

#iwill Fund Learning Hub

What does youth social action do?

May 2023



Proudly supporting
youth social action

#iwill



Department
for Culture
Media & Sport



DARTINGTON
SERVICE
DESIGN LAB

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Summary

This report is the fourth in a four-part series of summative reports by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub and focuses 1) on the different types of youth social action benefit and 2) how these benefits have been evidenced within the #iwill Fund.

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 plan and evidence outcomes of youth social action, organisations working with young people to drive change and champions of youth social action.

Key insights on the benefit of youth social action

- » Thinking about community and young people's outcomes throughout the design and delivery of youth social action is important in making opportunities relevant, meaningful and good quality.
- » There are two different types of youth social action benefit: young people's benefit (shown through socio-emotional, civic-societal, educational and employment outcomes) and community benefit (direct community benefit, organisational, societal and reflexive benefit).
- » The different benefits feed into each other and are a dynamic process. Organisations should consider these value flows when creating their theories of change.
- » The creation of outcomes for young people or communities is at least partly dependent on creating outcomes for the other. Organisations should therefore consider both types of benefit when thinking about outcomes.
- » Organisations should consider empowering young people to plan and measure their impact – in engaging and appropriate ways.
- » Young people's benefits ([See evidence of young people's outcomes](#)) have been evidenced the most in formal monitoring and impact reports within the #iwill Fund.
- » The evidence base for community benefit ([See evidence of community outcomes](#)) is currently less developed than young people's outcomes, potentially due to 'community' meaning different things to different people, the challenge of identifying pragmatic measures or challenges in consolidating information on community outcomes.
- » To continue building a strong evidence base, mechanisms of change need to be consistently articulated (See [summative report 1](#) for our recently identified mechanisms of change). Additionally, to be able to generalise findings more confidently, the same measures should be used across youth social action activities when applicable.
- » Match Funders have experienced organisational benefits by being part of the #iwill Fund (e.g., youth voice informing their strategy, embedding learning across different provisions, and creating networks)

Summary

Key insights for young people's benefit

- A strong evidence base has been built for socio-emotional outcomes. Particularly for positive changes in wellbeing, interpersonal skills and practical skills.
- Civic-societal outcomes have been the second most reported on. Mainly, there are promising reports on increased civic-participation, change agency and social cohesion.
- There have been positive changes in employment outcomes. The benefits are two-fold: 1) increased employability skills and 2) clearer career aspirations.
- Education outcomes have been the least reported on, although there have been a few reports on changes in pupil's behaviour and improved academic performance (albeit, it is hard to know with certainty how much direct engagement with youth social action can be attributed to this). However, socio-emotional outcomes that have been reported, like practical skills in time management, would arguably also be beneficial for educational settings.

Key insights for community benefit

- Direct community benefit e.g., through young people improving the local area,
- Reflexive benefit e.g., through intergenerational youth social action,
- Organisational benefit e.g., through embedding youth voice in organisational strategy;
- and Societal benefit e.g., by using short-term outcomes like increased change agency as an indicator for potential future youth social action.

Introduction

The #iwill Fund is a joint fund established by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), 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 YMCA George Williams College. Work by all three organisations has fed into this report.

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub has produced 42 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 final report in a series of high-level reports summarising learning from the past five years and endeavours to answer the sector evidence plan question:

What does youth social action do?

About this report

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

Who is the report for? The insights in this report will be useful for funders, evaluators, delivery organisations and decision-makers who want to plan and evidence outcomes of youth social action. It is especially useful for all, organisations working with young people to drive change and champions of youth social action. Finally, it can be useful for young people interested in engaging with the literature around youth social action.

What is in the report? The report unpacks concepts about the potential benefits of youth social action and includes case studies of how these have been evidenced.

Why read the report? The report is designed to help readers critically think about the outcomes of youth social action so that these are relevant and meaningful for communities and young people.

Where has the evidence in this report come from?

The report is divided into two sections:

Part 1: Types of youth social action benefit unpacks five different types of outcomes of youth social action so that young people and organisations involved in youth social action can both consider the impacts they are having in different ways, with different groups, and plan youth social action projects accordingly.

Part 2: Evidence from practice focuses on what outcomes funders and delivery organisations have evidenced within the #iwill Fund, gives examples on how evaluation and learning has been approached, and shares qualitative insights from funders about the organisational change and societal impact of taking part in the #iwill Fund.

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 shows information sources used for analysis in answering the question "What does youth social action do?"

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

Table 1. Information sources for data collection

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.

Why is thinking about the benefit of youth social action important?

When talking about “benefit”, we’re talking about what positive outcomes young people and communities get out of youth social action. Having a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem distinguishes youth social action from other programmatic work that focuses solely on the potential benefit for young people ([See summative report 1](#)). Community and young people’s benefit (double benefit) should be given attention in the design and evaluation of youth social action activities on several grounds.

Firstly, it’s important to think about young people’s outcomes and community outcomes to ensure that they’re achievable in the first place. Developing a theory of change is a foundational step in ensuring that a provision will plausibly lead to outcomes that were chosen. It requires a team to decide and describe the change they wish to make, articulate why they expect the change to happen (mechanisms of change), and set out what’s needed to achieve it (See guidance for [funders](#) and [delivery organisations](#)). Aiming for outcomes you can’t deliver lets young people down, as well as obviously undermining any evaluation. Equally, selecting a few outcomes to focus on, rather than anything that could flow from youth social action, supports you to focus on achieving [quality delivery](#) for the most important things and allows you to track the progress towards each.

Additionally, thinking about outcomes from the beginning ensures that they are relevant, meaningful to, and wanted

by, your target population. Intended outcomes may change during the course of delivery or additional outcomes may be identified, due to unexpected external factors. Updating the theory of change and evaluation plans can ensure that outcomes remain relevant, meaningful and are measured. One way to ensure that provisions can flex while maintaining priorities, is identifying the ‘core’ and ‘flex’ of programmes ([See summative report 3](#)). Decisions on outcomes should also be co-produced with the young people who participate in the Youth Social Action.

To note, ‘measurability’ is not the most important criterion to consider when thinking about outcomes – what is relevant for, and needed by, target populations is the most important, balanced by what is reasonable to achieve. However, we should consider how to monitor and eventually evaluate the difference youth social action is making. Community benefit may be particularly challenging to measure, specifically indirect benefits. As the [polarity mapping exercise shows](#), it is still important to define and direct resources to achieving these benefits, even if they are not easily measurable.



Types of youth social action: Who benefits?

Youth social action has a wide range of benefits for different groups. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub has identified two types of benefit: Young people's benefits (socio-emotional, civic-societal, educational, and employment) and community benefits (direct community, societal, organisational and reflexive).

This section defines those benefits so that young people and organisations involved in youth social action can both consider the impacts they are having in different ways, with different groups, and plan youth social action projects with these benefits in mind. The section concludes with some discussion on how to balance different priorities when thinking about benefits for different groups.

To get an overview of how and what benefits have been evidenced within the #iwill Fund, see part two of this report.



