



UK Youth Representation to Autumn Budget 2026

About UK Youth

UK Youth is the UK-wide infrastructure body for youth work. Our mission is to widen the reach and deepen the impact of youth work and outdoor learning.

Working through a national network of youth organisations, UK Youth supports the youth sector to deliver high-quality youth work and works with Government, businesses and communities to improve outcomes for young people.

UK Youth has worked closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on the development and delivery of the National Youth Strategy, including delivering consultation with young people and supporting the wider youth sector.

UK Youth also acts as Secretariat for the Back Youth Alliance (BYA), a coalition of leading national youth organisations supporting more than two million young people every year.

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Executive Summary

The upcoming Autumn Budget is an opportunity to turn this new Government's ambitions for young people into sustained investment and delivery.

Young people deserve the opportunities to find their way in the world - but for young people furthest from the labour market, access to these opportunities must come with relational, community based support.

Youth work is essential preventative infrastructure: its trusted, relationship-based approach in the communities where young people live improves their wellbeing, strengthens pathways into education and employment, and unlocks the potential of young people to drive future economic growth in their communities.



UK Youth recommends that HM Treasury:

1. **Provide sustainable, multi-year investment in youth work and supporting infrastructure to deliver the commitments in the Government's National Youth Strategy**, balancing both capital and revenue spend to reach communities in highest need.
2. **Embed youth work into national employment and skills strategies including the Youth Guarantee as part of a 'youth worker-first approach' to reduce economic inactivity**, recognising youth work as a core entry-level service function to support skills development and wellbeing for young people.
3. **Establish a long-term, cross-government funding settlement for youth work as preventative mental health support to reduce demand on departmental budgets**, recognising youth work as core preventative mental health infrastructure, not a discretionary add-on, in the next Spending Review.
4. **Revive the UK Youth Adventures Away from Home Programme in partnership with DCMS** to support young people's socio-emotional skills and efficiently deploy public spend through a bursary-funded model, with an average cost of just £151 per young person.
5. **Fund meaningful youth voice across Government**, ensuring that young people participate in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies and services that affect them to improve user adoption and public spending returns.

1. Provide sustainable, multi-year investment in youth work and supporting infrastructure to deliver the commitments in the Government's National Youth Strategy

This Government's National Youth Strategy represents an important commitment to improving the opportunities and support available to young people and sets out an ambitious vision. This must be translated into sustained action and investment. The Strategy was launched in December 2025, yet funding to support its delivery has yet to reach communities at the scale needed. While initial commitments, including investment in workforce training to support youth work infrastructure, are positive steps, critical funding gaps remain. Similarly, the delay in launching the Enrichment Expansion Programme, announced almost a year ago, risks further slowing progress at a time when young people and local services urgently need support.

As the Strategy highlights, years of underinvestment have weakened the youth work ecosystem and reduced the availability of open-access provision. Previous UK Youth analysis has highlighted the significant economic and social returns generated by youth work are already saving the Government £3.2bn a year across a wide range of areas including employment, education and health.^[1] UK Youth has previously identified a need for approximately £1.6 billion of additional investment over five years across England and Wales to begin rebuilding youth infrastructure and reduce regional disparities in provision, equivalent to approximately £324 million of additional annual investment.^[3]



The Back Youth Alliance has highlighted that national ambitions for young people depend upon both strong local provision and the national infrastructure that supports it. National youth organisations, including UK Youth, provide training, evidence, funding, workforce development and infrastructure that enable grassroots organisations in our networks to deliver high-quality services in every postcode.^[2]

UK Youth recommends that Government commits to sustainable, multi-year funding for youth work and supporting infrastructure, prioritising communities facing the greatest barriers to opportunity. Funding arrangements should be sufficiently flexible to allow organisations to respond to local need and should ensure revenue investment keeps pace with capital investment so that buildings and programmes can be properly staffed, operated and maintained.

This is a critical moment to turn ambition into action and ensure that investment reaches the youth services, organisations and communities that are best placed to deliver for young people. Funding committed through the Youth Matters Fund and Dormant Assets can make a generational difference in the lives of young people, ensuring all young people can access high-quality and multidisciplinary enrichment and youth work opportunities.

2. Embed youth work into national employment and skills strategies including the Youth Guarantee as part of a ‘youth worker-first approach’ to reduce economic inactivity

It is well-established that young people face multiple barriers to participation in employment, education and training (EET), leading to the high numbers of young people, currently around 981,000 according to latest ONS figures, classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training). These barriers are not limited to skills or vacancies. Young people can experience low confidence, poor mental health, limited professional networks, financial insecurity, inaccessible careers advice and a lack of meaningful work experience. Government has set out clear intention to take action to address this challenge. Ongoing committed policy focus is essential beyond Government’s response to the upcoming Milburn Review on young people and work.

Recent Government initiatives like the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Jobs Grant are positive steps, but narrow in scope. Young people who are not already on Universal Credit are neglected. Too often, interventions focus on cross-sections of young people at crisis thresholds, excluding large numbers of young people whose need is less urgent but no less acute. Supporting young people into meaningful employment must remain a central economic priority.

