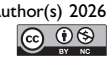
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Reaching the 'grassroots'?: Local youth partnerships, the *National Youth Strategy* and the *Civil Society Covenant*

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Abstract

The UK government's *National Youth Strategy* and the *Civil Society Covenant* have both emphasised the role of partnerships for addressing complex social problems. In this commentary, we argue that grassroots youth provisions – especially those established 'by and for' their communities – will be pivotal to the success of the *National Youth Strategy*, which seeks to ensure that all young people have a safe place to go, someone who cares for them and a community they feel part of. Realising this ambition will require a more intentional approach to the inclusion and capacity enhancement of grassroots organisations delivering youth work in communities. To make this argument, we present a brief overview of the national youth work context. We then introduce the *Civil Society Covenant* in more detail before making two recommendations for the implementation of youth partnerships at national and regional levels.

Keywords

Civil Society Covenant, grassroots, partnership, policy, youth work

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Introduction

This commentary focuses on the role of partnerships highlighted in the UK government's *National Youth Strategy* (DCMS, 2025a). UK youth policy has placed renewed emphasis

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on the importance of cross-sector partnerships for supporting young people's health and wellbeing. The *Civil Society Covenant* (DCMS, 2025b) has introduced new principles for partnership working between civil society and government. Several current initiatives, including the *Local Youth Transformation Pilot* (DCMS, 2025c) and the *Local Youth Partnership Capacity Building Project* (YPF Trust, 2024), also now seek to build capacity in the youth sector through the medium of partnerships.

In December 2025, the UK government published the first *National Youth Strategy* since 2005, *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy* (DCMS, 2025a; DfES, 2005). The strategy, which draws on *the State of the Nation*, a survey of over 14,000 young people (DCMS, 2025d), introduces an ambitious 10-year plan supported by £500 million of combined investment across areas including workforce development, the upgrading of existing youth facilities, the establishment of 50 Young Futures Hubs and the expansion of training and employment opportunities for 16–24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training. To improve outcomes for young people, the strategy proposes three 'radical shifts': (a) from national to local, (b) from fragmented to collaborative and (c) from excluded to empowered. These shifts represent a broader set of intentions to develop more place-based approaches to the delivery of youth policy, to improve cross-sector partnerships for the benefit of young people and to create new mechanisms for young people to be involved in the decisions that impact their lives.

Partnerships are at the heart of the *National Youth Strategy* (DCMS, 2025a). The term *partnership* features 20 times throughout the document, underpinning commitments to support 'new School Sport Partnerships', to 'develop strong partnerships with local organisations', to 'bring youth services together' and to set 'clear expectations that local areas in receipt of youth funding should be able to clearly demonstrate strong partnership working with young people' (DCMS, 2025a). These priorities are scaffolded by the *Civil Society Covenant* (DCMS, 2025b), a principle-based agreement that seeks to set the foundations for a new model of partnership between civil society (including volunteers, charities, faith organisations, cooperatives, trade unions, philanthropists, social enterprises, social investors and purpose-driven businesses) and government. The implementation of new Covenant principles are to be piloted over the 3 years spanning 2026–2029 in *Local Covenant Partnerships* (LCPs) across 15 English local authority (LA) districts. The promise of partnership, as such, is central to the UK government's ambitions to improve experiences and outcomes for young people. What is yet to be determined, however, is quite how these partnerships will manifest in practice and the extent to which they will generate tangible advantages for the largely voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations delivering youth work in communities (Davies, 2024; NYA, 2025).

In the following, we argue that grassroots youth provisions – particularly those established 'by and for' their communities – will be central to the success of the *National Youth Strategy*, which seeks to ensure that 'all young people have a safe place to go, someone who cares for them, and a community they feel part of' (DCMS, 2025a). Grassroots youth providers are often the organisations delivering 'open-access' youth work that is (a) available to all; (b) grounded in the principle of voluntary engagement, such that young people can engage as they please; and (c) rooted in (often long-term)

