?” 47.4% responded yes, 20.7% responded no, and 31.9% responded they were unsure. One young person said: “Somewhat, but I feel like with rising food insecurity and the cost of living crisis it is almost more normalised and understood that many people need to access emergency food provision” (Right to Food Report, 2023, SYP, page 10). Whilst it is very important to reduce the stigma associated with asking for help to access food, it is concerning that the current way this is being achieved has been identified as food insecurity becoming a more common problem.

Looking at solutions that address stigma and also help achieve the right to food, SYP has been campaigning for universal free school meals. 86 per cent of the young people who responded believed that universal free school meals would uphold young people's right to food, with the potential to reduce the stigma associated with free school meals and asking for help.

Another suggestion included: "you have the Young Scot card which gives you free travel what about partnering with shopping centres or local shops so that possible a system like the Young Scot card is implemented and you can get lunch for free on a card" (Right to Food Report, 2023, SYP, page 18). As everyone already has Young Scot cards, school meal payment systems that use them (or similar cards) could provide young people who receive free school meals with more privacy. This could be a positive action if universal free school meals are not possible.

Given the free bus travel under-22 scheme using the Young Scot card was evaluated as successful, expanding the ability to use a card across the UK for more travel options and ways to access free school meals could help address some of the problems identified.

Life chances and support for young people

FOCUS GROUP (8 MSYPs):

How have youth groups been supporting young people during the cost of living crisis?

When asked how have youth groups been impacted by the cost of living crisis, and consequently, how have young people been affected, the young people in the focus group identified lack of funding as a core issue. They said this impacted them as there were less resources and opportunities, cuts to the number of staff and sessions on offer, and services only available in concentrated areas where workers are as they can't travel. As a result, young people have less access to services and opportunities.

EVIDENCE SPOTLIGHT:

Youth Work and Me (August 2023) - [available here](#)

In July 2023, at SYP's 79th National Sitting in Orkney, 86 members of SYP (MSYPs) - young people aged 14 to 25 - took part in a consultation workshop to discuss their experiences of youth work.

The rising cost of living is impacting children and young people in Scotland as families struggle to keep people warm and fed, with consequences for their mental health. MSYPs believe that youth work is important for young people's health and well-being, as it reduces loneliness and mental health problems by providing support, opportunities, and a sense of belonging. However, youth work is not accessible to everyone and is becoming less so in the cost-of-living crisis, when young people need it most. Addressing cuts to funding and less access in rural areas have been identified as important actions.

Youth work can create supportive networks for young people, where they feel they have the "opportunity to express [themselves], become confident, make friends, help others through volunteering and youth voice groups, and improve my future greatly" (Youth Work and Me, 2023, SYP, p.4). With gaps in mental health services, the environment youth work creates can be vital for young people's mental health and well-being, as evidenced by MSYPs responding that without youth work there would be more mental health problems. Overall, MSYPs were passionate about the positive impact of youth work, as shown in the chart below.

