

UK YOUTH

# Unlocking Youth Work

---

The catalyst for change that a  
commitment to young people calls for.

Our >>> 2025 Strategy

## Contents

Our 2025 Strategy	4
Year 1: The impact of 2020	4
System change vs system improvement	6
What is youth work?	7
Key challenges facing young people today	8
Our insights from 2020	10
Our theory of change	13
2025 organisational objectives	14
Our impact goal and 2025 outcomes	15



A photograph of three young people standing outdoors in a grassy area with trees in the background. On the left is a boy in a blue patterned sweater, seen in profile. In the center is a girl with long reddish-brown hair wearing a red hoodie, smiling and gesturing with her hand. On the right is another girl with brown hair wearing a yellow hoodie, looking down. A white text box with a red border is overlaid on the image.

## Our vision

**All young people are equipped to thrive and empowered to contribute at every stage of their lives.**



## Our >>> 2025 Strategy



# Year 1: The impact of 2020

Over 2018-19, UK Youth embarked on an 18-month consultation process to engage staff and the youth sector on what the charity's next strategic focus should be.

That new strategic period began in 2020 but due to the realities of Covid-19 and the arrival of a new CEO, we made the decision to approach 2020 as the foundation building first year of a new five-year strategic period. We focused our attention on being flexible and fearlessly responsive to the growing needs of young people and the youth sector. We understood that insights from that first year would ultimately provide us with a depth of clarity that would then crystallize our priorities for the remaining four years.

The Covid-19 pandemic has literally changed the world and it has further illuminated that young people need a diverse range of support if they are to truly thrive. It stands to reason that we needed to build a strategy that recognised the

realities of this new world. Initial analysis at the start of 2020 identified internal work that was an urgent priority for us to address. Consequently, we embarked upon a journey to design a new operating model that would be better suited to the realities we needed to be equipped to face. We looked across the spectrum of need, worked with partners and sought to better understand what UK Youth is distinctly placed to do. We have now chosen a clear problem area that we will focus all our efforts on addressing. We have successfully reviewed our leadership, structure, processes, capabilities, technology, and culture. Now as we embark on the second year of this five-year strategy; we are doing so in a new organisational structure that we believe will unlock our potential for transformational impact.

This document lays out the high level context that sits behind our 2020-2025 Strategy and shares our bold ambition to impact young lives by unlocking youth work as the catalyst for change that an effective recovery from the pandemic calls for.





The Covid-19 pandemic has literally changed the world and it has further illuminated that young people need a diverse range of support if they are to truly thrive.





# System change vs system improvement

---

2020 brought into sharp focus the fragility of the current system that surrounds young people across the UK. Based on the hybrid nature of the work that UK Youth delivers, we have noted the deepening gaps that exist for millions of young people. The pandemic has revealed what happens when young people are left vulnerable to a system that isn't able to meet them where they are or ensure there are clear pathways of support that they can easily access. Due to the diversity and strength of our partnerships, we are distinctly placed to focus our strategic efforts beyond improving the system as is. We have the opportunity to focus on systems change and

address the root causes of the social problems which are often intractable and embedded in networks of cause and effect.

**We have made the decision to take a 'systems change' approach to our strategy. This will impact the way we think about, plan, execute and evaluate our work.** The intentionality of focusing on systems change will enable us to decide on what we will do, why we are doing it and what we will not do. These choices are made, all through the lens of understanding which of our activities will meaningfully shift the dial for young people and transform the very systems that are currently failing millions of them.







## Defining our strategic priorities



## What is youth work?

Youth work is a distinct educational process adapted across a variety of settings to support a young person's personal, social and educational development. It is used in order to: explore their values, beliefs, ideas and issues; enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and/or facilitate

the learning of a set of practical or technical skills/competencies that enable them to realise their full potential. Youth work places young people at the centre of the practice and youth workers aim to empower young people to overcome the challenges, disadvantages or obstacles that stand in the way of achieving their maximum potential (2020 National Youth Work Curriculum).



# Key challenges facing young people today

---

There are more than 11 million young people in the UK, they make up over a fifth of the population and ultimately represent Britain's future.

For so many young people, their youth worker is the trusted adult that they openly talk to, and their youth club is the only safe space they feel they have to be heard and to explore their character, communities, interests, talents and the wider world on their own terms. Youth work uses pedagogically sound techniques that foster the kind of skills, mindset and agency required to successfully navigate life.

Youth organisations report that Covid-19 is having a significant and negative impact on young people. With growing reports of mental health challenges as well as a lack of confidence in their skills and prospects for the future. It is therefore not surprising that 66% of youth organisations are reporting experiencing an increase in demand for their services, with 32% of them stating that the increase is significant (UK Youth "Impact of Covid-19 on England's Youth Organisations" March 2021).

A survey by the Office for National Statistics found that 8 in 10 young people (aged 16 to 29 years) were deeply concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their ability to attend their places of education. Furthermore, data from parents indicates that young people from lower income households are less likely to have developed a routine for learning, got help with school from their family and struggled to

understand homework (Covid-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance report, 2020).

Youth organisations have reported that because of the pandemic, young people are more vulnerable than ever to issues such as poverty, sexual exploitation, grooming and serious violence. Young people are also more likely to be exposed to negative and risky activities, with youth organisations seeing an increase in engagement in gang activity, anti-social behaviour, negative online activity, substance misuse and risk-taking behaviours. The Children's Commissioner for England warned that during lockdown many vulnerable young people have "simply gone off the radar" with the closure of schools and youth centres. During the lockdown children protection referrals (usually made by schools and health professionals), have decreased by 50% (Risk Advisory Services, 2020). We know that young people are experiencing challenges in accessing safe and reliable employment and are therefore suffering from the financial consequences of this. We are seeing a generation that has lost access to the critical development activities that develop their personal skills and increase their employability. In addition, we have seen negative impacts on physical health due to the severe reduction in opportunities to engage in physical activity.

**We believe that youth work can be a catalyst for change;** directly addressing the key needs young people have. Needs that have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic in unprecedented ways.





**11m**

young people in  
the UK represent  
Britain's future

**66%**

of youth organisations  
reporting an increase  
in demand for  
their services

**32%**

stating the  
increase in  
demand is  
significant

**80%**

of young people  
concerned about  
pandemic impact  
on attending places  
of education

**50%**

decrease in child  
protection referrals  
during lockdown



# Our insights from 2020

2020 has reinforced that youth work is an underutilised, poorly understood, yet critical mechanism of support for young people. If unlocked, it could be a catalyst for change, directly addressing the key needs young people have and helping our society to sustainably build back better. Over the past year, our work with the sector, young people, funders, and government has identified key areas of need that UK Youth is well placed to add distinctive value to. These are the needs that have shaped our strategic priorities for the coming years.

## The youth sector needs:

1

### A highly effective advocate

Government, funder, and cross-sector feedback consistently identified a need for greater understanding of youth work and the critical role it has in supporting young people. We believe that this lack of understanding has played a part in why investment in youth work has been declining for over 10 years and the growing sense of frustration felt by the youth sector itself. In 2020 there was perhaps no greater obstacle to unlocking support than the lack of understanding of the difference that youth work makes to young people. We know that we can successfully represent the needs and views of young people in a way that results in increased funding for the sector (e.g. Guardian Christmas Appeal, success of the #YoungAndBlack campaign, UK Youth Fund distributing for DCMS/ PEARS/Paul Hamlyn Foundation etc.). We are well placed to continue to lead on evidencing the key questions

underpinning the value of youth work and the critical role of the sector.

2

### A joined up, cross-sector approach

We know that there is a lack of cross-sector mutual understanding across the services that impact young people and this fragmentation results in complexity that young people are left to try and navigate. To effectively develop young people in the UK we need a joined-up approach from across the key sectors that exist to support them. Evidence from organisations using a networked, collective approach demonstrates that impact can be achieved through connecting organisations to each other, providing mechanisms for shared learning and ensuring solutions can be embedded in a sustainable way. Taking a deliberate collective action approach to our work, allows us to ensure that solutions created in one sector can be reinforced, championed and built upon in others.



**3****Greater access to quality outdoor learning environments to support young people's development and wellbeing**

Facilitated outdoor learning programmes are proven to engage young people, support their development, wellbeing, knowledge, skills, attitudes and support positive behaviour change because of direct engagement with an outdoor learning environment. We know that young people living in the poorest circumstances were over 6 times more likely to have had no previous experience of wild places (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 2010). Outdoor experiences can lead to breakthroughs in learning and development of life skills. We have heard loud and clear from young people that they want more of the opportunities that outdoor learning provides. We have made the decision to use our existing asset of Avon Tyrrell Outdoor Activity Centre to take a leadership role in amplifying the impact of utilising outdoor learning in youth work.

**4****Capacity building support in the form of workforce development and peer-to-peer support**

Over the past year we have heard repeatedly from youth organisations about their growing desire for specific capacity building support in the form of structured leadership development opportunities and forums to work with peers on key issues at a local, regional and thematic basis. This past year, we have evolved and strengthened the way we bring organisations together to co-create solutions around funding, race, digital, mental health and workforce development. This is an area we believe we can work with partners to further innovate in.

**5****Support to embed evidence-based solutions**

At UK Youth we believe in the need for evidence-based work and we know that there are many examples of youth work practice that transforms the lives of young people. Many organisations across our network are working in effective ways that support young people to thrive; whilst others raise barriers that prevent them from being able to access, understand and then embed those insights in their own contexts. We believe that UK Youth is well placed to spotlight effective practice and work with partners to embed solutions in local communities right across the UK.

**6****Support to deliver meaningful youth engagement**

Young people continue to be the greatest untapped resource in the development of solutions to meet their own needs. Over this past year we were able to convene young people, government, funders and organisations more than ever before. Each time we have seen the impact that comes from quality youth engagement. UK Youth can now step beyond our current approach to youth voice and work with others to ensure that young people have access to meaningful partnerships in the design and evaluation of solutions.

