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#iwill Fund Learning Hub Evidence Workstream

Adaptation and Youth Social Action: The Impact of COVID-19

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Introduction

This report presents the #iwill Fund Learning Hub's work to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and associated restrictions, on the delivery of #iwill-Funded youth social action. It is a part of the Learning Hub's Evidence workstream, which seeks to build answers over time to a series of 'key questions' about youth social action.

Since 2019, to answer these questions, we have used data entered in the #iwill Fund Information Management System, reports from Match Funders to the #iwill Fund, and evaluations of funded delivery, commissioned by Match Funders. The pandemic disrupted this process significantly: adapted delivery meant postponed, and then adapted, evaluations and data entry, as well the easing of reporting requirements on grantee delivery organisations.

On top of this disruption to 'business as usual' learning we were also aware that what was happening during lockdown – the adaptations that funders and delivery organisations were making to youth social action, and the response to and engagement by, young people – was important to capture. As this report will show, the innovation required reveals some promising new approaches. This learning is important in understanding the impact of the #iwill Fund, and in developing high-quality youth social action for the future, both under ongoing pandemic conditions, and further ahead.

To maintain some continuity with our previous work, we have largely organised our findings against existing 'key questions':

- 1) What is Youth Social Action?
- 2) How do we support Youth Social Action for all?
- 3) What are the outcomes of Youth Social Action?
- 4) How can we support quality Youth Social Action?

This will allow the Learning Hub, over time, to integrate the learning from this unprecedented period with previous work, and the rest of our work over the remaining life of the #iwill Fund. There is no doubt that the changes resulting from the pandemic will shape the future work of Match Funders and grantee organisations in the future, as well as that of the Learning Hub.

Methodology

Between May to mid-September the #iwill Fund Learning Hub carried out monthly surveys of Match Funders to understand the disruption to, and adaptation of, funded delivery. We asked them to describe the extent of the disruption to their services, the extent of adaptation and any examples of this. The final survey captured some experiences of the impact of the new school term beginning.

We also asked them for information on reach and engagement with adapted services, any shifts in the focus, or intended outcomes, of social action during the pandemic, and how they or delivery partners were engaging with young people themselves during the restrictions. In later months we asked Match Funders about plans for restarting face-to-face delivery where this had been suspended and their learning from the period - including adaptations that they would like to maintain and build on in the future, and what they would like to stop doing.

Over the five months, we received 56 responses, not including nil responses. The average number of responses received per month was 11, with 20 being the most in any one month (in May), and seven the least (in August). The most consistent respondents were Comic Relief, The Ernest Cook Trust and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

Questions were adapted over the months to respond to changes in restrictions. We analysed the responses by grouping answers against the 'key questions' listed above, identifying themes, and looking for consistency or change in these themes over the different surveys. This method produces descriptive findings.

The surveys were complemented by eight 'deep-dive' interviews, carried out by Renaisi. These were held with six Match Funders and two members of the #iwill Fund team. Interviews covered most of the topics above in depth, and also considered how Match Funders had supported grantees, and what Match Funders thought might happen over the coming months. Interviewees were also asked about safeguarding challenges that arose during lockdown and how grantees responded to these.

The #iwill Learning Hub is very grateful for the help of the Match Funders in providing the information, via surveys and interviews, which provided the material for this report. This report does not attempt to present a complete picture of how #iwill-Funded youth social action was disrupted or adapted during the restrictions, and it can only share Match Funder predictions of what might happen next. Future #iwill Fund Learning Hub reports will return to these topics.

1. What is Youth Social Action?

Before COVID-19, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub sought to understand the different types of Youth Social Action being supported by the #iwill Fund. In this section we look at how severely the lockdown restrictions disrupted delivery of #iwill-Funded activities, and the widespread adaptation of youth social action into new types of delivery.

We provide some detail about what the adapted social action 'looked like' and describe some of the support that Match Funders provided to grantees to enable them to adapt and continue delivery. These adaptations and support began as soon as lockdown was announced, but changed over the months, and continue to change.

1.1 Disruption and adaptation

Delivery of existing youth social action was disrupted for nearly all Match Funders who responded over the survey period, with only two not impacted, having always been exclusively online. Disruption did not mean suspension though, with only one Match Funder, which funded activities entirely in schools, having to become fully inactive.

The majority of Match Funders reported that their funded programmes had moved partially online, or that existing online activities were continuing and adapting.

Two Match Funders reported continuing socially distant face-to-face activities, or meetings, throughout lockdown in line with restrictions. Young Manchester described 'highly focussed, street-based protective youth work interventions using 10-minute engagements using personal protective equipment'. Others noted engagement was difficult, even after restrictions changed, due to the obvious health risks and concerns from parents or carers.

