

# Our West Midlands: Young Combined Authority Vision and Priorities for the Future

February 2021



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# Foreword



Aisha Masood  
Co-Chair of the YCA Board  
@aish\_masood

"Aisha is Co-Chair of the West Midlands Young Combined Authority and is passionate about diverse representation and inclusive leadership."

Welcome to 'Our West Midlands: Young Combined Authority Vision and Priorities for the Future.'

The West Midlands Young Combined Authority (WMYCA) brings together a diverse board of young people who all live, learn and work across the West Midlands. As a collective, we recognise the youth and diversity of our population as a huge source of potential, and want to ensure that these voices are represented in the region's leadership.

We are passionate to support causes we believe in and make a positive difference for the younger generations that we represent. We want to help guide the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) in building the future for the next generation and look to inspire future generations.

In light of coronavirus (Covid-19), this means engaging with regional decision makers to help shape the way that the West Midlands works to recover from the pandemic.

It is no secret that young people have been disproportionately disadvantaged by Covid-19 – whether that is by the direct impact of the lockdown on the hospitality sector, where high numbers of young people work, or how existing issues such as digital poverty have become more critical during the crisis. Many of these challenges will have long term impacts.

Covid-19 has also demonstrated the radical impact which public policy and political decisions can have on young people. The world around us continues to change rapidly and every choice can transform many aspects of our lives.

The pandemic has proved the necessity of hearing youth voice within decision making.

Decision makers in the West Midlands need to understand what matters to young people, focus on the issues that most affect us and actively seek to bring change. Equally, young people need to be assured that their civic leaders are willing to listen, incorporate our needs in their agendas and address our concerns.

This is why we have created this vision document: to outline our priorities for addressing the issues which affect young people living in the region and establish clear asks across key policy areas.

We have been frank about the changes we want to see happen. However, we have also been optimistic: hopeful that decision

makers will act on this document and enable young people to build a bright future for our region.

Our vision can only be realised by working with others. So we will work with regional leaders at the same time as holding those in power to account through a strong focus on scrutiny and advice. While we will continue to use our platform to express our views and challenge policy, we will also welcome collaboration and the opportunity to strengthen partnerships across the region. We can build our shared future together.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all YCA members and partners for their unwavering support and contribution in making this vision a reality.



# Introduction

## Who we are...

The Young Combined Authority is a diverse group of young people, aged 16 to 25, from across the West Midlands. We were established by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Board to:

- Provide direct insight and challenge from young people within regional policy
- Speak up for the third of West Midlands residents who are aged under 25 years
- Help inform decisions which will shape the future for our generation

## About this document...

We created this vision and priorities document to:

- Articulate our asks and aspirations for the future of the West Midlands
- Set out the priorities which we know are key to this region's young population
- Share our priorities, hopes and concerns with our region's leaders and decision makers

We have identified seven priority areas which we think are particularly important for helping the region and its younger population to bounce back from the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. These are:

- Culture and Major Events
- Skills
- Digital
- Environment
- Transport
- Housing and Regeneration
- Inclusive Communities and Wellbeing

For each priority, we have developed a vision statement and five 'asks' of and for the region.

Our vision, priorities and asks are aspirational. We have written them for our generation and the future of our region. We appreciate that some of our asks may go beyond the direct role and remit of the WMCA. So, we have tried to indicate where we think our ideas are...

 DELIVER	Asks that relate to activities which we think are within the WMCA's current role and remit to <b>deliver</b> .
 INFLUENCE	Policy areas and asks which we think may fall outside the WMCA's direct remit, but that the WMCA may help to promote and <b>influence</b> with and through its partners.
 INFORM	Ideas that we hope might <b>inform</b> future thinking and activity – such as considering what more the WMCA and its partners could do in the region, or new powers to request from national government in future devolution deals.





# Culture and Major Events

(1 of 7)



Eman Mowatt  
Co-Lead for Culture and Major Events

"Eman is a student who actively champions youth representation and is passionate about cultural diversity and inclusion. She co-wrote the YCA's letter on Black Lives Matter in July 2020."