relationships of mutual respect between youth workers and young people (Davies, 2024). Grassroots providers specialise in developing stable, trusted relationships, a key priority for the *National Youth Strategy* (DCMS, 2025a; El-Hoss et al., 2023). They can offer tailored local responses to systemic issues like poverty (Ord and Monks, 2022). They can also be the 'first port of call' for young people who feel silenced, surveilled or misunderstood in formal settings like school (Nichols, 2017; Nijjar, 2021; Tester-Jones et al., 2026). However, open-access youth work and, in particular, organisations established 'by and for' their communities are facing some of the most significant challenges with resourcing and sustainability (Davies, 2024; O'Connor and Northrop, 2025). Realising the *National Youth Strategy*'s ambitions will require a more intentional approach to the inclusion and capacity enhancement of grassroots organisations delivering youth work in communities. To make this point, we briefly describe the national youth work context. We then draw attention to some of the details of the *Civil Society Covenant*, before reflecting on, and offering recommendations for, its implementation at national and regional levels.

Grassroots youth work: The State of the Nation

The *National Youth Strategy* comes at a time of significant need within the youth and community sector. Between 2010 and 2023, local spending on youth services in England fell by 73% (YMCA, 2025), more than 1000 youth centres closed and over 4500 youth worker roles were lost (DCMS, 2025a). These cuts have not fallen evenly. In some parts of England, community-based youth provisions have disappeared almost entirely. Research mapping the relationship between 'youth provision' and 'youth need', for example, has established several 'black holes for youth work' where demand for youth work now substantially outweighs the availability of youth services (Social Investment Business, 2026). These areas are concentrated in the North East of England, the North West, the East Midlands, London and some coastal towns. Beyond these localities, the grant making upon which much grassroots youth work depends has been particularly curtailed in councils facing financial hardship, 30 English councils as of March 2025 (Doherty et al., 2025). Moreover, the number of councils facing insolvency is set to rise substantially in March 2028, when the 'statutory override' accounting mechanism, which allows councils to keep high needs deficits, comes to an end (Local Government Association, 2026). However, it should be noted that this may be offset by the fact that LAs will no longer need to cover the costs of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities system (DfE, 2025). Of the (circa) 2800 youth organisations responding to the most recent *National Youth Sector Census* (NYA, 2025), two-thirds reported increased operating costs, and just over 6 in 10 reported a decline in funding and operating budgets.

Where investments have been made since 2010, they have tended to focus on targeted responses to priority issues (like violent crime or youth unemployment) and the development of youth centres that offer state-of-the-art facilities but may be less firmly rooted in local communities or accessible to young people (Davies, 2024). Resource scarcity in an increasingly narrow funding landscape has also disproportionately impacted smaller

organisations, which have been forced to compete with more established actors for funding (El-Hoss et al., 2023; Tayleur et al., 2023). Studies show that those organisations established 'by and for' their communities enter an 'unlevel playing field' with regard to funding (O'Connor and Northrop, 2025). Capacity limitations (particularly with administrative infrastructure, bidding and evaluation duties) are common within grassroots organisations (JRF, 2023). Inequalities in resource access can also manifest along the lines of race (Harries et al., 2020). Mason and Williams (2022) observed that larger and predominantly white-led organisations often enjoy readier access to the resources needed to bid successfully for funds. Conversely, smaller organisations, which typically have stronger and more credible relationships within their communities, continue to work with very limited resources (*see also* Mwale and Williams, 2023).

Despite the manifold challenges facing grassroots youth work, the sector is resistant (de St Croix, 2016). In 2025, youth work was being delivered in over 28,000 English locations (NYA, 2025). Systematic reviews demonstrate that youth activities continue to benefit young people across a range of social, educational and economic outcomes (SQW, 2024). Recent evidence has also shown a significant relationship between youth club closures and poorer outcomes for young people concerning educational attainment and youth offending rates (Villa, 2024). However, where open-access youth work is still happening, it relies heavily on volunteers and paid staff managing low paid and precarious working conditions (O'Connor and Northrop, 2025). This mirrors international trends where the gaps formed by disinvestment in nonprofit services have tended to be filled by various forms of unstable or unpaid work (Baines et al., 2017). These dynamics provide a very strong justification for the workforce, facilities and infrastructure investments envisaged in the *National Youth Strategy*. It is important to remember, though, that most of these announcements span only 3 or 4 years into a 10-year plan (Ferguson, 2025). The next 3 years will therefore be a critical time for LAs to build capacity in the youth sector. Local youth partnerships present a promising mechanism for achieving this (Watson et al., 2024; YPF Trust, 2024). But, as studies of cross-sector partnership show, negotiations of partnership working in children and youth services are fraught with complexities (El-Hoss et al., 2023).

