

Youth Voice and Leadership Strategy

2025–2028



Contents

Section	Page
1 Why and why now	2
2 How – our journey in developing this strategy	2
3 What – our youth voice vision	4
4 How – our participatory approach	4
o Roger Hart's ladder	
o The Lundy Model	
o Our model of participation	
5 Our youth voice and leadership goals	6
o Goal 1	
o Goal 2	
o Goal 3	
o Key enabler	
6 How we will deliver the strategy	9
o Resources	
o Year 1 priorities	
o Governance and review	
Appendix 1 – our strategy development group	12
Appendix 2 – our SWOT analysis, 2024	12

1. Why and why now?

Listening to children and young people has always been integral to the work we do at YMCA DownLink Group.

However, we have never had at the heart of our organisation a clear and fully owned strategy which brings together best practice, creates consistency in approach, encourages learning and, most importantly, embeds the voice of all our young people in our work and decision making, in support of our mission to help children and young people have a fair change to be who they want to be.

In our recent history, we have engaged in various youth voice activities. For example, we've had specialist youth engagement teams (Right Here and currently e-wellbeing), employed Support Coaches (formally Inspire Coaches) and Chaplains who have each had participation and co-production within their roles, and various iterations of youth voice and participation strategies which were service specific and not joined across our organisation.

In 2023, we launched our current organisational [strategy](#), and this put youth voice and leadership at the centre of our strategic priorities (see box right).

This has been the driver for the development of this new strategy to shape and develop a consistent approach across all our services.

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

2. How – our journey in developing our strategy

With this strategic mandate, we created a project team from May 2024, with representatives from across the organisation (see appendix 1), and led by our Head of Improvement and Impact, Charlotte Carp, and our new Youth Voice and Engagement Manager, Harriet Peach.

The strategy development process involved:

- Consultation with managers at 2024 Manager's Forum about their views and priorities
- Creating our youth voice Goals in collaboration with our Youth Mental Health Ambassadors, a group of creative 16–25-year-olds, passionate about improving the emotional health and wellbeing for all
- Creating our youth voice Vision in collaboration with the strategy project team and our Youth Mental Health Ambassadors
- Auditing our previous and current youth voice initiatives and approaches across our organisation to allow us to understand the current landscape
- Reviewing the requirements of Regulators; Regulator for Social Housing and OFSTED.
- Looking outside our organisation at best practice in other organisations, to inform our own methodology for engaging meaningful youth voice practice
- Engaging with our trustees around our development plans and challenges
- Starting with the end in mind, considering data, metrics and how we will measure our impact from the outset
- **And...**we assessed our current youth voice activities to understand our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (see appendix 2) and **understand 'where we are now'** which is summarised in the box below.

We have multiple pockets of individuals and groups completing youth voice activities in their work. They are commonly completed in silo and therefore outcomes often support individual services, but the impact is not consistently recorded.

These projects/activities do not feed into our central monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and are therefore hard to track. There is no common methodology in place, and staff are reliant on their own experience. We haven't defined what 'good' looks like.

Our staff are so passionate about supporting our children and young people, but many examples of wonderful work are not shared and celebrated.

- This mapping exercise clarified the need to put in place a specialist role to lead youth engagement in our organisation. Our current Youth Voice and Engagement Manager role has been in place since October 2024.
- **Acknowledgement** - this strategy has NOT been co-produced 'with' young people. We do not yet have the structures and mechanisms in place. However, existing groups of young people have given feedback on elements of the strategy. **See sample in box overleaf.**

Our Mental Health Youth Ambassadors on what 'having a voice' means to them

"I think it's important Youth voice is involved in the services that are there to support them because a lot of the adults that are running the services, obviously they have training, but the idea of mental health that they would have been brought up with is still going to be very different to what we think now so it's important we get a say so they are educated in what fits the youth of today" Grace

"I like being involved in sharing youth voice because I feel like it's important and I have a sense of achievement. I like working on all the projects as they are all so different but in particular I like working on the mental health champions and the research projects I have been involved with. I think it's important for young people to have a say in the services that are there to support them because the young people are the ones accessing the support and are the ones that can give valuable comments on it" Soph

3. Our youth voice vision

With our mission in mind (**children and young people should have a fair chance to be who they want to be**), and with the input of our working group and feedback from our Mental Health Youth Ambassadors, we developed a new vision for the strategy, which sets out our intention and ambition (supporting our 'how') for the work to be delivered.