Michael-Akolade Ayodeji  
Co-Lead for Culture and Major Events

"Michael is university student passionate about many things including art, poetry, mental health, opportunities for young people in his local Communities and making processes more accessible for people of different abilities. "

While the pandemic has challenged the West Midlands, there is reason to remain optimistic; we are on the brink of a cultural revolution. World class events such as Coventry City of Culture 2021 and Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022 present the opportunity to change perceptions about our region and make a mark nationally and globally. However, we must think about legacy and ensure that benefiting local people is not an afterthought, but our primary concern.

1

Involve young people throughout the development and delivery of cultural strategies and events – setting the expectation that all major cultural initiatives in the West Midlands will be significantly shaped by local young people.



2

Work in partnership to advance diversity across the cultural sector; using major events to celebrate our region's diverse communities, tracking the impact of Culture Central's 'More than a Moment' pledge and ensuring that sector support is accessible for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic artists.



3

Ensure that opportunities created by cultural programmes directly benefit people from disadvantaged groups. A key example will be ensuring that money is not a barrier to young people accessing volunteering opportunities created by Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022.



4

Develop creative solutions for enabling disadvantaged young people to access major events, including Coventry City of Culture 2021 and Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022, such as; a lottery of free tickets, subsidised travel to events, online activities and a 'Youth Games' programme for young people to participate in.



5

Follow Greater Manchester Combined Authority in appointing a Night Time Economy Czar, to advocate for and support the recovery of the hospitality sector, which employs a large number of young people and has been significantly affected by the pandemic.





# Skills (2 of 7)



Gina Patel  
Co-Lead for Digital and Skills  
@PatelGinaS

"Gina is a personal assistant at Health Education England and member of the Cultural Leadership Board. She is passionate about how skills development helps people overcome barriers and access opportunity."



Kari Lawler  
Co-Lead for Digital and Skills  
@karilawler

"Kari is a multi-award-winning entrepreneur and founder of Youth4AI, a digital skills programme which introduces young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to AI and data ethics."

Our young and diverse population will only achieve its full potential if public and private sector organisations across the West Midlands work together to invest in training, create job opportunities and remove barriers to young people realising their ambitions. Now more than ever, we must build up a skills offer to make our region more resilient and equipped to support future generations.

1

Explore the potential for a regional scheme to better support people with disabilities to get reasonable adjustments in the workplace. The scheme should be designed by and give power to people with disabilities, as experts in their own lives.



2

Work in partnership to consider skills-based interventions for young people in school, to prevent them from dropping out of education or becoming unemployed.



3

Encourage businesses to create and promote more high-quality apprenticeship opportunities so that more young people can go straight from school into a work or further education setting.



4

Strengthen the connections between young people and industry by encouraging businesses to develop their mentoring and work experience offers – investing early in attracting and supporting young people into work.



5

Be mindful that digital poverty has meant that many young people have lost access to youth services as they moved to online formats during the pandemic, and create a strategy to ensure young people will retain their access to skills support.





# Digital (3 of 7)



Kari Lawler  
Co-Lead for Digital and Skills  
@karilawler

"Kari is a multi-award-winning entrepreneur and founder of Youth4AI, a digital skills programme which introduces young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to AI and data ethics."



Gina Patel  
Co-Lead for Digital and Skills  
@PatelGinaS

"Gina is a personal assistant at Health Education England and member of the Cultural Leadership Board. She is passionate about how skills development helps people overcome barriers and access opportunity."

Digital underpins everything we do as a region. Covid-19 has highlighted our overwhelming reliance on technology and the inequalities experienced by those living in digital poverty, the so-called 'digital divide'. The region has a responsibility to tackle this disparity, support young people to gain access to careers within industry and ensure that we are using digital resources.

1

Develop a robust strategy to effectively address the digital divide highlighted by Covid-19, with a specific focus on young people to ensure equal access to education and development opportunities.



2

Extend the current digital skills strategy to include training in schools, to ensure that we are effectively building the workforce of the future by giving young people the right opportunities to obtain vital skills and access to careers in the digital industry.



3

Launch a regionwide public awareness campaign to ensure that people living in the West Midlands are more aware of digital based resources and more likely to increase basic digital skills.



4

Focus on developing industry partnerships and promoting investment in new and innovative technologies, to both build businesses in the region and effectively attract large companies with the view to providing more opportunities for young people.



