

# YMCA

Here for young people  
Here for communities  
Here for you

# NOW'S Our Chance

YMCA General Election  
Manifesto 2024

What's  
the **BEST**  
that  
could  
happen?



The promise of a general election in 2024 is  
**OUR CHANCE** to make young people's voices heard.

# EVERYONE

should have a fair chance to discover who they are and what they can become.

## ABOUT YMCA

YMCA is the oldest and largest youth charity in the world, set up in England in 1844. In the 180 years since, YMCA has evolved into a global movement supporting more than 64 million people across 120 different countries today.

Throughout England and Wales we operate as a federation, with 85 local YMCAs supporting young people and local communities in 190 local authority areas across both countries. We operate in 688 communities across England and Wales, creating supportive environments where young people can belong, contribute and thrive.

The 375,197 young people we help each year are firmly at the heart of what we do, supported by more than 3,900 members of staff and 1,900 volunteers across 669 locations.



# FOREWORD

At YMCA, we have seen the long-term effects of the challenges faced daily by young people, families and communities. The Covid-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis, and the housing crisis, are all leaving scars on our communities that will take time to heal.

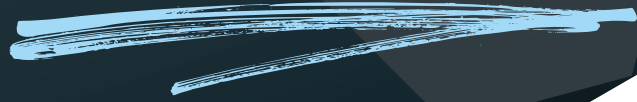
But at YMCA, we haven't lost hope for a brighter future. Every day through our hundreds of services and projects around the country, YMCA staff are working tirelessly to be part of the solution: helping people to escape homelessness, improving people's mental health, providing access to sport and physical activity, offering financial advice and support, and building strong relationships.

Our vision for young people and communities is one where everyone has stability, security, and access to the resources they need to live a good life. We want everyone in the UK to be able to flourish, rather than fighting just to survive. And we would like to see our society treat everyone with the same principles of fairness, equity, and dignity.

We know that it's possible to achieve this. We need political leaders to step up their ambition, to articulate a bold new plan for the betterment of our society, and to lead us all into this new reality without forgetting about those who often get left behind. The next government must put young people and communities at the heart of their vision — and deliver real change for the benefit of all of us. Now's our chance. What's the best that could happen?

*Denise Hatton,  
Chief Executive, YMCA England & Wales*

# HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS



A stable home is one of the most important things people need to live a good life. But right now, the UK is in a housing crisis. The dwindling supply of council homes, combined with a lack of new house building and spiralling costs in the private rented sector, have created a perfect storm: and the result is that far too many people are struggling to keep a roof over their heads.

Young people are particularly badly affected by this because they receive a lower minimum wage and lower levels of benefits, leaving a huge proportion of the housing market unaffordable to them. Young people often don't have enough money saved for a deposit, and many from disadvantaged backgrounds don't have someone who can act as a guarantor for them. 168 young people were assessed as homeless or at risk of homelessness in England and Wales every day in 2021/22, but there is no clear strategy for how to protect young people who are homeless or face the risk of homelessness.

YMCA supports more than 20,000 people annually through its supported housing offer, and is the largest voluntary provider of supported accommodation for young people in England and Wales. We know that many young people struggle to move on from YMCA accommodation because of the lack of affordable housing available to move into, and the difficulty of saving money to meet the costs of moving. We need to see new ambition from political leaders to end this housing crisis, for good.



**EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, GOOD QUALITY, SAFE AND SECURE HOUSING.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➡ **We need investment in a significant programme of building new affordable housing around the country, to deliver the much-needed supply of low-cost, stable, good quality housing.**
- ➡ **There should be a cross-departmental strategy to end youth homelessness which is tailored to young people's needs.**
- ➡ **There should be a nationwide scheme of support for young people in supported accommodation to access the private rented sector when they are ready, through providing deposits and guarantors for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.**

# YOUTH SERVICES



**EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO YOUTH SERVICES IN THEIR AREA, ALL YEAR ROUND.**

Youth services are a vital resource for building young people's confidence, resilience, and skills. YMCA provides high quality youth services to 34,698 young people every year. Our youth clubs help fight loneliness and create fun spaces for children and young people to belong. They help young people to deal with school and societal pressures, supporting their mental health and allowing them to make friends in a safe space. They also help young people to stay away from crime and anti-social behaviour.

