

YMCA
DOWNSLINK GROUP

A Manifesto for **Youth Homelessness** and **Mental Health**



YMCA

Here for young people
Here for communities
Here for you



Reorganisation and devolution

We recognise that the anticipated devolution to Sussex – including plans for a directly elected Mayor and a Mayoral Combined County Authority – has been further delayed, with the inaugural mayoral election now scheduled for May 2028.

While this shifts the timetable, the urgency of tackling youth homelessness and mental health remains undiminished.

We call on current leaders and prospective mayoral candidates to step forward with interim commitments and concrete, cross-boundary collaboration throughout the transition.

Introduction

On 9 October 2025, YMCA Downslink convened over 100 leading voices on youth homelessness and mental health to mark World Homelessness and Mental Health Awareness Day. The aim was simple: to share lived experience, frontline insight and local evidence across Sussex and Surrey – and define the actions needed to stop young people experiencing mental health or housing crisis at the very point they should be building their future.

YMCA Downslink Group is the largest regional charity in Sussex and Surrey working to prevent youth homelessness and support children and young people's mental health. With youth homelessness rising while funding for prevention and mental health support services falls, the need for new thinking and bold action is critical.

Our future hope is that devolution, local government reorganisation, and the upcoming appointment of a Mayor for Sussex offers a unique opportunity for strategic collaboration and innovation. Together, we can tackle systemic challenges and deliver lasting solutions.

From our discussion - and with input from those who attended - we drafted a manifesto. It sets out the one clear goal and four commitments for the incoming Mayor: to **prevent homelessness; strengthen mental health support; secure safe housing, and tackle inequality** so young people in Sussex can move from crisis to stability and hope.



Manifesto – our asks

We call on the incoming Mayor of Sussex to:

- ▶ **Formally acknowledge that young people up to the age of 25** have distinct needs and commit to creating tailored support services specifically designed for this group.
- ▶ **Adopt the goal and four flagship commitments** as a core pillar of the first term's delivery
- ▶ **Commit within the first 100 days** to establishing a Youth Advisory Board and commissioning the first Sussex Youth Homelessness Report to provide the data and insight needed to improve services
- ▶ **Meet with those who have collaborated** on this manifesto and YMCA DownsLink Group to agree a roadmap to turn these commitments into a delivery plan.

We recognise the scale of this challenge. But by working together, we can stop young people in Sussex from falling into crisis and homelessness – saving lives and reducing the huge human and financial costs to society.

We look forward to discussing this manifesto with the future Mayor of Sussex and securing their support to develop an implementation plan that addresses the priorities we identified: empowering young voices; prevention support; better data; and stronger housing supply.

Ending youth homelessness and improving mental health: a manifesto for Sussex's next Mayor

Youth homelessness is rising across the South East, with more young people turning to councils for help. Nationally, at least **129,000 16–24 year olds** were homeless or at risk last year - and the true figure may be more than double once hidden homelessness is included.

(Sussex Nightstop)

Family breakdown remains the leading cause of youth homelessness, while cuts to youth services and the cost of living crisis have stripped away preventative support. Councils in East and West Sussex now spend huge proportions of their budgets on temporary accommodation, leaving little for prevention and long-term solutions.

(The Times)

Sussex also faces a growing mental health crisis among young people.

Demand for support has risen by 67% since 2022, and three-quarters still report barriers to accessing help. At the same time, service cuts and restructuring risk reducing provision when it's needed most.

(Sussex Partnership NHS Trust, 2024. Sussex Youth Mental Health Survey, 2025)

YMCA DownsLink Group brings **valuable experience in early intervention** through **therapeutic services** and **innovative peer-led initiatives** like Mental Health Champions, where students, supported by our e-wellbeing team and Youth Ambassadors, co-design and create solutions to **improve wellbeing**.

These approaches **demonstrate what works** — but scaling them requires strategic collaboration and sustained investment.

Demand and complexity are **growing faster than funding or workforce capacity**. Without decisive leadership, **more young people will face crisis**, become homeless, and long-term poor mental health – with lifelong costs to the individuals and society.

The creation of the new Sussex and Brighton Combined Authority, led by a directly elected Mayor, offers a chance for new leadership. With convening power, strategic influence, and aligned funding, we can deliver a youth-specific focus on mental health and housing - and improve outcomes for good.