"A number of partners and youth organisations have attempted to organise trips and outdoor social action projects...but it seems parents of young people were a bit concerned and anxious, so they have not been very keen to allow engagement." Clarion Futures

The challenges faced by organisations enabling youth social action were not just around creating adaptations. Many also faced reduced capacity as staff were furloughed, the loss of engagement with schools, and the stress of uncertain futures personally and organisationally. Some organisations were also less knowledgeable about digital options than others, particularly those who had no existing digital provision.

Match Funders reflected that, alongside 'tech-savviness', some factors allowed some organisations to do this faster and more successfully:

- Organisations with a greater proportion of grant-funding benefited from funders' flexibility and ongoing support during the pandemic, compared to those with diverse income streams, which lost trading and commercial income.
- Organisations which did not rely on schools and teachers for either referrals or delivery support benefited from being able to retain young people's engagement more easily, compared to organisations which were reliant on these things.
- Organisations that were further along in the delivery of their programme were generally in a better position to adapt and move online, as they had already built up relationships with young people in person, meaning engagement was easier to sustain. For this reason, there was a sense that recipients of multi-year grants were generally better able to respond than those that received short term or recent funding.
- Some organisations chose to pause delivery as they thought an online or adapted approach would not be appropriate for the particular group of young people they were engaging. One Match Funder described two projects that chose to pause – one working with the LGBTQ+ community that felt it would be unsafe for young people to engage from their homes, and another working with homeless young people who felt digital access would be too limited. However, not all organisations working with those groups chose to take the same approach.

Safeguarding was also highlighted as a barrier, at least at first. Match Funders felt that some organisations were overwhelmed by the idea of adapting safeguarding policies and procedures to suit the new predominantly online delivery models. However, as time went on there was a sense that organisations had risen to the challenge and there were some good examples of safeguarding practice in the new context. Examples of good practice, and useful guidance was shared between Match Funders, and delivery organisations – including that produced by JLGB (due to their experience protecting participants from antisemitism), as well as guidance produced by CAST, UK Youth and the National Youth Agency.

1.2 Examples of adaptation

Those that did adapt their mode of delivery took advantage of online platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams to run group work and sometimes large live events, as well using phone calls and text messages to communicate one to one with young people. New online resources were also created, with Match Funders describing the rationale as being both to maintain engagement, but also to entertain and divert young people who were now stuck at home.

Match Funders notes that the flexibility and breadth of the term 'youth social action' has meant that organisations could be creative with what it looked like during this period. Some felt that the content of activities had changed less than the modes of delivery.

"I think people have had to be much more creative in what they term as youth social action and what youth social action can deliver and achieve in the confines of lockdown and social distancing." **The National Lottery Community Fund**

"In some respects, the overarching stuff hasn't changed... but the tactics and strategies may have shifted." **Act for Change Fund**

For Match Funders supporting activities enabled through schools, the priority has been about supporting *teachers* to facilitate youth social action, mainly through providing clear online guidance and materials.

For at least three Match Funders, this had a positive response, each suggesting they have either sustained or exceeded engagement targets due to shifting delivery online.

"It was clear there was a huge appetite and urgent need from teachers in England for digital support in delivering meaningful and impactful contact to their students during distant learning." **WE Charity**

Adaptation was not solely about moving activities online though; Match Funders directly delivering awards had to innovate in other ways too:

"We created a certificate of achievement for participants that have completed all sections except their expedition as a result of lock down. This has been extended to any participant enrolling between 1 June 2018 and 31 July 2021. Participants do not have to complete their three sections before 31 July 2021 as social distancing rules and local lock downs may continue and we do not want the next cohort of participants starting to be unfairly penalised. We hope this change will encourage schools and young people to continue to enrol and complete their social action through to 2021." **The Duke of Edinburgh's Award**

1.3 Youth Voice and Youth Leadership

Many Match Funders felt that their own, and delivery organisations', enabling of 'youth voice' increased over the pandemic. This was in part due to an awareness that the voices of young people would be crucial in directing what was enabled online but also in response to a widespread

feeling that agencies directing the emergency response were not consulting with young people, even as their lives were being deeply affected by the pandemic.

