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#iwill Fund Learning Hub Quality Practice Workstream

Building Confidence: Final Report on the First Impact Accelerator Cohort

The Centre for Youth Impact
November 2019

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Introduction

The Quality Practice workstream of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub seeks to identify strengths and areas for development in youth social action delivery by supporting learning and improvement amongst delivery organisations, and sharing the resulting learning with funders and beyond. At the core of this workstream is a 12-month cohort learning programme, developed by Generation Change and now delivered by the Centre for Youth Impact, called the Impact Accelerator. This scheme is undertaken by #iwill Fund grantees individually and as part of a peer cohort. At the heart of the Impact Accelerator is a self-assessment tool for #iwill Fund grantees, developed by the Dartington Service Design Lab, called The Confidence Framework. The self-assessment process is offered alongside a package of training and consultancy to help organisations to use the tool to drive improvement and learning.

By supporting these delivery organisations to understand and improve their offer in this way, and by building their capacity to clarify and learn about their programme outcomes, this work will deepen our understanding of what it takes to deliver quality youth social action. This will also generate insights that can inform Match Funders' understanding of practice across different settings.

Alongside, the Impact Accelerator aims to establish a strong community of practice amongst organisations offering youth social action opportunities, all of whom are using The Confidence Framework as a common self-assessment framework to better understand and improve their impact. Since August 2019, the Impact Accelerator is led and delivered by the Centre for Youth Impact, who are the authors of this paper. The Quality Practice workstream intends to support three cohorts of organisations in total to undertake the 12-month accelerator process. The learning from each cohort will feed into two Quality Practice Insights Reports - one during the early stages to capture initial insights, and one produced at the end, once improvement work has been implemented. You can read the first paper relating to the first cohort [here](#).

This is the second report on the first cohort, and also the first paper to be authored by the Centre for Youth Impact since agreeing a partnership with Generation Change to take forward delivery of the Impact Accelerator.

The Centre's vision is for the Impact Accelerator to be a powerful learning and improvement offer for any organisation delivering youth social action with the potential to support the youth sector more widely. This is completely in line with the Centre's vision and mission, which is why we are so excited to be taking forward this programme into its next phase of life.

Building on the initial cohort one report published by Generation Change in April 2019, this paper sets out a summary of the work undertaken, and lessons learned by the first cohort of organisations engaged in the Impact Accelerator. It then sets out key recommendations for the development of the programme, informed and guided by this learning.

As set out in more detail below, the delivery of the Impact Accelerator thus far suggests that organisations greatly welcome the opportunity to reflect, alone and with peers, and the support and challenge from expert ‘coaches’ is particularly valuable. There are also indications that, in some cases, organisations need to take a step backwards before going forwards, and the design of the Impact Accelerator needs to support this in an enabling and compassionate way.

Critically, the experience of this first cohort has confirmed that Dartington Service Design Lab’s Confidence Framework – which sits at the heart of the programme – provides a helpful structure for thinking through organisational behaviours and priorities for improvement. It also raises some useful questions that require further exploration, and can prompt significant shifts in thinking. Interestingly, levels of ‘confidence’ across the five pillars of the framework do not appear to be contingent on factors like organisational size, type or turnover – though we don’t yet know what is driving this.

The experience of drawing together the learning set out in this paper strongly suggests that the programme has demonstrable value to the organisations taking part. Creating and maintaining change at organisational level is hard but we know the learning from the Impact Accelerator is ‘sticky’: over the course of the past 12 months, organisations have remained engaged, and, for the most part, achieved the improvement goals they set for themselves. Organisations involved in the pilot of the Impact Accelerator (prior to the launch of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub) report that they continue to see and feel the changes resulting from their participation.

Publishing this paper is itself a worked example of a continuous cycle of reflection, learning and improvements that runs through the Impact Accelerator as a whole. In close partnership with our colleagues at Dartington Service Design Lab, we are committed to iterating and refining this programme in an open, structured and responsive way.

