

# Our Strategy

2023-2026

**YMCA**

Here for young people  
Here for communities  
Here for you

## Our mission

To help children and young people have a fair chance to be who they want to be.

We do this by providing a safe home, increasing life skills and self-confidence, and improving emotional wellbeing and mental health.

## Our values

- ▶ **We welcome all** who need space to feel secure, respected, heard and valued
- ▶ **We inspire** people to realise their full potential
- ▶ **We support** people to maximise opportunity and choice
- ▶ **We speak out** on the issues that are important to children and young people and help them find their own voice

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YMCA DownsLink Group is proud to be a member of the federation of YMCA England and Wales.

We contribute to their vision and purpose: An inclusive Christian movement transforming communities so that all young people can belong, contribute and thrive.

**Everyone should have a fair chance to discover who they are and what they can become.**

# Foreword

I joined YMCA DownsLink Group as CEO on 12 July 2023 and am now pleased to share our direction of travel over the next three years. We're acutely aware of the challenges facing children and young people in our post-pandemic world and the impact of the economic uncertainty. This strategy puts children and young people in Sussex and Surrey at the heart of our thinking – they matter, they deserve support – and the role we play is vital, now more than ever.

I look forward to working in partnership with the many people and organisations who share our passion for changing the lives of children and young people by giving them a fair chance of a positive future. Thank you to our staff, volunteers, partners, supporters, and our community for everything you do.

**Emily Brock**  
Chief Executive Officer



## About our strategy

Following a period of organisational growth and a global pandemic, this strategy sets out YMCA DownsLink Group's ambitions over the next three years.

Now more than ever, we recognise the need to be clear why we do what we do and how we improve outcomes for more children and young people, whilst also consolidating and optimising our resources for the future.

The strategy development process started in 2022 and throughout we have consulted with colleagues, young people who use our services, partners and donors, and our trustees.

We reflected on the vision and purpose as part of our membership of YMCA England and Wales, and reviewed and updated our own organisational mission and values.

We assessed the external factors that impact us and evaluated what we do best, and devised goals which would build our future success.

From September 2022 to January 2023, we collaborated with The Centre for Youth Impact, part of YMCA George Williams College, to develop a theory of change to underpin the strategy.

The final strategy was approved by the Board of Trustees in July 2023. Whilst we have this direction of travel for the next three years, we know that we're living in an ever-changing world, and we will adapt as necessary.

## Our context

Many children and young people experience extraordinary challenges and adversity that can prevent their lives starting well.

The ever-increasing level of risk and complexity they face has driven our services to be needed now more than ever before.

Like many others, we've been impacted by the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, particularly by the rise in energy prices, with costs soaring across our estate of 90 buildings. To continue to serve the needs of children and young people in Sussex and Surrey, we recognise the need to strengthen our organisation to meet our present and future challenges.

This means being agile enough to respond effectively to changes across the sector, including the drive towards greater integration of health and social care and new regulations to enhance the provision of accommodation for children in care and care leavers aged 16 to 17.

We're on a journey to build psychologically informed environments that promote safety and resilience for children and young people, and for our staff and volunteers. This also means attracting and retaining people who share our values and can help us to build a strong and resilient organisational culture.

In 2021, we saw a **25% increase in children and young people needing mental health support** nationally. In Sussex this equates to a rise from 29,470 to 37,200.

**129,000 young people asked for help from their local council** in 2021/22 because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness. **Brighton has the third highest rate of people who are living on the streets** or in temporary accommodation when compared to other regions, and Hastings ranks fifth highest. In Guildford, up to eight people are sleeping rough in any single night.

In 2020, there were **985 children in care in Surrey and 941 in West Sussex**. 282 and 129 were 16-17 years of age. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) make up a significant proportion (27%) of Surrey's 16-17 year old Looked After cohort.



*“I was in such a dark place. I couldn’t see happiness and thought there was no hope. But then, the lovely people at the YMCA gave me a nice home to live in and a safe space.”*

- Ben, Ex-Resident

*“Before having the support from YMCA Dialogue, I didn’t think that it would even be a possibility for me to gain power over my anxious thoughts and not let them control the way I lived my life. I am proud to say now, post-counselling, that I feel empowered, prepared and able to live my life to the absolute fullest.”*

- Mollie, YMCA Dialogue Client



*The YMCA has made such a difference. I was given so much more than just a roof over my head. The staff did so much to help me pass my A levels and get into university.*

- Mapalo, Ex-resident





## Who we are

YMCA DownsLink Group (YMCA DLG) grew out of the merger of several local YMCAs across Sussex and Surrey. We can trace our history back to Hove YMCA which was formed in 1919.

Today we are the largest regional charity in Sussex and Surrey working to prevent youth homelessness and support children and young people's emotional and mental health.

We employ 370 people and have 80 volunteers. With a turnover of approximately £17 million, 53% of our income is from rent and service charges, with the remaining 47% from support contracts, donations and investments.

We support children and young people up to the age of 25 with multiple and complex needs.

### We offer support in three service areas:

- ▶ Housing provision and sustaining accommodation
- ▶ Specialist information, advice and support
- ▶ Emotional wellbeing and mental health

Our services are inclusive, and we support children and young people who are LGBTQ+, Black and Racially Minoritised, neurodiverse, have experienced exploitation, are care experienced, young families, young carers, young refugees and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

### The children and young people we support may experience one or more of the following:

Homelessness, Domestic abuse, Substance use, Involvement in criminal activity, Exploitation, Economic difficulties, Not in employment, education or training (NEET), Mental and physical health issues (mild to moderate), Self-harm or suicide, Life transitions, Adverse childhood experiences, Trauma, Family relationships, Bereavement.