Youth sector partnerships and the *Civil Society Covenant*

The *National Youth Strategy* emphasises a 'radical shift' *from fragmented to collaborative* ways of working. Given this renewed investment in partnerships, it is prudent to consider the histories of such working. A growing body of organisational research highlights the challenges of cross-sector partnerships involving grassroots organisations (El-Hoss et al., 2023; McDonald, 2005; Meade, 2005). This work consistently shows the tendency of cross-sector partnerships to reproduce hierarchies between grassroots organisations and their more established counterparts (McGovern, 2013; Tilki et al., 2015). Challenges of communication, joint operating models, inter-organisational accountability, power imbalances and negotiations of a shared vision can all compromise partnerships (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). Moreover, smaller and less powerful organisations are particularly vulnerable to the asymmetries that can arise within partnership arrangements where larger

organisations subcontract work to smaller grassroots providers (Blakey et al., 2016; Tilki et al., 2015). Partnerships, as such, can be 'dangerous liaisons' for grassroots organisations, if they are not arranged and maintained with the needs of *all* partners in mind (Craig and Taylor, 2002). Operating in this way, however, is the exception to the norm (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). It also 'requires major resource investment, together with significant managerial skill and patience from each of the individual participants' (Huxham and Vangen, 2000: 800).

Investment in partnerships does feature in the *National Youth Strategy*. It promises £5 million over 3 years to 'support the creation of strong partnerships, including with civil society organisations' (DCMS, 2025a). This builds on an existing investment of £8 million over 2025–2026 for 12 'Pathfinder' LAs involved in the *Local Youth Transformation Pilot* to rebuild a high-quality offer for young people and transition back to local youth services leadership (DCMS, 2025c). The *LCP* fund will also distribute £11.59 million across 15 LA districts to pilot the implementation of new Covenant principles.

In the name of partnership, the *Civil Society Covenant* (2025b) seeks to encourage high-quality, purposeful, collaborative working between government and civil society. The document also contains some evidence that the needs of grassroots organisations have been considered. The *Covenant Guidance Principles*, for example, present indicators for assessing the implementation of the Covenant, such as the availability of funding opportunities 'for civil society organisations, including smaller organisations', and the reduction of barriers to partnership within civil society, including for smaller parties (DCMS, 2025b). However, these references do not commit LAs to any specific or measurable capacity enhancement goals. The 'removal of barriers', for example, could include a wide variety of more and less effective interventions. Increasing access to a competitive field of play may not be sufficiently enabling for organisations that still lack the capital they need to secure resources (El-Hoss et al., 2023). This, again, reflects the importance of local youth partnerships that are sensitive to the needs of grassroots youth work providers and able to maximise capacity across the complex ecosystem of children and young people's services (Webb, 2023).

Of note, the *Civil Society Covenant* also focuses more persistently on 'collaboration' (DCMS, 2025b: 12–13) and 'partnerships between civil society and … government' (2025b: 20) than on those between 'civil society organisations' themselves (2025b: 13). Indeed, endorsing collaborative partnerships *between* civil society organisations sits uneasily with the cultivation of competition (see Davies, 2014: 41, 43, 57; Simmel, 2008: 962), which has characterised the VCSE sector. Yet cultivating, even accepting, competition jars with the promotion of attributes of social life espoused by the *Civil Society Covenant* itself. Firstly, many '[c]ivil society organisations … represent the interests of the people or causes they have been established to support' (DCMS, 2025b: 15). Civil society has 'varied expertise' (2025b: 10, see also 4–5). Its organisations do not all serve the same group(s). An organisation may serve predominantly specific minoritised groups, people of a certain age or those in a particular area. Hence, shaping the relationships between civil society organisations often involves shaping the relationships between *different* groups. Secondly, 'competition' can be considered an 'indirect form of fighting' (Simmel, 2008: 958) characterised by 'antagonistic tension' (2008: 962). Multiple competitors 'struggle for the same … good', which is 'scarce'

