



UK YOUTH

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Board – March 2026

Introduction

Board are asked to approve UK Youth's new organisational strategy.

The strategy has been developed over the past year through an extensive and inclusive process, including:

- A Young People's Steering Group, ensuring meaningful youth voice is embedded throughout
- A year-long programme of staff consultation and sense-making
- Trustee workshops to shape direction, ambition, and trade-offs
- Deep engagement with partners and funders to test assumptions, priorities, and positioning

This presentation sets out the framework of the new strategy. It includes the core narrative, strategic objectives, and alignment to other youth sector infrastructure organisations. All key strategic decisions are contained within this pack.

Following Board approval, we will use this framework to develop:

- A public-facing strategy document, and
- Tailored outputs for key audiences (incl. young people, youth workers, funders, and policy makers) to ensure the strategy is accessible and compelling for those we work with and seek to influence.

Key changes since last strategy

1. **Infrastructure for infrastructure** - Greater emphasis on strengthening the organisations that strengthen others, with less direct one-to-one organisational development support.
2. **Leadership at the heart of Grants+** - Increased focus on developing confident, equitable youth work leaders as a driver of long-term sustainability and impact.
3. **Programmes with a clear purpose** - A streamlined portfolio focused on testing, proving, and spreading effective youth work approaches that concentrate on a smaller number of issue areas where youth work can make the greatest contribution and where UK Youth has credibility to lead.
4. **Clearer ecosystem role** - Being explicit about our position relative to other infrastructure bodies, prioritising coordination over competition and reducing duplication.
5. **Strategic communications as a lever for change** - Shifting from narrating impact to using communications to shape policy, unlock investment, and build public support.
6. **A more hopeful narrative** - Leading with the potential of young people and youth work, not only the crisis.
7. **Stronger youth governance** - Deepening the role of young people in organisational decision-making and power-sharing.



High level strategic narrative

Growing up has never been easy – but young people today are navigating an increasingly divided and difficult world.

There are severe pressures on their mental health, employment prospects, and even physical safety.

These are heavy weights for young shoulders to carry.

Many young people have support around them – from families, schools, or paid-for activities.

But millions do not. Too many lack a trusted adult to turn to, or safe spaces where they can learn and grow.

The result is deepening inequality – with a high personal and societal cost that will be paid for decades.

Yet this is also a story of hope.

Across the country, youth workers are changing – and often saving – young lives.

They are trusted adults helping young people find confidence, connection, purpose, and joy.

Despite fifteen years of severe cuts and rising need, they continue to show up with extraordinary courage and creativity.

UK YOUTH

Every young person deserves a youth worker. UK Youth exists to make that a reality.

We support a network of thousands of youth organisations across the UK to improve young lives every day.

At the same time, we are transforming the policies, investment, and ideas needed to future-proof youth work and outdoor learning for generations to come.

UK YOUTH

Our mission

We exist to widen the reach and deepen the impact of youth work and outdoor learning.

UK YOUTH

Our vision

A society that backs every young person –
through each spark, struggle, and success.

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Context

Youth work definition

UK Youth defines youth work as an informal educational approach that puts young people's needs and interests first. It supports their social and emotional development while helping them build vital life skills.

Youth workers use both their professional expertise and their personal experiences to develop strong, trusting relationships with young people – listening to what matters to them and offering support as well as constructive challenge.

Because young people have diverse needs and interests, youth work activities take many forms – from sports, arts, and outdoor learning approaches to mentoring and safe spaces like youth clubs.

Ultimately, the goal of youth work is not to produce the best footballer or artist. It is to help young people find their voice, know they matter, feel connected to their communities, and navigate life's challenges with confidence and critical thinking.

UK Youth defines outdoor learning as experiential learning within an outdoor environment to support a young person's personal, social, and educational development. It is proven to improve health and wellbeing, increased physical literacy, and environmental awareness. The outdoor space in which the activity takes place is an integral part of the learning process.

What problem are we trying to solve?

Young people are facing multiple challenges – including severe pressures on their mental health, employment prospects, and even physical safety.

