

#iwill Fund Learning Hub

How do we support quality youth social action?

March 2023



Proudly supporting
youth social action



Department for
Digital, Culture
Media & Sport



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Summary

This report is the third in a four-part series of summative reports by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub and outlines recommendations on:

1. Supporting good quality youth social action activity design and delivery.
2. Supporting organisations to embed a culture of learning and improvement.

The evidence presented in this report draws from the insights and reports that Match Funders and delivery organisations have shared with the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. This report is for those who want to learn and understand more about quality youth social action, organisations working with young people, funders supporting young people to drive change and champions of youth social action.



Key findings for supporting quality youth social action

- » Defining and understanding what youth social action is ([see summative report 1](#)) is the first step in ensuring good quality youth social action.
 - » There are two related approaches to supporting quality youth social action:
 - Focusing on the quality of practice in delivery and activity design of youth social action.
 - Embedding a culture of learning and improvement in the organisations supporting youth social action.
 - » Funders and delivery organisations need to undertake a joined-up, consistent approach to create a system that supports quality youth social action.
 - » Establishing a culture of learning, which drives a cycle of continuous improvement, takes time, patience and support.
- The #iwill Fund has provided opportunities for organisations to connect with others working through similar challenges (through processes like the [Impact Accelerator and LabStorm toolkit](#)).
- » Organisations that are best placed to generate and act on insights are those that have been able to establish a strong foundation for high-quality delivery. This includes:
 - Articulating the 'core' and 'flex' of programmes
 - Developing and being confident in theories of change
 - Having systems in place for collecting, acting on, and sharing learning
 - Embedding cycles of learning
 - Having processes for stakeholder involvement
 - » The six quality principles (youth-led, progressive, reflective, embedded, challenging, and socially impactful) contribute to the understanding of what "good" youth social action looks like. There are several ways that quality principles can be applied across grant-making, design, implementation, and evaluation of youth social action. For the six quality principles to be embedded throughout the programme design, organisations should:
 - Consider and embed the quality principles from the beginning
 - Understand how the implementation of the principles may flex
 - Build a shared language and understanding of 'quality'
 - Dedicate time and resource for design work, continual reviews and improvement

Introduction

The #iwill Fund is a joint fund established by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), Department for Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS), and more than 25 independent Match Funders ([See Appendix 1](#)). The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was established to capture and reflect on learning from the #iwill Fund's investment in youth social action. It does this in two ways: first, by helping the funders involved to learn as they go. Secondly, it supports the legacy of the #iwill Fund by building a body of knowledge that can support future funders and enablers of youth social action. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub is a three-member consortium of Dartington Service Design Lab, Renaisi, and the Centre for Youth Impact. Work by all three organisations has fed into this report.

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub has produced 41 reports since 2018, [all of which can be found here](#).

Over the course of the #iwill Fund, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub has focused on answering four sector evidence plan questions ([See Appendix 2](#)). The #iwill Fund Learning Hub developed the questions in consultation with stakeholders in the #iwill Fund – Match Funders, their evaluation partners, and the #iwill Fund Leadership Board to help guide learning. This report is the third in a series of high-level reports summarising learning from the past five years and answers the question: ***How do we support quality youth social action?***

This report is particularly relevant for anyone looking to understand how to design, deliver, and fund quality youth social action opportunities.

The insights in this report will be useful for funders, delivery organisations, decision-makers and young people. It includes recommendations and case studies to show what quality looks like in practice. The report is designed to help readers critically engage in the quality of their current youth social action, and to further strengthen their approach.

The report is divided into two sections:

The first section focuses on the quality principles for youth social action, and how these can be applied in practice. The #iwill Campaign identified six principles of 'high-quality' youth social action that define what high-quality youth social action activities look like. In this section we share case study examples from Match Funder and delivery organisations. We also share some of the challenges and enablers for ensuring quality in youth social action.

The second section focuses on how funders and delivery organisations can embed continuous quality improvement and a culture of learning across youth social action opportunities. These recommendations are based on the learning from Match Funders and Delivery Organisations, which have been collected in the last five years of the #iwill Learning Hub.

Where has the evidence in this report come from?

Within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, three workstreams have fed into answering the sector evidence plan questions:

- **Systems** - Learning how to support youth social action within systems and supporting funder collaboration on shared challenges
- **Sector Evidence Plan** - Aggregating learning across sources to build answers to key questions about youth social action
- **Quality Practice** - Supporting organisations enabling youth social action to reflect on and improve practice, and share lessons from this

The table below shows information sources used for analysis in answering the question "How do we support quality youth social action?".