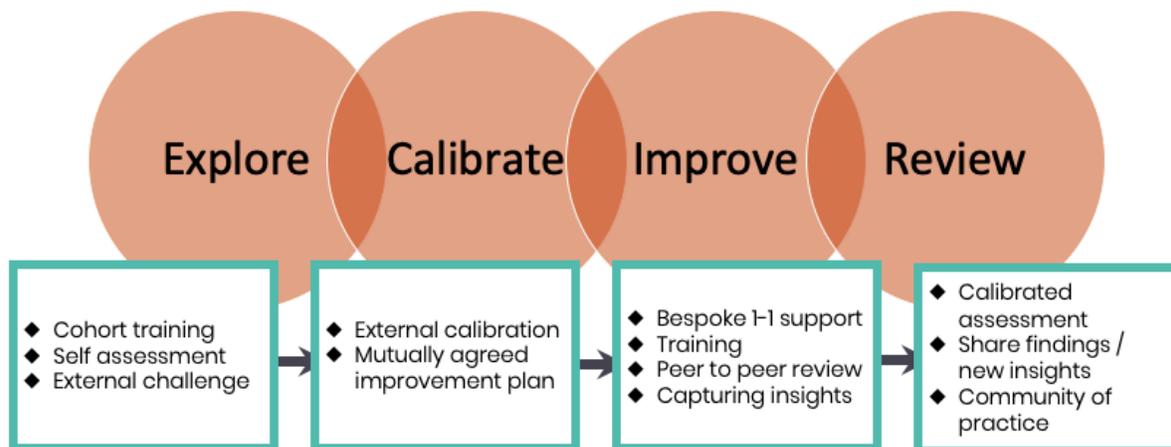
The Impact Accelerator Programme

The Impact Accelerator is an intensive, 12-month programme for organisations offering youth social action opportunities (**YSAOs**) that are committed to getting (even) better at what they do. It is designed to:

- foster a culture of learning within youth programme delivery;
- build organisational capacity for evidence-led improvement; and
- establish a common approach to understanding and improving impact.

It is a cohort-based programme, with the intention that organisations will engage in a deep and sustained mode of learning, sharing collective lessons, insights and good practice as they progress through the process.

The programme takes place over four key phases:



1) Explore

The common structure running through each of these phases is The Confidence Framework, which supports organisations to identify their strengths and weaknesses and prioritise their improvement goals. The process takes organisations through an initial self-assessment, which generates a 'heat-map' of the team's confidence across five key 'pillars':

To improve quality, increase impact and scale of Youth Social Action:	
Design	<p>The YSA opportunity is logical and clearly articulated</p> <p>Outcomes are clearly defined and measurable</p> <p>Supporting materials have been created</p> <p>Core structure and activities are clearly defined</p> <p>Target populations are defined</p>
Deliver	<p>The YSAO is supported by a Theory of Change linking these elements</p> <p>The YSAO is effectively and properly delivered to support young people to make a difference</p> <p>Key stakeholders for delivery are known and engaged.</p> <p>The YSAO recruits the right staff</p> <p>Delivery targets are set, and monitored.</p> <p>Implementation of the YSAO is monitored</p>
Monitor	<p>Learning is shared across the organisation</p> <p>Young people are involved in shaping the YSAO</p> <p>Attendance and attrition is monitored and acted upon</p> <p>Target population enrolment is monitored, and acted upon</p> <p>Outcomes are monitored, and acted upon</p>
Determine double benefit	<p>There is evidence in the present site of wider positive double benefit</p> <p>Evidence generated in the present site (organisation or location) suggests the YSAO improves outcomes for YP and/or communities</p> <p>The organisation is able to effectively analyse and communicate its data</p> <p>Evidence generated in other sites (organisations or locations) suggests the YSAO improves outcomes for YP and/or communities</p> <p>The theory of change of the YSAO is underpinned by research evidence</p>
Sustain	<p>Delivery of the YSAO is sustainable</p> <p>The YSAO is fully integrated into core business of the organisation</p> <p>There is a compelling business case for replicating the YSAO</p> <p>There is evidence the YSAO is value for money</p> <p>There is evidence that YP value and are satisfied with the YSAO</p> <p>The YSAO provides value for money and is sustainable</p>

2) Calibrate

The participating team then gathers evidence as grounds for these confidence levels, which is 'calibrated', via a review from an external 'coach' (either a Research Associate, or a member of staff from Dartington or the Centre). This calibration is not a 'pass/fail' process: rather, it provides the organisation with a broader perspective, informed by external insight and expertise, and how others in the cohort have rated and evidenced their confidence levels, and indicates any areas where they may have over- or under-estimated how established their practice is within each of the five pillars.

3) Improve

The calibrated Confidence Framework then informs the production of a targeted improvement plan, which sets out specific objectives that the organisation is committed to achieving. This is undertaken with a combination of dedicated one-to-one support (for cohort one, this was provided by a group of independent Research Associates), as well as peer review and support from other members of the cohort.

Some of the objectives may be achievable within the 12-month timeframe of the Accelerator; others will be set out for the medium and long term. Crucially, the process as a whole is intended to support a cycle of continuous quality improvement – assess, plan and improve – which manifests across every aspect of participating organisations' work.

4) Review

The final phase sees the organisation return to The Confidence Framework, re-assessing themselves and reflecting on any changes they see. This also provides a backdrop for a final 'improvement report', which combines a retrospective review of the process, and identifies next steps for the organisation in its continuous quality improvement cycle. As a cohort, organisations are also actively encouraged to share insights, learning and examples of effective practice which others can apply to their own context.