Types of youth social action: Double benefit

Double benefit has been an important concept within the #iwill Fund. A clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem, as well as benefits to the young person undertaking youth social action is what distinguishes youth social action from other types of youth work with young people, which often focuses exclusively on potential benefits to the young person.

The idea of “**double benefit**’ is a central tenet of youth social action” and part of its definition:

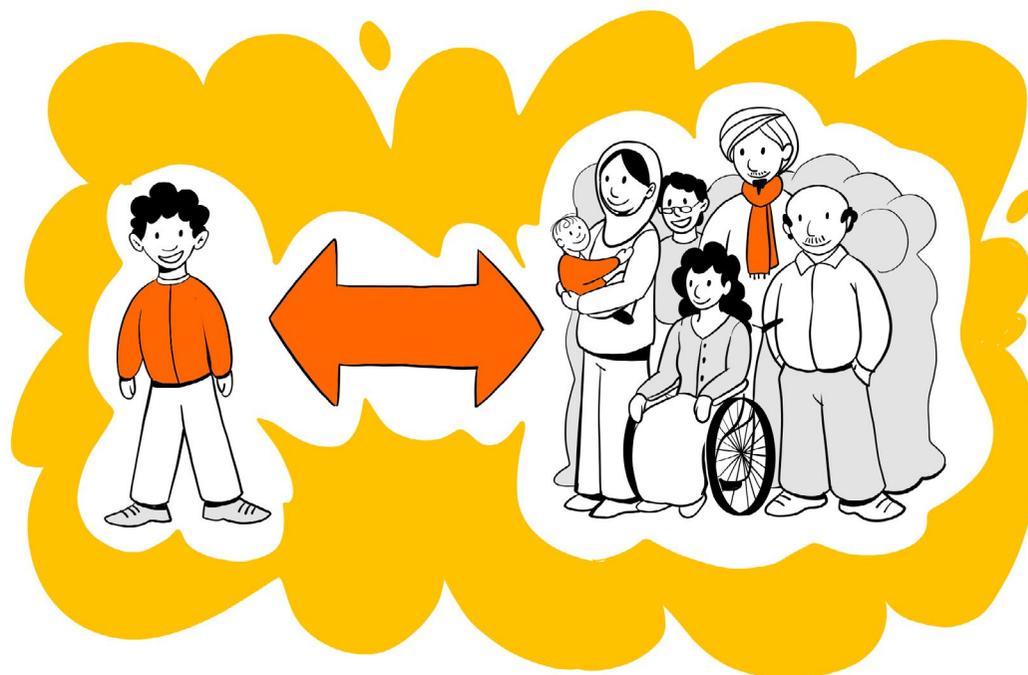
Youth social action can be defined as youth-led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action. Youth social action can be flexible in delivery and must involve at least one of three core mechanisms that 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 and/or self-efficacy.

- Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging.

One side of the double benefit is the benefit that young people experience from participating in youth social action (**young people’s benefit**).



Types of youth social action: Double benefit

The other side of double benefit, is the benefit to the wider community ([See community benefit](#)). In this case, community is defined within four categories. Categories of community can overlap. A youth social action programme may create benefits for a community that is defined by a combination of the dimensions including; geography, culture, interest and experience. It is also important to note that defining a community is a necessarily exclusive act; some people are included in the community and others are not. This is not something that can be avoided, but it is important to recognise this at the levels of funding and programme

design as it will affect which outcomes are sought, and how provisions are designed.

Youth social action activities can directly or indirectly contribute benefits to any of these communities. For example, tidying up a park directly impacts park visitors, whereas young people engaging in campaigning may have an indirect effect if other factors are in place e.g., a campaign to raise awareness around mental health may indirectly benefit communities.

Type of community	Definition
Geography	Communities of geography are defined by more or less precisely drawn boundaries around a 'local area' such as a town, neighbourhood, city, county or postcode. A report from the #iwill Fund Learning Hub has considered in greater detail the importance of place in youth social action.
Culture	Communities of culture are groups of people who may share (among other things) history, language, and traditions. Examples of communities of culture include diaspora groups in the UK.
Interest	Communities of interest identify around a shared interest or set of interests. A sports club is an example of a community that aligns around an interest in a particular hobby. Other interests can include the use of a piece of land: a local group may share an interest in keeping a park well-maintained.
Experience	Communities of experience are made up of individuals who share a past or ongoing experience. These can include experiences of physical or mental health difficulties, challenging circumstances such as financial hardship or caring for a relative, or universal experiences such as ageing.

Table 2: Types of communities

Types of youth social action: Young people's benefit

An [early review of external evidence](#) revealed four categories of outcomes for young people that have been shown, or theorised, to be linked to youth social action:

Outcome category	Specific outcomes include
Socio-Emotional Outcomes	Wellbeing, self-concept, interpersonal skills, pro-social attitudes
Civic-Societal Outcomes	Change agency, civic skills, social cohesion, habit of service
Educational Outcomes	Attitude to education, attendance, progress
Employment Outcomes	Skills development, career choices, work readiness

Table 3: Young people's benefit categorisation



Young people's benefit: Evidence from literature

For our previous literature review of young people's outcomes [read here](#). Whilst there is promising evidence for socio-emotional and civic-societal outcomes stemming from youth social action, benefits for education and employment may be more indirect through young people gaining relevant skills.

For example, a comprehensive study indicated a significant positive impact on civic-societal (pro-social behaviour, agency and sense of community), socio-emotional (empathy) outcomes as well as skills (problem-solving¹.) To note, although there were increases in positive attitudes towards education these were non-significant. Similarly, the most recent National Citizen Service evaluation found a positive impact on all four ONS wellbeing measures, young people's agency, and attitudes towards community².

The different types of youth social action: Young people's benefit

Untangling the effect of social action on civic and societal outcomes is challenging not only because social action participation can be expressive of civic engagement, but also because both can result from the same motivation to help others³. However, findings from longitudinal studies do suggest that youth social action participation can influence civic and societal behaviour^{4,5}. More recently, new evidence supported this with young people being more empowered to propose ideas and engage with their local government⁶.

Similarly, there is reasonable evidence of socio-emotional outcomes such as confidence⁷. Our [previous review](#) noted that although several studies have found small positive effects on socio-emotional outcomes, the ways in which youth social action causes these outcomes is not well understood. In our [first summative paper](#), we have proposed three common mechanisms of change that may be relevant.

Evidence from practice across the #iwill Fund strengthens some of the socio-emotional and civic-societal outcomes, experienced by young people, highlighted through literature (See Part 2). Notably, the #iwill Fund found socio-emotional outcomes such as; improved wellbeing, empathy, confidence and interpersonal skills similarly to previous literature. Moreover, civic-societal outcomes across the #iwill Fund were also congruent with previous literature, such as; sense of agency, likelihood of additional civic participation and sense of community.

