



UNLOCKING UNLIMITED FUTURES

A year in review - 2025/26
thekeyuk.org



www.thekeyuk.org

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THE KEY - A YEAR IN REVIEW

Empowering young people in the North East

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO, REBECCA MAW

Welcome to The Key's annual impact report for the financial year 2025/26

This year marked the beginning of a new chapter for The Key as we launched our ambitious three-year strategy, focused on supporting young people facing poverty and other barriers to realise their potential and create positive futures. At a time when too many young people continue to face significant challenges and unequal opportunities, our work remains firmly focused on helping them build confidence, develop skills, strengthen relationships and discover what is possible for their future.

Through KEY+, young people took the lead in designing and delivering projects rooted in the issues, interests and opportunities that mattered most to them. Whether improving their local communities, exploring what brings them joy or trying something completely new, young people demonstrated creativity and determination. Along the way, they developed the confidence to step outside their comfort zones, the resilience to overcome challenges and a stronger belief in their ability to achieve their goals.

This year also saw young people play an increasingly important role in shaping The Key itself. Through our Youth Advisory Board and programme development work, young people's voices helped influence decisions, improve quality and ensure our work remained relevant to their experiences and ambitions.

None of this would be possible without the commitment of our facilitators, partners, volunteers, funders and supporters. Together, we are creating more opportunities for young people to take the lead, discover their strengths and build brighter futures. Thank you for being part of that journey.



REBECCA MAW, CEO

A YEAR IN PHOTOS



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WHO WE ARE

The Key's vision is for a North East where all young people can unlock unlimited futures for themselves. We create opportunities for young people, particularly those growing up in poverty and facing barriers, to harness their own agency and forge positive pathways for themselves.

We help young people realise their potential by providing the support, resources and opportunities to try new things, develop essential skills and take control of their futures. Our support enables those facing additional barriers to discover what they are capable of, build pride in themselves and pursue futures that once felt out of reach.

We achieve this through our tried and tested model, the KEY+ Challenge.

THE KEY+ CHALLENGE

The KEY+ Challenge is built on the belief that young people thrive when they have genuine opportunities to make decisions, take responsibility and shape their own experiences.

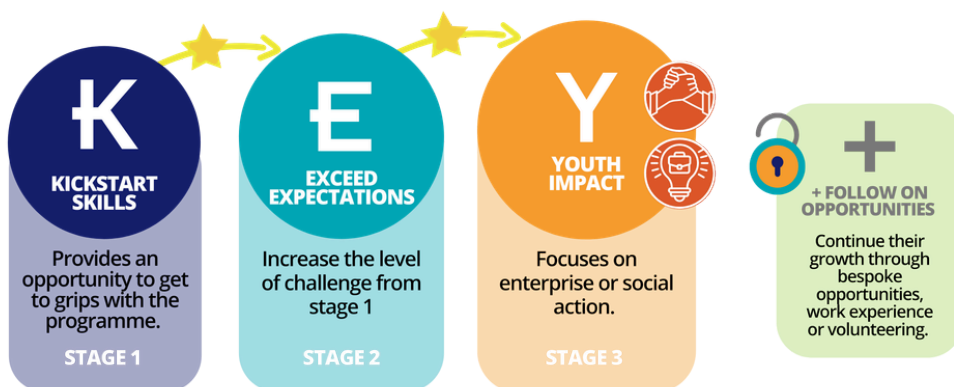
Our approach starts with what matters to young people. Every project is shaped by their own interests and ideas, ensuring the experience is meaningful, motivating and relevant to their lives. Young people work together in small groups to transform their ideas into reality, supported by trained KEY+ Facilitators who are trusted adults who believe in their potential and guide without taking over.

This hands-on approach creates meaningful opportunities for young people to make decisions, take on responsibility and overcome challenges. As they see their ideas become reality, they develop confidence, resilience and self-belief, while building the skills needed to navigate challenges and shape positive futures for themselves.

Together in small groups and supported by a KEY+ Facilitator, young people:

- **Think** of a project or activity
- **Plan** what is needed for that project, including a budget
- **Pitch** their project to a panel of volunteers
- **Do** their project if given the go ahead by the panel
- **Review** and reflect on their project, learning and development