The #iwill Fund Cohort One - Overview

Cohort One consisted of nine organisations, who worked through the Impact Accelerator process between September 2018 and September 2019. These organisations, supported by a range of #iwill Fund Match Funders, were selected via an assessment of applications, with an emphasis on identifying organisations with commitment to the process and the capacity to fully engage. The assessment was led by Generation Change, with the selection endorsed by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub partners and

Match Funders. They represented a wide range in terms of size, types of provision and the role or 'position' of youth social action within their work.

As noted above, engagement across the cohort was high overall, with all participating organisations successfully completing each phase of the programme. Through this process, the following outputs were produced, which form the source material for this paper:

- Calibrated Confidence Frameworks for all nine organisations, and self-assessed updated frameworks completed at the stage 4 (review).
- Submitted evidence in support of each organisation's Confidence Framework levels
- Case notes from each organisation's 1:1 meeting, Improvement Plans, follow up work with Research Associates and review meetings
- Feedback generated from staff and Associates working on the Impact Accelerator
- Feedback generated by cohort organisations reflecting on their participation in the programme across all four phases.

Improvement Plans

In table 1.1 below, we set out the key objective each organisation set for themselves in their improvement plan, and which pillar(s) of The Confidence Framework this most closely maps on to:

Table 1.1 – Summary of Improvement Plan Objectives ¹

Organisation	Improvement Plan Overall Objective	Confidence Framework Pillar(s)	Final Improvement Work	Confidence Framework Pillar(s)
City Year	Refreshing their theory of change and building strong data recording and analysis.	Design / Monitor	Refreshed theory of change, with new data system selected and a plan for implementation. Progress on performance	Design / Monitor

¹ 6 organisations were recruited who met selection criteria set by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, and who were motivated to participate in the scheme, given the resource and time commitments involved (UK Youth, Young Minds, N-Gage, Student Hubs, Football Beyond Borders, WE Charity). There were a further 3 organisations who joined this cohort through sponsorship from other partners besides the #iwill Fund. 2 of them also receive funding from the #iwill Fund (UpRising, Co-Operative College) and we have agreed to include them in our Practice Insights Reports for this cohort. For more information on the recruitment and selection process, please refer to the [Impact Accelerator Initial Insights Report](#).

	Associated work to embed this through staff performance management.		management (appraisals and volunteer attendance).	
Co-Operative College	Re-designing their social action project, including its theory of change and associated outcomes measurement toolkit.	Design / Monitor	Developed theory of change and new measurement tools. New staff training on impact measurement and updated staff competencies used to recruit additional staff, following successful funding to scale the project.	Design / Monitor
Football Beyond Borders	Understanding the impact for the individual and community of their social action work based on gender.	Determine Double Benefit	Work on user journeys and assumptions testing, leading to codification of programme strands (including social action within curriculum). New staff training on impact measurement and change to internal team structure, with new dedicated impact role. Focus groups and interviews looking into individual and community impact of gender projects.	Design, Deliver / Determine Double Benefit

N-Gage	Designing a youth social action programme, including its theory of change and associated evaluation framework.	Design	Initial design for YSA programme, including outcomes and prospective measurement tools, and timeline for implementation. Learning visit scheduled with another YSAO provider.	Design
Student Hubs	Identifying and developing a list of 'active ingredients' against their current delivery and outcomes, for both student volunteers and beneficiaries.	Design	Core and flex elements ² ('active ingredients') defined through interviews and embedded in new staff tools for implementation fidelity.	Design / Monitor
UK Youth	Gathering more evidence to underpin the theory of change. Codifying the core and flex elements of the programme and	Design / Deliver	Primary research (qualitative and quantitative from the programme's first cohort) and secondary research (literature review) contributed to a revised theory of change and new survey measures.	Design / Deliver / Determine Double Benefit

² The "core" of a programme is the active ingredients that must be in place for it to achieve its intended outcomes, whereas the "flex" are elements of the activity that can be adapted to context (or which are primarily in place to help users respond to the 'core' components).

	associated methods to capture programme implementation.		Core and flex elements defined and embedded into implementation fidelity tools for delivery partners.	
UpRising	Identifying data gaps relating to social action and upskilling the staff team on evaluation to increase organisational capacity for evaluation.	Monitor	Updated theory of change to embed social action components. New staff training on impact measurement, leading to the creation of impact profiles to refine core elements (in development).	Design / Deliver / Monitor
WE Charity	Defining the core WE Schools offering, to establish a clear offering to schools. Strengthening the link between core offering and theory of change.	Sustain	Creation of new journey map (capturing core offering, core activities, resources required, and indicators), created in collaboration with staff and partners, to be used with delivery partners (recruitment and retention) and to enhance staff training and support.	Design / Deliver
Young Minds	Starting from a review of the theory of	Design / Monitor	New theory of change developed through a series of staff workshops,	Design / Monitor

	<p>change, reviewing core and flex elements and measuring plans (with a focus on double benefit).</p>		<p>definition of core and flex elements, and a refined measurement and learning plan.</p>	
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It is notable that the objectives for improvement plans represented - in the main - fairly foundational and 'early stage' considerations regarding evidence and impact. Many of the participating organisations commenced the Impact Accelerator process with aspirations of moving further and faster, but found that The Confidence Framework in particular (alongside support from an external 'coach') prompted a re-framing of their immediate priorities and the journey ahead.

