

YMCA
DOWNSLINK GROUP

Our Impact

2023/24



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 ► We inspire ► We support ► We speak out

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.

Our impact 2023-2024

7,146

children, young people and families used our services

1,094

young people given a safe home

89%

of residents ready to move on did so successfully

5,000

children and young people provided with counselling support





I was pleased to be asked to do the introduction to this Impact Report because YMCA DownsLink Group (YMCA DLG) has helped me so much. Things are so much better now compared to when I first came here when I was kicked out and had nowhere to go.

I was in a very bad place then and when I look back, I wonder how I got through all that. I'm doing a lot better now and I'm even planning to move on in September. I'm moving in with my best friend. If I didn't have the help from YMCA DLG, I don't think I would be able to live independently again because last time I tried it went the worst way it could.

Welcome from one of our young residents

The support workers we have are very good, they know that everyone needs different things and have different boundaries. When I first moved in, I went to chaplaincy where we had meals together like a family. My key worker encouraged me to go because I was shy and I thought it would be awkward. But I kept going and made friends there.

I've learnt a lot about budgeting since living here. I never used to be able to do it. I've also learnt to plan stuff and remember appointments.

I'm now a member of the Youth Council which has been interesting. We've discussed rent, guests staying and maintenance in the housing projects. I've seen changes happen since I've been involved and I think a lot of things are in the process of happening right now, which is good.

YMCA has been a stepping stone for me. I'm not stopping here, but it's helped me get started with the rest of my life. I hope you enjoy reading this Impact Report and about all the great work YMCA DLG does for young people like me.

Georgia

List of photos:

P1 (cover) a resident in our supported accommodation; p2 a resident in our supported accommodation; p3 Georgia; p4 volunteer chaplains Brian and Gill; p5 library image; p6 library image; p7 Madeleine, Jake and Helen, from our young families project; p9 Crista, one of our therapists; p10 library image; p11, Niki, one of our housing managers; p12 two of our residents in our supported accommodation; p13 Ben, Charlotte and Jade, three of our supported housing colleagues; p14 a fundraiser doing a skydive with instructor; p14 inset, fundraisers on the Downs Link Challenge; p15 youth engagement manager Harriet; p16 residents at our supported accommodation paint the mural; p16 Dynamo staff; p18 our CEO, Emily Brock.

How we made an impact on youth homelessness

Homelessness across our areas continues to be a major issue and our team deals with the harsh realities that young people face. Many are sofa surfing, cramped in chronically overcrowded homes, in emergency accommodation or street homeless.

In 2023-2024 we provided safe, high quality supported **accommodation for 1,094 young people** aged 16-25.

We offer so much more than simply a bed: we provide access to education, training, employment, advice on dealing with finances, budgeting, personal relationships, nutrition and cooking, community involvement and more. Our aim is to enable them to live independently.

Our multi-faith chaplains provide a sense of family, a space to be heard, to have fun and to eat together. Our chaplains provided home-cooked meals to 464 young people across our housing projects.

One in five people facing homelessness in the UK is aged 16 to 24 and in 2022-2023 about 136,000 young people asked their local council for help because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

There were a variety of reasons the young people we supported over the year became homeless including family breakdown, friends no longer willing to accommodate them, relationship breakdown, eviction from private housing tenancy, family death and domestic abuse.

Of the young people we supported:


240 were care leavers, three of whom were 16 and 17-year-olds

61 had been sleeping rough

69 were asylum seekers

625 had recorded mental health needs.





After running away from a violent home, Josh was sofa surfing, sleeping rough and became involved with drugs.

“Thankfully I was able to move into the YMCA. They gave me meals every day and a comfortable room to stay in. I had support from the housing team and was offered counselling. I lived at the YMCA for about two years, before moving on to live more independently at another YMCA property. I lived there for 18 months until I was offered a home by the local council. I’m now finished with drugs and working part time.”

“If I hadn’t had a room at the YMCA then I don’t know where I would be today, probably lying dead in a gutter.”