Information Management System (IMS)	Match Funder Reports	Match Funder Evaluations	#iwill Fund Learning Hub Activities
Quantitative data provided by Match Funders on funded activity	Qualitative information provided by Match Funders on their funded activities	Commissioned work by Match Funders to evaluate the process of their funded activities	Insights into funded activities from our LabStorms, Impact Accelerator ^a cohorts and events

Table 1. Information sources for data collection

a. The Impact Accelerator is a 12-month process designed to help organisations delivering youth social action to examine, build confidence in, and improve their programmes' outcomes on the basis of evidence. Labstorms were a space created for Match Funders to share learning and collaborate on solving problems.



Supporting quality youth social action activity, design and delivery

Defining youth social action is key to understanding how to deliver quality youth social action. Arguably, it is the first step in ensuring quality youth social action as it determines whether the opportunity being delivered is youth social action. The [first report in this series](#) unpacks and builds the #iwill Fund's definition of youth social action:

"Youth-led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action. Youth social action can be flexible in delivery and must involve at least one of three core mechanisms that improve the skills, well-being or increasing knowledge of others and sense of belonging of a young person. These are:

- ***Young people have a safe yet challenging space in which to develop practical, vocational, and socio-emotional skills.***
- ***Young people take self-directed action which gives them a sense of purpose that contributes to their well-being, self-concept, or self-efficacy.***
- ***Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging."***

Different aspects of identifying youth social action may come into play at different stages of programme delivery, serve different purposes, and support quality youth social action.



Supporting quality youth social action activity, design and delivery

Quality principles

The key insights outline how funders and delivery organisations can embed continuous quality improvement and a culture of learning across youth social action opportunities.

On a more granular level, the #iwill Campaign identified six principles of 'high-quality' youth social action that defines what high-quality youth social action looks like.

These quality principles contribute to the understanding of what "good" youth social action looks like. It is important to consider shared quality principles so that there is consistency in quality of delivery and evaluation of youth social action offered to young people.



> Be youth-led

Led, owned, and shaped by young people's needs, ideas and decision-making.



> Allow progression

Sustained and providing links to other activities and opportunities.



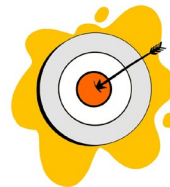
> Be challenging

Stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling.



> Be embedded

Accessible to all, and well-integrated into existing pathways, to become a habit for life.



> Have social impact

Have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem.



> Enable reflection

Recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning.

Quality principles in practice

During the span of the #iwill Fund, funders and delivery organisations have applied the six quality principles to grant-making decisions, designing, implementation and evaluation of youth social action.

All six quality principles are needed in practice to ensure quality youth social action. To demonstrate how the quality principles may be applied in practice, each principle has been unpacked in turn.

Be youth-led

Youth-led social action activities often come in a variety of forms dependent on the young person's interests, capacity and ability. Regardless of the shape of the activity, youth leadership is a defining characteristic as to whether an opportunity can even be defined as 'youth social action'.



Within the #iwill Fund, 'youth leadership' predominantly looked like young people deciding the cause of their youth social action opportunity or choosing/shaping the activities that they do. Additional ways that young people took part in leadership opportunities were:

- Young people directing parts of a programme e.g., warm-ups or short activities.
- Young people supporting other young people to partake in youth social action opportunities (e.g., mentoring).
- Young people applying directly to grants. This can be for projects that they are running or for training and ongoing support.
- Young people being part of funding decisions and allocation.
- Young people informing organisational strategy through things like advisory groups.
- Young people are involved in research and evaluation opportunities.

How youth-led a particular opportunity is may depend on the age, interest, and experience of the participants as well as the nature of the activity. A [previous report](#) outlined challenges that organisations may encounter in making opportunities genuinely youth-led, and how to circumvent these. This often includes investing time and resource for additional support, protecting time for staff and young people, additional structures of support and flexibility for young people to meaningfully take part in youth leadership opportunities.

