

Theory of Change

Guidance for organisations enabling youth social action

#iwill Fund Learning Hub

This guidance on 'theory of change' has been created for organisations working within youth social action, particularly those enabling activities for young people. It can be used by organisations which already have theories of change and want to scrutinise and refresh them, and for those that do not, to help them create one for the first time.

It was written by Dartington Service Design Lab as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. It comes from a longer report about theories of change within youth social action, which can be found [here](#).

Creating theories of change

This guidance is based in part on The Confidence Framework, a tool designed to support improvements in the quality, scale and impact of programmes and services for children and young people. The Framework was originally developed by Dartington Service Design Lab, and the current version has been created by the Centre for Youth Impact.

The guidance will take you through a series of questions that any theory of change has to answer, and which should prompt discussion, reflection, and decision in an organisation. We will also provide some ideas on how to use your theory of change to guide delivery and monitoring. Before that, we share some principles for any organisation to bear in mind if it considering undertaking a theory of change creation or review process. We believe that following these principles can create a well-informed, robust, and useful theory of change:

The Principles

- 1) **Participatory** – involving the right stakeholders is essential. Most obviously this means involving colleagues from, for example, programme delivery staff, data and impact teams, and management, and young people themselves. It can also mean including trustees, funders, referral partners or other users themselves. The decisions must be taken by the organisation who enables the provision – but they should be informed by many voices. This produces stronger decisions, but also builds alignment and buy-in.
- 2) **Evidence-informed** – the youth social action evidence base is limited but useful in building understanding of the theories of change in previous programmes, including some

with proof of impact. This evidence can build confidence in the outcomes and activities you decide upon. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub’s papers on [types of youth social action](#), [young people’s outcomes](#), and [community benefit](#) are useful places to start.

- 3) **Aligned** – it is important that your theory of change makes sense, and that there are logical connections between its elements. The activities you contribute must plausibly contribute to the outcomes you seek. This increases the chances that you will have your desired impact.
- 4) **Precise** – a theory of change should be specific and detailed. Ambiguous and vague statements introduce the possibility of misunderstandings which undermine implementation and evaluation.

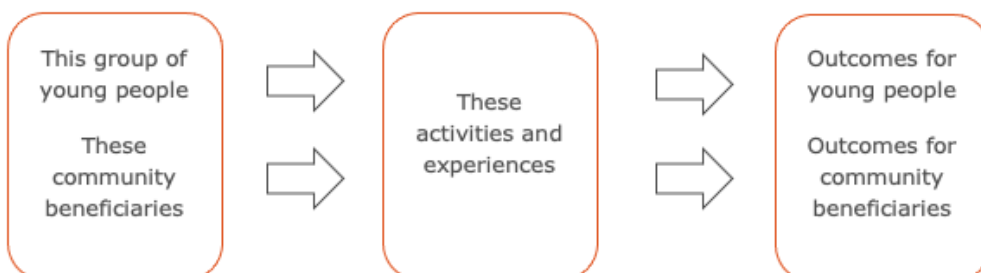
A participatory theory of change process is not a day’s work. It requires up front research into the current theory or plan used to guide delivery, and into promising or proven practice in your field. The team creating the theory of change need to receive this research in advance and be ‘in the room’ over one or more sessions to make the decisions – these sessions are often externally facilitated to support participation, although this is not essential. A draft theory of change can then be created and refined.

The Decisions

In this section we list the major decisions an organisation needs to make to create their theory of change. They do not have to be made in the order we have set them out – we find organisations go back and forth between them during the process, in particular to ensure they are aligned.

Who?	Who is your provision for? In youth social action this requires an answer for both young people and communities.
What?	What outcomes will it achieve with and for those who take part? Again, this needs to be defined for both young people and communities.
How?	How will your provision support those outcomes, and what needs to be delivered or enabled to make this happen?

These are often visualised in the order shown below to make explicit the hypothesised causal chain:



Below we look at these decisions in more detail and offer some considerations to help decision-making.

Who	Young People	Communities
(i)	<p>Which children or young people is your provision right for? Criteria may include age, gender, location or other demographic factors. You may also consider specific needs – is this provision specially for young people facing particular challenges, or experiencing difficulties?</p> <p>Which community/communities should benefit from the youth social action? This could be individuals, groups, an organisation, or institution, or a cause regionally, nationally or internationally.</p>	
(ii)	<p>Being intentional about your target population helps you meet the needs of those you serve – no provision can meet the needs of all young people equally well. Often your decision may be as simple as setting an age-range, which means you can develop and enable developmentally-appropriate opportunities. It may be more precisely for young people with certain disabilities, or for young people identified, or self-identifying, as experiencing challenges with wellbeing, or school, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The young people you wish to serve will affect which outcomes you seek, and how you design your provision to meet their needs.</p> <p>Your staff and referral partners need to know who you can serve – this can guide their decisions and ensure they promote, refer, and enroll the young people who can get the most out of your provision.</p>	
(iii)	<p>The community target population decision is different – a too-detailed decision isn't always appropriate in highly youth-led provision, where young people will decide the precise aims of their action, including who it will benefit. However, a high-level decision can be formed by deciding whether the provision will enable activity with individuals (e.g., one-to one volunteering), local areas, communities, or groups (e.g., local environmental activity of fundraising) or at a larger scale (e.g., campaigning on a national or international level). This will determine how the youth social action opportunities are designed.</p>	