Supporting young families

In Brighton our young families project provided holistic housing **support for 32 young parents in crisis.**

Many of our young parents come to us following family relationship breakdown or having experienced their own childhood trauma. Others have been trying to cope in cramped and overcrowded homes, sharing bedrooms with siblings together with their baby or young child.

We house eight young families in seven one-bedroom flats and one two-bedroom flat. There's also a communal courtyard which boasts a colourful mural, created by a former YMCA resident. The outdoor space is used for groups, socialising and as a space for the young children to play.

Our support workers link in with other professionals such as health visitors, support them with advice on providing nutritious meals for their babies and young children, and encourage them to attend young parent groups in the community.



“Teen mothers are often stigmatised by negative stereotypes which can make them feel judged and isolated. We support the young parents to recognise and grow their skills which leads to an increase in confidence in their abilities as parents.”

- Deputy manager Madeleine Bowen

“My keyworker was so supportive and understanding, she never judged me whatever I went through, and always told me what an amazing mum I am.”

- Kelly



Supporting children and young people with their mental health

We provided **therapeutic support to 6,632 young people** across East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex through our community counselling and schools services.

In Brighton and Hove, we are the main provider of support for children and young people with mild to moderate mental health needs. Some of the ways we help the different age groups, from four to 25, include counselling, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), online counselling via our E-wellbeing site (for ages 13 to 25), canine-assisted therapy, drama therapy, play therapy, emotional wellbeing support, family therapy and autism spectrum counselling.

We provided mental health support and counselling to 1,032 children and young people in Brighton and Hove over the year.

In partnership with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Youth Emotional Support (YES), we have a single point of access for mental health support in West Sussex which was used by 5,862 people over the year.

Mental health counselling in schools

We continued to provide counselling to children and young people in schools across East and West Sussex, Brighton and Hove and Surrey. Our counselling helps them cope with stressful and distressing experiences, emotional difficulties, anxiety, bereavement and loss of self-confidence.

Our specialist counsellors supported 1,345 children during the year. Within secondary and primary schools, we engaged 150 Mental Health Champions and, at the end of the project, 88% said they felt more confident about their knowledge of mental health. A total of 84% said they knew where to get mental health support in and out of school or college and 89% felt more confident about creating action to improve mental health.

Therapy for fostered and adopted children within school

We provided therapy for 18 children who were adopted or in care through our work with schools during the year. These children are often deeply traumatised and we work closely with social workers, foster carers, adoptive families and schools to support them.

“The therapy I had helped to unpack and make sense of my brain. We spoke about things in a logical way rather than being a jumble of thoughts, as it had previously felt like. It helped me to overcome the problems I was facing and changed the way that I think and speak to myself.”

- Mollie



Sam was experiencing social anxiety that stopped him attending school or going out with family and friends:

“I found starting secondary school very overwhelming. It was difficult to make friends and come to school. I had panic attacks and would not leave my house for any fun activities that I used to enjoy. I had always liked going to London or the seaside but even thinking about leaving my house was very scary. I needed to do something because I realised I was missing out.”

“My therapist and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helped my social anxiety decrease. I felt less anxious and did more of the same things as other children. I started going out, to the gym, the hairdresser or cinema. Now I’m no longer scared of going to London and I do things

almost every weekend. I recommend sessions every week because then you can talk about what is happening and why you are you feeling sad.”

“My YMCA DownsLink Group therapist listened to my worries and I learnt that sometimes these were just thoughts that came and went. I now know that I don’t need to worry about everything.”

“I’m doing ok now. I sometimes still feel anxious but it’s ok. I’ve learnt to calm my body down with breathing and I can talk to my friends or mum.”

Our WiSE project - What is Sexual Exploitation

Our specialist WiSE team, some of whom are former police officers, social workers and teachers, work across Sussex and Surrey, providing trauma-informed support to children. Our sessions for families included information, guidance, and resources to update their knowledge on online safety.

