

appg

APPG on Youth Affairs

Thrive or Decline?

What youth work needs for 2035

November 2026

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

FOREWORD

Young people spend around 80% of their time outside the classroom. How they spend that time matters. It is where confidence can grow, resilience can be built and young people can discover more about who they are and what they can achieve. Youth services provide these critical spaces to do just that - the space for young people to build relationships, have fun, make friends, and learn skills. Youth clubs can change lives and have done so for millions of young people over decades. We ask a lot of our young people, and as they grow up in a world different from the one before it, we must consider how to support them to be themselves.

For too long now, youth work has not been given the attention it desperately needs. The National Youth Strategy was one step to help change that, but it must be just the start of a journey that sees youth work given the support and respect it deserves. The APPG for Youth Affairs started this inquiry in the hope of identifying how youth work can be supported over the next decade to meet the challenges ahead, and to enable young people to thrive. We hoped to find ways the Government could build on the National Youth Strategy for England and help the sector and young people overcome future and current obstacles.

What we discovered was that the changing and complex needs of young people will make youth work ever more vital in the future. This will result in the need for more formal training and greater recognition of our fantastic youth workers, as well as long-term sustainable funding to ensure the longevity of services. The further development of digital and AI will also bring new and unseen challenges which youth workers will have to adapt to, alongside young people. New and different ways must be found to provide support, on top of strengthening the core youth work offer, to ensure that the sector can be sustainable.

I am very grateful to all the experts, charities and organisations who have submitted written evidence as well as those who have kindly attended evidence sessions in Parliament and beyond. We have gained so much from hearing your thoughts. We also wanted to hear from young people and were delighted by the strong attendance at our first session in Parliament, as well as the young people who joined our roundtable discussions and submitted their thoughts. Young people are at the heart of youth work and our report.

We have identified several opportunities and areas for support in this report, which will help youth workers and their services serve young people across the country who all deserve opportunities and the chance to achieve.



Natasha Irons MP
Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Methodology	5
Background	7
What is the Government currently doing?	9
The needs of young people	11
Workforce and skills	17
Decision-making and funding	21
Recommendations	25
Contributors	29
References	30

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth work has a rich and enduring history in England, dating back to the mid-19th century when the YMCA first opened its doors to young men in 1844. As industrialisation drew increasing numbers of young men into Britain's rapidly growing towns and cities, organisations emerged to support their spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing amid the pressures of urban life. This marked the beginning of a movement that would grow and diversify over the following decades, giving rise to organisations such as the Scouts, Girlguiding and the Boys' Brigade.

Today, thousands of young people attend a youth club every week. Providing a vital resource in building confidence, resilience and social skills, youth services have for decades helped fight loneliness and created fun spaces for children and young people to belong. Youth services have also helped young people to deal with school and societal pressures, supported their mental health and allowed them to make friends in safe spaces.

In more recent years, youth work has changed to meet the needs of young people. It has become more pastoral, with youth workers providing more emotional support, and other services such as healthcare, justice and education also relying on youth work to reach and support young people they are unable to. As youth work has adapted, local authority funding of provision has been cut significantly: a staggering 76% real-terms decline since 2010-11 in England. This has put extreme pressures on the delivery of services. The majority of local authorities have cut expenditure on youth services but to varying degrees, and as a result a postcode lottery has developed. A hop, skip and jump across local authority boundaries has resulted in drastically differing spends per head.

Alongside the decline in youth service spending, the needs of young people have also been changing. A rise in poor mental health, along with other complex and overlapping needs means that young people need more support than ever. Looking forward, youth workers must be equipped to deal with this, receiving adequate training to be able to provide the necessary support. **More formal training and recognition will equip them with the necessary skills whilst there is a growing need to recognise the contribution and impact of youth workers.** This needs to be accompanied by proper funding, guidance and oversight to ensure that youth services are being enabled to thrive.

Growing technological change and the rise of AI will also mean the sector will need to adapt, and youth workers will need guidance and training to be able to support young people to navigate the changes. **Existing standards and guidance for digital youth work should be built on by strengthening national guidance on safeguarding and the responsible collection, use and protection of young people's data so digital youth work can be carried out safely and effectively.** The development of safe digital spaces for young people will be needed, to make sure that they can access youth work securely. However, this must go hand-in-hand with the protection of physical youth spaces, which remain vital for young people and where they can work with trusted adults.

Devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR) in England provide opportunities and challenges for youth services. Being able to adapt to local need is a benefit, but this is balanced by funding considerations, and the need for greater clarity around roles, structures, and regulation. Currently varying timescales for devolution and LGR makes the landscape different for different areas. It will mean inconsistent provision across the country, with contrasting decision-making processes that may make operating challenging for smaller youth organisations in particular. **Government should ensure that there is consistency and fairness through devolution and LGR, and ensure no area is unrepresented.** This will bring more certainty and consistency in youth services, funding, and provision.

As outlined, local authority expenditure on youth services has drastically decreased with organisations relying on short-term uncertain funding cycles which are causing workforce retention problems, rendering it difficult to provide full support to young people, and impacting organisations. **There is a serious need for long-term sustainable funding to ensure the security of youth work in areas across England.**

This report focuses on youth work over the next ten years in England only, to map against the UK Government's National Youth Strategy. Youth services are devolved across the four nations of the UK, with each nation having a slightly different approach to youth work. The focus on England reflects the recent publication of the strategy and seeks to determine how it will impact youth work over the next decade.

The National Youth Strategy has brought with it a clear direction of travel for youth work in England over the next 10 years with a focus on making decisions closer to communities, better collaboration and co-production with young people. This brings with it a lot of promise but, as this report lays out, the strategy must come with more funding and government backing to ensure it is successful.