Our previous evidence review suggests that youth social action is likely to have a positive impact on employment outcomes. However, it is not entirely clear how these effects are caused. Evaluations that focus on employment outcomes tend to look for evidence of the job skills mechanism, measuring changes in young people's work and life skills. For example, one study reported students developing skills in; event planning, teamwork, leadership, decision making and problem-solving', as well as 'communication skills such as presentation skills and public speaking'⁸. To note, it's been suggested that positive employment outcomes are more prevalent in young people who volunteered in a sector relevant to their occupational interest⁹. See Part 2 on how improvements in career aspirations and practical skills have been evidenced within the #iwill Fund.

As suggested in our previous evidence review, we cannot conclude that youth social action participation has a consistent, positive impact on educational outcomes. Instead, it may facilitate non-cognitive skills that are beneficial, which is further supported by outcomes evidenced within the #iwill Fund (See Part 2). For example, one study indicated that effect sizes were very small, but the development of non-cognitive skills like "teamwork" and "social responsibility" could be relevant for success in the classroom¹⁰.

Types of youth social action: Community benefit

Benefits for the community have been less explored than benefits to the young person involved in youth social action within the #iwill Fund. However, through our [review of the external evidence](#) and in conversation with #iwill Fund stakeholders we have identified four distinct types of community benefit relevant to the creation of theories of change, delivery, and evaluation. Two are direct (Direct community benefit and organisational benefit), which means that they benefit directly. The other two types of benefit are indirect.



Outcome category	Specific outcomes include
Direct community benefit	These include outcomes to the 'beneficiaries' of volunteering, mentoring, local environmental work or campaigning
Societal benefit	Benefit to society as a result of young people taking part in social action – e.g., more civic engagement in the population
Reflexive benefit	Benefit to young people as a result of changes brought about by youth social action e.g. changes brought about by campaigning, or by improved public spaces
Organisational benefit	Benefit to social purpose organisations which enable youth social action – e.g., youth social action helps them create more impact on their goals and strengthens the organisation.

Table 4: Community benefit categorisation

Types of youth social action:

Community benefit

Here we explore the evidence from literature surrounding community benefit. For our previous evidence review of community outcomes [read here](#).

Direct Community Benefit

Although there is promising evidence for short-term community outcomes, it is not always clear whether benefits are sustained. In terms of direct community benefit, there are anecdotal qualitative reports from young people and community members directly benefitting from social action¹¹, as well as evidence of successful policy changes¹² (e.g., changes in schools' health policy).

Direct community benefits can be highly varied between youth social action activities, as these are often chosen by young people rather than being pre-defined.

Societal Benefit

Musick and Wilson¹³ defined two overarching societal benefits: Citizenship benefits in which young people become more active citizens now and in their adult life (e.g. greater awareness of structural causes of social problems and the need for collective solutions and a strong habit of service) and prosocial behaviour (e.g. empathy).

Several studies have linked youth social action to young people's short-term prosocial outcomes that could theoretically continue into adulthood and benefit the society that young people are part of^{14,15}. Indeed, a longitudinal

study of the City Year programme in the US found that alumni of the programme were more likely to volunteer and vote as adults¹⁶. However, others have found that short-term effects were not sustained¹⁷. Within the #iwill Fund, a common short-term outcome has been young people expressing that they'd like to participate in social action again, as well as increases in change agency [\(See Part 2\)](#).

Reflexive Benefit

Reflexive benefits may be most obvious when young people complete youth social action projects that aim to benefit communities to which they themselves belong (e.g., improving a park in the area that they live in).

Reflexive benefit has been tentatively documented in various ways. For example, one study highlighted that youth voice and youth leadership are key aspects to young people influencing changes in policy or supporting systems-change objectives for their community¹⁸. Another study highlighted that 'older' young people have helped to improve science policies with the support of academics and scholars by offering diverse and versatile perspectives, which in turn would benefit the young people as well¹⁹. Another type of reflexive benefit that has been reported is communities benefitting from social cohesion (e.g., through young people reportedly breaking down stereotypes), whilst young people felt they in turn benefitted by gaining social capital²⁰.

Types of youth social action: Organisational benefit

As well as the benefit to young people and the community, youth social action has been reported to have a benefit for organisations delivering opportunities. In order to articulate the value to an organisation of ongoing investment in youth social action provisions, it may be helpful to distinguish organisational benefit separately from benefit to the wider community. Some organisations use the term 'triple benefit' to describe the benefit that organisations experience. The term 'triple benefit' is often motivated by a desire to demonstrate the value of youth social action to an organisation in the hope that the organisation will continue to provide opportunities from its regular budget. Examples of organisational benefit include:



Organisations and funders that embed youth voice at all stages of their work contribute to the organisation's strategy and mission.



Organisations that provide youth social action opportunities can benefit directly from the activity, e.g. Young volunteers support paid staff.



Organisations and funders are able to improve capacity to gather and use evidence to inform the delivery of their provisions.



Organisations and funders gain increased understanding and ability to implement high quality youth social action²¹.



Organisational benefit: Evidence from literature

In wider literature, organisational benefit has been evidenced through young people informing organisations' strategies by acting as active stakeholders, and informing organisational decisions that impact youth²². Predominantly, however, organisational benefit has been evidenced through 'value-for-money' research. For example, in summer 2019, through National Citizen Service, young people completed hours of volunteering equivalent to approximately £35.7 million of paid work²³.

Within the #iwill Fund, organisational benefit was shown for organisations delivering youth social action as well as funders. See Part 2 for an outline of evidence taken from monitoring and evaluation reports as well as interviews with Match Funders.

Value flows in youth social action

As the description of different benefit suggests, benefits emerging from youth social action are theorised to be a dynamic process. For example, as young people benefit, so does the community and vice versa. The framework displayed in Figure 1 is a useful visual representation using value flows to depict the possible benefit that 'ripples through' young people, communities, and organisations as a result of youth social action.

