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**YHA's response in the first year of the pandemic, a people's perspective**



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# Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has been devastating for our communities, beneficiaries, supporters and people. It has also deeply affected the charity's ability to generate income and deliver impact.

This document covers the period March 2020 to February 2021. It tells the story of the first year of the pandemic from the perspectives of those responsible for YHA's recovery and reopening.

This was YHA's 90th year. Thanks to the pandemic, it panned out quite differently to the one we had planned. Yet YHA has a proud history of overcoming adversity. And we learn from our past. In April we launched our new 10-year strategy for connecting people and places. A strategy built on the lessons of the past with ambitious plans for the future. As you will see from this piece – the impact priorities of our strategy have become even more pressing as a consequence of the crisis.

It is important to us to keep comprehensive records of YHA's pandemic response – documenting as we go to avoid hindsight bias. The accounts presented here were collected over the year and tell the human story. They have been produced alongside an archive project that's recording all the key decisions and important milestones for posterity, so that others can look back and see what we did, when and why.

**COVID stories is a testament to the huge effort, energy, dedication and passion of our people, supporters and partners. We hope you will find it an enlightening read.**

**“We were clear early on that our strategy is right, and that there’s nothing about the pandemic that changes the overall strategy. It was about what we wanted to see in 10 years’ time. And the impact that we would have on society and people. COVID-19 has made those priorities even more relevant.”**

James Blake  
Chief Executive







# The view from the top

**“Thank goodness we entered this pandemic with our finances in the best shape possible, with a clear strategy for the future.”**



James Blake  
Chief Executive

## Strong foundations and a strategy to guide us

Developed in 2019, a new 10-year strategy called *Adventure. For the first time and a lifetime.* set the direction of travel for YHA in the run up to its centenary. It launched in April 2020, a month into the pandemic, with a conviction that its vision, mission and aims would only prove more urgent in the wake of crisis.

**“We’ve been really clear that that goal remains the same, the nature of how we are going to get there and when we’re going to get there is going to change probably more radically than we realised. What we’re fundamentally doing is trying to achieve our charitable objective, mission and impact. Wherever possible we should seek to have that impact in whatever disrupted way is possible.”**

James Blake



# How fast things change

“I remember one particular March day in the Matlock office, about 5 o’clock in the afternoon, Boris Johnson made an announcement about shutting restaurants down immediately. I remember it for two reasons. One was Jake [Chalmers, property director] and I were planning to go out to grab something to eat and suddenly we were unsure it would still be possible. The other was I’d spent the afternoon writing a staff message and I had to basically rip it up and start again.”

James Blake

“In March, we realised that we were going to have to make a set of quick decisions about what could or couldn’t stay open. The plan was to understand the matter at hand, work out the internal and external communication needed, and move on to the next thing as quickly as possible.”

James Blake

# Strong governance

“We’ve got a really strong Board and a set of people who are highly skilled and with a very diverse range of experiences. People in fundraising, in charity, in commerce, in law, we’ve got a good range of perspectives. Our governance is strong, and we have robust, appropriately challenging relationships between the Board and executive.”

James Blake



Margaret Hart  
Chair

“What distinguishes the YHA Board from other committees and boards I’ve worked on, is the level of trust between us and the executive team. We consistently work well together as a group.”

Margaret Hart

An emergency committee was set up to ensure decisions could be made quickly. Membership included Margaret Hart and the chair of each of the Board’s sub-committees including the vice chair and treasurer.

“The committee was able to convene at short notice and make decision on behalf of the Board in line with a tight set of terms of reference. We had to be very careful, in enabling a smaller group of people to make decisions that needed to be made quickly, we didn’t disempower other members of the Board.”

James Blake

# Key decisions informed by our core values

“Due to speed, some decisions had to be directive. These included closing dormitories and our policy from the start to give ‘no quibble’ refunds to all customers. I often thought back about this. Many competitors made a different decision. We took the view to refund based partly on our values. We are a charity. We have to do right by our supporters and be responsible during this period. I am convinced it was right, but it was a multi-million-pound decision.”

James Blake

“We know that whatever decisions we make must ensure our financial sustainability and make our organisation better placed to deliver on our charitable objective.”

Margaret Hart

“We’re trying to walk a tightrope in the absence of the information that we need to make good decisions. We have a great executive team, we have great people on the Board and we make the best decisions we can. It’s much too early to evaluate whether we’ve got the decisions right. Whether our general approach has been right or not. I don’t think we’ll know for a couple of years.”

Margaret Hart



# The view from the strategist

**“Leadership isn’t waiting until you have run out of options and picking what you are left with. It is making the best decisions when you have the most options available to you.”**



Anita Kerwin-Nye  
Director of Strategy and Engagement

“We chose to keep a focus on access from the start.

The immediate reaction to something like COVID-19 is often to concentrate on the crisis response and say that anything at all goes. Organisations only focus on one thing – with COVID-19 that’s saving lives – and during the crisis phase everybody says, ‘we can’t improve access now.’

So, people say we couldn’t look at access during the crisis phase. Then they say we couldn’t do it during the recovery phase because we have to focus on money and infrastructure and systems. And access becomes too difficult and too fluffy.

Then you find you’ve built the structures that replicate inequity.”

“If access was the first thing you cut in a crisis, you were never about access to begin with.”

## It begins

“In early February [2020], I flagged COVID-19 and its possible impact on the charity as a concern. International news was suggesting it might be an issue. And in China and Italy, it was already a big deal.”

“There was a false sense of complacency that Britain was better. That it wouldn’t happen here, or perhaps last no more than a few months. I’ve got a history in the Red Cross and then emergency planning. [I realised] it probably would.”

Anita begins to set up fundraising plans and raises the issue of how YHA might reposition itself – how staycations might become more important.

“In a crisis, people often want to think about everything all at once. That’s unworkable.”

Delegation is crucial in a time of crisis. A group of associate directors was empowered to organise the Reboot stage.

Planning was broken down into stages:

- ✓ Closure
- ✓ Repurposing
- ✓ Reboot
- ✓ Renew

“In 2019 we had developed a team of six staff into associate directors. A new role to support the executive team. The first day of them being in that role was 1st March 2020.