Added to this, we must equip the sector to deal with the changing world we live in, and the changing needs of young people. Without recognition of the challenges young people and the youth work sector will face over the coming years, action cannot be taken to prepare and support them to thrive. Identified in this report are the challenges we envisage the sector will be facing in 2035 and the recommendations to ensure that youth services are strengthened. Young people will suffer if this is not acknowledged and actioned.

METHODOLOGY

The APPG began the evidence collection process for this report in December 2025. The APPG hoped to consider what youth work might look like in 2035, what changes the sector might need to undergo over the next decade, and how it might need to adapt to support young people.

> The APPG set out to consider the following issues:
> - The changing role of youth workers
> - Digital and AI impacts on youth work
> - Devolution, decision-making and funding
> - Meeting the needs of all young people

The APPG convened in December 2025, with nearly 90 young people, MPs, and organisations in attendance.

The APPG conducted three oral evidence sessions, two in Parliament and one at YMCA North Staffordshire in Stoke-on-Trent. Across the three sessions, 24 witnesses spoke from a wide range of perspectives across local authorities, charity, academia, and youth organisations.

The APPG received 17 written submissions, which considered key questions around the report topics and potential solutions.





1 BACKGROUND

APPG ON YOUTH AFFAIRS

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs is a cross-party group of MPs who come together to raise the profile of issues that affect and concern young people, encourage dialogue between parliamentarians, young people and youth services, and encourage a coordinated and coherent approach to youth policy making. This APPG gives the unique opportunity for young people to come to parliament to speak directly to MPs and Peers about the issues that affect them most.

WHAT IS YOUTH WORK?

Youth work (also known as 'youth services') is a form of support for young people outside of formal education, usually aged from 11-19, although it can also be provided to those up to age 25. Universal open-access youth work is available to any young person whereas targeted supports those who need it most.

Local authorities in England have statutory duties to provide youth services. The 1996 Education Act requires local authorities to provide recreational leisure time activities and facilities for 13–19-year olds 'so far as is reasonably practicable'. [1]

Key features of youth work include building trusted relationships between youth workers and young people, as well as providing safe spaces where young people can meet, socialise, learn, and be themselves. It also helps young people navigate challenges such as mental health issues, education, and life skills. It may include youth clubs and drop-in sessions, but also detached and outreach work, as well as mentoring, volunteering, and targeted support.

UK Government has also had a strong focus on enrichment for young people. A paper submitted to the Government in July 2024 by SQW sought to define enrichment as: building on learning in schools, as both organised and intentional, and facilitated by a trusted or qualified adult. [2] Youth work, in contrast, tends to operate outside of schools, and focuses not only on giving young people access to enrichment activities such as art, sport, and outdoor learning, but also on wellbeing, confidence, skills, and outreach. It offers space away from school for children and young people to meet with each other and have access to other trusted adults in the community.

STATE OF PLAY OF YOUTH SERVICES

YMCA research has shown that local authority expenditure on youth services in England has declined by 76% since 2010, a loss of £1.3 billion. [3] The general decline in youth services spend has been a consistent trend since 2010, although the sheerest drops were in the first seven years.

The number of full-time equivalent (FTE) youth workers employed by local authorities has also fallen by 780 since 2012 in England, and in the last financial year, the number of local authority-run youth centres fell from 429 to 379, a 12% decrease.[4] In some instances, these declines do not always equate to a loss of provision: several local authorities now outsource their youth provision to a third party, or some centres are now run by local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH SERVICES

Research by UK Youth and Frontier Economics found that for every £1 government invests in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40. [5] Their #Untapped report also found that youth work is already saving the government £3.2bn a year through improved education and employment outcomes and positive impacts on mental health. It is also contributing £5.7bn annually to the wider economy through jobs, volunteering, and local suppliers. [6]



The report found that youth work supports young people across a number of issues in their lives, leading to benefits across multiple outcomes, not just operating in a silo. Indirect economic value of youth work can be worth around £0.5bn from decreased crime, and £1.7bn from improved health. Not only that, but there is high social return from youth work, through the positive effects it has on young people.



2 WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT CURRENTLY DOING?

NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY

In 2025, the Government published its National Youth Strategy for England, setting out a vision for youth provision for the next 10 years. Backed by £500m over the next three years, the Government has committed to building and refurbishing up to 250 youth facilities, provide a 'Better Youth Spaces' programme with equipment for activities, and a new programme of support around the school day in 400 schools. [7] Other measures in the strategy include supporting organisations in underserved areas, recruiting and training youth workers, and moving decision-making closer to local communities to meet local needs.

The strategy focuses on three shifts. The first is "from national to local", moving funding closer to local areas, and having local authorities work with young people more to design services. In addition, there will be more decisions taken by people in local areas. The second shift is "from fragmented to collaborative", partly through Young Futures Hubs. These seek to bring support and activities together in one offering for young people, from education to mental health support. The final shift is "from excluded to empowered", bringing more youth voice into decision-making. This will be partly through votes at 16, as well as co-designing of programmes with Government.

During the development of this strategy, the Government held a consultation with young people, asking them to submit their thoughts to inform the strategy and how it would work, with over 14,000 young people contributing their views. There was also a steering group of young people who helped to produce the State of the Nation report, looking at what it is like to grow up in England in 2025. [8]

The National Youth Strategy is a vision for the next 10 years. Accordingly, the APPG considered what youth work might look like in 10 years in light of this strategy, and what else might be needed for the sector.



YOUNG FUTURES HUBS

In July 2025 the Government announced that the first wave of Young Futures Hubs will launch later that year, bringing together community-focused services under one roof to help teenagers who face being caught up in violence and criminality, and at risk of mental health challenges. The Government committed to launching 50 Hubs by March 2029 as part of a £70m local transformation programme.

FUNDING FOR YOUTH SERVICES

In 2024, Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy MP announced the closure of the National Citizen Service (NCS) programme from March 2025. [9] Funding pots for youth services and enrichment include the 'Every Child Can' programme, funded with £132.5m from dormant assets funding. This programme will help to give greater access to opportunities in sport, creative activities, nature and the arts, both in and out of school. It is being developed alongside the National Lottery Community Fund.