What?	Young People	Communities
(i)	<p>What are the outcomes you (and young people) want young people to get from this youth social action? You may think of this in terms of new skills or knowledge, or improvements in mental health, relationships, or other circumstances – the full report provides examples.</p> <p>What are the likely intended outcomes for the 'community' or 'communities' that the social action is for? You may think of this in terms of individual benefits, or progress at a group or national level. As well as direct benefits, there may also be indirect benefits that you wish to consider – the full report provides examples.</p> <p>Your outcomes need to be relevant and meaningful to, and wanted by, your target population – what do the specific young people you are serving want and need from</p>	

	youth social action, and what can you enable in partnership with them? The outcomes framework in the full report shows the range of outcomes commonly hypothesised for youth social action – some are clearly targeted to young people with specific needs, and others address the developmental needs of all young people. Your decisions must be co-produced with the young people you will serve.
(ii)	Changes in skills, knowledge or circumstance don't usually happen immediately. As well as defining your 'ultimate' outcomes, you also need to think about the more immediate changes that not only lead to your ultimate change but can act as markers of progress.
(iii)	'Measurability' is not the most important criteria to consider when deciding outcomes – what you think is relevant for, and needed by, for your target population is the most important, balanced by what you think it is reasonable for your provision to achieve. However, you <i>should</i> consider how you will monitor, and eventually evaluate, what difference your youth social action provision is making. Community benefit may be particularly challenging to measure, particularly indirect benefits. As the polarity mapping exercise shows, it is still important to define and direct resources to achieving these benefits, even if they are not easily measurable.

How?	What needs to happen for the changes above to occur? This should be answered <i>firstly</i> in terms of 'mechanisms of change' – the experiences young people and 'communities' need to have that you believe can affect their outcomes. <i>Secondly</i> you need to agree the detail the activities which will enable these experiences.
(i)	Mechanisms of change are the 'active ingredients' in your provision. To identify them you need to get to the heart of what's important about your provision and what will make it high-quality. For example, one mechanism might be that 'young people are challenged to learn and practice new skills in a safe environment'. In the full report you will find some more mechanisms of change for young people that the #iwill Fund Learning Hub has identified from reports of #iwill-Funded provision.
(ii)	It may be more challenging to identify mechanisms of change for the community in detail. However, the general type of youth social action you enable will determine some active ingredients which will promote a quality experience for community beneficiaries and increase the likelihood of outcomes.
(iii)	Once the mechanisms of change are agreed, the shape of the provision can be designed and agreed. What will the activities look like, how often should young people attend or engage and how long for? Which adults will enable the activities and where will they take place? The answers to these questions are individual for each provision, but they should be designed to enable young people to experience the mechanisms of change, which should be logically linked to your outcomes.

Reviewing your decisions

Theory of change decisions need to align, otherwise one decision won't make logical sense next to the others. Reaching alignment may mean returning to previous decisions as you make new ones and making adjustments. Below are some questions you can ask yourself to check alignment.

- 1) Are the outcomes chosen *meaningful* to the target population? For example, if you have said you serve any young people aged between 16-18 does it make sense to say you're committing to improve their wellbeing? You are not targeting young people who have low wellbeing. In response you could think about what other outcomes your provision could aim for or think about intentionally focusing on and reaching young people who could benefit from increased wellbeing.
- 2) Is the number of outcomes realistic? It can be tempting to include a long list of outcomes that could potentially flow from your efforts. We recommend focusing on just a few – not only because you need to monitor progress towards each of them (and perhaps eventually evaluate your impact on them) but also because it is unrealistic to expect one particular provision to 'do everything' – focus on being really good at a few important things.
- 3) How many mechanisms of change are we committing to? A long list is not necessarily better – making sure that each young person has 'enough' of the most important experiences is more important than trying to do everything possible.
- 4) Are our outcomes achievable? Conversely, your mechanisms of change and the logistics of your provision must plausibly lead to the outcomes you have chosen. A very short engagement with only a couple of mechanisms of change may be very worthwhile but it cannot achieve very meaningful outcomes, particularly for more vulnerable young people or communities. Aiming for outcomes you can't deliver lets young people down, as well as obviously undermining evaluation.
- 5) What are the assumptions you're making – are they reasonable? It can be helpful to record these – what needs to be in place to make your theory of change work as you plan? These are likely to be contextual, like relationships with referral partners who introduce young people to your provision, or community partners who help enable the social action. These are really important and including them in your theory of change decreases the chance that they are overlooked or under-resourced as you plan delivery.