During 2023-2024 we supported a total of **289 children and young people** who were experiencing sexual exploitation or at risk of it.

We also ran training sessions for more than 1,000 professionals who work with children and young people including social workers, health visitors, teachers and police.

Complex sexual exploitation cases are referred to us through children's services, health, education and the police. In addition, we do preventative work in schools including a six-week programme of early intervention workshops. During the year, we supported 58 children across seven schools in Surrey through these workshops.

The average age range we work with is 13 to 17 years but we have seen an increase in referrals to us of children aged between five and 10 years, due to the online world and access to devices.

“All our interventions are tailored to each child or young person to ensure we engage them effectively. We often meet the young person in their school, home or we go for a walk together to do the support sessions. This ensures they feel safe and supported whilst tackling uncomfortable topics and conversations.”

- Harriet Nixon, WiSE manager in Sussex



Supporting young people in their communities

We run two youth advice centres, in Brighton and in Crawley, which act as a **'front door' for about 1,200 children and young people** aged 13-25 over the year, 1,147 in Brighton, and 62 in Crawley.

Of the people who took part in family mediation sessions, **71% stayed safely in their homes, rather than becoming homeless.**

The young people we support are typically experiencing, or at risk of, multiple, interconnected issues significantly impeding their life chances. These include homelessness, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, poor mental health, family breakdown, education exclusion and seeking asylum.

"My daughter and I are having mediation and well and truly on the road of recovery. We have had a very difficult few years and, when we walked in there, we were at a point where my daughter didn't want to spend any time with me."

"That has completely changed and I now have my daughter back in my life. We are having fun together and even going on holiday in a few weeks as a family. I'm so grateful."

