



Montrose Academy: Detached Youth Work & School Support

Contents

Introduction	2
Background.....	3
Exclusions, Attendance, and ASNs.....	3
Socioeconomic influences	5
Pilot Narrative	8
December 2023 to January 2024	8
February to March 2024	8
April to May 2024.....	8
June 2024	10
July to August 2024	10
October to December 2024	13
Post-Group Sessions	16
Montrose Academy Timeline	17
Findings, Learning, and Recommendations	18
Co-design Sessions	18
Detached Youth Work.....	18
Community Resources.....	19
Are young people treated unfairly?	20
Recommendations for future interventions and projects	21
Conclusion	22
References	23



Introduction

This pilot was designed to address the challenges faced by young people in the Montrose, such as a lack of community resources and disengagement from school. By using an approach that connected the community with the school, the pilot aimed to improve relationships and engagement at school, as well as creating a sense of belonging in the community. The pilot design involved several components:

Thematic Analysis: includem conducted a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with several organisations across Scotland, including with members of the Angus Third Sector Children's Services Forum and Angus Social Work. This analysis helped identify the primary issues and themes affecting young people in the region.

Co-Design Sessions: Three co-design sessions were held at Montrose Academy to gather insights and ideas from different stakeholders. We held sessions with pupils, practitioners, and senior management.

Detached Youth Work: A detached youth work program was implemented to establish relationships with young people in Montrose. This involved trying to engage with young people in their communities and connect them with local resources and services.

Group Sessions: Following the detached youth work, group work sessions were conducted within Montrose Academy. These sessions aimed to build on the relationships already established and provide targeted support based on the themes identified in the co-design sessions. The group sessions were designed to run for six weeks, with each week focusing on a different theme.

A Better Life Toolkit: The group sessions were designed around includem's bespoke support model, the A Better Life Toolkit (ABL). Originally designed to support individuals, the toolkit was adapted for group settings to facilitate collaborative learning and support.

Resource Directory: Along with young people, includem planned to create a directory of local services and resources to support young people. This directory was used to connect young people with relevant services during the detached youth work and group work sessions.



Background

When a young person goes to school, they do not leave the world behind. Young people live complex lives, and school is just one part. When thinking about the challenges facing schools it is essential to situate them in the wider social context. Schools in Scotland are facing serious challenges. Teacher numbers are on a downward trend, education budgets are being cut, attendance is at a record low, and violence in schools is on the rise.¹ Between 2010 and 2023, 1,243 council-run youth centres across Scotland were closed down.² Along with the loss of youth centres, councils have also cut funding for a range of essential youth services.³ Compounding these challenges further is a growing mental health crisis for young people in Scotland.⁴

While schools are a part of the social fabric, the support that schools can offer to young people might not extend past the school gates. This type of support includes classroom aids, modified curriculums, and extra support staff. However, young people should have access to support that connects them with the wider community. As concluded by a study that examined over 2.4million school records, “a whole-of-community approach that provides support for disadvantaged families and encourages parents to invest in and care about their child’s education and learning will yield greater returns than simply aiming to increase attendance rates.”⁵ This idea is well-known in Scotland. One of the core principles of GIRFEC states: “everyone working together in local areas and across Scotland to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.”⁶

Exclusions, Attendance, and ASNs

The relationship between school and the wider social context is evident at the local level. In Angus, school exclusions have been on a downward trend since 2008, and saw a noticeable uptick in 2023 (see Fig 1):

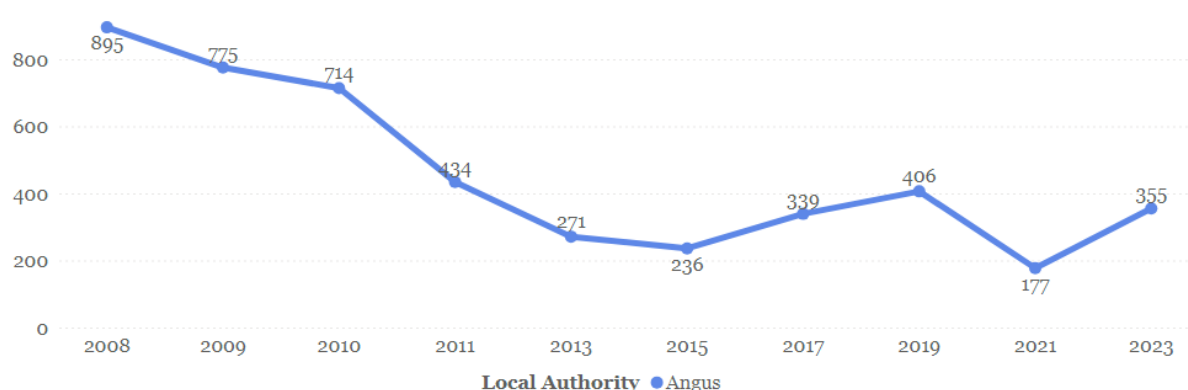


Fig 1: Number of Exclusions in Angus, 2008 to 2023

It is worth noting that while the number of exclusions in Angus remains below the number of exclusions in 2019, the impact of the COVID pandemic seems to have interrupted an upward trend. Between 2015 and 2019, exclusions increased every year. After the pandemic, exclusions seem to be returning to this upward trend. The reasons for increased exclusions in Angus include verbal abuse, fights, physical assaults, and general disobedience, such as refusal to attend class and persistent disobedience (see Fig 2):

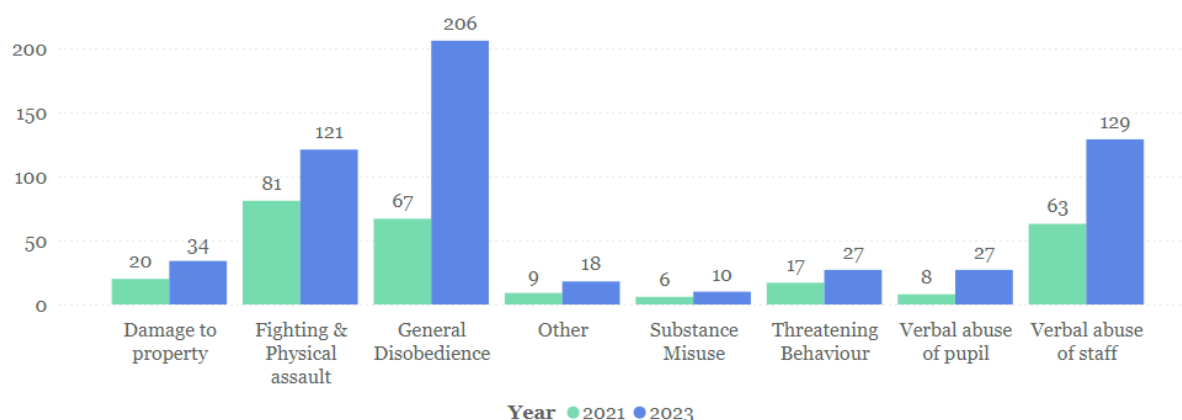


Fig 2: Reason for Exclusions in Angus, 2021 and 2023

School attendance in Angus has been declining since 2015, mirroring national trends (see Fig 3):