Yet traditional employment support alone cannot overcome the interconnected challenges young people are facing. Youth workers are uniquely positioned to help bridge the gaps between young people, schools, employers and statutory systems. Their trusted relationships with young people allow them to provide personalised support in a low-pressure, supportive space that differs from sanctions-based government employment support. Youth workers,

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working in partnership with careers advisors, training providers, employers and schools can help young people through work placements, connect them to opportunities and build their confidence, helping them stay in employment in the long-term.

The Milburn Review Interim Report outlines the cracks of the existing employment support system. Youth workers are often working within these cracks with young people who have been failed by the system and trapped in economic inactivity. Unlocking the potential of youth work to support young people into sustainable employment would significantly contribute to national productivity. Successful implementation of the Youth Guarantee will require funding for youth work alongside employment support and health services that can shape a strong, joined-up local work, health and skills offer, enabling future growth.

Evidence from UK Youth's employability programmes demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach.

- **The Hatch Employability Programme:** Provided more than **1,200** young people with paid work experience alongside employability training and ongoing youth worker support. Only **18%** of participants were in education, employment or training at the start of the programme; three months after completing it, this had risen to **66%**. Across the programme, **71%** of participants improved their employability skills.^[5]
- **Building Connections Programme:** Successfully connected youth organisations, employers and young people. Youth workers acted as trusted intermediaries, helping young people explore careers while supporting employers to provide meaningful and inclusive opportunities.^[6]
- **Summer Jobs Programme:** Inspired by successful US initiatives and launched in 2024 across Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and London, this programme offers young people aged 16–20 at risk of violence a six-week paid work placement (one preparation week followed by five weeks of paid work) paired with dedicated 1:1 youth worker support. The initiative improves wellbeing and employability skills while engaging major employers, such as Burger King, Timpson, and Veolia. Many young people were hired permanently by their placement providers. Running again in 2026, the programme offers expanded placement opportunities across the UK.

Employment interventions should not be designed around sanctions or short-term job entry alone. They should recognise that sustainable employment depends on confidence, relationships, wellbeing, skills and access to opportunities. This approach would particularly benefit young people experiencing multiple disadvantages and those furthest from the labour market, helping to reduce regional and socioeconomic inequalities in employment outcomes.

To deliver growth across every postcode, national skills strategies must align with the Government's fiscal devolution roadmap and regional growth corridors. Through No.10 North and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), youth work infrastructure provides local mayors



with a proven mechanism to reach young people in their communities. By integrating youth workers directly into mayoral employment hubs and local industrial strategies, HM Treasury can ensure that regional growth funds actively reduce economic inactivity rather than leaving underserved young people behind.

Supporting more young people into sustainable education, employment and training increases labour-market participation, strengthens the future skills base and reduces long-term welfare expenditure. Youth work-led employment programmes can also improve the effectiveness of existing public investment by engaging young people who may not access or trust mainstream employment services. Investment in supported work experience and community-based careers provision should therefore be embedded into national employment and skills strategies, including the Youth Guarantee. Incentivising and expanding access to paid supported work experience, such as the opportunities offered by scaling up UK Youth's Summer Jobs programme, would improve retention in high-priority areas.

3. Establish a long-term, cross-government funding settlement for youth work as preventative mental health support to reduce demand on departmental budgets

Young people's mental health and wellbeing needs to be a priority for Government reforms and emerging place-based models, including Young Futures Hubs and NHS Neighbourhood Health Teams. To succeed, these models must be rooted in communities where young people already are, build on existing youth work and social prescribing initiatives and be resourced for meaningful relational practice.

Young people consulted through the National Youth Strategy identified mental health and wellbeing as one of their biggest daily concerns, with more than **one in three** identifying it as a principal area of concern.^[7] At the same time, statutory services remain under significant pressure. A sustainable response cannot depend solely on clinical services intervening once a young person's needs have reached crisis point. According to the Nuffield Foundation (2026), around 1 in 10 young people aged 16–24 had been in contact with mental health services but only around 1 in 25 had 2 contacts or more, indicating limited access to treatment.^[8]

UK Youth's 2026 *Thriving Minds* policy report demonstrates that youth work acts as essential preventative mental health infrastructure.^[9] Youth workers provide accessible, non-clinical and relationship-based support in accessible community settings. They can identify challenges early, provide emotional and practical support, build belonging and confidence, and help young people access specialist services when necessary before crisis thresholds are reached.

UK Youth's research has previously estimated that youth work already generates approximately **£1.7 billion** in annual savings through improved health outcomes, including reduced pressure on mental health services.^[10] Young Futures Hubs offer a significant opportunity to provide joined-up support. It is important that the Hubs are situated within specific community and cultural contexts relevant to young people, in spaces where young people feel both



comfortable and understood. Equally, the Hubs need to complement existing support offers, such as Youth Hubs and Careers Hubs run through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Family Hubs, and Early Support Hubs jointly managed by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC). This is crucial to ensure there is a clear pathway to joined-up support that can enable young people to access the information that they need.

