

#iwill Fund Learning Hub

LabStorms: A 'How-to Guide'

The Centre for Youth Impact
October 2022

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youth social action

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Introduction

This guide is for funders and providers of youth social action, to support them in their organisational and peer to peer learning as they enable, fund and increase high-quality youth social action opportunities for young people. The guide draws on learning from the LabStorms facilitated by the Centre for Youth Impact (now part of YMCA George Williams College) as part of the Quality Practice workstream of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub.

The guide provides inspiration and advice in how to convene and facilitate LabStorms as a powerful and shared legacy of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. Funders may wish to create these collaborative learning spaces for themselves, as a community of practice, or facilitate shared spaces for peer-to-peer learning for the organisations they fund and support to deliver youth social action opportunities. This consistently emerged as an important feature of the #iwill Fund experience for youth organisations. Similarly, organisations that offer youth social action opportunities for young people may wish to convene LabStorms to share and progress their learning, and in turn, organisations creating and offering youth social action opportunities for young people could consider how LabStorms can create intentional space for young people to explore and surface solutions to common challenges in their activism and change-making roles.

This guide shares practical information on how – and when – to offer LabStorms, alongside reflecting on the role of shared spaces in supporting the **process** of collaborative learning, and exploring the **content** that informs more engaging and impactful youth social action opportunities, for both young people and communities.

What is a LabStorm?

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.

Between 2019 and 2022, the Centre for Youth Impact hosted a series of LabStorms, both in-person and virtual, for the Match Funders within the #iwill Fund in order to provide a space for thinking, reflection and discussion on the issues posed by funding high-quality youth social action.

A LabStorm provides a facilitated space that is designed to create the conditions for reflection, fresh thinking, openness, generosity and insight. Each LabStorm begins with an individual giving a 15-minute presentation that covers both their work in general and details of a specific challenge that they're facing, with which they would like support and guidance from their peers. The 'challenge' needs to be an issue that has value and meaning to the 'presenter', and over which they have some influence (that is, they are able to enact some of the wisdom and suggestions offered by their peers).

The presenter sets out the challenge and why it matters in their work, alongside the actions or paths they have taken so far in attempting to address it. They conclude in framing two or three specific questions with which they would like help from the attendees. Then, via a group discussion, attendees work together to support the presenter in finding answers or responses to their challenge. This can range from offering specific advice or suggestions to asking open questions in order to help the presenter reframe their questions and find new insight. Whilst the discussion remains confidential, the learning from each session is then written up and distributed for the wider community to benefit from.

The role of the facilitator is to prepare for and 'hold' the space and support the process, rather than to bring content. The content is generated by the group, through discussion and the conversational flow of asking for ideas and offering them. This can be anxiety-inducing: it is not often that we 'host' a meeting where we do not prepare content to ensure that the time is well-used and beneficial. But LabStorms are about trusting the process and the group: when the conditions and the framing are right, the content flows.

Why convene LabStorms?

LabStorms were adopted within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub in order to foster ongoing, deeper collaboration between Match Funders, and a shared sense of common challenges and potential solutions. The aim was to enable a system of effective youth social action funding to be continued beyond the end of the existing phase of the #iwill Fund in 2023.

Capturing the impact of LabStorms involves a focus on process – did participants experience the process as intended? – and the learning that emerges as a result – what was this learning, and what did participants do with it? The quality of the process can be checked during and at the end of the session, and through follow-ups with participants. It is also helpful to begin LabStorm sessions with reflections from the presenter and participants at previous sessions, to understand how they reflected on, shared and used the learning. LabStorms supported the #iwill Fund Learning Hub by enabling and encouraging Match Funders to collaborate to identify and address potentially shared problems, increasing the effectiveness of their youth social action funding and relationships with the organisations they fund. LabStorms also directly enabled the sharing of learning, data and insights – both within the session, and via the write-ups of the session.

LabStorms won't be 'right' in every context. LabStorms embody the ideal conditions in which collaboration can emerge, deepen and endure. They also create opportunities for learning to be both shared and generated, in response to real-world challenges. LabStorms draw on lived experience and shared wisdom, and are rooted in a belief that potential solutions reside within us all. In contexts that are more contested, where collaboration is not necessarily a shared goal, where participants are not participating voluntarily or do not feel they have wisdom to share, or where the 'solution' is known in advance, LabStorms are unlikely to be useful or effective. Similarly, the facilitator must have the trust of the room, and all other participants must believe themselves to be there as equals – the culture of reciprocity is critical in LabStorms.