One of the things I did push for and I’m both proud and pleased about was to immediately give them the Reboot project to reopen our hostels and let them figure it out. They bonded as a group quickly. It meant that the executive could push responsibility down and focus on the bigger issues and wider horizon.

There were teething problems. What could that associate director group actually agree? What did they need to agree? But in terms of accelerating an organisation change that needed to happen anyway, it’s worked remarkably. And they made exceptionally good proposals and supported YHA’s decision making as part of the leadership team.”

A guiding principle was to make decisions quickly and decisively, based on available evidence, then acting or moving on so that organisational energy can be conserved as much as possible.

For example, the early decision to reopen at the end of July provided “certainty for our guests, certainty for our staff, certainty for us in terms of planning.”



# The pandemic hits

The lockdown in March 2020 meant the entire network of 153 hostels had to close for recreational use. This was the first complete closure in YHA's history.

Within a week, 92% of hostel teams and the majority of national office staff were furloughed. Caretaker hostel managers were selected to look after small groups of hostels – overseeing the security and maintenance of these closed buildings. From national office, the recovery team formed – a skeleton staff of people needed to support the organisation through the shutdown and plan for reopening.

While most competitors planned for a May reopening, YHA's network would stay closed until the end of July.

YHA's decision-makers, having reviewed the evidence, resolved that an earlier reopening was unlikely. Reopening in July was realistic. The decision to publicise this fixed date gave certainty to our staff and customers.

With news of the lockdown, national office was rapidly closed down and teams switched to home working. For the central sales team – logistically – this posed a significant challenge to get set up. A challenge that they rose to by pulling together.

All 153 hostels close on

## 23rd March

## 47 hostels

repurposed to accommodate key workers and vulnerable people

## Over

## 200,000

## young people

missed out on a residential as a result of YHA's closure between March and July



**“As a team who were 100% office based, this was a hugely disruptive and worrying time for us all. Only a handful of our team of 50 had access to a work laptop and mobile phone. We weren't set up to work outside the office and the vast majority of the team had never worked from home before.**

**In the couple of weeks leading up to lockdown, I worked with our IT team to quickly get the team set up. When the time came to leave the office, for what we thought would be a couple of weeks, we switched off incoming calls and added emergency messaging. We didn't have a system where calls could be delivered remotely, so for the next few months we channelled our customers to contact us by webchat or email.**

**Colleagues and customers were adapting to the unknown – with the situation changing on a daily basis. The demand on the team was huge. Within days we received thousands of refund requests. In the space of a couple of weeks we had had more cancellations and refunds to process than we usual get in an entire year. All team members pulled together, taking on additional tasks to ensure we continued to provide a great service to our customers.**

**By mid-April, 90% of the team were on furlough. The few team members on the recovery team worked hard to service all our incoming queries and contact guests affected by the closure – contacting existing bookers as soon as possible to arrange a transfer or cancellation.**

**As a consequence of the pandemic, we have switched from selling to cancelling, from working to targets to meeting deadlines, from working in the office to working at home. What hasn't changed is our focus on our customers, our can-do approach and our great team spirit. We are all committed to ensuring YHA has a positive future. I am extremely proud.”**

Gemma Slater  
Head of Central Sales



# The hostel manager experience of lockdown one

Hostel staff thrive on interaction with people, the job satisfaction that comes with facilitating amazing adventures and accommodating guests in buildings bursting with life. So, with hostels shut, staff furloughed, travel restricted and the 'new normal' feeling anything but, how did hostel managers adapt to working life in lockdown?

## How did hostel managers find it?

"I'm very much a hospitality born and bred kind of girl and loved being around people. So, it's been challenging in itself that I've turned into a handyman/gardener."

Steph Henson, YHA New Forest

"The lack of social interaction with staff, customers and even my operations manager was strange and took some getting used to. Having an empty hostel during the heart of the season was saddening when you thought about it."

Stuart Chaplin, YHA Ilam Hall

"Very different from the day-to-day running of a busy groups hostel - without the excited buzz of children playing, laughing and chasing about. Now all I can hear are the birds singing and the lambs bleating, the floorboards squeaking and doors creaking."

Laura Wood, YHA Malham

## How was interaction with locals during closure?

"The locals have been great. You could feel the sense of community spirit even in a small place [like ours]. People knew you worked at the hostel and waved from their gardens. It was a good time to feel a part of a community we have quite often felt on the edge of."

Stuart Chaplin, YHA Ilam Hall

"There has been a lot of interest from our neighbours and regulars I've met out and about as to when we will be reopening. The feeling that we were genuinely missed came across. At some points during closure the local residents were congregating on our outside benches to share a drink of an evening."

Penny Ellis, YHA Ironbridge Coalport

"As soon as we went into lockdown a WhatsApp community response group of over 70 people was created. This was set up to help support local residents who were shielding/self-isolating with shopping (as delivery slots were non-existent at the time), prescription collection, meals on wheels and general help and support. The community got together and decorated houses with Union Jacks for VE Day and had socially distanced get togethers. I made VE Day cupcakes and left them in the porch of the hostel for locals to help themselves. New friendships were made and the bond in the community has strengthened 100-fold."

Laura Wood, YHA Malham



# Were there any unexpected positive outcomes to time in lockdown?

**“I enjoyed my journeys over to YHA Grinton Lodge during the initial lockdown, driving through the heart of the Yorkshire Dales with no traffic at all, maybe the odd tractor or police car, the sun shining, and the lambs skipping. Nature was very much alive in contrast to the world that was in hiding.”**

Laura Wood, YHA Malham

**“Being around the hostel and in the surrounding area for daily exercise was a pleasure and it was rare to experience solitude in what is usually a busy honeypot site.”**

Stuart Chaplin, YHA Ilam Hall



# Sensitivity to local concerns

On 13th May, the Government allowed garden centres to reopen and granted unlimited exercise outdoors. Under the latest guidance, people had to keep two metres away from one another and were encouraged to wear face coverings in enclosed spaces.

With the relaxation of restrictions, many beauty spots were overwhelmed. With short notice from the Government, few measures had been put in place by most National Park authorities and many of their staff had been furloughed. Contractors who cleaned public toilets had to be reinstated quickly and others replaced because they had ceased trading as a consequence of COVID-19. With the public flocking to outdoor spaces, local communities were alarmed and upset.

Hostels and hospitality venues remained closed, but our hostel managers witnessed the difficulties locally.