The Government is also merging several major youth funds with an aim to simplify the funding system. [10] The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), in partnership with Department for Education (DfE), will also provide £22.5m of funding over three years for schools in England to deliver an enrichment offer for young people. [11] This will be tailored to the Enrichment Framework and encourage young people to access more activities in school.



YOUTH WORKERS

In September 2026, the Government launched a drive to train and employ 1,000 new youth workers, to be in place by spring 2027. [12] The youth workers will work with young people aged 11 plus, within community spaces and through outreach, particularly with those at highest risk of becoming NEET. The specialist youth workers will collaborate with multi-agency teams across education and training, health and crime prevention to support young people to engage in a range of activities including sport, arts, mentoring and wider youth services. This also forms part of the initiative for all young people to have access to a trusted adult by 2035.

3 THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

HOW ARE THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE CHANGING?

Young people are growing up in an ever-changing world. Later in the report, we discuss the rapid expansion of AI and the increased use of digital technology; however there are other external factors and challenges that will continue to evolve and shape the needs of young people. Identified by our contributors, these include:

- Rising special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) diagnoses
- Misogyny and violence against women and girls (VAWG)
- Online extremism
- Mental health
- Cuts to school funding and other critical services
- Rising unemployment

Contributors raised mental health as a standout issue among the young people they work with and believed this would continue to be significant in the future. According to The Children's Society in The Good Childhood Report, young people's wellbeing has been continuously declining for more than a decade, and the average happiness score in recent years was significantly lower than in 2010. [13] Additionally, a recent report by the Children's Commissioner found that the number of children with a referral to mental health services reached over a million – almost double the number in 2018-19. [14]

Alongside mental health, the rise in SEND diagnoses was raised. Government figures show that there has been an 11.6% rise in the number of pupils in England with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan (which states the extra support children with SEND should receive from their local authority) from 2025-26. [15] Additionally, the number of pupils with SEN support in England has increased by 2.8% from 2025-26. [16]

On unemployment, the number of 16- to 24-year-olds who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) was 1.01m between January and March 2026, an increase of 89,000 from the previous year. [17] The last time this number exceeded a million was in 2013. Although there is currently an independent review being conducted into this issue by Alan Milburn, which will report its recommendations in the autumn, it is not likely to be solved immediately.

This is not an exhaustive list, and many young people face multiple, overlapping challenges, but demonstrates the concerns amongst our contributors about the challenges young people are facing, and as a result, the support of youth workers and youth services to help them navigate these will also need to adapt.



HOW DO WE SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE?

The overriding message from those who contributed to this report was the need to invest in youth workers. Having a trusted adult present who is able to build face-to-face relationships will be vital. They must be given the time and space to build genuine relationships to help understand the challenges young people are facing.

Alongside support for youth workers, the ability to co-design services with young people is vital to ensure that their needs can be met, as highlighted by Amy Murray, youth worker at YMCA North Staffordshire. Unless we involve young people in the services they use, we cannot know what will best support them. This is particularly relevant for those young people from global majority backgrounds; Brian Ngure from BAME HUB-UK raised the issue of a distrust in public services felt amongst some in this group. Youth centres can provide uniquely effective spaces for certain groups of young people.

The National Youth Strategy has made this a priority, with Action 9 on delivering with young people specifically referencing involving young people in 'national and local funding decisions regarding services for young people'. [18] Furthermore, the strategy commits to creating a Youth Policy Network in the DCMS to ensure that a range of young people can take part in decision-making.

The importance of safe spaces and trusted professionals was reiterated by several other contributors including Essex County Council Youth Service and Marine Society & Sea Cadets, who noted that young people are experiencing a decline in the availability of physical third spaces.



HOW WILL DIGITAL AND AI DEVELOPMENTS AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE OVER THE NEXT DECADE?

The rise of technology, including digital and AI advancements, will affect young people's needs and behaviours. Young people are already online, and this is likely to continue even when the social media ban for under-16s is enacted. Technology and AI will still affect how young people access information, build communities, and engage with opportunities. They encounter people and ideas differently online, which can have effects in the real world on behaviour and experiences.

Although young people often lead the way in digital spaces, they can still be exposed to a darker side of it, through misinformation and conflict online. There is the potential for harmful content, AI-generated misinformation, online humiliation and exploitation to all pose risks to young people's wellbeing. Essex County Council Youth Service mentioned particular concern about young people turning to AI for advice – including for mental health difficulties – instead of trusted adults. As the use of AI becomes more widespread (a public survey found that 73% of the public have used AI in their day-to-day life[19]), this is an issue that needs careful observation.

However, technology can provide opportunities and benefits for young people, and also for youth work. Digital avenues can extend the reach of youth work to young people who aren't able to engage with services in person, allowing organisations to connect with people they may never have otherwise reached. Catch22 referenced their work during the pandemic, when they delivered digital youth work, enabling them to reach more cohorts of young people including young carers and neurodivergent young people.

The virtual world also gives young people opportunities to connect with their peers, provide community to those isolated, and find opportunities, including job opportunities and volunteering opportunities. Several youth organisations have their own digital spaces where young people can meet, providing a safe and secure way for them to engage. Young people spoke at our meetings and roundtables about how digital services and technology have provided them opportunities they could not have found otherwise.

The use of digital youth work is growing and should be treated as a core part of all youth work. My Life My Say said that the Government's National Youth Strategy, while generally seen as a good step in the right direction, did not contain a clear focus on the use of digital in youth work and how it should be channelled, and there should be an attempt to consider how digital can play an important role in youth work. The social media ban may also create practical challenges for youth organisations that currently use digital platforms to engage young people, amplify youth voice, promote opportunities and provide safe spaces for communication.