The potential impact of LabStorms

LabStorms can be a useful approach for individuals and organisations that work with others within a system that can grow and change through collaboration. Where there is a sense of shared challenges and common solutions, the expression and exploration of diverse perspectives can have real value and generate new and innovative ideas. Feedback Labs note the power of what can happen when you begin 'asking for experiences that will inform solutions from those that have faced similar issues'.

Feedback collected by the Centre for Youth Impact indicates that LabStorms can be particularly helpful when discussing challenges that resonate with everyone in the group, and can lead to a real sense of camaraderie and comfort from learning together.

In this way, LabStorms are a democratic space where everyone's experience is valued equally. It is also a safe space to name and explore power dynamics, particularly in funding relationships.

"LabStorms offer an intense and extremely helpful environment to bring questions and concerns, and to discuss them with others who have an interest and practical experience in one area. It was exciting to dig deeper into the issues that niggle with us, and I left feeling it should be more standard to talk through things in this way in such a productive space. The conversation is brilliantly facilitated, allowing all to contribute and share from their own perspectives and experiences" – Viv Jackson, Paul Hamlyn Foundation

"The LabStorm process, and session itself, provided a space for me to air my questions, concerns and ideas without the usual barriers which often impede real interrogation of challenging issues, most notably the pressure to always ensure you are saying the right thing at the right time, conscious of your audience of potential influencers or decision-makers. This freedom created possibility – "What if..." and "I wonder what would happen if..." – which opened up discussions, whilst also still providing opportunity for challenge, development and I hope ultimately practical action" – Justin Watson, Young Manchester Foundation

Feedback Labs have produced their own community guidelines for participants that cover five guiding principles that underpin the approach:



1. Usefulness

The LabStorm should be helpful to the presenting individual and organisation.



2. Thoughtfulness

In particular, about who is invited to participate. Invitations to LabStorms should be sent personally and not be 'open invitation' or promoted via social media.



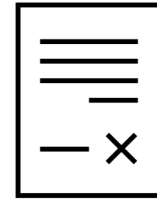
3. Reciprocity

Organisations that present at a LabStorm should commit to attending sessions where others are presenting.



4. Collaboration

LabStorm sessions are about sharing and learning rather than duplicating others' work for one's own benefit.



5. Confidentiality

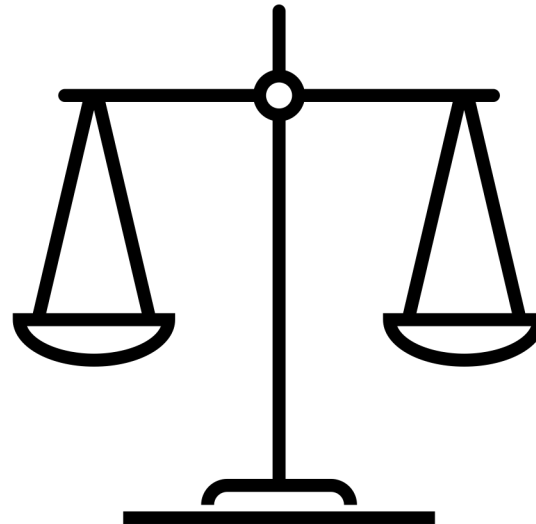
LabStorms sessions are explicitly conducted under Chatham House Rules.

LabStorms – a perfect balance of process and content

A key element of the power and potential of LabStorms is the balance of focus on **process** and **content**. The process is 'held' by the facilitator, but is a responsibility shared by the group. The content is uniquely generated by the group.

Process

An equitable, safe space in which to ask questions, share vulnerability, seek support and celebrate success, with safety to test ideas and language with peers



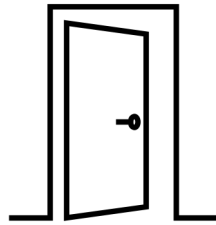
Content

Challenges that resonate with others, and that have impact beyond the individual, questions that create shared experience and build collaborative will and energy, tightly framed enquiries that get to the heart of issues

How does a LabStorm work?

