



ALLIANCE OF YOUTH WORKERS ASSOCIATIONS

AYWA Position Paper on the Future EU Youth Strategy

**Strengthening Participation, Inclusion,
and Youth Work Across Europe**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the European Commission prepares the next EU Youth Strategy beyond 2027, a fundamental question, also raised during the kick-off of European Youth Week 2026, must be addressed:

How will the EU Youth Strategy effectively reach all young people in Europe?

Answering this question also requires recognising that the influence of the EU Youth Strategy extends beyond EU Member States. Candidate and neighbouring countries participating in European youth programmes and youth work processes should be able to align with, contribute to and benefit from the Strategy.

The current Strategy 2019-2027 has strengthened youth participation, cooperation and visibility. However, too many young people remain excluded. Participation is uneven, youth mainstreaming is inconsistent, and policies often fail to connect with young people's realities. European programmes remain insufficiently known and accessible to many young people.

At the same time, the 4th European Youth Work Convention (Malta, 2025) has provided a clear and shared European direction: supporting young people requires not only commitments, but structures, systems and conditions that enable participation, inclusion and development in practice.

This position paper argues that:

A youth-centred EU Youth Strategy requires strong delivery systems that reach young people where they are, with youth work as a key enabler.

Youth work is not the objective of the Strategy, young people are.

However, without accessible and quality youth work:

- participation remains limited
- inclusion remains uneven
- policies remain disconnected from young people's lives



AYWA therefore calls for the next EU Youth Strategy to:

1. **Strengthen meaningful youth participation and democracy** by recognising the role of youth work in ensuring that diverse young people influence decision-making processes at all levels.
2. **Make youth mainstreaming operational**, through concrete mechanisms such as the EU Youth Check, supported by real implementation structures.
3. **Establish youth work as a core pillar of the Strategy**, recognising its role in enabling youth participation, inclusion and empowerment.
4. **Support youth work systems and youth workers**, through recognition, governance, funding and professional development.
5. **Reinforce youth organisations and civic space**, ensuring their independence, sustainability and role in representing young people.
6. **Ensure inclusion and equity** by investing in local approaches that reach even more young people with fewer opportunities.
7. **Align the European Youth Goals with real delivery mechanisms**, ensuring that they are implemented through concrete systems and structures.
8. **Strengthen Member State Ownership and Commitment**, ensuring that the Strategy is effectively adopted and delivered at national level.
9. **Extend the Strategy's reach to EU Candidate countries**, ensuring youth benefit from aligned frameworks, cross-border mobility, and access to EU Youth dialogue mechanism and to EU funding support for capacity building and for democracy strengthening initiatives.

The next EU Youth Strategy must ensure that:

- participation is not only invited, but enabled
- policies are not only designed, but experienced by young people
- commitments are not only stated, but delivered in practice

The strategic priorities outlined above reflect AYWA's key political positions for the future EU Youth Strategy. The following sections provide the broader rationale behind these positions, highlighting the current gaps, implementation challenges, and the role of youth work in ensuring that the Strategy effectively reaches and benefits all young people across Europe.



A STRATEGY THAT REACHES ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

The EU Youth Strategy aims to ensure that all young people can participate in society, access opportunities, and drive the decisions that affect them. In recent years, the Strategy has contributed to strengthening youth participation, increasing visibility, and fostering cooperation across Europe. However, a persistent gap remains between policy frameworks and the everyday realities of young people. Many young people still:

- feel disconnected from decision-making processes
- face structural barriers to participation
- lack access to opportunities
- experience growing social, economic and mental health challenges

At the same time, participation mechanisms often reach those who are already engaged, while others remain outside the system.

This creates a central challenge for the next EU Youth Strategy:

How can it effectively reach all young people, including those who are not already part of organised structures or participation processes?

Answering this question requires moving beyond policy design and focusing on how policies are translated into practice across all levels of governance, from European commitments to national, regional, and local implementation. Reaching all young people requires specific attention to young people affected by war, displacement, trauma, disrupted education, migration and reduced access to local youth infrastructures.

The ambition to reach all young people in Europe must also include those in candidate and neighbouring countries that are connected to European youth programmes and youth work processes. These young people may face additional barriers, including fewer accessible opportunities, weaker institutional support and reduced visibility in European policy processes.

FROM POLICY COMMITMENTS TO REAL ACCESS

The EU has made strong commitments to youth participation and youth mainstreaming. Instruments such as the EU Youth Dialogue have created valuable spaces for young people to express their views and contribute to policymaking.