The strategy does nevertheless have an action point to expand training in certain areas, including safeguarding, online wellbeing and communication for adults who support young people. The National Youth Agency (NYA) is also working with DCMS through the development of a national Digital Youth Work CPD programme and social media ban implementation guidance.

WHICH GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LEAST LIKELY TO ACCESS YOUTH PROVISION BY 2035, AND HOW DO WE REACH THEM?

The groups of young people who will be less likely to access universal youth provision in a decade's time are likely to be those less connected to traditional services and decision-making. This includes groups such as refugees, those with SEND, religious groups, deprived young people, LGBTQ+ young people, those with mental health needs, neurodivergent young people, care-experienced, and young carers.

Other factors, such as transport, and accessible venues, will continue to be obstacles to young people accessing youth work. One example given by Emily Green, youth board member at Whizz Kidz, was of the difficulty for young disabled people to access transport and not being able to travel with friends, as there may be only one wheelchair spot on a bus.





She also noted that accessible venues are often more expensive, making inclusive provision harder to fund. These barriers make it harder for young people to be able to access provision, but also for that provision to exist in the first place. Other transport considerations also affect those in rural areas, or in poorly connected areas. For many young people, and young people without reliable public transport, they can be cut off from services. Finally, Brian Ngure from BAME HUB-UK noted that many young people, and often their families, simply don't know what services are available in their area. He also warned that as services become more digital, this risks marginalising young people who lack access to technology or the skills to use it.

This may be related to the rurality of a young person's home or the cost of technology. To help, it is important to collaborate closely with communities, work with parents and guardians to ensure they are aware of what is available for their families and invest in physical spaces.

HOW DO WE HELP TO REMOVE THESE BARRIERS?

Commissioning and funding structures are failing to keep pace with need. As identified by Dominique Williams, founder and chief executive at Reach and Unite Outreach and Empowerment, inclusion does not often feature in service commissioning, and recommissioning hasn't kept up with rising costs of delivering youth services. This has left many services cutting back or stopping tendering all together.

The presence of youth services and trusted adults in communities provides vital consistency; particularly for young people who are navigating some of the challenges we have identified. Heidi Bentley from YMCA Chiltern Group noted that for those from Royal Air Force families, having a youth club on an airbase provides consistency and somewhere to go for young people who may have turbulent lives. It was also noted that this sense of belonging and a safe space are also vital for LGBTQ+ young people who lack positive representation and having their voices heard. Investing in targeted youth work is critical to this ensuring those marginalised groups have tailored interventions in safe spaces where trust and relationships can be built.

Better information-sharing is also essential. This would help young people, and their families, know what youth services exist, making it easier to access services. This would also help organisations work together and identify gaps in provision across areas. Julie Auger, Youth Services Manager at Essex County Council Youth Service, mentioned that Essex has a youth map which shows where provision is – a model which could be replicated by all local authorities.

YMCA England & Wales releases an annual report on youth services spending, and as part of the evidence collection process, sends Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) to all local authorities on youth provision. Several don't know what's being delivered in their area – 34% of local authorities did not know or hold information about the number of youth centres in their area run by other organisations, suggesting they haven't carried out any mapping of provision, despite statutory guidance suggesting they do so. [20]

This will make it harder to determine what local need is, as per the National Youth Strategy, which seeks to prioritise funding for the areas most in need. Information gathering and data collection on youth services is currently not good enough. More work needs to be done to work out where the gaps are in services, and where provision is. Making youth services open data would help to improve collaboration and fill these gaps.

The National Youth Strategy does recognise there are gaps and committed the Government to working with youth organisations at a local and regional level. As part of this, the strategy commits £5 million over three years to 'understand what youth services exist and what is missing and share information on how to improve the quality, effectiveness, and safeguarding of services'. [21] This would be welcome and a key step in understanding where provision is located and where the gaps are.

Additional measures in the strategy, such as improving information sharing between services and supporting strong local partnerships, will also strengthen local collaboration and could enable more targeted action to close the gaps identified.

Finally, continued investment in youth-led research, peer engagement, and participation is essential. Services can only address the needs of young people if they are involved in shaping them. The level of co-production in the National Youth Strategy was a fantastic start, as young people were consulted and involved in its development. It is also mentioned as a key theme in the strategy moving forward, and we hope that this commitment will turn into sustained long-term engagement with young people.

Recommendation: Update the statutory guidance for local authorities to provide youth services by removing "reasonably practicable" and to provide a minimum level of provision

Recommendation: Embed genuine co-production requirements into all DCMS-funded youth delivery

Recommendation: Explore the possibility of creating a youth services database to help young people and families locate provision



4 WORKFORCE AND SKILLS

WHAT SKILLS WILL A YOUTH WORKER NEED IN 2035?

The core skills of a youth worker such as empathy, relationship-building and community knowledge have remained consistent over the past 20 years. These will continue to be critical in 2035, however there will be new skills that youth workers will need to learn to both support young people with additional needs and to support young people as they face the challenges identified in the previous section.



Overwhelmingly, written evidence called for more formal training and professional development to support youth workers, particularly in relation to prevalent issues such as misogyny, VAWG and youth violence, as well as better guidance on conflict resolution, mental health, trauma and misinformation.

Evidence also pointed to a lack of clarity around the 'trusted adult' role. This was a key theme of the National Youth Strategy with the ambition for half a million more young people to have access to a trusted adult outside of the home by 2035. Currently, this role is assumed more informally, as highlighted by Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership, who outlined that often young people themselves independently choose adults in their life to trust rather than have the person prescribed to them. [22]

Respondents, including The Children's Society, argued this should be underpinned by clearer definitions, qualification requirements and safeguarding standards, alongside training that equips youth workers to handle sensitive issues - such as trauma - appropriately and safely. The National Youth Strategy does mention expanding training on safeguarding and online wellbeing, among other areas, to adults who support young people. This could apply to volunteer mentors, sports coaches and others. This would be a welcome step but would need to be accompanied by adequate funding to make sure that the training is accessible to as many people as possible and can be carried out effectively.