'Youth-led' does not always mean 'youth leading alone'. It may be harder to ensure that young people participate and shape activities on equal terms with adults, but if it is done well, and adults sometimes take a lead, this doesn't necessarily mean young people have had their power and agency removed. They may benefit from making decisions with adults, for example in co-research opportunities where the level of skill can be a challenge¹. Working alongside adults can fill skill gaps or help young people overcome barriers, and where there is a diverse participant base of

Quality principles in practice

young people, all voices should be heard. One way to support youth-voice being incorporated within the design of activities is ensuring equitable decision-making processes through stakeholder mapping and management, and documenting when there have been stakeholder interactions.

A previous data review discusses youth-leadership in depth and specifically the ways in which youth leadership can be implemented at different levels. Key insights were drawn from Match Funders to support young people in leading these processes. Insights include:

- Smaller scale funding may be required to support highly youth-led youth social action opportunities, as young people are less likely to request, or be able to use, large grants.
- Grant application processes should be adapted for, and accessible to, all young people, including marginalised groups.
- Governance processes such as assessment meetings for funding applications need to consider young people's schedules.

- Funders with a commitment to supporting youth-led social action should consider how to adapt all of their processes to enable young people to be part of leadership and decision-making.
- Training and mentoring should be provided for young people to have the skills to meaningfully take part in research and evaluation.
- Time and resource should be protected for youth advisory groups to collaborate together.
- How young people are part of decision-making should work for them, and feedback should be gathered to shape engagement.
- Funders and delivery organisations should be clear in how they are sharing real power. For example, Virgin Money Foundation granted members of their youth advisory panel a veto over all funding allocations.

Example in practice from Housing Association Youth Network (HAYN)

Youth-led approaches were embedded

into HAYN's Green Consortium programme. These have involved a green youth board that shaped the programme, enhanced the voices of young people living in social housing communities and had access to a micro-grant to use for youth social action delivery. Additionally, the programme involved young researchers who mapped spaces by a green, blue and grey colour code to represent levels of urbanisation and green spaces within their communities to create new projects and increase engagement in the area².

Example in practice from Comic Relief

Comic Relief's project supported LGBT young people to engage in social action. Each young person participated in a residential where they designed their campaign, and were then supported by an adult to deliver it within their community. The project ended with a youth summit where participants presented the impact of their campaign to peers. This is an example of a youth-led opportunity that had elements of adult support without removing the agency of the young person.

Quality principles in practice

Be challenging

Creating a safe yet challenging space can act as a key mechanism of change as outlined in the [first summative report](#). Creating a challenge can be around enabling 'stretching activities' but may also involve providing challenges to young people on their ideas and plans, particularly for how they will bring about community benefit.

Funders and delivery organisations can apply this principle by creating a space for young people where it is safe to fail but are able to practice and develop their skills. Likewise, organisations are also able to learn and grow from setbacks. Ways that organisations have supported with creating challenges for young people involve; enabling young people to learn new skills to serve their community in a specific way i.e., trade and building skills by helping to fix local grassroots sports clubs and facilities, encouraging young people to take the lead on projects, or encouraging young people to conduct research that challenges their initial thoughts and opinions.

Further support is sometimes needed to enable young people to take on challenges without these becoming overwhelming. This may look like; providing training or qualifications, breaking down tasks that are too challenging or coaching young people through a challenge. Additionally, organisations should apply reasonable adjustments for young people with both visible and invisible challenges – however, they may need help in which to assess these needs. Organisations should reflect on their current model for assessing and meeting the needs of the young people, to better tailor challenge and support, depending on the context of the activity and the young person. They may need support to know how to do this – this can be done in a variety of ways, from co-designing with young people, to connecting with and learning from organisations already successfully implementing needs assessments with young people.



Example in practice from Global Action Plan

Young people were initially tasked with the challenge of considering what they would like to change about the world through planning and delivering youth social action projects. Often, young people found the challenge was "too big" as they often identified systemic global-level changes that they wanted to act on, resulting in them being discouraged of their ability to create change. In response, teachers supported young people through coaching to consider different scales of change, and introduced a new supportive challenge of creating and goal setting community-level projects. Support included coaching, introducing young people to community role models, and connecting schools in regions to show the scale of impact across communities. Global Action Plan learned the challenge of enabling

Quality principles in practice

a genuinely youth-led social action opportunity while implementing a challenge that still offered an appropriate level of support.

