CHANGING PLACES

POWERED BY US: PUTTING COMMUNITY AND CLIMATE AT THE HEART OF A NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY

June 2025

Groundwork was established with the support of national and local government more than 40 years ago with a mission to regenerate communities impacted by industrial decline and to provide the practical support people needed to improve their local environments.

Engaging young people in this process of renewal has always been a priority. Young people are impacted more than adults by changes to their immediate neighbourhood and are more vulnerable to environmental harms such as air pollution and a lack of green space. We believe young people should have an equal say in shaping what goes on in their area and that developing the decision-makers of tomorrow is crucial if we're going to tackle long-term threats such as climate change.

A new National Youth Strategy is an opportunity to ensure young people's voices are heard as we tackle the multiple issues facing our communities – protecting and improving the local environment, addressing growing health inequalities and creating accessible routes into good jobs in a changing economy. To generate this response, we facilitated discussion with members of our Youth Advisory Board, a diverse group of young people from around the UK who have committed to supporting our work. The concerns outlined and the proposals put forward are theirs, but we agree with them wholeheartedly.

Young people tell us they are worried about both global issues, such as conflict and climate change, and personal challenges, including money, health and work. We hope the Youth Strategy will provide the protection and support young people need but also build a platform for them to lead our efforts to create a fair and green future in which people, places and nature thrive.

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Graham Duxbury CEO, Groundwork UK

The Groundwork Youth Advisory Board (YAB) considered the DCMS Youth Strategy Consultation questions, identifying the following key concerns and asks of government:

- > 1. Connecting young people with nature
- > 2. Giving young people more of a voice in their communities
- > 3. Putting young people at the heart of practical climate action
- > 4. Supporting young people to access jobs in the environmental sector

1. Connecting young people with nature

Being able to use safe, accessible and inclusive green spaces brings multiple benefits for young people including improved mental health, a greater sense of belonging and being able to form a positive connection with nature.

1.1 Concerns

- Safety parks or public spaces often don't feel safe. They are poorly lit, not policed, don't have security cameras, and attract anti-social behaviour.
- Maintenance public facilities are often poorly maintained, and either hazardous or closed.
- Inclusion young people feel unwelcome or excluded from community green spaces. Often a space focusses on very young children or adults, and areas are not designed with teenagers and young adults in mind.
- Support of those that still exist, youth spaces (such as youth clubs) are under-funded and often don't have enough trained, engaging and supportive staff.
- Lack of connection with nature a disconnect with nature leads to indifference in the face of climate change.

"Spending time in green spaces helps me clear my head and feel part of something bigger – but too often, these places don't feel like they're meant for us." Mia

1.2 Youth Strategy Proposal

- Investment in youth-friendly facilities within greenspaces. Opportunities for young people to positively engage with local greenspace and nature should be embedded in the new Youth Strategy, including prioritising youth-friendly facilities and provision in local parks. Young people should have the opportunity to co-design spaces to meet their needs.
- Investment in qualified staff to provide natureand community-based provision (such as youth clubs). This should include more open-access resources, providing stigma-free, good quality and meaningful engagement, alongside purposeful provision such as the NCS model.

Integrating a 'green' thread into youth provision – introducing young people to the benefits of spending time in nature will support the next generation of adults to care for and protect our natural environment, develop tools to support their mental and physical health and to take positive action against climate change.

"Spending time in nature has changed how I see the world - and myself. It's also shaped what I appreciate, engage with and makes me feel motivated. If more young people had safe, inclusive and wild green spaces, I genuinely think we'd grow up more connected to it. Having access to that also shouldn't be a luxury or something you can appreciate when you go on holiday, there's so much value in being able to access that connection in your everyday life." Saskia

2. Giving young people more of a voice in their communities

Strategically and meaningfully engaging young people in local place-based decisionmaking has the potential to benefit the whole community, and lead to a greater sense of responsibility and belonging.

2.1 Concerns

- Exclusion from local decision-making community planning doesn't often focus on finding the best outcomes for young people or the environment.
- Alienation and discrimination young people frequently feel disconnected from their area, alienated from local decision-making and discriminated against by older generations.
- Young people are seen through a lens of criminality or victimhood - young people often feel invisible in their communities, except when perceived to be the victim of or perpetrator of crimes and/or disturbances.
- Lack of youth specialist community staff a lack of skilled, visible and accessible community-based youth workers has contributed to the alienation and negative perception of young people.
- > Negative impact of poor investment in public services and support - the cost-of-living crisis and ever-increasing waiting lists for health care and community provision have a disproportionate impact on young people living in poverty. This limits their ability to engage in positive community activities and can increase anti-social behaviour.

"We don't want to just be consulted – we want to be listened to, involved, and see real change because of our input." Mia Diminishing sense of community – the privatisation of land, and speculative development means that communities have restricted access to space within the community for development of new facilities. Alongside this, gentrification can change the identity of an area and force out young people growing up there, due to housing prices. Displaced young people may not have the same commitment or attachment to their local community and its resources.

