



Expanding our reach, deepening our impact

Strategy 2026–2031



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Introduction

This strategy sets out how we will work alongside children and young people over the next five years - building safer places to live, earlier support, stronger relationships and more opportunities for them to influence decisions that matter.

We thank all partners, staff, trustees and young people for their collaboration in developing this strategy.

Who we are

YMCA DownsLink Group is the leading charity supporting children and young people across Sussex and Surrey.

We offer



safe homes



mental health support



trusted advice

Our purpose

Every child and young person has the right to be safe, heard and to shape their own future. We work alongside them to make that happen.

Who we are for

We are here for children and young people, many of whom face multiple challenges and need our support.

How we work alongside children and young people

- We listen
- We meet them where they're at
- We take a trauma-informed approach
- We prioritise safety in every space and relationship.

Our values

- We do what's right
- We work with heart
- We build real connection.



Counsellor in our Community Wellbeing service



Chaplain talking to a supported housing resident

Shaped with young people

Young people have told us they want support that is **joined up, respectful and easy to access** and gives them **a real say** in the decisions that affect their lives.

They highlighted the things that make the biggest difference day to day:

- Clear, honest communication
- Smooth, coordinated transitions
- Safe, well-kept homes and welcoming spaces.

Getting the basics right matters.

This is not a one-off conversation. We will continue to listen, learn and work alongside young people so their insight shapes our decisions, our culture and the changes we make.

Our Youth Voice and Leadership Strategy, launched in 2025, began this shift. This strategy moves it forward, making sure young people's voices guide our everyday work and help define what good support looks like.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"A supportive, helpful, incredibly supportive service that goes above and beyond to support anyone who approaches them for help."

"Working with schools and contributing to mental health projects has shown me how important it is for young people to have a voice. Seeing young people lead conversations empowers others to speak up too."

"I felt listened to."



School Mental Health Champions at event

Why change is needed

Children and young people across Sussex and Surrey are facing growing pressures.

While we see young people as resilient and full of potential, we also recognise that many are growing up in a world where they feel lonelier, less happy and more anxious than previous generations.

Some are struggling with mental health and identity, while others face challenges at school, difficulties with money or uncertainty about their future. Young people have also told us they face rising risks linked to exploitation, conflict at home and community tensions.

At the same time, it has become harder for young people to get support. Waiting lists are longer, early help has reduced and support can feel confusing or difficult to navigate. Too often, young people reach crisis not because they aren't seeking help, but because help is harder to find.

Around **60,000** young people across Sussex and Surrey may now need extra support - a number likely to increase over the next five years. Despite national and local recognition that things must change, many young people still cannot access the right support early enough.

This strategy responds to what young people have told us and to what we see every day: **they need earlier support, safer places to live, stronger relationships and more say in the decisions that affect their lives.**

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"I feel as though it transformed my mental state last year and helped me get back on my feet massively."

"YMCA DownsLink Group were an anchor for me in the chaos when I became homeless."



YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"Everyone is very kind. You can go to the staff about anything."

"Lovely and supportive staff."

Residents and colleagues at our supported housing

Our foundations

Through our 2023-2026 strategy, we strengthened the foundations children and young people rely on – creating safer, more stable and more supportive environments. This groundwork has improved the quality of what we offer and ensured we are ready to grow in the ways young people tell us they need most.

We improved staff support and trauma informed and psychologically informed practice. We also improved our structures and systems for young people to be heard and shape decisions, data and insight, safeguarding, and the safety and feel of the homes and spaces young people use.

We strengthened relationships and trust with councils, commissioners and local communities.

These improvements were essential, but stabilisation on its own couldn't meet the pace of rising need. Young people's needs rose faster than support could keep up. To respond, we now need to grow earlier help, expand housing, improve collaboration and use our resources more effectively so we can support many more young people.

Ready for the next phase

We are ready for this next phase because of the foundations we built.

Our strengths:

- A clear purpose rooted in children and young people's rights
- Strong values and skilled, compassionate staff
- A commitment to youth voice
- A commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion
- Trusted relationships with partners
- Better data and insight
- Safe, welcoming homes and spaces
- Connection to a wider movement as part of YMCA England & Wales.



