

Youth work for all young people

Our manifesto to open doors to opportunities and build stronger communities

Youth work services – whether in a youth club or detached, or delivered with allied sectors such as schools, youth justice or hospitals – provide a lifeline for young people, helping them to gain essential life skills and fulfil their potential. We know that youth work transforms young people’s mental health and wellbeing, confidence, behaviour, engagement with school and builds aspirations and resilience that enable young people to take control of their futures.

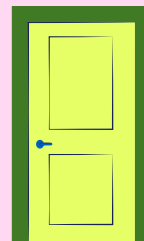
However, cuts to statutory youth services for over a decade means that access to youth work is patchy, the profession often goes unrecognised and many young people are missing out on the vital support of a trusted adult.



Over a decade of **funding cuts**

Too many young people are **missing out**

NYA
National Youth Agency



The National Youth Agency’s six-point manifesto calls on national government to ensure all young people have access to the youth provision they need, to create opportunities for young people where they live, to support local authorities to fulfil their Statutory Duty through new legislation and to rebuild the youth work workforce.



1. Create a National Youth Strategy

setting out a long-term plan for young people with clear accountability measures and mechanisms through which all young people can access high quality youth work provision where they live.

Despite welcome government interventions such as the National Youth Guarantee, there is currently no long-term commitment to giving young people somewhere safe to be, fun things to do, and opportunities to develop their skills outside of school or college.

Young people are in need of support more than ever in a growing mental health emergency, with one in five children and young people in England aged eight to 25 having a probable mental health disorder in 2023¹ and 40% of 16-25 year olds having experienced a mental health problem.² Young people are also facing increased risk of exploitation and involvement with the criminal justice system, as well as online harms as AI develops at an exponential rate and the continued long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Youth work – as both a preventative and interventional approach – is key to addressing these complex challenges and barriers, with proven positive impacts on young people's mental health and wellbeing, confidence, school attendance, academic attainment, behaviour, and skills development.³

A National Youth Strategy would provide the vision, accountability and framework needed to put the focus back on prevention as a moral duty and an economic imperative. The National Youth Sector Advisory Board sets out the building blocks for a National Youth Strategy in its [Roadmap to a National Youth Strategy](#).



2. Appoint a dedicated Youth Minister at Cabinet level with a cross-departmental remit

that leads on the National Youth Strategy and works across DfE, DCMS, DWP, DHSC and Home Office, supported by a departmental structure that elevates, prioritises and empowers youth services and youth work provision as both a preventative approach and a targeted intervention.

Youth work is delivered in lots of places and spaces and is not just out-of-school activity, as it takes place within schools and colleges, youth justice settings, hospitals, the outdoors as well as more traditional youth club settings. Therefore, this work spans several departments including DCMS, DfE, MoJ, DHSC, the Home Office, DLUHC and requires joined-up working to truly deliver on this mission.

Having 'youth' in a ministerial title, and 'youth work' as a core component of a minister's brief, is key for securing the prioritisation of the agenda and sufficient resource to mobilise a National Youth Strategy. The removal of the post of Minister for Young People and Youth Engagement in 2010, which had been created at the recommendation of the Youth Citizenship Commission, coincided with the decline in funding of youth services.

A dedicated youth minister at Cabinet level would ensure that there is a driving force taking the National Youth Strategy forward and a convening power for cross-governmental action. Youth work must not be an after-thought but recognised and valued in government as an essential profession for securing positive outcomes for young people.

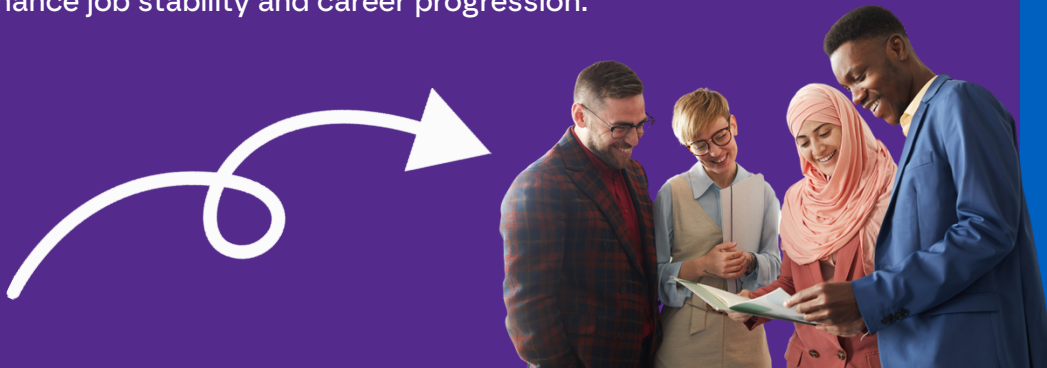


3. Rebuild the youth workforce

by creating innovative pathways into youth work to recruit and train a greater number of qualified youth workers and youth support workers and upskill all volunteers and uniformed youth staff working with young people in youth work principles and safeguarding.

With 4,500 youth workers lost from the front line, England currently does not have the workforce to meet demand and many young people do not have access to a youth worker where they live. We believe that every young person should have access to a named youth worker where they live and that no one who needs the support should lose out or be left behind.