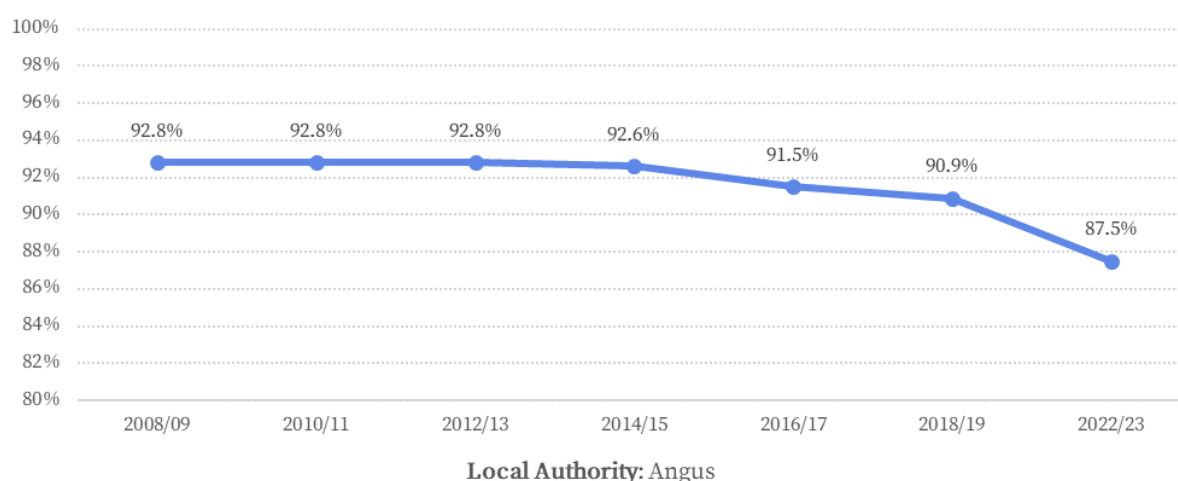


Fig 3: Attendance rates in Angus, 2008 to 2023

While attendance was stable between 2008 and 2015, it began to decline until 2019. Post-pandemic attendance figures show a more pronounced decline, influenced by factors such as lack of parental support, social isolation, poverty, age, and so on.⁷

Data on Additional Support Needs (ASNs) in Angus aligns with national trends but shows more pronounced changes due to the smaller population size. For example, in 2013 only 13 pupils were recognised as having an ASN for mental health problems, whereas in 2023 that number was 447. Since 2013, the number of pupils with ASNs in Scotland increased by 110.2%, while Angus saw a 226.6% increase. Significant increases include:

- **Mental health problems:** Scotland = +600.8%; Angus = +3,338.5%.
- **Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Difficulties:** Scotland = +136.2%; Angus = +235.5%.
- **Family Issues:** Scotland = +334.5%; Angus = +7,060%.



These sharp increases in Angus can be attributed to a smaller population size, but also better social awareness and improved training for professionals. What remains unchanged since 2013 is that young people from low-income families remain disproportionately impacted by ASNs.

Socioeconomic influences

Scottish Government data shows a clear relationship between socioeconomic status and attendance, attainment, exclusions, and ASNs. For example, pupils from SIMD Q1 are excluded at over twice the rate of pupils from SIMD Q5. While SIMD data is a very good indicator, its geographical nature hinders its precision. Data on Free School Meal uptake, on the other hand, does not have the same richness as the SIMD data, but it is based on individual pupils which makes it much more precise. Fig 4 is a graph showing the relationship between attendance and Free School Meal uptake for all secondary schools in Scotland:

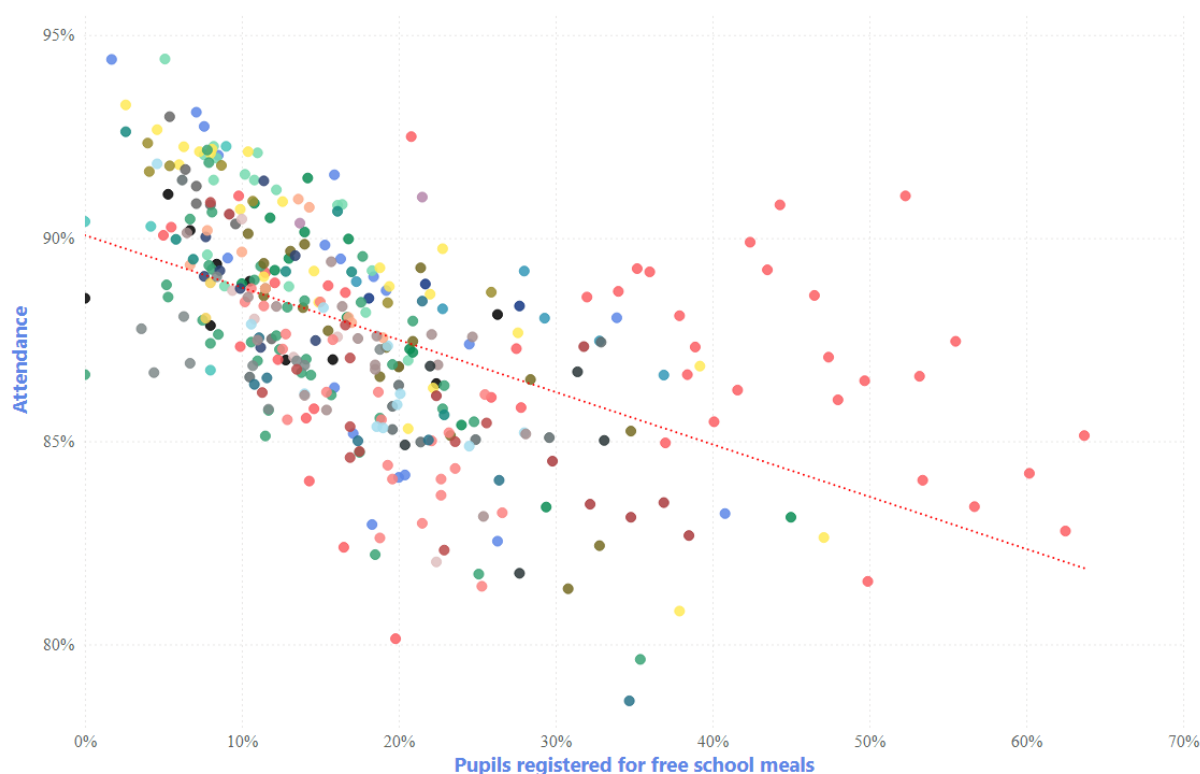


Fig 4: Free School Meal Uptake and Attendance in Scottish High Schools, 2023

There is a clear negative trend between attendance and Free School Meal uptake. While Angus only has 8 secondary schools, the same trend can be seen on the graph below (see Fig 5):

