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THE SCOTTISH Sun SUNDAY 24/11/24

**CHARITY CALLS FOR NORDIC APPROACH**

**We'll reap rewards by preventing teens taking drink & drugs**

By ZAHRA HEDGES, Winning Scotland

**“THERE is no money,” is the refrain ringing through the corridors of Holyrood.**

And as worrying as it is with the current issues facing our NHS, education system and other public services, the real concern is that this not only becomes the norm but gets worse in years to come.

If we carry on as we are and fail to look for and embrace change, it is all but inevitable.

And the consequences will be far more than just the financial burden when it comes to Scotland's future.

Scotland is a small country. We need every person to thrive.

That starts with giving our children and young people the best chance of a healthy, happy future.

If we sow the seeds of prevention now, we will all reap the rewards.

One change Scotland could and should make is shifting from a culture of treating problems to one of preventing them.

If we take, for example, the recurring issue around drug and alcohol misuse which sees related deaths stats remain stubbornly high.

It is clear the current treatment method is not working. And just last month the auditor general warned that the Scottish Government “needs to develop more preventative approaches to tackling Scotland's harmful relationship with alcohol and drugs”.

That's why at Planet Youth we believe Scotland should look to one of our Nordic neighbours in

Iceland where a preventative model, targeting young people before problematic behaviours arise has led to significant cultural changes.

The consequences of drinking, smoking, vaping and drug use are well known, and we know the costly burden they can place on our NHS.

From a young age, we are told that smoking, vaping and drinking alcohol are harmful to our health. But still so many indulge. For many this begins in the teenage years.

This is because the teenage brain is wired to take risks, and to seek out connection and belonging.

And if we do not give them safe places to find natural highs, why are we surprised when they look in dark corners?

We have a chance to make a difference though. In Iceland, a 20-year “experiment” has completely transformed the futures of their young people and the communities they live in.

Last year, the Scottish Government invested in a Planet Youth. Planet Youth is about changing the environment our children grow up in and offering them more opportunities, so they make different and better choices. It is about prevention and using data to help communities understand why young people make the choices they do.

Planet Youth surveys young people in schools to find out not only what choices they are making, but also to help identify what is influencing these choices.

Communities can then make changes based on what they learn from the young people.

For example, in one area in Scotland, it was clear how important it was for parents to know who their teenagers were spending time with.

That led to the local youth group beginning a series of measures to encourage parents to become more involved with their activities.

In another school, the survey was able to identify warning signs for pupils who might stop attending classes, and this allowed the schools to change their processes and intervene earlier with families to ensure that youngsters did not miss out.

In Iceland, in 1998 42 per cent of teenagers said they were regularly drinking. Today just six per cent say this, with more choosing sport, family and their community – with huge benefits for cost-cutting in areas from healthcare to justice.

By embracing a preventative model, Iceland began offering opportunities around sport and other activities which allowed teenagers to engage with their peers and find safer ways of having fun.

In just a few weeks Finance Secretary Shona Robison will set out the Scottish Government's budget for next year. And she could use this to begin making that cultural change Scotland needs.

We know Ms Robison faces many difficult decisions with public funding tight and continued concerns over the cost of preventative models today, we can help the country prepare for the future.

THIS week marked World Children's Day with 2024's theme focusing on listening to kids and creating a better future.

But in Scotland, many fear for the next generation with the country blighted by horrific records when it comes to issues such as alcohol and drugs abuse.

Charity Winning Scotland is working to build confidence and resilience in young people and is currently running a new initiative called Planet Youth. Taking tips from Iceland, where successful drug and alcohol schemes are being carried out, it asks young people what they want for the future.

Today, Winning Scotland Chief Executive Zahra Hedges writes for The Scottish Sun on why we must start taking a prevention approach when it comes to the big issues, rather than simply trying to treat them.





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## ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT:

**Charity Calls for Nordic Approach:**

**We'll Reap Rewards by Preventing Teens Taking Drink & Drugs**

**By Zahra Hedges, Winning Scotland**

This week marked World Children's Day with 2024's theme focusing on listening to kids and creating a better future. Yet in Scotland, many fear for the next generation as the country is blighted by horrific records when it comes to issues such as alcohol and drug abuse.

Charity Winning Scotland is working to build confidence and resilience in young people and is currently running a new initiative called Planet Youth. Taking inspiration from Iceland, where successful anti-drink and alcohol schemes were carried out, it asks young people to signal what they want for their future.

Today, Winning Scotland CEO Zahra Hedges writes in The Scottish Sun on why taking a prevention approach when it comes to these big issues is more effective than simply trying to treat them.

"There is no money," is the refrain ringing through the corridors of Holyrood.

And as worrying as it is with the current issues facing our NHS, education system, and other public services, the real concern is that this not only becomes the norm but gets worse in years to come.

If we sow the seeds of prevention now, we will reap the rewards in healthier, happier futures for every person to thrive. We know the costly burden drinking, smoking, and drug use places on our NHS, justice system, and wider society.

In Iceland, where a preventative model targeting young people before problematic behaviours arise has led to significant cultural changes, the results are staggering.

From a young age, we are told that drinking, smoking, and vaping are harmful to our health. Yet for so many young people, this warning is ignored because of a lack of connection and belonging. In Iceland, teenagers found belonging in their communities and families through government-backed measures such as funding sports, arts, and social activities. In 1998, 42% of teenagers said they regularly drank alcohol. Today, just 6% say the same.

By embracing preventative models and providing young people with more opportunities to make better choices, we can help them lead healthier lives. This means listening to what they need, spending time with them, and identifying issues early.

For example, in one area in Scotland, a Planet Youth survey found that teenagers were spending too much unsupervised time. Parents became more involved, leading to significant changes.

In another school, the survey identified warning signs for pupils who were skipping classes. This allowed the school to make interventions, which stopped further issues from developing.

Prevention is Key.

Embracing a preventative approach doesn't just save lives; it saves money. From reduced costs in healthcare to fewer crimes, it pays to invest in young people.

The Scottish Government's budget for next year will soon be announced, and this is a perfect opportunity to fund preventative models like Planet Youth. By doing so, Scotland can begin making the changes needed to create a brighter future.