5

Position inclusivity and accessibility at the forefront of any digital strategy, particularly when looking at digital based public service reform, to ensure that a transition to digital does not mean that those unable to access the internet are left unable to access support.





# Environment (4 of 7)



Lily Eaves  
Co-Lead for Environment  
@LilyMorganna

"Lily is an aspiring law student who is passionate about inclusivity. Lily also sits on the Beatfreeks' Youth Steering Committee and volunteers for Scope, a national charity for disability equality."



Ibrahim Sohail  
Co-Lead for Environment  
@ibrahimsohail

"Ibrahim is a champion for youth engagement. He is a member of Youth of Walsall, Deputy Member of Youth Parliament and young persons representative on the Walsall For All board."

Covid-19 has shown that we cannot wait to address the problems which we may face in the future. Young people will bear the brunt of the impact of climate change. The Young Combined Authority has recognised that it may be too late to prevent irrevocable damage to our environment, but swift action must be taken to mitigate these effects.

1

Work with urgency to deliver a transition to low carbon and carbon neutral transport: securing more charging points for electric vehicles, investing in public transport and encouraging citizens to use active transport where possible.



2

Educate young people in environmental awareness by developing resources, holding virtual workshops and information evenings, and launching campaigns to highlight sustainable choices.



3

Enable young people to lead the Green Industrial Revolution from our region by working with businesses, universities and other organisations to encourage and support young people to pursue green careers.



4

Campaign and take action to tackle climate change: the YCA Board will make our own 'Count Us In' pledge, focused on walking and cycling more, and will challenge the WMCA and its partners to invest in active travel.



5

Improve the access to and quality of green spaces in low-income areas, to improve mental health for our communities and biodiversity for our places.





# Transport (5 of 7)



Kashmire Hawker  
Co-Lead for Transport  
@Kashmiredshawker

"Kashmire works as an Admin at Birmingham 2022's Culture Team and has major interests in Youth and Disability Advocacy, along with fighting for greater accessibility in society."



Asad Kalang  
Co-Lead for Transport  
@AsadKalang

"Active in youth voice, Asad is part of Friends of Bescot Station (Chair), Youth of Walsall (Vice Chair), Youth Parliament (Deputy Member) and Transport for West Midlands Youth Forum (Member)."

In the wake of Covid-19, there must be renewed attention on how we as a region can make transport work for people. Transport networks form the basis of our society; creating access and connections between people, places and opportunities. It is therefore vital that any regional recovery plan builds a resilient network, that is sustainable and tailored to our future communities.

1

Ensure that all current concession schemes for Young, Disabled and Elderly residents of the West Midlands are maintained in the immediate future – and extend these schemes when finances allow.



2

Further engage young people in the development of transport policy - through greater participation, transparency, scrutiny and accountability on transport decisions, and formal channels such as the YCA and TfWM Youth Forum.



3

Further develop the SWIFT Card offer, to extend across all operators and support greater integration of contactless payment for passengers who may opt to use this technology.



4

Work with travel operators to deliver the rollout of free and fast WiFi on all buses, trains and Metro across the region to enable greater access to travel.



5

Champion greater community involvement and accessibility across the transport network, through funding streams and projects agreed within operator contracts (particularly on Timetables and station improvement) and embracing schemes such as Changing Places Toilets at stations, toilets on trains and the Sunflower Lanyard for those with disabilities.





# Housing and Regeneration (6 of 7)



Ayan Aden  
Co-Lead for Housing and Regeneration  
@ayanmoaden

"Passionate about inclusive growth, Ayan studies Economics and Politics at university, works with grassroot organisations on community development and has presented at firms, conferences and TEDx Talks on youth empowerment."



Avtar Purewal  
Co-Lead for Housing and Regeneration

"Avtar is an IT student who is always looking for ways to help the local community. He has been a member of Chance Heritage Trust's Young Advisory Board and Uprising's Environmental Leadership Programme."



Grace Lynskey  
Co-Lead for Housing and Regeneration  
@grace\_andgrief

"Grace is an inspirational speaker on resilience and founder of 'The Comeback Club', a podcast which celebrates people overcoming setbacks. She is as a Homelessness Prevention Officer at St Basils."