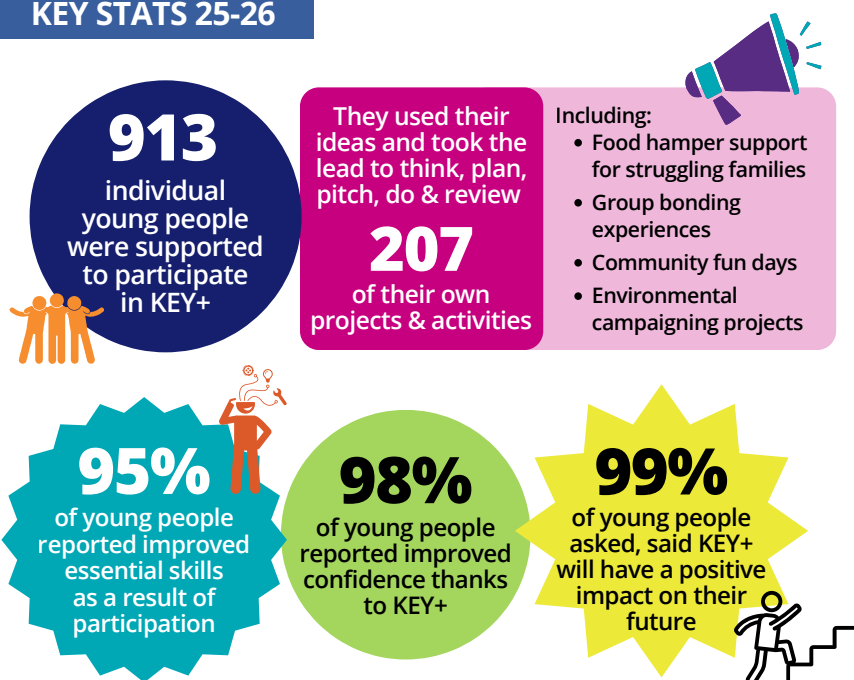
Young people can complete this process up to three times, with each stage introducing greater challenge, responsibility and opportunities for personal development. At Stage 3, young people must explore enterprise or take action on a social issue through their KEY+ project.



A 2025-26 SNAPSHOT

We empowered more young people to take on the KEY+ Challenge and unlock their potential this year. We built on solid foundation from the year prior, undertook some great learning and were proud to have delivered real impact for young people with our partners.

KEY STATS 25-26



KEY YOUNG PEOPLE QUOTES

"I feel I am more capable than I thought I could be and that I can make a difference in my life."
- Robin, KEY+ Completer

"KEY+ has helped me with my responsibilities. I can take more stress now and I have more energy and motivation to do work."
- Rhys, KEY+ Completer

"I don't do crime anymore, like in the most brutal answer, I haven't been arrested or nothing since I've been here, I've actually been keeping my head down and sorting my life out."
- Lucas, KEY+ completer

"Taking part helped me come out of my shell. Now I feel more confident and like my voice matters."
- Zara, KEY+ Completer

"[The KEY+ Challenge] has really helped me build my confidence which is something I used to struggle with."
- Chelsea, KEY+ completer

"It [KEY+] really helped me with communicating as before key I would be very non-talkative but now I have the confidence to talk about practically anything."
- Alexey, KEY+ completer

KEY STORIES

1. **The Other Direction** took part in Youth Action Unlocked to raise awareness of vaping and encourage healthier choices among their peers. Through peer-research with around 30 young people, they created an awareness video, developed resource packs for schools and youth clubs, and shared their findings at youth groups and an NHS health conference, demonstrating the power of youth voice. [Read about their project here.](#)

2. **Friends Together** purchased silent disco equipment to create fun, inclusive and accessible events for young people with additional needs in Sunderland. Through KEY+ they developed their confidence, communication and skills, with one member, Josh, sharing that the skills he gained helped him secure a job at a local café. [See what they did here.](#)

3. **The Duck Tilters** created 'Shed Not a Shed', a community bike repair space where people can access tools, get their bikes fixed and learn to repair them themselves, helping make cycling more accessible to local people. Through KEY+, the group developed their communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills with Lucas reflecting on how the experience helped him turn things around and make positive changes in his life. [Check it out here.](#)

4. **The Funky Phoenixes** introduced a recycling scheme at their school and expanded their impact through an eco-friendly competition encouraging local primary schools to take action on climate change. Through the KEY+ Challenge, they developed their confidence and skills, showing how young people can inspire lasting environmental change in their communities. [Read about it here.](#)

5. **Respect and Relate** created a domestic abuse handbook, conversation cards and a podcast to raise awareness of teenage relationship abuse and help young people recognise the signs of toxic relationships. Their resources have been shared across schools, youth clubs and workshops. [Read more about their project here.](#)



KEY MILESTONES

1. Launching our new strategy: In 2025/26, we launched our new three-year strategy, developed alongside young people, partners and stakeholders. The strategy sharpened our focus on supporting young people experiencing poverty and other barriers to build confidence, develop skills, strengthen relationships and create positive futures.