**“Like a lot of other beauty spots around the country, the flood gates opened and masses of people descended upon the village. I can only describe what followed as carnage. BBQs, rubbish, serious parking issues so much so that Mountain Rescue and ambulances could not get to a number of incidents. People were using the open countryside as a public toilet. The local residents were upset and understandably some were frightened.”**

Laura Wood, YHA Malham

For decision-makers at YHA, working in partnership with National Parks colleagues, it was imperative that, when we moved to reopen safely, we did so with the support of local communities.

**“We had to make sure that we weren’t going to suddenly find ourselves in a really difficult position where we were doing something that frustrated and angered our partners and the communities we’re located in.”**

Jon Smith  
Associate Director of User Experience



# Taking care of our communities

One of the defining characteristics of the early pandemic response was the outpouring of neighbourliness, generosity of spirit and acts of kindness – the sense of community cohesion.

Hostels helped out locally where they could. For example, some hostels distributed food to the elderly members of their villages. Others donated supplies to food banks. Nationally, YHA looked at ways it could help.

With our green bed linen having been removed from hostels for spring replacement, when the first lockdown came into force in March, services ground to a halt which meant this load of linen languished in the laundry. At the time, the PPE shortage was making the headlines. In response, YHA donated the stock and – through a joint initiative by Clean Linen services, HMP Guys Marsh Prison and St Joseph’s School, Salisbury – helped turn the bed linen into scrubs, face masks and wash bags.

In January 2021, with the return of lockdown restrictions and another temporary network closure, hostels were left with food stock they could not use. In partnership with our supplier, Creed Foodservice, YHA donated £11,000 worth of food to FareShare East Midlands. The charity then redistributed the food to other charities to turn it into meals. FareShare East Midlands provides a lifeline for more than 10,000 people in the community.

**“When Creed approached us and asked whether we would be happy to donate the excess food we didn’t have to think twice. Not only does the food not get wasted but, indirectly YHA is able to help young people and their families who are suffering financial hardship during this challenging time. The donation was absolutely in line with our mission as a charity and we are delighted to be able to do this.”**

John McGrath  
Head of Franchising and Procurement

# PROJECT 90

## Christmas 2019

In the run up to our 90th birthday, YHA launched an anniversary appeal to fund life-enriching adventures for 900 young carers and children with challenging lives.

## Spring 2020

YHA extended the appeal to support respite breaks for NHS staff, key workers and low-income families affected by the pandemic.

## February 2021

The appeal total stands at £380,000. Our target is £500,000.



So far 50 families have taken breaks, using the time to rest, recuperate and spend quality time together in inspiring surroundings. A further 500 families will receive breaks when we are open again.

The pandemic and lockdowns have brought into focus what it means to lack access to the outdoors, nature, green space, culture and heritage. For most of us this is temporary. For children and families with challenging lives, lack of access is pervasive and much more permanent.

Together we can provide positive childhood experiences, life-changing adventures and respite breaks for those who need them most.

[yha.org.uk/give/project90](https://yha.org.uk/give/project90)









# Repurposing our places and spaces

The entire hostel network closed for recreational use on 23rd March. A specialist reservations task force was set up in the week prior, to find ways to repurpose our hostels and answer how we could assist the national effort to support key workers, NHS staff and vulnerable people.

With recreational stays prohibited, over the year, repurposing offered YHA an opportunity to make an impact. Though recreational income is significantly higher in a normal year, repurposing offered the charity a valuable source of income, contributing over £3m.

Across the organisation, we considered where the network could best support the needs of communities. Early on, we identified homeless people and women experiencing domestic abuse as people we could offer real support.

Manchester council was our first repurposing partner. YHA then went on to work with local authorities across England and Wales.

**“The week before we closed down, Jon Hurring [from specialist reservations] flagged an interesting enquiry from a partner supporting the homeless. At the same time Anita [Kerwin-Nye] was picking up vibes from Government that they might need support with getting homeless people into safe accommodation during lockdown. Suddenly, we accelerated into place.”**

Jerry Robinson  
Chief Operating Officer

**“We’ve proven that we are quite creative, in terms of some of the projects that we’ve got involved in. We didn’t sit and wait and say, ‘Oh, we’re just going to shut the doors and wait until when we can reopen.’ I think people have really opened their minds to see what we can do in the meantime. We’re being realistic, we’re not going to be able to go back to normal straight away, but we still want to deliver on our strategy.”**

Steph Kynnersley  
Head of Programmes and Partnerships





“Repurposing has been really rewarding. We have helped [in the national pandemic response] in terms of helping key workers and vulnerable groups. It has also provided YHA with some income and longer-term partnerships as well. I had lots of groups asking if we could accommodate them in the autumn and the winter.”

Mike Sabin  
Group Sales Manager

We looked into other sections of society we could assist. These included women at risk of domestic violence and key workers.

**47**

hostels were repurposed

**650**

vulnerable people supported

**c.47,000**

overnights

## In depth case study

We worked with a domestic violence charity to provide crisis accommodation. The charity, which will remain anonymous for safety, run a variety of services for people – mainly women and their children – who are fleeing domestic violence.

COVID-19 impacted their staff, operations and service users meaning they had to re-provision what they did.

“As soon as the lockdown was announced, we started talking about the impact it was going to have on women experiencing abuse at this time. We were really worried because of the original ‘stay at home’ message from the Government. Other partners like local authorities and housing departments were stopping their business as usual. We knew that our refuges were going to get clogged up because there wouldn’t be the usual movement through. We started reaching out to different providers to see what might be available.”

Representative from the domestic violence charity



Funding became available from the local authority and negotiations with YHA began.

Reasons why YHA was better suited than hotels:



The building would be managed



YHA was offering food as part of the package, when a lot of hotels had shut their kitchens



Hostels were better suited to longer term family living because they had access to a laundry and self-catering kitchen



The hostel offered lots of space inside and out

This was new territory and a steep learning curve for both charities. Through collaboration, problem-solving and working through challenges, we delivered a successful project and vital service.