Example in practice from Spirit of 2012

EmpowHER delivered youth social action opportunities that challenged young women and girls' perceptions in a relaxed and supportive environment. EmpowHER facilitated single-gendered groups, with trusted adults, to create a safe space for participants to discuss gender centred issues. As well as providing a safe space, EmpowHER provided scaffolding that helped young women and girls challenge their own perceptions and engage in a socially conscious way. These resources included: a high-quality flexible social learning curriculum, exposure to relatable and diverse role models, bringing a diverse group of young women and girls together and the opportunity for young women and girls to co-produce and co-deliver social action opportunities. This process not only challenged young women and girls but also empowered their confidence to overcome challenge and apply what they had learned in a meaningful way.

Have social impact

Organisations that have delivered youth social action are still developing proportionate but meaningful ways of evidencing community impact. We know that community benefit is a prime motivator for young people's participation. To ensure a socially impactful design is achieved organisations must identify clear and justified needs that link to specific aims for young people and communities.

Funders should consider whether they are supporting organisations and young people to have conversations with community members in order to understand what forms of social action they think would be beneficial for their community, and to articulate how the term 'community' is being used and understood. Critically, funders should encourage organisations to also step forward where young people and communities have not both or equally benefited from an activity, and to understand and enable the support needed in these circumstances. Learning about and supporting double-benefit is crucial as it's theorised to be a key characteristic of youth social action.

A common area of improvement for Match Funders and delivery organisations within the #iwill Fund was measuring community impact. This can, at times be hard to articulate. But, if funders are to ensure that community benefit becomes more of a shared enquiry, it is important that they are willing to listen to, and support organisations in navigating questions such as what their community impact is, how it's understood and how it's measured.

As youth social action opportunities are youth-led, organisations aiming to deliver quality youth social action should empower young people to plan and measure their community impact. Projects hoping to achieve social impact should be designed on the basis of a logical theory of change and should use monitoring and evaluation for accountability and improvement. These aspects also apply to the projects young people undertake as part of highly youth-led social action opportunities, as highlighted in our previous [**community benefit paper**](#) that discusses the importance of balancing double benefit. Those designing, providing and funding

Quality principles in practice

youth social action opportunities should consider how young people can be empowered to apply these principles to their projects. For example, organisations can support young people to develop theories of change and evaluate the impact of their work – in engaging and proportionate ways.



Example in practice from Young Manchester

Manchester Metropolitan University worked alongside young people in the evaluation of Young Manchester's youth social action programmes. The Young Social Action Researchers helped to co-develop the participatory research tools used in workshops with youth social action providers in order to produce case studies detailing the impact of youth social action opportunities. They received training and mentoring in research and leadership and earned two AQA qualifications.

An example of one of the tools that the Young Social Action Researchers co-developed was journey mapping that encouraged attendees of the Youth and Play workshops to identify the changes they had experienced through participation. In line with Young Manchester's specified areas of interest, 'skills and knowledge', 'health and wellbeing', 'social connections' and 'future plans' were provided as prompts for the kinds of changes that might have occurred. This activity captured the perceived benefits of youth and play participation over time.

Example in practice from Housing Association Youth Network Volunteering Academy (HAYN)

InCommon enabled young people to create social impact by supporting intergenerational social action. The project was a way to bring people of different ages together within a neighbourhood to find common ground, a shared future for their communities, and overall social cohesion. InCommon has supported 12 youth groups in increasing their intergenerational activity by reaching out to older neighbours in fun and innovative ways such as: 1:1 support calls, intergenerational social action newsletters, training and resources. The project was youth-led, reflective and encouraged the young people involved to plan the activities. This is an example of young people participating in a youth social action activity that incorporates social impact by directly benefitting the community surrounding them. InCommon's most recent impact report substantiates the social impact by providing evidence that older people reported higher levels of feeling happier, were offered valuable support and experienced social cohesion³.

Quality principles in practice

Allow progression

To ensure that youth social action becomes a 'habit for life', progression routes need to be built in from the beginning of programme design.

Many funded evaluations assess young people's willingness to participate again, which is usually high. Progression can look 'external' meaning the young person is signposted to other youth social opportunities with a different organisation. On the other hand, it can look 'internal' meaning young people are encouraged to participate in other offers from the same organisation or continue with the same opportunity but in a different role. For example, once a young person has completed a project, they may be interested in offering mentorship to others.

Most Match Funders stated that youth social action opportunities within the #iwill Fund had a tendency towards internal progression routes⁴. For all but a few organisations, this will limit how many young people can progress as well as the ways in which they do so. Using partnership approaches and investing resources to increase linking and 'transitioning' between

organisations can build stronger progression routes.