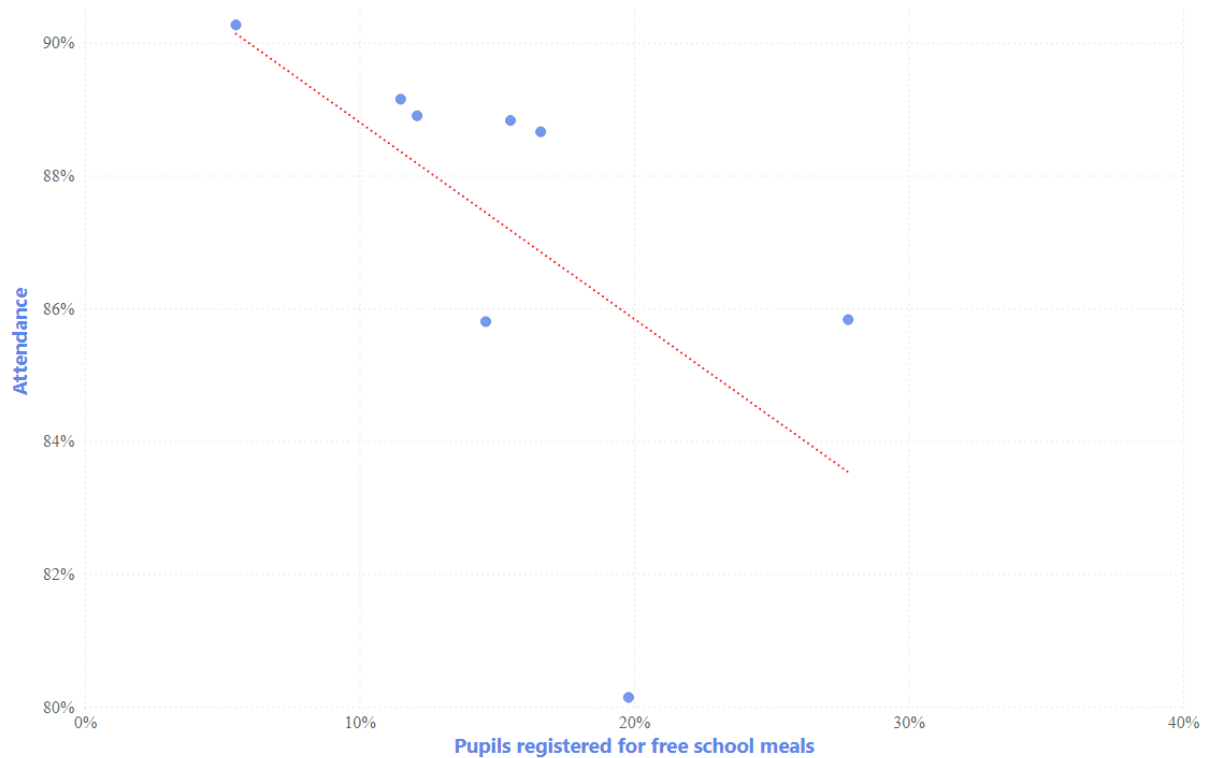


Fig 5: Free School Meal Uptake and Attendance in Angus High Schools, 2023

The same relationship can be seen for attainment. The number of students achieving 5 or more Highers decreases when there is an increase in Free School Meal uptake (see Fig 6):

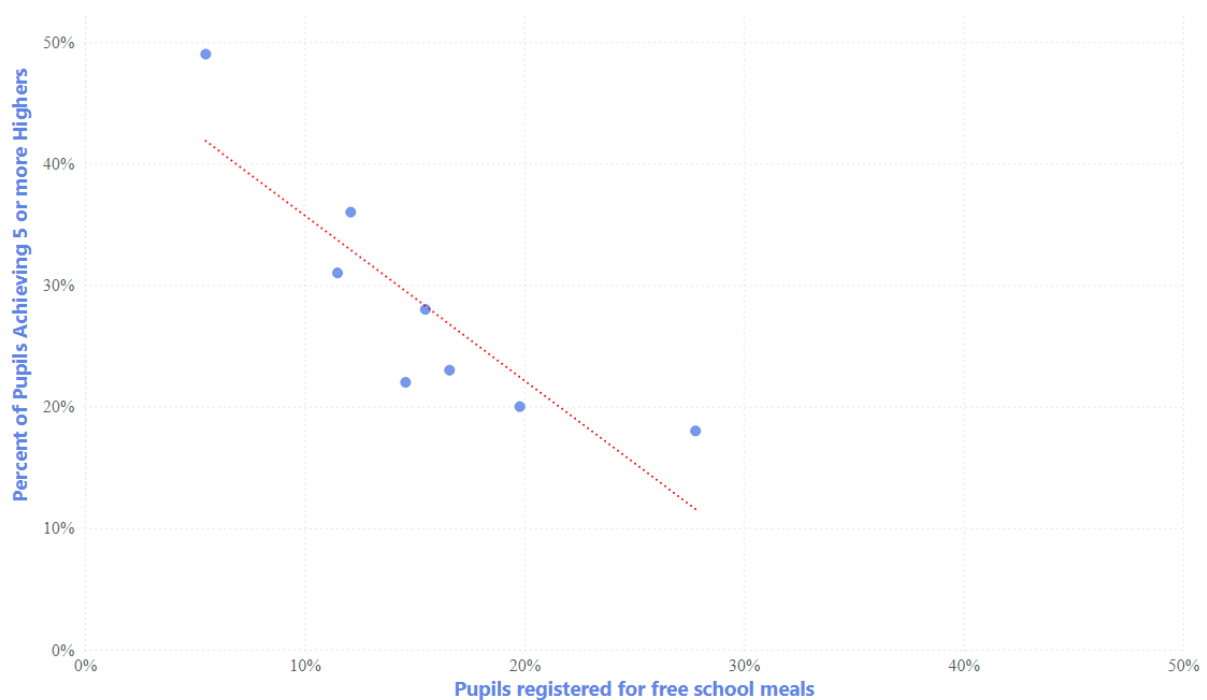
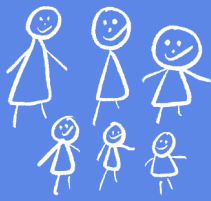


Fig 6: Free School Meal Uptake and Attainment in Angus High Schools, 2023



An inverse relationship can be seen for students with an ASN and the number of students registered for free school meals. In other words, as the number of students who are registered for free school meals increases, so does the number of students with additional support needs:

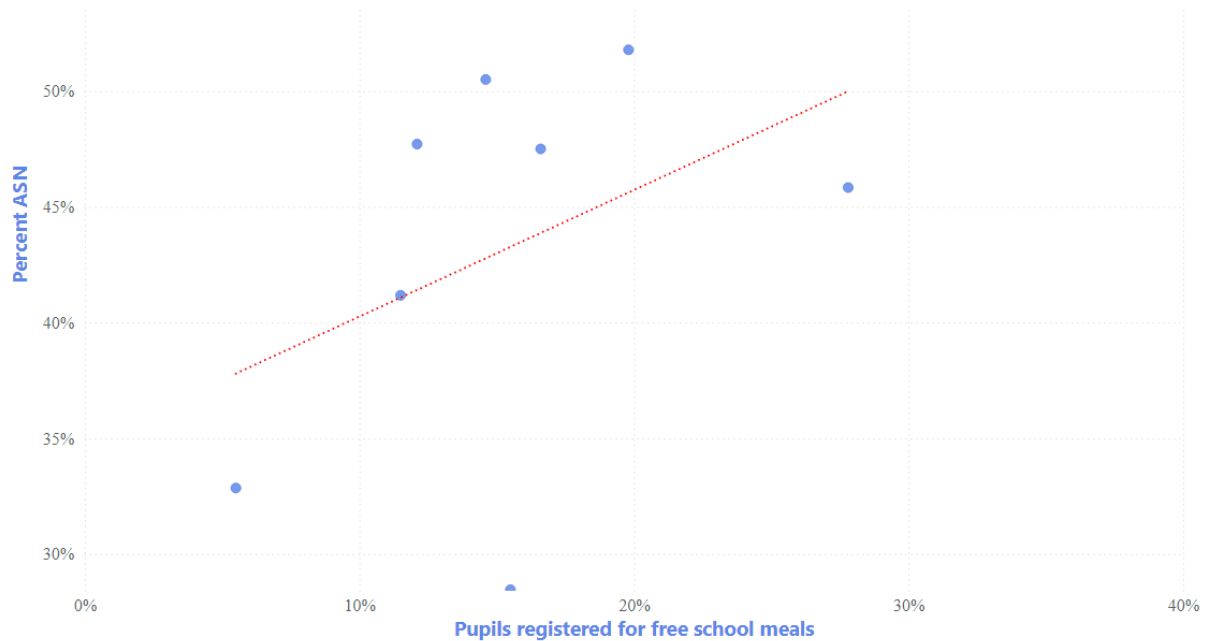


Fig 7: Free School Meal Uptake and number of pupils with an ASN in Angus High Schools, 2023

