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#iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream

Report on the seventh #iwill Fund Learning Hub
Labstorm

The Centre for Youth Impact
March 2022

Introduction

LabStorms were adopted within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub to foster ongoing, deeper collaboration between Match Funders, to enable a system of effective youth social action funding to be continued beyond 2023. Success for this workstream includes stronger, more enduring collaboration across funders, and a shared sense of common challenges and potential solutions.

The Centre for Youth Impact has facilitated a series of LabStorms as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. By sharing insights across the sector, the LabStorms contributed to sharing learning, data, and insights. Each LabStorm created a dedicated space for the #iwill Fund match funders to collaboratively frame and respond to a problem or challenge that they have identified as pressing in their work.

This report draws out the key themes from the seventh and final LabStorm for the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, which took place on 17 January 2022, which featured as its subject how the group of match funders would like to be able to learn in the future. To accommodate COVID-19 restrictions, the LabStorm was held online for two hours and intentionally involved a smaller group of Match Funders. Steve Hillman from the Centre for Youth Impact presented the topic for discussion. We would like to thank all the match funders who participated.

As LabStorms take place under Chatham House rules, the themes and reflections in this report cannot be attributed to any one person or organisation; nor should they be seen as representative of an 'average' or consensus view in the room. Instead, they should be understood as providing kernels of insight and conversation within the Match Funder community. In the sections below, we first summarise the discussions held in May before highlighting the key insights generated from the discussion and identifying potential opportunities for funders moving forwards.

The first six rounds of LabStorms took place in June 2019, February 2020, October 2020, December 2020, February 2021 and May 2021 and similar reports^{1 2 3 4 5} were produced to draw out the key themes. Previous LabStorms featured the following discussion topics:

1. Understanding and communicating community benefit, led by Pears Foundation, and developing a habit of social action led by the Act for Change Fund (a joint initiative between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation)

¹ <https://www.youthimpact.uk/iwill-learninghubpublications/report-first-iwill-fund-learning-labstorms>

² https://www.youthimpact.uk/uploads/1/1/4/1/114154335/iwill_labstorms_report_round_2.pdf

³ <https://www.youthimpact.uk/iwill-fund-learning-hub/iwill-fund-learning-hub-blogs-and-reports>

⁴ <https://www.youthimpact.uk/iwill-fund-learning-hub/iwill-fund-learning-hub-blogs-and-reports>

⁵ <https://www.youthimpact.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/iwill%20Fund%20Learning%20Hub%20LabStorm%206%20FINAL.pdf>



2. Embedding high-quality opportunities for youth voice into youth social action, led by Premier League Charitable Fund, and the concept of 'place' in youth social action, led by Young Manchester.
3. Working with schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic, led by Ernest Cook Trust.
- 4 and 5. Campaigning in youth social action, led by Dartington Service Design Lab and Team London respectively.
6. The impact of youth voice in youth social action, led by the Centre for Youth Impact.

Discussion: How do funders want to learn in the future?

The Centre for Youth Impact brings together practitioners, funders and policy makers to improve services and support for young people across the UK

The Centre was founded in 2014, through a partnership between NCVYS, Project Oracle and the Dartington Service Design Lab, to support everyone working with and for young people. In 2017, the Centre became an independent charity and in 2018, it acquired Project Oracle Children and Youth Evidence Hub.

From the outset the Centre's vision has been for all young people in the UK to have access to high quality services that support their social and emotional learning. To achieve this vision, it works collaboratively with partners across the UK youth sector to develop shared approaches to learning, evaluation and continuous improvement.

For this final LabStorm in the series, Steve Hillman from the Centre for Youth Impact led a conversation on how #iwill match funders – as individuals and as a cohort - want to learn in the future. The #iwill Fund provides multiple structured learning offers for match funders of youth social action to enable sharing and disseminating learning including conferences, seminars, long and short written pieces, reports, webinars. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was set up to offer insight and intelligence to inform and shape future decisions, and also to provide a source of information and support to #iwill delivery organisations. The following questions were used to frame the discussion:

**What elements of the learning offer have match funder found most useful?
What would you still like to learn about?**

1. Written reports and blogs

The group reported that the thematic reports produced by the Learning Hub are useful, particularly for new members of staff or when thinking about designing new pieces of work. They are also helpful when looking for answers to specific questions. The ability to pick up, dip into and absorb reports at one's own pace is also significant. The group mentioned frequently how each report contains certain 'nuggets' of learning that are useful, but that these might be different for each match funder. The group felt it was useful to categorise the learning emerging from the Fund at three levels:

- Programme level – what makes for effective programme delivery at a local level, insights from specific groups of young people, and how organisations have managed to make their programmes sustainable;
- Funder level – how funders know about exactly what it is they are funding, and the most effective strategies for 'investing' in this type of provision and organisation; and

- Movement level – what does the group of match funders need to know about where youth social action is in the landscape of Government policy and young people’s needs, and how they can work together to support this.

The group also wondered how the learning generated through the reports in the Learning Hub filters down to delivery level, and discussed how they as individual match funders did this, through ‘distilling’ reports into manageable information and sharing this with funded organisations.

2. Usefulness of coming together as a group

The group acknowledged that there is a diverse range of match funders represented within the #iwill Fund, including some that are also (or mainly) delivery organisations, and that this brings challenges but also benefits. Every funder has different priorities and approaches, but despite this the group felt that there was real value in coming together in spaces that were non-judgemental, thorough, interrogative, and with a blend of challenge and mutual support. The group felt that the Labstorms, in particular:

- offered time and spaces that generated new thinking;
- enabled a shift in perspectives;
- supported match funders to be agile and responsive to their grantees; and
- encouraged them to be iterative and adapt their practice across cohorts.