2. Strengthening youth voice and participation: Young people's voices played a bigger role than ever in shaping The Key. Our Youth Advisory Board became firmly embedded within the organisation, influencing programme development, organisational thinking and decision-making and ensuring lived experience remained at the heart of our work.

3. Growing youth-led action across the region: We continued to expand opportunities for young people to lead change through initiatives including Youth Action Unlocked and Unity in the Community. These programmes enabled young people to explore issues important to them, take positive action in their communities and strengthen their confidence, leadership skills and sense of agency. Unity in the Community was mobilised quickly in response to young people's concerns around rising tensions in communities.

4. Launching our new impact framework: Following an in-depth project with Trust Impact and consultation with young people and partners, we introduced a new impact framework to better understand and evidence the difference KEY+ makes. Alongside essential skills, it focuses on five key outcomes for young people: feeling able to shape their world, being confident to try new things, believing they can achieve when things feel hard, taking pride in themselves, and building supportive friendships.

5. Completing five years of organisational transformation: 2025/26 marked our successful transition from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Youth Strategic Investment Fund after five years of transformational support. This investment strengthened our sustainability, leadership and resilience, leaving The Key in a stronger position to deepen our impact for young people and deliver our new strategy with confidence.



KEY LEARNING

1. Young people value opportunities that reflect their interests: Across our programmes, we continued to see the strongest engagement when young people were able to explore issues, activities and ideas that genuinely mattered to them. This reinforced the importance of maintaining a flexible, youth-led approach that starts with young people's own interests, ambitions and lived experiences.

2. Meaningful youth voice strengthens decision-making: As our Youth Advisory Board became embedded within the organisation, we saw first-hand how young people's insights improved programme development, organisational thinking and strategic planning. This reinforced our belief that young people should help shape decisions, not simply be consulted on them.

3. Young people want opportunities to create change beyond themselves: Through initiatives such as Youth Action Unlocked and Unity in the Community, we learned that many young people are motivated not only by personal development but also by opportunities to influence the issues, services and communities around them. Providing spaces for young people to take action can strengthen both individual outcomes and community impact. The Key plays a unique role in this space and will continue to create these opportunities for young people in the region.

4. Learning from impact to strengthen quality: Through the development of our new impact framework, we gained a clearer understanding of the outcomes that matter most to young people and how change happens through KEY+. This work highlighted the importance of helping young people feel able to shape their world, be confident to try new things, believe they can achieve when challenges arise, take pride in themselves and build supportive friendships. These insights are now informing the development of our Quality Framework which will be launched by the end of the 26-27 financial year and will help us strengthen and embed the practices that create the greatest impact for young people.



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WHAT NEXT?

2026/27 marks the second year of our three-year strategy and an exciting opportunity to build on the progress made this year. Our ambition remains clear: to create opportunities for more young people, particularly those growing up in poverty and facing additional barriers, to harness their own agency and forge positive pathways for themselves.

REACH - Supporting young people who need us most

We will continue to expand access to KEY+ across the North East, ensuring more young people can benefit from meaningful opportunities to build confidence, develop skills and discover what they are capable of. In 2026-27, we will place particular focus on supporting young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Through our experience and evidence, we know these young people can benefit significantly from the opportunities, support and outcomes that KEY+ provides.

Quality - Creating the best experience for young people

Building on the learning from our new Impact Framework, we will develop and embed our new Quality Framework across all areas of delivery. This will help ensure every young person experiences high-quality, youth-led provision that reflects what we know makes the greatest difference to their confidence, relationships, self-belief and agency.

Impact - Delivering the best outcomes for young people

We will continue to strengthen how we understand, measure and maximise impact for young people. Alongside embedding our new Impact Framework, we will introduce Skills Builder across KEY+, helping young people to recognise, develop and articulate the essential skills they gain through their participation. This will further strengthen young people's ability to understand their own progress and support positive progression into education, employment and wider opportunities.

Young people at the heart

Young people's voices will continue to shape everything we do. Through initiatives including our Youth Advisory Board and Youth Action Unlocked, we will create more opportunities for young people to influence decisions, shape services and take action on the issues that matter most to them and their communities.

As we look ahead, we remain ambitious for the young people we work alongside. By increasing our reach with those who need us most, strengthening quality and deepening our impact, we will continue creating opportunities for young people to discover their strengths, believe in themselves and unlock futures that once felt beyond their reach.

Because when young people are trusted, supported and given the opportunity to lead, there is no limit to what they can achieve.

JOIN US

We are committed to expanding opportunities for young people - but we can't do it alone. We invite funders, commissioners, and partners to invest in this work, helping us create lasting change for young people across the North East of England. By working together, we can ensure that young people have the support, skills and opportunities they need to succeed. To find out more visit www.thekeyuk.org