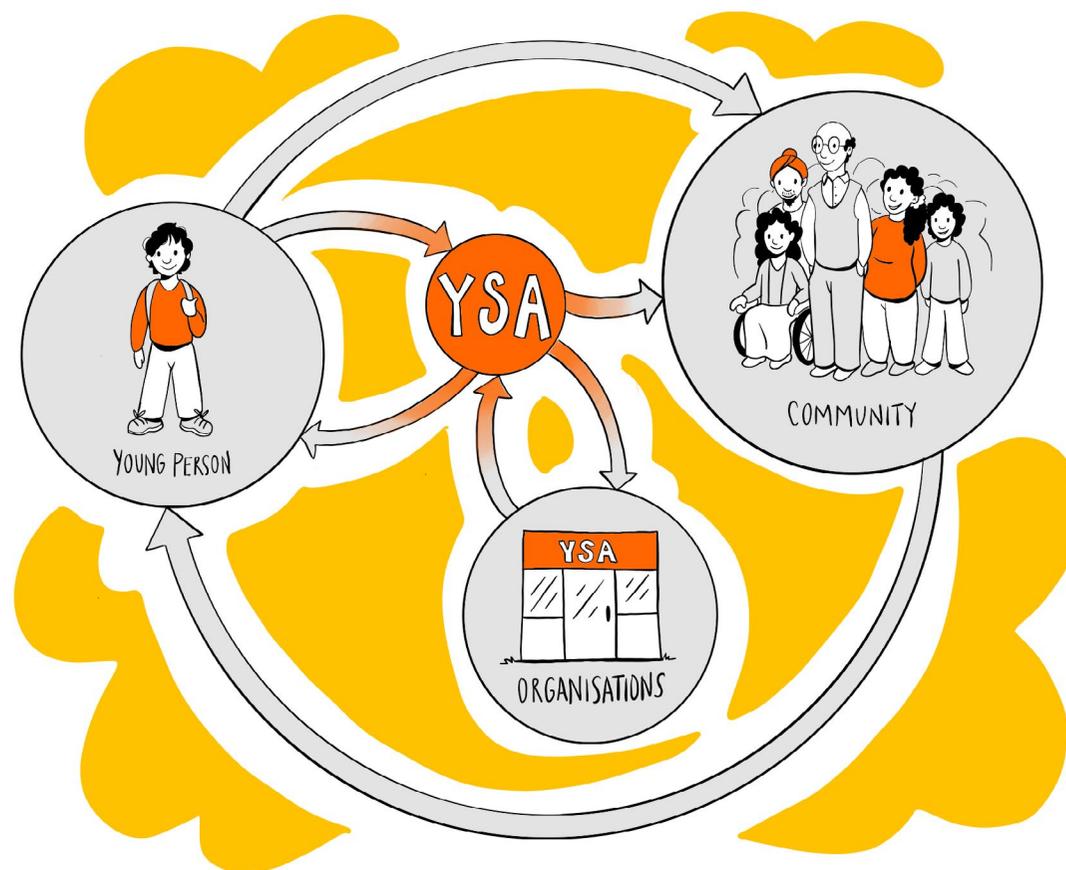
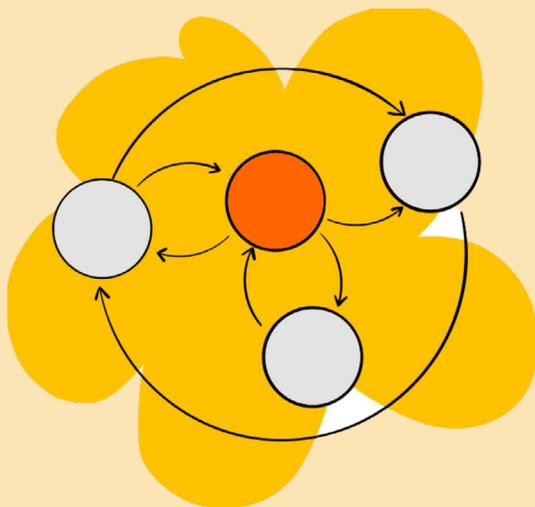
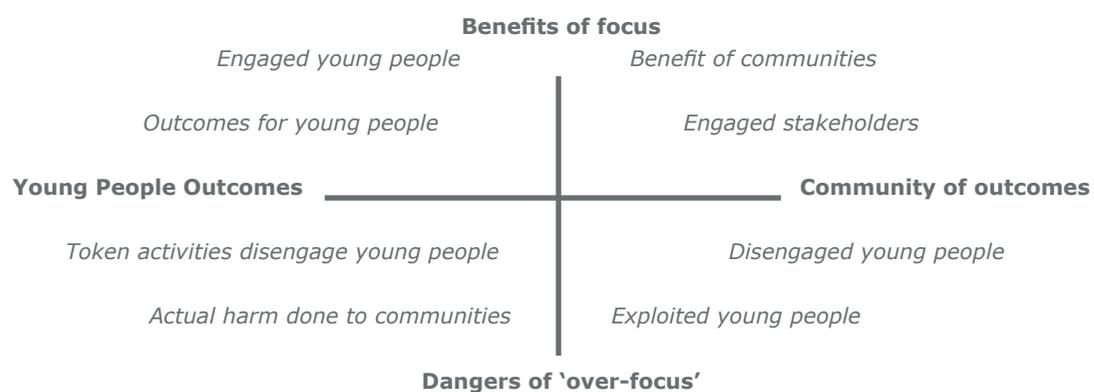


Figure 1: Youth Social Action Value Flows

Managing polarities in double benefit

Double benefit is unusual and can be challenging, both because of the youth-led element meaning that the community outcomes, length of engagement and activities can vastly differ, but also because most organisations are naturally more expert in creating outcomes for one than the other or their strategy has a particular focus²⁴. Because of this, it can be tempting to focus on where there is more expertise and define only (or particularly) one set of outcomes – leaving the theory of change and subsequent delivery one-sided.

However, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub’s learning to date suggests that this may have unintended consequences. The creation of outcomes for young people or communities is at least partly dependent on creating outcomes for the other. This is known as ‘managing polarities’ illustrated in figure.2.



At each end of the horizontal axis are outcomes, either of which may receive more focus from a delivery organisation. Above the line and on either side of the vertical axis are the benefits of that focus. Below it are the risks, or dangers.

We can see that youth social action provision which is focused on outcomes for young people can engage young people well and may indeed achieve some outcomes. However, over-focus on these outcomes and marginalisation of community outcomes may have consequences. For example, as young people are motivated by creating change in their communities, if they feel that the community isn't benefitting they may disengage²⁵. Importantly, an organisation which does not take its engagement with the community seriously may end up doing real harm to those they work with.

Further developing theories of change has allowed organisations to be explicit about what community and Young People's outcomes they are aiming to achieve. This also facilitates managing polarities of double benefit (See theory of change guidance for **fund**ers and **del**ivery organisations).

Figure 2: Polarities of double benefit

Conclusions and recommendations



The frameworks described before should be used to think rigorously about the theories of change underpinning youth social action programme designs.

Target Populations

Those designing youth social action programmes should use the categories of beneficiaries from social action (young people, organisations, services users and communities) and the categories of communities (e.g. of geography, culture, interest and experience) to refine their theories of change, being explicit about where their programme is anticipated to have an impact.

Outcomes

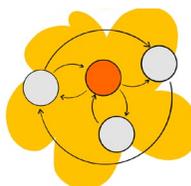
Organisations should consider all of the potential benefits of youth social action when planning and measuring impact. The concepts of societal and reflexive benefit should enable those designing youth social action opportunities to broaden their understanding of the potential impact of their programmes,

the mechanisms by which this may be achieved, and appropriate and proportionate ways to understand their impact. Societal and reflexive benefit may be slightly easier to measure as organisations have direct contact with young people.



Tailor provisions for both the community and young people's benefit from the beginning.

Even though it is more difficult to measure, community benefit should still be equally considered when planning and undertaking youth social action. Prioritising both young people's and community benefits may be necessary to make provisions relevant and meaningful to both parties and prevent disengagement



Use value flows in youth social action to understand how change happens.

Programmes that may be creating reflexive benefit (according to their theory of change) will not understand how they are changing young people's outcomes without appreciating their

effects for the communities in which those young people live. Understanding how benefits to one stakeholder group can have knock on benefits to others is a useful way of thinking of mechanisms of change within youth social action.