The National Youth Strategy cannot be achieved without the workforce to deliver it. Despite exciting developments with expanding youth work apprenticeship pathways, we have seen youth work university courses close and there are not enough youth workers being trained to meet demand. Many youth workers are not paid using JNC pay scales, funding is unstable and contracts are often not long enough to provide security within the career. Alongside this, there is no standardised job description for youth work, so these posts are sometimes rebadged under other titles in different settings which reduces the visibility of the profession. A measurable target is needed to ensure that there is accountability for rebuilding the youth work workforce at an appropriate pace to support sufficiency of youth provision and fulfilment of local authorities' Statutory Duty. The government should work with the NYA to explore innovative pathways that can build the pipeline of new entrants to the sector, and support initiatives to enhance job stability and career progression.



4. Support local authorities to fulfil their Statutory Duty through introducing a new Statutory Youth Services Act

accompanied by government funding, to support increased prioritisation of youth service provision in every area of the country to restore, secure and strengthen high quality and accessible local youth offers.

DCMS's strengthened statutory guidance published in 2023, outlining local authorities' legal duty to secure a local youth offer that is responsive to the needs of young people, was a welcome step in setting out legal expectations for ensuring access to quality youth services⁴. NYA is proud to have supported the development of the updated duty and has also published a toolkit to help local authorities and youth organisations understand the new guidance⁵. However, many local authorities don't currently have the financial means or resources to fulfil their Statutory Duty and youth provision is currently fragmented across the country. Youth services continue to be diminished through budget cuts and this fragmentation in delivery has resulted in VCS organisations accounting for 82% of the organisations delivering youth work activities for young people⁶.

The introduction of a new Statutory Duty Youth Services Act would address these challenges through strengthening DCMS's guidance legislatively to increase the prioritisation of youth service provision by local authorities. The new legislation would need to be accompanied by increased government funding to ensure that local authorities have the financial means and resources to deliver on the new legislation. This would strengthen, restore and rebuild youth services and also open up opportunities for better forging of multi-agency partnerships, improved mapping of youth provision across local authority areas, as well as sharing of best practice and common goals between youth services, VCS organisations and across sectors.



5. Ensure long-term and more joined-up funding

with a commitment from government to invest revenue funding to reverse the £1 billion a year annual decline over the last decade. Additionally, the youth provision funding system should be reformed to focus on long-term dedicated funding pots that are simpler to navigate and equitable in access.

Since 2010, there has been a £1 billion real terms cut in spending by local authorities on youth services (a 73% drop)⁷; 4,500 youth work jobs have been lost, many youth centres have closed and there has been a general decrease in preventative funding over late intervention funding. Furthermore, the average length of funding for the youth sector is nine months long and this is undermining sustainability, investment, innovation and the workforce as funding pots are often short-term, one-off, targeted and can be difficult to access, especially for smaller youth work organisations. Simpler and longer-term funding pots that are easier to navigate and equitable in access would help break down barriers for local authorities, but also for VCS and smaller youth work organisations who might otherwise be locked out from opportunities.

There needs to be a cross-departmental approach to funding and opportunities to unlock governmental and non-governmental long-term funding streams including Dormant Assets and working with the private sector, public sector and third sector. There has been a reduction in revenue funding in favour of capital investment, and whilst safe and youth-friendly spaces for young people are of vital importance, revenue funding enables the life-changing youth work interventions that fills the buildings.

Funding youth work and youth services is not just the morally right thing to do, it also saves the taxpayer money – young people are an investment, not a cost. Research shows that for every £1 government invests in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40 and youth work saves £500 million annually by preventing incidences of knife crime, anti-social behaviour and other associated criminal justice costs.⁸



6. Strengthen data, impact and evidence on youth work interventions

through establishing a ‘challenge’ fund to pilot high quality youth work interventions which can then be scaled up to trials.

The youth work sector has no shortage of qualitative research and evidence. From youth work organisations collecting statistics on engagement and retention rates and tracking young people’s outcomes to in-depth studies on open access and targeted approaches to powerful case studies and testimonials. Youth work works and it is high impact – the profession saves young people’s lives and prevents negative trajectories. It is why across the Commonwealth there is a collective effort to recognise the value that youth work brings to society, to promote the professionalisation of youth work and to include youth workers in policymaking.⁹ However, the argument the sector comes up against time and time again is around quantitative data to support the compelling case studies and qualitative evidence.

More quantitative data on the impact of youth work is needed and one way in which to do this would be to pilot high quality youth work interventions which can then be scaled up to trials. Investigating effective interventions and using them to inform policy design would build the evidence base and ensure that the best models to support young people can be rolled out on a national scale. National government must work with the third sector and local authority youth services to strengthen data, impact and evidence on youth work interventions to showcase the significant impacts this unique profession is having on young people’s lives and futures.



Footnotes

1. NHS England (2023), Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023
2. The Prince’s Trust (2024), The Prince’s Trust NatWest Youth Index 2024
3. NYA (2023), Better Together: Youth work with schools
4. DCMS (2023), Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being
5. NYA (2023), How to fulfil your Statutory Duty under Section 507B of the Education Act: A toolkit for local authorities
6. National Youth Agency (2023), National Youth Sector Census Snapshot 2023
7. YMCA (2023), Generation Cut: A research report into youth work funding disparities across England and Wales
8. UK Youth and Frontier Economics (2022), The economic value of youth work
9. Bryan Jetem Obaji, 2023, Youth Work: A Dynamic Approach to The Commonwealth Vision – YourCommonwealth