In addition to creating clear progression routes, context should also be considered to encourage progression. Regardless of the quality of a youth social action opportunity, the level to which a young person may want to participate as well as their confidence to do so may affect whether they take up an opportunity. Youth social action opportunities that actively encourage young people to take part, rather than opportunities being passively available, allow for greater take-up and sustained involvement⁵. As such, organisations should ensure that progression opportunities are bolstered with encouragement and support.



Example in practice from Comic Relief

Many of Comic Relief's funded organisations had a range of plans for how young people would be supported out of youth social action opportunities after their #iwill Fund funding came to an end. Some organisations had found alternative sources of funding and continued to work with the same cohorts or with new cohorts. While others had plans to borrow the social action approach and incorporate it into new or existing strands of work that didn't previously have this focus⁶.

Example in practice from Jewish Lads and Girls' Brigade

JLGB set up a project named eVOLve to address the needs of Jewish young people. For the first time, eVOLve brought together all key stakeholders from across the community to ensure that social action becomes more accessible and more rewarding for Jewish young people than ever before. The programme created a volunteering journey that embraced Jewish young people aged 8-25, enabling them to fully engage in meaningful social action and become active citizens in their community. By bringing together

Quality principles in practice

multiple organisations, they have developed key connections that will aid in sustainability and promote widespread reflection of youth social action across organisations.



Be embedded

Organisations had various strategies to embed youth social action into young people's lives. Within the #iwill Fund a large portion of youth social action opportunities were delivered in schools and community settings that were familiar to young people. Evidence surrounding the effectiveness of reaching young people, particularly hard to reach young people, through

embedding youth social action opportunities into schools is highlighted in our [increasing youth social action in education paper](#).

Another way to embed youth social action into young people's lives is to consider 'place' ([See our paper on increasing youth social action in place](#)). In the context of embedding youth social action, place refers to a geographically bounded area such as a town, a neighbourhood, a city, a county, or a postcode. Place matters in how policy makers think about supporting, encouraging and working with young people because place matters so much for the development of children and young people. Those supporting young people should think about three immediate influences on young people: the home, the school and the local community. By examining these influences, and how they interact, organisations can determine how youth social action could be embedded within them.

Example in practice from Pears Foundation

Pears Foundation embedded youth social action opportunities into a

number of further education (FE) colleges. As data shows that young people from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately likely to attend FE colleges, supporting youth social action in colleges improves reach for young people in this group. Additionally, [The National Youth Social Action Survey](#) showcased that young people were more likely to engage in youth social action if they could access it through school and engage in it with friends.

Young Manchester

The "4CT" organisation led the East Manchester Youth and Play Partnership. They embedded youth social action by delivering it in after-school clubs. They aimed to deliver a core programme of regular youth and play sessions that were equally distributed to ensure geographical coverage across the five identified wards of East Manchester. The partnership offered an integrated programme of social action within these sessions and access to a range of training, volunteering, campaigning and activities of benefit to the wider community.

Quality principles in practice

Enable reflection

Enabling reflection involves recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning. Designing reflection into youth social action opportunities can be achieved in various ways; by building structured opportunities for reflection into the activity, by building a habit of consistency in being reflective and sharing any learning from it or by encouraging reflection that is linked to the outcomes that youth social action creates for young people and the community. By tying these aspects together, young people can reflect on how the project and experience has impacted them and the community that they are helping.

Promoting reflection within an activity can be carried out in person or online. Indeed, some Match Funders highlighted that digital or part-digital models have enabled more reflection by making it easier to schedule small groups or one to one conversations with young people. To ensure that reflection is a consistent practice for young people, it can be embedded within theories of change, as detailed by this [theory of change guidance](#).

Similarly, as mentioned in recommendation section 2.1, cycles of reflection are not only important for the young people but also delivery organisations and staff so that learning on quality improvement can continue to be embedded.

Example in practice from Civil Society and Sport

Young people within youth social action opportunities in London were offered phone or in-person evaluation sessions on the programme they participated in and to complete end of project monitoring. Providing a space to evaluate with young people meant that meaningful reflection and validation of young people's learning was promoted. Civil Society and Sport reported that at the beginning of conversations or training sessions, many of the young people were able to talk in volumes about their project, but not as much about what they had learned or how the project had impacted them personally. Having sessions based solely on reflection allowed London Youth to explore the link between the project, the young person's mental health and their skill set. By the end of the sessions, many of the young people were able to identify positive changes within themselves which seemed to make them feel more satisfied with their experience on the programme⁷.