Case study - Football Beyond Borders

Football Beyond Borders (FBB) chose two specific programmes to put through the Impact Accelerator programme. Their objective was to better understand the impact for both the individual and community of their work. This was important because FBB's social action work was not embedded in the organisation's existing theory of change. The social action programmes were led by a specific member of staff, and the social action was very much seen as an additional component or strand of work.

Their initial calibration of The Confidence Framework focused solely on their social action scheme of work. However, throughout their work with the Research Associate allocated to FBB, this approach was challenged: "The thinking of how we see ourselves as a youth social action organisation has changed. Youth social action is now more inextricably linked to outcomes, rather than a standalone strand of work. We are inherently a social action organisation as we are a platform for young people's voices to be heard on the issues they care about".

The Impact Accelerator journey started with FBB describing social action as adding value to their sport for development approach. This changed throughout the first two phases of the Impact Accelerator process: "When we met with our Research Associate the philosophical positioning of youth social action within FBB was difficult to communicate, so it pushed our timescales back. However, with the help of our Research Associate, we have learnt that social

action isn't an end in itself, but is a means to an end for our young people to develop a sense of self and agency over the world around them. We have also learnt that youth social action is much more localised and will always start with issues our young people feel passionately about".

Learning Focus

Whilst acknowledging that the first cohort represents a very small sample set (nine organisations), below we set out an initial mapping of size of programme (i.e. the overall number of young people engaged) and Confidence Framework levels against learning focus. Other variables may well be at play, hence these are offered as tentative trends, which provide a starting point for further testing and development:

Table 1.2 – Mapping Programme size/Confidence levels against Learning Focus

Programme Size/ Confidence Level	Learning focus	Cohort 1 examples
Small scale, low Confidence Framework levels	Support experimental work – or the adoption of best practice from elsewhere that has been indicated to work.	Those focusing their improvement plans on adopting practice resources from other organisations. The element of Cohort peer support is particularly useful here, although it is important that organisations have enough capacity to prioritise it.
Large scale, low Confidence Framework levels	Refine and test the logic model and theory of change, support the development of real-time monitoring, including feedback on key mechanisms of change.	Organisations that reach a large number of young people, but came into the programme with a less developed/codified youth social action offer. This required a focus on service design before advancing in their improvement work.

<p>Small scale, high Confidence Framework levels</p>	<p>Rapid cycle testing, and service design work to codify best practice and mechanisms of change.</p>	<p>Organisations that entered the programme with a tight operational model but identified a need to test what works and codify it for future growth. In many cases this involved revisiting some key design areas in order to ensure organisations are building upon strong foundations.</p>
<p>Large scale, high Confidence Framework levels (Rare exceptions)</p>	<p>Capacity-building support to maintain rigour at scale. Work to codify best practice and transmit to other settings. RCTs may be appropriate in certain cases.</p>	<p>Organisations that have strong evidence across the framework but may benefit from developing their approaches to monitoring and sustaining.</p>

In choosing areas of focus for the improvement phase of the Accelerator process, The Confidence Framework provided a starting point for the conversation, but it was essential to recognise that these improvement projects were not taking place in a vacuum - the motivation and action had to be 'taken back' to the organisation and maintained. With the support of the Impact Accelerator team, and guided by staff (including senior management team and CEO conversations), each organisation set out its individual improvement plans. These plans were then allocated for support across a team of five Research Associates who brought different skills and experience across them.

The diversity in the first cohort has led to a wide range of improvement projects that were designed to serve organisations' individual objectives and priorities. The original briefs are summarised in the table 1.1. above.

It is important to note that improvement projects were not set in stone, and changes were made along the way in response to changing circumstances or new insights about their work. The next section reviews the organisations' experience of the Impact Accelerator process, with a focus on the improvement phase.

The focus of the improvement phase was on developing practice for all organisations, and where possible, encouraging organisations to share this with each other through participation at peer events and an online learning community for members of the Impact Accelerator.

In this section we choose to highlight three case studies, with a particular focus on approaches that can be of wider benefit to the youth social action sector and are aligned with the priorities set in the #iwill Fund Learning Hub.

Case Study - N-Gage

Strategic learning priority: reaching young people from low socio-economic backgrounds

N-Gage is a youth work provider based in Manchester, with only a small number of full-time staff. N-Gage is funded by Young Manchester and has been focusing on its Transform Programme ('designed for young people to make a difference within their communities. This could include litter picking, planting, intergenerational activities, fundraising.')