The data also demonstrates the social context of exclusions. Students with an ASN and students registered for free school meals are much more likely to be excluded than other students. This is true on a national level, but this is especially the case in Angus:

	Scotland		Angus	
	With	Without	With	Without
Free School Meals	54.9	18.0	102.3	62.1
Additional Support Needs	35.2	11.5	66.7	35.7

Table 1: Number of exclusions per 1,000 pupils.



Pilot Narrative

As part of the ADAPT Project, includem wanted to better understand service provisions for young people in conflict with the law in rural settings. Based on the findings of desk-based research and discussions held during Steering Group meetings, Angus was chosen as an area for research. What follows is the timeline for the Montrose Academy pilot, starting with the research phase and ending with the final group session with the pupils.

December 2023 to January 2024

In December 2023, includem attended the Angus Third Sector Children's Services Forum. Eight organisations discussed a range of issues, but the group unanimously agreed that one of the biggest issues in Angus relates to transitions from primary to secondary schools. For example, one organisation explained that they have support programs for primary schools that do not continue into secondary schools. The exact same young people who are receiving support in primary schools quickly start to struggle in secondary schools, which leads to pupils struggling to cope, unauthorised absences, and exclusions.

Speaking with Angus Social Work confirmed that younger children tend to receive a good level of support which falls away as they enter into teenage years. The wider social context was also brought to light, which includes low-level antisocial behaviours around supermarkets and schools, a lack of local resources for young people, and a postcode lottery of resources for young people living in a rural setting. Other issues that came out of these conversations include mental health services being oversaturated, a lack of EEI resources, and limited transport options restricting the type and level of support than can be provided.

February to March 2024

Following these preliminary conversations, includem then contacted several secondary schools to find out more. An Assistant Team Manager from includem met with Montrose Academy, Brechin High, and Arbroath High to discuss specific gaps and potential solutions. Several ideas were discussed, including a potential pilot on mental health, rights, and responsibilities. Montrose Academy expressed an interest in taking part in a co-design session with includem to explore the issues facing young people in Angus from the perspective of young people. Because the issues being discussed directly impacted children and young people in Angus, includem decided a co-design session would benefit the focus and delivery of any pilot. The ADAPT Steering Group approved this approach and gave the green light to proceed with the co-design sessions.

April to May 2024

The co-design sessions were to be held with pupils, practitioners, and the senior management team (SMT) in their own individual groups. The pupils who were asked to attend were identified by practitioners as needing extra support. Of the pupils who were asked, 14 accepted. Information sheets were given to the pupils in young-person-friendly language along with consent forms which were signed and returned. Finding time to conduct the co-design sessions proved challenging. It took a full month to find a date that could accommodate the full schedules and competing priorities of each group. On the 17th



of May, includem conducted three focus group sessions at Montrose Academy. The sessions for the practitioners and SMT ran concurrently in the morning, and the session for the pupils ran in the afternoon. From the thematic analysis, scoping, and from the conversations with other Angus high schools, seven themes were used to guide the sessions. These themes were, Physical Health, Education, Activities and Leisure, Relationships and Community, Mental Health, My Future/Young People's Future, and Resources. Each group was facilitated by two includem staff members who guided the discussions through the seven themes. Participants were encouraged to be as honest as possible and individual participants were kept anonymous in the writeup.

One of the strongest areas of agreement between the three groups was the need for more resources and support for education, mental health, and extracurricular activities. SMT, practitioners, and young people all recognised that current support systems are inadequate, particularly for pupils who are struggling academically or facing mental health challenges. Similarly, all groups highlighted that extracurricular activities have declined due to staffing and financial constraints, which has limited opportunities for young people to engage in physical and social activities outside of school. Another shared concern was the lack of connection between the school and the wider community. SMT and practitioners both pointed to a breakdown in relationships with local businesses, police, and community organisations, while young people expressed that they do not feel a sense of belonging in the area.

Even with areas of agreement, differences in perspectives arose in several key areas. While SMT and practitioners were focused on structural and systemic changes, young people were more concerned with immediate, day-to-day frustrations. For example, while SMT wanted to improve community engagement and practitioners highlighted the need for more space for pastoral care, young people were more concerned about restricted toilet access, poor food options at school, and negative attitudes from teachers.

In terms of mental health, the SMT recognised the lack of support within the school and suggested staff training to better support students, whereas young people felt that the community as a whole lacked awareness of their struggles and highlighted the absence of local mental health services in Montrose. Practitioners, on the other hand, raised concerns about their own work-related stress and lack of support for staff mental health. When discussing future aspirations, SMT saw parental engagement as key to young people's success, while practitioners wanted to change attitudes around ambition. Young people, however, were focused on financial barriers preventing them from pursuing their goals, whether in education, employment, or personal development, such as learning to drive or travelling.

Young people were clear in their dissatisfaction with the lack of activities and entertainment options in Montrose. They reported that free time was often spent indoors or "just walking about" due to the lack of accessible leisure activities. Many expressed a desire for more recreational facilities. Additionally, young people raised serious concerns about safety in the local area, mentioning issues such as drug use, fights, and antisocial behaviour. They felt that these factors made Montrose feel unsafe and limited their ability to enjoy their community. SMT agreed that more targeted and equitable activities should



be available and that families should have better access to leisure opportunities, but they did not directly address concerns around safety. Practitioners acknowledged that previously funded activities had been cut, affecting disadvantaged young people the most, and noted that existing activities were not always taken up due to cultural barriers.

June 2024

The findings of the co-design session were written into a report and formed the basis of the final design session with the ADAPT Scoping Team. The disconnect between pupils and their community stood out for several reasons. One reason is the simple fact that young people raised this as one of their primary concerns. Another reason is that it was an area that SMT and practitioners agreed with young people. A third reason is because the research interviews conducted for the ADAPT Project showed that several other organisations from rural local authority areas highlighted that young people have a notable lack of community support and resources.

Several ideas and approaches were discussed during the final design session. The general consensus was that a single-pronged approach would not adequately address the specific needs of Montrose pupils. The decision was made to create a pilot intervention that had multiple stages. The first stage was to use includem staff to reach out to local services, organisations, and groups to start to build relationships in the area. Part of this stage was to enable includem staff to better understand what is available for young people, and part of it was to gain a better understanding of the area by seeing Montrose from other perspectives. Once this stage was complete, the pilot would move into a group work stage.