Respondents, including Marine Society & Sea Cadets, also highlighted the need for training to support youth workers with community building, partnership working, leadership, and resilience. St Giles Trust noted that 'youth workers will need regular, funded and accessible training that reflects the realities of young people's lives. Training should not be occasional, optional or only offered after a serious incident'. Alongside more structure and structured training for youth workers, greater professional recognition was also recommended by Essex County Council Youth Service.





WHAT DIGITAL SKILLS WILL YOUTH WORKERS AND THE SECTOR NEED IN 2035?

Young people are online and therefore digital must be treated as a legitimate, core part of youth work – not just a crisis workaround as was seen during the Covid pandemic. To help deal with the changing technology landscape, youth workers need support and training for digital skills. Included in this is the use of AI, both for youth workers and the young people they serve.

It became clear through our evidence gathering process that there is a need for clearer digital policies across the sector. UK Youth also highlighted a need to guide youth services organisations in supporting young people access technology safely. Respondents outlined the need for further guidance on how to safeguard young people when providing digital services, how to utilise digital technology to conduct youth services, and how to integrate digital youth work into provision in the first place. The NYA has already established Digital Youth Work Standards to support digital youth work and is continuing to develop further professional development resources, training and support to help youth workers integrate digital practice safely and effectively alongside face-to-face provision.[23] Given that digital youth work is becoming more prevalent, further action in this area may be necessary in the coming years.

There was an acknowledgement that digital youth work has an important place in the sector and should be bolstered to help young people. For it to succeed however, it was clear that there needs to be investment in safeguarding, hybrid models, and specialised roles for online youth workers. The NYA highlighted that most youth work organisations are behind on digital development, and that digital youth work could have large potential, but it is not being seized. They urged the sector not to wait to develop digital services. The National Youth Strategy committed to funding the NYA's online safeguarding and risk management hub, as well as more action on safeguarding more generally.

Collaboration within the workforce was also emphasised as important to navigating the changing digital landscape. Opportunities for youth organisations to share learning and best practice, and strong peer support networks among youth workers, would enable expertise-sharing, help adaptability to a changing landscape, and deepen confidence to continue their work.

DO WE NEED MORE YOUTH WORKERS?

According to YMCA, there are around 780 fewer FTE local authority youth workers than in 2012.[24] However, the challenge is not only one of overall workforce numbers. It is estimated that almost 60% of the overall paid youth work workforce don't hold a recognised youth work qualification, while current qualified workforce capacity is estimated at less than a quarter of the level needed to meet the Workforce Sufficiency Standard.[25] Due to funding issues, the role of a youth worker is both more unstable and there are fewer opportunities in the sector, making it harder to deliver services and rendering it an unattractive place to work. John Lyon's Charity also highlighted that 'many youth workers have left the sector, particularly in the last six years, as a direct result of the pandemic and cost of living crisis. [This has exposed] the vulnerabilities of shorter hour jobs and the pressures of delivering to a cohort of young people with increasing needs.'

As the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body for youth work in England, the NYA has set out a 10-year Workforce Transformation Plan to increase the number of youth workers, ensure they are better equipped and strengthen professional recognition. Its ambition is to more than double the qualified workforce, supported by clearer qualification and progression routes, continuing professional development and stronger workforce infrastructure. It was clear from the respondents that there was a strong belief that there will be a need for more youth workers to support young people, and accordingly that youth workers will need to be better supported and trained to do so. A change in approach to caseloads for youth workers may also be needed, as was recommended by St Giles Trust who discussed the need for smaller caseloads for high-risk and specialist work.

Also noted was real concern about the loss of experienced youth workers from the sector who are unable to pass on their skills. NYA's Youth Sector Workforce Survey 2026 highlighted that there has been a reduction in qualified youth workers with specialist knowledge of youth work practice, as people have left the profession. They noted that this leads to 'less emphasis on personal, social, emotional and political development in service delivery', affecting the young people they serve as well as the profession more widely. [26] This loss of knowledge and qualified youth workers can lead to reduced peer learning and knowledge exchange, as well as loss of institutional memory.

In October 2026, NYA launched the new Standard Qualification Framework (SQF) for youth work.[27] This aims to create clearer and more accessible routes into the profession and supporting workforce development. This follows the Government's announcement in September 2026 of an ambition to recruit and train 1,000 new youth workers, as part of their efforts to give 500,000 young people access to a trusted adult by 2035. NYA has developed the framework 'to support greater consistency across qualifications, strengthen professional recognition and help meet growing demand for skilled youth workers.' It also includes 'inclusive, safe, relationship-based and ethical youth work practice, alongside the development of leadership, evaluation and professional responsibility skills', which will also help to bridge some gaps in skills or training identified by contributors to this report.[28]

The framework forms part of NYA's wider Workforce Transformation Plan, with the ambition to grow the qualified workforce from around 8,400 today to 19,500 by 2035, including 6,500 professionally qualified workers at Levels 6 and 7, alongside 13,000 volunteers and trusted adults equipped through essential training. This is a welcomed ambition however it will require sustained investment in training, salaries, apprenticeships and progression routes.

The sector needs long-term funding, better professional recognition, and clearer progression routes to help make it an attractive career. In the National Youth Strategy, there is a section on strengthening the workforce, with £15 million committed over three years for youth workers, volunteers and trusted adults, including helping with recruitment, training and retention. This is a positive start, along with the plans to work with NYA across the youth sector to plan for future workforce needs and raise the status of youth workers.