**In partnership with the domestic violence charity, YHA housed 70 families.**

**“The project has filled a massive gap [for] 70 families that would otherwise either be in an abusive situation or they’d have had to flee and potentially live on the streets. If they hadn’t been in that building, they could be dead or in a really awful, ongoing situation where they’re trapped at home with a very abusive person. That’s why it’s so important. There isn’t an alternative for a lot of these women, there aren’t spaces for them”**

Representative from the domestic violence charity

**“I am really grateful for the work [and] the commitment from YHA. I do think, for all the challenges, there’s been a very proactive desire to resolve the issues and to work together on that front. A lot of your staff have been brilliant and really bent over backwards to try and genuinely make things better for the women in that unit and to make things work.”**

Representative from the domestic violence charity

**“A lot of feedback from the women is really positive. They’re happy and they appreciate the space, the meals, the input, the support, the children can run around. The freedom aspect is really important for us because that’s exactly what they didn’t have.”**

Representative from the domestic violence charity

## What it meant to staff at YHA

**“The partnership was really exciting. That’s when I became really excited about work again after lockdown. We were addressing a real need. And drawing on staff skills in a new way to make a difference. We learned a lot which will help our future work with families who need us.**

Steph Kynnersley  
Head of Programmes and Partnerships







# Getting YHA back to doing what it does best

**“Reboot is, saying at its simplest form, how do we go from a closed network to reopen accommodation and activities, and having an impact again, in the safest possible way in the new climate.”**

Jon Smith  
Associate Director of User Experience

Reboot, the road to reopening, would be managed by YHA's newly formed group of associate directors (ADs).

Considering all sources of information, the AD group set about creating a series of broad statements that could be agreed upon or challenged by the executive. Examples included things like supposing YHA Exclusive Hire might be the safest product to open and that dorm rooms might be the last accommodation to come back.

In the early planning phase, the group used educated guesses on what the Government may or may not allow – based on what had happened in countries impacted by COVID-19 before Britain.

**“All credit to the staff who are working so hard, at every level, from staff in the network, to staff at national office, to get us through. The external goalposts change all this day by day.”**

Margaret Hart  
Chair

A framework for decision-making was developed along with a matrix of YHA accommodation options that we could safely open given various criteria that the Government might impose.

Once decisions were made, they would be communicated to supporters – sometimes even before Government guidance had been finalised.

# The green light for hospitality

The Government indicated the hospitality sector was expected to reopen from 4th July. As a charity with a duty of care to our supporters, beneficiaries, staff and partners, the situation compelled YHA to progress with caution and careful consideration – guarding against financial and reputational loss.

In order to reopen, the executive set rigorous criteria. So long as the Government maintained that hostels could reopen, they would but only if:



we were confident we could reopen safely



the public and our partners in the communities we are located were supportive



we could do so viably in a way that safeguards the charity for the future.

**“We have a hugely diverse network of hostels, a property portfolio that spans across England and Wales and the centuries. A great concern throughout this year – particularly as hostels stood closed for significant periods of time – has been ensuring we maintain our unique properties, keeping them in good repair. From the start of lockdown, every hostel has been visited and checked every week, twice a week.”**

**As we approached a phased reopening of the network, we were thorough in our commitment to understanding the guidance and implementing best practice. We kicked in early in our response to the pandemic, which put us ahead of the curve when it came to reopening safely and in a COVID-secure way. This gave our customers confidence. It is a testament to the talent and commitment of our property and operational teams and I thank all for their effort.”**

Jake Chalmers  
Property Director

On 17th July, we began a phased reopening of selected properties.

To meet the requirement for social distancing, we were unable to open dorm rooms or social spaces such as self-catering kitchens – unique and fundamental features of the hostelling experience.

## 34 hostels

reopened for recreational use

The rest remained closed or were repurposed to support vulnerable people and accommodate key workers.

# First impressions

“Thank you, @YHAOfficial @YHAWhitby, for an amazing weekend away with friends. Private rooms, everything spotlessly clean, hand sanitisers everywhere, and you even arranged the glorious sunny weather! We’ll definitely be back!”

Helen

“Loving my first stay in a very cool land pod at @YHAHartington. Snug beds, ultra clean loos and the normal lovely warm welcome @YHAOfficial”

Fiona

“Not quite hostelling as we know it, but lovely to be @YHAManorbier @YHAOfficial. The takeaway lasagne and orange sponge were delicious 🍷 #SocialDistancing”

Katherine

“Had a fantastic overnight stay at Ilam Hall Youth Hostel on the beautiful #Staffordshire/#Derbyshire border near #Dovedale.

Always great locations and friendly staff, often historic buildings, incredibly clean & with appropriate Covid measures in place @YHAOfficial @peakdistrict”

Nigel Huddleston MP, Minister for Tourism

# COVID-19 Flexibility Guarantee

The guarantee was introduced to give bookers confidence that they wouldn’t be left out of pocket if Government restrictions related to COVID-19 prevented them from travelling or our accommodation became unavailable for any reason.

The guarantee was applied to all future stays – regardless of when they were booked or the terms and conditions in place at the time.

Under the guarantee, bookers had the option to transfer their booking to a later date or alternative hostel, or to receive a full refund.

“YHA did the right thing. Customers with bookings made before 17 April for arrivals up to 16 July are entitled to a full refund.”

Which? article, published 17th June

“Working during the first lockdown to try and understand how we would deal with something that was new to everyone was tiring but galvanising. It was amazing to be able to see so many people from the same sector coming together to share what they hoped would work to keep people safe.

The beauty of YHA is the variety we offer, but it also brought some of the biggest challenges. Others in the industry could offer a single solution that worked everywhere but we couldn’t do that. It tested us over and over. Then just when we thought we had a solution the guidance would change. There was great satisfaction in getting the network open again and making sure all our colleagues were safe.”

Luke Blewett  
Associate Director of Risk Management

Where we did open however, hostel staff impressed returning guests, and at our busiest we achieved high satisfaction scores.

## 9.1 / 10

for cleanliness and hygiene  
& for overall satisfaction

“The announcement that we’d reopen was like a light at the end of the tunnel. It’s been a true team effort to get the doors open again, and in the safest way possible. All the new procedures were put in place, and tried and tested prior to guests’ arrival, then it was time to reopen. People were so happy to come and stay again. Many lifelong hostellers had been keenly awaiting the chance to return. Talking to them about their many previous stays with YHA was joyous as I checked them in.”