Colleagues from our supported housing

Our five-year ambition

Over the next five years, our ambition is clear: to reach more children and young people, strengthen the difference our support makes, increase the power and influence of young people and use all our strengths to grow responsibly and boldly.

We know many more young people need earlier help, safe homes, trusted relationships and real influence. After a period of stabilisation, we are ready to move into a phase of purposeful growth - working alongside young people to shape support that fits their lives and responds quickly when they need it.

50%

more children and young people will be using our services by 2031.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"Now I know what to do when I'm worried."

"You just about saved my sanity, mental health and life."

"Chaplaincy sessions make it feel more like home... it's made me feel less lonely."



Residents from our supported and transitional housing

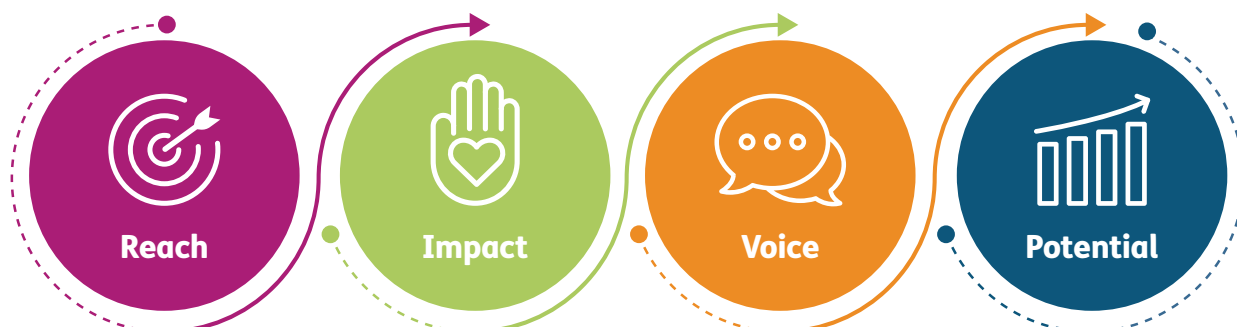
Outcomes we're working towards

By listening to young people's experiences, we understand more clearly the changes they want to see - and the outcomes we are committed to working towards with them over the lifetime of this strategy.

What we want children and young people to achieve

- I feel safe and have access to trusted advice to help me understand my options and make my own choices
- I have better mental health; and am more emotionally resilient
- I live in a quality, affordable home that is right for me
- I am doing things which are fun and give me purpose and belonging
- I am influencing the services and decisions that affect my life.

Our goals





Reach

Our four goals

Reach

Children and young people told us support can feel hard to find - long waits, confusing routes and help that arrives too late. Over the next five years, we want to change that by reaching far more young people, especially those who face the biggest barriers to accessing support.

We will:

- Expand services into more places so support is easier to access
- Grow our housing options for young people, including more move-on homes
- Develop new services where young people say there are gaps
- Make access simpler for young people living in deprived areas.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"The best place that a young person can get help for everything."

"A friendly, welcoming environment"



Impact

Children and young people told us they want support that meets them where they are, feels joined up around their needs and responds quickly. We have made progress - and now we want to go further.

We will:

- Strengthen trauma informed and psychologically informed practice
- Prioritise staff learning, wellbeing and inclusion
- Work more collaboratively across our teams to create more connected support
- Continue improving the safety and quality of the homes and spaces where young people live and receive support.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"My support worker is the most caring, kind, understanding person... they treat me like a human being and not just a number."

"I am able to positively open up and express my feelings."



Impact

Voice

Children and young people told us that support works best when they can influence what it looks like. They want meaningful ways to shape decisions - not just to be listened to, but to have real impact.

We will:

- Co-produce a youth participation structure with influence at every level
- Create more opportunities for young people to lead, contribute and build skills
- Support young people to take part in social action on issues that matter to them
- Recognise and celebrate young people's contributions in consistent and meaningful ways.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"I know when I don't feel safe, I can talk about things on my mind."