Co-produced with organisations participating in and supporting our October event

[BHT Sussex](#)

[Brighton & Hove City Council](#)

[Brighton Chamber](#)

[Brighton Womens Centre](#)

[Clarion Housing](#)

[Clock Tower Sanctuary](#)

[Different Noise CIC](#)

[East Sussex County Council](#)

[Emmaus Brighton](#)

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[Esteem](#)

[Flexibility Matters](#)

[Here: Care Unbound Ltd](#)

[Homeless Link](#)

[Justlife](#)

[National Lottery Community Fund](#)

[Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey](#)

[Southdown](#)

[Sussex Nightstop](#)

[Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust](#)

[Sussex Police](#)

[The Hangleton and Knoll Project](#)

[The Insight Alliance](#)

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[West Sussex County Council](#)

[West Sussex Mind](#)

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Overarching goal

By the end of the first Mayoral term, reduce the number of young people in Sussex who become homeless – and improve mental health and housing outcomes – for 16-25 year olds across the region.

Our four flagship commitments

1. Empower young voices

What must be done

- ▶ Put **young people at the heart of decision-making**.
- ▶ Co-design and **create solutions to housing and mental health challenges** based on lived experience.
- ▶ Ensure every vulnerable young person in Sussex **can access the support they need** to fulfil their potential.

How

- ▶ Establish a Youth Advisory Board for Sussex to **give young people aged 16-25 a formal voice** in shaping policy and services.
- ▶ Review existing work and **strengthen partnerships** to share **insight and learnings** across all service providers in Sussex.

- ▶ Co-design **housing and mental health strategies** with young people.
- ▶ **Expand access** to health, wellbeing, and housing support services.

What would be the outcome

- ▶ Young people have **real power** to influence the system.
- ▶ Strategies that **destigmatise vulnerability and remove barriers** to support.
- ▶ Vulnerable young people **equipped with skills**, support and services which they have co-designed.
- ▶ Young people feel **safer**, are **more independent**, advocate for themselves, **develop life skills and self-confidence**, and **improve their emotional wellbeing and mental health**.

2. Invest in crisis prevention and place-based support

What must be done

- ▶ Identify gaps and invest in **preventative services and early interventions**, co-designed by young people.
- ▶ Fund and **grow trusted, relational support networks** embedded in communities.

How

- ▶ **Guarantee access to preventative advice and support** for every young person in Sussex - through schools, colleges and youth support hubs.
- ▶ Deliver earlier, **joined-up, wraparound care** in local communities.

- ▶ Launch **public education campaigns** to destigmatise youth homelessness and raise awareness of available support.

What would be the outcome

- ▶ Homelessness and mental **health crises are prevented**.
- ▶ Young people can **access help when they need it** - not when it is too late.
- ▶ **Strong, trusted support networks** embedded in every community.

3. Improve data, insight sharing and service design

What must be done

- ▶ Collect **better data on youth homelessness and mental health** to inform service design alongside young voices.
- ▶ Ensure mental health services are **youth-specific, trauma-informed**, and accessible.

How

- ▶ Review and **strengthen data collection** on youth housing and mental health.
- ▶ Include a youth strand in **regional mental health strategies**.
- ▶ **Improve access** to trauma services, including **evidence-based therapies**.
- ▶ Share insights widely to **drive innovation in service design**.

What would be the outcome

- ▶ Youth-specific, trauma-informed, and **accessible mental health support**.
- ▶ **Bespoke services for young people** and trauma support, for more than six sessions.
- ▶ Decisions guided by long-term impact **analysis and cost-benefit evidence**.
- ▶ **A clear picture** of the scale of the problem - and what works to solve it.

4. Secure safe and affordable housing

What must be done

- ▶ **Increase and improve** the supply of safe, affordable housing young people in Sussex.
- ▶ Guarantee every young person in Sussex has **access to safe, stable, and affordable housing**.

How

- ▶ Develop more housing provision that is co-designed with young voices, ensuring **holistic and person-centred support** for 16-25-year-olds, guided by insights from the Youth Advisory Board

- ▶ **Retain central Brighton sites** for youth accommodation (e.g. Brighton General Hospital site).
- ▶ **Align health and housing strategies** with a youth focus and address the growing complexity of local populations and severity of young people's mental health problems.

What would be the outcome

- ▶ **Safe, stable, affordable housing** for every young person in Sussex.
- ▶ **More homes offering holistic support** for 16-25 year olds.
- ▶ Joined up strategies under a **clear funding plan**.

YMCA DOWNSLINK GROUP

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