Tracey Coggle, YHA National Forest

# Our summer

From 17th July, three types of accommodation were offered, across 34 sites. Private rooms with en suite or allocated bathrooms, YHA Camping & Cabins accommodation and whole hostels available on YHA Exclusive Hire.

Hostels in rural and coastal locations had a busy summer as people jumped at the chance of a change of scene on a UK holiday.

With huge demand for holidays in England and Wales, new people found us – attracted by the offer of rural locations and views.

Comparatively, unsurprisingly, there was little appetite for city breaks with customers keen to avoid crowds. Despite the popularity of countryside and seaside locations, this couldn’t make up for the loss of revenue from city sites and from group stays.



# Guest safety measures

## ✓ Social distancing

Hostellers are encouraged to stay physically distant from other hostel users. Signs have been put in place to remind both staff and guests.

## ✓ Enhanced cleaning

Staff are trained to deliver frequent COVID-19 secure cleaning and disinfecting protocols throughout the hostel.

## ✓ Hand sanitiser

Stations are positioned throughout the hostel, with signs reminding guests of the importance of frequent hand cleaning.

## ✓ Contactless payments

Customers are encouraged to pay with contactless mobile or card payments where possible to avoid cash transactions.

## In addition, we:



introduced new internal signage to provide clear guidance to guests



installed protective screens at reception



initiated new hostel operating procedures that ensured, once a guest had checked in, the bedroom or YHA Exclusive Hire property would not be entered by a team member unless for essential maintenance



kept communal spaces closed until guidance permitted their re-opening



removed non-essential and difficult-to-clean items



introduced a food and drink takeaway service at many catering hostels while we were unable to offer our dining and bar facilities





# The impact of reopening

Between reopening on 17th July and reclosure on 21st December 2020, YHA welcomed over 100,000 people.

**103,536**      **29,997 (29%)**

guests

were under 26

The period has put into sharp focus people's need for connectedness – with other people and places, with nature, the outdoors, culture and heritage. And that YHA has a unique contribution to make to the recovery of society and to the common good.

## First beneficiaries get free break

A family of seven, two adults and five children, were among the first to receive a free break through YHA's Project90 fund over summer 2020.

Without YHA's support, they would not have had time away together this year. Financial difficulties, as well as physical disability and autism within the family, make getting away a challenge.

The family, who remain anonymous, loved their time at YHA Castleton Losehill Hall. They enjoyed the freedom of the space and safety of the hostel and grounds.

They reported being much more active than they would be at home, with opportunities for walking. The most precious part of the experience was the opportunity to just be. To enjoy time as a family, be away from it all in a beautiful setting and therapeutic environment.

The mum described the trip as "life changing".

[yha.org.uk/give/project90](https://yha.org.uk/give/project90)

# Financial planning

Over 90% of the charity's income comes from hostel stays. With hostels closed for recreational use for the majority of the year, YHA suffered a c.£40m loss of income.

YHA's financial focus has been on reducing the impact of this loss through some £28m of savings, efficiencies and making best use of sources of support.

**"We entered 2020 in great shape, as a result of 10 years of work on the commercial viability of the organisations and the quality of our products. We also have a very good relationship with our bank, HSBC. This foundation has been critical to our ability to weather this storm.**

**With HSBC's assistance, we successfully applied for support through the CBILS loan. This £15m injection bought us security and time to plan effectively - the amount we borrowed was based on worst case projections of the cash we would need to ride out a 12-month close-down of the network - avoiding the need for a fire sale of assets or other measures that would severely impact on our ability to deliver our long term strategic plans.**

**Despite the ongoing severity of the situation, our financial management and planning has been sound. We produced an initial forecast of the net cashflow impact back in May assuming a gradual improvement in trading once the network reopened in July - as we know the second lockdown meant that has not been the case, nevertheless our final February year end position was still within 3% of those original forecast cash outflows."**

William Howarth  
Chief Financial Officer

## The consequences of financial losses

In having to cut our costs to mitigate our loss, sadly we have lost a number of valued colleagues. Whilst furlough helped us retain many more people than we otherwise might have been able to, we have lost 380 colleagues with eight voluntary redundancies. The vast majority of these were seasonal contracts in the hostel network but the total also includes some permanent posts.

# Supporting our people

It has been a long haul and a period of huge disruption. YHA colleagues may be spread across two countries, and live and work in remote spots or highly populated urban areas, yet YHA is one team and a team that looks out for one another.

With the vast majority of colleagues furloughed within one week of the announcement of lockdown, YHA had a staff body that was experiencing a seismic shift in their day-to-day lives – suddenly off work without knowing what the future would hold. For the people team, part of the challenge of this period has been to ensure colleagues did not feel disenfranchised or become disaffected while YHA maximised its use of the Government furlough scheme.

Keeping people informed and maintaining communication between colleagues at all levels of the organisation was a key concern.



**“Dealing with the pandemic has been one of the biggest challenges of my career in HR. Maintaining staff wellbeing, dealing with people’s worries and concerns, understanding the Government furlough scheme rules and taking some very difficult decisions has been hard. The thing that has surprised me the most is the level of support and understanding from our employees and teams – whether that is the way people have adapted to working from home, how people have managed on less income or individual’s understanding through the redundancy consultation process.**”

**At the end of 2019 we launched the new YHA HEART values which have helped underpin and guide the way we behave as an organisation. By being open and honest and encouraging two-way communication through the weekly webinars, a weekly dialogue with our union colleagues, mutual respect and a feeling of one team have helped navigate our way through.”**

Jane Price  
Director of People

**“You cannot overstate the importance of being able to tell the story and keep telling it in a coherent and measured way. You see it in the staff survey. We’ve gone from 71% staff engagement to 79% at a time when we’ve had to lose hundreds of staff. We have handled those decisions well, and with compassion, but I think it’s also to do with clear and regular communications.”**

James Blake  
Chief Executive

**“The feedback I’m getting about the webinars is that they’re really great. People feel connected to the executive and to the chief executive, in a way that wouldn’t have been possible if we were all trying to travel.”**

Jon Smith  
Associate Director of User Experience

An overwhelming success and popular approach to internal communications during this period has been the all-staff webinar. At first weekly, and then fortnightly, open to all staff, the webinar provided an opportunity for people to put questions to the executive team and other guests. The Christmas party also took place via Zoom.