A LabStorm session generally lasts one hour and forty-five minutes to two hours. In order to generate the sense of shared and collective learning, it needs to have at least six participants as well as the facilitator. There is no upper limit on number of participants, though attention needs to be paid to timing and allowing everyone to make a contribution. An outline schedule for a typical LabStorm session is presented here:

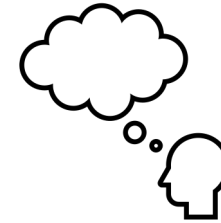
Timing	Activity
15 minutes	Presentation Presenter introduces the issue at hand, including a sense of what the question means to them and their organisation, what they have already tried, what constraints or parameters exist that limit capacity for action, and three specific questions they would like the group to help them address
45 minutes	Round 1 Facilitator invites participants to ask questions to explore the nature of the challenge and refine the questions presented. Presenter may respond individually, or to 'clusters' of questions
15 minutes	Presenter reflections Session pauses, and presenter reflects on how what they've heard so far impacts upon their initial thinking. How have the presenter's thoughts moved on as a result of the discussion? Presenter suggests specific areas where they'd welcome more discussion
15 minutes	Round 2 Facilitator invites participants to ask additional questions. Presenter responds individually or to 'clusters' of questions. To end, facilitator invites participants to offer one "gift" - a piece of advice or reflection for the presenter
10 minutes	Closing thoughts Presenter summarises: O Key ideas or discussions that have advanced their thinking O What they are taking away O What their next steps will be
5 mins	Final round All participants, including facilitator, reflect in turn on the process: what was helpful? What are they taking away for their own practice or learning?



Invite people in

- LabStorms are open yet closed spaces: the invite to join is open and generous, and a key element of creating an inclusive, community-owned space. However, once established, the space is 'closed' to offer a safe and confidential space when everyone has committed to be present.
- It is important that participants are there by choice and engage 'as themselves' rather than just representatives of their organisation.

LabStorms: the role of process



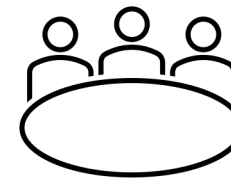
Welcome a presenter

- The presenter needs to volunteer – it's far less effective where the role of presenter is pre-assigned, or works on a rolling basis without an element of choice.
- Provide plenty of space for a presenter to step forwards – it may take time for them to build up the courage to bring their challenge to the group, or to feel assured that it's the right moment.
- Make sure everyone knows that the facilitator will be on hand to support the presenter to refine and focus their questions before the session.



Frame the questions

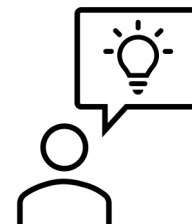
- Supporting the presenter to frame their three questions is one of the most important roles of the facilitator.
- The questions need to get to the heart of the matter – what is the presenter *really* asking? How can the framing and language of the question help the group to focus in, generate reflections and ideas, and signal the value of insight to the presenter's work?
- Don't be afraid to re-frame the questions for the second round of discussion. The group may have shifted the presenter's thinking already, and they now wish to ask an emergent question. Or the framing of the original questions may not have been as tight as it was hoped. Trust the process!



Hold the space

- The facilitator must hold the space for participants – watch the clock so others don't have to, notice who is contributing and who isn't, play back what they have heard, allow for silence but know when to ask a powerful question.