Youth work is proven to change lives. But despite this, millions of young people are still isolated from the support they need.

Access to youth work remains deeply unequal, with young people from wealthier backgrounds more than four times as likely to receive support (*DCMS Barriers & Enablers Research, 2025*).

As young people's lives continue to evolve, youth work must adapt to remain relevant, effective, and accessible for all whilst staying true to the values and relationships that make it so powerful.

We must work tirelessly to widen the reach and deepen the impact of youth work and outdoor learning.

Why hasn't this problem been solved already?

Chronic under-investment and fragmented funding

Government and charitable investment in youth work has been too small and too short-term, leading to unequal provision across the country. Local authorities have cut youth services dramatically over the past fifteen years, and remaining funding is often tied to narrow outcomes or short project cycles. This makes it hard to sustain youth work services for those who cannot afford to pay.

An over-stretched and under-valued workforce

The workforce faces severe pressures, from low pay and insecure employment to limited professional development opportunities. Leadership and management capacity is stretched to breaking point. This makes it harder to attract, retain, and develop the skilled practitioners and strategic leaders needed to sustain and evolve the sector.

Difficulty spreading and embedding effective practice

Excellent youth work exists in many places, but the sector lacks the mechanisms to share and replicate it widely. Competitive funding environments often discourage collaboration because organisations focus on survival and differentiation rather than open exchange. Without stronger structures for learning, coordination, and collective improvement, great practice often remains isolated.

Unequal local infrastructure and capacity

Access to youth work varies widely between communities. Affluent areas with strong local infrastructure, engaged volunteers, and supportive councils tend to sustain youth work; others – often those with the highest need – have seen provision collapse. There is no consistent national framework ensuring equitable access to infrastructure support for youth organisations.

Limited visibility and policy influence

The youth work sector has deep local knowledge and professional expertise, but this wisdom rarely shapes national policy. Despite powerful evidence of life-changing impact, youth work is often undervalued or misunderstood by decision-makers and the public alike. The sector needs to tell more compelling stories that connect high quality evidence with human experience – building public understanding, political will, and sustainable support for change.

A changing and challenging external context

Young people have grown up through years of austerity, widening inequality, and growing social division. The climate emergency, global conflict, and the aftermath of Covid-19 have created new anxieties, divisions, and disrupted traditional support networks. Meanwhile, rapid technological change – from social media to AI – is reshaping how young people connect, learn, and form their identities. Changes are often happening faster than services can adapt. These pressures have intensified demand for youth work just as resources have been removed. The sector must navigate complexity and uncertainty, while remaining a trusted, stable presence for young people in an unpredictable world.

Why we are hopeful

Young people who engage in youth work experience important benefits in the short term – with **improved physical health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes.**

(UK Youth, University of Warwick & SQW, 2024)

Investment in **youth work** 
is currently saving society **£3.2 BILLION** annually



Read the report:

ukyouth.org/Untapped

Crucially, these young people become **happier, healthier, and wealthier adults** compared to young people from the same background who did not have access to youth work.

(UK Youth, University of Essex & SQW, 2024)

Youth work currently saves the taxpayer at **least £3.20 for every £1 spent** through decreased crime, increased employment, and reduced pressure on mental health services.

(UK Youth & Frontier Economics, 2022)

UK YOUTH

Our track record

Over the past five years, UK Youth has **championed the transformative power of youth work** and unlocked more of its life-changing impact for young people across the UK.

We have **reshaped the national evidence base** - demonstrating youth work's positive impact on mental health, employment, and mental health outcomes. We have also proven the long-term benefits: **people who engage in youth work become happier, healthier, and wealthier adults** than their peers.

This has helped unlock significant new resources: our annual **income has more than doubled**. This has enabled us to **support over 750,000 young people** and distribute almost £30 million to brilliant youth groups across the country – **learning from what works, increasing access to proven support, and backing bold innovation**.

We've turned influence into action. At the last general election, we secured public **commitments from all major parties to invest in youth work**, and our advocacy helped drive the creation of a cross-government **National Youth Strategy** – with young people meaningfully involved in shaping it.