However, participation does not happen automatically. It depends on:

- access to information,
- supportive environments,
- trust in institutions,
- long-term engagement,
- safeguarding the right to participation,
- targeted outreach to young people outside large cities and organised youth structures
- the presence of actors who can connect young people with opportunities

Similarly, youth mainstreaming cannot rely solely on political will. It requires mechanisms that ensure policies are shaped together with young people and actually reach them in their daily lives.

Without such conditions, participation risks remaining selective, and mainstreaming risks remaining symbolic.



YOUTH WORK AS A KEY ENABLER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Youth work plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between policy and young people's realities.

It provides:

- Accessible, inclusive and safe spaces where young people can engage, belong, express themselves freely and build trusting relationships.
- Support for personal and social development.
- Support young people in crisis and post-crisis contexts, including psychosocial recovery, resilience, rebuilding trust, reconnecting young people with communities and institutions, and supporting young people affected by war.
- Opportunities for participation and democratic engagement.
- Connections between young people and institutions.
- Creates learning opportunities together with young people to experience their potential and position in society

Importantly, youth work reaches young people who are often not engaged in formal systems or institutional participation mechanisms.

In this sense, youth work serves as a means of ensuring that young people can access their rights, opportunities, and spaces for participation.

The sustainability of youth work depends on recognising youth workers as qualified professionals with access to fair working conditions, supervision and wellbeing support, professional development, mechanisms to prevent burnout and long-term career opportunities that support retention in the field.

Following the Proposals of the *New European Youth Goals developed by the Youth Goals Task Force*^[1], particularly Proposal 2 on Current YG#11, "Youth Organisations, EU Youth programmes, and Youth Work" is suggested "*for updates to existing Youth Goal which may include a new title and a stronger focus on youth work ...*"

The 4th European Youth Work Convention^[2] reinforced this understanding, highlighting that youth work can only fulfil this role when it is supported through:

- sustainable funding
- appropriate infrastructure
- clear recognition
- and coherent systems and governance

The Convention also made clear that youth work should not be treated as a temporary or project-based activity, but as a long-term investment in young people and democratic societies.

The Convention's roadmap^[3] explicitly calls for the next EU Youth Strategy to include a dedicated focus on youth work and to support the development of youth work systems across Europe. This creates a shared responsibility for European institutions and Member States: **to implement what has already been agreed.**

^[1] [Proposals for the structures of the new European Youth Goals](#)

^[2] [4th EYWC Conclusions](#)

^[3] [4th EYWC Roadmap](#)



FROM COMMITMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION: STRENGTHENING MEMBER STATE OWNERSHIP

A key limitation of the current EU Youth Strategy lies not in its ambition, but in its implementation. Across its pillars, the Strategy consistently encourages Member States to take action, whether in supporting youth participation, strengthening youth work, or promoting inclusion. However, encouragement alone has proven insufficient to ensure consistent and meaningful implementation across Europe.

As a result:

- progress remains uneven between countries
- youth work development varies significantly
- participation opportunities are not equally accessible
- many young people remain unreached

This creates a structural gap between European commitments and national realities. Without clear adoption, prioritisation and implementation by Member States, the Strategy's ability to deliver for young people remains limited.

• From Encouragement to Responsibility

The next EU Youth Strategy must move beyond soft coordination and establish stronger expectations for Member State engagement.

This does not require rigid harmonisation, but it does require:

- clearer political commitment
- shared accountability
- and a stronger alignment between European priorities and national action

In particular, areas such as youth work, participation and inclusion cannot remain optional or dependent on national interpretation alone.

• Linking EU Priorities with National Implementation

To strengthen impact, the EU Youth Strategy must create clearer links between:

- European priorities
- national policy frameworks
- and local implementation

This could include:

- stronger alignment between EU Youth Strategy priorities and national youth strategies
- a European and national governance system on youth work
- structured follow-up mechanisms at the national level and clearer support for local implementation
- and better use of EU programmes to support national implementation

Such alignment would help ensure that European commitments are not only reflected in national strategies but also translated into governance practices and real opportunities for young people.