"You helped me learn [...] to accept that it's okay not to be okay."



Voice

Potential

We want to use all our strengths - our people, our relationships, our spaces and our experience - to support many more young people. We are ready to grow and we want to use our potential boldly and responsibly.

We will:

- Grow our work through stronger collaboration and new opportunities
- Invest in more of the safe, high quality homes young people need
- Build stronger partnerships across the sector
- Use insight and data to improve what we do and demonstrate our impact
- Make better use of digital tools to support innovation and effectiveness.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"...friendly, capable and determined people who will listen to you... I wouldn't have my own place if it wasn't for [them]."

"Having both physical and emotional space has allowed me to be myself."



Potential



Residents at our supported housing

How we will get there

To achieve our goals, we will focus on the approaches that children and young people — and our partners — tell us make the biggest difference.

Measuring progress

In the first year of this strategy, we will strengthen how we learn and measure change - improving the tools and systems we use and updating how we understand children and young people's experiences.

Each year, we will monitor progress using four core measures:

- Progress against our strategic goals, including movement towards our ambition to reach 50% more children and young people each year by 2031
- Feedback from children and young people on their experiences of accessing and using our services
- Evidence of change over time in the lives of children and young people who engage with our services
- Assessment of wider impact, including benefits for families, communities and society as a whole.

By bringing together data, insight and feedback from children, young people and partners, we will learn what works, strengthen our work, and remain accountable for the difference we aim to make.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY...

"Having both physical and emotional space has allowed me to be myself and given me the chance to work on my relationship with my parents."

"Invest in safe places for young people to live and get support."

CEO and stakeholders at our event in October 2025

Working with partners

Children and young people's lives are shaped across many places - home, school, communities and online. No single organisation can meet every need. To reach more young people and improve the support they receive, strong partnerships are essential.

We will:

- Work closely with councils, NHS partners and schools to create earlier more joined up support
- Collaborate with community organisations, youth groups and charities to build trusted spaces and opportunities
- Share insight, evidence and youth voice so decisions about support reflect what young people say they need
- Learn alongside partners so we can close gaps together and create more consistent, accessible support.

Our Manifesto

In October 2025, we brought together leaders, practitioners and some of the young people we support to confront the growing challenges of youth homelessness and mental health. The event shaped our **Youth Homelessness and Mental Health Manifesto** - a shared call for action for the incoming Mayor of Sussex for earlier support, stronger collaboration and better outcomes for 16-25-year-olds across the area.

The Manifesto sets out four key commitments and now sits alongside this strategy, guiding how we work with partners to drive early, collective action and lasting change.

[www.ymcadlg.org/
launching-the-sussex-
youth-manifesto-a-
shared-vision-for-change](http://www.ymcadlg.org/launching-the-sussex-youth-manifesto-a-shared-vision-for-change)



"I value our relationship with YMCA DownsLink Group. Their specialist expertise and commitment to working in partnership helps us improve the health and wellbeing of the local communities we serve. By working together across the VCSE sector and the NHS, we are able to achieve so much together."
Jane Padmore, Chief Executive, Sussex Trust NHS Foundation Trust

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a white t-shirt with black sleeves, watering plants in green trays. He is holding a red watering can. In the background, a large sign on a wall reads 'KEEP GROWING' in colorful letters. To the left of the sign is a painting of sunflowers. The setting appears to be an indoor greenhouse or community space.

KEEP GROWING

*"If it wasn't for YMCA DownsLink Group,
I don't think I would still be here."*

A resident in our supported housing

We are ready

We are ready for this next phase. The foundations are strong, the need is clear, and young people have told us what must change.

Our ambition is bold: to reach more children and young people, deepen our impact, elevate their voices and unlock our collective potential.

We will hold ourselves to this commitment over the lifetime of this strategy, so children and young people are better supported to move forward with confidence, opportunity and hope.

*"This strategy is our
commitment to children
and young people - a
promise to work alongside
them, listen with humility
and act with courage."*

Emily Brock, CEO

YMCA DOWNSLINK GROUP

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

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Keep in touch:

