

February Insights at a glance

This month we asked practitioners to complete the sentence
To make the National Youth Strategy work locally, the one change we need most
(in addition to funding) is...

We had **131** responses

Key messages

- The responses collectively say that the [National Youth Strategy](#) will only work locally if youth work is treated as essential, long-term community infrastructure, and not a series of short-term projects.
- People are clear that funding alone is not enough: youth work needs professional recognition, stable and valued workers, safe local spaces, and genuinely joined-up collaboration, with decisions shaped by those closest to young people.
- Without consistency, trust, and accountability, the strategy risks repeating the same fragmented approaches that have already failed young people and the workforce.

Key findings

Across the responses, **six dominant changes the sector needs** emerged. These are presented in order of significance based on respondent input:

1. Recognition and professionalisation of youth work

Across responses, there was a strong sense that youth work is undervalued, misunderstood, and not treated as a profession despite its impact. Respondents highlighted a lack of respect from senior leaders in local authorities, and other professionals, resulting in youth work often being the first service cut. Many called for clearer professional recognition, statutory protection, parity with teaching and social work, and greater understanding of youth work practice at leadership level.

“Youth work recognised as a professional qualification to the same degree social work and teaching is”

Across the responses, six dominant changes the sector needs emerged. These are presented in order of significance based on respondent input:

2. Genuine collaboration and joined-up working

Collaboration was one of the most frequently cited needs. Respondents described fragmented systems, siloed organisations, and competitive funding environments that undermine local delivery. There were repeated calls for genuine partnership working, better communication, shared data and accountability, and trust between local authorities, VCSE organisations, grassroots groups, and other partners. Many stressed that opportunities and resources should be shared rather than guarded.

“Working collaboratively and not hoarding opportunities.”

3. Consistency, stability, and long-term approaches

Respondents strongly criticised short-term, project-based funding and described it as incompatible with relationship-based youth work. Many emphasised that meaningful impact depends on time, consistency, and sustained presence in communities. Stop-start provision was seen as damaging to trust with young people, staff retention, and long-term outcomes. Calls for multi-year funding and steady local approaches were widespread.

“Time. Time to build the relationships. Not short term projects. Consistent 3/5 years to build and empower young people within communities.”

4. Workforce capacity, pay and development

Many responses focused on the shortage of youth workers and the pressures facing the existing workforce. Issues raised included low pay, insecure and sessional contracts, limited career progression, and reliance on goodwill and unpaid hours. Respondents linked these conditions to high turnover, difficulties recruiting experienced staff, and reduced quality of provision. Training pathways, apprenticeships, fair pay, and stable contracts were seen as essential to rebuilding and sustaining the workforce.

“When we are so reliant on sessional workers the Youth Work is never going to be the priority as it doesn't pay the bills - so the high turnover will continue”

5. Safe, accessible youth spaces rooted in communities

Respondents strongly emphasised the need for safe, accessible physical spaces where young people can meet, socialise, and feel a sense of belonging.

Youth centres, clubs, and community spaces were seen as essential infrastructure rather than optional extras, particularly in rural areas and smaller towns. A lack of appropriate spaces was described as a major barrier to delivery.

“Recognition that the primary need for young people is a safe social meeting place.”

6. Youth voice, participation, and co-design

Many responses highlighted the importance of genuinely listening to young people and involving them meaningfully in decisions that affect them right through to delivery.

Respondents warned against tokenistic engagement and stressed the need to reach young people who may not naturally come forward. Youth voice was seen as essential to relevance, trust, and effectiveness, particularly around mental health, safety, and local priorities.

“It is vital that the young people who may not immediately put themselves forward are given the opportunity to have a voice and be listened to”

A bit on what we have done so far at UK Youth:

UK Youth hosted regional road shows to talk with organisations within its network about what to expect in the National Youth Strategy before it was published, our response to it and next steps for the sector following publication. You can watch back the most recent session [here](#) and view the slides [here](#).

Since the end of last year, when the National Youth Strategy, was launched, at UK Youth we have been speaking with our network and young people across England, about what the Strategy means in practice, what's encouraging, and where there are still big unanswered questions.

In February, we released a [blog](#) that brings together those conversations setting out UK Youth's assessment of the Strategy against our 10 tests, sharing what we've heard from grassroots organisations, and outlining how we'll continue working with the sector to push for delivery that genuinely improves young people's lives.



Through the place work of [the #iWill Movement](#), we have also been delivering the '[Seen & Heard](#)' events that take place across England, bringing our [Youth Collaborators](#), #iWill Ambassadors and young people from different towns and cities together with DCMS and local leaders.

So far, we have hosted this event in 10 cities and towns, aiming to turn national commitments into local action. These sessions are about shaping what Youth Matters looks like where young people live, identifying practical next steps that strengthen youth leadership, trusted adults and meaningful opportunities in your community.

Last but not least, UK Youth and Pears Foundation have launched a new £10 million fund to strengthen the financial resilience and capacity of small youth and outdoor learning organisations across the UK. The funding offers multi-year, unrestricted funding alongside targeted capacity-building support to small youth organisations. **Expressions of Interest for this funding closed at 11:59pm Wednesday 6 May 2026.**

Click [here](#) to look at the insights gathered through 'Just One Question'. over two years of Just One Question

Next Question

One question. One minute. Your insight matters.

How do you expect local election results in your area to affect your ability to deliver effective youth work over the next 12 months?

👉 Vote via the link - https://bit.ly/JOQ_June26

🕒 Poll closes 18 June.

The more responses we get, the clearer the picture for youth work across the UK.