The group work was structured around the seven themes of the codesign sessions with a special focus on the specific needs raised by the young people. Making use of includem's knowledge and history, includem staff modified the A Better Life (ABL) toolkit to be suitable for group sessions. This required several design and planning sessions by includem staff where each module was analysed alongside a six-week group session template. As the analysis went on, the staff adjusted and adapted the activities to meet the needs of group work. During the first stage, several organisations expressed a lot of interest in the group work sessions and the aims of the pilot. With such a high-level interest, organisations were invited to attend a community focussed group session to talk about what they can offer young people.

After the group session stage, includem staff planned to work with the young people to create a local directory of groups, organisations, and services that they can use. This directory would draw from the connections made by includem staff in stage one but would be guided by the young people as well. Their knowledge of local resources, their specific interests, and their own research would be the main ingredients to the directory. The final design of the multi-stage pilot was taken to the ADAPT Steering Group who gave it final approval.

July to August 2024

The timing of the pilot meant that the final design was approved towards the end of the school year. Speaking with Montrose Academy, it was felt that running the pilot immediately after the pupils returned from the summer break would not be a good idea



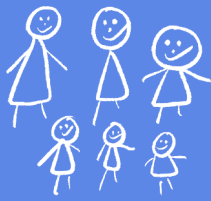
because of how busy and unsettled that time of year can be. It was agreed that the pilot should begin in October when the pupils had settled back into a routine and perhaps other pupils had started to show a need to participate in the pilot. This meant that the pilot was designed and ready to go but would need to wait for several months before it could be implemented.

A decision was made to implement a detached youth work stage to the pilot. The decision was in part based on the findings of the research, scoping, and co-design sessions that highlighted that young people in Montrose are disconnected from their local area and that anti-social behaviour is becoming an issue for local residents. Another aspect of the decision to implement a detached youth work stage to the pilot came from the intention to build relationships with young people over the summer which would then carry over into the group work sessions. The final influence that led to this decision was an internal pressure at includem to deliver a pilot. With so much time spent on research, scoping, and design, the Steering Group felt that the delivery side of the pilot should avoid any delays. The short turn around between the final sign off on the pilot design and the start of the summer holidays did not leave adequate time to properly scope and design the new detached youth work stage. Instead, includem drew from previous experience running detached youth work sessions in other parts of Scotland to guide the work going forward. The key difference between the detached youth work includem decided to do in Montrose and other types of detached youth work is that includem workers were encouraged to contact the young people who attended the codesign sessions. The nature of the contact related to trying to organise activities, checking in on how the young people were doing over the summer, and to build relationships.

At the end of June heading into July, includem staff visited Montrose to implement stage one of the pilot to gain a detailed understanding of the area. This included a tour of the area with staff from Montrose Academy. Includem staff met with dozens of organisations, groups, and services, and kept a log of their progress. Staff from the local cinema and from MoHub (the community centre) agreed that there is very little for young people to do in the area. The cinema puts on films for teenagers, but they did not run any other activities. The MoHub has a space for young people with video games, a TV, activities, and warm food for all attendees. However, the timetable is limited and the staff also agreed that there need to be more groups and organisations in the area offering something for young people to do.

In July, the first detached youth work session was held. Includem staff reached out to the 14 young people who attended the co-design sessions and three agreed to meet up. The young people talked about how little there is to do in the area and what they would like to see more of. The main desire was for a warm space with a couple of things to do, such as a gaming console and a TV. They also talked about how they don't tend to stay in Montrose if they can, and prefer to catch a bus to Arbroath or Dundee where there are more things to do.

In the second week, the young people had either stopped replying to communications from includem, or they only responded to decline invitations to do activities. With none of the young people from the co-design sessions wanting to meet up, includem staff continued with a more conventional approach to detached youth work by trying to connect with local



young people they meet while working in the area. The staff quickly faced similar issues that face local young people, namely, they struggled to find a warm and dry space to connect with any young people that they might encounter. Outside of the MoHub they had nowhere to go that did not carry a financial burden (such as cafés). While not having a warm space to meet young people was one problem, a more immediate issue was that includem staff did not encounter any young people while walking around Montrose who fit the remit for detached youth work.

The third week began in a similar way. All of the young people declined invitation to meet with includem staff. Some young people expressed frustration at being contacted during the holidays, telling includem staff to “go away” and to “leave me alone.” These responses were fed back to includem team managers who encouraged staff implement the principle of ‘stickability’. Stickability is defined by a strong commitment to building and maintaining relationships, offering ongoing support, and refusing to give up when faced with challenges. It means never abandoning efforts to support each young person, focusing on providing care, maintaining communication, and remaining a constant presence over time. With this in mind, includem staff continued to contact the young people from the co-design sessions, inviting them to attend activities.

Includem staff continued to invite young people to meet up and the young people continued to decline. With none of the invited young people attending, includem staff explored Montrose intending to connect with any young people who look suitable for detached youth work. They also met with local groups and organisations to find out more about the dynamic of Montrose during the summer. During these conversations, includem staff were told that young people do not really hang around in Montrose during the summer, and instead go Brechin, Arbroath, and Dundee. Because of this, antisocial behaviour also falls away. According to these organisations, antisocial behaviour in Montrose escalates during term time when the number of young people in the area is at its highest. Taking this information onboard, along with their experiences trying to contact young people includem staff met with the Scoping Team to discuss their concerns.

With regards to the planned stage one of the pilot, the first three weeks in Montrose were a success. Staff had contact dozens of local organisations, groups, and services. They also began establishing relationships with key figures within the area who expressed a keen interest in the aims of the pilot. These findings and these relationships would inform some of the group sessions and the creation of a local directory. The detached youth work side of the pilot was very different. It was clear that using ‘stickability’ to encourage consistent contact was damaging relationships between the young people and includem. Young people in the Montrose Academy catchment area do not tend to congregate in Montrose during the summer. Instead, young people are drawn towards larger towns and cities that can provide a better range of leisure activities. Without the restrictions of school hours, young people are able to satisfy some of their own needs by using the free bus pass to travel further afield than Montrose. The nature of the contact from includem was offering to satisfy a need that the young people no longer felt they had. With this in mind, the delivery staff advised that persistent communications with young people was becoming



harassment. The detached youth work stage was immediately brought to an end once the delivery staff had spoken to the Steering Group.

The delivery staff moved into planning and designing group work sessions for stage two of the Montrose Academy pilot. This involved using the codesign report and includem's ABL as the foundation of the work. The seven themes of the codesign sessions and the specific concerns raised by the young people would be the focus of the sessions, while the ABL toolkit would be used to guide the delivery of the sessions. ABL is designed to be used with individual young people as part of a support package. The challenge for the delivery team was to draw on their experiences using ABL with individual young people to create a group work package. The design sessions included mock classes with includem staff and using the Steering Group to monitor the lesson plans. Includem staff also invited members of the Montrose community, such as staff from MoHub and from a local tennis club, to attend one of the group sessions to talk about what they can offer the young people. At the end of the summer, the final group session plan was approved by the Steering Group ready to be implemented in October. Going into the first week of the group sessions, Montrose Academy decided that it would help group dynamics to organise the groups by gender. The girls' group consisted of YP1, YP2, YP3, and YP8, and the boys group consisted of YP4, YP5, YP6, and YP7.