• **Strengthening the Role of Member States in Delivering Youth Work**

AYWA recognises the efforts made at the European level to improve and develop policies and programmes supporting youth work, but we also urge all member states and candidate countries to design and implement support measures for quality youth work, by developing national youth work frameworks, professional standards and quality assurance systems

The current Strategy recognises the importance of youth work^[4] and invites Member States to:

- support its social and formal recognition
- strengthen its quality
- and use it as a tool for participation

However, without concrete frameworks, these remain unevenly implemented. The next Strategy should therefore encourage Member States to:

- adopt or strengthen national youth work strategies or frameworks,
- ensure political and formal recognition of youth work,
- develop nationally appropriate quality assurance systems, including standards, ethical frameworks, monitoring and accreditation or equivalent mechanisms,
- create an advisory group on youth work with the active participation of national youth work associations,
- support the development of youth work that is accessible to all young people,
- establish minimum professional standards for youth work employment and working conditions,
- develop sustainable funding mechanisms,
- integrate youth work into cross-sectoral policies.

This reflects the shared European direction already outlined through the European Youth Work Convention and related processes.

● **Strengthening Accountability and Follow-up**

For the Strategy to be effective, implementation must be visible and measurable.

This requires:

- improved monitoring of how Member States implement the Strategy
- better use of indicators related to youth participation, inclusion and youth work
- stronger links between EU Youth Dialogue outcomes and national policymaking

Monitoring should go beyond tracking whether actions have taken place and should provide evidence of outcomes for young people. The Strategy should support common evidence frameworks, impact measurement approaches and data systems showing how youth work contributes to participation, inclusion, wellbeing, employability and democratic engagement.

Accountability should not be understood as control, but as a shared responsibility to deliver for young people.

^[4] <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0269>, (p.5-7)



●A Shared European Responsibility

Ensuring the success of the EU Youth Strategy is a shared responsibility between European institutions and Member States. European frameworks can set direction, but their impact depends on how they are implemented nationally and locally.

This shared responsibility should also recognise the wider European youth work space. Candidate and neighbouring countries are strongly influenced by EU youth policy, European youth programmes and European youth work processes. The next Strategy should therefore provide pathways for these countries to align with its priorities, contribute to its implementation and benefit from its support mechanisms.

Moving forward, the challenge is not to redefine priorities, but to ensure that they are taken seriously, adopted, and implemented across all Member States.



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR A YOUTH-CENTRED EU YOUTH STRATEGY

- **Strengthening Participation and Youth Democracy through Youth Work**

The next EU Youth Strategy must ensure that participation is meaningful, inclusive and impactful.

Participation should not be limited to consultation processes; rather, it should enable young people to actively shape the policies and decisions that affect their lives.

This requires strengthening the EU Youth Dialogue, ensuring follow-up of its outcomes, and improving connections between European, national and local levels.

At the same time, participation must be supported by structures that make it accessible to all young people. Youth work plays a key role in this regard, providing the environments and support that enable young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, to engage in democratic life.

Furthermore, participation today is increasingly digital. However, policy frameworks often reduce digital citizenship to mere IT skills or the use of e-services. The next EU Youth Strategy must actively support digital youth work to help young people navigate algorithmic influences, combat toxic online environments, and bridge the gap between organic social media activism and formal democratic processes

In this context, youth participation and youth work also contribute to strengthening democratic resilience, civic trust and young people's confidence in democratic institutions.

- **Making Youth Mainstreaming Operational and Reachable**

Youth mainstreaming must become a practical and accountable approach across all policy areas.

The EU Youth Check is an important step in this direction. However, its effectiveness will depend on how it is implemented, how young people are involved, and how its results influence policymaking.

To be meaningful, youth mainstreaming must be connected to real-life contexts. This requires mechanisms that ensure policies are translated into opportunities that young people can access and benefit from.

Youth work contributes to this process by connecting policies with young people's realities and ensuring that their needs and experiences are reflected in implementation.



- **Establishing Youth Work as a Core Pillar of the Strategy**

To ensure that the EU Youth Strategy delivers for young people, youth work must be recognised as a structural component of the Strategy.

This includes:

- a dedicated section or pillar on youth work
- a clear and shared understanding of its role
- its integration across all areas of the Strategy
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This approach reflects the direction set by the 4th European Youth Work Convention and ensures that youth work is not treated as an add-on, but as a key part of the system that supports young people.

- **Supporting Youth Work Systems and Youth Workers**

Supporting young people requires strong and sustainable youth work systems.

This includes:

- legal and institutional recognition of youth work
- quality assurance systems based on standards, ethical practice, monitoring and continuous improvement
- governance structures at the national, regional and local level
- sustainable and predictable funding
- cooperation with other policy areas

At the same time, youth workers must be recognised as key actors. Their role in supporting young people, facilitating participation, and connecting policy with practice is essential.