“A change in recent weeks has been increased engagement with young people’s voices to inform decisions.” **Pears Foundation**

Mechanisms such as Youth Advisory Boards and Ambassador groups have shaped adapted delivery for many Match Funders and delivery organisations. Again, those organisations which had already enabled these mechanisms were able to benefit from them most quickly, but some organisations have been able to do this from scratch:

“Our Youth Advisory Board has met as a group a number of times. They have been AMAZING! The resilience of these young people is incredible and they have provided us with some great ideas on how we can direct young people to environmental youth social action. The ‘new normal’ of online meetings and interactions allowed us to get the youth board up and running more quickly than perhaps we might have and has enabled them to meet more easily given the geographical spread of our Youth Advisory Board members.” **The Ernest Cook Trust**

“It underlines some of the attitudes and values in organisations, whether they saw young people as an add on - a part of their service that could be closed - or whether they saw them as integral partners who deserved to be consulted and kept within the organisation even if they couldn’t do what they had been doing previously. That feels like quite a fundamental difference in some of the responses.” **Pears Foundation**

1.4 How did funders support grantees?

“I think the Match Funders are all being very hands on with their funded organisations. There is an overarching positive attitude throughout the programme... [A sense that] we all need to support each other and get through it as best we can.”

The National Lottery Community Fund

#iwill Fund money already committed to youth social action activities could be re-imagined to deliver the aims of the programme but not re-purposed, so several Match Funders discussed encouraging grantees to apply to other emergency funds they had set up in the wake of the pandemic, or in some cases proactively injecting funding into organisations that were struggling. The latter took place more frequently where grantees had long-standing relationships with the funder, perhaps across multiple funds.

As well as signposting or providing alternative funding to facilitate organisational survival during the pandemic, several Match Funders also described making specific grants in relation to digital access. Some developed new microgrants to ensure young people had access to necessary digital

equipment, while Spirit of 2012's delivery partner UK Youth expanded an existing accessibility fund to encompass digital access. Other funders directly provided funding for digital access items including Zoom licenses, data, laptops, and dongles.

Non-financial support was also put in place, including:

- **Developing or sharing helpful resources:** Pears Foundation described disseminating resources developed by NCVO, and several Match Funders mentioned sharing NYA frameworks among their grantees. Team London also highlighted WE Charity's efforts to adapt their resources to suit the new context.
- **Supporting wellbeing of staff and young people:** It was recognised early on by Match Funders that the pandemic was having negative impacts upon the wellbeing of young people participating in social action and the staff supporting them. Act for Change Fund provided support for staff wellbeing, while Team London phoned grantees to understand and ease their worries.

"We had individual calls with each group [in the grants programme] to see how they were affected. It helped ease their worry about outcomes and outputs...as we let them know we appreciated that it is difficult for everyone." **Team London**

- **Convening networks:** One role that Match Funders recognised they could play in response to the pandemic was to bring groups of grant-funded organisations together to share experiences and advice with one another. Pears Foundation described hosting peer networking sessions, although suggested that these did not go far beyond what they would normally offer in terms of sector support. Meanwhile Act for Change Fund chose to experiment with a new approach, hosting casual drop ins with grantees once a week. They believe these weekly sessions have been highly valuable for three main reasons:
 1. It allowed them to be more sensitive to grantee needs as a funder and feed this back to others within their organisations and beyond.
 2. It allowed them to develop better relationships with grantees and break down barriers to engagement as a result of sector power dynamics.
 3. It allowed grantees to learn from one another and feel validated in working through challenges together.

"It's quite rich to get a community organizer in Wales talking to a refugee project in Kent, they wouldn't have chatted much before, but they are now plugged in and learn from each other... That will impact delivery, it will strengthen our work connecting young people together." **Act for Change Fund**

#iwill Fund response

The #iwill Fund's decision to continue to fund youth social action in re-imagined ways rather than re-purposing funding for other activities was generally understood by Match Funders, who felt it made sense given the aims of the programme and the range of emergency funding available elsewhere. Some also felt that the broad nature of social action meant that in practice a wide range of adapted delivery was acceptable.

"TNLCF said maintain focus on the original outcomes, which we conveyed to our funded organisations. But the overarching social action goal has meant that in practice TNLCF seem quite relaxed. Also, these are youth-led projects so the content will change over time anyway." **Act for Change Fund**

The National Lottery Community Fund also played a supportive role by bringing together Match Funders through 'bitesize' sessions every 2-4 weeks (a framework set up in January 2020), which was felt to be an important mechanism for sharing practice and ideas.

2. How can we support youth social action for all?

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub has previously sought to understand both how #iwill-Funded delivery can reach large numbers of young people, and in particular, how it can reach and engage young people from groups traditionally less likely to take part – particularly children from lower socio-economic groups. This section looks at how delivery organisations addressed the question of 'reach' when traditional channels were disrupted, and which groups of young people they have been more or less successful in engaging.

Match Funders felt that the pandemic and subsequent move to online provision affected reach and engagement significantly for two main reasons.

2.1 The impact of digital delivery

The move to digital gave delivery organisations the opportunity to hold 'live' events, as frequently as they were able, which allowed them to reach large numbers. Global Action Plan held a Summit and JLGB held nightly events resulting in huge reach and participation from young people, likely beyond those they previously reached.