October to December 2024

The first week of the group sessions began with a 10-minute introduction where includem staff introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the sessions. They emphasised that they were not teachers and assured the young people that anything shared in the sessions would not be reported unless there were safeguarding concerns. Following the introduction, the group engaged in a storyboarding activity. This activity involved ranking different choices using a colour-coded system: Green for positive choices, Amber for choices that are not immediately harmful but could cause future issues, and Red for harmful choices. The young people were asked to depict their ideal weekend in pictures and narrate the story from start to finish. Photos were taken to document their choices, which would be revisited in the final session to see if their opinions had changed. In the girls' group, the session went well. The girls were initially quiet but warmed up as the session progressed. They engaged with the tasks with some support and expressed their general dislike for school and the lack of activities in the area. The session was much more energetic in the boys' group. The boys required support to stay on task but eventually participated actively. They also mentioned the lack of activities in the area and their dislike for school.

The focus of week 2 was Beating Boredom. The session was designed to help the young people understand boredom and explore healthy ways to manage it. The first activity explored the different activities the young people engaged in when they were bored and discussed the positive and negative aspects of these activities. The young people wrote down their preferred activities on sticky notes and then categorised them as either positive or negative ways to tackle boredom. This led to a discussion about why they considered certain activities positive or negative. The second activity was the Bucket Illustration.



Includem staff used a bucket with a hole as an illustration to demonstrate how different levels of stimulating activities affect dopamine levels and how quickly it runs out.

The final activity was creating Dopamine Menus/Vision Boards. The aim was to help the young people create a resource that listed various activities they could do when bored. The dopamine menu included categories such as Starters (quick dopamine bursts), Mains (exciting activities), Sides (ways to make activities more engaging), and Desserts (activities that are often overdone and don't fill the bucket). They also had a section for Specials, which included occasional activities like vacations or concerts. The young people were encouraged to decorate their menus and put them up in their rooms.

The girls' group were chattier and provided more in-depth answers compared to the previous week. YP8, who was absent the first week, participated well and encouraged her peers to join in the discussions. Although some participants were initially slow to speak up, they eventually contributed positively to the group interactions. In the boys' group were keen to start the session but got distracted quickly. With support from includem staff, they returned to the discussion. The boys mentioned that YP7 had come to school high and had been smoking cannabis earlier. includem staff monitored YP7 closely but found no concerning behaviour, and based on the conversations that followed, decided that the comment was made as a joke and as a way to test boundaries.

In the third week of the group sessions, the focus was on Risk Taking Behaviours. The session was designed to help the young people understand what constitutes a risk and the consequences of different types of risky behaviours. The session began with a discussion about what risk is. Includem staff asked the young people to share their thoughts on what they considered to be a risk. This initial discussion helped to set the stage for the activities that followed.

The first activity involved using offence cards to build an understanding of what constitutes an offence. The young people were asked to discuss as a group and compare and contrast three different types of offences. This activity aimed to help them understand the varying severities of offences and how they are handled differently. The discussion also included the ripple effect, allowing the young people to see how different offences can have broader impacts. One specific example discussed was the ripple effect of trespassing inside abandoned buildings. This helped the young people understand the potential consequences of such actions, not just for themselves but for others as well.

YP8 and YP3 in the girls' group were particularly engaged, while YP1 and YP2 needed more support to find their focus. There was an accusation made about one of the girls having vodka in her water bottle, but it became clear very quickly that this was a joke. YP1 and YP2 left the session to go to the toilet but were away for longer than expected. YP8 took a leading role in explaining the tasks to them when they returned. The boys' group showed better engagement compared to the previous week. They discussed the differences between smoking and drinking, with YP7 participating particularly well. The boys needed support to stay on topic but were adaptable and managed to make the sessions work for them.



The focus of week four was Drugs, Vaping, and Alcohol. The session was designed to educate the young people about the different substances, their effects, and the legal implications of their use. The session began with an activity using images of various drugs. The young people were asked to name the drugs depicted in the images. Includem staff then talked about the severity and legal system related to these substances, including how drugs are classed and potential charges. This discussion aimed to provide the young people with a clear understanding of the legal consequences of drug use.

Next, the effects and categories of the substances were discussed. The young people mapped each substance to the correct categories, which helped them visualise the different effects and risks. The session also covered the ripple effects and wider impacts of using these substances. This discussion included the potential consequences for the individual, their family, and the community. Includem staff used this as an opportunity to discuss harm reduction strategies and making sure individuals are in a safe place if they choose to use substances.

YP8 continued to participate well in the girls' group, but YP1 and YP2 still required a lot of prompting. YP3 was quieter than usual due to not feeling well. The girls openly discussed past negative experiences with alcohol and recognised the difficulty in distinguishing between different types of drugs. The boys' group saw YP4 engaging particularly well with a drug identification exercise. Although the boys often talked as if they knew a lot about drugs, they struggled to match the pictures with the labels. Unfortunately, YP6 left the session early and did not return.

In the fifth week of the group sessions, the focus was on Online Safety. The session began with a quiz to gauge the young people's knowledge of social media platforms. This activity served as an icebreaker and provided insight into how familiar they were with various online platforms. The next activity was a digital footprint exercise. The pupils were then asked to write down on sticky notes where they go on the internet and what information is left behind, such as their name, address, religion, demographic details, sexual orientation, race, political views, etc. These sticky notes were then stuck onto a foot illustration. The discussion focused on whether any of this information could be considered problematic and what dangers it posed, such as privacy issues, identity theft, hacked emails, and implications for future employers and colleges. Includem staff emphasised that it is difficult to remove information from the internet once it is out there, so it is important to be careful about what information is shared and with which websites.

The session also included the "Becky and Jack" exercise. In this scenario, Becky, a fifteen-year-old girl, takes a nude photo of herself and sends it to her boyfriend Jack, who is sixteen. Jack shares the photo with a friend to prove its existence, and it eventually spreads throughout their school. The discussion centred on who was in the wrong: Becky for taking the photo (*Section 52 of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982*), Jack for sharing it (*Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm 2016 Act*), or both. The ripple effect of such actions was also discussed, highlighting how it could affect not only Becky and Jack but also their parents and families, their school, and other students.

In the girls' group, YP1 found parts of the session slightly unsettling, especially when discussing explicit images. Her body language changed, and she became less engaged.



includem staff offered individual support, but it was not taken up. Includem staff spoke with the Depute Head about YP1's change in demeanour. The Depute Head advised that they would keep a close eye on YP1 and would connect with relevant support staff if needed. In the boys' group, YP5 was the only participant due to unexpected circumstances of the other boys. He engaged well and showed a good understanding of the material. YP5. During a conversation with includem staff he discussed giving up smoking weed, recognising its negative effects on him. While week five did not explicitly cover drugs and alcohol, includem staff reported that YP5's desire to talk about the harmful effects of cannabis was encouraging and showed a marked change in how he spoke about drug use.

In the sixth and final week of the group sessions, the focus was on wrapping up the programme and evaluating the progress made by the young people. The session was designed to reflect on what they had learned and to celebrate their achievements. The session began with a storyboarding activity, similar to the one conducted in the first session. The young people were asked to depict their ideal weekend in pictures. They were encouraged to tell the story from start to finish and explain why they picked each item, discussing the positives and negatives. Following the storyboarding activity, there were brief talks from representatives of MoHub and a local tennis club, each lasting 5 minutes. These talks aimed to provide the young people with information about local resources and opportunities for engagement.