Recommendation: Build on existing standards and guidance for digital youth work, including by strengthening national guidance on safeguarding and the responsible collection, use and protection of young people's data

Recommendation: Provide a stronger, clearer definition of 'trusted adult' and training to support them in their roles

Recommendation: Ring-fence funding to support digital delivery, workforce development, and innovation in the youth sector

Recommendation: Implement the Workforce Transformation Plan and Standard Qualification Framework for youth work to increase the number of qualified youth workers, strengthen recruitment and retention, and support clear career progression



5 DECISION-MAKING AND FUNDING

HOW MIGHT DEVOLUTION AFFECT YOUTH SERVICES?

Contributors broadly agreed that the more local the decision-making, the better placed decision-makers are to understanding the needs of young people, and target services where they're needed most. As a result, there was some enthusiasm among most respondents about the potential of devolution and LGR to reshape youth services for the better. However, only if it allows local areas to design responses around local need.



So far, devolution has seen the introduction of 16 new combined authorities, some with Mayors. Currently, combined authorities have no statutory duty to provide youth services, this still rests with the local authorities. They also have no oversight over youth services. Matt Keane, from John Lyon's Charity, noted that in London, where there is a mayoral combined authority, the Mayor has stepped up and made investments where there have been cuts. For example, the Mayor of London recently announced funding for late-night youth clubs with over £30 million allocated to this programme. This funding is welcome however this funding pot is unique amongst most combined authorities who instead have been focusing on funding of employment and skills services. At present, as combined authorities have no statutory duty to deliver youth services, many are not considering it as a funding opportunity.



Daniel McAllister from Marine Society & Sea Cadets highlighted the fear that devolution could end up favouring organisations with the strongest administrative capacity, rather than those delivering the strongest local outcomes for young people. He proposed a more standardised application process across authorities, alongside proportionate reporting and appropriate oversight to create a fairer system.

WHAT CLARITY AND SUPPORT IS NEEDED ON DEVOLUTION AND LGR?

Several respondents highlighted the need for greater clarity on what devolution and LGR will entail for funding, roles and responsibilities of different local government levels, and decision-making structures. The overriding concern was uncertainty, and addressing these issues would help youth work providers immensely. There were also calls for stronger statutory recognition and clearer national expectations.

The issue of commissioning services was raised several times. Often, it was noted, commissioners don't have professional experience of youth work, so they don't always know what services are needed or what works, or what success measures should be used to reflect youth work outcomes. Julie Auger from Essex County Council Youth Service called for a clearer commissioning framework and guidelines on what youth services should look like to help support commissioners make the best choices for the young people in their area.

As outlined in previous sections, it is also important that as a result of the devolution and LGR process, youth services are resourced properly, with dedicated funding settlements and long-term investments to make it sustainable. Youth work needs to be embedded in the local priorities of combined authorities along with employment, health, education, and community development.

HOW SHOULD THE ROLES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN YOUTH WORK CHANGE OR EVOLVE OVER THE NEXT DECADE?

According to several written evidence submissions from youth work providers, it is felt that local authorities do not necessarily value local knowledge or innovation. They are not seen as very dynamic in response to needs within communities, and so it is clear that they need to evolve to become more adaptable to what young people in their areas require. It is hoped that devolution will be able to support that.

Local authorities are uniquely placed to bring people and organisations together, building the strong partnerships the sector needs to give young people the best support possible. Devolution and LGR offers a real opportunity to strengthen this collaboration even further.





WHAT FUNDING MODELS MIGHT BE NEEDED FOR YOUTH WORK IN 2035?

Despite the announcement of the National Youth Strategy, and significant funding to support it, it does not fully compensate for the funding gap that has accumulated since 2010/11. In addition, the funding covers only the next few years, leaving uncertainty over the future of youth services spend beyond 2030.

It was highlighted numerous times during our evidence collection process that there is financial instability in the sector, short-term funding cycles, and lack of investment. The short-term nature of funding affects planning for youth services organisations, and has serious consequences for youth workers who often cannot be offered long-term stable employment as a result.

The point made time and time again by respondents was that there needs to be sustainable, long-term funding for youth services to enable the sector to thrive. Without it, further declines in capability and provision will occur, negatively affecting young people across the country. Other points raised included the need for locally led funding to be clearly understood by commissioners, greater flexibility to allow providers to make needs-based decisions, and more consistent funding models. The National Youth Strategy committed to simplifying grant funding for local authorities, as well as consolidating local funding where possible, which is welcome. This may help provide more consistency across the country.

Local or smaller providers raised concerns about having to compete with national charities who have much more resource to secure funding. Consistency across regions would help all providers and the possibility of more collaborative delivery models where local authorities work in partnership with others to improve quality and co-design services should be encouraged.

The late release of funding and delayed decision-making processes often mean that funding is released too close to the point of delivery. Dominique Williams, founder and chief executive of Reach and Unite Outreach and Empowerment, mentioned that this affects quality and inclusion in youth services, and when funding is delayed, organisations struggle to plan effectively or seek alternative funding options. This can cause cash flow issues leading to reduced staffing and reliance on zero-hours contracts and subcontracting, making the sector even less stable for youth workers. The issue around delays in funding was repeated by several others.

Finally, respondents felt that the balance on capital and revenue funding in the National Youth Strategy was tilted too much towards capital spend. This has consequences on paying staff, maintaining buildings and paying for energy costs. Some local authorities are having to sell off properties and assets to stay afloat, as they can't afford the running or staff costs. Urgent action to establish long-term, sustainable funding, including revenue funding, is needed to ensure youth services can continue to thrive and look beyond just one year and well into the future.