- parent

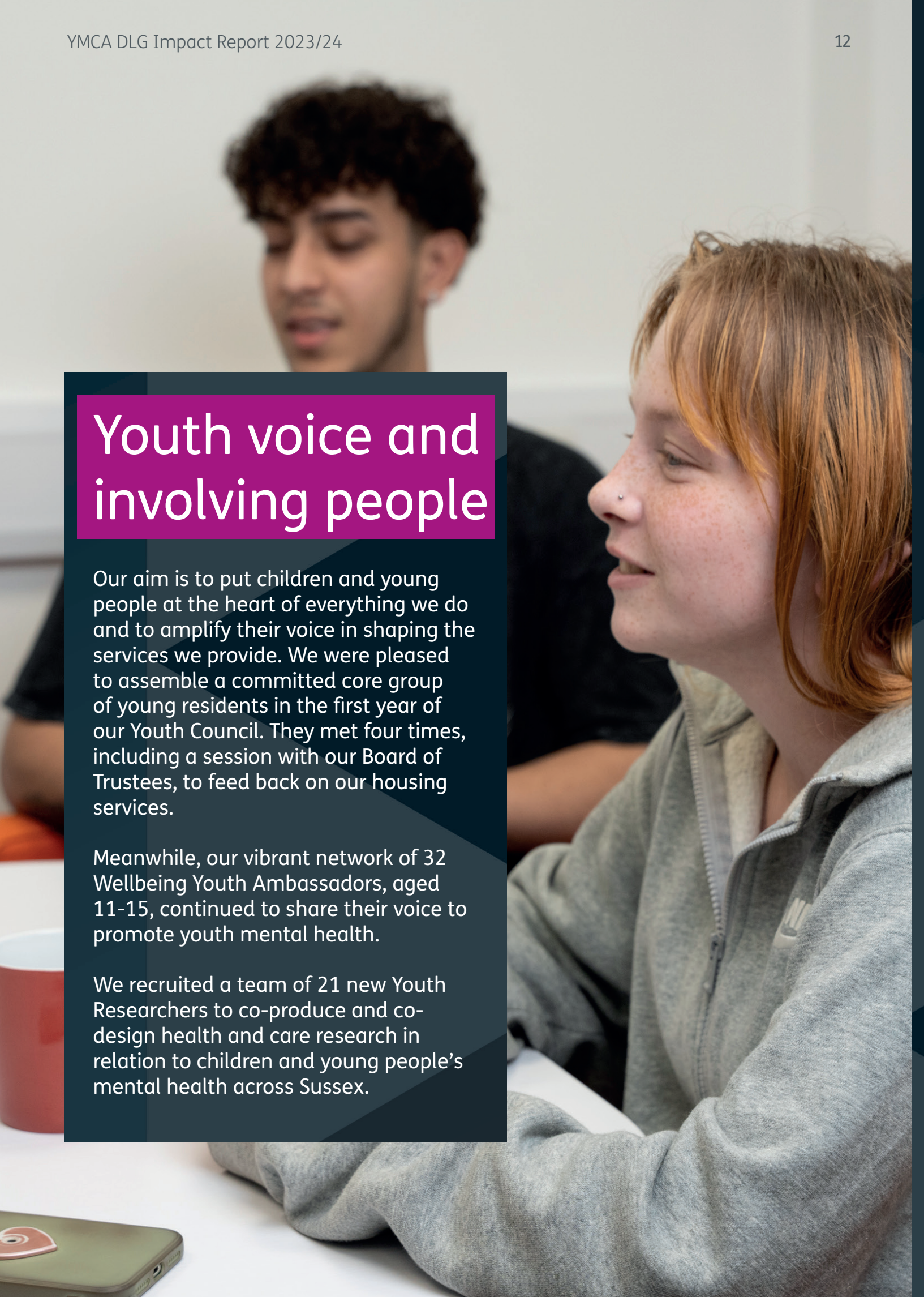


Youth voice and involving people

Our aim is to put children and young people at the heart of everything we do and to amplify their voice in shaping the services we provide. We were pleased to assemble a committed core group of young residents in the first year of our Youth Council. They met four times, including a session with our Board of Trustees, to feed back on our housing services.

Meanwhile, our vibrant network of 32 Wellbeing Youth Ambassadors, aged 11-15, continued to share their voice to promote youth mental health.

We recruited a team of 21 new Youth Researchers to co-produce and co-design health and care research in relation to children and young people's mental health across Sussex.



Colleagues and volunteers

We place great value on our colleagues and volunteers and aim to create a psychologically informed environment.

Every year we survey staff and in May 2023, **79% of staff believed they could be themselves at work.**

We continue to work hard to create a culture of trust and inclusion that is free from harassment and abuse, and

offer access to continuous professional development and, for frontline staff, regular reflective practice supervision and clinical supervision.

During the year, we:

- ▶ increased the diversity of our Board and leadership
- ▶ introduced a new digital HR system
- ▶ committed to becoming a Real Living Wage employer
- ▶ paid a 4% cost of living increase to all staff in April 2023
- ▶ distributed 25 long service awards for staff with over five years' service.



Fundraising

Our fundraising supports funding to complement our contract and commercial income streams. We set targets for ourselves to increase our fundraised income and in 2023-2024 we were pleased to achieve this target.

Some of the community fundraising highlights of the year included:

- ▶ The Brighton Half Marathon
- ▶ A skydive event
- ▶ Our DownsLink Challenge 17.5mile walk along the Downs Link Route through Sussex and Surrey
- ▶ Campaigns including Room Sponsorship and our Love in a Box Christmas campaign.

We are registered with The Fundraising Regulator and have adopted and abide by the Code of Fundraising Practice, which ensures we have a strong fundraising framework and practice.



Thank you to our funders and supporters

We received funding from many organisations this year. The Trustees are grateful to all the organisations that have so generously supported us in 2023-2024.