Our places are what make our people. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our town and cities; we must rebuild and rebuild back better. For so long, our places have not worked for the young and the most vulnerable in our society. It is our duty to take this opportunity presented by Covid-19 to deliver change - we must strive to build better.

1

Take further action to support and enable an increase in the proportion of affordable housing in the West Midlands, so that young people can get on the housing ladder and benefit from the 215,000 homes due to be built in the region by 2031.



2

Ensure that rough sleeping levels do not return to those experienced before Covid-19 and take action to prevent people from falling into homelessness as a result of the economic impacts of the pandemic.



3

Work in partnership to pursue eco-friendly development, that extends beyond carbon-neutral construction to actively allocating land to create the green spaces which are central for promoting mental health, social cohesion and community ownership of place.



4

Collaborate with partners to ensure that construction training courses are tailored for and targeted at young people, to provide employment opportunities in the immediate future.



5

Support and enable the repurposing of more brownfield land and under-utilised retail space to community hubs and low rent space for entrepreneurs, to provide young people with ample opportunities at the same time as rejuvenating our town and city centres.





# Inclusive Communities and Wellbeing (7 of 7)



Olivia Agbe  
Co-Lead for Inclusive Communities and Wellbeing  
@agbeolivia

"Olivia is a student, public speaker and youth empowerment advocate. She co-wrote the YCA's Black Lives Matter letter and has hosted a Beatfrees panel on Black women in the media."



Daniel Ndaty  
Co-Lead for Inclusive Communities and Wellbeing  
@\_danielndaty

"Daniel is empowered by his experiences of life as a young, black man in Birmingham, leading him to want to make a change, and make sure that today's politics leaves nobody behind."



Georgia Wiggin  
Co-Lead for Inclusive Communities and Wellbeing  
@WigginGeorgia

"Georgia is a Law student at the University of Hull. She has participated in both Stonewall's and Campaign Bootcamp's programmes. She is passionate about racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights and feminism."

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted and deepened existing inequalities within the West Midlands. Supporting inclusive communities and wellbeing is essential for achieving a fair and effective recovery from the crisis. By tackling disadvantage, decision makers will begin to address historic injustice and also enable more of our citizens to contribute to recovery efforts.

1

Recognise the unequal and disruptive impact of the lockdown on education, and ensure that young people get the support they need to overcome this additional disadvantage and realise their long-term goals.



2

Work in partnership to support and resource the community organisations who deliver essential help to the most vulnerable people in our region.



3

Acknowledge that the pandemic has caused significant trauma for many communities in the West Midlands - connecting to Black Lives Matter, disrupting worship and increasing vulnerability – and ensure those affected are given the Mental Health support they need to recover.



4

Work in partnership to deliver a Youth Games programme to run alongside the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, so that young people across the region feel included and inspired by the Commonwealth Games.

