

Social connections of young people in rural areas

Briefing Paper 1

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Overview

The briefing paper focus on the role of social connections in supporting rural young people's social, economic, and wellbeing needs in rural places. The findings illustrate that young people value close, supportive relationships with both family members, peers and trusted adults. For many young people friends and family are the most important source of support and information. However, for others, youth workers, teachers, and other significant adults are also important. Although young people feel there are a number of available support organisations in their area, these primarily offered support to find employment and less are available in other areas, with access to housing being particular issue.

Main Findings

This briefing paper outlines and discuss the role of social connections in supporting rural young people's social, economic, and wellbeing needs. It explores the forms of social connections that are felt to be most important and the functions they play for the young people we spoke to.

- **Family, friends and trusted professionals are the key social connections for young people**

Young people typically described a small number of close relationships that were important to them in providing advice, support and connecting them to available support services. These relationships are with trusted individuals with whom young people have sustained and ongoing connections and who provide multiple forms of support. These relations included family members, friends and trusted professional.

- **Diversity of social connections and their role in connecting young people into the service provision**

Social connections help young people to access various services that are accessible to them. These services are an important part of helping a young person access the resources they need to feel settled in a local area. However, the availability and accessibility of services varied. Young people were, across communities, much more able to access sources of support for finding employment than for accessing housing (see Figure 1).

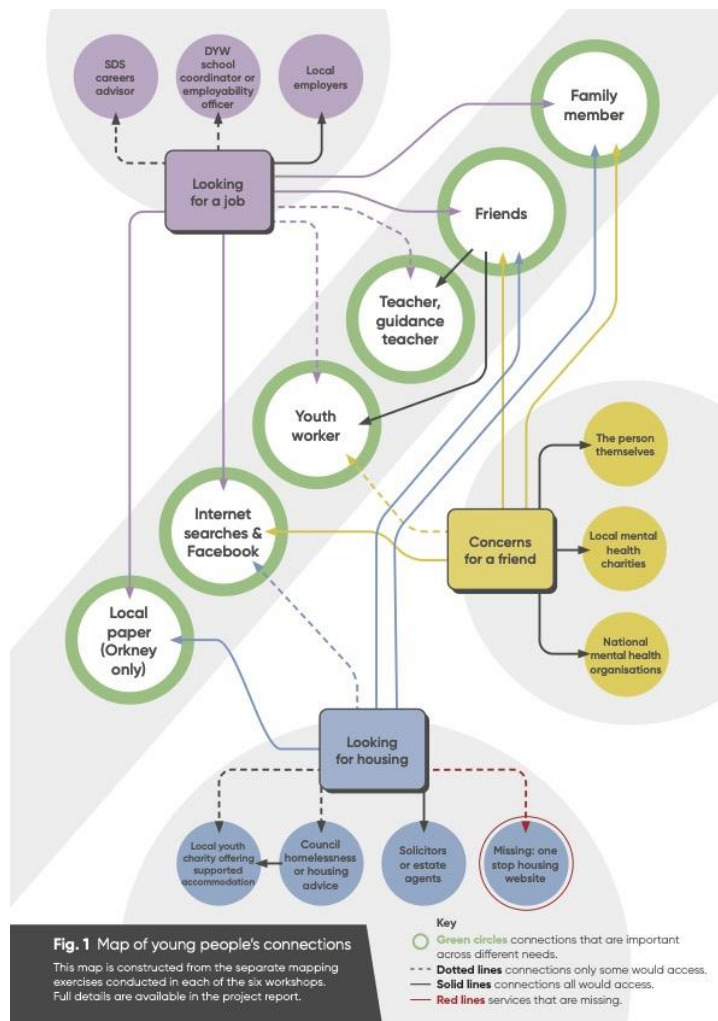
Introduction

This briefing paper highlights key findings from ‘Mapping Social Connections of Diverse Young People in Rural Scotland’; a project undertaken within SEFARI Gateway funded Special Advisory Group and led by Emilia Pietka-Nykaza from the University of the West of Scotland, alongside Rosie Alexander (University of West of Scotland), Helen Baillot and Leyla Kerlaff (both from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh). It discusses the role of social connections in supporting rural young people’s social, economic, and wellbeing needs, with particular focus the forms of social connections that are felt to be important and the functions they play for the young people we spoke to.

Methods

The project involved six participatory workshops conducted between March and May 2024. Three were held in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands, and three in the Orkney Islands. Young people who took part in the workshops were asked about the people and organisations that young people living in their area would speak to or ask for help in three different scenarios: looking for a job, finding a place to live, and if they were concerned about a friend or family member’s wellbeing. The scenarios were designed to elicit a range of social connections that are important to young people living locally and what role these connections play in resolving relevant practical and emotional issues in their lives. The figure 1 illustrates the summary of young people's social connections obtained via six workshops

Figure 1: Map of young people’s social connections



SDS – Scottish Development Scotland; DYW – Developing School Workforce

Discussion:

The relative value of social connections:

Young people typically described a small number of close relationships that were important to them in providing advice, support and connecting them to available support services. These relationships are with trusted individuals with whom young people have sustained and ongoing connections, and who provide multiple forms of support. The three most important forms of connection were:

- 1. Family members.** Family members, especially parents, are a source of information about jobs, housing and other aspects of adult life. In many cases they also provide material support. For example, most young people lived with parents and some found work through parents or other family members. The role of family members was universally identified as important, however, kinship relations differed in terms of their capacity to help, and in the value of resources they could offer to young people.
- 2. Friends.** Peer groups are an important source of multiple types of support including companionship, practical information, and guidance. Peer groups are especially important in providing information that feels directly relevant to the age-and-stage of young people, and as such their value is different from relationships with older individuals. Peer groups therefore played an important role in shaping young people's attitudes and perceptions of where they might go to seek help.
- 3. Trusted professionals.** Other adults in professional roles were frequently identified as important to young people as a source of multiple types of support and signposting to other resources. Exactly which professionals were identified as valuable varied depending on the environments young people accessed regularly and felt comfortable in, but included youth workers, guidance teachers, and employability workers. Young people reported the most beneficial relationships to be with adults who they felt really cared about them, and who were knowledgeable about, and well connected to, other local services.

Connecting into service provision

Social connections help young people to access various services that are accessible to them. These services are an important part of helping a young person access the resources they need to feel settled in a local area. Across employment, housing and mental health and wellbeing, participants were able to identify multiple types of services or sources of support in their communities. These included national services and local charities and trusts. However, the availability and accessibility of services varied. Young people were, across communities, much more able to access sources of support for finding employment than for accessing housing (see Figure 1).

Young people were also often cautious about approaching organisations and services directly. In some cases, they reported not knowing what services did, whether they would be accessible to young people, or whether they would be helpful. In some cases, a level of stigma was attached to approaching services. Housing services particularly were identified as an issue, with few sources of support being identified and young people unsure whether they could access the services. Further 'advice' about housing was felt to be of very limited value in communities where housing supply and affordability were significant barriers to access.

Accessing services was often indirect, with young people typically relying on their close social connections of friends, family and trusted professionals. It is through these relationships young people heard about services, developed an understanding of what they did, and were encouraged to contact them. Another key form of support-seeking behaviour, and consistent across all dimensions was the importance of web searches and local social media pages (especially Facebook groups) as sources of information. Typically, the internet was the first place that young people would go to seek information and support.

Summary:

Young people value close, supportive relationships with both peers and trusted adults. For many young people friends and family are the most important source of support and information. However, for others, youth workers, teachers, and other significant adults are also important. The most important relationships are marked by care and feeling genuinely cared for, consistency, regularity, and in-person connection. They are a key connector through whom young people come to hear about and engage with other kinds of services. Although young people feel there are a number of available support organisations in their area, these primarily offered support to find employment and less are available in other areas, with access to housing being particular issue. Young people are also unlikely to access these directly without encouragement or signposting from a trusted individual such as friends, family, or significant others. Websites are also a primary source of information.

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