We've taken on stewardship of the **#iwill Movement** (in partnership with Volunteering Matters), securing a sustainable future for this powerful force for youth social action and youth power.

We've also **grown our national network of thousands of youth organisations** and significantly increased the number of cross-sector allies we work with – uniting those who believe in the transformative potential of youth work.

Our outdoor learning **social enterprise has grown substantially** since the pandemic, and we've **championed outdoor learning** as a core pillar of outstanding youth work. We have **secured £8.7m for the outdoor learning sector**, worked with providers across the UK to widen their reach, and **supported 60,000 young people** to strengthen their social & emotional development and essential life skills through the power of outdoor learning youth work.

But the context remains stark. Government **funding for youth work is still around 75% below 2010 levels**, services remain fragmented, and regional inequalities are deepening. Too many youth organisations have closed and too many skilled youth workers have been lost. **Youth work is still undervalued – but together, we are changing that.**

Partnerships & collaboration

UK Youth is part of a wonderfully diverse and resourceful youth sector ecosystem. Our mission to widen the reach and deepen the impact of youth work and outdoor learning can only be achieved through extensive partnership working and deep collaboration. Here are the principles for how we approach this work:

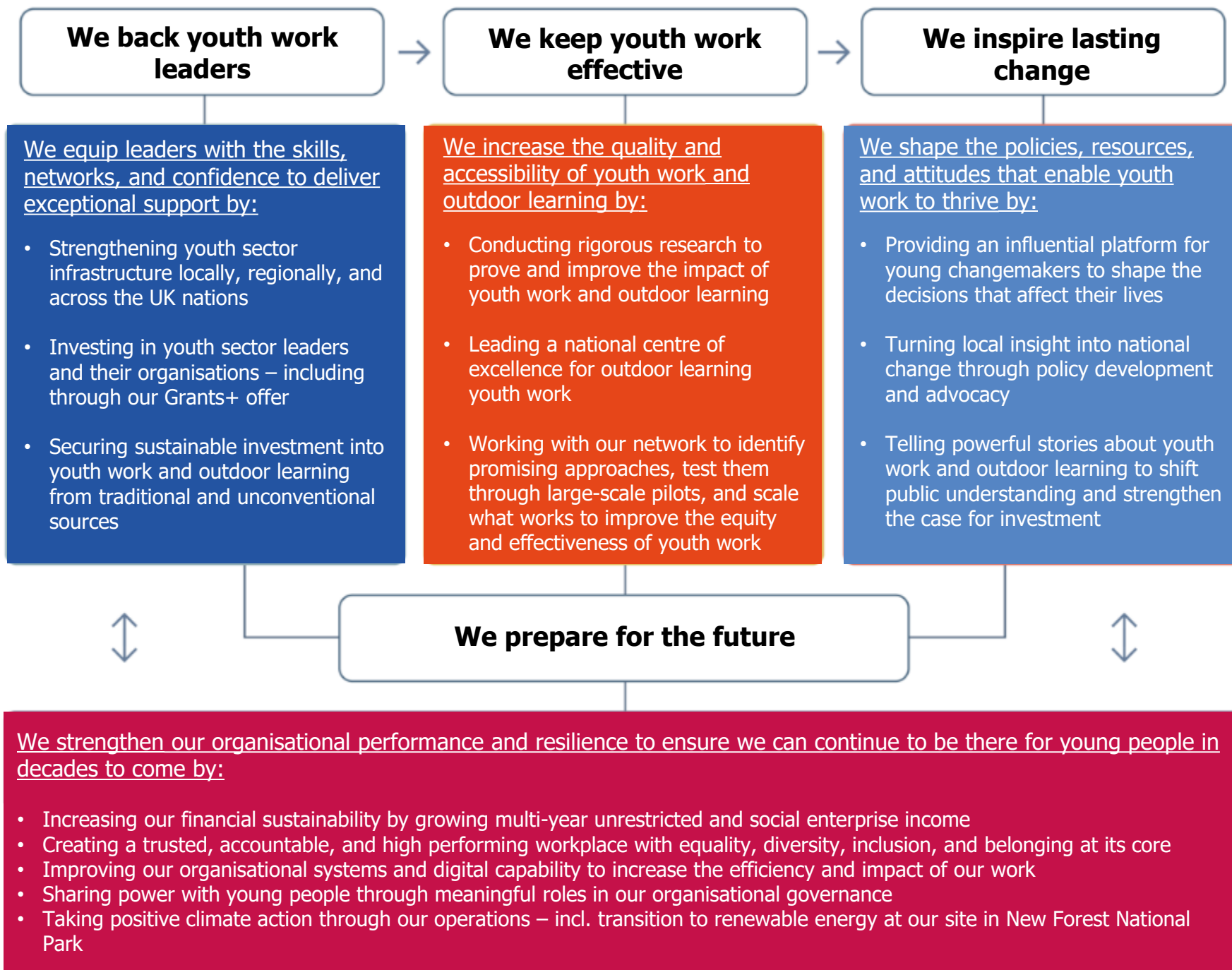
- **We work collaboratively across the whole youth sector ecosystem** – with grassroots and community-led youth organisations, infrastructure bodies, funders, policymakers, and young people – recognising that lasting impact depends on shared purpose and coordinated action. We are proud members of the five nations partnership.
- **We prioritise coordination over competition**, working with partners to reduce duplication, fill gaps in support, and ensure youth organisations can access the right help at the right level (locally, regionally, or across the UK nations) depending on need and context. This includes providing the Secretariat for the Back Youth Alliance.
- **We commit to transparency and shared planning with partners**, clearly articulating roles, offers, and responsibilities to create accessible routes for youth organisations to navigate support and engage in collective initiatives.
- **We build partnerships rooted in equity and inclusion**, working alongside under-served communities, amplifying the voices of smaller and community-led organisations, and embedding anti-oppressive practice in how collaboration is designed, governed, and delivered.
- **We pool insight, evidence, and learning** with sector partners to strengthen practice, improve quality, and support shared advocacy that influences funding, policy, and system reform in line with young people's needs and preferences.
- **We collaborate beyond the youth sector where it benefits young people**, building bridges with education, health, employment, and justice partners to enable joined-up support that places young people at the centre not professional siloes.