Investing in youth workers means strengthening their competences, working conditions, and professional recognition, as well as supporting youth worker associations.

Professional recognition must therefore include not only competences and qualifications, but also supervision, well-being support, fair employment conditions and measures that prevent burnout and support the retention of youth workers.

National associations of youth workers should be recognised as key infrastructure for sustainable youth work systems. They contribute to professional recognition, quality assurance, standards development, professional learning, policy dialogue and the connection between youth work practice and national and European policy processes, particularly in countries where youth work recognition is still developing or fragile

● **Strengthening Youth Organisations and Civic Space**

Youth organisations are essential for representing young people, facilitating participation, and connecting local realities with policymaking. In many contexts, civil society organisations are also the primary, or sometimes the only, spaces where youth work is delivered, particularly where public youth work structures remain weak or absent.

The next Strategy must ensure that youth organisations are:

- recognised as key stakeholders
- supported sustainably
- able to operate independently

Protecting civic space for youth organisations is essential for democracy and participation.

This is equally important in candidate and neighbouring countries connected to European youth policy and enlargement processes, where youth organisations may face limited institutional support, unstable funding or shrinking civic space. Protecting their independence and sustainability contributes directly to democratic development and meaningful youth participation across Europe.

● **Ensuring Inclusion and Equity through Local Approaches**

The Strategy must prioritise young people with fewer opportunities. Inclusion requires targeted and locally grounded approaches that can adapt to different realities. Particular attention should be paid to young people facing socio-economic, territorial, cultural or digital barriers to participation and access to opportunities.

Investment in local structures, including youth work, is essential to:

- reach marginalised young people and include actions for the support of youth work in rural areas
- build trust
- support long-term engagement

Inclusion must focus not only on access, but on ensuring that all young people can meaningfully participate and benefit from opportunities. Because youth work reaches young people primarily in their everyday communities, local and municipal responsibility must be strengthened. This includes investment in accessible youth spaces, local youth work budgets and long-term programme funding, rather than reliance only on short-term project-based support.

• **Aligning the European Youth Goals with Delivery Mechanisms**

The European Youth Goals reflect the priorities of young people. However, their impact depends on how they are implemented.

The next EU Youth Strategy must ensure that the Youth Goals are supported by concrete delivery mechanisms, including policies, funding and systems that enable their realisation.

Youth work should be recognised as a cross-cutting enabler contributing to the achievement of these goals.

• **Strengthening Member State Ownership and Commitment**

The effectiveness of the EU Youth Strategy depends on its implementation at the national level. The next Strategy should not only support implementation by Member States, but also encourage stronger ownership and political commitment towards shared European youth policy objectives.

This requires:

- clearer alignment between EU and national youth policies
- support for national implementation frameworks
- stronger monitoring and follow-up mechanisms
- increased political commitment at the national level

Alongside stronger Member State ownership, the Strategy should support meaningful alignment and participation of candidate and neighbouring countries within the broader European youth policy and youth work landscape.

Without such ownership, the Strategy risks remaining a reference framework rather than a driver of change in young people's lives.

GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPLEMENTATION

To ensure impact, the next EU Youth Strategy must strengthen governance, accountability and implementation mechanisms.

This includes:

- clear coordination between the EU, Member States and partner countries
- defined roles and responsibilities across all levels of governance
- monitoring, evidence collection and impact measurement based on real outcomes for young people
- structured follow-up mechanisms to ensure that progress in youth policy, youth work recognition and youth participation is visible and measurable across the wider European youth policy space
- stronger links between policy, programmes and practice

Participation mechanisms must be connected to decision-making processes, and their outcomes must be followed up on and implemented.

CONCLUSION: A STRATEGY THAT WORKS IN PRACTICE

The next EU Youth Strategy must be a Strategy that works in practice for young people.

This means ensuring that:

- young people are not only consulted, but supported to participate
- policies are not only designed, but accessible and relevant
- commitments are translated into real opportunities

Youth work does not replace policy. It turns policy into meaningful outcomes for young people.

→A Strategy that does not reach young people cannot succeed.

→A Strategy that reaches young people requires systems that support them.

The next EU Youth Strategy must ensure that these systems are in place.

Only then can it deliver on its promise: **a Europe, including the wider European youth work space, where all young people can participate, shape their lives and contribute to society.**