Includem staff then talked through a draft directory of local resources and activities. They explained the different sections and handed out copies to the young people. They advised the young people that they would invite them to a session in the near future to help complete the directory. They asked the young people to think of fun and positive activities in their community that can be added to the directory. An evaluation session followed, using flipchart paper to write down the young people's comments. The session concluded with an awards ceremony where certificates were handed out to the participants, celebrating their involvement and achievements throughout the programme.

YP1 and YP3 participated well in the girls' group, although YP2 and YP8 were absent. The group expressed interest in volunteering to help elderly people in their community. The boys' group, despite their tendency to get distracted, participated eagerly in the storyboarding activity. YP6 was absent, but his certificate and goody bag were left at the office.

Post-Group Sessions

A follow-up workshop was planned with Montrose Academy that mirrored the initial co-design sessions. The aim of this workshop was to see if the young people thought differently about their local area and the school, and to see if they had a better understanding of the support that was available in Montrose. Unfortunately, communication with the school could not be maintained after the group sessions. As of the time of writing (04/04/2025), several attempts to reestablish contact have been made by multiple includem members of staff. Without the final workshop, there is no way to gauge the impact that the pilot had on young people. Despite this, the pilot has produced a lot of learning.



Montrose Academy Timeline

December 2023 to January 2024

Design of pilot finalised.

February to March 2024

Met with Angus high schools to begin the process of designing a pilot

April to May 2024

Planning and organising co-design sessions with Montrose Academy

May 2024

Hosted co-design sessions with pupils, staff, and management at Montrose Academy

June 2024

Design of pilot finalised.

July 2024

Detached Youth Work section of pilot begins.

August 2024

Detached Youth Work section of pilot is ended early.

October 2024

Group work sessions begin

December 2024

Group work sessions come to an end, which brings the pilot to a close.



Findings, Learning, and Recommendations

This section provides an overview of the learning gained from this pilot. The learning comes from the detached youth work and the group sessions, but also from the research activities.

Co-design Sessions

The co-design sessions at Montrose Academy proved to be highly effective in identifying the key issues faced by young people in the area. These sessions brought together pupils, practitioners, and the SMT into individual groups to explore issues around physical health, education, activities and leisure, relationships and community, mental health, and future aspirations. The inclusive approach ensured that the voices of young people were heard and valued, leading to a comprehensive understanding of their needs and concerns. One of the strongest areas of agreement among all groups was the need for more resources and support for education, mental health, and extracurricular activities. Additionally, the sessions highlighted a significant disconnect between the school and the wider community, emphasising the importance of building stronger community ties to support young people effectively. The insights gained from these co-design sessions were instrumental in shaping the subsequent stages of the pilot project, ensuring that the interventions were tailored to the specific needs of the Montrose Academy pupils.

Including a broader range of young people in the co-design sessions would enhance the effectiveness and applicability of the findings. While the initial selection process focused on pupils identified as needing more support, there are many other students who are affected by similar issues but may not currently require immediate intervention. Involving these students would help to adopt a preventative approach, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their perspectives are considered. This proactive engagement would have helped to identify emerging issues before they escalate, providing valuable insights into the diverse ways in which pupils experience and cope with challenges. Additionally, some students who are struggling might present their difficulties in less obvious ways, which could have been overlooked during the initial selection process. By broadening the scope of which pupils are asked to attend, we can capture a wider array of experiences and needs, leading to more comprehensive and effective solutions that benefit the entire student body.

Detached Youth Work

The detached youth work stage of the Montrose Academy pilot faced several significant challenges that hindered its effectiveness and risked compromising the success of the other stages of the pilot. Firstly, there was a notable lack of engagement from young people during the summer months, as many preferred to spend their time in larger towns and cities with more recreational activities. This made it difficult for includem staff to establish consistent contact and build relationships. Secondly, the absence of suitable meeting spaces posed a major obstacle. Outside of the MoHub, there were few warm and dry locations where staff could interact with young people without incurring financial costs. Finally, the principle of stickability, which emphasises persistent contact, backfired in this context. Repeated attempts to engage young people were perceived as harassment, potentially damaging the relationship between includem staff and young people.



The two main factors that contributed to these issues are a lack of planning and a misapplication of an otherwise highly effective technique for engaging young people, namely, stickability. The detached youth work stage of the pilot came very last minute, which did not allow for proper research, scoping, and design to take place. Knowing that antisocial behaviour from young people is at its lowest during the summer would have influenced the detached youth work strategy. Had the detached youth work stage been on the table in the research and scoping stages of the pilot, the codesign sessions could have been used to find out what the young people might want from it, and even if a detached youth work programme was wanted at all. With regards to the appropriateness of stickability, having more time to plan and design a detached youth work programme might have brought this to light before the pilot went live. While on reflection, persistent contact with young people could lead to negative outcomes, the delivery team were in a position where they had to be reactive, and stickability has a proven track record for engaging young people. The decision to go with a tried and tested method of engagement is to be expected when a more appropriate alternative has not been created. Again, with more time to plan and design the detached youth work side of the pilot, an alternative approach to engaging young people could have been devised and implemented.

Community Resources

The young people who took part in the codesign sessions and the local organisations who spoke to includem workers are right to say that resources and activities for young people are extremely limited in Montrose. Compared to somewhere like Dundee, where there is an abundance of leisure activities and dry spaces to hang out, Montrose has very little to offer. It should be noted that there are several organisations and clubs that offer activities to young people, such as Taekwondo at Dave McNairn's Blackbelt Academy, training sessions at Hands of Stone Boxing, classes at C Mixed Martial Arts, youth sessions with Montrose Rugby club, the Senior's Club at Montrose Community Hub, films at Montrose Playhouse Cinema, Tennis Court hire, and more. There are lots of young people in Montrose who do meaningfully engage with these clubs and organisations. However, laying out a list of activities in the area without context is misleading. There is a cost attached to many of these activities which creates a barrier for many young people. As previously mentioned, young people living in poverty are disproportionately impacted with regards to school attendance, attainment, exclusions, and ASNs. It is unreasonable to expect young people already impacted by poverty to be able to afford the costs associated with joining one, or even multiple, sports clubs.

Another important thing to note relates to time, both in terms of when these activities take place and in terms of how long they last. Many of the clubs, particularly the sports clubs, take place in the evenings and they only take place once or twice a week. Assuming costs were not a factor, the most engaged young person would only be able to remain engaged for an hour and a half a day at the most. And this engagement would require the young person to be interested in Taekwondo, Boxing, Mixed Martial Arts, Tennis, Rugby, and be an avid film goer. Assuming this hypothetical young person was engaged in all these activities, a question still remains about what they can do to occupy the rest of their time. One option is to go back home. However, one of the main issues raised by the young people



during the codesign sessions was that they had to spend a lot of their time in their homes. They wanted to be able to spend more time in Montrose but there is nothing for them to do. Another option is for them to find a space in Montrose where they can meet with their friends. However, it's here we start to walk the very tenuous tightrope between young people enjoying their town and "antisocial behaviour."

Are young people treated unfairly?

