

Tips for organisations planning to deliver Youth Social Action projects

This document summarises a series of tips about how to effectively deliver youth social action projects, drawn from interviews with young people and practitioners who have been working together on social action projects funded through the #iwill Youth Social Action Fund.



Be genuinely youth led



Be attuned to the needs of the young people you are supporting



Consider virtual methods



Provide opportunities for creativity and connection



Do not take a lack of engagement personally



Keep it accessible



Keep in touch



Recognise that impacts will be individual



Involve staff young people can relate to

Proudly supporting youth social action



Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport



wavehill™
social and economic research

Background

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 (aged 10-25), 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.



Tips for organisations planning to deliver Youth Social Action projects

Be genuinely youth led

Organisations emphasised the importance of projects being led by young people's interests and priorities to be true social action, otherwise there was a risk that organisations were relying on young people to deliver against the organisation's agenda, rather than empowering young people to make changes that matter to them.

Delivery staff found that, to shape this work, consultation exercises could provide a useful starting point to ensure that projects are developed around young peoples' passions and not just 'a topic that has been given to them'. Other staff found that asking open questions like 'what needs to change' could help young people to find a focus or priority for their project to move forward.

'To make genuine change and impact, the campaign's content needs to come from the young people directly - our own agendas as professionals shouldn't play a part in leading young people to campaign about issues they aren't interested in. Whilst offering advice and support to decide on themes and topics, for everyone to get the most out of it, this needs to be youth led.'

Project delivery staff

Be attuned to the needs of the group

Staff need to be aware of the varying needs of individuals, considering how age and lived experience may affect the kind of support and relationship required. For example, many projects within the #iwill Youth Social Action fund were supporting groups with multiple and complex barriers. This meant that building trust and providing flexible support to respond to the circumstances of participant's lives was a key part of delivery. Additionally, it is important the projects are mindful of power differentials, and recognise that participants may have had poor experiences with services in the past.

Participants valued opportunities where they felt they were on an equal footing with project delivery staff. This is particularly key where projects are targeting young people aged 18+ who will expect to be seen as an adult.

'They created an equal playing field between staff and young people, and that was really nice especially when you're not under 18, and that's quite nice when you're an adult. Recognising you're equal but have different skills, instead of being infantilised'

Young person

Consider virtual methods (where appropriate)

Some young people reported that they were only able to participate in the projects because of their remote delivery, which was prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. For young people living in more remote locations, or who faced additional access barriers due to disability or caring needs, this enabled them to access communities that were otherwise inaccessible to them.



There was a feeling among some participants that opportunities for young people to engage in social action could be quite 'London centric', which could create financial barriers to participation for young people based outside the capital. A 'virtual first' or blended format might also help larger national organisations reach beyond the city their headquarters were based in. Virtual events can also support the inclusion of participants who may need their own space to decompress, and may find travelling to an unknown venue a barrier to participating.

Provide opportunities for creativity and connection

When reflecting on what they had enjoyed the most about participating in the projects young people most often referenced the more creative aspects of projects, or the opportunities where they had been able to learn from each other. As part of this projects should consider the importance of settings. For example participants might find boardroom settings feel 'institutional'.

Related to this, organisations should consider how they can support young people to build lasting connections. In one project the safeguarding approach adopted had prevented young people from being able to share their contact details with other participants, which meant young people felt they lost out on opportunities to make friends.

Do not take a lack of engagement personally

Some young people will face increased barriers to participation which may limit their capacity to engage with youth social action. This includes young carers, care experienced young people, homeless young people, socio-economically disadvantaged young people and young people with disabilities.

When working with these groups practitioners should avoid taking a lack of engagement personally, and focus instead on actions they might be able to implement to mitigate these barriers. This could include covering transportation costs, providing food for attendees, or being flexible about attendance so that young people can dip in and out of projects in a way that compliments the other things going on in their lives.

Keep it accessible

Proper planning is key to ensuring that events are accessible to a wide range of young people, from keeping sessions short and offering adequate break-times, to using language that is inclusive of young people with autism or additional learning needs.

Accessible language makes it easier for young people to engage, as it ensures that the project is pitched at a level that feels relevant to them and keeps them engaged. This is not just about using language that is accessible, but also being careful to avoid jargon or terms that may cause young people to 'shut down' or put their guards up.

Keep in touch

Not only can maintaining contact be helpful for the organisation as it can help you to monitor the impact of your project, but it can also help to show participants that they are valued.



It's been good to have contacts in the charity... to know there are people I can go to if I wanted to be involved in more projects. It feels like a relationship has been built. It's nice to know I have worked with a big charity and I can get in touch and feedback my ideas. It's nice to have that two-way conversation. I've really appreciated that I'm still included, like with mailing opportunities. It's felt like a continual process to keep us involved, like they will contact us to keep us involved. There's no pressure to do things but you are heard in opportunities.'

Young person

Recognise that the impact will be individual

For some young people who face complex barriers to engagement the impact of the project may be more subtle. For example, project staff were often working with young people who felt quite disempowered, voiceless, or who did not have access to adults they could trust. For these participants the most important change may be that they start to develop that trust and feel they have gained a voice. As a result, it is important to consider the impact projects have at an individual level.

Involve youth workers who can relate to the young people being supported

Project staff emphasised the importance of involving staff that could relate to the young people they were working with. This included involving staff who had a thorough understanding of the experiences and barriers to participation that may be faced by the specific groups being supported by projects, recognising that different groups of young people will face different barriers. Alongside this, some project staff recommended including staff who shared lived experience with participating young people to help ensure participants had someone they could relate to.