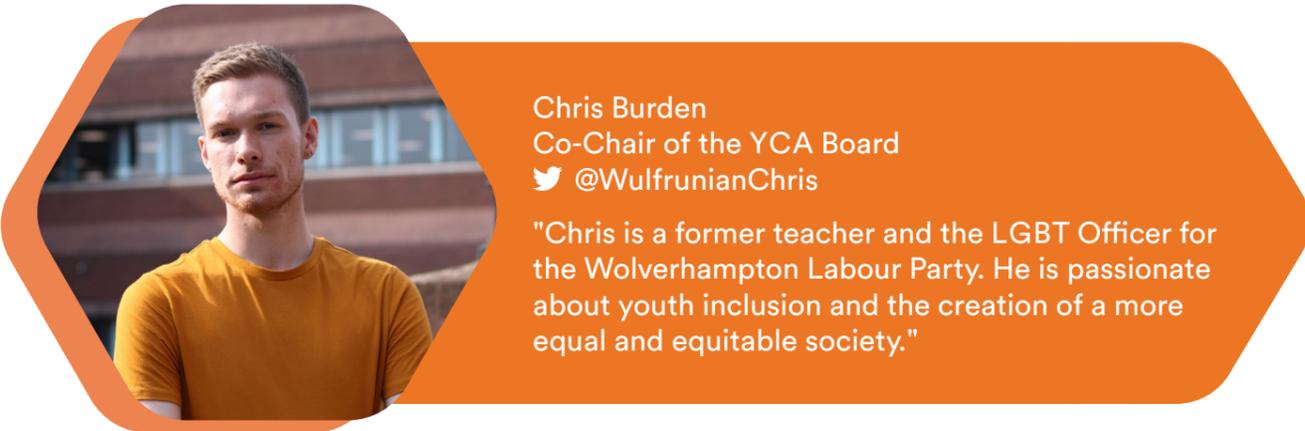


5

Take action to ensure that our region's leadership is representative of the communities they serve and ensure that policy development is truly inclusive of all people in the West Midlands, spanning all forms of identity and lived experience.



# Afterword



Chris Burden  
Co-Chair of the YCA Board  
@WulfrunianChris

"Chris is a former teacher and the LGBT Officer for the Wolverhampton Labour Party. He is passionate about youth inclusion and the creation of a more equal and equitable society."

First of all, may I extend the thanks of the Young Combined Authority to you for taking your time to read our vision.

This is a vision that we as young people share, and we hope that you too share the same ambition for our region, our places, and our people.

This document is a first of its kind in the West Midlands. To our understanding, this is the first time that young people have come together to produce a vision for our region in which we call on our leaders to be ambitious in delivering not only growth but a more radical change that reflects the urgency of our situations.

We recognise that our vision is ambitious. We recognise that it is wide in scope. We recognise that it may well seem impossible.

But every single great leap forward in history was called impossible. It was impossible, until it was done.

We strongly believe that in the future, everything which we have outlined will have been done. But we, as young people and citizens of the West Midlands, deserve them to be done now. With each passing day of inaction, there is less of a future left to fight for.

Covid-19 will have changed the face of our world forever, and the West Midlands has not been immune to the sweeping changes which it has brought. However, Out of Darkness Cometh Light, and we must move Forward in Unity. We are provided with a once in a lifetime opportunity to address the structural inequalities in our society. We can rethink our entire economy, and rebuild a better West Midlands.

But when we do that, we must do it together. This time, the world must work for everyone, not just a selected few.

The people who created this document were the disempowered. Many of our members are not even old enough to vote. Many more have not yet had the opportunity to cast the vote to which they are entitled. We as young people do not have the ability to implement any of these recommendations by ourselves.

So, we rely on you, the reader, to do us a favour. Please help us to spread the word about this document. Send this to anyone who you believe might care about the needs of young people. Send it to politicians, civic leaders, and company CEOs. Send it to everyone who needs to see it.

Please, help us to help make the West Midlands a better place.

Thank you.

# Acknowledgments

Thank you to those involved in the YCA's '2020 Youth Manifesto' project (January – March 2020, funded by Aston University's Strategic Priorities Fund) which inspired and laid the foundations for this vision document:

Dr Daniel Fitzpatrick, Aston University

Sophia Griffin, Amerah Saleh, Loreal Stokes and Chloe Deakin, Beatfreaks

West Midlands Combined Authority

YCA members of September 2019/20: Aisha Masood, Aleksandar Damjanovic, Alexandra Haigh, Asad Kalang, Avtar Purewal, Ayan Aden, Christopher Burden, Daniel Ndaty, Dion Fanthom, Eman Mowatt, Emerson Hanslip, Georgia Wiggan, Gina Patel, Grace Lynskey, Ibrahim Mohammed Ilyas, Ibrahim Sohail, James Tilsley, Kari Lawler, Kashmire Hawker, Lele Tankam, Lily Eaves, Michael-Akolade Ayodeji, Mohammed Lukeman, Olivia Agbe, Tyler Smith, Yasmine Bywater.



# Get Involved

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Our region has one of the youngest and most diverse populations in the country, and this is something to be proud of. We want to make sure that these voices – your voices – are heard by people making decisions today which will shape the future of the West Midlands.

If you are aged 16 to 25 years and live in the West Midlands, then you can get involved by joining the YCA Community, which offers an easy and flexible way to have your say on key issues for the region. Find out more at [wmca.org.uk/ya-about](https://wmca.org.uk/ya-about) or apply at [wmca.org.uk/yca-apply](https://wmca.org.uk/yca-apply).

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