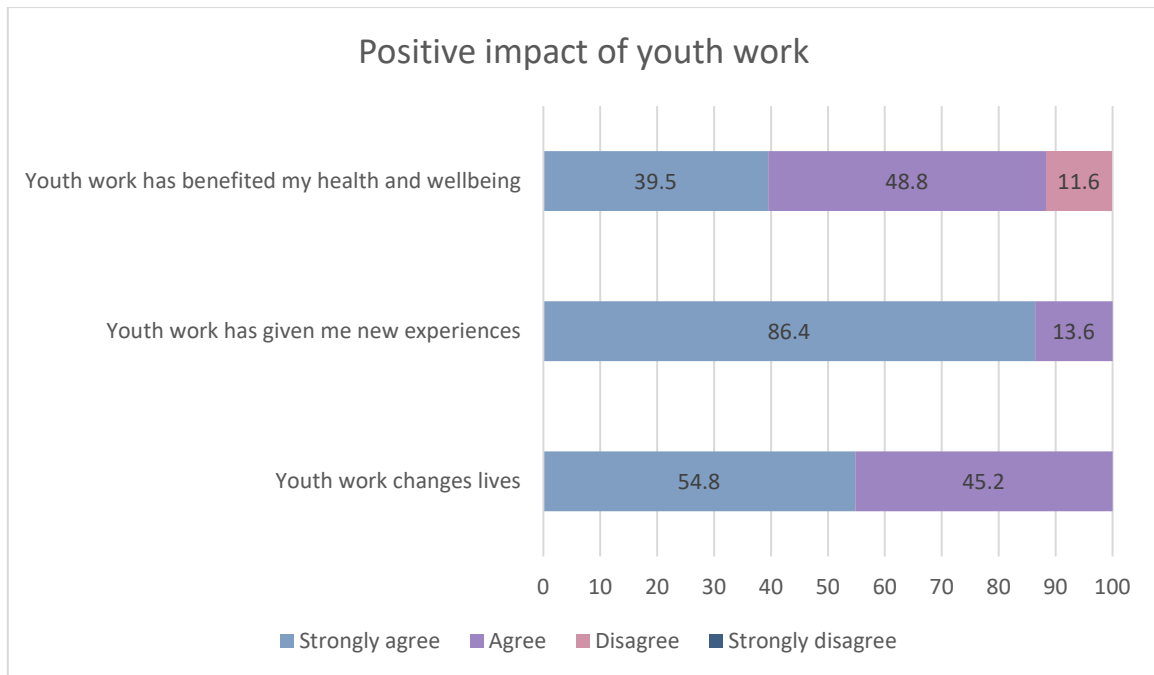


Chart 1. bar chart with responses from Youth Work and Me report (2023)

An important aspect of the benefits MSYPs perceived in the youth work at SYP was the ability to make a difference and participate in decision-making. This not only provided them with a sense that they were broadening their own skills and experience, but also that they could make a positive impact in their community: “it can give those who are under-represented a voice and chance to make a positive difference” (Youth Work and Me, 2023, SYP, p.6). Without youth work, the respondents believed there would be less opportunities for youth participation in decision-making. In the cost of living crisis, as young people’s rights are more at risk (such as the right to food), having a mechanism to support their voices being heard is even more crucial.

Given the positive impact youth work can have on young people’s health and opportunities, it is concerning that it is not accessible to everyone, as illustrated by the chart below. Further, MSYPs said more work needed to be done to improve inclusion, of those in rural communities and from people of colour and minority groups.

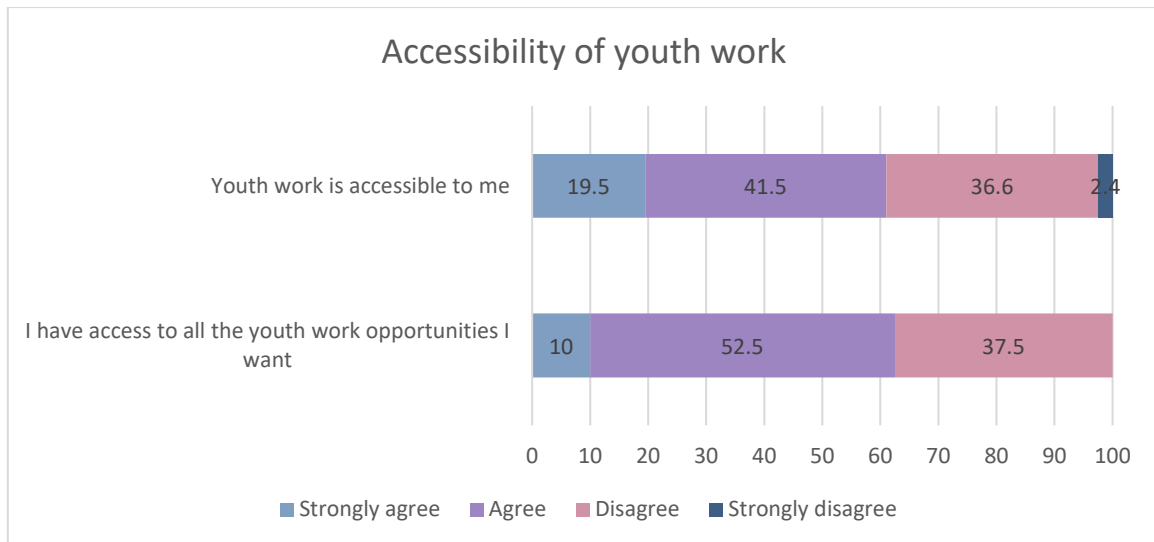


Chart 2. bar chart with responses from Youth Work and Me report (2023)

SYP’s Youth Work and Me report (2023), calls for more funding and support for youth work to be delivered across Scotland, more opportunities to get involved, improved promotion of opportunities, and better accessibility and inclusion for all young people. This is in line with SYP’s manifesto statement that “local youth work should be invested in by national and local government and protected by law from budget cuts” (75% agreed, 2020). Long-term protection from budget cuts is vital in order to achieve the holistic role youth work can play. This can be for reducing mental health problems as previously mentioned, or providing protection against young people developing problem drug use as SYP explored in the campaign priority to treat drug-related harm as a public health approach.