Insights for embedding quality principles

Match Funders and delivery organisations have reported that embedding all of the quality principles can be a challenge at times ([See here](#)). Here are some considerations to ensure that all quality principles are considered during the development and implementation of youth social action opportunities.

1. Dedicate time and resource for design work

Dedicated design work at the early stages of funding can help to fill any gaps of clarity in activity design, which will in turn improve quality. To note, some delivery timelines (e.g., where activities are dependent on school terms) could mean that delivery needs to start very soon after – or even before – funding is in place. In this case, funders should support organisations to embed short ‘test’ and learn’ cycles, with time and resource to act on learning and develop programme design in between phases of delivery.

2. Ensure that the six quality principles are embedded throughout programme design

Organisations should consider how quality principles are being embedded from the beginning of a programme. Some quality principles, like progression, are more likely to be considered at the end. However, for things to be resourced, developed and embedded as best as possible, all quality principles should be considered at all stages of a programme.

3. Understand how quality principles may ‘flex’

All quality principles may look different depending on the context, need and desire of young people. Understanding what is ‘core and flex’ in a programme will allow delivery organisations to adapt quality principles to different contexts whilst still ensuring consistency in delivery.

4. Build a shared language and understanding of quality

Working towards a common language and understanding of quality principles will ensure that learning on quality improvement is more easily shared, prioritised and embedded. Making sure that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the quality principles will also mean that the design and evaluation of activities can be shaped in a more participatory way.

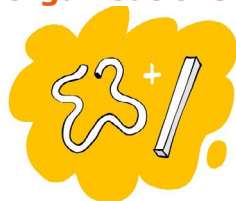


Supporting organisations to embed a culture of learning and improvement

Throughout the #iwill Fund, shared learning has been gathered on how to support quality youth social action. Particularly, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub undertook an Impact Accelerator, a 12-month learning programme that sits at the heart of the Quality Practice workstream and informs practice into youth social action opportunities. For detailed recommendations see the [final impact accelerator report](#) on enabling quality youth social action.

Insights on how delivery organisations and funders can support quality youth social action are outlined over the next few pages. These recommendations largely complement each other. For learning and improvement processes to be long-term and embedded, it is important that delivery organisations and funders need to support quality youth social action.

Recommendations for delivery organisations...



1. Core and flex

To ensure that activities are delivered to the best quality and consistently, delivery organisations should record all the relevant details of what is being delivered. This includes articulating which elements are “core” (such as eligibility or targeting, or the central ‘offer’ to young people), and which are “flex” (valuable additions to the core but that are considered flexible e.g., whether a mode of delivery is face-to-face or digital). This turns a theory of change (the theory of how a programme is meant to achieve impact) and an evaluation plan into a ‘recipe’ for all staff to follow. Within the Impact Accelerator programme, delivery organisations sometimes lacked ‘manualisation’ of their programme, struggling to bring together all the materials of the provision together to reference. Relying on memorisation poses a risk for quality and whether each young person is provided with the same standard of provision, especially when there’s staff turnover.



2. Develop a theory of change

Developing a theory of change is foundational in informing subsequent data gathering for quality improvement, defining outcomes and measuring impact ([See guidance here](#)). Theories of change can offer an ‘accountability line’. This is the point at which it is difficult to know if outcomes happened as a direct result of youth social action or other factors. This will help to distinguish between the things delivery organisations should measure and hold themselves accountable to and things that they hope to happen in the future.

Importantly, delivery organisations should develop an understanding of what the mechanisms of change are for their youth social action opportunities – the process through which young people engage and benefit, and what young people experience ‘in the moment’ that creates or affects change. For us to be confident of outcomes occurring, we need to know that the mechanisms are ‘happening’ or being enabled to the highest quality possible. The [first summary report](#) outlines three common mechanisms that have been found across the #iwill Fund.

Supporting organisations to embed a culture of learning and improvement



3. Youth-led design

Delivery organisations reported on building in time and opportunities for young people to shape the design and evaluation of activities. Equitable decision-making should be ensured by documenting consultations with stakeholders and undertaking stakeholder mapping. Relationships with young people should be invested in so that they can drive the development of activities and inform quality improvement. For an outline of the 'youth-led' principle, see page 11. Use another activity (sport, the arts etc.,) as a 'hook' for youth social action programmes.