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 principles also apply to the projects young people undertake as part of highly youth-led social action opportunities. Those designing, providing and funding youth social action opportunities should consider how young people can be empowered to apply these principles to their projects. They should support young people to develop theories of change and evaluate the impact of their work – in engaging and proportionate ways.

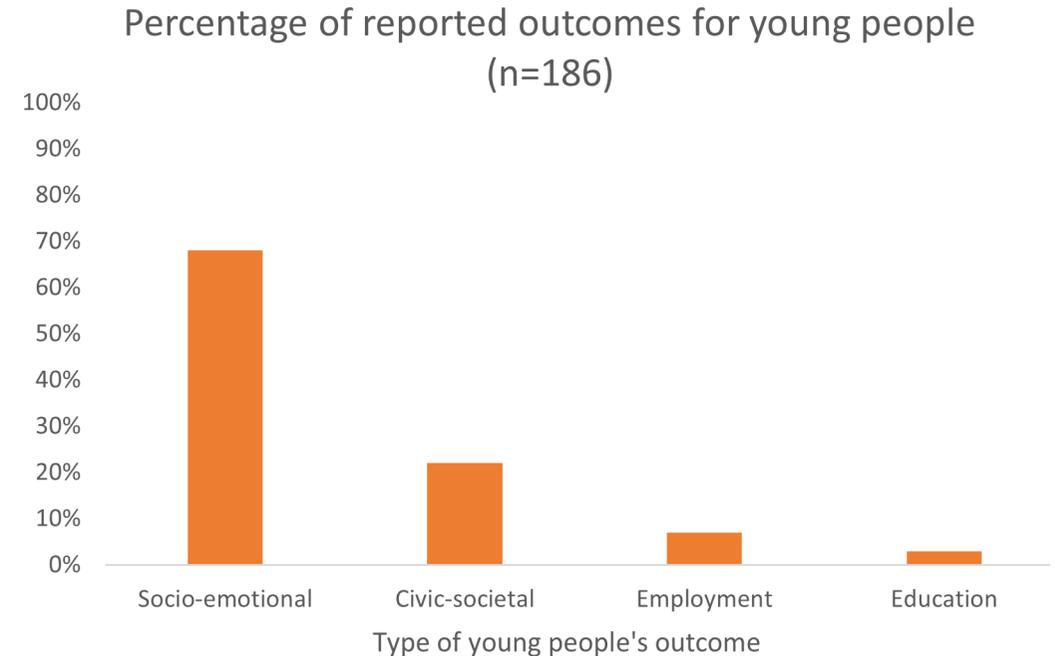
Evidence from practice

Summary of evidence of benefit within #iwill Fund

This section provides examples of how the different types of young people and community benefits have been measured and evidenced within the #iwill Fund. Evidence has been reviewed from Match Funder's monitoring and impact reports. The majority of young people's benefit that has been reported used quantitative measures e.g., surveys. In contrast, community benefit has mostly been evidenced by Match Funders through interviews with young people, staff or community members.

Evidence for young people's benefit within the #iwill Fund

Graph 1 showcases the proportion of outcomes that have been reported for each young people's outcomes category. It does not include reported benefits in case studies or anecdotal evidence from Match Funder reports. Rather, it showcases outcomes that were specifically reported in monitoring and impact reports.



Graph 1 reported outcomes for young people

Evidence of Socio-emotional outcomes

Over half of the benefits that have been reported within the #iwill Fund are socio-emotional outcomes (n=132), and thus is an area we can be most confident in.



A quarter of these positive reports evidence benefits to the **wellbeing of young people** (n=33). This included validated measures such as the ONS4, Warwick Edinburgh short scale for wellbeing, and Stirling wellbeing scores. For instance, both Sport England and Spirit of 2012 used the ONS4 measure to show positive

changes in young people feeling their life was worthwhile, life satisfaction, and happiness. These changes were statistically significant across Spirit of 2012's reporting period. To note, the #iwill Fund spanned the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a detrimental impact on many young people's wellbeing. However, although Match Funders noted lower improvements in wellbeing, as well as some deterioration, it is noteworthy that youth social action still offered benefits to young people's wellbeing during this difficult time. For example, Comic Relief highlighted that 92% of young people that were interviewed felt less lonely or isolated because of their project.



Using individual journey maps (n=101) to unpack young people's experiences, Young Manchester highlighted that the most frequently mentioned benefit related to the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Within the #iwill Fund, the most common skills to be reported on were **interpersonal skills**

(n=31). Changes in leadership skills were the most reported. This may be unsurprising given the youth-led element of youth social action. Similarly, benefits in teamwork skills were evidenced. For example, Ormiston Trust Academies surveyed over 14,000 students and found there to be a statistically significant relationship between higher skills in solving problems and working with others and whether a pupil had participated in #iwill Fund. Another commonly reported interpersonal skill was "communication", with seven Match Funders reporting on improved communication skills. Although there were no validated measures for this, Spirit of 2012 reported that these changes were significant.



The third most frequently reported socio-emotional outcome was the benefit relating to **self-concept** (n=27). Positive changes in confidence (n=15) were reported across the #iwill Fund. These were mainly changes in young people's general confidence in themselves. For example, Virgin Money Foundation reported that 71% of young people said that they had improved confidence at the end of a programme. Some Match Funders, like Young Manchester, also mentioned confidence in skills e.g., confidence as a researcher. Using interviews, Comic Relief

Evidence of Socio-emotional outcomes

noted that staff understood increased confidence as helping young people believe their views and opinions matter. In turn, staff suggested, this has encouraged young people to be more assertive and challenge issues they feel strongly about. Unpacking mechanisms that have led to change will allow us to understand what leads to commonly reported benefits within youth social action opportunities.

Additionally, Match Funders reported on improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy and aspirations (n=12). Comic Relief's staff interviews showcased that young people felt more pride, self-worth and value based on their roles, experiences and what they can give back to the community. Similarly, Spirit of 2012 reported significant changes in young people's self-efficacy as well as young people's perceptions of their gender. **Within summative report 1**, a common mechanism leading to improved self-concept was highlighted: "young people take self-directed action which gives them a sense of purpose that contributes to their well-being, self-concept and/or self-efficacy".



Comic Relief emphasised that young people perceived practical skills as a main benefit of youth social action. Across the #iwill Fund, **practical skills** could be project-specific such as The Ernest Cook Trust reporting on improved environmental and volunteering skills and interviews from Pears Foundation showcasing skills in healthcare. Considering that youth social action can take shape in a variety of activities (**See summative report 1**), specific practical skills that can emerge from opportunities are likely many and varied. More generally,

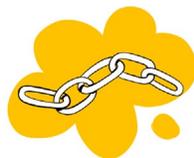
Match Funders like Housing Association Youth Network (HAYN) and Civil Society and Sport Young Ambassadors reported self-reported positive changes in problem-solving, self-organisation and creativity/ideas development.