Their initial self-assessment had low levels of confidence, as there was little codification and therefore evidence of how activities related to intended outcomes. The focus of their Improvement Plan was the development of a youth social action programme and associated evaluation approaches.

Throughout the improvement phase, N-Gage had the opportunity of learning from other social action providers, including training run by Envision. The Research Associates from Envision delivered a workshop on programme design for N-Gage, enabling them to better define some of the core elements of their potential youth social action opportunity, including a structure for sessions, intended outcomes for young people, budget and basic evaluation processes. Envision was able to provide examples of key materials (e.g. session plans, young person's reflection log) and industry-standard measurement tools.

N-Gage has also connected with the Co-op College as part of the peer support offer of the Impact Accelerator. This can support them to learn about social action in their region more specifically, and accelerate their learning journey in the area of social action. As part of their journey, N-Gage is exploring how youth social action can work in a detached youth work setting, which will also support their aims around engaging young people who may not attend centre-based provision.

Organisations like N-Gage present a unique opportunity to bring youth social action to young people who may be accessing other forms of youth provision through a pre-existing offer. Match Funder Young Manchester is interested in applying learning from N-Gage's journey to other similar providers that are being supported to deliver youth social action through the #iwill Fund. This is an area that will continue to be developed in the second Impact Accelerator cohort with 4CT, an organisation that has been running youth and community centres for over 14 years and is now the partner responsible for other local organisations introducing youth social action into their delivery offer.

Case Study - Student Hubs

Strategic Learning priority: Delivery at Scale

Student Hubs put its 'Active' programmes through the Impact Accelerator. The Active programmes were developed in 2017-18 following an #iwill Fund grant from Sport England. Active supports disadvantaged young people aged 7-13 years to access opportunities through volunteer-run activity days and mentoring. The programmes were adapted from pre-existing delivery to incorporate a sports element, and to attract more male and 'new to social action' volunteers.

Since the opportunity was pre-existing, it was codified to an extent, including sessions plans, theory of change and evaluation framework. There were some weaknesses regarding the specific sport elements, which were new to the programme. The Research Associate guided Student Hubs through a process of gathering data on the impact of these activities over the past academic year. Activities had been running across three sites, with different set-ups (e.g. during school, after school) depending on the stated needs of community partners, interest and availability of student volunteers, and other factors. The goal was to identify which programme elements were key to creating the desired impact, refining what that impact was, and using that information to better define core and flex elements and communicate a clearer theory of change: "We have created an 'active ingredients' review after work surveying and interviewing staff, along with reviewing volunteer feedback. We have also updated our 'Free/Fixed/Flex' mapping for the Active programmes. Overall, we have a better evidence base for demonstrating what is core to the programme and communicating this to staff".

The focus on 'active ingredients' enabled the team to arrive at a shared understanding of what matters in the replication of the youth social action activity across different locations. They moved from red to yellow in this area of the framework, endorsed by their Research Associate: "There is good specificity around concepts of 'dosage' and 'frequency' - e.g., how long should the programmes run for, what is the minimum number of sessions a student should do, how important is a 1:1 ratio with the young people, etc. Now these are defined,

they can be measured more clearly and will only lead to improvements in knowing ‘what works’ in the future”.

The work of Student Hubs highlights the importance of having a clear ‘core and flex’ framework for projects that are scaling up. This is something that was also an area of interest for other organisations in the first Impact Accelerator Cohort. As concepts, core and flex equally matter beyond design stage, as quality at scale will only be possible if the framework directly informs delivery and monitoring.

Case Study - UK Youth

Strategic Learning priority: Replication across type of setting

As part of its improvement plan, UK Youth reviewed its core and flex framework for a specific national programme supporting young women and girls. UK Youth’s model delivers to a wide reach of young people through multiple regional partners, who in many cases operate across multiple sites. This means that it is difficult to establish whether key elements are being delivered without youth workers feeling overburdened by reporting.

Through creating new methods to capture programme implementation in simple and light-touch ways, they have been able to better manage replication across youth settings. As a result, they have been more able to capture and communicate the positive variation in how the model is delivered and are also more able to assess the quality of the ‘core’ components.

With support from their Research Associate, UK Youth has introduced a training webinar on core and flex for delivery partners and embedded the core and flex indicators into the site visit form and call logs. This approach is now a key part of agendas for regional meetings with delivery partners.

Culture change is an important part of ensuring this is sustainable over time: “Through the programme evaluation, we are capturing profiles on youth workers and case studies of great facilitation of youth-led social action. These youth worker case studies are helping us build a picture of the qualities of great social action ‘activists’, which we intend to share back with delivery partners and the wider sector”.