Our statutory partners were:

Brighton and Hove City Council
Eastbourne District Council
East Sussex County Council
Kent Surrey Sussex Academic Health Science Network
NHS England
Surrey County Council
Surrey Police Crime Commissioner
Sussex Police Crime Commissioner
Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
West Sussex Integrated Care Board
West Sussex County Council

Companies supporting us included:

Audio Note
Burt Brill & Cardens Solicitors
Bupa
Dynamo Mortgages
Kier Group
Mayday Group
Mott MacDonald
Oban International
Service Master Clean
Waitrose

Trusts and Foundations supporting us were:

BBC Children in Need
Garfield Weston
Golders Green Foundation
Goodnews Evangelical Mission (GEM)
Hyde Charitable Trust
Nationwide Foundation
OptiGene Foundation
PE Lennard Trust
The Albert Hunt Trust
The Blagrove Trust
The Gledswood Charitable Trust
The Ludlow Trust
The Pebble Trust
The Rosaz Charity
The Three Oaks Trust
Ufi VocTech Trust
YMCA England and Wales



Funders spotlight

Horsham atrium mural

The Horsham-based health and safety consultancy business, **Assurity Consulting**, took on a heart-warming initiative at our Horsham Y centre when they created a colourful mural inside the atrium. The mural's theme is hope, resilience, and positive new beginnings. All the butterflies on the mural were left blank so residents could fill in their own and write a message of hope or encouragement that will stay on the wall for years to come.

Assurity Consulting's Adam Curtis said: "We chose YMCA DownsLink Group because it's an important part of our community. We could see the great work that's being

done and some of our colleagues who helped out last year met some residents and left wanting to do more. As a company, we believe in helping local organisations and making a positive difference."