“With some targeted advertising from us, we have had over one million people view the nightly show in total” (JLGB)

Holding online events such as this has reduced geographical barriers too, with Clarion Futures reporting that their content has reached further across the UK than previously. Co-op Foundation felt that their funded projects, many of which are very local, were now able to connect with young people anywhere in the country, particularly those in rural areas who might not have been able to access face-to-face youth social action previously, and young people with disabilities.

“Books Beyond Words, based in Kent, support young people with disabilities through book clubs. They are now planning to reach out to other organisations supporting the same target group, to ensure there are peer support networks available during lockdown”. Co-op Foundation

However, there were also downsides from the shift to digital. Some of these were dependent on how quickly organisations were able to get up and running digitally: for example, JLGB were already operating some elements online, such as the logging of social action for awards, and felt this helped them get JLGB Virtual set up quickly – others were not able to act as quickly.

Some organisations felt that they were able to convert existing engagement to digital, but organisations trying to engage new young people found this difficult. Act for Change Fund said that a small number of funded organisations lost some engagement from core groups as result of the shift away from face-to-face engagement. This suggests that while digital allows for mass engagement with content, this is not the same as building engagement with programmes, and some reported that digital could undermine engagement in the long-term.

“Community Ambassador programmes with established groups of young people have adapted very well to online sessions. Some partners have found it difficult to engage young people online, perhaps due to the amount of online interaction that is expected from young people” **Clarion Futures**

“Typically partners with an established relationship with the young people they support have transitioned fairly seamlessly to digital delivery. However, partners who intended to engage new young people into their project have struggled, as they are unable to rely on more traditional methods of engagement (e.g. speaking at schools or youth clubs etc.)” **Co-op Foundation**

“Many of the organisations we work with have relied heavily on the trusting relationships they have built over time with young people to keep them engaged but this is can be more difficult to

sustain when relying on online contact.” **Sport England**

All Match Funders acknowledged that digital delivery relies on young people having access at home to devices, Wi-Fi or data, and a suitable environment. This naturally disadvantages young people from poorer households, and some Match Funders reported seeing a ‘less diverse’ audience for activities during lockdown than under normal conditions.

“We have heard consistently that access to technology for more disadvantaged young people has been a major barrier to engagement.” **Sport England**

Some also reported concerns that young people with caring responsibilities were having to spend more time on these during lockdown and were less able to engage with youth social action that they were at school.

2.2 The loss of referral pathways

The partial closure of schools did not just affect those programmes delivering within school. Many others sought relied on referrals from, and recruitment within, schools and this was effectively halted in lockdown. Teachers not on school were focussed on delivering education remotely, or on pastoral care.

“We’ve seen a drop in the number of young people accessing the programme, as we delivered primarily to mainstream schools, and they are still not ready to engage with external provision, as a result we instead engaged with a significant community response to support young people and vulnerable adults across our communities during the lock down period. We also made adaptations to our programme to offer virtual social action workshops during this time to ensure that we still supported young people to increase their awareness and understanding of social action.” **LFC Foundation**

“Since Covid-19, some areas are unable to engage young people due to a gap in the chain of communication – using schools or referral partners.” **Spirit of 2012**

“The ones that engage via schools, obviously when schools were locked down, that’s really impacted them to be able to keep their young people engaged or involve new young people whilst schools are in lockdown. The ones that were delivering more away from the school setting and have other ways to engage participants, have had a slight advantage.” **The National Lottery Community Fund**

3. What are the outcomes of youth social action?

A key line of enquiry for the #iwill Fund Learning Hub is which outcomes do youth social action programmes try to affect, and what evidence is there that it does affect these. Youth social action is predicated on producing benefit (or positive outcomes) for both the young people taking part and those affected by their social action – which could be individual, communities, organisations, or wider society.

Previous reports have set out the range of outcomes for both young people and communities that #iwill-Funded programmes are trying to deliver. We have also noted that organisations with a historic focus on young people are likely to focus more on outcomes for young people; the converse is true for those with a historic focus on community impact. The #iwill Fund has allowed these organisations to explore how to balance these two different areas of focus – we wanted to see how the crisis conditions of the pandemic had affected this balance, and whether they had provoked new issues that young people wanted to focus on.

3.1 How did priorities change?

Match Funders, during their conversations with delivery organisations, noted different responses in terms of what they were focussing on.