(Werron, 2015: 188; see also Simmel, 2008: 958, 964). As a result of one party making a particular 'gain', another will not make it (Simmel, 2008: 966, see also 964; Werron, 2015: 188). To champion 'competition' therefore is to champion 'inequality' (Davies, 2014: 37, see also 41–42, 54, 57; Simmel, 2008: 971). Competition is supposed to generate 'distinguishable "winners" and "losers" …' (Davies, 2014: 56–57). Arranging competitions, notably for funding, between civil society organisations means arranging such indirect fights. Organisations strive to obtain the same scarce resources. The success of one or some entails another's or others' failure. Their interests diverge in key respects. The contests yield distinct winners, who are rewarded with resources or opportunities to participate, and losers, who are not. This can impede the promotion of just what the *Civil Society Covenant* itself advocates: 'connected … communities with inclusive opportunities for participation which strengthen our social fabric' (DCMS, 2025b: 8, see also 5–7). One way of generating respite from competition, in turn, is bolstering the capacity for collaborative partnerships *between* VCSE organisations. As existing work on local youth partnership demonstrates, these arrangements are likely to work best if they are community-led and able to prioritise resources for smaller community-based organisations, supported by long-term funding (Gregg-Auraic, 2025). The *Civil Society Covenant* (DCMS, 2025b) is less clear on such arrangements. This warrants further attention.

Reaching the grassroots: Implementing the *National Youth Strategy*

Over the past 15 years, grassroots youth providers located in the most disadvantaged communities have borne the brunt of sustained funding cuts (Davies, 2024). Yet these are the organisations that specialise in developing trusting relationships between young people and adults. They are also the groups that can feel most accessible to young people who do not feel represented or understood in more formal settings. The *National Youth Strategy* rightly emphasises that LAs are best placed to decide what is needed in their communities. This is manifest in the proposed shift *from national to local*. However, to mitigate the risk that resource-poor LAs repeat established ways of working, which have embedded inequalities within the youth sector to date, two recommendations can be made. These recommendations are not intended to be exhaustive. They are aids to thinking and prompts to critically consider the implementation of national youth policy in diverse local contexts:

- Nationally, the *Covenant Guidance Principles*, which will provide a framework for LA partnerships, could adopt a more specific and intentional approach to the inclusion and capacity enhancement of grassroots youth work organisations. This would mean shifting the accent from reducing barriers to partnership to more determined capacity enhancement measurable by specific indicators, such as the provision of 'development grants' for grassroots organisations (to enhance funding readiness), rates of grant capture for grassroots organisations, involvement of grassroots youth providers in strategic decision-making or the number of paid staff members for grassroots youth organisations. Existing toolkits for partnership working, for instance, the National Council for Voluntary Organisation's

Partnership Working Toolkit (NVCO, 2018) or the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation's (2024), stress the importance of clearly defined governance, shared objectives and accountability mechanisms. Providing LAs with a sharper set of tools for the implementation and monitoring of Covenant principles may support the local prioritisation of resources for grassroots youth work.

- Locally, it will be important that LAs (irrespective of their *Local Youth Transformation* or *LCP* status) are provided with the resources necessary to support partnerships that enable capacity enhancement across the sector but for grassroots youth providers in particular. Localisation alone does not guarantee equitable outcomes. This has been made clear by several existing partnership frameworks, all of which emphasise the importance of investments in dedicated staff – and time – to manage collaboration and support smaller organisations (Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, 2024; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023; Local Government Association, 2023; Young People's Foundation Trust, 2024). Good partnerships are social arrangements that realise their objectives, whilst enhancing the capacity of all the partners. This requires significant resources, high levels of managerial skill and a commitment to learn from histories of flawed partnership working in the VCSE (El-Hoss et al., 2023; Huxham and Vangen, 2000).

The *National Youth Strategy* presents a much-needed (and potentially short-lived) opportunity to replenish a sector that has been significantly depleted by deep funding cuts (Davies, 2024). Seizing this opportunity will require LAs to be intentional about their use of, and investment in, partnerships to *redress* rather than *reproduce* inequalities within the sector.

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