The core and flex framework has been identified as a key foundation at the design stage, but the work at the delivery and monitoring level is essential to ensure that the approach is fully embedded across an organisation. This is particularly important for organisations like UK Youth, which are delivering across a network of youth settings. Learning from this approach has also been particularly important

for the Co-operative College, which has extended its social action programme across different sites with different delivery partners.

Opportunities and challenges

One of the key strengths of the Impact Accelerator process is the thorough recording of all meetings and interactions between organisations and the Impact Accelerator team, as well as with their Research Associates. Using this as evidence, we have identified four key opportunities for the organisations that have participated in the process: each opportunity, in turn, also surfaces challenges, which we set out below.

A framework for inquiry and motivation for improvement

The Confidence Framework and the calibration process set out a very structured approach to reflecting on, planning and managing an organisation's impact and learning journey. This is particularly important in a context where youth organisations have access to a diverse landscape of support providers with different offers that they often find difficult to navigate. The Impact Accelerator simplifies an organisation's choice with regards to 'what next' in their learning journey.

Equally, The Confidence Framework has a very intentional focus on organisational behaviours, as opposed to the mere presence of outputs or artefacts (such as a theory of change or evaluation plan). This helps to maintain focus on internal motivation and progress, rather than 'outsourcing' the production of a theory of change, for example, to a consultant. The focus on organisational behaviour also supports a more inclusive approach: it does not favour or emphasise any particular commercial tool or method.

Since the Framework sets out a comprehensive list of areas of improvement, and clarity about what improvement in any area would look like, it is easier for organisations to define their next steps and what success would look like for them. This clarity can translate into motivation to progress through their improvement journey. Improvement meetings took a half-day, with follow-up work, ensuring that organisations had time to review their calibrated framework in detail.

"The spirit in which the improvement meeting was conducted was really positive; it was thorough and long, helped to push our thinking, and highlighted areas where we thought the programme did well but we had never written down or codified the approach".

Young Minds

Feedback from those who participated also highlights that the structured nature of the Accelerator, through the different phases, introduced a good level of accountability. The involvement of the most senior staff in the organisation was critical in determining which improvements were prioritised.

The key challenge in realising the benefits of The Confidence Framework process is internal capacity; the crucial 'protective factor' in this regard being the engagement of senior leadership. In larger organisations, this will most often be an enabling role – giving a key person responsibility for leading improvements, and protecting their capacity to do so effectively. For smaller organisations, it is more likely that the senior leader will also have to be directly engaged in managing the delivery of improvement priorities. As we note below, this capacity must also be aligned with capability: support to develop skills and experience in a consistent way.

Coaching and external support

The role of the Research Associate during the improvement phase was flagged by most organisations as the most valuable aspect of their improvement journey. The Impact Accelerator recruited seven Research Associates who brought a wide range of experience and skills to the programme. This included professional experience in the youth social action sector, specific impact and evaluation experience, service design, change management, organisational development and strategy.

Most organisations benefited from an average of three days of dedicated support from their Research Associate. This provided them with increased capacity, as well as helpful space for reflection, external challenge and scrutiny.

“The extra capacity provided by our Research Associate was really helpful; it built on work we had already done before internally, but allowed an external perspective to summarise and review it. External validation of the work also meant that people could take it a bit more seriously.”

City Year

Organisations reported that their Research Associate pushed their thinking and some mentioned that it was valuable to be introduced to an external source of expertise with whom they can work again. Organisations felt they had learned from their Research Associates and could use their new skills in the future without the external support.

“It has been fantastic working with the research associate. Her advice, guidance and feedback have been extremely helpful. Due to her support we now have a high-quality project that we are happy with, and can use this to replicate the process for other programmes and areas of work.”

The Co-operative College

Research Associates were mindful of their short-term role and they worked to build internal staff capacity, for instance by sharing reading and useful resources, and skilling up new members of staff.

“Getting the opportunity to work with our Research Associate has been a great highlight of the programme. It’s an opportunity we wouldn’t have had otherwise, and she has been able to provide so much expertise, support and input into the work we’ve been doing. With a member of staff leaving who has been leading on the programme, [Our Research Associate’s] input allows us to retain capacity to support a different member of staff who is supporting the programme.”

Student Hubs

The key challenge here is to maximise the benefit with minimum ‘friction’ for the organisation receiving support. While the contribution of the Research Associates was felt to be very positive overall, it is also worth noting that the benefit could have been enhanced through stream-lining the process. In some cases, as a result of staff changes and Research Associates not being available, two or three different people from outside the participant organisation were engaged at different stages of the process. Creating consistent relationships across the piece for cohort two will allow for deeper understanding to develop, and avoid duplication or repetition as new people are briefed on the organisation’s improvement priorities.