We believe that children and young people are experts in their own lives, and their voices are key to shaping our organisation.

Through active participation, collaboration, and leadership opportunities, we aim to create inclusive spaces where all young people can influence decisions that affect them. Together, we will build a supportive environment where youth ideas are respected, their contributions celebrated, and their leadership nurtured.

We are committed to ensuring that young people are at the heart of positive change in our services.

*This vision is aligned to our new values; **we do what's right, we work with heart** and **we build real connection**.*

4. How – our participatory approach

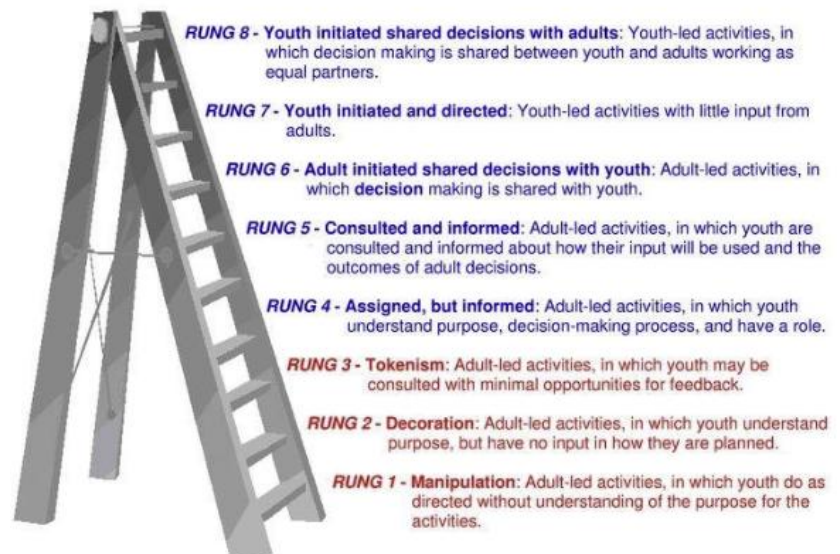
To establish a consistent approach to this work we looked at examples of best practice to identify clear, easy to understand models to activate and support the work generated

from the strategy. We chose to adopt **two existing well-respected and referenced models** which will help us develop resources to support our people and record and measure our impact.

a. Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation

We chose [this model](#) as it clearly outlines our commitment to involve young people starting from level 4 and above.

This means young people will have a real voice in decision making. From level 4 onward, young people are not just informed or consulted but actively involved.



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

b. The Lundy Model

We've adopted [this model](#) to ensure we are using consistent youth participation practice in everything we do.

Professor Laura Lundy's model is based around the human rights of the child and has four key areas to ensure our children and young people have consistent conditions to have their voices heard, are empowered and their voices are acted upon.



In our work we must ensure that the children and young people who use our services have access to safe and inclusive spaces so that they are able to express their views in a way that is best for them, they are listened to by the right people and views are taken seriously and acted upon.

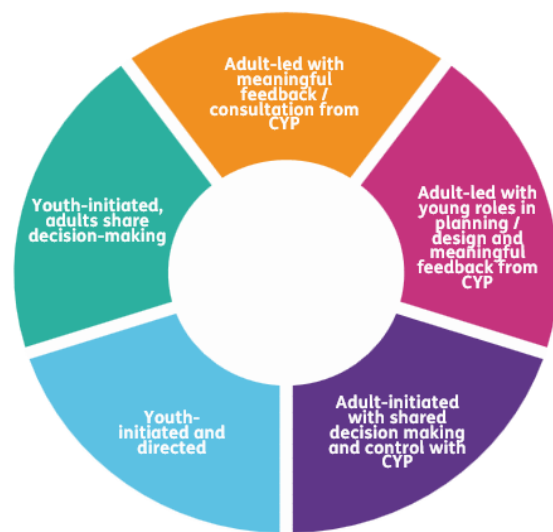
c. Our model of participation

We have developed our own YMCA Downslink Group model of participation. This is circular (we don't reach the end) in recognition of the need to provide options for participation when our staff are planning projects and activities.

All the sections on our model are above level 4 on Hart's Ladder of Participation model.

We will use our model as a checklist when we:

- Create/update policies and strategies
- Create our youth voice structures
- Create training for staff
- Develop and evaluate services
- Plan activities and events
- Campaign for change
- Recruit new members of staff
- Fundraise or in business development around contracts
- Deliver our psychologically informed practice.