Infrastructure alignment

Infrastructure	Example Orgs	Distinctive Role	Key Activities
UK-wide infrastructure	UK Youth	Transforming the policies, investment, and ideas needed to widen the reach and deepen the impact of youth work & outdoor learning, within and across UK nations	- Backing youth sector leaders through Grants+ offers & tailored supported for other infrastructure organisations - Keeping youth work effective through research; outdoor learning centre of excellence; and large-scale pilot programmes - Inspiring lasting change by working with youth workers and young changemakers to influence the policies, resources, and attitudes that enable youth work to thrive
National professional standards and workforce development orgs	National Youth Agency (England); Youth Link Scotland; new national workforce agency in Wales	Setting professional standards and supporting workforce development to improve the capacity, quality, and professional identity of youth work	- Youth work standards setting and safeguarding guidance - Validating qualifications and bursary funding - Training/ CPD delivery - Local authority support and statutory guidance - Workforce research and insights (e.g. youth sector census) - Policy advocacy
National organisational development orgs	Youth Scotland; Youth Action Northern Ireland; Youth Cymru	Supporting voluntary sector youth organisations in each UK nation to improve their quality, sustainability, and connectedness	- Organisational development and governance support - Leadership and trustee development programmes - Quality assurance and improvement frameworks - National networking, collaboration, and peer learning - Representing the voluntary youth sector in national policy and funding conversations
Method specific orgs	Youth United; Institute of Outdoor Learning; Youth Council UK	Promoting the value and driving continuous improvement of specific youth work approaches (e.g. uniformed youth work; outdoor learning; youth voice)	- Good practice guidance - Practitioner networks and communities of practice - Research, learning, and evidence building for specific methods - Advocacy for the value and distinct contribution of the approach
Research & policy specialist orgs	Centre for Young Lives; Youth Futures Foundation; Youth Endowment Fund	Funding and/or conducting research to inform the development of youth sector policy, funding, and practice	- Evidence reviews and primary research - Policy development and advocacy - Grant making to fill evidence gaps - Supporting evidence translation into practice
Regional Youth Work Units	Partnership for Young London; Youth Focus North East; etc	Regional coordination and advocacy for youth work and youth voice (with particular focus on local authorities)	- Regional workforce development - Partnership building and networking - Regional insight and evidence - Translating national policy into regional practice - Youth voice capacity building
Local infrastructure	London Youth; Oxfordshire Youth; Young Devon; etc	Using deep local knowledge and trusted relationship to join-up youth sector in their area and provide practical support that sustains frontline youth provision (with a particular focus on VCS)	- Capacity building, grants, and training - Network coordination and peer learning - Local advocacy and partnership brokerage - Sometimes direct delivery of youth work and outdoor learning
Young People's Foundation Trusts	Young Brent; Young Westminster; etc	Strengthens local cross-sector coordination around young people and supports leadership development within youth sector	- Cross-sector convening across services working with young people, local government, and businesses - Local system mapping and coordination - Leadership development programmes