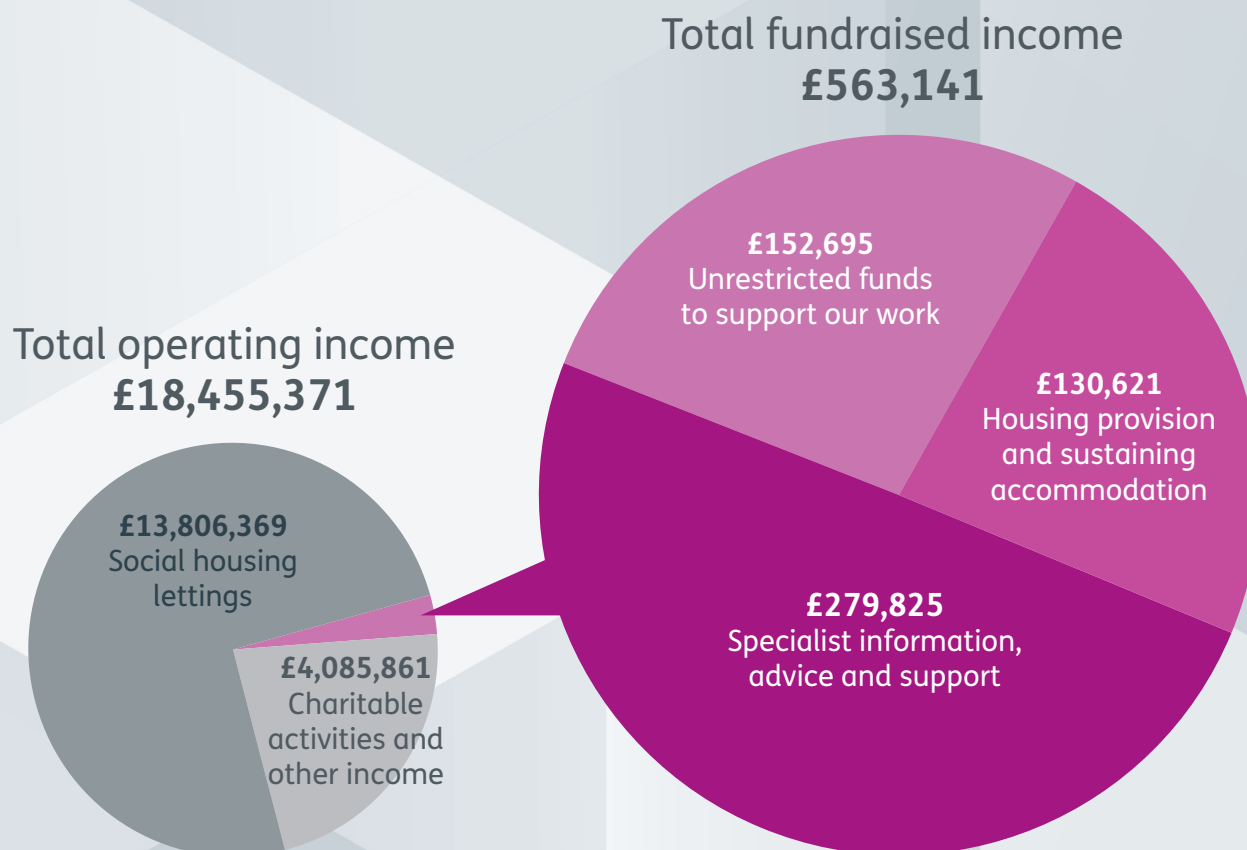
Guildford bike challenge

Dynamo, a mortgage brokerage in Camberley, took on a bike challenge to raise funds for us. Over a week their staff, underwriters and account managers hopped into the saddle to rack up an incredible 3,311km between them in 176 half-hour stints.

Head of sales Jess Folkes said: "The enthusiasm was infectious and it was wonderful to see everyone working together for such a great cause."



How we spent our fundraised income



Funding our mission

Last year, we raised £563,141 through fundraising. We are so grateful to every single one of our supporters for helping us to make a difference to the lives of children and young people in Sussex and Surrey. Thanks to the generosity of our partners, this vital funding means we can sustain our services and expand our impact.

How you can help

Donate today
and change a life



Fundraise for us
Take part in one of our events



Volunteer
Give your time to make a difference



Corporate Partnerships
Change through collaboration





Since joining YMCA DownsLink Group in July 2023, I have been continually inspired by our dedicated staff and volunteers. Last year alone, they delivered vital services to meet the emotional and psychological needs of 7,146 children and young people across Sussex and Surrey.

As the largest charity in the region dedicated to preventing youth homelessness and supporting children and young people's emotional and mental health, we witness firsthand the significant challenges and adversities that can prevent young lives starting well.

Final word from our CEO

But equally, we see the profound impact made when we engage with compassion, respect, and an unwavering belief in the strengths and potential of our young people.

This is why initiatives such as our residents' Youth Council and our e-wellbeing Ambassadors Programme are so important. They give children and young people a platform to be heard, ensuring their voices are taken seriously in shaping the decisions that directly affect them.

We know we are not alone in our commitment to giving children and young people a fair chance to be who they want to be. We are proud of the strong partnerships we have with health organisations, local authorities, corporate partners, trusts, foundations, and the communities and individuals who believe in our mission.

To all who contribute to transforming young lives, thank you.

Emily Brock

Looking ahead

Our 2023-2026 strategy identifies our three priority areas. It was launched in July 2023 following a full consultation process with staff and trustees.

Deliver psychologically informed services

We will:

- ▶ Ensure our accommodation for 16 and 17-year-olds meet Ofsted regulations and national standards
- ▶ Plan to increase our housing provision to meet future demand
- ▶ Review our move-on accommodation
- ▶ Expand our emotional wellbeing and specialist mental health offer in the community and in schools
- ▶ Develop our youth advice centres as open access early support hubs.

Amplify youth voice and leadership

We will:

- ▶ Produce a youth voice strategy and strengthen our approach to youth engagement
- ▶ Provide a platform for young people to take social action in their local area and nationally on issues that matter most to them
- ▶ Involve young people in decisions that affect their care and in decisions at all levels of our organisation
- ▶ Continue to treat young people as experts in their own lives.

Be a great place to work

We will:

- ▶ Develop new organisational values to support our culture
- ▶ Implement leadership and management development
- ▶ Improve our internal communications
- ▶ Support wellbeing by helping colleagues balance life and work responsibilities.

Our annual plans ensure we deliver against these priorities, and we measure progress via our key performance indicator framework.

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Keep in touch



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