

# Involving underrepresented groups in Youth Social Action

Lessons from the #iwill Youth Social Action Fund



Proudly supporting youth social action



Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport



COMMUNITY FUND



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social and economic research

## What is Youth Social Action?

Social action involves activities such as campaigning, fundraising and volunteering, all of which enable young people to make a difference in their communities as well as develop their own skills and knowledge.

### Introduction to the #iwill Youth Social Action Fund

The #iwill Fund was made possible thanks to £54 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action. In 2017 Comic Relief partnered with the #iwill Fund to create the #iwill Youth Social Action Fund - a £2.4million fund that would provide opportunities for underrepresented young people to participate in social action.

The #iwill Youth Social Action fund provided support to sixteen organisations (funded partners) to deliver youth social action projects. These projects targeted young people from groups who are commonly underrepresented in YSA.

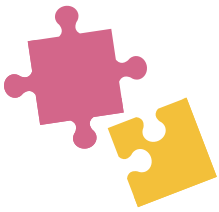
Based on the experiences of funded partners and young people, this short summary sets out effective methods and common challenges encountered in engaging underrepresented groups in YSA.

### The Funded Projects

The #iwill Youth Social Action Fund created more than 5,500 opportunities for young people to participate in youth social action projects. The 16 funded projects engaged with a wide variety of groups who are underrepresented in youth social action. This included young people from the following groups:

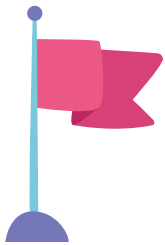
- Men
- Socio-economically disadvantaged young people
- Young carers
- Care experienced young people
- Disabled young people
- Young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- Asylum seekers and refugees.

## Effective Strategies for involving underrepresented groups in Youth Social Action



### **Create spaces where young people can connect and share their experiences**

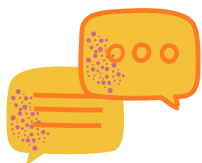
Young people valued the opportunity to be involved in projects where they had the opportunity to engage with others with similar lived experiences. This was particularly valued by young carers, care experienced young people and LGBT+ young people who in some cases had not had many opportunities to meet young people with similar experiences.



### **Empower young people to lead**

Projects provided a range of opportunities for young people to lead including steering the direction of the project, and taking on roles as ambassadors, leaders or supporting recruitment and outreach.

"Having young people themselves advertising the group and talking to other people about the project was very effective as we found young people were in the best position to identify other young people who maybe struggling that no one else had seen. For being able to intervene early for young people this worked really well." - Project Delivery Staff



### **Provide pastoral support and work to minimise barriers**

The groups projects involved in youth social action included young carers, care-experienced young people, homeless young people, and other socio-economically disadvantaged groups. As a result, it was important that projects took steps to offer pastoral support and minimise the barriers to participation faced by these groups.

In some projects this included providing appropriate mentorship and signposting participants to support for specialist needs like mental health or employability services. Project teams also took steps to reduce barriers by providing food, and offering sessions at suitable times to fit around the different commitments and responsibilities the young people were juggling.

## Involve a diverse and locally knowledgeable team

It was important that staff could relate to the lived experiences of participants. Having a diverse team helped to ensure that staff were able to reflect the wide range of young people involved in this project. This, in turn, helped to increase participants engagement with staff, encouraging continued engagement in the project.



The best thing you can do is make sure that staff have practical knowledge about the area and as much exposure to the young people they will be working with as possible. If staff come down from London for a day - that's not enough insight. You need staff who live there who understand and grasp the culture of how things work.



## Challenges faced by organisations

### The complexity of young people's lives

Whilst all projects funded by the #iwill Youth Social Action Fund were working with underrepresented groups, some projects were working with groups who experience multiple and complex barriers to engagement which may have limited the extent to which young people were able to continually engage with social action projects. For example, projects that worked with care experienced young people, young carers, asylum seekers and refugees and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

There was a recognition among the staff delivering these projects that the needs of the young people needed to take priority, and that sometimes participants capacity to engage was limited by the other things going on in their lives. It was therefore important that, where possible, project staff took opportunities to reduce barriers to engagement to participants.

### Tips for minimising barriers



#### Don't Cancel

It's important that participants build up trust with project staff and know that the project is something they can rely on. Therefore, even when turn out is low staff should commit to delivering planned activity.



#### Be realistic about timescales

Timescales should be planned with young people so that they are responsive to the differing commitments they might have.



#### Be responsive to the barriers experienced

Take steps to mitigate barriers where possible, and be mindful of the fact that participants may only be able to dip in and out of projects.

## The term 'Youth Social Action' was not well understood

Both project staff and young people sometimes struggled to understand what 'youth social action' meant. Using commonly used terms like 'campaigning' and 'volunteering' or action-orientated phrases like 'making a change' might help staff to convey what social action is.



## Some young people had experienced disempowerment

Previous experiences of disempowerment meant that many young people were not used to having their voice be heard or valued. This could make youth social action a hard sell initially as young people may not believe that their views are really valued. As a result it's important that projects prioritise trust building.

Project staff may also benefit from working closely with partners to identify changes that are within their gift, so that they can bring about change quickly. The need for realistic goals and clear communication about this with young people is important, as otherwise there is a risk that where change is not effected this compounds young people's pre-existing beliefs that their views are not valued.

## Exploring mental health topic areas

There was a strong interest in exploring mental health through youth social action, but project staff sometimes found that the language of mental health could cause young people to close up. Using terms like 'low mood' helped to open up discussions.

## Involving male participants in Youth Social Action

Males are less likely to participate in youth social action compared with females. The 2019 National Youth Social Action Survey found that 37% of girls have participated in meaningful social action, compared with 34% of boys. This trend was also reflected in the projects funded by the #iwill Youth Social Action Fund.

Where projects were more successful recruiting male participants they were more likely to be shaped around an activity (such as building, sports or music), rather than explicitly themed around social action.

### Boys are less likely to participate in Youth Social Action.