# Fit for the future

The Renew programme began in November 2020 and will run through 2021 and beyond. It is a programme of activity to enable YHA to recover from the pandemic in the best possible shape to deliver its mission and strategy in the years to come – the aim, to ensure YHA's future prosperity.

**“COVID-19 has been devastating. We must make ourselves ready to contribute to the renewal of society because the benefits we can deliver are going to be all the more critical in the future. In order to do that, first we must repair and renew ourselves.**

**The last year has taught us a lot about our organisation, including how resilient we are, but it has also highlighted areas of weakness. The projects we have prioritised will allow us to build on our strengths while taking forward the lessons of last year to develop new, more efficient ways of working.”**

Sharn Harrison  
Associate Director of IT and Business Systems



Renew is structured around four themes:

- ✓ reopening our hostel network and returning to an annual surplus
- ✓ delivering growth and impact
- ✓ ensuring a network of quality hostels and infrastructure
- ✓ creating a smaller, more efficient central support team



Our task is to develop and embed new ways of working through YHA, whilst nurturing critical partnerships and ensuring we continue to engage with our members and supporters.

We will continue in our commitment to greater representation of youth voices – listening to what young people want from us.

We will embed diversity and accessibility in everything we do.



# Hostelling Together

**H**ostelling is all about sharing – shared rooms, kitchens, social spaces and experiences. These are the things that make hostelling unique. Yet Government guidance has required us to close off these shared spaces when our hostels are open. As a consequence, our room capacity has been reduced along with our ability to generate income.

Hostelling — compared to the hotel and cottage-hire sectors of the hospitality industry — has been disproportionately hit by COVID-19. Yet hostels contribute more than any other aspect of hospitality to wellbeing, connection with nature and the rural economy. With 90% of our income coming from hostel stays ordinarily, the sector needs support.

Over winter 20/21, YHA joined with Independent Hostels UK, Hostelling Scotland, Scottish Independent Hostels and Hostelling International Northern Ireland to ask the Government for additional support — recognising their unique role in providing affordable, sustainable travel.

[livemore.yha.org.uk/yha-news/hostelling-together](https://livemore.yha.org.uk/yha-news/hostelling-together)

**“Hostels have the ingredients needed to support the nation’s recovery: connections to nature; affordable breaks near home and within the UK; access to heritage; support for communities and schools.**

**When circumstances allow, hostels are able to open safely and provide a much-needed change of scene. We have shown that over last summer and autumn, as over 100,000 guests returned to us.**

**We are grateful for Government support so far, but hostels now need extra help on the path to reopening in 2021 and towards renewal in 2022.”**

*Anita Kerwin-Nye  
Director of Strategy and Engagement*





# A period of innovation

Working through an ever-evolving situation, colleagues have flexed and adapted, adopting new ways of working and mining new revenue streams – all with a continued commitment to the 10-year strategy and renewed passion for YHA's purpose and contribution to society.

Despite the challenges of the period, the charity continued to demonstrate its core commitment to young people's development and to getting more young people outdoors.

As part of the 10-year strategy published in April 2020, YHA had committed to working in partnership to open up access to National Parks.

Despite the disruption wrought by COVID-19, we developed a partnership and model to achieve this. In late December 2020, the partnership won a competitive process to fund the project.

## 'Generation Green' gets the green light

The Access Unlimited coalition has been awarded a £2.5m grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The award, on behalf of Defra, will mean that more than 100,000 young people will get the opportunity to connect with nature through a 16-month project beginning in March 2021.

YHA will lead the 15-strong coalition, which includes National Parks and outdoor education providers, in the delivery of the Generation Green Project. The initiative will save 20 jobs, create 10 new ones, enable one paid internship, 30 Kickstart placements, seven apprenticeships and 659 volunteer roles in the outdoor sector. Crucially, the project will prioritise young people from BAME groups, disadvantaged backgrounds and coastal communities.

The steps we now all take together will deliver real opportunities to thousands of young people who have been impacted by the pandemic — many of whom faced lockdown without gardens or access to green spaces. It is a tremendously exciting and hugely positive end to an otherwise challenging year, not only for YHA but the outdoor sector as a whole."

James Blake  
Chief Executive

December 2020

# Supporting teachers and home schoolers

Following the announcement of lockdown three and the closure of schools, in January we set about creating a children's activity pack. Aimed at primary-school-aged children, our intent was to support educators and parents looking for materials to take teaching offline from time to time.

"Many have reflected on the importance of digital learning during lockdown – rightly so. But there's nothing like connecting to nature. Or looking up at the stars. Or a little bit of gluing and colouring.

Learning in lockdown is hard. For children, for schools and for parents and carers. At YHA, we wanted to do our bit."

Anita Kerwin-Nye  
Director of Strategy & Engagement

Thousands of packs were printed and distributed to partner schools, including a number of academy trusts and prioritising schools in disadvantaged areas. We also sent out packs to our staff.

Contents included how to guides to stargazing, craft projects and recipes; wordsearches and puzzles; wildlife facts; make-your-own hostel kit; and the YHA 90 – a list of hobbies and activities to try.





# Volunteering goes virtual

With in-person opportunities impossible during periods of lockdown, the charity found new ways to engage young people with volunteerism.

A partnership between Waltham Forest College and YHA has helped 38 first year travel and tourism students gain vital work experience over lockdown.

The students set up their own YHA-focussed Instagram account to raise awareness of YHA amongst their peers. They also acted as secret shoppers, testing the website for ease of use and booking.

**“It is a new way of doing work experience, but it has really opened my eyes. I have learned a lot about websites and how they are organised. I’ve really enjoyed it and learnt a lot about YHA as well.”**

Fatima, student

Prior to the pandemic, more than 1,000 young people a year volunteered in YHA hostels in order to learn new skills, boost their CVs, give something back and travel. To support young people to complete their Duke of Edinburgh Award during COVID-19, YHA has launched a number of virtual volunteering opportunities with roles in fundraising, videography and social media.

So far, over 100 DofE volunteers have completed or are completing projects including a 100-mile fundraising walk, a sponsored week of chores, a charity Twitch stream, and a TikTok video review of YHA hostels.



# The shape of the network

The solid financial footing upon which YHA entered the pandemic meant YHA was shielded from having to offload capital assets at short notice. Through borrowing and rigorous financial management, YHA avoided the need for a fire sale.