Building internal staff capability

While the support from Research Associates was essential, the Impact Accelerator was designed primarily to develop internal organisational capacity over the long term, through increasing capability (skills, experience and confidence) in learning and evaluation. This is intended to support a longer-term effect for organisations, and that the improvements of the Impact Accelerator are ‘sticky’ - embedded and sustained over time.

At the start of the process, only a few of the organisations that participated in cohort one had dedicated staff who were specifically focused on impact and learning. Some organisations used the Accelerator as a development and leadership opportunity for existing delivery staff who were

interested in deepening their knowledge in these areas of practice. Others engaged at both leadership/management and operational/delivery levels, with a view that the development experience needed to be shared across the organisation.

Participants highlighted the value of being introduced to new tools, which they found useful to engage, support and motivate staff within the organisation and delivery partners.

“We have benefited from bringing delivery staff on the learning journey together and fostering positive culture about impact and learning. The Impact Accelerator has helped to bring Young Minds on a journey internally, getting different teams on the same page about what the Activists programme does. That internal communications piece has been particularly helpful.”

Young Minds

Finally, the cohort model also contributed to formal and informal opportunities for learning across different organisations. This included organisations sharing areas where they have particular successful approaches alongside challenges, learning from best practice through shared training and peer visits.

As the number of organisations involved in the Impact Accelerator grows over time, there is an ongoing opportunity for different forms of peer support beyond the 12 months of the programme. This is also the key challenge: all capacity/capability building initiatives have a beginning and an end. Inevitably, ‘what happens next’ is often the space in which consolidated learning and shared purpose becomes fragmented: organisations, teams and individuals carry on down their respective paths, and the ‘double benefit’ of collective learning and shared approaches across organisations is reduced. Hence we set out below our intention to establish a learning community for all organisations, from which they can draw support over the longer term.

Wider organisation and culture change

While the Impact Accelerator required organisations to focus on a specific programme for calibration and improvement, participants have reported that the wider learning about impact has enabled them to translate the benefits of the Accelerator to other areas of the organisation.

“Although not in our improvement plan, our Research Associate highlighted that there was opportunity to better articulate how EmpowHER links to UK Youth’s wider work in order to join-up cross-departmentally and have greater, sustainable impact. This external feedback acted as a catalyst for the development of a National Programmes Theory of Change, linking



to our organisational Theory of Change. This was something we had considered doing previously but had not prioritised – the external viewpoint was the nudge we needed to get going with a first draft which we hope will be valuable for staff, partners and supporters alike.”

UK Youth

The experience of cohort one participants reinforces a well-established perspective about organisational change: we must attend not just to ‘technical’ learning (e.g. building a better understanding of different aspects of theory of change or approaches to monitoring), but also focus on the context in which that learning is enacted. Behaviour change, over the long-term, is most significantly influenced by culture, and this is where organisations of any size or shape can struggle to maintain clarity and momentum.

Many organisations organised internal team learning days in which staff were able to share the learning and insight from the Impact Accelerator with the wider team, to raise awareness about the importance of this area of work. The extent to which this sharing of learning and invitation to ‘get on board’ is internalised and acted upon, day to day, is a key area of interest for the Centre as we set out to establish, with all Impact Accelerator participants, a longer term, durable community for learning and continuous improvement.

Recommendations for the #iwill Fund and Match Funders

As the Impact Accelerator moves through its next developmental stage, our aim is for the collective experience and learning of both participant organisations and the Centre to be a regular source of insight to inform and guide the practice of the diverse range of Match Funders engaged across the #iwill Fund, and youth social action funders outside of the #iwill Fund. Below, we set out two recommendations for these partners, based on our reflections on the process up to this point. These are offered for discussion and refinement, with an intention to create consensus and consistency as far as possible. This process will be supported by our work on the funder-focused LabStorms strand of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub: we will share these recommendations with Match Funders taking part in the next LabStorm session. For reference, you can read the first LabStorm report [here](#).

1) Align funding approach to learning needs

There is potential for funders to draw on the Confidence Framework as a means to shape and target their grant-making in this domain. The following table offers a tentative mapping of different funding approaches which would best support organisations given the stage they are at in their service development and continuous improvement cycle. This requires further testing and refinement, and this could usefully involve operationalising a light-touch version of the Confidence Framework process as part of the grant initiation process, post-award.

Table 1.3 - Mapping funding approaches against learning priority

Programme Size/ Confidence Level	Funding approach needed	Learning Priority
Small scale, low confidence framework levels	Low investment size, long term, iterative grant periods	Support experimental work – or the adoption of best practice from elsewhere.
Large scale, low confidence framework levels	Medium grants in line with programme cycles	Refine and test the logic model, support the development of real time monitoring.

Small scale, high confidence framework levels	Medium to large fixed term grants	Rapid cycle testing, and service design work to codify best practice and mechanisms of change.
Large scale, high confidence framework levels (no current examples of this)	Major scale-up funding	Capacity building support to maintain rigour at scale. Work to codify best practice and transmit to other settings. RCTs may be appropriate in certain cases.