# Our approach

The environments in which we deliver our services are designed to meet the psychological needs of children and young people, and we will respond to those who have experienced adversity in a trauma informed way.

We create services that are inclusive and accessible, and that children and young people trust and want to use. Our multi-faith chaplaincy service offers non-judgemental spiritual, emotional, and social wellbeing support to the young people in our supported accommodation.

As part of being a psychologically informed organisation, our staff have access to continuous professional development and, for frontline staff, reflective practice supervision and clinical supervision.

We commit to co-production. Children and young people's voices and experiences will help us in decision-making at all levels across the organisation. At an individual level, this means the care and support they receive, and at the organisational level, this means ensuring they actively and meaningfully influence decisions that affect them.

# Measuring our impact

Together with the Centre for Youth Impact, we have developed an organisational Theory of Change to be clear how we support positive change for children and young people. It captures:



We will use it to underpin decision-making, improve services, communicate what we do, and support and develop our people. Most significantly, it will improve how we communicate our impact.



*“Over the past six years I have supported many families with children aged 14-17 who have been in crisis with their relationships. Mediation is such an amazing tool, and it really works to help people in conflict resolve issues and move forward.”*

- Mary, Family Mediator



*“I enjoy getting to provide support and advice to staff in best practice to enable the young people in exploring their identity and being comfortable to express themselves within an inclusive atmosphere.”*

- Eden, Deputy Project Manager

*“I often will tell the residents I am proud of them. Some young people may not have received a lot positive feedback before, every time it happens you see them grow a little bit.”*

- Trish, Project Worker





# Our Priorities

## What we will do

For 2023-26, everything we do will be aligned to our **THREE PRIORITIES** to ensure we can help children and young people have a fair chance to be who they want to be.

### Priority #1

#### **Deliver psychologically informed services**

##### **We will:**

- ▶ Ensure that our accommodation for 16- and 17-year-old looked-after children and care leavers meet Ofsted regulations and national standards
- ▶ Develop a plan to grow our housing provision to meet future demand
- ▶ Review our move-on accommodation services and buildings
- ▶ Develop and expand our emotional wellbeing and specialist mental health offer in community and education settings
- ▶ Collaborate across our services to enhance outcomes for children and young people, and to create efficiencies
- ▶ Develop our Youth Advice Centres as open access early support hubs for information and advice for young people in need of support
- ▶ Ensure that a framework to build psychological safety is embedded at all levels in the organisation to guide service delivery and physical environments

## Priority #2

### Amplify youth voice and leadership

#### We will:

- ▶ Co-produce with young people inclusive and meaningful methods and systems that involve them in decisions that affect their care and in decision-making spaces at all levels of the organisation
- ▶ Provide a platform for young people to take social action in their local area and nationally on the issues that matter most to them, and so they can influence change in local health and social care systems
- ▶ Build the capacity of young people to enable their participation and build their skills for life
- ▶ Continue to properly reward, recognise and celebrate young people's contributions and treat them as experts in their own lives



## Priority #3

### Be a great place to work

#### We will:

- ▶ Develop and implement a work force plan to ensure we have the right combination of roles and skills to deliver this strategy
- ▶ Review, embed and live our organisational values
- ▶ Build a community of leaders and managers who role model our values and motivate and enhance the performance of staff
- ▶ Improve our recruitment and retention by exploring ways to grow our own talent pool
- ▶ Ensure our reward and benefits package remains in line with the external market
- ▶ Support wellbeing by helping colleagues balance work and life responsibilities



# Our Enablers

In achieving the above priorities, we also have THREE ENABLERS which should inform all our activities and ways of working. In achieving our priorities, we will be:

## Effective and financially sustainable

### We will:

- ▶ Become financially resilient and generate free reserves
- ▶ Make sure our buildings are compliant with regulatory standards
- ▶ Embrace digital innovation to improve internal systems and data management
- ▶ Work towards 2030 targets to reduce carbon footprint
- ▶ Grow fundraising income
- ▶ Create partnerships to support our strategy and deliver value for money
- ▶ Review and improve our governance

## Equitable, diverse and inclusive

### We will:

- ▶ Ensure services are inclusive and accessible for all children and young people
- ▶ Deliver on our commitment to tackle discrimination of all kinds
- ▶ Embed our expected behaviours to build a safe, inclusive and respectful space centred on the needs of children and young people

## Committed to learning

### We will:

- ▶ Develop a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan to measure the outcomes in our Theory of Change and enable continuous service development
- ▶ Establish a culture where everyone values and shares learning from successes and failures equally
- ▶ Innovate new approaches to delivery to increase effectiveness and efficiency



## Keep in Touch

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## Assessing our risk appetite

The Executive Team takes responsibility for identifying and monitoring the risks associated with the delivery of this strategy.

An organisational risk register is reviewed on a quarterly basis. This seeks to ascertain the top risks the organisation faces, their current risk rating relative to the desired rating and then action any gaps. Gaps are closely monitored, as are new risks that emerge in this challenging operating environment.

The risks are monitored through the relevant subcommittees of our Board of Trustees, with oversight from our Audit and Risk Committee, and ultimately the full Board. The Board of Trustees conduct an annual review to assess risk appetite.

## Delivering our strategy

Year on year, implementation of this strategy will be driven by an annual plan and the Board will receive quarterly reports on progress. Before the end of March, the Board will review progress and agree an annual plan for the next year.

Recognising that our operating environment is constantly changing, as are the needs and experiences of the children and young people we support, the Board of Trustees will review this strategy and publish an updated version mid-way through the strategy period.