Prior to the pandemic, decision-makers had planned to appraise the size, shape and character of the hostel network to ensure it met the aims of the 10-year strategy. The pandemic and consequent financial losses have expedited some of this thinking to safeguard the charity for the future.

To shape our hostels for the strategy, YHA launched a survey on the network to assess the suitability and viability of its assets. As a movement and membership organisation, the charity committed to hearing the views of its supporters and stakeholders.

The survey began in November 2020, garnering views from staff, volunteers, members and a number of strategic partners.

The results of this are due out in 2021.





# A year like no other

YHA began 2020 on the back of another record-breaking year for impact and income. Following 10 years of investment in our hostel network, in 2019/20 we had our busiest 12 months. We passed the million-guest mark, as more people discovered our unique offer and quality, affordable accommodation.

YHA ended the financial year with a £40m drop in income. Through immediate and decisive action, we have done all we can to safeguard the charity for the future. This has included pausing capital investment, making cost savings where we can, applying for all available funding and grants, and broadening our income streams. Overall, this helped us save some £28m.

With the proposed lifting of restrictions on the horizon, our immediate priority now is planning for the 2021 summer season and meeting the already high demand for YHA stays. Through closure, repurposing, and reboot, YHA has come through. With the renew programme now under way, we look to the future with hope and ambition.

**“We know that YHA will survive. This is about how we thrive. How we increase access. How we improve efficiency without losing the human touch. How we connect people and places in a world where COVID-19 is with us. Innovation will be crucial.”**

Anita Kerwin-Nye  
Director of Strategy and Engagement

**“I think there is huge strength, huge resilience in YHA as an organization and in just about everybody I meet in YHA. We will get through and we will find a new future, and we will take the crisis as an opportunity to reshape the organisation in a way that when we emerge will mean that we’re in better shape to deliver on our charitable objectives.”**

Margaret Hart  
Chair



With thanks to Iesha Small who conducted the interviews and compiled the evidence for this document.



# Thank yous

With grateful thanks to the individuals, organisations, trusts, foundations and funders who have supported YHA in 2020/21.

- The Percy Hedley 1990 Charitable Trust
- The Privy Purse Charitable Trust
- Fisherbeck Charitable Trust
- The Praebendo Charitable Foundation
- The Norman Family Charitable Trust
- Joseph Strong Frazer Trust
- The Hadrian Trust
- Sir James Knott Trust
- The Catherine Cookson Charitable Trust
- Friarsgate Trust
- Baron Davenport's Charity
- CB & HH Taylor 1984 Trust
- Open Gate Trust
- Peter Harrison Foundation
- Chapman Charitable Trust
- Alpkit Foundation
- The Michael Marsh Charitable Trust
- The Charles Brotherton Trust
- The Jones 1986 Charitable Trust
- Sir John Eastwood Foundation



The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Historic England



Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

## Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage

The Culture Recovery Fund is being delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England, using funds provided by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.



London Community Response Fund



National Lottery Heritage Fund - Heritage Emergency Fund



National Lottery Community Fund - Emerging Futures Fund



Third Sector Resilience Fund for Wales

Wales Economic Resilience Fund Sector Specific Grant



Department for Work & Pensions - Kickstart Scheme

## Green Recovery Challenge Fund



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

The National Lottery Heritage Fund



## Green Recovery Challenge Fund

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund is being delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency.

# Support us

Thank you to everyone who has given to our Project90 appeal to fund respite breaks for 900 young people and 900 families impacted by COVID-19. We have raised an amazing £380,000 towards our £500,000 total so far.

We are really looking forward to reopening again soon and welcoming the hundreds of young people and families that your donations have supported.

During 2021 we are hoping to raise the remaining £120,000 needed to send a further 430 families and young people on a supported break.

We'd really appreciate your help, either by making a donation or fundraising for us.

To give a gift, please visit [yha.org.uk/give/project90](https://yha.org.uk/give/project90)

For information on ways to fundraise, please email [fundraising@yha.org.uk](mailto:fundraising@yha.org.uk)

# Timeline of the pandemic

## March

### 3rd

The Government launches the “contain” phase of its coronavirus action plan, described as “detect early cases, follow up close contacts, and prevent the disease taking hold in this country for as long as is reasonably possible”.

### 16th

Modellers at Imperial College London find critical care capacity in the UK will be overwhelmed by the outbreak and 250,000 will die unless social distancing protocols are put into place.

The prime minister advises the public to avoid unnecessary contact and travel, and to stay away from pubs and theatres.

### 18th



The Government announces the closure of all primary and secondary schools until further notice.

### 24th



The health secretary reveals that a 4,000-capacity new Nightingale hospital is being prepared.



A scheme to recruit 250,000 volunteers to help the NHS is launched. More than 500,000 apply in two days.

### 23rd

The UK lockdown is announced. The public will only be allowed to leave their homes for food shopping, exercise once per day, medical reasons and travelling to work when absolutely necessary.

Shops selling non-essential goods close, gatherings of more than two people in public are banned, events including weddings but not funerals are cancelled.



Britons abroad are told that they are to return home when they can.

### 26th

A support package for the self-employed is announced, covering an average of 80% of earnings over the past three years.



The Clap for our Carers campaign begins – a weekly national applause for frontline workers.

### 28th

UK deaths from coronavirus reach 1,019 – an increase of 260 in 24 hours.

Amged El-Hawrani, a 55-year-old consultant at University Hospitals of Derby and Burton, is the first frontline NHS hospital worker to die from the virus.

## April

### 2nd

The number of confirmed cases of coronavirus across the world reaches one million.

### 6th

The number of people who have died in hospital across the UK after testing positive for coronavirus rises beyond 5,000.

### 8th

The Royal College of Nursing warns that a lack of protective equipment for nurses is “fundamentally compromising” the care they give to patients.

### 10th



The worldwide coronavirus death toll reaches 100,000.

### 12th



The hospital death toll of people who have tested positive for coronavirus in the UK exceeds 10,000.

### 18th

More than 15,000 are reported to have died in hospital after testing positive.

### 20th

The Government announces the launch of the furlough job retention scheme.

### 29th

Data shows that 26,097 people have died from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and the wider community.

### 30th

The prime minister declares that the country is now past the peak of the disease.