As previous reports from the Learning Hub have shown, the #iwill Fund supports a large number of organisations with an existing focus on young people's outcomes, including via youth work. Match Funders supporting a high number of these were likely to report that their delivery organisations had narrowed their focus, during lockdown, to young people's mental health, wellbeing, and in some cases safety. This was particularly true for organisations working with young people from marginalised communities. Beyond this, all 'youth-focussed' organisations were initially concerned with, and put a lot of effort into, maintaining the engagement of young people as their usual routes of contact with them were disrupted.

Match Funders reflected that this new increased focus on young people's wellbeing went hand-in-hand with a reduced focus on community benefit. This was also driven by many social action opportunities being halted due to young people being kept at home.

“Organisations have generally been less successful at redefining community benefit, mostly because they have been working flat out to support young people with health, social, learning and

economic issues. It feels like community benefit outcomes have not been in proportion to personal development outcomes, which we may see rebalance as restrictions ease”

Comic Relief

Match Funders working with organisations without a previous focus on young people had a different experience, feeling that young people’s outcomes were somewhat ignored as organisations worked out how to respond to the crisis.

“My gut instinct is community benefit [has been emphasised during the crisis], as in young people have been swept into the generic discourse of ‘everybody needs to help out’, and young people have been largely underserved in having their rights and opportunities protected.” **Pears Foundation**

“For organisations that have always been youth focused, their natural tendency quite rightly I think is to focus on the needs of their participants and the needs of the young people. For organisations that were more potentially youth social action or social action focused, it’s quite organically more about community benefit and things like that.” **The National Lottery Community Fund**

Several organisations mentioned the idea that young people *are* an invaluable resource in serving communities during this period. Pears Foundation highlighted the example of NHS Trusts recognising that older volunteers may not be able to return to hospitals in the foreseeable future, so young people must be recruited, and their engagement sustained if hospital volunteering is to survive.

It was also noted that, in some youth social action, the outcomes for young people and for communities can be blurred, particularly where the young people taking action are part of communities that will benefit from the social action. This has been defined as ‘[reflexive benefit](#)’ by the Learning Hub before. Some Match Funders felt that was particularly the case during the pandemic as young people engaged in social action campaigned for young people’s voices to be heard more clearly in the pandemic response, and social action shifted to campaigning more generally.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some Match Funders talked about projects focussing on mitigating the effects of the pandemic and restrictions:

“Bereavement and loss is a big topic at the moment...a team of girls with Autism and ADHD designed their social action project around bringing their community together. It involved creating a memorial space planting flowers and painted rocks in memory of those who lost their lives due to the pandemic. The team felt it was important to instil

hope and shine an example of how they can all come together even in the most difficult circumstances to make a difference.” **Spirit of 2012**

“Next quarter [we will] help young people log the hours of good deeds that they did during the pandemic, with the particular emphasis on the younger age group.” **JLGB**

3.2 The shift to campaigning

“Young people were largely excluded from emergency responses, so some started to campaign for their inclusion, but also a lot of physical opportunities closed down, so the voice and online space was the only one left open for many young people.” **Pears Foundation**

This quote describes what many young people, and organisations, found during the pandemic. Volunteering or ‘service-based’ activities have been the majority of #iwill-Funded activities to date – but these were nearly all suddenly halted. This, in addition to a widespread feeling within the youth sector that young people were being ignored by the government, drove engagement with campaigning activities to make young people’s voice heard. Another example of a motivating force was the exam results crisis, where some #iwill-Funded organisations helped mobilise young people’s voices on this issue – in Greater Manchester this moved the metropolitan Mayor to establish a taskforce to consider a ‘youth guarantee’.

The Black Lives Matter movement, and the light it shed on entrenched inequalities, became the most-cited reason given by Match Funders for the rise in campaigning activities.

“The Black Lives Matter movement has been a prominent force... it has transitioned everyone’s minds, and made externally facing campaigning work more popular” **Spirit of 2012**

Match Funders themselves were moved to act by Black Lives Matter, with work being taken forward to increased Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion by individual funders and working in partnership, including with The National Lottery Community Fund.

While the need for young people’s voices to be heard in the pandemic response, and the impact of Black Lives Matter, were repeatedly noted as driving the shift to campaigning, it was also noted that this was in line with an existing, and wider shift in the youth social action sector:

“Step Up To Serve and the #iwill campaign...Their language has shifted, and they are talking much more...about young people at the heart, power and making change and challenging things – as well as thinking about their community and looking out for other people.” **Act for Change Fund**

Some Match Funders raised concerns about inclusivity if too much weight was put on this type of social action. Spirit of 2012 felt that younger children may not be able to participate in external-

facing work to the same extent where the focus is on campaigning, while Pears Foundation noted that this emphasis could be off-putting for some young people.

“One of the strengths of youth social action is the spectrum of activity - you can do your neighbour’s shopping and be included or be Greta Thunberg and be included.”