2) Invest in dedicated impact and learning capacity

The Impact Accelerator takes place over 12 months. This period of time means that organisations are subject to internal changes that may affect their capacity to benefit from the value of the Impact Accelerator. Challenges include turnover of staff, or changes in internal staff capacity depending on other priorities for the organisation. This is particularly relevant for participants who did not have dedicated impact and learning staff capacity, and for organisations that had limited youth social action experience.

Where these functions have dedicated resources allocated to them, there is greater potential for organisational transformation over the long term. Funders can play a crucial role in bringing this about, particularly where they collaborate with their peers to support core learning and evaluation capacity, rather than siloed resources directed at one project or delivery area. Both within the #iwill Fund, and alongside other youth-focused funders, there is huge potential to collectively coordinate in resourcing organisation-wide learning and continuous improvement. Supporting funders to realise this potential is a key strategic priority for the Centre, and the #iwill Fund represents an ideal forum and context in which to nurture, develop and evidence the benefits of this way of working.

The Future of the Impact Accelerator

The Centre's ambition for the Impact Accelerator is both to consolidate its place within the youth social action field, and open up the programme to other areas of practice and specialism within the youth sector. Below we set out three key reflections and refinements we have made and intend to develop, to support the achievement of both aspects of this ambition.

1) The Confidence Framework

As the centrepiece for the Impact Accelerator process, it is important to firstly reflect on what function The Confidence Framework most effectively fulfils, and what it can convey in terms of information. Each area of the Framework has some detailed evidence requirements associated with each 'level' (corresponding to the colours of the Framework such that it becomes a heat map). However, this does not mean that the calibrated level is an absolute truth: it simply provides a helpful focus to begin to explore areas of improvement. There is insight to be gleaned from the level selected, but also from the difference between the self-assessment and the calibrated level, which can highlight blind spots, or areas where staff can develop their knowledge and practice.

Overall, it is important to remember the objective is not to turn every box of The Confidence Framework green for every participating organisation. Some areas of the framework may be a priority for improvement, but in other cases it may be that a confidence area was low because structurally it does not fit or the organisation is not at the appropriate point in their journey for that area to be a focus.

In order to recognise the nuance of the Framework, we have adapted the terminology we use for the external review process from 'validation' to 'calibration'. The process is the same, but we feel that calibration better describes what is actually taking place. It recognises that the reviewers are not working to provide a 'score' or a seal of approval, or to assure the self-assessment in any objective sense, but are focussed on providing an informed external perspective. Their input is in service of the organisation being able to identify its priorities, and areas where improvement work may result in better impact, over repeated cycles of continuous improvement.

2) Confidence in community

As noted above, a key outcome of participation in the Impact Accelerator is positive culture change within organisations, in order to embed impact and learning approaches in day-to-day practice. This organisational change takes time, and the effects will be seen, if sustained, well beyond the 12 months of the programme. Most organisations made significant progress in their improvement



plans during the improvement phase, but they were not able to finish all areas where they could have implemented positive changes.

The Impact Accelerator process has provided these organisations with a clear structure and priorities for further improvement beyond the end of the programme, but there is a risk that collective momentum may be lost – and, along with it, the opportunity to develop durable, youth social action-specific assets and insights (e.g. a ‘bottom-up’ good practice guide, template processes and forms, or a white-label volunteer-management platform).

Hence we will be working with both cohort one and the incoming cohort two to establish the terms of engagement for a learning community which will draw together the collective continuous improvement experience, challenge and ambition for the sector.

3) Consistency of external support

The crucial role of the ‘Research Associate’ in supporting cohort one organisations through the different phases of the programme has come through very strongly in the process of putting together this report. Our focus is now to preserve the benefits brought by this role, while also addressing the challenge raised above, that bringing in external people inevitably generates some ‘friction’ in the form of staff time invested in briefing them about their context, culture and priorities.

For the second cohort, the Centre has adjusted this aspect of the delivery model: rather than using external consultants, the majority of the research associate function will be provided by key staff within its Practice Development team. Subject to feedback from participants over the course of this second cycle, we may refine this process further, and identify points at which some additional external input may be of benefit.

Appendix 1: 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 activities of the #iwill Fund. It has two strategic objectives:

1. To inform the strategic and investment direction of the #iwill Fund. This will ensure that the #iwill Fund Leadership Board and #iwill Fund delivery partners are able to target funds into the right areas, ages and approaches, where it is really 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 #iwill Fund Learning Hub has developed three workstreams which will support its objectives. This will allow us to support funders in making decisions about how to support youth social action now, and to 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 as well as 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 identifying 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; how to reach under-served groups and how to 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 both 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.