**7****Greater digital skills and expertise**

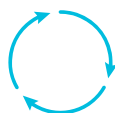
We know that there is need across the sector for creative ways of utilising digital to elevate youth voices. Our goal is to authentically represent the needs and views of diverse groups of young people, therefore if we are to effectively tell their stories and advocate on their behalf, then we ourselves, (and/or those we work with) must be skilled in using the digital platforms that young people are accessing to meet them where they are. We are well placed to take an innovative, bold approach to adaptation as the digital landscape continues to evolve.



We will work to build a movement of change. We will work in partnership to build a society that understands, champions, and delivers effective youth work for all.







# Our theory of change

Our vision is that all young people are equipped to thrive and empowered to contribute at every stage of their lives.

There are many things required for our vision to be achieved. We believe in the potential of young people and **we believe that unlocking youth work is the catalyst for change that a true commitment to young people calls for.**

UK Youth is a multi-faceted organisation that operates at a national scale across the UK. We have influence as a sector-supporting infrastructure body, a direct delivery partner and a campaigner for social change. Therefore, it is critical for us to be clear on the specific problem we are focusing on addressing and the distinct role we can play to complement the work of others.

**Our chosen problem to solve can be broken down into three parts:**

- 1 The lack of investment into youth work.**
- 2 The lack of cross-sector understanding of how youth work makes a difference.**
- 3 The limited opportunities to embed effective solutions.**

**This problem results in the mass inequality of access to quality youth work provision for young people across the UK.** Provision that could proactively address the social, personal and skills gaps that millions of young people

are left to navigate life with. Covid-19 has only made the situation more dire. UK Youth is uniquely placed to move beyond merely supporting young people to try and navigate a broken system. By harnessing our passion, scale, influence and expertise, we can play a UK-wide leadership role to bring people together and drive the sustained transformation of the system itself.

**Youth work is the catalyst for change that is needed now more than ever.** We will work to build a movement of change; galvanising like-minded individuals, organisations, government, and businesses from all sectors, to work together and deliver system change for young people.

**This cross-sector movement will work together to:**

- 1 Ensure that youth organisations have access to sustained funding and quality development provision for young people.**
- 2 Bring cross-sector leaders and young people together to share, grow expertise and solve key issues.**
- 3 Grow the evidence base of what works; working with others to embed learning and scale quality provision.**

Our Strategy to 2025, is therefore focused on **unlocking youth work**, so that the transformational benefits can be accessed by young people regardless of where they are and what they need. We will work in partnership to build a society that understands, champions, and delivers effective youth work for all.



## Our vision

All young people are equipped to thrive and empowered to contribute at every stage of their lives.

## 2025 organisational objectives

Our chosen problem to solve	Strategic goals: transform the system to:	2025 organisational objectives		
Equipping UK Youth for system impact.	become an employer of choice; building a thriving culture of innovation, diversity, and expertise.	Increase investment in the diversity, development, and experience of our people at all levels.	Ensure our work is distinguished by high quality operations and insights from the innovative use of digital, data and user-led design.	Deliver transformational growth through increasing the total contribution of income from our supporters.
“the lack of investment into youth work”	ensure that youth organisations have access to sustained quality provision.	Impact 1 million young people through innovative youth development/ outdoor learning provision.	Increase local access to and engagement in quality youth work including the use of outdoor learning.	Channel £30 million into youth work; leveraging our networks to enable youth organisations to sustainably deepen their impact.
“the lack of cross-sector understanding of how youth work makes a difference”	bring cross-sector leaders and young people together to share, grow expertise and solve key issues.	Increase cross sector understanding and advocacy of youth work including the use of outdoor learning.	Increase the number of individuals and organisations demonstrably taking action to embed meaningful co-partnerships with young people.	Increase the number of cross-sector individuals and organisations demonstrably working together to solve key issues.
“the limited opportunities to embed effective solutions.”	grow the evidence base of what works; working with others to embed learning and scale quality provision.	Become a centre of excellence for innovative, evidence informed youth development content.	Increase the number of organisations we partner with to effectively embed quality practice.	

## Our impact goal

“A society that, understands, champions, and delivers effective youth work for all.”



## 2025 outcomes

How will we know system change is happening.

1

Youth work (including the use of outdoor learning) is widely utilised as an equal and valuable part of the ecosystem that supports young people.

2

All young people have access to quality, local provision delivered by youth organisations that are equipped with sustainable and meaningful funding.

3

Youth development content/experiences are high quality and led by the recognised needs of young people through youth led decision making.

4

There is effective collaboration and problem solving between young people, policy makers and the sectors working with young people.



# UK YOUTH

## **UK Youth London Office**

Kings Building, 16 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HQ  
020 3137 3810

## **Avon Tyrrell Outdoor Centre**

Braggers Lane, Bransgore, Hampshire, BH23 8EE  
01425 672 347

Charity number: 1110590  
[www.ukyouth.org](http://www.ukyouth.org)

Find us on:

