

Post-School Education and Skills Reform: Consultation on legislation

CAS response – September 2024



Scotland's Citizens Advice Network is an essential community service that empowers people in every corner of Scotland through our local bureaux and national services by providing free, confidential, and independent advice.

The Citizens Advice network across Scotland helped over 187,100 people in 2022-23, resulting in £142.3 million being unlocked for clients to use in their local communities. The advice we provide is life-changing and often live-saving. Moreover, we use this unique evidence base to advocate for consumers and influence long-term structural change.

Overview

Citizens Advice Scotland welcomes the opportunity to the Scottish Government's consultation on post school education and skills reform.

Integrating professionalised volunteering and voluntary organisations into the post-school education and skills reform is essential. CABs deliver significant learning outcomes, foster essential meta-skills, and contribute to community wealth and well-being – our response is based around those thematic areas with four overarching recommendations relating to the proposed changes and interconnected policy areas. At its heart, recognising and resourcing their contributions within the legislative framework will ensure a more inclusive, effective, and holistic approach to skills development in Scotland.

Volunteering has always played a key role with supporting individuals to achieve professionalised careers, providing invaluable experiences and skills – in our view this must now be recognised through adequate funding, to open and support the opportunities available, and develop our communities and services further.

Recognising the impact of volunteering as part of skills reform

- As the Scottish Government reforms post-school education and skills, it is imperative to acknowledge the significant contributions of professionalised volunteering and voluntary organizations.
- Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) are essential in community learning and development. Despite being culturally, operationally, and spatially invisible in the current skills landscape, they deliver substantial outcomes. In 2022-23, the Citizens Advice network in Scotland assisted over 187,100 people, unlocking £142.3 million for local communities.
- This demonstrates direct impact on personal and collective well-being, but also highlights their role in upskilling volunteers, many of whom proceed to paid employment or further education.

Volunteering is a pathway to employment

- 42% of volunteers who leave the Citizens Advice network advance to paid employment or further education, illustrating the efficacy of professionalised volunteering as a career pathway.
- Volunteering at CABs offers significant professional development opportunities. Volunteers engage in a structured training program, the Adviser Training Programme (ATP), which includes practical assessments and support. This program equips them with essential skills and knowledge, that can be applied across different professional sectors.

The current funding model overlooks voluntary organisations

- Current funding models and policy frameworks largely overlook the contributions of CABs to the skills and learning landscape.
- Increased accessibility to public funding for these organisations to continue delivering high-quality community-based learning would bring improved the fairness and transparency in line with the aims of the consultation.
- Recognition and resourcing are critical to maintaining and expanding their impact on community wealth building and individual wellbeing and upskilling Scotland's well-being economy.

Meta-skills and lifelong learning

- Voluntary organisations foster the development of meta-skills—such as innovation, resilience, and empathy—that are increasingly vital in a rapidly

changing world. These skills are cultivated through experiential learning, a cornerstone of volunteering at CABs.

- Such meta-skills are essential not only for coping with change but also for excelling in collaborative and innovative environments. Therefore, integrating funding for these voluntary sector-based learning experiences into the formal education and skills framework is essential for a holistic approach to skills development.
- 54% of our volunteers choose to volunteer at their local CAB to learn new skills. 12% of our volunteers also reported volunteering with a CAB to enhance employment prospects. Moreover, 89% of our volunteers report that their motivations and reasons for volunteering were met.

CASE STUDY - Sofia

Dundee law student Sofia Mechtidou had no prior knowledge of Citizens Advice, having grown up in Athens. She learned about the network when a student society she helped to run hosted speakers from the third sector. Dundee CAB gave a presentation about the work of the network and its volunteer force. "That really struck a chord with me and I immediately emailed after the event, to ask how I could potentially become a volunteer adviser," says Sofia.

Since completing her adviser training in November last year, Sofia has worked at the bureau between her studies. "The work can definitely be stressful at times, but I also find it extremely rewarding – especially when you can hear the client's relief in their voice after you present them with options they weren't aware they had," she says.

For Sofia, the age mix was unexpected: "I was genuinely surprised to find out that most volunteers are not students! It's so incredible to see that the sense of community can be so strong that people of all ages want to help each other out," she says. "I believe that students can definitely bring day-to-day knowledge that we learn through the internet and our degrees, that might not necessarily make the news for older people to hear about. As an international student, particularly, I know that I can definitely relate to clients who are struggling with immigration issues and problems relating to language barriers."

Volunteering and community wealth and wellbeing

- The Citizens Advice network contribution to community wealth and well-being are profound. CABs, as anchor institutions, support local economies by providing advice, advocacy, and learning opportunities.

- These efforts align with Community Wealth Building (CWB) principles and the Wellbeing Economy, which aim to maximise local incomes and enhance social capital.
- Legislation that recognises and integrates the voluntary sector can amplify these benefits, ensuring that community-based learning and development are adequately supported and sustained.

CASE STUDY - Yamuna

Growing up in Arbroath, Yamuna Kunwar became very familiar with the services of her local CAB. "When I was nine or ten, my parents used to ask me to contact the bureau," she recalls. "We had emigrated from Nepal, and English wasn't their first language, so if they had a question or needed help filling in a form, I would go to the bureau or call them up." So years later, as a student at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh, Citizens Advice was Yamuna's first choice when she wanted to gain some volunteer experience.

"A friend had volunteered at the Musselburgh bureau and said she really enjoyed it. And because CAB meant a lot to me personally, I wanted to join." At Musselburgh, Yamuna has gained different experience.

Her role on the front desk and in administration is a good practical complement to her business and finance degree. "It can get busy, but I've found ways to keep on top of everything. I feel I'm definitely more confident now and can work better under pressure," she says. "You go home feeling you've actually been able to help someone."

Recommendations

1. **Visibility and Inclusion:** Recognise the voluntary sector's role in delivering skills outcomes within policy frameworks and funding models.
2. **Funding Accessibility:** Increase access to public funding for voluntary organisations to support their dual role in providing advice/advocacy increasing financial gain for clients and facilitating learning and development.
3. **Accreditation and Recognition:** Work with accrediting bodies to formally recognise training programs offered by voluntary organisations, thus validating the skills and competencies acquired through volunteering.
4. **Policy Alignment:** Align this new legislation with existing and forthcoming work on Community Wealth Building, National Performance Framework, and the Wellbeing Economy to ensure a cohesive approach to skills development and community empowerment.