4. Establish cycles of learning and improvement

Delivery organisations can ensure that their provision is being delivered as intended by protecting staff time so that they are able to reflect and learn from what has been delivered and embed learning. Establishing a cycle of learning and improvement depends on leadership: leadership not in the sense of seniority, but ownership and persistence.

Organisations within the #iwill Fund who, despite challenges like lockdown, were able to continue quality improvement work were all characterised by having individuals that consistently championed and advocated for quality improvement work. To note, while having 'champions' will keep momentum, bringing others into the process is crucial for sustainability. Delivery organisations should ensure that regular and structured time for staff to collaborate is built in throughout. This will allow for learning to be shared internally.



5. Refine an evaluation plan

Creating a strong evaluation plan will support with evidencing impact and help to consistently improve provisions. Some delivery organisations within the #iwill Fund used the [confidence framework](#) for self-assessment but also found that using external evaluators was useful in providing a different perspective on their provision. Regardless of the form of assessment, developing sustainable cycles of reflection and improvement is a necessity. By creating these conditions delivery organisations can also better support young people in creating 'social impact' as part of embedding quality principles.



6. Define staff roles

By defining staff roles, delivery organisations can offer; structured support, accountability and more time and headspace for improvement work to increase the quality of provision. Within the #iwill Fund, delivery organisations had a strong practice of good documentation for skills profiles, staff development and competencies.



7. Share learning with wider networks

Delivery organisations within the #iwill Fund are all part of a huge range of networks, focusing on different geographical areas, specific communities of interest, cross-sector groups (educational partnerships, multi-agency networks, local authority networks and stakeholder groups), lived experience groups, funding related communities of practice, and learning and evaluation groups. For system-wide quality youth social action, it's important to think about and set up mechanisms of sharing learning to make quality improvement widespread.

Supporting organisations to embed a culture of learning and improvement

Recommendations for funders...



1. Provide training in theory of change and other core concepts

There is a need to support youth social action providers in understanding, managing and monitoring implementation fidelity. Providing access to training in theory of change and other core concepts is the crucial contribution funders and delivery organisations could make to support learning and improvement practice across organisations. Training can also help to support the long-term nature of the learning and improvement process to embed these concepts and ways of working. This may involve resourcing delivery organisations to continue engaging in support and reflection, and funding an open, collective improvement offer for organisations.



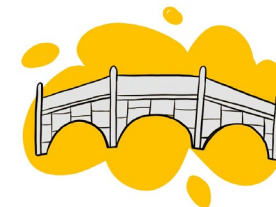
2. Support organisations with more experience to work in tandem with less experienced organisations

Funders can encourage organisations to 'deep-dive' into their own theories of change, mechanisms of change and the associated evidence. By further exploring their own theories of change, organisations can identify strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement. Understanding these aspects of their theory of change enables learning on what 'works'. In turn, funders can create spaces for more experienced organisations to work with less experienced organisations to share this learning. Pursuing this work together allows more opportunities for shared efforts and the building of a collaborative evidence base. This can be used to understand the most effective ways to implement and maintain quality principles. The [first summary report](#) outlines three common mechanisms that have been found across the #iwill Fund.



3. Promote collective leadership

Organisations should support individuals at all levels of delivery to develop skills and access opportunities to contribute to continuous quality improvement. Funders should work with organisations to identify where support and capacity building will be most valuable. By doing this, it creates an environment where quality principles are upheld by all staff and creates cycles where quality improvement principles are not forgotten but instead are passed on to any new staff joining the organisation.



4. Design an infrastructure to support the learning system

Funders can support the implementation of quality principles by providing tailored and appropriate support for improvement as part of the funding process, in a way that aligns with (and ideally supports) an organisation's broader aims and deliverables across different funded

Supporting organisations to embed a culture of learning and improvement

workstreams. Funders should explicitly fund and embed cycles of learning and improvement into grants and recognise that quality improvement won't come through outcome measurement alone.



5. Promoting autonomy

Funders can promote autonomy allowing delivery organisations to lead when identifying priorities for improvement and capacity building. Funders can also create an environment of 'low stakes accountability' where teams are collectively accountable to each other for identifying where and how they can improve; improvements are attainable; and resources and support are available and perceived to be worthwhile.



6. Develop a shared purpose

Ensuring clear and mutual intentions for improvement efforts, avoiding duplication across funded streams and ensuring the best use of time and resources can aid in the consideration of quality principles being embedded in opportunities from the start of youth social action work. This is enabled by having honest conversations about how much an organisation can invest in quality improvement.