5. Our youth voice and leadership goals

With our participation framework tools clearly designed and agreed, we developed the structure for our strategy, in support of the organisational strategic priority - **Amplify youth voice and leadership**.

Our strategy has **three goals**, and **one enabler**.

Strategic priority #2 – Amplify youth voice and leadership		
GOAL 1 Co-produce with children and young people an inclusive and meaningful youth structure to involve them in decisions that affect their care and support at all levels of the organisation	GOAL 2 Co-develop and invest in young people through meaningful opportunities to build life skills	GOAL 3 Co-create accessible channels for young people so they can take part in social action . Supporting the issues that matter most to them in their local area, as well as nationally.
KEY ENabler Consistently ensure all young people's contributions are appropriately rewarded, recognised and celebrated .		

The aims and activities for each goal and the enabler can be seen below.

Goal 1

Co-produce with children and young people an inclusive and meaningful youth structure to involve them in decisions that affect their care and support at all levels of the organisation

Our AIM

To respond and work with children and young people to ensure they have the right space and audience to be able to have an impact on decision making in our organisation, and improve their outcomes

We will achieve this by

- Mapping our existing youth voice as a baseline and developing participation mechanisms for each service that are meaningful and relevant
- Develop organisational policies, procedures and tools to support youth voice work and co-production
- Ensure our staff induction reflects and introduces our youth voice approach
- Develop youth voice learning opportunities for staff around our models and frameworks (i.e. training and toolkits)
- Develop mechanisms for children and young people to input into decision making within the organisation with the relevant audiences, including alumni and other lived experience networks (Youth Advisory Board, resident's consultation around rent setting etc.)
- Create outcome measures to track youth engagement and ensure due weight given to children and young people's voices and opinions

We will measure our progress by

- Action plans in place
- Staff induction and learning session designed and embedded
- Outcome measures for youth voice
- Tracking the number of youth decisions implemented

GOAL 2:

Co-develop and invest in young people through meaningful opportunities to build life skills

Our AIM

To empower children and young people with essential skills helping them gain confidence and independence to support being part of a community, personal growth and economic skills

We will achieve this by

- Creating clarity around roles and responsibilities around our approach to developing skills for life and work
- Creating our own framework for skills for life
- Creating organisational socio educational youth voice measures
- Creating opportunities for children and young people to improve skills for life
- Creating digital tools reflecting young people's need to build skills for life
- Create a community of practice for staff to share opportunities and learning
- Create a communication plan for sharing opportunities equitably

We will measure our progress by

- Agreed outcome measures (e.g. socio – educational youth voice measures, Outcome Star etc.)
- Add/review our KPIs on the number of children and young people in employment, education and training (EET)

GOAL 3

Co-create accessible channels for young people so they can take part in social action. Supporting the issues that matter most to them in their local area, as well as nationally.

Our AIM

To support and provide opportunities for children and young people to speak out on the issues that affect them

We will achieve this by

- Assessing any current interest in our young people to engage in social action
- Creating a framework to ensure they have space and voice to express ideas or to question the issues that matter to them
- Creating a policy outlining the remit of the social action we can/cannot support in our organisation
- Amplifying youth social action priorities through our campaigns and communications activity
- Using our understanding of young people's needs to influence local and national agenda
- Working with external partners and YMCA England and Wales on joint campaigns and activity

We will measure our progress by

- Number of youth-led campaigns
- Organisational youth voice measurements/KPIs
- Monitoring engagement levels by young people on digital platforms where they are encouraged to engage

KEY ENABLER

Consistently ensure all young people's contributions are appropriately rewarded, recognised and celebrated

Our AIM

Recognise children and young people as experts in their own lives, and encourage our future leaders

We will achieve this by

- Developing a recognition framework for participation, which includes clear details about paid and non-monetary rewards
- Ensuring opportunities to get involved are accessible across the organisation
- Co-creating solutions, and recognising young people's contributions during events and in our communications, internally and externally

We will measure our progress by

- The number of roles we create to enable participation, and feedback from the people who are in them about their experience
- Public recognition for youth recognition posts
- Piloting our monetary reward scheme with Youth Researchers in 2025
- Opportunities to document the diverse needs of children and young people

6. How will we deliver our strategy

a. Staffing resources

We want this strategy to be truly sustainable and be everyone's responsibility. To help support this aim we have designed a specialist team who will work with our colleagues and young people across our organisation to help achieve the above goals.