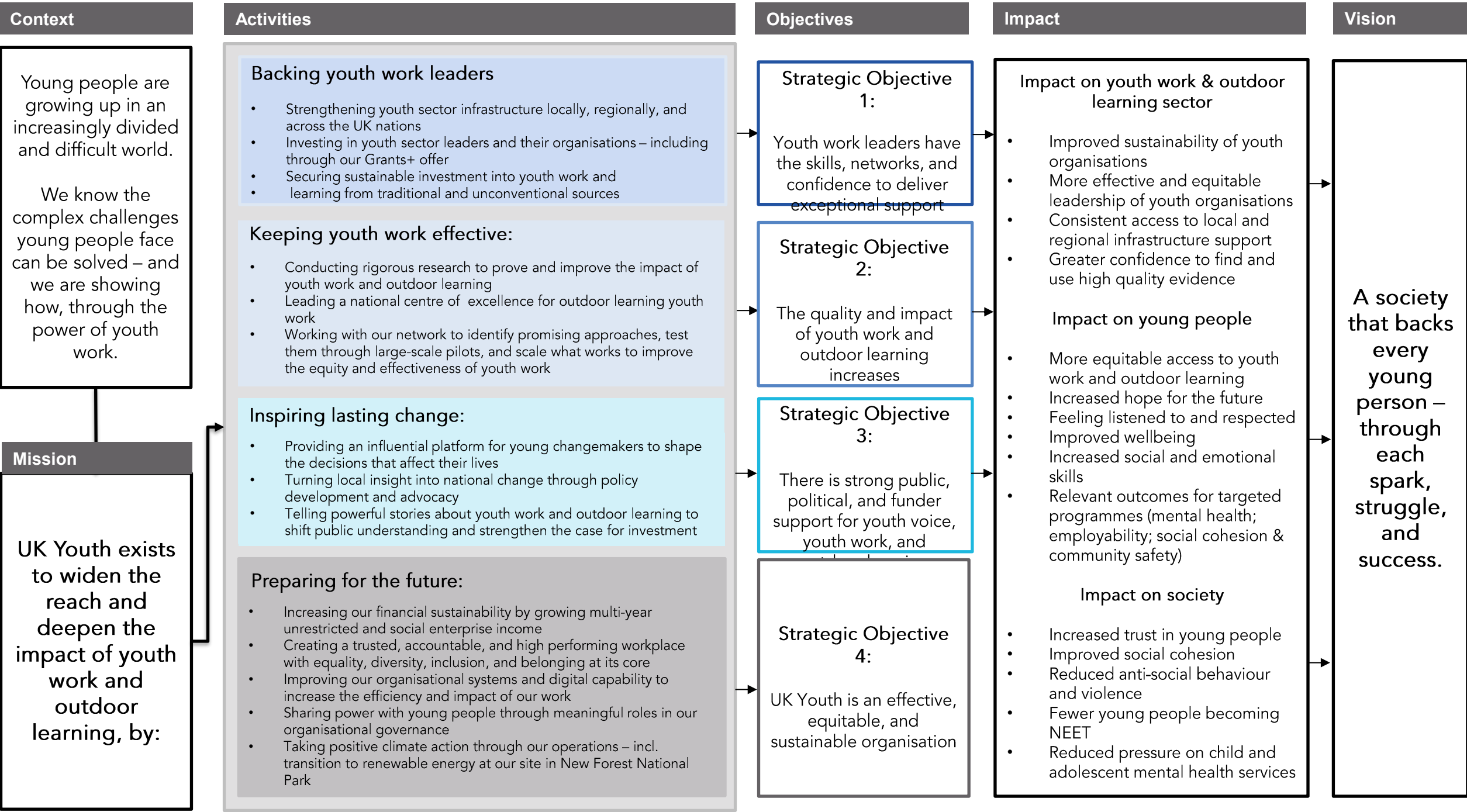
Strategic Framework



Our priority issue areas

To keep youth work relevant to young people's changing lives, our programmes, grants, and influencing will focus on urgent issues where youth work can make a major positive contribution and where UK Youth already has credibility to act.

Mental health & wellbeing	Employability	Social cohesion & community safety
One in five teenagers now experiences a mental health problem, with long waiting lists for specialist services and high levels of worry about the future. Young people consistently call for trusted adults, accessible holistic support, and safe spaces where they can boost their wellbeing through positive activities. Physical activity and access to nature have been shown to reduce anxiety and improve mood. However, too many young people lack regular opportunities to experience green and blue spaces. UK Youth has developed and tested youth work and outdoor learning programmes with large positive impacts on mental health and wellbeing.	Many young people see the job market as inaccessible – citing lack of confidence, work experience, and mental health problems as major barriers. With almost one million young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET), government and businesses are prioritising this issue to reduce pressure on welfare services, boost growth, and build a sustainable workforce pipeline. UK Youth has a strong track record of delivering effective employability programmes and influencing businesses to deepen their support for young people, youth work, and outdoor learning.	Community safety is foundational: without it, young people cannot participate fully in education, work, or community life. Young people want affordable, welcoming, and safe places to meet face-to-face, make friends, and build positive relationships across differences. At a time of rising division, prioritising social cohesion means investing in opportunities that build belonging, mutual respect, and open dialogue. It also requires actively challenging divisive and discriminatory behaviours wherever they occur. UK Youth has successfully delivered youth social action programmes that have strengthened social connection and trust. We are also piloting a large-scale violence reduction programme.



Developing our Impact Framework

We are designing a robust and proportionate Impact Framework that will:

- Provide clear methods for monitoring and reporting on:
 - **Direct impact** on young people and youth workers engaging in our programmes, grants, and organisational development support.
 - **Indirect impact** of our influencing work – shaping policy, practice, investment, and public attitudes towards youth work.
- Establish a small set of organisation-wide indicators, with clear baselines and stretching but achievable impact targets, that will be regularly reported to Board.
- Align with sector-wide data standards, wherever possible.
- Enable consistent learning and improvement – helping us prove and improve the effectiveness of our work and share powerful stories of change.