However, YMCA research has shown that due to funding cuts, local authority expenditure on youth services in England and Wales has decreased by 73% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2020/21. As a result, more than 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut and 760 youth centres have closed. Many young people now have little to no access to youth services in their area.

There is a need for better promotion of routes into youth work roles, to help the sector recruit enough youth workers. However, recent government funding has been narrowly targeted towards investment in youth club buildings in specific areas, and this has not been sufficiently supported by revenue funding to train and support well-qualified youth workers to run these services. Too many different government departments are currently offering small, uncoordinated funding pots for targeted youth services, instead of having a clear strategy around how every department will contribute to youth services for all young people.

Youth services are a fundamental part of our national infrastructure, ensuring that young people get the support they need to live healthy, happy, and successful lives. In order to invest in young people and in the future of the UK, we have to invest in youth services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ **We need to see long-term revenue funding for universal and open-access youth services, delivering for all young people, all year round.**
- ➔ **We need a cross-departmental strategy for youth services, which takes a long-term strategic vision for the provision of youth services around the country.**
- ➔ **There should be a duty placed on local authorities to ensure that all young people can access youth services in their area, with the support and resourcing from the government to enable it.**



# COST OF LIVING

Over the past two years young people have been bearing the brunt of the cost of living crisis. As a result, many of them are going without basic essentials such as food, electricity, or transport. Those aged under 25 receive lower wages and a lower level of benefits, even though many young people live independently from their family and have the same costs as older adults.

People living in supported housing are also financially penalised for working more than a few hours a week, as they begin to lose more money in benefits than they receive from working. This prevents supported housing residents from improving their financial situation through work, or from progressing into independent living. As a result, people are being trapped in supported accommodation when they are ready to move on, and getting stuck on benefits rather than being able to support themselves financially.

Recent YMCA research found that 66% of young people in supported housing felt that benefit levels were not enough money to live on. Young people are struggling to survive, let alone to thrive. This has a knock-on effect on their physical and mental health, which can be worsened by experiences of poverty and food insecurity.

YMCA provides benefits advice to 4,054 people and housing advice to 4,504 people each year. In addition, a number of YMCAs run foodbanks, which support 4,491 people annually. We believe that the benefits system should protect people from poverty by providing for their essential needs, supporting people through hard times or changing life circumstances, and empowering them to succeed. We need a benefits system that is fit for purpose and does not allow young people to fall through the social safety net.



**EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ALLOW THEM TO MEET THEIR ESSENTIAL NEEDS.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ **The Government should introduce an Essentials Guarantee for benefits, an independently-calculated figure which would determine the minimum level of benefits to meet people's essential needs.**
- ➔ **Young people under 25 who are living independently should receive an additional Universal Credit payment, to bring their standard allowance up to match the over 25s rate.**
- ➔ **Residents of supported accommodation should receive a Universal Credit work allowance to allow them to earn more before their income from benefits is tapered.**

# WELLBEING

For years, young people have told us that mental health is one of their biggest issues. The combined effects of the isolation and disruption of the pandemic, alongside the anxiety and stress caused by the cost of living crisis, have worsened this situation even further. Too many young people are sitting on NHS waiting lists for months on end, waiting for treatment while their mental health deteriorates, and unable to access early help services in their local area.

YMCA supports 4,302 people through mental health education and advice work and delivers counselling to 7,958 people each year. We also welcome 63,205 people through our doors every year to participate in healthy living activities such as sports, fitness classes, swimming, and more. We know that easily available mental health services in the local area, as well as open access youth services, can be the key to better mental health for young people; and that sports and wider physical activity can be a fundamental element of good overall wellbeing.

If we do not tackle the problem of poor mental health and wellbeing, more and more young people will drop out of education or employment, or be unable to enter them in the first place, because of mental illness — which could damage their lives and careers permanently. Political leaders need to make mental and physical health and wellbeing a priority, and to take a preventative and whole-system approach to ensuring adequate mental health support for all young people.