Other less frequently reported outcomes were **resilience** (n=5). For example, Co-op Foundation analysed project reports with partial monitoring submissions in November 2021 and highlighted that over half of the projects that were submitted were reporting young people making progress towards building resilience. Similarly, there were reports of increased levels of **trust in others**, with the Greater London Authority reporting positive changes in trust in all of their reporting periods. This is further supported by Spirit of 2012, surveying 911 participants and showing statistically significant improvements in young people's trust in others.

Evidence of Civic-societal outcomes

The second most reported young people's outcomes were civic societal (n=42).



Most commonly, this included reports of **social cohesion** (n=14). Match Funders' interviews with young people highlighted their increased sense of community.

For example, Comic Relief noted that youth social action gave young people the opportunity to engage with others with similar experiences, creating a sense of community. Similarly, interviews from Pears Foundation highlighted that young people feeling part of a bigger change and experiencing solidarity allowed them to feel part of the hospitals they were volunteering at. These positive changes in social cohesion and connectedness are further supported by 10 survey reports across six different funders. Across Match Funder reports, there was a common mechanism that may have contributed to these positive changes: "Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging."



Across Match Funder reports, it was highlighted that young people were empowered to create social change. This is also reflected by evaluations showcasing positive changes in young people's **change agency** (n=14). **Mainly young people's belief that change is possible.**

The majority of change was evaluated using self-report tools. For example, at the end of their youth social action opportunity, Housing Association Youth Network reported that 52% agreed that they had increased in change agency, while pupils in Ormiston Academies Trust believed they were able to make positive changes in their school significantly more than non-#iwill Fund pupils. Qualitative reports from Match Funders consistently highlighted young people's positive feelings towards social change after their projects. For example, Young Manchester case studies carried out by peer researchers showcased that young people felt good after helping others, while a young person in a Pears Foundation interview mentioned that "I know it's a cliché, but it feels good to do good!! Whether I'm part of a huge change, or just

helping out a little bit day by day, I feel so much better than doing nothing at all". Although it's possible that young people who already have higher levels of change agency are more likely to partake in youth social action projects, it's encouraging that there are four reports that showed positive changes at the end of the projects compared to the beginning.



Similarly, Match Funders reported on positive changes in **civic participation** (n=13). Participants were frequently shown to want to continue doing youth social action after projects ended. Match Funders like Housing Association Youth Network consistently showcased an increase in the proportion of young people who agreed that they had a desire for civic participation (e.g., a 13% increase in 230 participants). To note, although some Match Funders reported young people to progress to future social action opportunities or careers that are perceived to have a social impact (e.g., youth worker), not every evaluation followed up on whether young people continued to engage in social change as they said they would.

Evidence of Employment outcomes

There were thirteen reports of positive employment outcomes.



Firstly, three Match Funders highlighted changes in **employability skills**. Using young people interviews, Pears Foundation emphasised that young people valued the opportunity to gain experience that not only provided skillsets but shaped future career aspirations.

Similarly, Comic Relief staff interviews reported that young people gained skills, relationship networks and experience that allowed young people to move into employment or education. It is important to note that this also applied to projects where young people had not originally been involved in education or any employment.

Other Match Funders also incorporated **accreditations** within their projects, such as youth work accreditations, that may contribute to young people's employability.

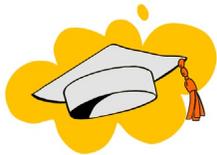


Match Funders also reported on youth social action shaping young people's **career aspirations**. For example, Dunhill Medical Trust found that teachers who were interviewed highlighted that young people's involvement with care home residents sparked an interest in older people and, more broadly, social care careers. To note, the majority of young people within the #iwill Fund have been younger than the age of 14 and therefore, employability outcomes may not be as relevant for them and thus not as frequently reported. For example, in one Match Funder report Housing Association Youth Network stated that even though young people felt the programme had opened new opportunities, they were still confused about their future as they were too young.

Evidence of Educational outcomes

Education outcomes were the least reported on (n=5). These outcomes were divided in two themes:

- 1) **Improved behaviour in education**
- 2) **Improved academic performance**



Two Match Funders reported on **behaviour in education**. For example, Greater London Authority reported that 91% of teachers (n=20) that were surveyed at the end of the programme agreed that students had improved their behaviour or attendance at school. Similarly, Housing Association Youth Network reported a slight increase (2%, n=230) in young people that agreed that they had developed educational motivation. Considering these small changes and sample sizes, outcomes are positive but still emerging.

Some educational outcomes arguably extended from socio-emotional outcomes. For example, Ormiston Academies Trust (n=14,000) reported that, at the endpoint, participating pupils reported statistically higher average scores across all three social-emotional learning domains than pupils who hadn't participated in #iwill-funded activities. Improvements included: tackling challenges, achieving goals, solving problems, working with others and agency over the school, the future and the community. All of these outcomes are beneficial when applied to an educational setting.



Similarly, there was one report from the Greater London Authority of **improved academic performance** in young people, with 75% of 15 teachers agreeing that young people performed better after taking part in the #iwill Fund. Although it's too early to say whether links can be drawn between youth social action and educational outcomes, other outcomes that have been more evidenced such as practical and interpersonal skills (e.g., project planning, self-management or teamwork) or young people's general wellbeing could arguably also benefit young people in an educational setting and in the long-term contribute to educational outcomes.

Outcomes for community in the #iwill Fund: Challenges in evaluating community benefit

Community benefit has been reported far less than the benefit to young people throughout the #iwill Fund. This may have been either due to a bigger focus on young people as [detailed here](#), or because it is more difficult to measure and as a result is more challenging to showcase.

Namely, rigorous measurement of community outcomes would require long-term study ideally comparing the youth social action intervention against a control scenario where the youth social action opportunity does not happen. This duration of study, practicality and resource required is often outside the scope projects and therefore has less feasibility.

Additionally, it is challenging to design a community outcomes framework for highly youth-led social action where the outcomes are not defined in advance, and we have not yet seen a good example of this being done. Match Funders reported that it was easier to provide surface-level observations around how the community engaged with young people's projects than any change that occurred to the community as a result, unless it was direct community benefit. For recommendations on measuring community impact, [refer to here](#).

Considering the difficulty of measuring community impact, the following section may not reflect the entirety of community benefit that happened across the #iwill Fund. Instead, it celebrates the creative ways that Match Funders and delivery organisations have tried to evaluate it.



Outcomes for community in the #iwill Fund: Direct community benefit

Direct community benefit was most frequently reported on across the #iwill Fund. Match Funders frequently reported on reach in terms of community e.g., number of visits to a website. However, although this indicates the reach of youth social action, we cannot say that it evidences community benefit.

The main way that direct community benefit was measured was through self-reports on whether they thought projects had had community benefit. For example, The Ernest Cook Trust reported that 60% of young people (total n=419) thought that the local environment or community had been improved.



Similarly, IFF research undertook a desk-based review of Co-op Foundation's project reports, finding that 9/21 project reports reported progress towards the outcomes that young people had felt they had **influenced support, services, or spaces in their community.**

When self-reports are triangulated with further sources of evidence, it can support a clearer picture of positive community benefits that emerge from youth social action. For example, only considering The Ernest Cook Trust's self-report measures may not be as reliable, but coupled with the evidence of residents wanting to support further youth social action, it becomes more promising.

When direct community benefit involved improving the local area this seemed to be more easily evidenced and thus reported on. For example, projects were able to report on the number of parks that had been improved or the local artwork that was installed. In contrast, youth social action that involved campaigning, for example, may not always have had such tangible proxies.



Finally, Match Funders evidenced direct community benefit through interviews with delivery staff, individual case studies, and quotes from community members. For example, Dunhill Medical Trust highlighted that 66.7% of care home staff reported that residents described themselves to be **happier** during and after youth social action opportunities with young people.

Similarly, Pears Foundation used interviews to highlight benefits experienced by hospital staff and patients: "These volunteers offered the most valuable gift – their time. Their great generosity has had a profound and lasting impact on our patients and the community as a whole". In both instances, the community that young people tried to create benefits for was consistent across opportunities, potentially making it easier to build an evidence base as well as generalise findings across opportunities.

Outcomes for community in the #iwill Fund: Organisational benefit

Organisational benefits that have been cited by Match Funders in their exit interviews can be [found on page 31](#)



Organisational benefit was mentioned across Match Funder reports, although often, this was anecdotal rather than built into formal evaluations. Firstly, some organisations benefitted from youth social action directly from the activity, with young people **contributing skills, capacity and time** to organisations. For example, Pears Foundation highlighted that embedding young people into health settings provided an “extra pair of helping hands”, taking the pressure of staff and allowing them to dedicate resources and time to patients.

“It was evident that the patients and the ward staff were always appreciative of our help, and I really enjoyed knowing that I was making a difference to somebody’s day.” **Young volunteer, Pears Foundation.**



Additionally, youth social action was reported to have given the benefit of embedding youth voice in organisations and **shaping organisational activity and strategy**.

Comic Relief highlighted that 90% of staff surveyed (n=23) reported that young people are now more involved in shaping organisational activities. Whilst this model hasn’t been new to all organisations within the #iwill Fund, there have been

many reports of organisations developing youth boards, forums or other opportunities for young people to shape change within organisations.



Finally, Match Funders reported that embedding youth voice for youth social action projects often allowed for a **better understanding of young people** more broadly.

For example, Comic Relief highlighted that 95% of staff agreed that the #iwill Fund created a better understanding of issues affecting the young people they support, and 85% agreed that this has resulted in their services and support becoming more relevant to the needs of young people.



Outcomes for community in the #iwill Fund: Reflexive benefit



Reports on reflexive benefits were more limited. Mainly, reflexive benefit was highlighted when there were improvements to the local area. For example, when young people created community gardens in their local schools.

One Match Funder that consistently reported on reflexive benefit was Dunhill Medical Trust. For example, interviews with school and care home leads (n=19) highlighted that youth social action opportunities not only offered intergenerational linking and added to the care home residents' happiness, but in turn, residents shared skills, knowledge and stories with the young people.

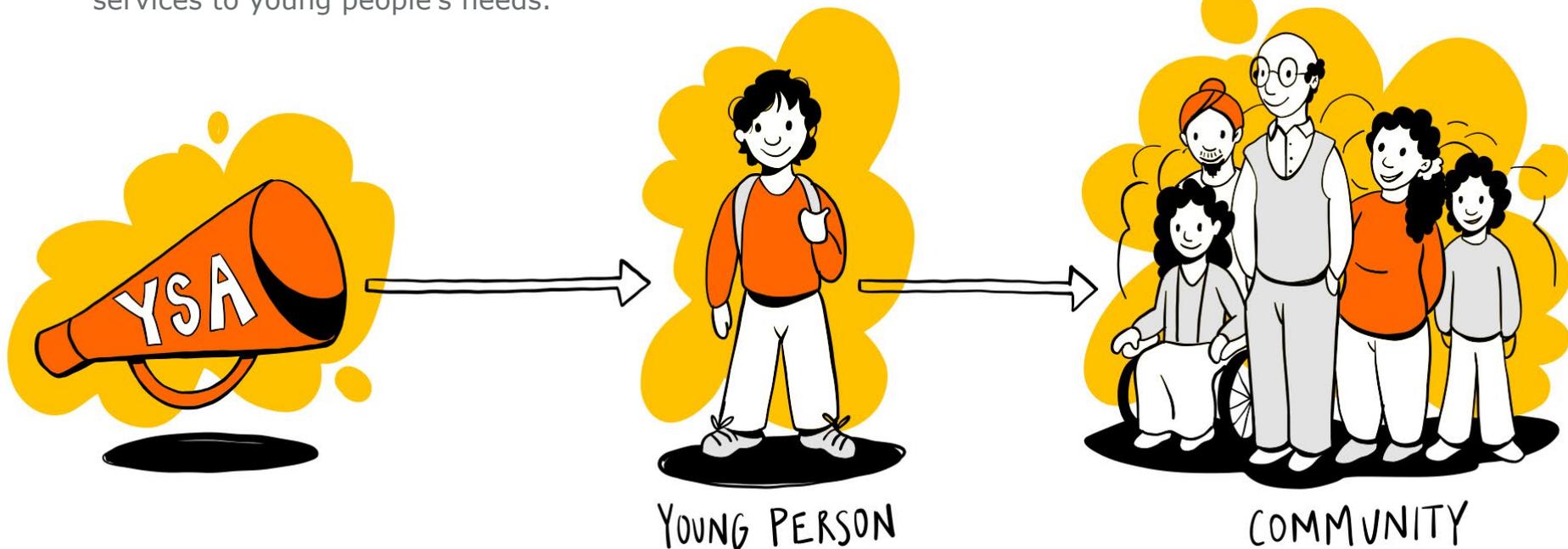
"Obviously we want to encourage young people to be active in their community, but what we liked about that was the residents having control and ownership and that reciprocation, it's not just the young people helping the older people. It's kind of a two-way. Yeah, respectful relationship, which is, yeah, really lovely and really important." – Staff interview, Dunhill Medical Trust.



Outcomes for community in the #iwill Fund: Societal benefit

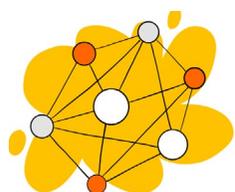


Societal benefit has been the least reported on, most likely because societal benefits from youth social action are thought to accrue over time and thus would require resource-intensive long-term study. However, many young people's outcomes that have been measured are tentative promising indicators for potential future societal benefit. For example, young people **developing more change agency and increasing their civic participation** could have societal benefits in the long-term. Equally, over the long-term, there could be increasing societal benefit as a consequence of organisations embedding youth voice into their organisational activities and strategies, and thus tailoring their support and services to young people's needs.



Organisational benefit of being part of the #iwill Fund

Outside of formal evaluations, another source for understanding the change that happened within the #iwill Fund is Match Funder exit interviews. These touch on organisational benefits experienced by being an #iwill Match Funder and perceived impact on the wider sector.



Collaborative working

Through being part of the #iwill Fund, organisations benefitted from having a peer network to share learning and collaborate with. It created a space for reflection and problem-solving to generate deeper insights from the work they were doing that they could also apply to other areas.