How we will deliver this strategy

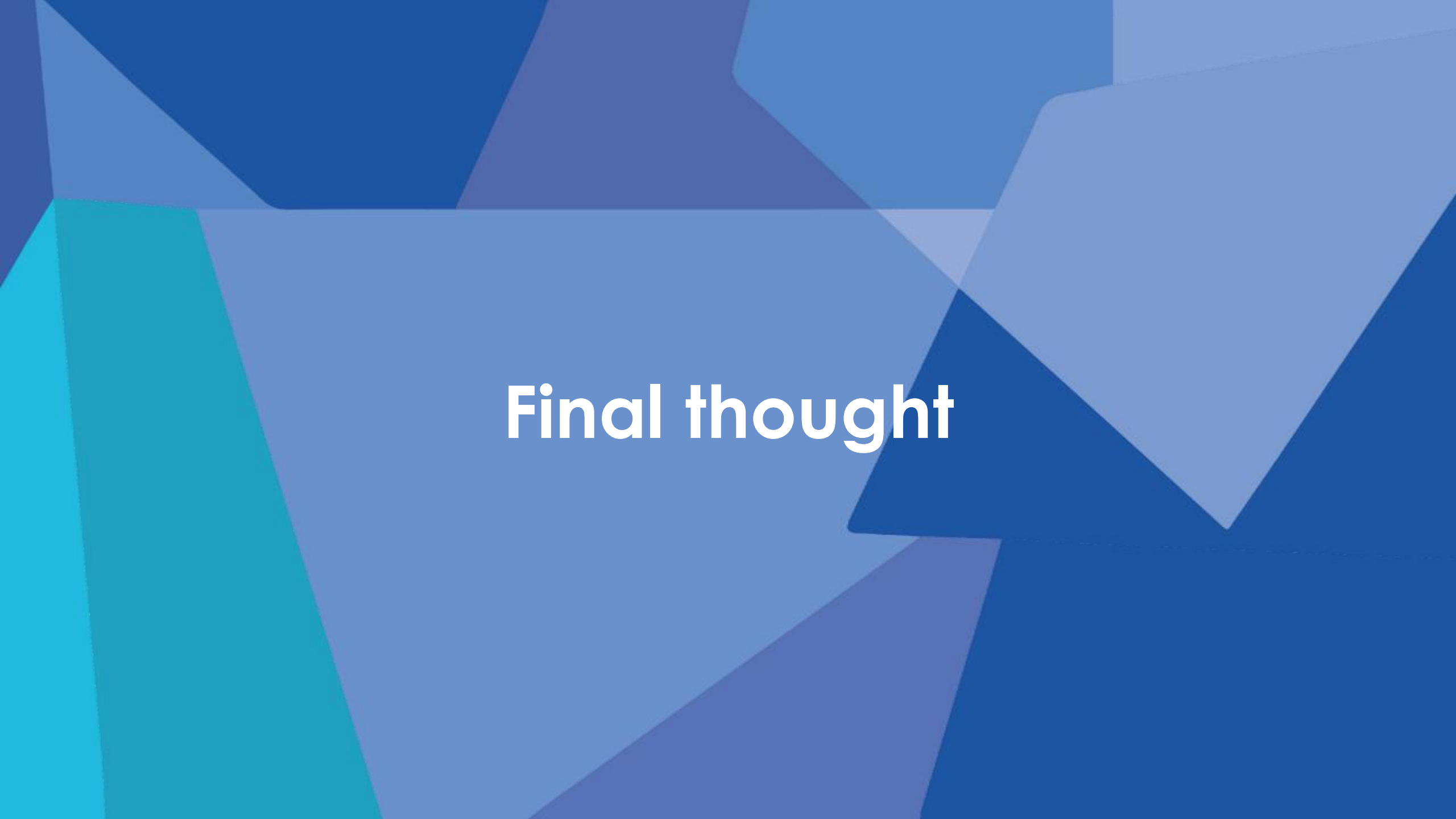
We see this strategy as a compass, not a map.

We will translate its ambition into clear, achievable milestones each year through our annual business planning process. We will review progress annually to ensure the strategy remains the most effective way to deliver impact, informed by what we are learning.

We have deliberately not set a fixed end date for this strategy. It will remain in place for as long as young people and youth workers tell us it is what is needed.

If the evidence or wider context shows that we need to adapt or change course to achieve our mission, we will do so.

However, we will always work to widen the reach and deepen the impact of youth work and learning.



Final thought

“We must see ourselves, not as isolated practitioners of particular techniques in adolescent education, but as a movement of vision and determination, a movement of joy and friendship and laughter, a movement that is helping to set going a yet mightier movement of the human spirit, which may bring out of this age of doubts and difficulties, a revitalising of our nation and our soul.”

Hubert Secretan, 1949

24th annual conference of the National Association of Boys Clubs
(predecessor organisation to UK Youth)

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