**EVERY PERSON SHOULD BE ABLE TO BUILD RESILIENCE AND POSITIVE WELLBEING, WHILE ALSO BEING ABLE TO ACCESS TIMELY HELP AND SUPPORT WHEN FACING PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ There needs to be increased investment in NHS mental health services to bring down waiting times for people who are in crisis, and to ensure that young people can access timely, appropriate mental health services whenever they need them.
- ➔ We need a national network of early support hubs, so that every young person can access early support for their mental health in their community and place of learning.
- ➔ We need investment in community sport facilities and universal access youth services, so that all young people have access to youth services with trained professionals such as youth workers and sports coaches, who can help them to build resilience and manage their emotions.

# EDUCATION

All children deserve the best start in life. Children’s earliest years shape their ability as adults to form relationships, to manage their emotions, and to learn effectively. Getting the right support during these years gives children the greatest chance of reaching their potential.

YMCA is the largest voluntary provider of early years in England, working with 7,528 children each year across 89 childcare settings. We particularly work in low-income communities where families face multiple vulnerabilities and often need the greatest support. Right now, the funding system for early years education doesn’t work — the amount of money early years education providers receive from the Government is not enough to cover the cost of providing government-funded places. This is especially the case when providers are supporting children with additional needs, or those living in deprived communities.

There is a long-standing recruitment and retention crisis in the early years sector, and some nurseries are at risk of closing down, leaving children and families with no support.

YMCA engages 20,391 young people and adults every year through our training and learning programmes. Training and education can break down barriers to educational success and employment opportunities so that people can fulfil their potential. This is crucial not just for people’s own lives, but also for the health and strength of our economy. However, the on-going underfunding of the further education sector and barriers to apprenticeships are leaving many people unable to progress. Some young people need more financial support to enable them to get the essential level 2 qualifications they need for many jobs.

We need a new sense of ambition from political leaders to set our children and young people up for success, and to invest in a whole life education system which works for everyone.

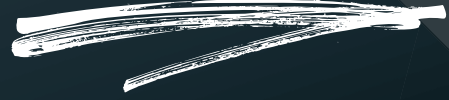


**EVERY CHILD AND YOUNG PERSON SHOULD RECEIVE GOOD QUALITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING WHICH GIVES THEM THE BEST START IN LIFE.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ➔ **We need to see investment in building a sustainable Early Years Education sector that is resourced to meet the scale of need, addressing the real cost of delivering early years education in more deprived areas and for children with additional needs.**
- ➔ **The Government must address the crisis in the early years workforce, implementing an action plan for the challenges of recruitment and retention.**
- ➔ **The Government must increase funding to the further education sector so that providers have the staff and resources to equip young people with the training and skills they need, and reform apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy to reverse the decline in apprenticeship starts and finishes.**

# PLEDGE YOUR SUPPORT



## If you agree that:

- ➔ EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, GOOD-QUALITY, STABLE HOUSING
- ➔ EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO YOUTH SERVICES IN THEIR AREA, ALL YEAR ROUND
- ➔ EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD HAVE THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ALLOW THEM TO MEET THEIR ESSENTIAL NEEDS
- ➔ EVERY PERSON SHOULD BE ABLE TO BUILD RESILIENCE AND POSITIVE WELLBEING, WHILE ALSO BEING ABLE TO ACCESS TIMELY HELP AND SUPPORT WHEN FACING PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES
- ➔ EVERY CHILD AND YOUNG PERSON SHOULD RECEIVE GOOD QUALITY EDUCATION WHICH GIVES THEM THE BEST START IN LIFE



**...then pledge your support for our YMCA manifesto and join our campaign for change:**

**[YMCA.ORG.UK/GENERALELECTION](https://YMCA.ORG.UK/GENERALELECTION)**

**Only with your help can we make this vision a reality. A better future for our children and young people could start tomorrow.**





[ymca.org.uk](https://www.ymca.org.uk)



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**should have a fair chance to  
discover who they are and  
what they can become.**

**[YMCA.ORG.UK/GENERALELECTION](https://www.ymca.org.uk/generalelection)**

Get in touch with us at: [policy@ymca.org.uk](mailto:policy@ymca.org.uk)

**YMCA**

Here for young people  
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Here for you

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

FAMILY & YOUTH WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

HOUSING

TRAINING & EDUCATION

SUPPORT & ADVICE