Discussion

This report has outlined how funders and delivery organisations can embed continuous quality improvement in their work in order to support more robust, data-driven, and high-quality youth social action opportunities for young people in the UK and to build on existing strengths within the sector. The recommendations relate to the design (using the six quality principles), delivery, evaluation, outcomes, and sustainability of youth social action opportunities and can be implemented at different stages of funding cycles (start of funding, during funding, end of funding).

Learning and improvement remains a critical element to deliver quality youth social action. Organisations that are best placed to generate and act on insights are those that have been able to establish a strong foundation. This includes confidence in developing and using theories of change, understanding what is 'core and flex', having routine structures for collecting, acting on and sharing learning and having enough time and resources.

For quality to be embedded, there needs to be a culture of learning that drives a cycle of continuous improvement. This can take time, patience and support. Organisational change is a long-term and potentially fragile process, which can be strengthened by opportunities to connect with others working through similar changes. The #iwill Fund has been an opportunity for a wide network of organisations to share learning and support each other.

Importantly, there needs to be a joined-up approach to continuous quality improvement. For system-wide quality youth social action, both delivery organisations and Match Funders need to prioritise quality improvement. For example,

although delivery organisations should ensure that staff are championing a culture of learning, funders should support this by funding and embedding cycles of learning into grants. Similarly, although delivery organisations should prioritise developing a theory of change, funders can support this by offering training and support.

More granularly, the six quality principles (**embedded, youth-led, reflective, progressive, socially impactful, and challenging**) can support the high-quality design of youth social action opportunities. Within this report, we outlined what the quality principles may look like in practice. Importantly, depending on the context, need and desire of young people the quality principles may look quite different and require different resourcing and support. For example, for one young person 'youth-led' may take shape by choosing an activity for their youth social action opportunity, whilst for another it may be actually leading parts of a programme.

To successfully embed the quality principles throughout the design of the programme, organisations should consider these from the beginning, dedicate time and resource for design, determine the 'core and flex' of activities, create a shared understanding of what 'good quality' looks like.

Next steps...

This has been the third of a four-part series in answering the sector evidence plan questions ([see Appendix 2](#)). All outputs from the #iwill Fund Learning Hub can be found on the Centre for Youth Impact [website here](#). The next step in addressing the sector evidence plan questions will be to review "What does youth social action do" in the final summative report of the four-part series.

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Appendix 1: List of Match Funders

BBC Children in Need
Bite Back 2030
Careers & Enterprise Company
Clarion Futures
Comic Relief
Co-op Foundation
Dulverton Trust
Dunhill Medical Trust
Global Action Plan
Global Fund for Children
Greater London Authority
Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade
Liverpool Football Club Foundation
Mumsnet
National Deaf Children's Society
One Million Mentors
Ormiston Trust
Paul Hamlyn Foundation & Esmee Fairbairn Foundation

Pears Foundation
Premier League Charitable Fund
Scouts Association
Sovereign Housing Association
Spirit of 2012
Sport England
The Diana Award
The Duke of Edinburgh's Award
The Ernest Cook Trust
UK Community Foundations
UK Youth
UpRising
V inspired
Virgin Money Foundation
Volunteering Matters
WE Foundation
Young Manchester
Youth Endowment Fund

Appendix 2: Sector Evidence Plan

Question: What is youth social action?

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub exists to harness the evidence and learning generated by the wave of youth social action opportunities supported through the #iwill Fund. The Learning Hub developed the sector evidence plan questions in consultation with stakeholders in the #iwill Fund – Match Funders, their evaluation partners, and the Leadership Board. The sector evidence plan questions have largely guided the learning of the learning hub.

Question	Sub-questions
What is Youth Social Action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What types of youth social action have been funded, including via digital delivery? • What are common Theories of Change?
What does Youth Social Action do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What positive outcomes have been shown to be promoted for CYP and communities? • How can double benefit be managed? • What features of youth social action make it effective?
How do we support Youth Social Action for all?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we reach CYP from backgrounds less likely to participate? • How do we reach younger children? • How do we initiate youth social action in 'cold spots' (places/institutions/sectors)? • What are the pros and cons of digital delivery for reaching all young people?
How can we support quality Youth Social Action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we know about strengths and weaknesses of providers? - What do we know about supporting providers to improve? • How can digital delivery support the quality principles?



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