Recommendation: Make youth services provision an explicit, monitored component of devolution and new mayoral combined authorities

Recommendation: Expand the £500m National Youth Strategy investment beyond the three-year-window with a clearer focus on revenue funding

Recommendation: Provide support for local authorities to map youth provision in their areas

Recommendation: Explore the creation of an outcomes-based commissioning framework and guidelines for youth services



6 RECOMMENDATIONS

INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY

1. Embed genuine co-production requirements into all DCMS-funded youth delivery

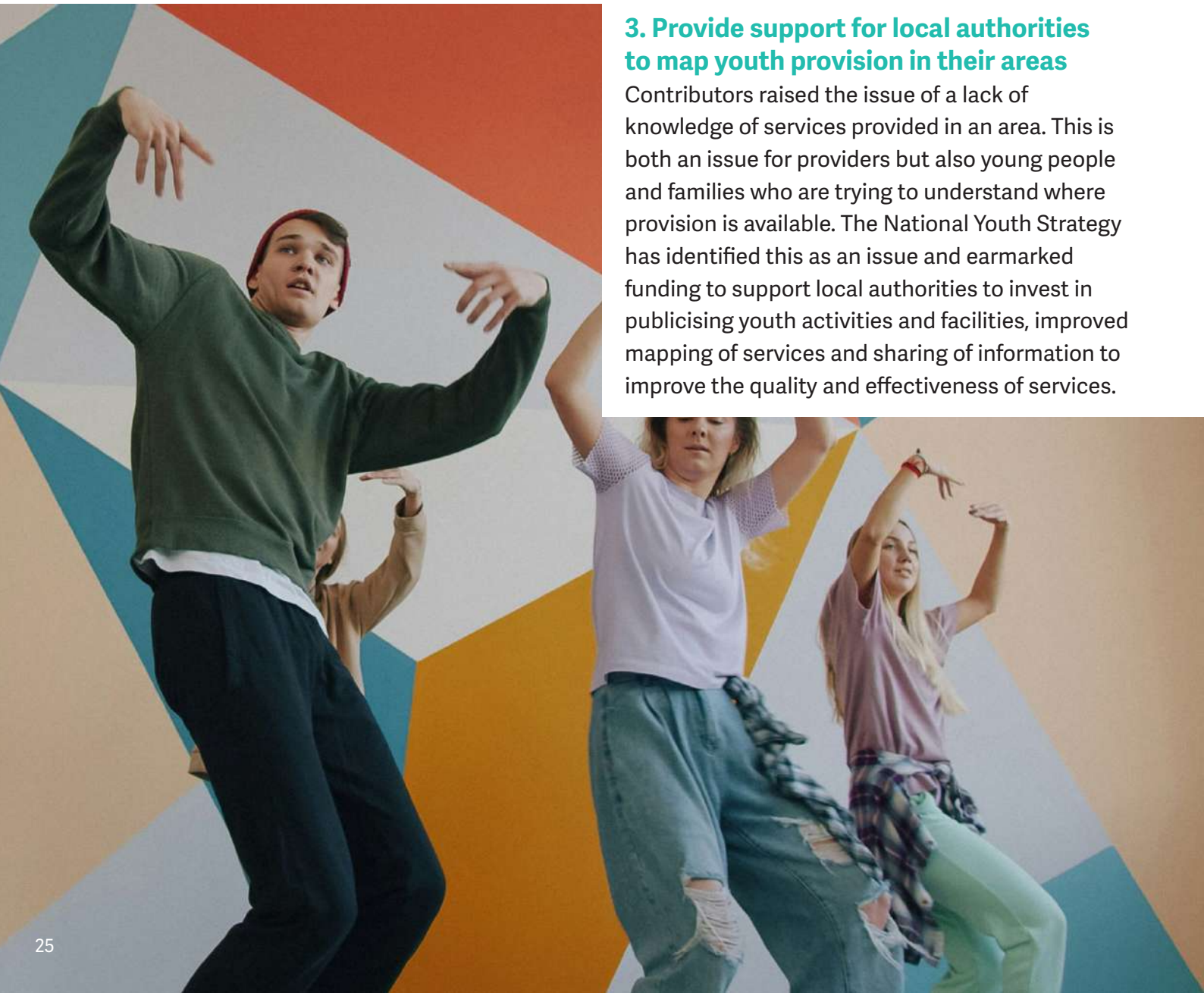
The National Youth Strategy aims to introduce a new, clear expectation that local areas in receipt of youth funding should be able to demonstrate strong partnership working with young people. This recommendation is particularly relevant for those marginalised groups discussed in the report whose services may be more specialised. We welcome this commitment and expect to see ambitious detail follow soon.

2. Provide a stronger, clearer definition of 'trusted adult' and training to support them in their roles

The Government is proposing that every young person have access to a trusted adult as part of its strategy. This is welcome however there should be a stronger, clearer definition of a trusted adult, one which does not diminish the role of a youth worker. As outlined in the strategy, funding is needed to support trusted adults to gain the training needed to support young people. Trusted adults should be able to access this training at any point to allow young people to choose those they trust and know that those adults will be equipped to work with them.

3. Provide support for local authorities to map youth provision in their areas

Contributors raised the issue of a lack of knowledge of services provided in an area. This is both an issue for providers but also young people and families who are trying to understand where provision is available. The National Youth Strategy has identified this as an issue and earmarked funding to support local authorities to invest in publicising youth activities and facilities, improved mapping of services and sharing of information to improve the quality and effectiveness of services.





ASPECTS ARE INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY

4. Update the statutory guidance for local authorities to provide youth services by removing "reasonably practicable" and to provide a minimum level of provision

The current statutory guidance asserts that local authorities, 'so far as reasonably practicable', should provide youth services. Removing this part and requiring a minimum level of provision would ensure that young people in communities have the youth services they need and provide greater clarity around the gaps in provision. The National Youth Strategy only goes as far as reviewing the current statutory duty with no commitment to change.

5. Explore the possibility of creating a youth services database to help young people and families locate provision

Young people and their families should know what provision is available. Support and provision should be clearly mapped and the information disseminated. The National Youth Strategy calls for improved local mapping to help information sharing but no one source of truth. UK Government should explore the possibility of bringing together this mapping into one single database so that young people all over the country can see what is on offer for them in their area.