The group also reported a sense of increased confidence in their approach having had the opportunity to explore it with others.

The group recognised that a great deal of expertise is held collectively across the match funder network, and welcomed the opportunity to explore different questions that enabled them to draw on that expertise. A number of match funders also reported that they were able to apply learning taken from the #iwill ‘context’ into their approach to funding more generally and that this was welcome.

3. The ‘theoretical’ vs the ‘practical’

The group described how the reports produced by the Learning Hub move from the practical to the theoretical, by using examples of what match funders are doing to ‘build backwards’ to why it should work. This was welcomed because there is a very low level of fidelity to any particular theoretical model across the group of match funders – as with other aspects of the #iwill Fund, this presents both challenges and opportunities. The move to the theoretical enables individual funders to contextualise and ‘think about what it means in their world.’ The group also recognised that the opportunities to create time and space to address some of the more theoretical questions raised are challenging, and perhaps may not happen were it not for spaces such as LabStorms, which are intentionally structured as such. Furthermore, the group identified the usefulness of the theoretical at the programme design stage, before moving to implementation in practice.

The group identified interaction with each other, either in organised settings or via informal contact, as the mechanism by which the theoretical gets translated into practical action. By discussing an issue with one or more peers, match funders are able to learn about how each other have responded to the issues at stake, and this helps them to think through what their organisational response should be.

4. Topics for future investigation

The group identified the following list as matters that warranted further future investigation. Some of these topics were explored within LabStorms, and their inclusion as future learning topics reflects the complexity of the question. Other topics emerged directly from LabStorm conversations as 'follow on' questions:

- How to measure community benefit;
- How to understand the counterfactual – what would have happened if we had not funded youth social action?
- How has the policy landscape changed since the start of the Fund and what are the implications of this?
- How to set up sustainably in disadvantaged communities
- What does digital youth social action look like?
- Where are the young people who engaged in youth social action at when they are 26?
- Have we done enough to embed youth social action in the communities in which we work?
- What does youth social action look like at an international level?

Feedback and Reflections

To understand how the match funders experienced the second set of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub LabStorms, we collected informal feedback after the session on what they were taking away from the session discussion and how effective Zoom was as a platform for hosting them.

Feedback was wholly positive, and the Match Funders who participated appreciated the time spent working through challenges that resonated with everyone in the group. Participants felt a sense of camaraderie and comfort in learning together.

What are LabStorms?

LabStorms are collaborative problem-solving sessions designed to help generate and explore actionable responses to challenges with which organisations are wrestling. They are an approach developed by Feedback Labs; a US-based consortium focused on identifying the best ways of using feedback to make programmes and institutions responsive to the needs of their constituents.

How do LabStorms work?

Conducted under Chatham House rules, LabStorms are designed to create space for deep discussions between stakeholders who value collective approaches to problem-solving. Each LabStorm begins with an individual giving a 15-minute presentation covering both their work in general and details of a specific challenge that they're facing, with which they would like support and guidance. The presenter sets out what they have tried so far, and two or three specific questions they would like help with from the attendees. Then, attendees work together to support the presenter in finding responses to their challenge via a group discussion. This can range from offering specific advice or suggestions to asking open questions to help the presenter reframe their questions and find new insight. While the discussion remains confidential, the learning from each session is written up and distributed to benefit the wider community.

Appendix A: About the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

This is a report by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was commissioned to support and build on the #iwill Fund activities. It has two strategic objectives:

1. To inform the strategic and investment direction of the #iwill Fund. This will ensure that the Leadership Board and #iwill Fund delivery partners can target funds into the right areas, ages and approaches, where it is needed.
2. To strengthen and connect the youth social action sector by enabling and facilitating the sharing of learning, data and insights across delivery partners, including what does and doesn't work, and sharing key insights and learning more broadly within the wider youth social action sector.

The Learning Hub has developed three workstreams that will support its objectives. This will allow us to support funders in making decisions about how to support youth social action now and capitalise on the evidence generated through the #iwill Fund to create a legacy of evidence to support funding and delivery in the future.

1. Systems

This work will develop our understanding of barriers and enablers in building and strengthening sustained youth social action. It will support the identification of emerging practice and the testing of potential new solutions and help guide investment decisions.

(a) Systems Mapping

Co-production workshops, supported by research briefings, will build the understanding of barriers to, and opportunities for, embedding and sustaining youth social action in three priority themes: education, place, and the relationship between youth social action and 'all ages' social action. Workshops are attended by Match Funders, invited grantees, and other invited stakeholders (Sept 2018 – Mar 2019).

(b) Funder Collaboration

A series of 'LabStorms' will be offered to Match Funders to enable a collaborative approach to identify common challenges and finding and sharing actionable responses to them. The LabStorms will support Match Funders to fund as effectively as possible (April 2019 – April 2021).

2. Sector Evidence Plan

This work will build on our understanding of what youth social action achieves, reach under-served groups, and sustain youth social action (Aug 2018 – ongoing). It will draw on these four information sources to develop and evolve answers to key questions:

- Intra-fund evaluation aggregation
- Extra-fund research aggregation
- Match Funder returns to the #iwill Fund and data from Information Management System
- Results from other workstreams.

3) Quality Practice

This work will deepen our understanding of what it takes to deliver quality youth social action. It will illustrate how delivery organisations define 'double benefit' and how they attempt to achieve and measure it. This work will support delivery organisations to improve their offer (September 2018 – ongoing). 'The Impact Accelerator', delivered by the Centre for Youth Impact, is an intensive process of impact support, challenge and development – up to 30 organisations will take part in this. Learning from these organisations will be shared more widely to spread knowledge about improvement across the youth social action landscape.