This team will be led by the Youth Voice and Engagement Manager, Harriet Peach, who brings specialist skills and experience to this work. This role will activate, lead and evaluate the strategy.

The wider team proposals are outlined below. Some roles are still subject to agreement in the FY25/26 budget (to be approved by the Board of Trustees in March 2025) or will be added when we identify additional funding.



* *In place / awaiting confirmation of funding*

The Digital Youth Engagement Specialist supports our digital reach with our children and young people (this role is already in place in our e-wellbeing services but would start to work on cross-organisational activities and tasks as part of this strategy).

The three part-time Youth Engagement Coordinators would work regionally to support/train our frontline colleagues and support children and young people. One role is funded, the other two are pending confirmation of budget.

b. Year 1 priorities (2025/26)

In year 1, our priorities will be dependent on the final staffing resources we can secure to deliver this work.

Within the existing resources we expect to prioritise:

- Agreeing non-negotiable actions with relevant teams and services, i.e. compliance with Consumer Standards, OFSTED and getting the minimum structures and mechanisms for youth voice in place
- Co-producing our youth voice impact measures
- Building tools and templates to effect good participation

In year 1, **with resources added to the team** (budget dependent) we expect to prioritise the above plus:

- Agreeing important actions with relevant teams and services
- Supporting development and delivery of staff learning around youth voice
- Celebrating achievements internally and externally, and launching alumni network
- Improving and supporting staff induction around our youth voice approach
- Engaging externally and within YMCA England and Wales network on best practice
- Consulting with young people on their ambitions in relation to social action

c. Governance

We will monitor and review progress against the delivery of our strategy by:

- Maintaining the advisory team (former strategy development group) with representatives from across the organisation. This group will help steer priorities and review progress, providing expert advice as needed.
- Consulting with young people once new structures and mechanisms are in place (Goal One).
- Reporting progress to the Extended Leadership Team, to the Impact and Services Committee, and to the Board of Trustees. We will also share learning with staff, and with young people.
- Creating our detailed year 1 action plan for delivery (once this strategy is approved)
- Ensuring that the goals and aims of this strategy feature appropriately in the new organisational strategy which will be in development in 2025, for launch in April 2026.
- Revising the year 2 delivery plan considering the new organisational strategy.

Appendix 1

Youth Voice and Leadership Strategy Development Working Group (May 2024 to present)

- Charlotte Carp, Head of Impact and Influence
- Harriett Peach, Youth Voice and Engagement Manager
- Thomas Palser, Head of Youth Advice and Support Services
- Jay Beach, Head of Operations (Housing), Brighton & Hove and Guildford
- Ellie Hayes, Service Manager, Crawley Youth Advice Service
- Katie Waters, Learning and Development Partners
- Laura James, Head of Therapeutic Services

Appendix 2

Our SWOT analysis conducted in 2024

Strengths	Weaknesses
• High quality opportunities for involvement already in place in areas of the organization • Staff passionate about supporting young people • Existing mechanisms in place, eg; Youth Council • Strategic goal shows this is a priority • Model chosen for youth voice strategy are trauma informed and can learn from new PIE role	• Confidence of managers / staff to interact with CYP engagement(Complaints, engagement, feedback) • No investment in training/ induction – Youth voice principles • No Youth voice strategy • Lacking a Communication strategy; impact, achievements and success ? • Do not have a recognition framework for CYP What does this mean? • Lack of resources on frontline, time, technology, space • We don't have current representative youth groups therefore hard to develop youth designed strategy.
Opportunities	Threats
• Trauma informed/ PIE organisation – what does this mean for Youth Voice. • New intranet/ platform for communication • Success stories – what do we do well already – learnings from current youth engagement work. • Behaviour framework • This work builds opportunities in reputation and experts in the field • Opportunities to influence sector and systems • Improvements in our Organisational data quality – making means we have better processes and data available to understanding the needs of our customers.	• The drive to meet regulations undermining the goals/vision of meaningful youth voice - • Staff feeling at max and not engaging with strategy (extra workload, not seen as priority) • Lack of processes • Departments running these areas have been cut in the past as cost saving • Reputational issues • New Ofsted regulations • Good practice not shared • Lack of hands on support for front line workers to facilitate feedback • Work is siloed and approaches are not consistent/ shared • Limited budget provided for this – not enough to cover the aims of the strategy • Engagement fully with youth voice vision from staff and ELT (culture change)