Pears Foundation

3.3 The effect on evaluation

At the beginning of restrictions, Match Funders and the Learning Hub anticipated a significant impact on existing evaluations and that has been borne out. Activities paused or significantly changes, which meant that even if data collection continues, it was no longer measuring the same thing.

Match funders frequently mentioned the fact that the significant impacts of the pandemic and restrictions on young people would make it much harder to feel confident that any improvement (or worsening) in outcomes like wellbeing could be attributed to a youth social action programme. Some Match Funders were proactive in adjusting their evaluation plans:

“We have removed the focus on *wellbeing* of girls and will measure *confidence* levels which can be attributed to the programme more easily. Our Cohort 3 impact and learning phase starts in August, so more information will come out in the coming months” **Spirit of 2012.**

Some Match Funders evaluation priorities shifted in response to the pandemic, with Act For Change Fund particularly concerned to try to track those young people that “drop off” from programmes and support them long-term – particularly those in hard to reach groups already (such as LGBTQ youth).

It is a positive that Match Funders have entered the #iwill Fund, and/or begun new projects at different times. Some Match Funders, like the Co-op Foundation, Team London, and the Ernest Cook Trust, are beginning new evaluations now – this will reflect the COVID-19 context and are less likely to be significantly negatively affected by it. Other Match Funders are commissioning, or carrying out, their own research, into what the effects of the pandemic have been on their activities.

As part of their support for grantees, Match Funders emphasised flexibility with reporting guidelines. Even when face-to-face delivery restarts, they anticipate greater flexibility in this area. This will likely decrease the amount of outcome information available from the #iwill Fund.

“We’ve altered a lot of timetables - that’s been the most common thing, timings shifting. We fully anticipate some of those timing shifts will later down the line transpose to outcomes or outputs shifts as well.” **Pears Foundation**

4. How can we support quality youth social action?

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub supports quality improvement by youth social action organisations through its Impact Accelerator programme, and shared findings from this. Alongside the common elements of quality programme design, delivery, and continuous improvement, we are also attentive to the six 'quality principles' of youth social action. We are keen to understand how digital delivery might enable any of these principles, as well as what the downsides of digital adaptation might be for maintaining quality.

It is too early to say with confidence what quality digital delivery looks like, but Match Funders formed many positive impressions of it through conversation with delivery organisations. Many Funders felt that holding online meetings made it easier to engage with young people and so to increase young people's participation in decision-making within organisations. This could help embed youth leadership and youth voice in more organisations as logistical barriers are reduced.

It was also felt that online meetings allowed for more creativity in who young people speak with – this can expose them to a wider range of partners, increase their learning, and open up new ways to reflect on their experience:

“Providing a space to evaluate together has proved invaluable as it has promoted meaningful reflection and validation of young people's learning... Funded groups reported that through their programmes they were able to strengthen relationships with other local groups. This included linking with groups working with similar cohorts of young people for cross referrals, developing greater awareness of grants and support available from member organisations” **Team London**

Other Match Funders noted that some individuals engage more successfully in online spaces than they do in-person. This suggests that digital delivery may be useful in enhancing initial engagement and relationship-building, particularly at 'ice-breaker' stage, but also presents a challenge in translating this enhanced engagement into a better experience when 'in-person' delivery takes over.

It is generally understood that more sustaining youth social action over time (as opposed to very light-tough engagements) is one way of meeting the quality principles of 'challenging' and 'socially impactful'. Digital delivery has posed challenges to this, as well as some new ways of working:

“Delivery partners at times find it challenging to build up 30 hours on zoom for the girls as

learning topics tend to be shorter. As such, UK Youth and British Red Cross have stepped in offering nationwide sessions advertised through the delivery partners and young workers to the girls. Girls are attending independently but feeding learnings back into their groups” **Spirit of 2012**

As mentioned above, safeguarding risks were often felt in the context of digital delivery. Guaranteeing participant’s safety online was seen as particularly challenging with younger children, as well as for some specific groups, such as LGBTQ youth.

The enforced move to digital also led Match Funders to reflect on the specific value of ‘in-person’ social action. Most obviously, and as mentioned above, restricting youth social action to digital restricts the type of action young people can take part in. But Match Funders also believed that opening up new digital options shouldn’t mean overlooking non-digital approaches where quality has been built over time.

“We need to fight the appeal of starting with a completely new slate or re-designing all our approaches... we don’t want to lose sight of the really good stuff that was already happening.”

Pears Foundation

5. What will happen next?

In this section we look at what Match Funders think will happen going forward, in terms of both restarting social action delivery in-person, and potentially extending and building on adaptations.