The *Angus Antisocial Behaviour Strategy 2021-26* sets out a multiyear approach to tackling antisocial behaviour across the whole local authority area. The tightrope that young people must walk in Montrose is found in this document. In one part of the document, "young people playing and gathering" is "not classed as antisocial," but in another part of the document, a form of antisocial behaviour called "Public Nuisance" includes "groups of youths gathering." (The subtle change in language is interesting to note. 'Young people' gathering is not antisocial, whereas 'youths' gathering is antisocial.) As part of the creation of the antisocial behaviour strategy, Angus council conducted a consultation with a range of community partners and with local residents. This consultation was referenced in the Equality Impact Assessment for the policy as an example of the council engaging with "any of the groups potentially affected." However, young people were not included in the consultations despite being directly affected by the policy.

The result of the consultation was the creation of antisocial themes, including "Drug Misuse," "Fire Raising and Vandalism," and "Youths Causing Annoyance." The latter category includes "Youths congregating, especially around parks" and "Youngsters in cars." The consultation identified a list of areas for development, including "diversionary activities for young people." The consultation speaks to an intolerance of young people in the area. Which diversionary activities are needed to prevent young people from congregating in parks? And is a similar set of diversionary activities needed to prevent adults from congregating in parks? With such an emphasis on young people engaging in antisocial behaviour, one might expect the data to reflect the perspectives of concerned citizens. However, as the data in the antisocial behaviour strategy shows, there were 929 reports of antisocial behaviour in Montrose between 2017 and 2020, and only one of them (0.11%) was "Youths Causing Annoyance."

On the one hand it's important to talk about young people as an identifiable group. This enables organisations and services to understand issues that are specific to young people, and it enables the creation of solutions catered to this group's needs. However, the use of 'young people' as a specific group in an antisocial behaviour, especially when the difference between 'young people' and 'youths' is so ill defined, unfairly discriminates against young people. With adults, specific behaviours are classed as antisocial, such as littering, vandalism, excessive noise, and so on. Young people can also engage in these behaviours, and yet they have their own category of antisocial behaviour which includes behaviours not found anywhere else in the policy, such as "gathering" and "congregating." Young people are the only group of people who are targeted in this way. With so many specific behaviours listed in the strategy, it begs the questions about why young people need their own category. The policy has several examples of how the council is focussing resources towards helping young people in Angus. The approaches being taken by the



council are, in most cases, preventative, diversionary, and focussed on positive engagement. However, these activities can be more effective by not singling out the behaviours of young people. Creating a strategy to divert young people away from “gathering” risks being counterproductive by ostracising young people from their community. By framing young people’s presence in public spaces as a problem to be managed, rather than a normal part of community life, the strategy risks reinforcing negative perceptions and further alienating the very group it seeks to support.

Recommendations for future interventions and projects

- **Establish a Youth Hub:** Create a dedicated youth hub in Montrose town centre, providing a free, warm space open seven days a week. This hub should offer a variety of activities, including recreational, educational, and social support services. Staff at the hub should work closely with Montrose Academy to ensure a strong connection between the school and the community, fostering a sense of belonging and support for young people.
- **Enhance Community Engagement:** Develop initiatives to strengthen the relationship between young people and the wider community. This could include organising community events, volunteer opportunities, and partnerships with local businesses and organisations. By involving young people in community activities, they can develop a sense of ownership and pride in their local area, reducing feelings of isolation and disengagement.
- **Expand Mental Health Support:** Increase access to mental health services for young people in Montrose. This could involve training school staff to better support students’ mental health needs, establishing partnerships with local mental health organisations, and creating peer support programmes. Providing comprehensive mental health support will help address the growing mental health crisis among young people and ensure they have the resources they need to thrive.



Conclusion

The Montrose Academy pilot project has provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by young people in Montrose. Through co-design sessions, detached youth work, and group work sessions, the project identified key issues such as the disconnect between the school and the wider community, limited local resources, and the need for enhanced mental health support. These findings underscore the importance of a holistic approach to supporting young people, one that integrates educational, social, and community-based interventions.

The recommendations outlined in this report aim to address these challenges by establishing a dedicated youth hub, enhancing community engagement, and expanding mental health support. By implementing these targeted interventions, Montrose Academy and its partners can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for young people, fostering their personal and educational development. These efforts will not only benefit the students but also strengthen the community as a whole.

The Montrose Academy pilot project has highlighted the critical need for comprehensive support systems for young people. By addressing the identified issues and implementing the recommended interventions, stakeholders can work together to create a brighter future for the youth of Montrose. Continued collaboration and commitment to these initiatives will ensure that young people have the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.



References

- ¹ EIS (2023a). *Another Year of Declining Teacher Numbers is Bad News for Scottish Education*. <https://www.eis.org.uk/latest-news/decline-in-teachers-2023>; SSTA (2024). *Children's education at risk by cutting teacher numbers*. <https://ssta.org.uk/childrens-education-at-risk-by-cutting-teacher-numbers>; Hepburn, H. (2024a) 'Learning hours and teacher numbers vulnerable to budget cuts,' *Tes Magazine*, 22 May. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/general/scottish-council-budget-cuts-learning-hours-teacher-numbers>; Petrie, E. (2024) 'Scottish school pupil absence rates soar to record high as 40% of exam-age pupils miss a day a fortnight,' *STV News*, 4 January. <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/scottish-school-pupil-absence-rates-soar-to-record-high-as-40-of-exam-age-pupils-miss-a-day-a-fortnight>; EIS (2023b). *Behaviour in Scottish schools data confirms rise in violence in the classroom*. <https://www.eis.org.uk/latest-news/dataviolenceclassroom>; Cunningham, J. (2024) "Budget cuts could affect every one of Scotland's children," *Tes Magazine*, 3 June. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/primary/why-education-budget-cuts-could-affect-every-one-scotlands-children-schools>.
- ² Barnes, A. (2024). *Closure of more than a thousand youth centres could have lasting impact on society*, UNISON National. <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2024/06/closure-of-more-than-a-thousand-youth-centres-could-have-lasting-impact-on-society>.
- ³ Turner, Kevin (2023). *Campaign to save youth work services as figures reveal millions in cuts*. *Youth Scotland*. <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/news-article/campaign-to-save-youth-work-services-as-figures-reveal-millions-in-cuts/>.
- ⁴ Marini, Cristina (2022). *Children and young people's mental health in Scotland*. SPICe Briefing: Edinburgh. <https://bprecdn.parliament.scot/published/2022/5/24/aa290f5c-f12a-4077-81ea-4cc5c6151e34/SB%2022-29.pdf>.
- ⁵ Hancock, Kirsten J., Carrington C.J. Shepherd, David Lawrence & Stephen R. Zubrick (2013). *Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts*. Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations: Canberra, (p.258).
- ⁶ Scottish Government (2019). *Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec>.
- ⁷ Adams, Lucy (2024). *I tried everything to get my daughter to go to school*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpq9dgv138wo>; Mackenzie-Chalmers, Tom (2024). *Scotland's primary school attendance crisis - and what to do about it*. TES. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/primary/scotland-primary-school-attendance-crisis-and-what-do-about-pupil-absence>; Education Scotland (2023). *Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues*. Education Scotland: Edinburgh. <https://education.gov.scot/media/3kdenpq4/improving-attendance-understanding-the-issues-101123-pw.pdf>.