Reflect and share



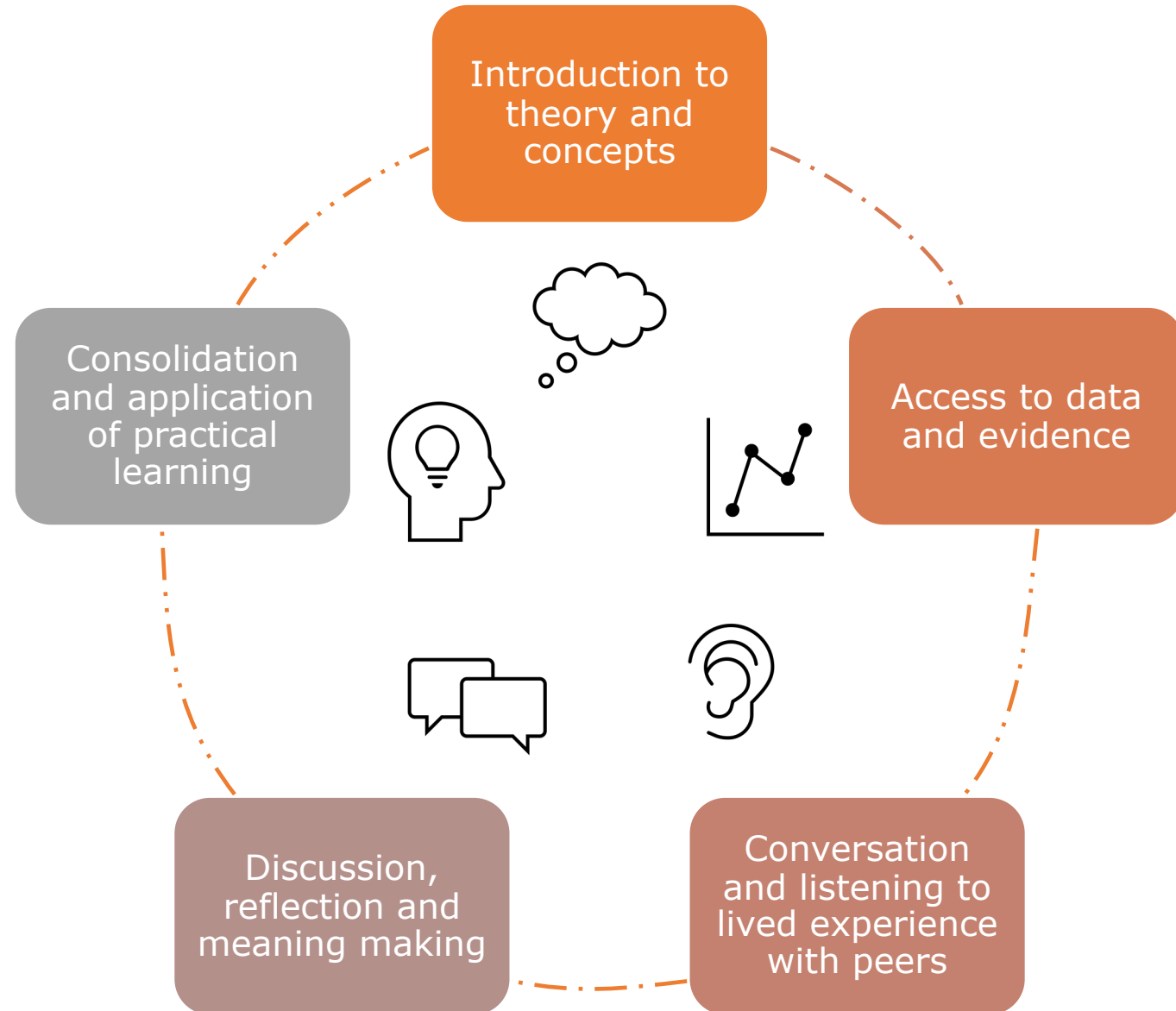
- It's important to surface and reflect on the process as much as the content – the facilitator should check in at the start, middle and end of the session to see how the process is being experienced, and what's more or less effective.
- It is also important to give all participants – not just the presenter – the opportunity to reflect on and share their own learning from the session.

LabStorms as part of a learning ecosystem

In our last LabStorm facilitated with #iwill Fund Match Funders, we explored the role that LabStorms had played in supporting the learning within and across the #iwill Fund.

Match Funders shared that LabStorms play an important role for them in a wider 'learning ecosystem'.

LabStorms create space for Match Funders to explore the theoretical and the conceptual, and to explore what ideas 'might mean in their world'. This collective meaning making is a core part of how the theoretical gets translated into practical action. This process sits alongside independent access to 'distilled' information – data and evidence – set out in written reports and blogs.