Captain Tom Moore celebrates his 100th birthday after becoming a national hero by raising over £32 million for NHS charities by completing 100 laps of his garden.



# May

## 5th

The UK's declared death toll from coronavirus surpasses 32,000, becoming the highest in Europe.

Trials of the new contact-tracing app commence on the Isle of Wight.

## 10th



The first easing of lockdown is announced, with people being allowed to leave the house to exercise more than once a day.

Coinciding with the restriction easing, the prime minister unveils the new "stay alert" slogan which replaces "stay at home".

## 12th

The furlough job retention scheme is extended until October.

## 13th

Garden centres can reopen, unlimited exercise is allowed outdoors, people must keep two metres away from one another and are encouraged to wear face coverings in enclosed spaces.

## 18th

Everyone over five years of age is made eligible for coronavirus testing if they are showing symptoms.

## 25th

If they can meet the "five tests", which set out guidelines to protect customers and staff, non-essential shops will be allowed to open from 15th June.

## 28th

Test and Trace officially launches in England. The accompanying contact-tracing app is delayed. Groups of up to six are allowed to meet outside.

## 13th

The first "social bubble" scheme is announced, in which single household are allowed to meet and stay overnight with another household.

## 15th

Retail parks, high streets and shopping centres reopen. As do zoos and safari parks.

## 18th

The Government abandons its app and Apple and Google take over the design of Track and Trace.

## 26th

After thousands flocked to beaches in a heatwave, the prime minister warns the public not to take liberties.

## 29th

Leicester goes into a local lockdown after a spike of cases in the area. The restrictions begin to ease here in mid-July.

# July

## 4th



Lockdown restrictions are eased with pubs, cafés, restaurants, museums, theme parks, libraries, cinemas, hotels, campsites and hairdressers allowed to reopen.

## 13th

Beauty salons, nail bars and tattoo shops are allowed to reopen.

## 17th

The prime minister sets out plans for a "significant return to normality" in England from early November.

## 24th



The wearing of face coverings become compulsory in shops in England.

## 30th

People who test positive for coronavirus or display symptoms must self-isolate for 10 days as the health secretary warns of a "second wave starting to roll across Europe".

People from different households in Greater Manchester, parts of East Lancashire and West Yorkshire are banned from meeting each other inside homes and in gardens following a spike in cases.

## 31st

Measures due to be lifted on 1st August are delayed by two weeks. These included small wedding receptions, reopening bowling alleys and pilots of larger gatherings in sports venues.

# June

## 1st



Lockdown measures are eased. Schools reopen for children in reception, year one and year six.

## 2nd

The health secretary urges people not to break lockdown rules by attending protests planned following the death of George Floyd in the US.

# August

## 3rd

The Government's Eat Out to Help Out scheme launches, with restaurants, pubs and cafés offering half-priced meals during August.

## 12th

Figures from the ONS confirm that the UK is in its worst recession since records began.

## 28th

Tougher measures come into force before the bank holiday weekend. Those organising or hosting illegal raves, music events or gatherings of 30 people or more may now face a £10,000 fine.

## 22nd

The prime minister announces new restrictions including a 10pm curfew on pubs, and restaurants in England from 24th September. Face coverings are made mandatory in more scenarios.

Scotland and Northern Ireland deviate from the restrictions in place for England by announcing bans on households mixing indoors. Wales bans alcohol sales in shops after 10pm, in addition to the curfew on hospitality venues.

UK statistics agencies show there have been more than 57,500 deaths registered in the UK where COVID-19 was mentioned on the death certificate.

# September

## 6th



2,988 new cases of coronavirus are reported in the UK, the largest daily figure since 22nd May.

## 8th

The health secretary warns of a second peak following a concerning rise in the number of cases.

## 9th



The prime minister outlines "Operation Moonshot" - the plan to deploy mass, rapid turnaround testing. It was later "subsumed" within the Test and Trace programme.

## 11th

UK transmission rate rises above 1 for the first time since March.

## 14th

Social gatherings of more than six people are made illegal in England.

## 12th

The prime minister warns of a second wave of coronavirus in the UK.

Parts of England's North West, West Yorkshire and the Midlands face tough new restrictions.

## 21st

The chief scientific adviser warns that the UK could see 50,000 cases a day by mid-October and a daily death toll of 200 or more a month later unless urgent action is taken.

# October

## 11th

The ONS estimate 224,000 have the virus. Hospital and intensive care admissions are rising. The deputy chief medical officer warns the UK is at a tipping point in the crisis.

## 14th

England moves to a three-tier system, with areas subject to different lockdown rules on the basis of local infection rates.

The Welsh first minister announces that people who live in COVID-19 hotspots in England will be banned from travelling to Wales.

The Liverpool City Region is immediately put into Tier 3.

## 20th

Talks between the Manchester Mayor and the Government to negotiate a support package for the city break down.

## 23rd



Wales begins a two week "firebreak" lockdown.

## 31st

The furlough scheme is extended through November as a second, month-long national lockdown for England is announced.



# November

## 2nd

Liverpool announces it will pioneer the UK's first attempt at city-wide mass testing.

## 5th



England enters a second national lockdown that will be in effect until 2nd December.

## 11th

The UK becomes the first European country to pass 50,000 COVID-19 deaths.

## 23rd

Trials show that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is 70% effective. The Government publishes its plans to return to a three-tier system of restrictions, with tougher measures for all areas once lockdown two ends on 2nd December.

# December

## 2nd

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is approved, making the UK the first country in the world to approve a coronavirus vaccination. Lockdown two ends.

## 8th



90-year-old Margaret Keenan becomes the first vaccine recipient outside a clinical trial.

## 19th

Plans for a relaxation of COVID rules over Christmas are scrapped for large areas of the South East and reduced to Christmas Day only for the rest of England. New Tier 4 measures are introduced in southern counties to control the spread of a new variant.

## 19th

Tier 4 restrictions are extended to more areas of England to contain the new variant.

# January

## 4th



The Government announce a new national lockdown for England.

## 13th

More than 100,000 people in the UK have now died within 28 days of testing positive for COVID-19.

# February

## 3rd



The Government announce that more than 10 million people in the UK received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine between 8th December 2020 and 2nd February.



**We are YHA.**

**We transform young lives forever through travel and real adventure.**

**Because where you go changes who you become.**

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