What happens next?

Most organisations choose to visualise their theory of change for ease of communication, and to highlight the logical connections between each decision. It should be easy for your team, your delivery partners and your funders to look at this and understand not only what you are trying to do but how you are going to do it.

A visualisation needs to be high-level and communicating only the key decisions – perhaps accompanied by a brief narrative to highlight the most important features and causal connections. But the detail of your decisions is needed to make the theory of change useful. The kind of detail that can be created after the theory of change is agreed include participation criteria (i.e., how staff can decide whether a particular young person is eligible or not for your provision) and guidance for staff about how to deliver each activity. This needs to be in a format that staff can easily use.

Finally, your theory of change is a tool for learning. It identifies the key elements of a provision, and by tracking these, you can learn

- whether you reach the young people you want to, and how long they engage for
- whether and how you enable the planned activities
- whether this appears to affect the outcomes for young people and communities

Over time you can respond to this data by (for example) changing how you attract young people and work with referral partners or adjust your activities so that they are more effective in enabling your mechanisms of change. Sometimes these changes will be significant enough that you adjust your theory of change. Over time, you will build your confidence in your provision's quality and effectiveness, be able to communicate this to others, and use further learning for further improvement.

A theory of change is a living document but you need to have amassed learning through delivery to make the review worthwhile. This review should be carried out at least every three years and perhaps more frequently if you have found it very difficult to successfully deliver any part of your theory of change.

Further Reading

Below is a list of free resources that provide further information, insight and tools to explain and support theory of change creation and use:

- Detailed [theory of change guidance](#) from the Centre for Youth Impact, including a downloadable toolkit
- A recent [outcomes framework](#) for young people, developed by the Centre for Youth Impact for the LGA
- [‘Working Hard and Working Well: A Practical Guide’](#) by David E K Hunter
- [Driving Impact: Helping charities transform the lives of disadvantaged young people’](#) by Impetus
- [Theory of Change in 10 Steps](#) by NPC

Appendix

Below shows an illustrative theory of change following the guidance in this report.

<p>Overview and Aim: Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds design and lead their own social action projects rooted locally to increase their sense of self-efficacy and long-term connection to their community. This takes place in Years 7-9 to support the habit of youth social action.</p>		
Target Population (Who)	Mechanisms of Change (How)	Outcomes (What)
<p><u>Young People</u> Girls and boys aged between 11-14, attending schools with >50% of pupils in receipt of Pupil Premium funding.</p> <p><u>Community</u> Local community School</p>	<p>Young people learn about social action and change</p> <p>Young people feel a sense of purpose, achievement, and contribution</p> <p>Young people feel positively challenged</p> <p>Community links are formed and young people experience meaningful working relationships with others in their community.</p>	<p><u>Young People</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greater understanding of local issues and knowledge of/connection to community actors - Improved self-efficacy, problem-solving and team-working skills - Increased ability to and likelihood of taking part in further social action
<p><i>Activities – the detail</i></p> <p>10-week youth social action project. Young people meet weekly for 2-hour sessions and they are supported to deliver their social action projects outside of these sessions. These could include holding an event, running a campaign, etc.</p> <p>2-hour weekly sessions involve the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young people take part in social learning about social action enabled by programme staff over 2 weeks - Young people are supported to identify local issues (environmental/social/cultural) and design their own projects to address these, enabled by programme staff and community groups/members 	<p>Young people are supported to set specific goals for their social action projects, and expectations around the degree of change that can be achieved are managed</p> <p>Young people have opportunities for reflection on value of social action for themselves and others</p> <p>Young people are aware of other social action opportunities and feel able to connect with them</p>	<p><u>Community and school</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct benefit of social action projects – these will be defined individually but are likely to include improvements to local environment, action on local priorities, or benefit to individuals via volunteering - Increased participation and voice of young people in community issues/organisations - Enhanced reputation for school



<p>over 3 weeks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Young people lead these projects in teams and work with community members and programme staff to complete them over 3-4 weeks- Young people evaluate and reflect on the project and experience, including identifying and connecting to organisations where they can continue to act on specific issues over 1 week	<p>Community groups are engaged with the provision and work with young people</p> <p>Community members are receptive of young people's projects and demonstrate a willingness to change</p>	
<p><i>Assumptions:</i> The provision can work with schools to ensure all students enrol over a year or in other ways to ensure better-off students are not cherry-picked for participation</p>		

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