Useful resources

- LabStorms reports:
 - [LabStorm one](#)
 - [LabStorm two](#)
 - [LabStorm three](#)
 - [LabStorms four and five](#)
 - [LabStorm six](#)
 - [LabStorm seven](#)
- The final Impact Accelerator learning [report](#)
- #iwill Fund Learning Hub papers on:
 - [Community Benefit and Youth Social Action](#)
 - [Youth Social Action and Outcomes for Young People](#)
 - [New Directions for Social Action](#)

Annex: LabStorms as part of a learning journey

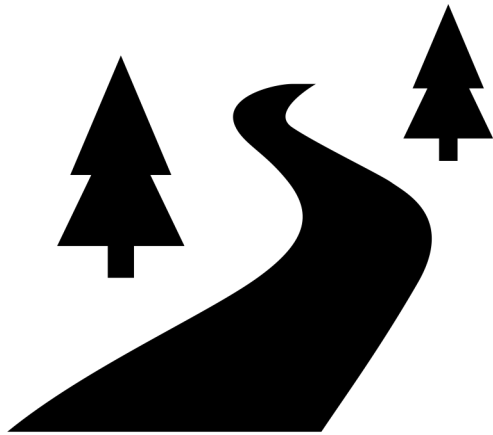
Is there a 'right time' to convene a LabStorm? And for Match Funders, does it make a difference if they're the convener or the participant?

Alongside facilitating LabStorms, the Centre for Youth Impact led the Impact Accelerator programme for the #iwill Fund Learning Hub: a 12-month learning programme for organisations funded via the #iwill Fund to offer high-quality youth social action opportunities to young people.

Our experience in the Impact Accelerator programme was that the different 'phases' of funding matter: the context and questions – set out on the following pages - are different at the start of funding, as compared to during funding, and at the end.

This is effectively the 'life cycle' of youth social action opportunities – although it is really important to note that the end of funding does not mean the end of young people taking action on issues that matter to them. The end of a funding cycle is often the start of 'handing over' leadership and stewardship of community action to young people.

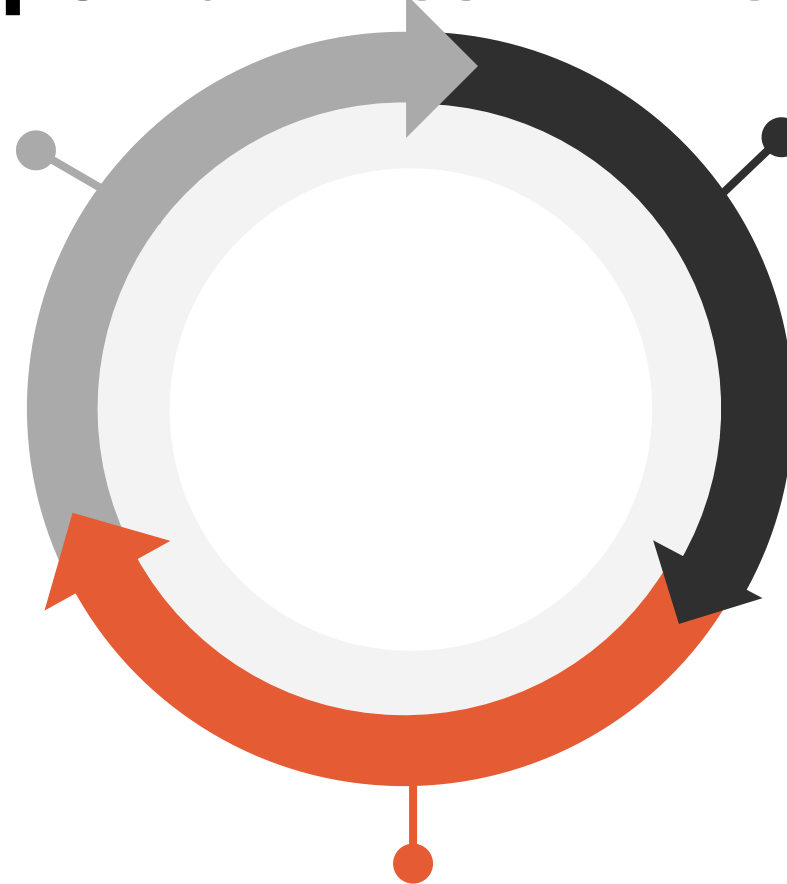
However, our experience is also that LabStorms create valuable opportunities for learning and reflection at **every** stage of the funding cycle, for both Match Funders and delivery organisations. We would also encourage opportunities for young people to facilitate, contribute and learn from LabStorms, which can be supported by attentiveness to the community guidelines (see previous slide).