"I have a much stronger understanding of what other funders are doing in the YSA action space than I do in any other area that we fund. That really helps to make links to understand what learning could apply to our learning. E.g., PHF have done stuff around campaigns and measuring the success of a campaign. That is ideal learning for another one of our projects that we have in an early stage. I would not have known about that without this. A sudden big collaboration, but it has been relevant in tangential ways in what we are doing or stopped us doing things and reinventing the wheel."
– **Spirit of 2012**

"We had some really good conversations that felt really supportive and positive with the Match Funders, and other

funding programmes you just don't get that sense of network necessarily and different perspectives. I'd say that's made it more fun and enjoyable." – **Sport England**

"Because we are a direct delivery organisation as well, we tend to get caught up in the doing. [While working as a Match Funder] We could rise above it and think about what we can do as an organisation setting standards." – **Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade**

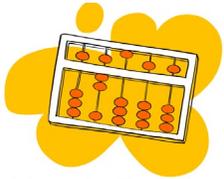


Understanding and embedding youth voice

Through youth social action, Match Funders reported that they improved their knowledge around the benefit of speaking with young people to inform their provisions. Co-creation and collaboration with young people to shape activities, improve the quality of provision and embed young peoples' opinions created a more youth-centred and informed delivery.

"It has really supported us when thinking about the future, what should we prioritise. Youth voice has been so championed throughout the Fund. It has supported us and enabled us to bring something we were already doing to the fore of our organisation. It [youth voice] is now a fundamental part of our new strategy and explicitly embedded in what we are doing. That has come directly from focus #iwill has put on that." – **Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade**

Organisational benefit of being part of the #iwill Fund



Developing and applying learning from the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

Match Funders found benefit in the support provided to develop their theories of change and tying it to their wider organisational strategy. They underlined the usefulness of other key concepts such as double benefit and embedding quality principles in evaluating a range of other programmes they are relevant to.

"How do you build in things like being youth-led to a programme where the outcomes are much more fixed? I have a much stronger idea how to do that now." – **Spirit of 2012**



Embedding different ways of working with young people

Organisations were able to test new models for working with young people as well as implement more effective evaluation strategies. Due to the introduction of new concepts and methods, Match Funders felt that these created a more general commitment towards participation and co-creation across the wider sector.

"It has given us more confidence to say that you do not need

to see that divide between adult and young volunteers in the same way. Yes, young people require different types of support to access opportunities, especially those who have never thought of volunteering before, but that does not mean that you have to put them in a box that this is too hard for young people. It does not have to be intimidating amounts of support." – **Spirit of 2012**



Sustainability

Organisations also gained deeper insights in how to maintain sustainable youth social action. Working alongside peers to gain insights into the wider sector and focusing on long-term goals instead of day-to-day tasks contributed to sustainable practices. The #iwill Fund has also helped to articulate the importance of youth social action to promote buy-in from interested investors.

"But, we sort of did shout about it for the #iwill Fund and it has been quite meaningful internally because it has set it up as something we care about and the type of funding that we want to do." – **Pears Foundation**

Societal benefit of being part of the #iwill Fund



Sustainability and increased opportunities for youth social action

After youth social action programmes ended, Match Funders reported that youth social action remained a core part of their services. Similarly, knowledge gained from delivering youth social action has been used in the wider volunteering sector. Both of which created more youth social action opportunities for young people to get involved with.

"Nowadays there's much more appetite for participation - it should be a given that there are opportunities for participation [from those with lived experience in the design and rollout of funding programmes]" - Comic Relief



A shift in attitude towards young people's capabilities

Match funders reported that they had seen a change in how young people were perceived. It was highlighted that youth social action enabled society to take the role of young people more seriously. It was suggested that there was a shift with young people being seen as an important part of civil society whose perceptions add value. Within the design and delivery of youth social action this shift was mirrored, with young people's contributions being seen as central.

*"It's **now** a basic expectation to see lived experience involved in developing proposals." - Comic Relief*

"The sector and landscape has become stronger. The #iwill campaign, the Fund, eVOLve, have helped to make YSA a focus and get young people involved in society." - Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade

"We heard through our evaluation quite a lot of surprise around young people's capabilities. It has opened the minds of community members; you can get something useful here. Not just something nice to have for young people but they can fulfil a role and are skilled enough to do it." -

Spirit of 2012

Discussion

Youth social action has been defined by two different types of benefit: young people and community benefits. Young people and organisations involved in youth social action should consider the impacts they are having in different ways, with different groups, and plan youth social action projects accordingly.

A theory of change is a useful tool to map out how youth social action plans to achieve change. Indeed, the Match Funders that had utilised a theory of change for their #iwill Fund programme benefited as the theory of change provided them with a strategic focus and guidance on measuring and evaluation (See theory of change guidance for [funders](#) and [delivery organisations](#)).

A challenge in measuring community impact has been the highly youth-led nature of projects meaning that activities and intended change are sometimes not pre-defined. However, 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 principles also apply to the projects young people undertake as part of highly youth-led social action opportunities.

Those designing, providing and funding youth social action opportunities should also consider how young people can be empowered to apply these principles to their projects. They should support young people to develop theories of change and evaluate the impact of their work in engaging and proportionate ways.

Despite having designed youth social action opportunities to benefit young people, organisations, and the community, measuring the impact in all three areas was a challenge. Most Match Funders felt most confident in measuring the outcomes for young people engaging in youth social action. This has resulted in a promising evidence base, particularly for socio-emotional and civic-societal outcomes. However, tracking community benefits and wider societal change was a challenge. This was additionally complicated by Match Funders not wanting to be too prescriptive in their monitoring data requirements for delivery organisations while still needing consistent data collection to evidence impact.

In exit interviews, some Match Funders underlined that there was a lack of wider assessment to come to conclusions about how youth social action across the #iwill Fund has impacted the wider sector. It was noted that youth social action opportunities may have enabled consultation with young people, however this hasn't been implemented on a global scale. Furthermore, goals were more focused on increasing the engagement of young people in youth social action than enacting systems-change in the wider sector. Some of the challenges to measuring wider impact surrounded; how to define impact; how to evidence long-term impact and causal relationships; how to collect data from young people and measure changes in their behaviours or attitudes.

This phase of the #iwill Fund has provided some promising evidence of positive outcomes resulting from youth social action, particularly for young people. However, because consistent measures or data collection were not prescribed

Discussion

across the fund, findings are still, at times, tentative. The next phase of the #iwill Fund will undertake an evaluation to 1) test mechanisms of change so that we can be confident in how youth social action achieves change and 2) start filling gaps in our current knowledge on what benefit is being achieved



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Appendix 1

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
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 Foundation
Scouts 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
Virgin Money Foundation
V inspired
Volunteering Matters
WE Foundation
Young Manchester
Youth Endowment Fund

Appendix 2: Sector evidence plan

question: how do we support youth social action for all?

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?



Report designed by Alice Hewson and Rachel Lily.
Illustrations by Supreetha Chakravarthy Krishnan

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