5.1 Resuming in-person youth social action

In September, Match Funders were reporting some resumption of socially distanced face-to-face delivery, particularly of projects which had already been underway when restrictions began, rather than new projects.

Projects which run independently of schools were more likely to have resumed, with some Match Funders reporting that grantees delivering via schools had been told that in-person delivery will not be able to resume for months. Measures such as staggered days are likely to reduce school time overall, and schools will be focussed on assessing, and rectifying, the gap in learning, and greater mental health and wellbeing needs are anticipated too.

“Feedback from our current Host Organisations has told us that schools are less likely to engage with projects that are outside of the curriculum. This seems to be due to a number of overlapping

factors including: concerns over students needing to 'catch-up' following the school closures; extra administrative and legislative work to ensure that schools are complying with latest DfE guidance and risk assessments; quarantining of teachers and/or students at different times; and concerns over visitors to schools." **The Ernest Cook Trust**

School-based Match Funders are being creative about what happens now:

"We have been in talks with teachers about launching our social action awards in schools virtually through pre-recorded and live video content delivered in classrooms... In addition, we have been working on a mobile responsive version of our opportunities page on our eVOLve platform to allow young people to easily sign up to in-person volunteering and social action as soon as it is safe to do so." **JLGB**

For these programmes, online delivery remains the primary mode of delivery, and for others a mix of face-to face and online is becoming the new normal. One Match Funder reported that their next cohort were being asked which they preferred, with the 'blended' option being the most popular. The Co-op Foundation reported that 'young people were becoming more familiar and comfortable with online engagement and there is hesitation to begin disrupting this style of delivery given the uncertainty around future restrictions, and the increased likelihood of having to resume online delivery soon'.

Some Match Funders expressed concern about additional support that might be needed to allow some children and young people to take part in youth social action again – digital delivery will be useful here.

"It's not going to be as simple as everyone being back in a room together on the 1st October. For example, young people with learning disabilities, or those who are caring for family members with health conditions... they won't be able to return as easily." **Spirit of 2012**

5.2 Future planning

In general, Match Funders felt that projects were not under significant threat of closure for financial reasons. However, many felt that the changing, or increasing needs of young people, and the uncertainty of what happens next, will have large impacts on social action – what's it for, who takes part, and how. Some were concerned about getting particular groups of young people back into face-to-face social action – namely those from more marginalised backgrounds, who could experience the double disadvantage of also being most affected by wider economic and social uncertainty. Some flagged the need for much more funding in the coming months.

“The impact of a huge recession will have profound implications for young people's wellbeing, and we cannot predict what impact this will have on youth social action for change. Predicted difficulties span food shortages for poor families to mass unemployment in certain areas. There may be risks that organisations will not be able to deliver the outcomes they had planned and will have to pivot or will want to pivot their youth social action... Realistically organisations and young people's ambitions and capacities may shift, depending on changing circumstances.” **Act for Change Fund**

“Funding levels do not meet the need required and we know it will grow in the coming months. Digital engagement has really worked for some and we don't want to lose it – the challenge will be funding to maintain it whilst going back to face-to-face” **Young Manchester**

Maintaining a digital, or blended offer, was something many Match Funders talked about, both to maintain positive digital engagement during lockdown and to safeguard against the effects of future lockdowns.

“Going forward, we could see a more blended approach between digital and face to face... Our funded delivery Host Organisations are beginning to work with young people in a socially distanced way. We hope that the vast majority of activities will be outdoors, but there may also be opportunities to think about environmental youth social action and youth engagement in new ways and to expand our reach through online work, which we hadn't previously considered.” **The Ernest Cook Trust**

“We're planning to continue to run JLGB Virtual one night a week when face-to-face delivery resumes. The success of JLGB Virtual has resulted in us reflecting and believing that going forward we may be able to be more agile and efficient and provide more online training and social action sessions” **JLGB**

“A number of partners have used lockdown time to grow their online presence or create an online presence and this will be continued post lockdown... Online sessions have [also] successfully reached a much wider geographical area than in-person.” **Clarion Futures**

“#DofEwithadifference changes will remain in place for the foreseeable future. We have a #DofEwithadifference board that meets monthly to review and recommend programme adaptations. There is no plan to quickly roll back any changes we have introduced due to the uncertain future - possible national/local lockdown and social distancing rules means that flexibility is a necessity.” **The Duke of Edinburgh's Award**

Match Funders had other things they wanted to preserve into the new normal, with Co-op Foundation naming a desire to keep the 'Increased opportunities for youth voice to feed into decision making via digital channels'. Others felt that, despite the uncertainty, the 'new normal' provided an opportunity for youth social action to meet a need in young people and the wider community.