6. Build on existing standards and guidance for digital youth work, including by strengthening national guidance on safeguarding and the responsible collection, use and protection of young people's data

Digital youth work will continue to grow, although balanced with face-to-face provision. Existing standards and guidance should be built on to ensure that youth workers are equipped to handle safeguarding issues and data.

7. Ring-fence funding to support digital delivery, workforce development, and innovation in the youth sector

The National Youth Strategy commits to workforce funding but lacks the ring-fenced funding for digital youth work and innovation. The youth work sector needs support on digital innovation to adapt to the needs of young people and help more young people to access provision. Alongside this, there should be support for workforce development in digital skills, as well as to deliver digital youth work.

8. Implement the Workforce Transformation Plan and Standard Qualification Framework for youth work to increase the number of qualified youth workers, strengthen recruitment and retention, and support clear career progression

The National Youth Agency, the Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Body for youth work, has launched a new Standard Qualification Framework (SQF) with the hope of strengthening professional recognition, supporting greater consistency across qualifications and help meet the growing demand for skilled youth workers. It is hoped that this will support their ambitions to double the number of qualified youth workers in England from 8,400 to 19,500 by 2038.

9. Make youth service provision an explicit, monitored component of devolution and new mayoral combined authorities

Devolution is a key policy of this government, which it believes will ensure that decision-making happens more locally and the National Youth Strategy has a commitment to rebuild local authority capability partially through its local youth transformation pilots, however it does not reference the role of mayoral combined authorities which we believe should have clearer oversight.

NOT ADDRESSED IN THE NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY

10. Explore the creation of an outcomes-based commissioning framework and guidelines for youth services

Youth services commissioning can be carried out by people with little knowledge of the sector, leading to decisions made based on inaccurate assumptions. A clear commissioning framework would help to establish the right criteria for youth services and support consistency across local authorities.

11. Expand the £500m National Youth Strategy investment beyond the three-year-window with a clearer focus on revenue funding

The majority of the funding that went alongside the National Youth Strategy does not go beyond three years and a key issue with youth services funding is the short-term nature of it, and the uncertainty. Sustainable, long-term funding is vital to ensure the sector can continue to support young people, and its own workforce. Enhanced revenue funding is necessary to maintain youth spaces and pay staff.



CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to APPG on Youth Affairs Officers.

Natasha Irons MP
Chair, Labour Party

David Williams MP
Officer, Labour Party

Lauren Sullivan MP
Officer, Labour Party

Lord Lilley
Officer, Conservative Party

Thank you to the experts, organisations and charities that contributed to the report development process and submitted evidence to the APPG.

- BAME HUB-UK
- Before Becoming a Parent
- Berkshire Youth
- Carers Trust
- Catch22
- Cheshire East Council
- Community Foundation for Staffordshire & Shropshire
- Essex County Council Youth Service
- FlippGen
- John Lyon's Charity
- Just Like Us
- Leeds University Digital Youth Work Research Hub
- LifeLine Projects
- London Youth
- Marine Society & Sea Cadets
- My Life My Say
- National Youth Agency
- Off the Record
- Partnership for Young London
- Reach and Unite Outreach and Empowerment
- Refugee Council
- St Giles Trust
- St John Ambulance
- Sunderland University
- The Children's Society
- The Duke of Edinburgh's Award
- Girls' Brigade
- UK Youth
- University of St Mark & St John
- Urban Saints
- Whizz Kidz
- YMCA Chiltern Group
- YMCA England & Wales
- YMCA North Staffordshire
- Youth Futures Foundation

The APPG on Youth Affairs Secretariat is provided by YMCA England & Wales.

youthappg.org.uk
appgonyouthaffairs@ymca.org.uk

YMCA
Here for young people
Here for communities
Here for you

REFERENCES

1 House of Lords Library (2019), 'Funding of Public Services for Young Adults'

2 SQW and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Youth Enrichment: Discovery Phase, published July 2024.

3 YMCA England & Wales, State of Play: Local authority funding of youth services in 2024-25, February 2026.

4 YMCA England & Wales, State of Play: Local authority funding of youth services in 2024-25, February 2026.

5 UK Youth and Frontier Economics, #Untapped: The economic value of youth work. 2022.

6 UK Youth and Frontier Economics, #Untapped: The economic value of youth work. 2022.

7 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Youth Matters: National Youth Strategy, published December 2025.

8 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Youth Matters: State of the Nation, published December 2025

9 National Citizen Service, Minutes of the June 2025 Board Meeting and Joint Statement, published July 2025.

10 Snowden, A. (2026) Youth services funding. Parliament: written questions and answers and written statements, 9 July, HC 16145.

11 Robertson, J. (2026) National Youth strategy and schools. Parliament: written questions and answers and written statements, 12 February, HC 107888.

12 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 1,000 new youth workers to help reduce the risk of unemployment, published September 2026.

13 The Children's Society, The Good Childhood Report, 2025.

14 Children's Commissioner, Children's and Young People's Mental Health Services: 2024-25, published July 2026

15 Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, published January 2026

16 Department for Education, Special educational needs in England, published January 2026

17 House of Commons Library, NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training, published June 2026

18 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Youth Matters: National Youth Strategy, published December 2025.

19 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, AI Skills for Life and Work: General Public Survey Findings, published January 2026

20 YMCA England & Wales, State of Play: Local authority funding of youth services in 2024-25, February 2026.

21 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Youth Matters: National Youth Strategy, published December 2025.

22 Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership, How to be a Trusted Adult: A guide for anyone working with Children and Young People, accessed July 2026.

23 NYA, Digital Youth Work Standards, accessed October 2026.

24 YMCA England & Wales, State of Play: Local authority funding of youth services in 2024-25, February 2026.

25 NYA, Workforce Survey Report 2026, published 2026.

26 NYA, Workforce Survey Report 2026, published 2026.

27 NYA, Standard Qualification Framework (SQF) for Youth Work, published October 2026.

28 NYA, Standard Qualification Framework (SQF) for Youth Work, published October 2026.