2.2 Youth Strategy Proposal

- Embedding a meaningful and diverse youth voice into place-based decision-making – ensuring young people have a genuine say in local decision-making and can see the outcome of their involvement will drive a greater sense of belonging and responsibility for their local area and its resources. Supporting decision-makers to track changes in the community as a result of youth input could help to ensure youth voice activity is meaningful and properly embedded.
- Providing qualified, community-based youth workers – ensuring young people have access to support, engagement opportunities and advocacy. By enabling youth workers to link young people to local decision-making forums, and representing their views, young people can increase their visibility and have a positive impact on their communities.
- Ring-fenced funding for youth-friendly community resources – investing in places and provision for young people, which is sustained and staffed adequately, and integrates with other community resources such as health care and policing.

3. Putting young people at the heart of practical climate action

Connecting young people to local nature and climate challenges and empowering them to take meaningful action and influence outcomes will positively impact communities – particularly those that are disproportionately affected by climate change. Building a sense of empowerment and enabling positive action will also work to alleviate feelings of being overwhelmed and eco-anxiety and inspire confidence in the future.

3.1 Concerns

- > Health impacts of pollution and climate change – young people and less affluent communities are disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change.
- Lack of urgency the lack of strong and decisive action causes climate anxiety, especially amongst young people who will be more affected by climate change.
- Climate change is seen as somebody else's problem - people find it hard to engage with the impact of climate change on where they live, seeing it as something that is happening elsewhere. A disconnect with nature fuels this.
- Continued investment in fossil fuels and lack of accountability from big businesses – without strong government action, achieving a just transition to Net Zero isn't achievable.

"The climate is changing and young people are marginalised in discussions about the world they will inherit. Young people in local communities should be empowered to feel a part of the world around them and encouraged to take decisive climate action, both locally and nationally!" Alice

3.2 Youth Strategy Proposal

- Embedding nature connectedness and climate responsibility – embedding this throughout youth provision, engaging young people in climate education, and promoting safe and inclusive access to green, blue and natural or wild spaces will help to ensure taking care of nature and the climate will be 'normalised' for the next generation of adults. Being present in nature allows young people to become aware of their surroundings, make meaningful choices and inspire them to take positive action.
- Engaging communities and their young people in practical environmental action – enabling community level action will help to empower local communities and young people to take action against the effects of climate changes and biodiversity loss in their area.

"Young people need to be given a more active role in climate action. They should not just be contributing passively, but working alongside others to drive real, environmental change." Muskaan

4. Supporting young people to access jobs in the environmental sector

Our economy is changing as we phase out heavily polluting industries and shift to a more sustainable, regenerative economy. We need to embed environmental awareness and green skills into all sectors of the economy if we're going to make progress against our national targets. Key industries at the forefront of this change have a significant shortage of skills, but at the same time the NEET rate among young people is rising. Bridging this gap will benefit young people, their communities and business.

4.1 Concerns

- > Barriers to employment and education marginalised communities face significant challenges accessing work and education, with gaps in opportunities not narrowing. Additionally, removing universal / open-access provision (such as NCS) limits the opportunity for young people to gain valuable post-education life experience that will help them develop the skills needed to find work.
- Young people do not see 'green jobs' as viable career paths – challenges of accessing the sector without significant work experience, the lack of diversity in the sector and negative perceptions of the sector are just some of the barriers to accessing 'green jobs'.

"I'm passionate about the environment, but it's hard to know where to start - green careers need to feel more reachable and inclusive." Mia

4.2 Youth Strategy Proposal

- Improved careers guidance more accurate and up-to-date information about opportunities in the green economy, including early exposure to green jobs to break down the perception that these are only for certain groups.
- Entry-level, accessible paid jobs and work experience in the charity and environmental sector – paid placement to support all young people to gain the experience they need.
- Support for mental health and neurodiversity - better funded and integrated mental health services and increased awareness and accommodation for neurodiverse individuals, removing barriers to employment.
- > Opportunities for building life skills and experience outside of formal education – provision of community-based, accessible courses and activities to build social, environmental and practical skills as a foundation for employment.

About the Youth Advisory Board

Groundwork's Youth Advisory Board is for young people from across the UK, aged between 16 – 24, who are passionate about the same issues as Groundwork and would like to be part of a group of like-minded young people to make their voice heard.

Groundwork's Youth Advisory Board enables members to see behind the scenes of a national charity, all while developing confidence, skills and the opportunity to share their opinions and experience with both Groundwork colleagues and peers. Groundwork first started the Youth Advisory Board in 2016 and each year since has invited young people from across the UK to join and make a difference.

You can find out more about the Groundwork Youth Advisory Board and its members by visiting our website www.groundwork.org.uk/ youth-advisory-board/





To find out more about Groundwork, please get in touch:

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