"There's a new formed sense of purpose going beyond immediate surroundings that may form longer-term social action habits" **Spirit of 2012**

"There was a real sense of community throughout the event, helped by the mixed audience... perhaps reflective of the growing sense of community around the UK – there were lots of calls for similar events in the future and for a community moving forward." **Global Action Plan**

Also on this theme, Pears Foundation in particular discussed NHS Trusts recognising that older volunteers may not be able to return to hospitals in the foreseeable future, so young people must be recruited, and their engagement sustained if these initiatives are to continue to be a success.

Many Match Funders by September felt they needed more time to really understand what was worth keeping from the changes made during restrictions, with Sport England undertaking research to identify innovative practices in volunteering that had emerged, so they could be shared more widely and maintained where appropriate.

Conclusions

In this section, we present some emerging conclusions based on our conversations with, and survey responses from, Match Funders and #iwill Fund staff. Some of these conclusions suggest further questions that we think arise from the experience of the last six months, and which we think it will be valuable to return to. It is clear that the full story of the effects of the restrictions on both #iwill Fund delivery, and youth social action more generally will take longer to emerge. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub is working with stakeholders to understand how it can best capture this story and share the implications for youth social action in the future.

- With flexible and creative support from Match Funders, delivery organisations proved themselves to be resilient and determined during the crisis. Much digital adaptation and resource began very quickly and continued to flex throughout the restrictions. For many organisations this was not an area of existing expertise, as youth social action has historically been a particularly 'offline' and face-to-face area of activity. This period has

seen the birth of widespread digital youth social action, and Match Funders seem confident that this will play a part in at least maintaining social action through the life of the pandemic, and beyond.

- As in previous reports, we found indications that the impact focus of an organisation depended how it responded to the pandemic. Youth-focussed organisations reacted by focussing on maintaining engagement with young people, and then on understanding and supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Organisations with a different impact focus reduced their contact with young people (some NHS Trusts, which managed to maintain in-person volunteering with young people were notable exceptions) as all their activities were put on hold by restrictions. Organisations with a longstanding youth social action focus were often swift and responsive in creating digital resources that could engage young people (sometimes via teachers) at home and keep them in touch with both youth social action, and the organisation.
- Given the likely permanence of digital engagement as a part of youth social action in the future, we will need to learn a bit more about how this affects reach and engagement. This is about whether the types of, and approaches to, youth social action which were successful in initiating and maintaining engagement in real-life, can make the transition to online-only or blended models. This is particularly important in considering the engagement of young people less likely to take part – particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. These young people face obvious barriers to online participation, and funders and delivery organisations may need to rethink the approaches they take to counter this.
- The pandemic has also raised new questions about quality in youth social action. Most obviously is how to deliver digital, or part-digital, social action that can meet the six quality principles. This report suggests some ways in which digital technology can support youth leadership and reflection, but there is more to learn about how it might enable the other principles, or which practices should be avoided. In particular, it will be important to understand how to make digital action challenging and impactful, given the chances of online engagement being only light-touch, and brief. As many Match Funders said, using digital to supplement and balance face-to-face engagement is likely to be important.
- Black Lives Matter has been an important influence on young people, delivery organisations and Match Funders. The latter report a shift towards a greater focus on inequalities (sometimes expressed in more campaigning activities) and expect this to continue. This rise can be seen alongside the increased focus on 'youth voice' (or lack of it) during the pandemic, and Match Funders' commitment to enable this further. Campaigning can happen in many different ways, and it may become more important for the #iwill Fund Learning

Hub to understand these forms, and their effects on young people and communities in more detail. As campaigning and 'voice' become higher-profile forms of youth social action, it may be important to maintain focus on, and recognition of, other types of social action as well.

- The pandemic, and the restrictions and behavioural change they provoke, are not over. Match funders believe further creativity and adaptation are likely to be required, both to continue promising adaptations for the longer-term but also to meet further changing conditions. How schools will enable social action is still unclear, and organisations enabling face-to-face delivery in multiple locations will need to be agile to accommodate local lockdowns, and make sure young people in those areas don't miss out. Schools have also been recognised in the past as a particularly equitable way to engage young people in social action, and this may be another barrier to ensuring all young people can take part.
- Across the voluntary sector, trusts and foundations responded to the pandemic by instituting unprecedented flexibility for their grantees and putting in place extra support. This was the case within the #iwill Fund, with Match Funders relaxing the conditions and reporting requirements for grantees as much as they could within their agreements with the #iwill Fund. The structure of the #iwill Fund also supported information-sharing and collaborative events between Match Funders. These events helped the #iwill Fund Learning Hub to understand adapted delivery. Our existing relationship with Match Funders supported 'light-touch' data gathering via surveys and interviews, which did not place too much of a reporting burden on Match Funders during this period.