While the Government's reforms to policies signal growing recognition of the depth of the challenges young people are facing, they remain largely focused on crisis response. Without parallel investment in preventative support through youth work, interventions will still arrive later than needed. This reinforces the need for a cross-government funding and delivery model that positions youth work alongside education and health as a core part of prevention policy and funding. Effective community-based early intervention can reduce demand on overstretched statutory mental health services, improve educational and employment outcomes and prevent challenges becoming more complex and expensive to address, lowering long-term expenditure across multiple departmental budgets.

4. Revive the UK Youth Adventures Away from Home Programme in partnership with DCMS

The case for outdoor learning has never been stronger. Outdoor learning plays a crucial role in skills development and social mobility, helping young people learn the skills, experience and confidence that are essential to their future employment opportunities. UK Youth has been responsible for delivering the £4.7million Adventures Away from Home Fund in partnership with DCMS for outdoor learning providers to work with under-represented young people in England who face barriers to participation.

Through Adventures Away From Home, thousands of young people have accessed fully funded outdoor learning experiences, ranging from single-day sessions to three-day residential. In the most recent year alone, the fund reached more than **31,000** young people, with nearly half (46%) coming from the most deprived areas and 64% attending with little or no previous outdoor learning experience. The evidence from the Fund is clear: structured time outdoors builds confidence, resilience, and wellbeing in ways that other forms of support cannot replicate while also improving life chances.

UK Youth's latest evaluation found measurable improvements in wellbeing across every indicator tracked, with around six in ten young people reporting improvements in happiness, life satisfaction and sense of worth after taking part. Benefits also extend to practitioners. The same evaluation found that 96% of group leaders said the experience helped them build stronger, more trusting relationships with the young people in their care, demonstrating the wider value of outdoor learning in strengthening youth work practice and delivering optimal Value for Money (VfM).



Bursary-funded models like Adventures Away from Home demonstrate that barriers to participation, including cost and transport, can be overcome through targeted investment and strong delivery partnerships between outdoor learning providers, schools and youth organisations. With an average cost of just £151 per young person, this represents a low-unit-cost delivery framework and a highly cost-effective investment when considered alongside the significant and lasting positive outcomes achieved. However, access to outdoor learning provision remains stubbornly unequal. A young person's opportunity to go on a residential trip or even participate in a youth work session outside can still depend too heavily on their family's postcode and socio-economic background.

At the same time, national Government is asking schools to deliver more enrichment and more outdoor experiences for young people while local authority capacity to support these opportunities is increasingly under pressure. Without sustained investment, there is a risk the gap between ambition and access will continue to grow and young people may miss out on essential formative experiences of learning outside and gaining access to nature. UK Youth recommends that the Government revives the Adventures Away from Home programme and builds on it with similar models to deliver on its promises made to young people in the National Youth Strategy.

5. Fund meaningful youth voice across Government

Young people should be active partners in the decisions that shape their lives. Policies designed for them, without them, risk failure when it comes to implementation and adoption, and wasted departmental spend. Government's commitment to youth voice through the National Youth Strategy and Cabinet Office's signing of the Power of Youth Charter is welcome. However, meaningful participation requires dedicated resources. Consultation should not be treated as an occasional exercise undertaken after policies have already been developed. Instead, young people's experiences and ideas should inform policy design, implementation and evaluation from the outset.

As opportunities for democratic participation grow (including the introduction of votes at 16), youth work will be essential in empowering young people to become the leaders of their communities. Funding for young people should empower young people to shape and choose the activities they participate in. This requires investment in provision that offers a broad and meaningful range of opportunities young people want and need in their local areas, rather than a narrow set of prescribed activities.

UK Youth's *Thriving Minds* research reinforces the importance of youth voice, particularly when reforming systems such as mental health provision. Services are more likely to be accessible, trusted and effective when they are designed with the people expected to use them.^[11] Government already has examples of effective practice. The National Youth Strategy's Deliver You consultation demonstrated how large-scale engagement can enable young people to



shape national policy as outlined in the Civil Society Covenant, while DCMS's Youth Engagement Impact Study provides guidance on effective participation across Government.^[12]

The next step is to ringfence specific funding in each department to commit to a high quality youth engagement process, drawing on the example of the National Youth Strategy Deliver You Consultation. UK Youth's previous Budget representation proposed a £300,000 minimum ringfenced youth engagement funding pot in each Government department to facilitate high-quality youth participation. This provides a practical starting point for establishing consistent participation infrastructure across Government departments.^[13]

Embedding youth voice within policymaking across Government departments leads to stronger and future-proofed policymaking and ensures that young people do not feel neglected by a political system where policies are done 'to' them not 'for' them.

Conclusion

Investment in youth work is an essential investment in the UK's economic growth, community cohesion and the wellbeing of future generations. By embedding youth work within a prevention-first approach, the Government can improve young people's mental health and wellbeing, strengthen pathways into employment and reduce longer-term pressure on public services, ensuring every young person has the support and opportunities they need to succeed in life.

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