Learning opportunities in the funding cycle

END OF FUNDING

This is the moment for reflection, and for capturing those reflections, both as an ending and a new beginning. It is important for embedding learning into new cycles of delivery, and 'codifying' learning for wider sharing, across organisations and the sector. It's also the time to reflect on the questions that were addressed during periods of experiential learning, and the questions that remain.



DURING FUNDING

This is the time to explicitly fund and embed cycles of learning and improvement, organisation-wide – into grant funding, and into Match Funder practice. It's also the moment to work in partnership to identify where support and capacity building will be most valuable. It is the time to recognise the value of process alongside outcomes.

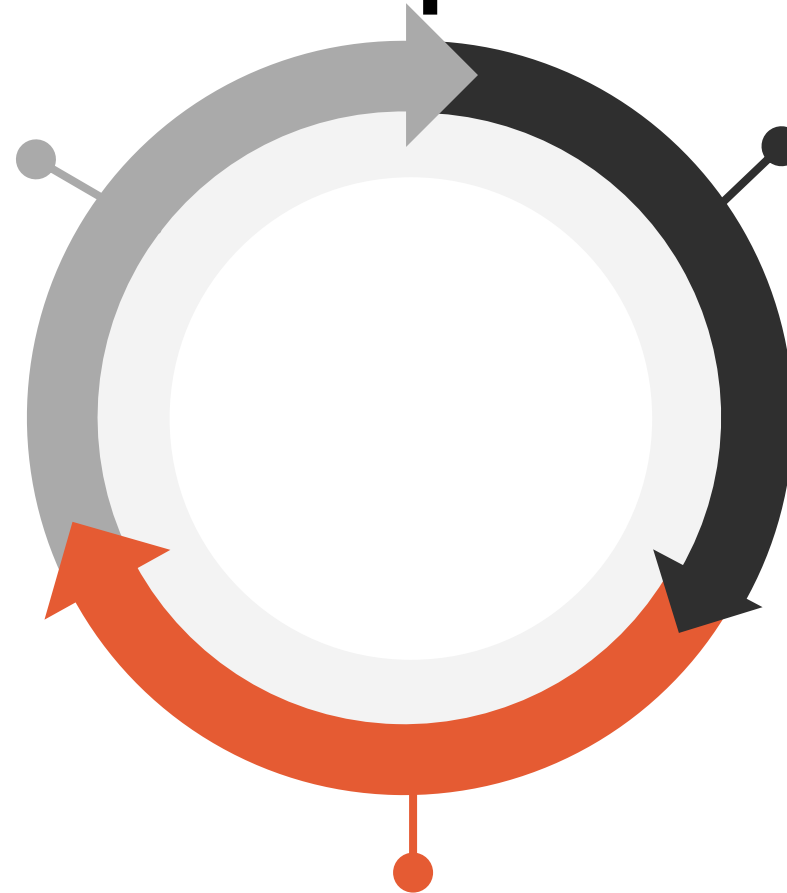
START OF FUNDING

This is the start of a funding relationship. It is about establishing clear aims for the youth social action opportunity/ies, supporting high quality design, and alignment with the six #iwill Fund quality principles. It's also about exploring the appetite and capacity for both the funder and delivery organisation(s) for learning and improvement. This phase applies as much to relationships between individual funder and grantee, as it does to the funder's relationship with its 'portfolio': the community of organisations it is supporting to contribute to wider social change.

Questions that could be explored through LabStorms

END OF FUNDING

- Who do we need to share our learning with? What could they do with it?
- What is our legacy? How do we ensure learning isn't lost?
- Do we have sufficient insight into what contributed (or didn't) to change for young people and communities?
- If we did this again, what would we do differently?
- What relationships do we need to share our learning widely?



DURING FUNDING

- How can we capture learning that's emerging quickly?
- How can we collate, learn from and act on what data is telling us?
- How do we make time for reflection, and change how we work as a result?
- How do we diagnose – and ask for – the help we need?

START OF FUNDING

- What are we trying to achieve? And who decides? Who needs to be involved in asking – and answering – these questions?
 - Who are we 'targeting' and why?
 - Is there any tension in our aims, for example, between young people and communities?
- How much space do we have to adapt our aims and plans in response to young people's perspectives and experience?
 - What's the role of youth social action within our wider organisational vision and mission?
- What prior learning can we draw on, and what knowledge gaps do we need to fill?